

The Pentateuch

LESSON
ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE PENTATEUCH



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The Pentateuch

Lesson One

Introduction to the Pentateuch

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered how different the Christian faith would be if we didn't have the Bible? Leaders would pass instructions from one generation to the next, but there would be no way to evaluate their ideas, no standard by which we could judge between differing opinions.

This must have been how it was for many in Israel in the time of Moses. Their ancestors had passed down accounts of primeval history and their patriarchs. They'd told the story of how God had delivered Israel from Egypt, given them his law, and led them toward the Promised Land. But what were they to believe God was going to do with Israel in their current circumstances, and in the future? How were they to judge between differing opinions on these matters? God answered these kinds of questions by giving them the first five books of the Bible as the standard of their faith, the books we now call the Pentateuch.

This is the first lesson in our series *The Pentateuch*, and we've entitled it, "Introduction to the Pentateuch." In this lesson we'll introduce how the biblical books of Genesis to Deuteronomy served as the standard for Israel's faith.

Our introduction to the Pentateuch will divide into two main parts. First, we'll describe modern critical approaches to this part of the Bible. These approaches represent the views of interpreters who deny the full authority of Scripture. Second, we'll explore modern evangelical outlooks, the views of biblical scholars who affirm the full authority of the Bible as the inspired Word of God. Let's look first at modern critical approaches to the Pentateuch.

MODERN CRITICAL APPROACHES

Although our lessons will go in a different direction, it's important for us to realize that many, if not most, modern biblical scholars have denied the divine inspiration and authority of the Pentateuch. They've also denied the traditional Jewish and Christian view that the Pentateuch came from the days of Moses, Israel's great lawgiver. So many commentators, teachers, pastors, and even lay people have endorsed these views that it's nearly impossible for serious students of Scripture to avoid them. And for this reason, it's crucial that we have some understanding of how critical scholars have handled this part of the Bible.

In the last 150 to 200 years, critical scholars have given a great deal of attention to study of the Pentateuch. And although we evangelicals may disagree with many of those approaches, it's necessary for us to

be aware of where many Old Testament scholars are in order that we can respond to their suggestions correctly. We must not simply do our Bible study in a vacuum, as it were, without being aware of what's going on around us. We need to state our approaches in the light of all that is being said elsewhere.

— Dr. John Oswalt

To understand modern critical approaches to the Pentateuch, we'll look at three issues: first, some important presuppositions that have influenced critical outlooks; second, critical perspectives on the authorship of the Pentateuch; and third, a number of significant interpretive strategies that critical scholars have pursued. Consider first some of the presuppositions that influence these approaches.

PRESUPPOSITIONS

For the most part, modern critical views on this part of the Bible flowed directly from the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment in seventeenth and eighteenth century Western Europe.

For our purposes, we'll focus on two significant presuppositions that grew out of the Enlightenment. Both of these perspectives have deeply influenced critical interpretations of the Pentateuch. First, we'll consider the concept of naturalism. And second, we'll look at presuppositions about the historical development of Israel's faith. Let's start with naturalism.

Naturalism

In brief, Enlightenment naturalism was the dominant scholarly belief that if spiritual realities existed at all, they had no discernable effect on the visible world. And for this reason, they had no place in academic research. By the middle of the nineteenth century, naturalism dominated every academic field in the West, including studies in the Christian faith. One major effect of naturalism in biblical studies was that well-respected scholars rejected the longstanding Jewish and Christian belief that the Pentateuch was inspired by God. And for this reason, most handled the Pentateuch in the same ways that they handled the religious writings of ancient cultures in general. In this view, the Pentateuch contains all kinds of errors, contradictions and even intentional misrepresentations of history and false theology, like all other merely human writings.

Interestingly enough, as the presuppositions that led to naturalism freed modern scholars to dismiss the inspiration and authority of the Pentateuch, they also led to certain outlooks on the historical development of Israel's faith.

Historical Development

By the early nineteenth century, naturalism had led to what we may call “naturalistic historicism.” This was the belief that the best way to understand any subject is to understand how it developed over time through natural causes. Nineteenth century biologists devoted themselves to explaining how life on earth originated and evolved through the millennia. Linguists traced the historical developments of human languages. Archeologists reconstructed the ancient backgrounds and advancements of human societies. And scholars in the field of religion gave similar priority to describing the naturalistic, historical evolution of world religions.

By and large, early modern western scholars reconstructed the evolution of world religions to align with their understanding of developments in human society. For instance, it was commonly assumed that ancient people first formed primitive tribal societies that practiced animism, the belief that objects in nature had spirits associated with them. As time passed, primitive tribal societies formed larger chiefdoms that practiced polytheism, a belief in many gods. As various chiefdoms formed larger confederations, religion began to move from polytheism to henotheism, the belief that one god was greatest among all gods. Finally, with the development of large kingdoms and empires, powerful monarchs and priests often moved their nations from henotheism toward monotheism, belief in one god. And in this naturalistic historical view, it wasn’t until this highly developed stage that the norms of religion began to be codified, or written down. Prior to this time, religion had passed from generation to generation only through oral and ritual traditions.

Now, we should note that later in the twentieth century anthropologists largely discredited the idea that religions evolved in such a simple manner. But these outlooks deeply influenced the ways biblical scholars handled the Pentateuch early in the modern period. And they continue to influence biblical scholarship even today.

What we call "critical scholarship" often assumes that the Old Testament reflects a development of beliefs from a primitive, less sophisticated form of religion to a more complex, more sophisticated form of religion, the latter being better than the former. There are a couple of things we can say about that. One thing, positively speaking, we can say that there is a progress in how God reveals himself. The Bible shows this, what we call “organic growth,” where doctrines and themes and ideas about God grow from seed to full form, and so the Bible even talks about its own progressive message. And so, yes, there is a form of progression within the Bible and within the Pentateuch. It’s a movement from the beginnings of God’s revelation to the full flowering, if you will, if you can imagine a time-lapse photo of a flower blossoming. But, negatively speaking, critical scholars generally hold an evolutionary or development view of human history which assumes the inevitability of progress... Now, all we have to do is look at the world around us to see that the inevitability of progress is a great myth. Yes, we progress, but also as we progress, we also devolve. So,

there's something about the hubris of the modern that looks upon something older as more inferior, whereas in fact, that is a philosophical assumption, it's not something that's found within the Bible itself.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Early modern outlooks on world religions were obviously different from the way the Bible depicts the development of Israel's faith. The Pentateuch presents Israel's faith as consistently monotheistic. From Adam and Eve, to Noah, to the patriarchs, to the heads of Israel's tribes, the faithful worshiped the one true God as the Creator of all. And, as far as we know from Genesis, in these early stages, this true, monotheistic faith was passed through oral and ritual traditions from one generation to the next.

Then, according to the Pentateuch, a decisive transition took place in the days of Moses. At this time, the norms of Israel's faith began to be codified. Moses prepared Israel for nationhood, first by writing down God's law in the Book of the Covenant and the Ten Commandments, and, as we'll see later, by composing the rest of the Pentateuch to guide Israel's faith. So, according to the Bible, Israel's religion was oriented toward sacred writings from the time of Moses, long before Israel had a king and temple.

As straightforward as this well-known biblical account is, modern criticism considered this timeline impossible due to the assumptions of naturalistic historicism. Modern critical scholars deconstructed the biblical portrait of Israel's faith. And they reconstructed it to conform to modern ideas of how all primitive religions evolved. In this outlook, Israel's prehistoric ancestors embraced tribal animism. Then, the patriarchs of Israel moved toward polytheism as their tribes merged together in what amounted to chiefdoms. In this view, if there was a Moses who led Israel out of Egypt, the Israelites he led were little more than a confederation of tribes characterized by henotheism. And, contrary to the Scriptures, critical interpreters believed that, at this stage of social development, it would have been impossible for someone to have written down the standards of Israel's faith. Such written standards only could have emerged during Israel's early monarchy, when Israel's kings and priests sought to regulate Israel's faith. So, according to critical scholars, it was from the time of the monarchy that Israel's religion increasingly became a religion of the book.

Now that we've touched on the presuppositions of modern critical approaches toward Scripture and the historical development of Israel's faith, we should turn to a second, closely related issue. How have these outlooks affected critical approaches to the authorship of the Pentateuch?

AUTHORSHIP

As we've seen, critical interpreters believed that Israelite faith only began to be codified in the time of Israel's monarchs. And of course, this assumption meant that Moses had no involvement in writing the Pentateuch. Rather, these books resulted from a long, complex process that began with ancient oral traditions that were compiled into

various documents during the monarchical period. And it was only during and after the time of Israel's exile that these documents were edited and compiled into the Pentateuch as we now know it. Now, when students of Scripture first hear that many scholars believe in this long history of the Pentateuch's development, they almost always wonder what evidence supports it.

We'll look at this approach to the Pentateuch's authorship by summarizing three of the main evidences offered by critical scholars. We'll begin with variations in divine names found in the Pentateuch.

Divine Names

Early critical interpreters noted that the Pentateuch has a variety of names for God. And they argued that these variations were evidences of a long evolution of Israel's faith. For instance, sometimes the Pentateuch simply uses the Hebrew term אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*) or "God." Other times, God is called יְהוָה (*Yahweh*) or "the Lord." The Pentateuch combines these terms with each other and with other terms as well, like "*Yahweh Elohim*" or "the Lord God," and "*Yahweh Yireh*," or "the Lord provides." God is also called "*El Elyon*" or "God Most High," and "*El Shaddai*," often translated "God Almighty."

Now, it's important to note that while the Pentateuch does reflect a variety of names for God, this may not have been unusual. Twentieth century research into divine names of other ancient Near Eastern religions has pointed out that the same authors use a variety of names for their gods as well. Still, early critical scholars thought that variations in the names of God in the Pentateuch revealed a long history of composition. They believed that different names for God indicated that one source was added to another and another, and eventually resulted in the Pentateuch.

When you're reading through the Old Testament, it doesn't take you very long to note that there are different names for God. In Genesis 1 the name for God is *Elohim*. Genesis 2, all of a sudden, you have the name *Yahweh*. Critical approaches will understand this very differently than an evangelical would. A critical scholar would say these come from different sources... As evangelicals, I think we need to step back and understand the bigger picture. God is *Elohim*, and he is *Yahweh*. *Elohim* is the God Almighty, the one who is over the world, the Creator, the one that all nations of the world would recognize as that higher power, that ultimate figure. But in a covenant relationship with the nation of Israel, he reveals himself in a very personal name, *Yahweh*. He is the "I Am" who will be for his people and will be with his people. And that is a covenant name because Israel is God's chosen people.

— Dr. David Talley

In addition to variations in divine names, many critical scholars have supported their views on the authorship of the Pentateuch by drawing attention to what they've called “duplicate accounts.”

Duplicate Accounts

It isn't difficult to see that a number of passages in the Pentateuch resemble each other. But critical interpreters have argued that these passages reflect different oral traditions among different groups of people, and the processes by which these accounts came to be written down in the Pentateuch.

For example, interpreters have often pointed to what they call the “two creation accounts” in Genesis 1:1–2:3 and Genesis 2:4-25. They've also pointed out the similarities between the accounts of Abraham and Isaac when they lied and endangered their wives in Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18; and 26:7-11. Both traditional Jewish and Christian interpreters have explained these similarities in reasonable ways. But critical scholars maintain that these accounts represent different oral traditions that were written down and later incorporated into the Pentateuch.

In the third place, critical scholars have pointed to what they consider inconsistencies in the Pentateuch. And they claim that these so-called inconsistencies support their complex reconstructions of this part of the Bible's authorship.

Inconsistencies

For example, they've often noted differences between the regulations for Passover in Exodus 12:1-20 and Deuteronomy 16:1-8. And they've pointed out variations between the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21. Once again, traditional Jewish and Christian interpreters have shown how these and other differences can be reconciled. But critical interpreters have seen them as reflecting a long, complex history of oral traditions and written sources that were woven together into the Pentateuch as we have it today.

When you read the Bible and the Pentateuch in particular, you're confronted with a lot of different types of literature. And sometimes when you read it, you read things like, for example, when the book of Genesis starts off you have Genesis 1:1–2:3... We have a picture of God creating over seven days a particular order. God creates with his speech and it's a powerful statement about God being powerful, God being the Creator, God creating humanity in his image. And then the very next chapter, 2:4-25, we have another story of creation, that are kind of one right after another. When you look at that one, some people would see contradictions because now we see God is called the Lord God. Instead of being this God who just speaks things to existence, we have God actually coming down; he creates people. It

says he makes a human out of mud, the first man. And then he takes the first woman right out of the man. So, you see God, instead of being this sort of invisible creator God, God's down almost, in human terms, kind of making stuff happen with his hands... But by having that other story, which is ultimately complementary, not contradictory... And again, we always have to remember if there's really contradictions, do we really think ancient people didn't see these things? I mean, that's a key piece. They aren't stupid people. It's a different time, a different culture, but they still have brains, and in their wisdom they keep these things together. And so like the second story gives us a God who is more hands-on. We call that in theology a God who is immanent, the God that comes into creation... And I think the faithful way of reading Scripture is not to read it suspiciously but ultimately read it with a sense to understand it. You know, I may have questions, but it's a faith-seeking understanding, and at the end of the day, I believe that what's in the Bible is what God wants to be in the Bible, and my job as a reader is to listen to it attentively, especially in places that may bother me, to try to see, what's God really saying by putting these two different things sometimes in juxtaposition. But we should be grateful for that because at different times in different places those two different kinds of images may speak more meaningfully at one time than at another time.

— Dr. Brian D. Russell

Now that we've looked at modern critical approaches in terms of their presuppositions and views of authorship, we can consider some of the main interpretive strategies that critical scholars have followed as they've handled the Pentateuch.

INTERPRETIVE STRATEGIES

There are many ways to summarize these matters, but we'll touch on five major interpretive strategies of modern critical scholars. We'll consider these strategies in the order they developed starting with source criticism.

Source Criticism

Source criticism, or as it was first called, "literary criticism," originated in the work of K. H. Graf entitled *The Historical Books of the Old Testament*, published in 1866. It was refined by the better-known interpreter, Julius Wellhausen in his *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, published in 1883.

Source critics believed that the Pentateuch had grown out of oral traditions, just like all other ancient religious writings. But they concentrated their attention on identifying and interpreting parts of the Pentateuch that they believed came from independent written sources that emerged during Israel's monarchical period.

Following Wellhausen's terminology, the earliest documentary source of the Pentateuch, written in the early monarchy, has normally been deemed "J" for the Yahwist. It bears this name because the prominent name for God in passages identified with this written source is "*Yahweh*" — spelled with a "J" in German, much like we spell the name "*Jehovah*" in English. "J" passages appear scattered in the books of Genesis and Exodus. Source critics have argued that portions of the Pentateuch were originally written in Judah during the days of Solomon around 950 B.C. In this outlook, "J" passages represent a document that told of ancient times and supported the centralization and the regulation of Israelite religion and society by David's dynasty in Jerusalem.

A second written source of the Pentateuch has been deemed "E," for the Elohist, because God normally is called *Elohim* in these passages. "E" materials also appear in Genesis and Exodus. According to this theory, "E" sources were written around 850 B.C. in the North, after the division of Israel into two kingdoms. "E" texts promoted northern, prophetic views that were critical of David's dynasty.

A third literary source has been called "D," or the Deuteronomist. It's given this name because "D" materials appear primarily in the book of Deuteronomy and only occasionally in other parts of the Pentateuch. This material is usually dated sometime between Josiah's reforms in approximately 622 B.C. and the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. In one common theory, "D" represented the work of Levites who defected from northern Israel to Judah. These Levites were loyal to David's house, but also critical of it.

Finally, a fourth major literary source in the Pentateuch's development has normally been called "P," standing for the Priestly writer or writers. In one common reconstruction, "P" was a group of priests who composed Leviticus and compiled and edited other portions of the Pentateuch between 500 and 400 B.C. According to this reconstruction, "P" designed the Pentateuch to direct social order and worship after a remnant of Israel had returned from exile.

Now, during the twentieth century, competent scholars left hardly any aspect of source criticism unchallenged. Yet, vestiges of these outlooks still appear in nearly every critical commentary on the Pentateuch.

Form Criticism

A second major strategy of critical approaches toward the Pentateuch has been deemed "form criticism."

Form criticism began as a specialized field of Old Testament studies with the work of Hermann Gunkel in *The Legends of Genesis*, written in 1901. Gunkel and those that followed him accepted the major tenets of source criticism, but they focused on an earlier aspect of the Pentateuch's development. Rather than focusing on the Pentateuch's

written sources, form critics concentrated on what they believed to be the oral traditions that predated the time of Israel's monarchs.

During the time when form criticism was popular, scholars noted the ways oral traditions functioned in illiterate tribal cultures. Form critics applied these studies as they searched for the pure, dynamic, pre-literary traditions that led to the documentary sources of the Pentateuch.

Form criticism's method was basically twofold: On the one side, form critics analyzed passages to discover ancient oral forms, or genres, like myths, folk-tales, sagas, romances, legends, and parables. On the other side, they associated these genres with cultural contexts known as the "*Sitze im Leben*," or the "life settings" of these oral traditions. These contexts included worship, tribal campsites, familial instruction, local courts, and the like.

For example, a number of form critics have treated the account of Jacob wrestling at Peniel, in Genesis 32:22-32, as a story that was originally told around the campfires of an ancient tribe. They've argued that it initially grew out of tales of supernatural, magical events at the ford of the Jabbok River. In this reconstruction, it was only much later that the story was associated with a tribal figure known as Jacob.

To be sure, form criticism rightly stressed the importance of the structures and formal features of biblical texts. But, like source criticism, form criticism has also been challenged in a variety of ways. Challenges to form criticism focus especially on its speculative reconstructions of the oral forms and settings behind biblical texts. Even so, we still find form criticism turning many critical scholars toward questionable reconstructions even today, rather than toward the Pentateuch as it exists in the canon of Scripture.

Tradition Criticism

A third major way that critical scholars have interpreted the Pentateuch is often called tradition criticism or traditio-historical criticism.

Building on the conclusions of source and form criticism, tradition critics focused on how primitive oral traditions and written texts developed into complex theological and political perspectives. Leading scholars like Martin Noth in *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, published in 1948, and Gerhard von Rad in his *Theology of the Old Testament*, published in 1957, asked how the Pentateuch reflected the influence of various traditions.

Among other things, tradition critics identified what they believed to be sets of competing theological beliefs found in the Pentateuch. They noted how the Pentateuch reflected consolidations of diverse traditions on subjects like creation, the patriarchs, the exodus from Egypt, and the conquest of the Promised Land. They also explored views concerning the tribes of Israel, David's throne, and Jerusalem's temple, to mention just a few. And they believed these complex streams of theology deeply influenced many of the major themes that appear in the Pentateuch.

Once again, most of the specific conclusions of tradition criticism have been questioned through the years. Yet, we can see the vestiges of this approach when Old

Testament interpreters speak of passages reflecting various streams of tradition in Israel that contradicted or even competed with each other.

Redaction Criticism

A fourth major way that critical interpreters have approached the Pentateuch's development has been called redaction criticism. As the word "redaction" indicates, this strategy focused on how hypothetical documents were edited together into the Pentateuch as we know it today.

Redaction criticism began in the twentieth century in New Testament studies as a way of explaining the differences between the Gospels of the New Testament. Redaction critics believed these differences resulted from editing and reshaping previously written records.

Similar techniques were applied to the Pentateuch. Attempts were made to explain how different editors took earlier written sources like "J", "E", and "D" and wove them together until the Pentateuch reached its final shape. This approach especially focused on the late editorial work of "P."

Redaction criticism had the advantage of drawing attention to the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy as they appear in the Bible today. But redaction criticism never broke significantly with the conclusions of source, form and tradition criticism.

Contemporary Criticism

At this point, we should mention some of the tendencies that characterize contemporary criticism, or the more current influential critical approaches to the Pentateuch.

In recent decades, many leading critical interpreters have sought to go beyond older critical historical reconstructions. Instead, they've concentrated on the remarkable theological unity and depth of the Pentateuch's traditional Hebrew text. These approaches have taken different forms — rhetorical criticism, canonical criticism, new literary criticism — to name just a few. But they all share a focus on interpreting the Pentateuch as it's been handed to us through the synagogue and the church. Treatments of the Pentateuch in its final form are more promising than older critical approaches. But only time will tell what fruit these more contemporary approaches will yield.

So far in our "Introduction to the Pentateuch", we've focused on modern critical approaches to this part of the Bible. Now we should turn to our second main topic in this lesson: modern evangelical outlooks on the Pentateuch. How do evangelicals today approach the first five books of the Bible?

MODERN EVANGELICAL APPROACHES

You'll recall that for our purposes here we've defined evangelicals as those who hold to the full authority of Scripture. Needless to say, evangelicals haven't always applied this conviction in precisely the same ways. But as we'll see, this commitment to Scripture's authority still leads evangelicals to handle the Pentateuch very differently than modern critical scholars.

We'll summarize modern evangelical outlooks on the Pentateuch along the lines of our earlier discussion. First, we'll look at some important presuppositions that should guide us. Second, we'll consider evangelical outlooks on the authorship of the Pentateuch. And third, we'll survey several major evangelical interpretive strategies. Let's look first at some important evangelical presuppositions.

PRESUPPOSITIONS

We'll limit ourselves to two presuppositions that contrast critical and evangelical outlooks. First, we'll examine our belief in supernaturalism. And second, we'll look at our presuppositions about the historical development of Israel's faith. Let's look first at our belief in supernaturalism.

Supernaturalism

"Supernatural" is kind of our modern language as distinguished from "natural" because, of course, if we believe in God, we believe God works through all things. But since the Scottish skeptic philosopher David Hume made that kind of distinction and said, "Well, we don't have reason to believe in supernatural activity," it's been an issue. And that's been one of the main reasons that many people have argued against the reliability of the Bible, because they say, well, the Bible is full of miracles and we know that miracles don't happen. Well, why do we know miracles don't happen? Well, because David Hume "proved" that. And you go back and you look at his argument, and his argument isn't very good at all. In fact, one of the key points of his argument is that we don't have eyewitnesses, who — credible eyewitnesses — who claim the existence of miracles, certainly not today when we can test it. And yet, even in Hume's day, there were credible eyewitnesses that God was still doing miraculous things, and today we have an incredible number of those... And if they take place today, how much more can we expect that they took place at significant junctures in salvation history as God was working.

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

The Scriptures teach that God ordinarily directs history in ways that follow discernable patterns. Reason and science are gifts from God that help us discern these patterns. And for this reason, evangelicals rightly value rational and scientific research into the Pentateuch. But at the same time, followers of Jesus also know that God has involved, and continues to involve himself supernaturally in the world. God acts in ways that are without, beyond, and even against ordinary processes and natural causes. This belief affects our study of the Pentateuch in many ways. But in particular, it assures us that God inspired and superintended the writing of these Scriptures. So, they are his fully authoritative and reliable Word. Of course, we always have to be careful not to confuse our interpretations with what the Pentateuch actually says. Our interpretations are always subject to improvement. But from an evangelical point of view, whatever the Pentateuch actually claims to be true is true because it is inspired by God.

Our presuppositions about supernaturalism lead directly to presuppositions about the historical development of Israel's faith.

Historical Development

As we've seen, modern critical scholars have argued that Israel's faith developed by natural means along the same lines as all other religions in the ancient Near East. But evangelicals hold that Israel's faith developed through special divine revelations. God actually revealed himself directly to men and women, beginning with Adam, and then Noah. And he also spoke to Israel's patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He addressed Moses in the burning bush. He disclosed his Law to Israel at Mount Sinai. These kinds of revelations caused Israel's faith to develop differently than other religions in the ancient Near East. To be sure, God's common grace and the influence of Satan led to similarities between Israelite faith and the religions of other nations. But Israel's faith did not simply evolve naturally. Instead, God supernaturally led the development of Israel's early faith just as the Pentateuch teaches.

We've considered modern evangelical outlooks and the presuppositions that contrast with critical approaches to the Pentateuch. These outlooks have led to contrasting beliefs about the Pentateuch's authorship. Critical scholars reject the idea that the Pentateuch could have come from the days of Moses. But evangelicals continue to affirm the longstanding Jewish and Christian belief that the Pentateuch came from Moses.

AUTHORSHIP

To investigate evangelical outlooks on the Pentateuch's authorship, we'll look in two directions. First, we'll note some biblical evidence for this point of view. And second, we'll explain how modern evangelicals believe in what's been called "essential Mosaic authorship." Let's start with some biblical evidence for Moses' authorship.

Biblical Evidence

Scripture contains more than enough biblical evidence for the traditional view that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch. But for the sake of time, we'll consider just a few passages from three distinct parts of the Bible, starting with evidence from the New Testament. Listen to Luke 24:44 where Jesus said:

Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms (Luke 24:44).

Here, Jesus referred to the entire Old Testament in three divisions, much like other Jews in his day: Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. Through these designations, Luke plainly indicated that Jesus associated the Pentateuch, or Torah, with Moses.

Jesus also referred to Moses as the author of the Pentateuch in John 5:46 where he said:

If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me (John 5:46).

In addition to Jesus' own testimony, other New Testament passages refer to specific portions of the Pentateuch as coming from Moses. We see this in places like Mark 7:10, John 7:19, Romans 10:5, and 1 Corinthians 9:9.

In reality, the New Testament support for Mosaic authorship was based on the testimony of the Old Testament. And on many occasions, Old Testament books associate the Pentateuch with Moses. For example, listen to 2 Chronicles 25:4:

[Amaziah] acted in accordance with what is written in the Law, in the Book of Moses (2 Chronicles 25:4).

Similar Old Testament passages also associate Moses with the Pentateuch, including verses like 2 Chronicles 35:12; Ezra 3:2 and 6:18; and Nehemiah 8:1 and 13:1.

We should also note that the testimony of the New Testament and Old Testament in general is based on what the Pentateuch itself says about its author. Strictly speaking, most of the Pentateuch is anonymous. Except for the first verse of Deuteronomy, Moses isn't named at the beginning or the end of any of these books in a way that would indicate his authorship. But this was not uncommon in the ancient Near East. Nor was it unusual in the Scriptures. In fact, the Pentateuch itself makes explicit statements verifying that Moses received revelations from God and was responsible for the Pentateuch's composition. For instance, Exodus 24:4 tells us that Moses wrote the Book of the Covenant found in Exodus 20:18–23:33. In Leviticus 1:1-2 we learn that the regulations in Leviticus were given to Israel through Moses. In Deuteronomy 31:1 and 32:44, we're told that Moses gave the speeches contained in the book of Deuteronomy. In sum, the Pentateuch clearly and explicitly claims that Moses was actively involved in receiving and transmitting the contents of major portions of the Pentateuch.

These and many other biblical evidences explain why evangelicals have stood strong against critical speculations about the Pentateuch's authorship. Clearly, Scripture doesn't support critical reconstructions that assume the Pentateuch was written much later than the life of Moses. If we follow the testimony of the Old and New Testaments, we can rest assured that we should associate the Pentateuch with Moses.

The Pentateuch itself presents itself as being essentially Mosaic. Moses is one of the major characters, of course, from Exodus through Deuteronomy. And the text presents itself as being largely from the time of Moses. We're told in Exodus, for example ... that Yahweh told Moses to write the Book of the Covenant, which is Exodus 21 to 23. We're told in the book of Leviticus that we've got a series of speeches and laws presented from Moses. Moses is the main character in the book of Numbers, of course. In the book of Deuteronomy we've got a series of speeches that Moses delivered, and we're told several times within the book of Deuteronomy that Moses wrote this section and handed it to the priests. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean that Moses wrote the book of Deuteronomy as a whole per se, but the book of Deuteronomy itself tells us that significant portions of the book, the bulk of the book, Moses wrote and then handed to the priests. So, for example, in Deuteronomy, whether or not he was the final author or the final narrator, we may have at least 90% of the book that Moses himself wrote.

— Dr. Gordon H. Johnston

Having seen that the basic concept of Mosaic authorship is supported by biblical evidence, we should turn to a second consideration. What do modern evangelicals mean by essential Mosaic authorship?

Essential Mosaic Authorship

As evangelicals responded to critical views on the Pentateuch, they refined their responses in a variety of ways. But by the middle of the twentieth century, it became common to speak of "essential Mosaic authorship" of the Pentateuch.

Listen to the way Edward J. Young summarized this outlook in his *Introduction to the Old Testament*, published in 1949:

When we affirm that Moses wrote ... the Pentateuch, we do not mean that he himself necessarily wrote every word... [He may] have employed parts of previously existing written documents. Also, under divine inspiration, there may have been later minor additions and even revisions. Substantially and essentially, however, it is the product of Moses.

Now, evangelicals have understood the details of this outlook on Moses' authorship in a variety of ways. But to one degree or another, we speak of "essential Mosaic authorship" to remind ourselves of three factors that we must always keep in mind: the sources Moses used, the process by which the Pentateuch was written, and the updating of the Pentateuch that took place after the days of Moses. Let's consider first the sources Moses used.

Sources. The Scriptures tell us that God revealed himself to Moses in different ways. For instance, God wrote the original Ten Commandments with his own finger. And the Book of the Covenant contains the laws that God gave Moses on Mount Sinai. But, as with many other parts of Scripture, there are indications that Moses also used additional sources as he wrote the Pentateuch.

On the one hand, he probably drew from a variety of oral traditions. For instance, in all likelihood Moses learned some things from his birth mother and extended family during his early childhood. Moreover, we see in Exodus 18:17-24 that Moses was quite receptive to instruction from his father-in-law, Jethro the Midianite.

Any time we talk about oral traditions behind any part of the Pentateuch, including the primeval history or some other part, it's a bit nebulous because there is obviously no concrete evidence for it. That's what it means when you say it's "oral", it means nothing was written down. But when you think about it for just a minute, we know a couple of things that help us realize that Moses probably did not just simply one day think up these stories, nor did God probably just tell him these stories one day without any kind of oral background. One evidence of that is just the fact that primitive cultures even today depend a lot on storytelling, a lot on repetition from generation to generation of ancient stories of their peoples, and this is often paralleled back to biblical times when people would do similar sorts of things. And the most concrete evidence we have of that in the Pentateuch, as a whole, is the way that the stories that are found in Exodus and Numbers are repeated often in the book of Deuteronomy. And in the book of Deuteronomy, we're given the context where Moses is giving speeches or giving sermons that include elements that we find also in the book of Exodus and Numbers. But the interesting thing about them is while they're similar they're not exactly the same. And so, there was a culture in the days of Moses, there was a culture in Israel in those days, of taking stories from the past or taking tales from the past, things that had happened and how they'd been passed down from generation to generation and then using them in specific ways in the context where you lived. And of course, you know Moses grew up in his mother's home in the early years of his life, and this of course would have given him stories to know about his ancestors, know about his identity as a Hebrew, know his identity as one who descended from Abraham. And, of course, as Moses would interact

with the elders of Israel, even upon his return from his time with Jethro, he would have been learning even more stories that were distinctive to his ancestry. And so, there's good reason to think that Moses did, in fact, depend on oral traditions, or stories that were told from generation to generation, as he wrote different parts of the Pentateuch.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

The influence of oral traditions explains a remarkable feature of Moses' call at the burning bush. Listen to what took place in Exodus 3:13, 16:

Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" ... "[S]ay to them, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers — the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — appeared to me'" (Exodus 3:13, 16).

Notice that God simply told Moses to refer to him as "the Lord" — or *Yahweh* — "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Someone must have taught Moses about the divine name *Yahweh* and the traditions of the patriarchs. Otherwise, God's statement would have raised countless questions in Moses' mind. But, as we see here, Moses was so well prepared to receive God's directive that he never raised any questions about it.

We can be even more confident that Moses' sources also included independent documents when he composed the Pentateuch. We see this in places like Exodus 24:7. This verse indicates that Moses wrote "the Book of the Covenant" as an independent document that he later included in the book of Exodus. And in Numbers 21:14-15, Moses quoted geographical references from an existing book known as "the Book of the Wars of the Lord."

In addition to this, in Genesis 5:1, we read what is likely an explicit reference to an external literary source called "the book of the generations of Adam." As this literal translation indicates, Moses probably referred to information that he acquired from an actual "book" or "scroll" — סֵפֶר (*sēpher*) in Hebrew — about Adam's descendants.

Moreover, Exodus 17:14 refers to a record of battle. In this verse, God commanded Moses:

Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it (Exodus 17:14).

God's command to Moses indicates that Moses independently recorded at least some events before he wrote the Pentateuch as a whole.

When you take a look at the Pentateuch it appears that, especially in the case of the book of Genesis, Moses was actually incorporating very ancient documents. We know Moses would have known, actually, four languages. Moses knew Egyptian. He also knew Hebrew because he

was raised in a Hebrew family; his mother was his own wet nurse. We also know that he would have known the common language of that day, the international trade and diplomatic language called Akkadian. And he also would have known Aramaic, because Aramaic is a language that the Israelites spoke in their early days — Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and so on. So, Moses was a very, very well-trained, well-educated person, and it appears from the way that he structured the book of Genesis that he's telling us he was using certain documents, because ten times he says to us, "These are the generations of..." or "These are the accounts of..." so-and-so. And it appears that those are accounts that he had access to, that he had preserved, that he had translated, perhaps, from some original language, partly Aramaic, perhaps, or earlier Canaanite, into the Hebrew that he wrote in for the people that he was writing Genesis for. Not necessarily was this the case after Genesis. Once you get to Leviticus and Numbers and so on, and certainly Exodus and Deuteronomy, once you get the final four books of the Pentateuch, Moses is composing those on site, on the scene. He's right there; he's making it happen. And more importantly, God's making it happen, because the bulk of those books is God's words through his prophet.

— Dr. Douglas Stuart

In addition to acknowledging oral and literary sources for the Pentateuch, when evangelicals speak of essential Mosaic authorship they also acknowledge that the Pentateuch was actually written down through a complex process.

Process. To begin with, Moses delivered much of the Pentateuch through oral recitation before it was actually written down. His speeches in Exodus and Deuteronomy provide us with explicit examples of this. And it's likely that other portions of the Pentateuch were also delivered to Israel orally at first and then written down later.

It's also very likely that Moses employed amanuenses — secretaries or scribes — to compose the Pentateuch. We know that Moses was educated in the courts of Egypt. So, he would have been familiar with the well-established practice of using scribes and secretaries for writing official documents. As Israel's leader, Moses probably commissioned amanuenses to write much, if not all of the Pentateuch under his supervision.

Scripture is clear that other inspired biblical writers also employed secretaries. For instance, in Jeremiah 36:4, the prophet Jeremiah explicitly instructed his disciple Baruch to write down his words.

We can see evidence of this practice primarily in the Pentateuch's uneven literary styles. For instance, the narrative styles that appear in various portions of Genesis are quite different from each other. And we see remarkable differences between the formulaic and repetitious Hebrew of Deuteronomy and all the other books of the Pentateuch. In all probability, variations like these reflect the work of different scribes.

Essential Mosaic authorship concerns not only the sources and the process Moses used, but also the updating of the Pentateuch after the time of Moses.

Updating. As we've seen, critical interpreters treat the entire Pentateuch as reaching its final form after Israel's return from exile. But evangelicals have held that the Pentateuch originated in the days of Moses. Still, there are some portions of the Pentateuch that represent slight editorial updating after the days of Moses.

Now, we have to be very careful as we date particular elements of the Pentateuch. For instance, some interpreters have suggested that every passage that mentions "Philistines" must have been written after the days of Moses. But this point of view is less than convincing for at least three reasons. First, the archeological data for the presence of Philistines in the region is disputed. Second, Moses may have used the term "Philistine" (which means "traveler") as a sociological designation. And third, even if the term "Philistine" was not known in Moses' day, it's always possible that the use of "Philistine" simply represents a slight updating to aid audiences after the days of Moses.

In a similar way, interpreters have argued that the list of Edomite rulers in Genesis 36:31-43 goes far beyond Moses' lifetime. But the identifications of Edom's rulers listed in Genesis are not certain. And it's also possible that these passages merely contain slight extensions of lists added after Moses' time.

One clear example of minor updating in the Pentateuch appears in Genesis 14:14. There we read:

When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he called out the 318 trained men born in his household and went in pursuit as far as Dan (Genesis 14:14).

This passage says that Abraham pursued his enemies "as far as Dan." But we learn in Joshua 19:47 that this northern region wasn't named Dan until the days of Joshua. So, the Scriptures themselves indicate that Genesis 14:14 reflects an updated place name. This type of modernization would have helped later readers associate the story of Abraham with geography they knew. And it's likely that a number of other passages in the Pentateuch were updated in this same way as well.

Perhaps the best known and most significant updating found in the Pentateuch is the record of Moses' death in Deuteronomy 34. But even here, we have little more than an appendix explaining what happened to Israel's lawgiver.

In addition to minor updates like these, the Pentateuch's language was also updated as the Hebrew language developed. Recent research strongly suggests that Moses wrote in a language that scholars have called "proto-Hebrew." Evidence from international documents found in Egypt, known as the "Amarna letters" indicates that this form of Hebrew was closely related to Canaanite dialects used in Moses' day. But this language was much earlier than what we find in the traditional Hebrew text of the Pentateuch.

The question of the language of the Old Testament is a fascinating one. When did this language... Where did it come from? Where did it emerge? It is one that has puzzled people for a long time, because the

evidence on the ground from archeology, is there even Hebrew writing, ancient Hebrew? And we do have quite a bit of texts that have been excavated in the recent past, in the twentieth century. And, but they all come late. They come later than the Mosaic time... And so, what do you do with that? Well, we have evidence during the thirteen hundreds, fourteenth century B.C. that there was a whole diplomatic correspondence, an archive that was excavated, not in Canaan, the land of Israel — that will become the land of Israel — but in Egypt... And they write in Akkadian, which is a language that really originates from Mesopotamia, but it's the lingua franca, it's the international language of diplomacy of the time. But they're Canaanites, they're local guys writing to their rulers in Egypt, and they have little margin notes that they have there, and this is written in Canaanite. And then that's our connection. The Canaanite language is then what connects us to the Hebrew of the Mosaic time. Now, of course, we don't have any record, we don't have anything left of the Hebrew of the Mosaic era, but that's our connection, that's our bridge. So, it goes from the Canaanite margin notes that we have to the Hebrew of Moses' time to the Hebrew that we know as standard biblical Hebrew in which most of the pre-exilic Hebrew and the text of preceding the exiles come from. So, that's our connection. It's an indirect one, but it's a real one, and it's a substantial one.

— Dr. Tom Petter

During the time of Israel's monarchs, between 1000 B.C. and 600 B.C., the language had developed into what is now called "old" or "Paleo-Hebrew." Many scholars would agree that portions of the Pentateuch resemble this stage of Hebrew, such as parts of Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 32.

But the vast majority of the Pentateuch very closely resembles the vocabulary, spelling, and grammar of what we now call "Classical Hebrew," a stage in the development of Hebrew that was in use sometime between the mid-eighth and the early sixth centuries B.C.

From this evidence, it would appear that the Proto-Hebrew that Moses himself used was updated to Paleo-Hebrew. Then it was later modernized into Classical Hebrew as we have it now in the Hebrew Bible.

It's always important to remember that in the days of Jesus and his apostles and prophets, the Hebrew of the Pentateuch had already gone through these kinds of changes. But this fact didn't dissuade Jesus or his followers from treating the Pentateuch of their day as faithfully representing what Moses himself wrote. So, as followers of Christ today, we can rest assured that the Pentateuch, as we have it now, faithfully represents Moses' original writings.

So far, we've looked at modern evangelical outlooks and touched on some important presuppositions that evangelicals bring to the Pentateuch. And we've considered how evangelicals view the authorship of this part of the Bible. Now, let's note

some of the ways these outlooks have affected the interpretive strategies that evangelicals follow.

INTERPRETATIVE STRATEGIES

There are many ways to describe these interpretive strategies, but we'll speak of three main directions that evangelicals have pursued. First we'll consider what we may call thematic interpretation. Then we'll explore historical interpretation. And finally, we'll investigate literary interpretation. These three strategies are highly interdependent and never operate apart from each other. But they represent different emphases, so it will help to look at them individually, beginning with thematic interpretation.

Thematic

In thematic interpretation, we hold up the Pentateuch like a mirror to reflect on issues that are important to us. Evangelicals have legitimately emphasized certain topics or themes in this part of the Bible. But as we'll see, every book in the Pentateuch has its own sets of priorities. So, Moses himself may or may not have emphasized these themes. This approach has characterized much of Christian interpretation throughout the millennia.

The list of themes that Christians have emphasized is very long. Some have stressed personal questions and current controversies. Others have used the Pentateuch as support for their views in traditional systematic theology. For instance, the Pentateuch reveals many things about God. It also spends a great deal of time on different aspects of humanity. And it gives a lot of attention to the rest of creation in general.

Now, one of the greatest drawbacks to thematic interpretation is that it often minimizes the fact that Moses' original themes were for the Israelites who followed him toward the Promised Land. And because little attention is given to this original context, thematic interpretations often do little more than draw attention to minor themes.

Still, we should always keep in mind that the New Testament validates this approach to the Pentateuch. Jesus and New Testament authors looked to the books of Moses when they dealt with themes like justification by faith, divorce, faith and works, and a host of other relatively minor themes in this part of the Bible. So, as long as we're careful not to read themes into these Scriptures, thematic interpretation can be a valuable approach to the Pentateuch.

In addition to the interpretive strategy of thematic interpretation, it's also been common for evangelicals to explore the Pentateuch with what we may call historical interpretation.

Historical

Evangelicals not only believe that the theological themes of the Pentateuch are true. But, following the examples of Jesus and his apostles and prophets, we also believe that the Pentateuch's record of history is true. For this reason, evangelicals have often interpreted the Pentateuch as a means of discovering what happened in the past.

We've mentioned that thematic interpretive strategies treat the Pentateuch like a mirror that reflects on themes that are of interest to us. But, historical analysis treats the Pentateuch like a window to history. We look through the books of Moses, as it were, to explore the history that lies behind them.

Genesis traces history from creation to the days of Joseph. Exodus' main storyline extends from the death of Joseph to the time when Israel encamped with Moses at the foot of Mount Sinai. Leviticus elaborates on some of the laws and rituals that Moses received while at Mount Sinai. Numbers traces the march of the first and second generations of the exodus from Mount Sinai to the Plains of Moab. And Deuteronomy elaborates on Moses' speeches to Israel on the plains of Moab, as they were about to enter Canaan. In historical interpretation, evangelicals have capitalized on this rather obvious historical orientation.

As valuable as historical interpretation has been, this approach to the Pentateuch has its limitations as well. Much like thematic analysis, historical interpretation gives relatively little attention to Moses and his original audience. Instead, the orientation is toward what God did in different periods of time before the books of the Pentateuch were written. What did God do with Adam and Eve? What was the significance of Noah's flood? How did Abraham interact with God? What did God accomplish when Israel crossed the sea? These are legitimate pursuits, but they minimize the significance of Moses as the author and Israel as the original audience.

Clearly, evangelicals have benefitted in many ways from thematic interpretation and historical interpretation of the Pentateuch. But in recent decades, a third orientation has moved to the foreground, what we may call literary interpretation.

Literary

As we've seen, thematic analysis treats the Pentateuch as a mirror that reflects on themes that are important to us. Historical analysis treats the Pentateuch as a window to historical events prior to the writing of the Pentateuch. By contrast, literary analysis treats the Pentateuch as a portrait, a literary work of art designed to impact its original audience in particular ways. Essentially, literary interpretation asks: How did Moses intend to impact his original Israelite audience as he wrote the Pentateuch?

It's fair to say that Moses had many purposes. But it helps to describe these purposes in general terms. So, we'll describe Moses' goal in this way: As Israel's God-ordained leader,

Moses wrote the Pentateuch to prepare Israel for faithful service to God in the conquest and settlement of the Promised Land.

Rather than touching on an assortment of themes in the abstract, or dealing with events out of mere historical interests, in one way or another every theme and historical record in the Pentateuch was designed to accomplish this goal.

Literary interpretation acknowledges that Moses stood between two periods of time as he composed the Pentateuch. On the one side, Moses wrote about what we may call “that world,” events that had taken place in the past. Events in the book of Genesis occurred long before Moses’ day. Exodus and Leviticus concentrate on events during the time of the first generation of the exodus from Egypt. Numbers and Deuteronomy include events in the time of the first generation to the days of the second generation. When Moses wrote each book of the Pentateuch he had these various times from the past in mind.

On the other side, however, Moses also wrote for “their world,” for the days of his original audience. Moses drew from the past of “that world” to teach his audience how they should think, act, and feel in service to God in “their world.” To accomplish this goal, Moses wrote about “that world” in ways that would connect it with “their world.”

Moses connected the past to his original audience in three main ways. He gave them accounts of the past that established the background or origins of his audience’s current experiences. He also provided them with models to imitate and reject. And he shaped his accounts as foreshadows or adumbrations of his audience’s world.

At times, Moses made these connections rather explicit. For instance, in Genesis 15:12-16, Moses told his audience about the background of God’s promise to bring them out of Egypt. This promise was being fulfilled in their day. In Genesis 2:24, Moses explained that Adam and Eve’s marriage was a model for marriage among God’s faithful people. And in Genesis 25:23, Moses reported that the wrestling between Jacob and Esau in their mother’s womb was a foreshadow of the struggle between his original Israelite audience and the Edomites in their day.

Explicit connections between “that world” and “their world” appear here and there in the Pentateuch. But for the most part, these connections were implicit. So, one of the chief tasks of literary interpretation is to discern how Moses connected “that world” of the past to “their world” of his original audience.

For millennia, the interpretation of the Pentateuch has stressed thematic and historical strategies far more than literary analysis. So, in our lessons on the books of Moses, we’ll devote most of our time to literary interpretation. We’ll unpack how Moses shaped the content of each of his books to provide backgrounds, models and foreshadows of his audience’s experiences. We’ll explore what Moses emphasized for his original audience, how he connected the content of his books to their lives, and how he led his original Israelite audience toward faithful service to God in their day.

CONCLUSION

In this introduction to the Pentateuch we’ve examined some crucial features of modern critical approaches to this part of the Bible. We’ve considered how the

presuppositions of critical interpreters have led to certain views of the Pentateuch's authorship and particular kinds of interpretations. We've also looked at modern evangelical outlooks and seen how the presuppositions of modern evangelicals have led to a very different view of authorship and interpretation.

As we continue to explore the Pentateuch, we'll see these introductory considerations move to the foreground many times. And as they do, we'll find ourselves better equipped to deal with this foundational part of the Bible. Along the way, we'll consider questions like: Why did Moses write each book of the Pentateuch? What was the original purpose for these books? What were the implications of the Pentateuch for Moses' original audience? By answering these kinds of questions, we'll discover crucial orientations toward Moses' original meaning. And not only will we see how the first five books of the Bible served as the earliest standard of Israel's faith in the days of Moses, but we'll also discover how these books should serve as the standard of our faith as we follow Christ today.

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The Pentateuch

LESSON
ONE

Introduction to the Pentateuch Faculty Forum



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The Pentateuch

Lesson One: Introduction to the Pentateuch

Faculty Forum

With

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Rev. Dr. Michael Walker

Dr. Larry J. Waters

Question 1:

Why is it important for evangelicals to become familiar with critical approaches to the Pentateuch?

Dr. David T. Lamb

It's important for evangelicals to be familiar with critical approaches to Scripture because — particularly the Pentateuch — because a lot has been written about the Pentateuch, and for any evangelical who's preaching and teaching from this part of the Bible, you're going to want to read the commentaries, you're going to want to read literature, secondary literature, about it, and if you're not familiar with the critical approaches, it's not going to make a lot of sense. It's a little bit like learning a language. Let's say you want to go to Spain. You love Spain, you want to travel there, but you know no Spanish at all. You're going to have a hard time when you go to Spain if you know absolutely no Spanish. Well, it's a little bit like an evangelical who is trying to study the Pentateuch. As you become familiar with the language of critical scholarship, it will make more sense to you, and you will gain a deeper appreciation of the Pentateuch, not always agreeing with what you're reading, but you will be learning from a wider variety of people. And I think it's important for evangelicals to be reading people that we don't always agree with, because we have things to learn from them.

Dr. Gordon H. Johnston

Well, it's important for evangelicals to become familiar with critical approaches to the Pentateuch because as you read commentaries, as you read the literature, you'll be exposed to it. You need to understand the background of some of the things that are said so that you know the presuppositions and the methodology. Sometimes some Bible interpreters or pastors might not realize that they're buying into a critical approach that might end up undermining faith in their audience, or their own faith, if they don't understand the background of what's behind it. ... So, the book of Deuteronomy is ... a good test case because we're told a half dozen times in the book that Moses delivered this particular speech, and then after we finish one of the speeches in the book, we're told that Moses then handed this speech, or this Torah,

this instruction, to the priests. And then the priests took that written speech and, we're told several times in the book, they stored it in the Ark of the Covenant, or placed it next to the Ark of the Covenant, and then Moses instructed them that every seven years the Israelites would come and they were to take it out and then to read it to the nation. So, what the book itself then tells us, part of the process of the preservation of the text, that Moses had a series of speeches that he wrote, delivered orally, and then handed these texts to the priests that preserved them. So, it appears that at the beginning, what we call now the book of Deuteronomy was originally made up of several different literary pieces that Moses handed to the priests, and then at one point, maybe by these priests, or we don't know who did it, then cobbled these speeches that Moses had written and handed them, and cobbled them together and gave us the book of Deuteronomy. Now, at the beginning of the book, 1:1-5, we have a narrative: "This is the law that Moses began to teach the Israelites on the other side of the Jordan." And at the end of the book we've got a third person narrative about Moses' death. So, it gives us kind of these end-caps to the book. And because it tells us that Moses wrote this law on the other side of the Jordan — and, of course, Moses didn't get onto this side of the Jordan — it sounds like that's from another hand. That third person narration then becomes the bridge throughout the book that bridges one speech to the other, so we're able to see, if you will, the process of composition, that somebody at some time — we're not quite sure who or when — took these materials Moses gave to the priests and then gave us our book.

Dr. Carol Kaminski

There are several critical approaches to the Pentateuch which really undermine, I think, the Christian faith. I think the one key issue is the authorship of the Pentateuch. Traditionally, over the centuries, we've understood that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch, and there are certain sections, especially his death notice, that he didn't write, but overall that Moses was responsible for the Pentateuch around about fifteenth century BC. Well, critical scholars have raised questions about that and, in fact, undermined Mosaic authorship, really dating a number of the sections of the Pentateuch anywhere from tenth century all the way through to the fifth, sixth century, you know, so, and what that means is that those changing the dates and undermining Mosaic authorship locates it, at the least, kind of four hundred years later, but up to eight, nine hundred years after the events themselves. So you have an enormous period of time that there is a gap between the events themselves and when they were written. And, we also have authors, these hypothetical authors, who actually don't have real names. They have names based on the names of God that it's used. So, I think it undermines the authority of the biblical text. I think it raises questions about the whole process of transmission of the biblical text as well.

The other area where critical scholarship has raised questions about the biblical text is also in Near Eastern material, especially in the early chapters of Genesis, we have other material outside the biblical account of the flood stories — and these are wonderful texts that have been found like *Gilgamesh Epic* and so forth — but what some scholars have said, "Well, this means, therefore, that the Old Testament's not so reliable because they're just borrowing from the ancient world." And I think, as

evangelicals, we don't need to be afraid of these Near Eastern materials; they're wonderfully rich and they do have parallels with the biblical material — an example would be the flood — because it seems to underscore that there was a flood and that the other cultures are actually giving witness to that. Even when we see parallels in the ancient Near Eastern material with the Pentateuch, it also reminds us that God is communicating in the culture of his day, and he's not using our culture, or whatever that may be, well, he's not using that. He's using the culture of the day. So, I think using the Near Eastern material in a way that looks at how biblical themes and what God is communicating, how they're being used, sometimes it's in contrast. And an example would be in the flood story where God says the reason why he's bringing a flood is because of human sin and wickedness, whereas, in the Near Eastern Mesopotamian texts it's the overpopulation of people. So, I think we can learn from it. I don't think we need to be afraid of it. But we also need to come back to the reliability of God's Word and its authority and stay within that tradition of the Mosaic authorship and the long history of the church on this. And also affirming, then, Jesus' words when he says, "the law of Moses" or "Moses said," really keeping within that history of the Christian tradition.

Question 2:

Do critical methods for interpreting the Pentateuch have any value?

Dr. Don Collett

Critical tools usually attempt to open up the historical dimension of the Bible, and they are different ways of... used in different ways of uncovering Scripture's historical dimension. The historical dimension of Scripture is important for evangelicals and not just critical thinkers. So, I think it really comes down to knowing the difference between a good and a bad use of these tools. It's not really the tools that are the problem so much as the theological assumptions and the worldviews that are connected to the use of the tools. And so, I would say it's important to know why these approaches are out there so that we can know the difference between a good and a bad use of a historical method and historical tool.

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

I find studying critical scholarship helpful even though I disagree with so many of the conclusions because it surfaces the issues for me. If I'm reading a source critic and he is arguing that these two passages contradict in some way, well, that's a challenge to me. Because of my presuppositions regarding Scripture, I don't think they contradict. There may be a tension, but I need to explain what's going on with those passages. And so, I find it helpful. It surfaces issues that I might just have missed if I had used the typical evangelical, conservative, "let's-trust-the-Bible-on-everything" kind of approach.

Question 3:

Critical scholarship often assumes that ancient religions were lower and less evolved. How should evangelicals evaluate this critical mindset?

Dr. David Talley

When considering the critical approach to the Pentateuch, they will often use as their conclusion that religion began with lower, less evolved forms and then it matured or evolved into what we might read about as a more advanced understanding with priests and different washings, sacrifices, a temple, etc., all those items. The way we need to approach that as evangelicals is understand that their bottom-line reasoning is that there is no God; therefore, there is no, “Thus saith the Lord.” There is no God speaking from Sinai, “This is the way I want you to do religion as you’re in a covenant relationship with me.” God laid all of that out for them. Now, we all need to understand that there is some kind of development of sacrifice and different forms of doing religious ceremony that’s grown throughout the years. Where it all originated we don’t fully understand. It could have been in Genesis 3 when God took the fig leaves, clothes that they had been wearing, and gave them animal skins. That could have been the first sacrifice. It could have grown from there. Cain and Abel were offering offerings to the Lord. We see that Noah, when he got off the ark, he offered a burnt offering. Where all that comes from, we don’t really know, but God was instituting something along the way and people were responding to that in worship. But when they get to Mt. Sinai, God lays it out there for them. And he does it in light of all the other religious practices. Many different nations were practicing religion, but God sets the record straight — “This is how you worship me.”

Dr. Craig S. Keener

The view that ancient religious beliefs reflect a lower evolutionary approach is basically ethnocentric. I mean, it comes from an era of racism and ethnocentrism that’s found in a lot of other ways. You actually read the people who came up with the ideas; it’s very degrading to other peoples.

Dr. Erika Moore

You know, there’s a critical mindset that argues that all ancient forms of religion were a lower, subpar form of religion that evolves into a higher form. And I think we need to be so careful here. That simply undercuts the biblical witness, and it also imbibes of that general evolutionary model of development, or Hegelian, even, a synthesis that comes out of a thesis and a contra-thesis. And that’s just not what Scripture tells us. Scripture tells us that God has entered time and space and has come and taken a people, blessed them to be missionaries to the rest of the world. And if we imbibe and buy into the critical mindset ... if we see that Israel’s religious understanding of Yahweh developed over the centuries and that what we have in the Pentateuch is simply the exilic or postexilic self-reflection, what happens is Yahweh ends up becoming a textual ontology, something on paper. So, it’s very dangerous to imbibe of that view. We need to take the text and understand it for what it says. There’s a great analogy: When you want to study stars you use the proper equipment;

you use a telescope. When you want to study microorganisms, you use a microscope. When we study Scripture, you've got to study something according to the integrity of its nature. So, we come — we're a faith people — we come and we study Scripture in faith, and we see that what God tells us here is that he's entered time and history; he's revealed himself as Yahweh early on in the biblical text.

Dr. Don Collett

Evangelicals should evaluate the idea that ancient religious beliefs are lower forms of religion with the Old Testament in mind. When the Christian church decided to give its witness to Jesus, its first witness was the Old Testament. So, the way that this impacts our understanding of the Canon is through the Old Testament. Israel is an ancient religious body of people, and if we look at that as a lower form of religion, we've got a real difficulty involved in understanding how that relates to Christianity. Was the Old Testament just a lower form of religion that sort of dropped off when the New Testament came along? I think those assumptions tell us more about modern views of history than they do the Bible's own self-presentation. The Bible speaks from the perspective of God as the one who speaks eternally, both in the past, the present and the future. So, the view that the Old Testament is a lower form of religious belief or that Israel represents, Israel's faith represents a lower form of religious belief would be something that Scripture's own self-witness doesn't support, but that comes from assumptions outside the text that have to do with modern ways of understanding our present in relation to the past.

Dr. John Oswalt

When we approach Old Testament religion, it's very, very common these days to argue that Old Testament religion is simply one more of the religions of the ancient world, all of which are sort of lower level, not very highly developed. In fact, the religions of Mesopotamia, of Egypt, of Greece, of Rome were very highly developed. These concepts were not those of primitives who couldn't think better. They are the concepts of people who have intentionally chosen these ways of thinking. And the Bible then stands against these, not because it's necessarily more highly developed, but because it's the result of revealed religion and not religion based on speculation, so that we must never say that those religions were not very highly developed. In fact, they were very highly developed.

Question 4:

How do you explain the variation in the names for God in the Pentateuch?

Prof. Thomas Egger

Readers of the Old Testament have thought of different explanations for why God is referred to in the Old Testament by different names. I mean, he's referred to as Yahweh; he's referred to as Elohim, which means God; and he's referred to as El, another word for God. Historical critical scholars in the last few hundred years have

especially focused on these different names as a way to piece apart what they speculate are different sources, different source documents that have been brought into the Pentateuch... I think that that's really kind of an unnatural explanation and that it makes perfect sense that God would be referred to by different names as the narrative goes along, just as we refer to God by different names in our day. We refer to him as Lord, and Father, and God, Jesus, Yahweh, Jehovah. But why? Why in a given passage would he be called one name and in another passage another? Well, there's a long tradition that there is really kind of a different accent to the name Yahweh than to the name Elohim or El within the narrative, that the name Yahweh is the familiar covenant name of God, the fulfiller of his promises to his people. It's the intimate name that's used of God in context, especially where he is the covenant God of Israel; whereas, Elohim, God, is a more cosmic name, a more transcendent name. It pictures God in his majestic rule over all the nations and over all the peoples. And I think that that difference, that explanation, can be helpful and does seem to apply in some places. But I also think that it's helpful to remember that these different names from God are different kinds of words, that they aren't just equivalent names for God, but that one of them is a personal name. Yahweh is a name like my first name is Tom. God's first name, his given personal name, is Yahweh. The name Elohim is technically not a name but a title. It means "God." It refers to his divinity, and also the name El. So that, in usage in the Old Testament, there would be times when it would be appropriate to use one rather than another. For example, if I want to say "your God," I would not use the word Yahweh with a descriptor "your." We don't say "your Yahweh." We say "your God"... In Hebrew, they like to use the divine name El when they use an adjective, so if you say, "a gracious and compassionate God," you would use El rather than Elohim or Yahweh. So, there are just some grammatical rules that govern the usage of the names as well.

Dr. David T. Lamb

In the Pentateuch, God is called a variety of different names: Yahweh, God's personal name; God, in the Hebrew, Elohim; Adonai, which is often translated as "the Lord." It's sometimes a little confusing when we encounter these names for God, in the Pentateuch, but what I like to think about is, as I speak about my wife, and often I will often call her Shannon, or sometimes Shan, or I have, actually, a variety of other names. When I'm talking to my sons I will say "your mother"... But, a lot of it depends on the context, and for my wife Shannon, she is the person that's the most important to me, the person I am closest to. I have a lot of names for her, and likewise, in the Pentateuch, we see a variety of different names that Israel calls their God, and I think we learn about the depth of their relationship, or their intimacy of their relationship, because of this wide variety of names. And so, yes, we can talk about in the different contexts, and it can be a little bit confusing, but I think one of the main reasons is just they had a special relationship, between God and Yahweh.

Dr. John Oswalt

One of the things that has interested Old Testament scholars for many years is the variation of the names for God that are found in the Pentateuch. In fact, some of the earliest critical theories were built upon the idea that there was one document that

used one name and another document that used the other name, and those have been sort of cut and pasted together now. I don't think anyone really believes that today, though there are still those who would say they reflect different communities or that sort of thing. But, what's really going on, I think, is a more general term for God, which is the Hebrew word "Elohim"... It's almost like our English word "deity." Yahweh, on the other hand, the word that regularly gets translated "Lord" in our English versions, that's God's personal name... And so, it's very interesting to see how those two names play off against each other, that if you want to speak of God simply as the divine, the one who stands behind everything, you're probably going to find Elohim. If you want to speak about God who has come personally as the covenant God, the great Creator, you're going to call him Yahweh. And it's very interesting to see those shifts. In Genesis 22, the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, it is Elohim all the way up until Abraham is holding the knife over his son, and then it's the angel of Yahweh who speaks to him, and it's Yahweh through the rest of the story. I don't think that's two different ancient documents. That's a change in the way we're expressing who God is and what he does.

Dr. Carol Kaminski

There are several different names for God used in the Pentateuch. And I think it's actually a wonderful, rich way to look at the character of God. Sometimes a name is given to God by someone, and it relates to something to do with his characteristic. We have, for example, God names like El Roi, "the God who sees." And so, this is using the term "El" which is a term for God, and then it's giving some other characteristic about God, that he's a God who sees, or we might have El Shaddai, and so forth, "God Almighty." So, there are some variations used, but really, the two most important names for God would be Elohim, which is used in Genesis 1, and then Yahweh, which is the personal name of God, or what we call the tetragrammaton used in chapter 2. So, in Genesis 1 you have the name Elohim, which is a common name for God in the ancient world. It's also a plural, it has a plural ending on it, and that doesn't mean that we have a multiplicity of gods, because all the verbs in Genesis chapter 1 are singular. So, "and he said" is singular, and so some scholars have suggested that the plural ending is an honorific way of referring to God. But the term Elohim, Genesis 1 begins with the creation of the world, so it's this kind of cosmic view in chapter 1. And so you have this common term for God. But what is interesting then, in Genesis 2:4, you are then told that the Lord God is the Creator God. Well, why is that important? Because the term "Yahweh" is used in Genesis 2 and 3, and this name of God is what we call the tetragrammaton, and it gets picked up when God comes to Moses and says... You know, Moses says, "Well, who will I say has come to me," and he says, "I AM." Now, "I am" is a form of the same verb "to be," and it's either "I will be" or "I am." And that then gets picked up in Exodus 32-34. Now, here's what I just want to underscore with the divine name: in Exodus 32-34, this is really where God reveals his name. And what the context of it is that here you have the Israelites, Moses is up on the mountain receiving God's law, and the Israelites build an idol, and God wants to destroy them because they have just broken the covenant and disobeyed his commandments. Moses pleads on their behalf, and then God says to Moses, "I'm going to show you... let all my goodness pass before

you. And he proclaims the divine name in Exodus 34:6. And this is really the heart of the Old Testament theology, the divine name, where he says the Lord God who is slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness. And what it means is that this name Yahweh and the character of his name is that he is gracious and compassionate. And, in fact, I think that's the character of God that is seen throughout all the pages of the Old Testament. Nehemiah 9 appeals to it in many places. So, now think about the character of God in Exodus 32–34. Now Moses, who's writing Genesis 2 and 3, so when God comes to Adam, and especially in Genesis 3 in the Fall, it's the Lord God who comes because he's the God who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger. And you know the story with the Fall, that they eat from the fruit, they disobey the command, and yet God in his grace doesn't destroy them. And so, Genesis 3 focuses on the Lord God, I think, to underscore his grace and his mercy. And notably, the serpent doesn't use Yahweh Elohim; he just uses Elohim. So, you can see the contrast even within the narrative that they have theological significance, most importantly the divine name, Yahweh, Yahweh Elohim.

Question 5:

Why do so many scholars teach that there are contradictory theological viewpoints in the Pentateuch?

Dr. Don Collett

One of the reasons why diversity is troubling to people when it comes to reading either one of the Testaments, Old or New Testament, is because they fail to contextualize that diversity in the theological frame of reference that the Bible contextualizes it in. Let me state that more concretely. They don't read it as the revelation or the disclosure of one God speaking in both Testaments. Really, diversity has origins in the inner life of the Trinity. What the Bible is disclosing is the being of God in all its richness. So, no one voice is ever going to be able to fully state that richness, and this is the reason why we have all kinds of different theological viewpoints and diversity in the Old Testament. It's simply a witness to the richness of the reality that Scripture is talking about, which is the Triune God. So, I think it's because they don't read it in that context that they end up saying, well, what we have here is just a bunch of conflicting theological viewpoints. What we actually have is a collection of different perspectives on a very rich reality we call the Triune God who speaks in Christ.

Dr. John Oswalt

The great thing about the Pentateuch is that it is not sort of a homogenized view of theology or of God or of religious truth. It presents the various truths in sort of undiluted form. I've always liked what G.K. Chesterton once said. He said there are no pastels in the Bible, they're all pure colors, and it's up to each generation to mix the colors in the way that is appropriate for that generation. And this is what you have in the Pentateuch. You have strong statements about God's absolute transcendence, and you have strong statements about his nearness, his immanence. And in a real

way, then, as Chesterton had said, it's where each culture, each situation is that we can relate to these truths in various ways. But in the end, they are not truly contradictory. It's not the idea that, well, in one place you have one God and in other places God is many. Not at all. He is the one God, the one Yahweh throughout, but sometimes presented in differing aspects, and sometimes people latch onto those differences. They will argue, "Well, if it was all inspired by God, it ought to be all even, shouldn't it?" Well, that's not the way God did it. He related to different people in different times and places and presented himself to them as they needed to hear him.

Dr. Erika Moore

You know, there are people who will argue that there are contradictory theological viewpoints in the Pentateuch. I think we need to be real careful here. I think many who embrace that sort of view have been trained in the historical critical method to look at sources. But we're never commanded in Scripture to do biblical paleontology, to try to excavate to see what the sources are of the text; we're command to read the text as it stands. And so, I think a lot of disagreement between those with a high view of Scripture and those with a low, has to do with presuppositions. So, somebody with a low view of Scripture, who has embraced the historical critical model, will come and say, "Well, there's Genesis 1 and there's Genesis 2. It's a second creation account, look at the contradictions." Well, I say, "Not so fast." Okay? A typical characteristic of Hebrew narrative is to state something generally and then unpack something important. So, what we have in Genesis 1 is creation stated in general terms, and in chapter 2 we have the zoom-in lens, so to speak, where we have extra time spent on the creation of Adam. And so, when we see that chapter 2 is simply explicating a particular part of chapter 1, there's not a contradiction there. What it is is a focusing in to highlight the creation of humanity. Another great example of those who argue for different theological, contradictory theological viewpoints in the Pentateuch will say, "Deuteronomy 12 argues for the centralization of worship, yet we have people worshipping at any altar at any place." Well, context is king. Deuteronomy 12... What keeps getting repeated by Moses in Deuteronomy? "When you're in the land..." "When you're in the land..." The idea is, Moses, who will not enter the land with the people, is preparing the people for when they enter the Land of Promise. And when they enter the land, at some point they are going to centralize worship. That's not contradicting the practices of the patriarchs before Israel enters the land and becomes a covenant nation before Yahweh.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

There's sometimes a popular belief that there are contradictory theological viewpoints within the Pentateuch, and the reasons for that are kind of interesting. Probably the biggest reason that there is that popular perception is that modern expectations are used in reading the text. So, we bring expectations of precision, perhaps, that Old Testament writers weren't "meeting" and, frankly, modern historians don't meet as well. It's a theological history, it's not a scientific history, although, where it does speak of history, it's important that we accept its basic truthfulness. But when we impose our modern kind of scientific mindset, rationalist mindset, on any piece of

literature, we're going to perceive contradictions. So, we need to read the literature on its own terms, and those perceived contradictions often fall away very quickly, especially if we read it sympathetically rather than with the hubris of modern people. Another reason people might perceive there are theological contradictions is it's an inherently complex matter; the subject matter is God. God is not a simple, single-cell organism. Because God is inherently complex, we would expect the Bible to reflect an inherent complexity about God. And so, there is a unity of the message, just as God is one, but there's also a variety within the message because God is the one and the many, he's the three-in-one. And the Bible, as a reflection of who he is, also reflects those things.

Question 6:

Why is belief in supernatural events so important for a proper understanding of the Bible?

Dr. Larry J. Waters

Belief in the supernatural events of the Bible is extremely important... In Genesis alone we have the six days of creation, we have the flood, we have the exodus itself, we have the ten plagues before the exodus; we have many, many years, 40 years in the wilderness and shoes didn't wear out and food was provided and water was provided. We have all of those things that are brought out by way of a miraculous activity within the Pentateuch itself. And so, if you delete, really, the miraculous from the Scripture, what you basically are doing is deleting God, and if not deleting, at least minimizing him to a God out there somewhere. And so, I think, if we accept the miraculous, we have a better idea, a better concept of who God really is and what the Bible really has to say to us... And this comes out in the providential lives of many of the patriarchs in the Pentateuch itself. And so, once again, it is important that we accept the miraculous if we're going to accept the Bible as God's inspired word.

Rev. Dr. Michael Walker

Belief in supernatural events is so important for a proper understanding of the Bible because the Bible, really, is the story of a supernatural God's acts in history and his promises for the future, which anticipate his supernatural intervention in activities and involvement in this world for the future. That is the story, the essence of the Bible. And it calls us to trust in this continuous, supernatural presence of God and, really, to understand the everyday life of God's people and what it means to be human as inherently supernatural. So, if we don't believe in the supernatural, then the story of the Bible will be distant from us. We won't be able to enter into that story, enter into the world that the Bible describes, which is the real world that we all live in. So, we need to believe in the supernatural so that we can receive the teaching of the Scriptures and the story of the Scriptures as the story in which our own life's story finds its meaning and its purpose and so that we can genuinely trust in the promises of the gospel, which anticipate God's supernatural activity in the future, so we can live

by faith, so that we can live in obedience to the gospel as the Scriptures call us to. That's why it's important for us to believe in the supernatural.

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

It seems to me, as we come to the Bible, to properly understand it that we have to know the God of the Bible, and the God of the Bible is an omnipotent God who has all power. He's a God who can know and predict the future. And so, if we come to the Scripture declaring that we won't accept any miracles or anything supernatural, we really have come to a Scripture that would be less than the God who inspired it. And so, God has those miracles within the Scripture to prove that he is God and that all humankind will ultimately be responsible to him. And so, when we come through Scripture and even get to the places of judgment, if we don't understand that God is the God who created everything and God is the God who can bring about his will when he chooses in this world, we really can't understand and appreciate the Scripture the way we need to. He is a God of miracles. It's a Scripture of miracles as well.

Dr. Douglas Stuart

Supernatural events are all over the place in the Bible because the Bible is a supernatural book from a supernatural God. C.S. Lewis, the great British thinker, Christian, and biblical scholar, along with many other areas in which he was a really smart man, said you really can't read the Bible just as literature the same way you would read other literary works because, he said, the Bible is so entirely holy, it's so sacred, it's so much infused with God's truth. And a big part of who God is, and a big part of what he wants us to realize about him, what he can do in our lives, what he can do for a country, for a culture, for a family, for a continent, is the supernatural. God is not limited by the things that limit us. We're natural, we are human ... easy to discourage; we're easy to get sick; we're easy to marginalize, but God's got the power, and when he wants to, he shows it. And in the Bible, he shows it repeatedly. Supernatural events are one of the things that let us understand who we're dealing with. We're dealing with heaven, not just earth, and the power of God is great enough even to overcome those principalities and powers that plague us so often. So, it's a wonderful thing that the Bible has those stories. They mean a lot and they're not to be put aside. They're to be embraced and appreciated for what they tell us about who it is we're dealing with. Whose word is this? And can he do the same things for us if he needs to and we need to? The answer is, you bet.

Question 7:

Why should we interpret the Pentateuch as coming from the days of Moses?

Dr. John Oswalt

Many people these days would say that the Pentateuch has very little to do with Moses, that it was written far later than he. The problem that I have with such a

position is, that's not what the Pentateuch says. The Pentateuch very clearly says to us that Moses wrote certain portions of the book, particularly the covenant. And that makes sense because covenants were required to be written. So, when the Pentateuch says, Moses wrote it, that makes a good deal of sense. In the same way, when we come to the end of the book of Deuteronomy, we are told Moses wrote this entire law — I think it's referring to the book of Deuteronomy in particular — from beginning to end. So, that's the issue. If the Bible didn't maintain that Moses was responsible for the Pentateuch, we would be free to go many different directions. But the Bible itself calls for this. Now, the question of Genesis, we're not told that Moses wrote Genesis, but I think in the context of the Pentateuch, it makes sense to think that here they are at Sinai, the book of the covenant is being written down; who is this God of the covenant? He's the God of the fathers, as Yahweh told Moses at the burning bush, so, hmm, we really ought to record all of these other traditions, some oral, some written, that have existed before and put them together. So... is Moses responsible for Genesis? I think all the evidence is yes.

Prof. Thomas Egger

I think that the most natural way to read the book of Exodus is to interpret it against the background of the time period and the events which it describes, and as having been written for the people who emerge from that situation, by Moses, God's spokesman and leader in that situation. It has become very popular, or very common, in our day not to interpret the book of Exodus against that historical situation and against that time period. But in classical historical criticism, classical biblical scholarship of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, it was common to assume that this story was a composite narrative based on sources that came, at the earliest, perhaps from the time of King David, and then spanning to the period of the exile and even after. In our own day, it now has become very much the dominant view amongst scholars that the book of Exodus was, in large part, composed after the exile and that, really, the historical situation that lies behind it, the concerns that it's trying to address, are concerns of the Persian period, in Israel, after the exile, especially with the competing interests of the priests in Jerusalem and the landholders and common people outside of Jerusalem, and that it's kind of a compromised document... It's really a very different way to approach the book of Exodus than the book of Exodus itself on the surface seems to invite. And so, I think it does matter what our assumptions are about its background, and if there is a God, and if that God really did reach into history and redeem his people with a mighty hand from Egypt, if he really did raise up a spokesman and a great prophet to speak to his people, it makes sense to me that the great spokesman of his people at that time would have recorded that and that that's what we have in the Exodus narrative.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

Of course, we know that there was editing that went on after the time of Moses, for instance in Genesis where it talks about before there was any king in Israel, and of course, Moses' death in Deuteronomy. We know that there were sources before the time of Moses, but it looks like the substance of it was pulled together in the time of Moses for a couple of reasons that I can mention offhand. One is that the structure of

Deuteronomy fits the structure of Hittite covenants from the time of Moses much better than it fits the majority of covenants from the time of Josiah and other periods. Another is, if you look at the structure of the first part of Genesis where you have Adam, Noah and Abraham, and each of those is connected by a genealogy with ten generations ending in three sons, and they're selective; it doesn't include every name in the genealogy as genealogies often didn't do. But you also notice with each of these, there's a blessing; God blesses them. He says basically be fruitful and multiple to Adam and Noah, and then to Abraham he says something similar to that. There's a curse in each one of them. "Cursed be the serpent and his seed." In Abraham's time it's "cursed be those who curse you." But in Noah's time it's, "cursed be Canaan." Even though it was Ham who did it, Canaan is the one who's cursed. Well, for what generation would that be relevant? Especially for a generation getting ready to go in and take the land. And the land of Canaan gets emphasized over and over again, that the promise of this land, it's something that would be relevant to the generation getting ready to go in and take the land. But it's built even into the structure of how the first cycle of stories is recounted.

Question 8:

What source materials did Moses have available to him when he wrote Genesis?

Rev. Dr. Cyprian K. Guchienda

Moses had several oral traditions that he used when he wrote the Pentateuch because the Jewish tradition carried their stories orally, and stories that were told from generation to generation, and he grew up in a society that passed those stories orally. So he had that content. Unlike today's society where we depend more on things that are written, they had perfected oral tradition more than we can keep it today. We have perfected writing so that's why we are captives of things that are written; we have to check. But for them, the story was told right, and it was checked and rechecked from time to time... So, particularly from African tradition where I come from, there are oral traditions that have been passed from one generation to another, and because there was no alternative of writing it, it was only transmitted orally. There were mechanisms for checking, making sure that it's right and it's protected... That is what happened with the Jews when the Scripture was not written, when God's revelation was not put into writing. It was protected, it was checked, and it was passed over right because they did not have the luxury of writing so that they can go back and check. This is the only way they heard it and they had to protect it so it's submitted right.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

It's reasonable to assume that Moses would have had significant oral tradition available to him when he wrote the book of Genesis. Obviously, he wasn't there to observe all that's related. We know he has written sources that he often polemicizes against to give God's version of history but over against other written histories. But think of how important, for instance, the covenant promises were to Abraham and the

emphasis on multiple generations of blessings, the covenant sign of circumcision to pass down the faith from generation to generation, which would be primarily a household responsibility. So, we know there are specific reasons why the oral history would have been important. We also know in the ancient world in general, oral history was very important, if not primary, at least equal to documentary histories. And so, there's nothing problematic about believing that Moses relied substantially on oral history as long as we incorporate the consideration of inspiration, that God superintended his writing of it. And this relieves us from some kind of a mechanical dictation view of inspiration as if God simply dictated to Moses what to write because we see the personality and the authorial influence, the literary style of Moses, manifesting itself in the book of Genesis.

Dr. David Talley

When Moses wrote what we call "the primeval history," the very old, old, old, old stories that begin the book of Genesis, it's obvious that he had to be using some kind of resources. And so, as we think about that book and especially the structure of it, there is a certain Hebrew word that's used — it's the *toledot*, and it can be translated as "these are the generations of" or "this is the history of"; "this is the story of" — and this word is used throughout the book. And it seems to me as we step back from this book that we understand that these were probably individual stories or tablets that somehow Moses had access to. It doesn't explain that to us, it doesn't tell us that, but these were probably historical documents that he was using, and then, through divinely inspired word from God, he is able to pull these together and to create what is God's perspective on creation, God's perspective on the Fall, God's perspective on the flood. Against all the other ancient Near East documents that are out there, God uses these documents that were already in the possession of the people to set the record straight so that people could know this is where life came from, and this is what happened in the early beginning of time.

Question 9:

Did Moses use any written documents as sources for the content of the Pentateuch?

Dr. Erika Moore

We talk about the "essential Mosaic authorship" of the Pentateuch. Are we to envision Moses sitting down and writing everything firsthand? Or are there any examples of him using written sources in the Pentateuch? And I think there are. If you turn to Genesis 5:1, we're told this is the written account of Adam's line, so it does seem that Moses here is reflecting on some sort of written document that he had before him. And then later on in the book of Numbers, and the account is the journey to the plains of Moab, we're told in Numbers 21:14, "That is why the Book of the Wars of the Lord says..." and he quotes from this thing called the "Book of the Wars of the Lord." Now, we don't have any extant copies of that, but it looks like Moses did indeed have written sources at his disposal when writing the Pentateuch.

Dr. Tom Petter

The question when you think about... the five books of Moses in the German Bible and other traditions... And we have to think about him as a literary scholar writing this magisterial, this awesome piece of literature, five books, you have to remember his background. And we think we don't know much about him, but when you start parsing and examining what we have available to us, we do know quite a bit. This is a young man who is raised among the royalty, the nobility of Egypt, during the New Kingdom era. This is like... this is a time of imperial splendor. I mean, this is an age of great learning, of great art, great culture. And Moses is part of that. It's part of his life... and he knows especially what goes on in Mesopotamia, the great cultural connection to Mesopotamia. This is where you have the law codes, you have these traditions of, great traditions of law and order, the code of Hammurabi, the Sumerian law codes, all that preceded his time, that come hundreds of years before he is even born. And he has access to that. We know there is Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultural relations, connections. So, he has access to these texts and resources. And so when he, inspired by the Spirit, starts bringing together the story of origins, he has the Sumerian flood story, Mesopotamian flood stories, he has all of these texts, these traditions, but here he is penning, or inking, or whatever form that he used, he has a unique perspective, and it's the one perspective from the one and only God, that there was, in fact, a flood, so the Mesopotamian traditions were partially right. There was a universal flood. There was a creation account of how God created everything from the beginning. But now, because of his revelation that he had of Yahweh as the Creator God, and this revelation of Yahweh is one of glory and splendor and grace and law, he has the right take on, this is what really happened... So, yes, he has access to resources as a scholar in Egypt. But that particular revelation, that special revelation that he has been given gives him a unique take because God, yes, does send a flood, but it's a moral underpinning to the flood. It's not, you know, all of a sudden God's angry at man and he just sent a flood. No, there is a reason for it, and it fits into his plan of redemption. So, that's the background to the written resources that Moses has at his disposal, is a very clear background, the Egyptian context, and so there's a sense of trustworthiness to what we have in front of us.

Question 10:

Should we be troubled by the fact that the Pentateuch reflects a form of Hebrew that is much later than the time of Moses?

Dr. Gordon H. Johnston

The Hebrew in the Pentateuch, particularly in the book of Deuteronomy, for example, reflects the type of Hebrew that we generally refer to as classical Hebrew of the Jerusalem dialect. By "classical Hebrew" we mean Hebrew from the period of the early monarchy, the pre-exilic period, and "Jerusalem dialect" because the way that they spoke and wrote Hebrew in Jerusalem was different than in Samaria to the north, more of a southern dialect. This should not be troubling, though, that this would be

from the time later than Moses because we do have in Deuteronomy two songs at the end of book: the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 and then the testament of Moses, Deuteronomy 33. And these songs reflect, appear to reflect a Hebrew that's older than the book as a whole, so we know that we've got some early stuff there. Now, the narrative structure, or the rest of the book is speeches that Moses delivered to the priests. The Hebrew in these speeches could have been updated grammatically from the time of Moses to the time of the monarchy. The question would be, well then, why wouldn't these songs at the end of the book have done that? They tended to, from scribal practices it appears that they tended to leave poetry alone; they wouldn't mess with poetry because the poetic structure is more unusual. And we've got examples elsewhere where we can see that they grammatically updated narrative. They didn't have a problem doing that. As an example of the kind of grammatical updating that we could have, one of the languages, ancient languages that was written near to Hebrew was Hittite. We've got examples of scribes that would take early Hittite texts that were written in the early period and grammatically update them to the later form of Hittite. So, the collection of the laws, the laws of Telipinu, the Hittite, it was originally written in the old Hittite period about 1600 BC. It continued to be copied over the centuries, but around 1200 BC, the Hittite language had changed, so we have a copy of the very same text, but the grammar, morphology, the form of Hittite has changed, so it was more from 1200. That could be very similar to what we have happening in the Hebrew Bible with the Pentateuch from the time of Moses. We know that scribes did this, and there's actually a couple of words in Deuteronomy and in the rest of the Pentateuch that are early forms of particular words that appear in the midst of later Hebrew. So, I think some of those early words give us a clue that the book as a whole was early. Most of the forms got updated, but you've still got some early forms that are still embedded in the text.

Dr. Brian D. Russell

The Pentateuch reflects substantially Moses and what Moses wrote when he was leading God's people towards the Promised Land. But if you learn Hebrew and study the Pentateuch, one of the things you'll find is that the Hebrew actually reflects a later time. And that bothers some people, but I want to suggest it really shouldn't, because a key part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus is ultimately that the things we believe are translatable. I mean, just to take Jesus, Christianity is the only religion whose document — I mean the New Testament — wasn't written in the language that its founder would have spoke most of the time. Jesus would have spoke Hebrew or Aramaic, and its New Testament's written in Greek. And so, that's a powerful point right there, the Bible is translatable. Study a lot of other religions, they'll claim you have to actually learn the original language, and you can only really understand it that way. You can think about other religions, like the Qur'an, you have to learn Arabic, and they even say a Muslim... a translation of the Qur'an is not adequate. So, in a sense, if the Pentateuch's having been updated proves that God wants us to be able to read his word. And so, you know, when would it have been updated? We don't know that precisely. We know if you read the Old Testament, the Scriptures make a powerful appearance during the days of Josiah when he leads a reformation, they find a book of the Law. When you look at the book of Ezra, Ezra the priest, when he

comes back and works with God's people who had returned from exile, it says he reads the Torah. So presumably he has the Pentateuch with him, and he's reading it. So, perhaps it's updated during his time. But the point is, language changes over time, and it's important that God's word preserves what was originally said. But the good news is the Pentateuch that we have shows that God's people had already moved from older forms of words to make sure that the words would continue to communicate. And so, in a sense, instead of bothering us, we should be grateful that the gospel is translatable over time.

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The Primeval History

LESSON
ONE

A PERFECT WORLD



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The Primeval History

Lesson One

A Perfect World

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, I was driving my car and I came across a train that had jumped its tracks. And of course it just sat there going nowhere. When a train derailed off the path it was made to follow, it simply sits there, and it's one big mess.

Well, in the beginning of time, God laid a track, or a path, for his creation to follow and this path led toward a grand and glorious destiny for God's creation. But time and again, human beings have failed to follow God's path for his creation. We have derailed the world and ended up with one big mess.

In this series of lessons, we will be learning about the path that God laid down for his creation in the earliest years of world history — what we often call in Christian circles “creation ordinances.” And we will be exploring Genesis 1–11, often known as *The Primeval History*. These chapters of the Bible will help us see the amazing path God wanted the people of Israel to follow under the leadership of Moses. And they will also show us the path his people should follow even today.

We have entitled our first lesson, “A Perfect World” because we will focus our attention on Genesis 1:1–2:3, the passage where Moses first described how God shaped the world into a perfect order that greatly pleased him.

As we will see, this ideal world anticipated or foreshadowed the destiny toward which God took Israel in the days of Moses — the same destiny toward which God takes all his people throughout history. It not only shows us how things were in the beginning, but also how life should be now, and how our world will certainly be at the end of our age.

This lesson divides into four parts: First, we will present an overview of the primeval history of Genesis 1–11. Second, we will narrow our focus to Genesis 1:1–2:3, looking first at its literary structure. Third, we will investigate the original meaning of this portion of Genesis in the light of its structure. And fourth, we will look for the proper modern applications of this passage. Let's begin with an overview of the entire primeval history of Genesis 1–11.

OVERVIEW

Our approach to Genesis 1–11 may seem a bit unusual at first. So, we should explain our basic strategy. At least three main ideas will guide our study of this part of the Bible: first, the inspiration of these chapters; second, the literary background behind these chapters; and third, the purpose for which these chapters were written.

In the first place, we are firmly committed to the divine inspiration of all of Scripture, including Genesis 1–11.

INSPIRATION

Our evangelical understanding of inspiration reminds us of two very important features about this part of the book of Genesis: first, its reliability, and second, its intentional design.

Reliability

We affirm in the strongest terms that this part of the Bible is completely reliable because it is divinely inspired. Now, many historical issues come to the foreground when we study this part of the Bible, and some of these issues have not been fully resolved. But for our purposes it will suffice to say that divine inspiration implies historical reliability. Moses intended his original readers to receive this portion of Genesis as historically true. Now, just as with all Scripture, we have to interpret these passages carefully so that we don't misunderstand their historical dimensions. Nevertheless, it is clear that other biblical writers, and even Jesus himself, believed that the stories of Genesis 1–11 were trustworthy history. These lessons will build on the belief that these chapters are true and reliable records of what actually happened in ancient times.

While we believe that the primeval history is reliable, we must always remember that God inspired Moses to select and arrange the content of these chapters according to a particular design.

Design

Think about it this way: Genesis 1–11 covers the whole history of the world from creation to the days of Abraham, who lived around 2000-1800 B.C. Now we would all agree that Moses left out many more world events from that period of time than he included in these eleven short chapters. So, to understand Genesis 1–11 we must take note of this selectivity as well as of the arrangement of these chapters. As we notice how Moses intentionally designed this primeval history, we will be able to answer some very important questions. Why did God inspire Moses to include this little information? And why did God have Moses arrange these chosen materials as he did?

To understand why Moses wrote as he did, we must first look into the background of the literary traditions that existed in his day.

BACKGROUND

The literature of the ancient Near East is very important to our purposes first because other primeval accounts were widely available to Moses, and second, because Moses actually interacted with other primeval accounts.

Availability

Archaeological research has demonstrated that Moses was not the first person to write about the world's origins. To be sure, God inspired Moses, so that his account is true. But Moses wrote in a day when many nations and groups in the Near East had already written many myths and epics about primeval history.

Some of these ancient texts are well known. Many people have heard of things like the *Enuma Elish*, or the Babylonian creation story, or "Tablet Eleven" of the *Gilgamesh Epic*, or the Babylonian flood story. An assortment of primeval accounts were written in Egypt and Canaan as well. These and many other documents from the ancient world dealt with the origins and early history of the universe.

And not only that, but many of these ancient Near Eastern documents were actually available to Moses in his youth. Moses was educated in the royal courts of Egypt, and his writings indicate that he knew the literature of the ancient world. As Moses wrote his own divinely-inspired and true account of the primeval period, he was quite aware of other literary traditions in the ancient Near East.

Knowing that other primeval accounts were available to Moses, we are now in a position to ask another question: How did Moses interact with the myths and epics of other cultures?

Interaction

As we will see throughout this series of lessons, Moses interacted with other primeval traditions both negatively and positively.

On the one hand, Moses wrote his history of the early times to counter falsehood with truth. We must always remember that the Israelites Moses led had been subjected to all kinds of pagan influence. They were tempted to believe that the world resulted from the efforts and struggles of many gods. They either rejected the true faith of their patriarchs, or they mixed this truth with the religious beliefs of other nations. In many respects, Moses wrote his account of the primeval times to teach the people of God the way things actually happened. He sought to establish the truth of Yahwism against the falsehoods of other religions.

At the same time, Moses accomplished this negative purpose of refuting false myths by interacting positively with the literary traditions of his time. His writings purposefully resembled other ancient near eastern writings so that he could communicate God's truth in ways that Israel could understand. Although there are many similarities between Moses' account and several important texts, recent archaeological research has pointed to a dramatic similarity with one particular literary tradition.

In 1969 an important document was published under the title *Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood*. Now we cannot be sure of how far back the tradition of this document reaches, but it is important to us because it brings together in one story many pieces which previously had been known only separately.

The *Atrahasis Epic* follows a basic threefold structure: It begins with the creation of humanity. The creation of humanity is followed by a record of early human history, which focuses especially on the corruption of the world due to the human race. And then finally, this corruption is rectified by a flood of judgment and a new world order.

Comparing Genesis with *Atrahasis* strongly supports the idea that Moses formed his record with an intentional overarching structure. At first glance, Genesis 1 through 11 may seem to be a loose collection of passages that move from one topic to another without much continuity, but simply noticing the broad literary parallels with *Atrahasis* helps us to see that Moses' primeval history holds together as a single story line with an overarching structure.

Genesis 1–11 divides into three parts: first the ideal creation in 1:1–2:3; second, the corruption of world due to human sin in Genesis 2:4–6:8; and then finally, the flood and new order in Genesis 6:9–11:9.

Now we are in position to ask a third question: Why did Moses write Genesis 1–11? What did he intend to convey to his Israelite readers?

PURPOSE

On a very basic level, we can be sure that Moses wanted to teach Israel the truth about the past. He wanted them to know what their God had done in the early years of world history. Just as the myths of other nations were intended to convince people of the perspectives of those myths, Moses sought to convince Israel of the historical truths of their faith.

But upon closer examination, we are going to see an additional purpose behind Moses' primeval history. Specifically, he also wrote in order to influence Israel to conform themselves to God's will. Now, this additional purpose is not readily apparent to everyone who reads Genesis 1–11, but it becomes clearer once we realize that other primeval accounts shared this same purpose as well.

Before we can understand the purpose of primeval accounts of the ancient world, we have to realize that many ancient Near Eastern cultures believed that the universe was structured or patterned according to a supernatural cosmic wisdom. In its ideal state, the universe operated according to this wisdom or divine order. And it was the responsibility of every person in society, from the emperor to the slave, to conform as much as possible to this divine order.

Now what does this have to do with primeval myths and epics in the ancient near east? The cultures around Israel had primeval accounts which spoke about the events near the beginning of time. They did this in order to explain the structures, which the gods had erected in the world in ancient times. Their traditions regarding the primeval times were not merely concerned with early world history. They wrote their primeval accounts to justify their current religious and social programs. The writers of these texts, who were often priests, pointed to the ways the gods had originally arranged the world in order to show how things were supposed to be in their own day. At times, they focused specifically on religious matters, such as temples, and priests, and rituals. Which temple was favored by the gods, and which priestly family was to serve? At other times, they were concerned with broader social structures, such as political power and laws. Who

was to be king? Why were some people slaves? Their myths called the people to conform to the creation ordinances of the gods, the structures they had set for the universe.

As we will see in these lessons, Moses wrote Genesis 1–11 for very similar reasons. On the one hand, Moses wrote his primeval history with an explicit focus on the ways Yahweh had created and ordered the world in ancient times. From creation to the tower of Babel, Moses told Israel about the way things happened long ago. Yet he did not do this simply out of historical interest. As Moses led the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land, he faced many opponents who believed that he had actually misled the children of Israel. And in response to this opposition, the primeval history demonstrated that Moses' policies and goals for Israel were true to God's design for the universe. As a result, to resist Moses' program was to resist the ordinances of God.

In his record of the ideal creation in Genesis 1:1–2:3, Moses showed that Israel was actually moving toward God's ideal by going toward Canaan. In his record of the world's corruption in 2:4–6:8, Moses showed that Egypt was a place of corruption and hardship, which resulted from God's curse on sin. Finally, in his record of the flood and the resulting new order in Genesis 6:9–11:9, Moses showed Israel that he was bringing them into a new order with many blessings, just as Noah before him had brought new order and blessings to the world. These primeval facts fully justified Moses' vision for Israel's future. If he could convince Israel of these truths, then the faithful among Israel would turn away from Egypt and take the land of Canaan as their divine inheritance.

Now that we have introduced our general approach to the primeval history of chapters 1–11, we are in a position to look at the details of the first section of Genesis: God's Ideal World described in Genesis 1:1–2:3.

LITERARY STRUCTURE

When most Evangelicals think about the opening chapter of the Bible, they think about all the controversies that surround its interpretation. Did God create the world in six ordinary days? Were the “days” of Genesis 1 great ages or epochs? Or is Genesis 1 a somewhat poetic, non-historical celebration of God's creative activity? All of these positions are acceptable within evangelical circles. Although my own view is that Genesis 1 teaches that God made the world as we know it today in six ordinary days, not all Bible-believing Christians hold to this view.

As we approach the opening chapters of Genesis in these lessons, our concern is not so much with historical issues like these. We are more concerned with literary questions. We are more interested in how and why Moses wrote this chapter. What literary structures appear in this passage? And how do these structures help us understand Moses' purpose?

We should begin by noting that this passage has three major steps, namely, a beginning, a middle, and an ending.

Moses' creation account begins with 1:1-2. We may summarize the content of these verses as the “dark chaotic world.” Chapter 1:3-31 form a middle section of this material which contains the so-called “six days of creation,” or what we will call the “six

days of ordering” creation. Finally, 2:1-3 is the Sabbath day, or as we will call it, the “ideal world.”

We will explore all three portions of this structure in this lesson, beginning with the dark chaotic world. Second, we will investigate the last section which deals with the ideal world. And finally, we will explore the six days of ordering. Let’s look first at the dark chaotic world of 1:1-2.

DARK CHAOTIC WORLD

Looking at the first portion of Genesis 1, we see a very important dramatic tension between the chaos covering the earth and the spirit of God.

The opening of 1:1-2 sets the stage by giving a title in verse 1, and by describing the initial condition of the world in verse 2. Listen to the way Moses put it in 1:2:

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters (Genesis 1:2).

This verse introduces the dramatic tension that flows through this entire chapter. On one side of this tension, the world is “formless and empty,” or as it is said in Hebrew, *tōhû wābōhû* (תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ). This Hebrew expression does not occur frequently enough in the Bible for us to know precisely what it means. But many scholars believe that it meant that the world was uninhabitable, hostile toward human life, much like a desert or wilderness is inhospitable to human life. So, at the beginning of this passage, we see that an uninhabitable, dark, primordial, chaotic deep covered the entire earth.

The second element in the dramatic tension also appears in 1:2. Moses wrote that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” The Hebrew term used here is *merachefet* (מְרַחֶפֶת) which means to “fly above” or to “encircle above.”

So we see a very dramatic picture right at the beginning of this passage. On one side we see chaos on the earth; on the other side we see the Spirit of God hovering above the chaos. In effect, God was ready to move into action to remedy the chaos which covered the earth. This initial dramatic tension raised several questions: What will the Spirit of God do? What will happen to the chaos?

With this initial dramatic tension of the opening verses in mind, we are in a position to look at the resolution of this tension in the final section of Moses’ creation account: the ideal world in Genesis 2:1-3.

IDEAL WORLD

This section is structured very simply. It begins in 2:1 with a summary statement that God had finished his creative work, and it concludes in 2:2-3 with God at rest. We read these words in Genesis 2:2-3:

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Genesis 2:2-3).

When Moses described God as entering a state of Sabbath rest, granting a special blessing to that day and making it holy, he declared that the tension between the chaos and God's hovering Spirit had been resolved. God had subdued the darkness, ruled over the chaotic deep, and delighted in his ideally ordered world. The creation story comes to an end with this delightfully peaceful vision of the universe in perfect harmony.

Now that we have seen how Moses' creation account begins and ends, we should look at the middle portion of this passage which describes how the tension between the chaotic world and God's hovering Spirit was resolved.

SIX DAYS OF ORDERING

This passage teaches that God restrained the chaos by ordering the world according to a wondrous six day plan described in 1:3-31. The central focus of this material becomes clear when we see that Moses repeatedly introduced the actions with the phrase, "And God said." This is because God is the main character of this material, and his powerful word is the focus of these verses.

God's mere word brought magnificent order to the world. Unlike many of the mythological gods from other cultures, the God of Israel faced no struggles and no battles as he created. He simply spoke, and the world took its proper order. Beyond this, God's spoken word displayed his powerful wisdom. God put the world into the order that seemed best to him.

Many interpreters have recognized that the days of God's ordering creation fall into two sets of three: days 1 through 3 and days 4 through 6. The relationships between these two sets of days have been described in many ways, and there are multiple interconnections.

One helpful way to introduce ourselves to these patterns is to draw upon the description of the earth in Genesis 1:2. You will recall that Moses said the earth was formless and empty, *tōhū wābōhū* (תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ). These terms may be used to explain the significance of the two sets of three days.

On one side, during the first three days, God dealt with the fact that the earth was "formless." That is to say, he brought form to his creation by separating one area from another and shaping spheres or domains within his creation. On the other side, during the last three days, God dealt with the fact that the chaotic world was "empty" or "void." God's solution was to fill up the various domains he had created with inhabitants.

Think about the first three days. On day one, God separated the domain of day from the night. Even before there was a sun, God caused light to shine in the darkness of the dark, chaotic world.

On day two, God separated the area of waters below and waters above by stretching a dome, or firmament, above the earth. This divine action caused what we now call the atmosphere of our planet, separating the water on earth from the moisture in the sky above.

On day three, God separated the territory of dry land from the seas. The oceans were gathered into regions of the earth, and the land appeared. Vegetation began to grow on the dry land. So it is that on the first three days, God brought form to a formless world. He erected the domains of light and darkness, the sky separating waters above and waters below, and the dry land of the earth.

According to Moses' record, once God dealt with the formlessness of the earth by creating domains during the first three days, he then dealt with the emptiness of the earth in the last three days by placing inhabitants in these domains.

On day four God placed the sun, moon, and stars in the heavens to fill up the domains of light and darkness which he had formed on the first day. These heavenly bodies were put in the sky to rule over the day and night and to keep them separate.

On the fifth day, God placed birds in the air and sea creatures in the oceans. These inhabitants filled the domains of waters above and below which had been formed on the second day.

Finally, on the sixth day God placed animals and humanity on the dry land. These inhabitants filled up the domain of the dry land which God had caused to rise out of the sea on the third day.

Moses gathered the whole of creation into these domains and their inhabitants. In a word, God spent six days bringing a splendid order to the dark chaotic world. His work was so wonderful that six times God said:

“It is good” (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25).

And after he made humanity to live on the dry land, he said:

“It is very good” (Genesis 1:31).

Moses made it very clear that God was wonderfully pleased with what he had done.

So we see that Genesis 1:1–2:3 has a very intentional, complex structure. The passage begins with the world in chaos and God about to move upon it. For six days God spoke order into the chaotic world. Consequently, on the seventh day God delighted in the ideal order he had brought to the world, and he enjoyed his Sabbath rest.

Now that we have seen the large literary structure of Genesis 1:1–2:3, we are in a position to see how the original meaning of this passage is conveyed.

ORIGINAL MEANING

We have already seen that on a large scale Moses' primeval history was intended to validate Israel's exodus and conquest by showing how they were in accordance with the order God had established in the early history of the world. But how did this general purpose show itself in the particular account of 1:1–2:3? How did Moses connect his ministry to Israel with the creation story?

We will explore how Moses did this by looking once again at the three main parts of Genesis 1:1–2:3. First, we will look at the dark chaotic world. Then we will move to the last section of the ideally ordered world. And finally, we will return to the middle portion of the passage where God ordered the world. Let's look first at 1:1-2, the dark chaotic world.

DARK CHAOTIC WORLD

For our purposes, the most important feature of the first two verses of Genesis is the dramatic tension introduced in verse 2. The manner in which Moses described the dramatic tension between the chaotic world and the Holy Spirit made it clear that he was not only writing about creation, but was also writing about Israel's exodus.

On the one hand, you will recall that in Genesis 1:2 Moses described the earth as "formless," or *tōhû*. On the other hand, he described the Spirit of God as "hovering," or in Hebrew, *merachefet*.

The significance of this scene becomes clear when we look at a passage in which Moses alluded to this dramatic portrait from Genesis. In Deuteronomy 32:10-12 Moses used the terminology of Genesis 1:2 to draw special attention to the connection between Israel's exodus and the creation account. Listen to what he says in these verses:

In a desert land [the Lord] found him, in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions. The Lord alone led him; no foreign god was with him (Deuteronomy 32:10-12).

These verses are important because they are the only other place where Moses used the terms "formless" and "hovering" in all of his writings.

In verse 10, the term here translated "barren" is the Hebrew word *tōhû*, which appears in Genesis 1:2 as "formless." Also, in verse 11, the term translated "hovers" is *merachefet*, the term used in Genesis 1:2 when the Spirit of God "hovers" over the deep.

Moses put these two terms together in Deuteronomy 32 in order to connect it solidly with Genesis 1. But just how did the use of these terms draw this connection? What did the terms "barren" and "hover" mean in Deuteronomy 32?

In the first place, Moses applied the term "barren" to Egypt. In 32:10 we read these words:

In a desert land [the Lord] found him, in a barren and howling waste (Deuteronomy 32:10).

In the second place, Moses used the term "hover" for God's presence with Israel, probably the pillar of smoke and fire, as he led the nation toward the Promised Land. In 32:10-11 we read these words:

He guarded him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young (Deuteronomy 32:10-11).

In many respects, we may treat Deuteronomy 32:10-12 as Moses' commentary on his own work in Genesis 1:2. It gives us insight into his intention as he wrote the first chapter of Genesis.

Deuteronomy 32 helps us understand that Moses saw a parallel situation between the creation and Israel's deliverance from Egypt. Moses wrote that both creation and Israel's deliverance from Egypt involved chaotic, uninhabitable worlds. He also wrote that God moved into the original chaotic world by hovering, much as he hovered over Israel when he delivered them from Egypt.

From these parallels between creation and the Exodus, we can see that Moses wrote about the dark chaotic world not simply to tell Israel about the creation; he also presented God's work at creation as a prototype, a pattern, or a paradigm, which explained what God was doing for the nation of Israel in his day. When Moses wrote about God's original work in creation, he did so to show his readers that they had not made a mistake in following him out of Egypt. Instead, the creation account proved how their deliverance from Egypt was a mighty act of God. God was re-ordering the world by delivering Israel from the chaos of Egypt, like he did in the beginning. God now hovered over Israel like he hovered over the creation in the beginning. Rather than being a mistake, the Exodus from Egypt was God at work bringing his desired order back to the world. In a word, Israel's deliverance from Egypt was nothing less than a re-creation.

With this parallel between the beginning of Genesis chapter 1 and Israel's exodus experience in mind, we can see this perspective confirmed as we look at the final portion, the ideally ordered world in 2:1-3.

IDEAL WORLD

You will recall that the creation story ends with God entering his rest. The Hebrew term for "rest" in Genesis 2:2-3 is *shabbat* (שָׁבַת), or as we say it, "Sabbath." And this terminology connects the creation story to Israel's exodus in yet another way.

Moses and the Israelites used the term *shabbat* primarily to refer to Sabbath observances which they would enjoy according to the law of Moses. In fact, in the listing of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, Moses explained that Israel was to observe the Sabbath because of what God had done in Genesis 2.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy... For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day (Exodus 20:8-11).

When Israel heard in Genesis that God rested on the seventh day, they could not help but relate the Genesis account to their own Sabbath observances and to the Ten Commandments.

Although the Israelites kept Sabbath in some measure in the wilderness, it is important to realize that the full extent of Sabbath worship could only take place in the Promised Land. The Israelites were to keep a weekly Sabbath, as we find in Exodus 20:8-11. But they were also to keep other holy days or Sabbaths. For instance, we learn from Leviticus 25 that they were also to observe every seventh year as a Sabbath year by leaving the ground fallow. Israel was also to keep the great year of Jubilee every fiftieth year when all debts were forgiven and all the families were to return to their original land inheritances. In Moses' law, the full worship of God in Sabbath observance was much more complex than anything the Israelites observed as they wandered through the wilderness.

Because the full observance of Sabbath could only take place as Israel entered the land, Moses often spoke of Canaan as a land of "rest," or the "resting place," using the Hebrew terms *nuach* (נָחַ) or *menucha* (מְנוּחָה), which are often closely associated with *shabbat* (Sabbath). In a number of places, Moses described the Promised Land as Israel's resting place where the nation would finally observe worship as God's law required. For instance, in Deuteronomy 12:10-11 we read these words:

But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety. Then to the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name — there you are to bring everything I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the Lord (Deuteronomy 12:10-11).

We see in this passage that the full observance of Sabbath — the worship of God — would take place only after Israel had entered the land of rest.

For Moses, Sabbath stood for more than individuals and families setting apart a day for quiet worship. Sabbath was a central dimension of Moses' vision of dwelling in the land of rest, worshipping and celebrating at the special place where God would place his Name. This is why in Psalm 95:11 God spoke of those who were forbidden to enter the land of Canaan in this way:

So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest" (Psalm 95:11).

This close connection between Sabbath and the full national worship of God in the Promised Land explains why Moses ended his account of creation with God entering his Sabbath rest. Moses was explaining to the Israelites that just as God had moved the earth from chaos to Sabbath, he was moving Israel from the chaos of Egypt to the goal of Sabbath in the Land of Promise. Moses was leading Israel to the place of rest, the land of Canaan. And those who resisted Moses' program were not merely resisting a human plan. They were actually resisting God's efforts to bring his people into conformity with the ideal structures of the universe. Leaving Egypt and entering the Land of Promise was nothing less than lining up with God's perfect plan for the creation.

Now that we have seen how the chaotic beginning and Sabbath end of the creation story explained the true nature of what God was doing for Israel through Moses, we should look briefly at some of the elements of the middle portion of the days of ordering in Genesis 1:3-31. How did Moses link the days of creation to his ministry?

SIX DAYS OF ORDERING

There are many links between the days of creation and Israel's exodus, but we will look at only two of these: first, the connections with the deliverance from Egypt, and second, the goal of possessing the Promised Land.

Deliverance from Egypt

In the first place, in delivering Israel from Egypt, God displayed the same kind of power he demonstrated in the ordering of creation in Genesis 1. On one side of the picture, God reversed the order established at creation by sending plagues on the Egyptians. For example, rather than waters teeming with life as in the beginning, the waters of Egypt became deadly and the fish died when God turned the water into blood. Rather than humans having dominion over the living things as God ordained in the beginning, frogs, gnats, insects and locusts ruled over the Egyptians. The separation of light and darkness at creation was overturned as darkness covered the land of Egypt even during the daytime. And rather than the ground bringing forth vegetation, hail, fire and locusts destroyed all the crops in Egypt. Rather than being fruitful and multiplying, both Egyptian animals and people died in large numbers. In these and many other ways, the curses on Egypt reversed the order God had established in the six days of Genesis 1. During the time of the plagues, the land of Egypt truly regressed toward the primordial chaos. It is no wonder then that Moses summoned Israel to leave that place, calling it a formless, barren wasteland.

Any Israelite who believed that life was good in Egypt had to reckon with Moses' creation account. Their experience in Egypt stood in stark contrast to the way the Egyptians themselves thought about their land. The Egyptians believed it was a land blessed by the gods, and apparently at least some Israelites had believed this as well. But Moses made it clear that Egypt had become the opposite of God's ideally ordered world.

While this contrast with Egypt is plain enough, the six days of creation also had a positive correspondence to the deliverance from Egypt. While the Egyptians saw their land regress into the primordial chaos, the Israelites saw God ordering the world in their favor in ways that resembled the six days of creation. Their waters remained fresh and life-giving. They were not overrun by frogs and locusts. They enjoyed light while the Egyptians suffered in darkness. Israelite fields remained productive. Their animals were protected, and the Israelites multiplied while they were in Egypt.

And more than this, in an astounding, dramatic display of his control over creation, God held back the Red Sea and caused dry land to appear before the Israelites, just as it had appeared on the third day of creation. The natural wonders God performed

on Israel's behalf were not unprecedented. In many ways, they recalled the ways God ordered the world in the days of Genesis 1.

These correspondences between the way God ordered the earth in Genesis 1 and the way he delivered Israel from Egypt demonstrated to Moses' readers that God's work on their behalf paralleled his work of creation. In their exodus from Egypt, God reshaped the world as he had in the beginning.

Not only did the deliverance from Egypt recall the days of creation, but the order which God established in the beginning also anticipated the way life would be in the land of Canaan.

Possession of Canaan

When Israel reached the Land of Promise, nature would be properly ordered with fertility and joy. This is why God called Canaan a land flowing with milk and honey. In addition to this, in the Promised Land, the Israelites would take the proper place of the image of God as it was established in the sixth day.

Notice especially that in Genesis 1:28, God told the human race:

Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground (Genesis 1:28).

Although Israel had experienced some of this blessing, even in Egypt, it was in the land of Canaan that God would afford Israel this honor in even greater measure. Under Moses' leadership, the Israelites were on their way to the place where they would fulfill this ideal position in the creation. Listen to what God promised would happen to the faithful Israelites in the land of Israel in Leviticus 26:9:

I will look on you with favor and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will keep my covenant with you (Leviticus 26:9).

Here the allusion to Genesis 1:28 is obvious. God said in Genesis 1:28, "Be fruitful and increase in number." In Leviticus 26:9 he said that he would make them fruitful and increase their numbers in the land.

The land of Canaan would be like the wonderful world God ordered in the beginning. Canaan would be a place of natural harmony where the image of God would be able to fulfill its original role in the earth.

We have touched only on a few of the ways the six days of creation connect to Israel's experience in the days of Moses. But we see from this sampling that Moses' record of how God ordered the universe in the first six days was not simply a report of what had happened at the beginning of time. He described the six days of creation in ways that helped his Israelite readers to see clearly what was happening in their own lives. Just as God had moved the cosmos from chaos to Sabbath by ordering nature in

certain ways, God was taking Israel from the chaos of Egypt to Sabbath rest in Canaan by re-ordering the world on their behalf.

We can only imagine the reaction of the Israelites when they heard Moses tell them about the creation of the world. They would have realized what was happening to them was no accident. By redeeming them from Egypt and taking them to Canaan, God was moving in the world as he had done in the beginning to bring an ideal order to the universe. Israel's salvation was a re-creation, and they were to follow Moses into greater and greater experiences of that re-creation.

Now that we have seen the original meaning of Genesis 1:1–2:3, we should move to our final topic, the modern application of the creation account. In applying this text, we will closely follow the ways the New Testament elaborated on the themes of this passage.

MODERN APPLICATION

The writers of the New Testament relied heavily on Genesis 1 to tell them about God's creation of the world. They gave every indication that they believed in the reliability of Moses' account. Yet, as important as this fact may be, the New Testament writers also elaborated on Moses' central purpose as we have outlined it here in this lesson.

Just as Moses saw creation as a prototype of Israel's redemption from Egypt, the New Testament looks at Genesis 1:1–2:3 as a prototype of a much greater redemption — the salvation that comes in Christ. The New Testament teaches that all the experiences of salvation and judgment which Israel saw in the days of the Old Testament anticipated the great and final day when God would bring salvation and judgment through his son, Jesus. This belief led New Testament writers to approach Moses' account of creation with a special focus on Christ. Just as Israel was to see her own exodus in the light of creation, New Testament writers looked at Christ in the light of creation.

Whenever we explore the New Testament's teaching on the redemptive work of Christ, we must always remember that New Testament writers realized that Christ did not bring redemption to the world all at once. Instead, they believed that Christ brought great salvation and judgment to the world in three interconnected stages of his kingdom.

In the first place, Christ accomplished much for the salvation of his people when he first came to earth. We may call this period of Christ's first coming, the inauguration of the kingdom. The New Testament looks to Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension, as well as to Pentecost and the foundational ministries of the apostles, as the beginning of Christ's great redemption.

In the second place, the New Testament writers understood that Christ's kingdom continues now that he has left this earth. During this time, God's saving grace spreads over the world through the preaching of the gospel. The whole history of the church after the apostles and until the return of Christ comprises the continuation of salvation in Christ.

In the third place, the New Testament teaches that salvation will come in its fullness at the consummation of the kingdom, when Christ returns in glory. We will see

his victory over wickedness, the dead in Christ will rise, and we will reign with him over the world. The salvation begun at Christ's first coming and continuing today will be completed when he returns at the consummation.

These three stages of Christ's kingdom are so essential for understanding the ways New Testament writers elaborated on Moses' creation that we should look at each of them separately. Following the example of Moses writing to Israel, New Testament writers applied the creation account of Genesis to Christ's salvation in the inauguration, continuation, and consummation of Christ's kingdom. Let's look first at the ways the New Testament relates the first chapter of Genesis to the inauguration of the kingdom.

INAUGURATION

How does the New Testament use creation as a lens for interpreting the inauguration of Christ's kingdom? Well, on several occasions the New Testament speaks of the first coming of Christ as God's re-creation, his reshaping of the cosmos. Consider first the opening words of the gospel of John. In John 1:1-3 we read these words:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made (John 1:1-3).

Notice that John's gospel starts off, "In the beginning." We all realize that these words come from the opening words of Genesis 1:1 where Moses wrote:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).

From the outset, John put his readers in the framework of the creation account in Genesis. Then John went on to say that Christ was the person of the Trinity who made all things; he was the Word of God, spoken at creation, by whom the world was first made.

Although these verses begin with a clear reference to the creation story, as we continue to read in John 1, we find that John subtly shifted from Genesis to another set of events that paralleled the creation account. Listen to what he wrote in the next verses, in John 1:4-5:

In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it (John 1:4-5).

At this point John continued to draw upon the themes of Genesis 1, especially the theme of the *light* which God brought to the dark chaotic world on the first day. Yet, instead of simply speaking of Jesus as the light of Genesis, John pointed to the incarnation of Christ as the light shining into the darkness of the world caused by sin. By shifting from creation to the coming of Christ, John revealed that in Christ's shining against the sinful darkness of the world, God moved against the chaos of the world, just as he had done in the beginning.

A similar motif appears in 2 Corinthians 4:6. There Paul explained the glory of his ministry in this way:

For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Here Paul directly referred to Genesis 1 in the words, “God ... said ‘Let light shine out of darkness.’” He focused first on the original ordering of creation with the appearance of light, but then drew attention to an important parallel to the creation story — God also “made his light shine in our hearts” when “the glory of God” was seen “in the face of Christ.”

The apostle said that the inauguration of Christ’s kingdom — that time when Christ’s face could be seen on earth — was best understood when it was related to the prototype of God’s original creative work. The same glory God displayed in the appearance of light in the beginning was also revealed at Christ’s first coming into the world of darkness.

From these two passages we find an essential element in the Christian approach to Moses’ creation account. Followers of Christ find in Genesis 1 a portrait, an anticipation, of what God did in the first coming of Christ, the inauguration of the kingdom.

In many ways, you and I face the kind of temptation that the Israelites following Moses faced. God did something wonderful when Christ first came to this world, just as he did when he first delivered Israel from Egypt. Yet, we often fail to see how magnificent God’s work in Christ 2,000 years ago actually was. From an uninformed human vantage point, Christ’s life does not look very important. It can easily be brushed off as just one of many insignificant events that occurred in those times. When we are tempted to think this way about Christ, we must remember the outlook of the New Testament. Christ’s appearance on earth was the beginning of God’s final re-ordering of the world. God was delivering the world from the chaotic darkness of sin and death. Jesus’ first coming began the process by which God would make his creation a wonderful, eternally life-giving place for him and his image to dwell in glory forever. We are right to place our faith in Christ, and in him alone.

So far, we have seen that the New Testament uses the creation story to explain the significance of Christ’s first coming. Now we may see that the New Testament considers the continuation of the kingdom, the period between the first and second comings of Christ, to be a re-creation as well.

CONTINUATION

One familiar passage which illustrates this outlook is 2 Corinthians 5:17:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The King James Version translates this verse to say that when a person is in Christ he becomes “a new creature.” This translation is unfortunate because it fails to convey Paul’s allusion to the creation account of Genesis 1. The Greek expression is *ktisis* (κτίσις), which is properly translated “creation” (as in most modern translations), not “creature.” In fact, this portion of the passage may actually be translated, “There is a new creation.” Paul’s concept seems to be that when people come to Christ in saving faith, they become part of a new realm, a new world, a new creation.

In this light we see that during the continuation of the kingdom men and women experience the new creation when they place their faith in Christ. In this sense, the Genesis account of creation becomes a way of understanding properly what happens to everyone who hears, believes, and follows Christ. As we become part of God’s new creation, we begin to enjoy the wonder of God’s ideal order for the world.

For this reason, it is not surprising that Paul also described the process of an individual’s salvation in another way that drew upon Moses’ creation account. In Colossians 3:9-10 we read these words:

You have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator (Colossians 3:9-10).

In this passage, the apostle described what happens to the followers of Christ in terms of Genesis 1. We are “renewed ... in the image of [our] Creator.” Of course, Paul referred to Genesis 1:27 where Moses said that God’s ideal world included Adam and Eve who were created “in the image of God.” During the continuation of the kingdom of Christ, we find that we are constantly “being renewed” in a lifelong process of regaining the status that our first parents held as God’s images.

These two passages demonstrate that the New Testament used Moses’ creation account as a standard for understanding Christ’s work, not only in the inauguration of the kingdom, but also in its continuation.

Of course, the New Testament writers took the themes of Moses’ creation story to one final step. Not only did they look at Christ’s first coming as the beginning of a new creation, and to the continuation of the kingdom as a time when individual people enjoy the effects of the new creation in their lives, but they also applied Creation themes to the final stage of Christ’s work — the consummation of the kingdom.

CONSUMMATION

At least two passages in the New Testament stand out in this regard. First, Hebrews 4 refers to Christ’s return in terms of Moses’ creation account:

For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: “And on the seventh day God rested from all his work.”... There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from

his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest (Hebrews 4:4-11).

Just as Moses used God's Sabbath day in Genesis 2 to spur Israel toward Canaan, the land of rest, the writer of Hebrews saw God's Sabbath day as an ideal prototype of the ultimate redemption we will experience when Christ returns. In the same way that God ideally ordered the world in the beginning and brought about Sabbath joy, when Christ returns in glory, he will re-order the world and give his people the joy of the final Sabbath rest. As we long for this day, we are told here that we must "make every effort to enter that rest," which will come when Christ returns.

Finally, one of the most magnificent passages that identifies Christ's second coming in terms of Moses' creation account is Revelation 21:1. Listen to the way John applied creation themes to the return of Christ:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea (Revelation 21:1).

John spoke of "a new heaven and a new earth," and this phrase recalls Genesis 1:1 which records that God created "the heavens and the earth." Moreover, John said that in this new world there would "no longer [be] any sea." You will recall that in Genesis 1:9 God restrained the sea, keeping it within boundaries so that dry land could appear and form a safe habitat for the human race. In the new world, after Christ's return, we'll find that the salt seas will be entirely removed from the earth and replaced with fresh life-giving water. The work of Christ is similar to the days of creation in Genesis 1, but in Christ God will go further, much further in bringing the ideal order to completion. The entire universe will be re-created into new heavens and a new earth, and God and his people will enjoy that new world together.

Unfortunately, Christians often disconnect their eternal hope from the creation. We assume that we will spend eternity in the spiritual world up in heaven. But the New Testament is very clear about this. Our final destiny is a return to the Sabbath ordained in the seventh day of creation. We will spend eternity in the new heavens and new earth. This was the hope of Israel in the days of Moses, and it is our hope even today.

When we follow the guidance of the New Testament, we should approach the opening chapter of Genesis as more than a mere record of what happened long ago. It is also a portrait of what God has done in Christ's first coming, what he is doing now in our lives day by day, and what God will one day bring to completion when Christ returns.

In all three stages of Christ's kingdom, God moves against the chaos of sin and death in the world, and in our lives. In the inauguration, continuation, and consummation of the kingdom, he sets the world on a path to its ideal end — a wonderful new creation for his people.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have seen four main ideas: the overarching purpose of Genesis 1–11, the structure and original meaning of Genesis 1:1–2:3, and the ways the New Testament applies the themes of the creation account to Christ and to our lives. The implications of this approach to Moses' creation record for today are astounding, to say the least.

As Christians living today, we need to see how Moses' original purpose in Genesis applies to our lives in Christ. Just like the Israelites who first heard the opening chapters of Genesis, we are easily discouraged as we follow Christ in this sinful world. But as Moses encouraged his readers to believe that they were on God's way toward his ideal world, we should also be encouraged as we walk God's amazing path toward this ideal world in Christ.

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The Primeval History

LESSON
TWO

PARADISE LOST & FOUND



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The Primeval History

Lesson Two

Paradise Lost & Found

INTRODUCTION

I suppose that at one time or another everybody loses something. Maybe it's a book. Maybe it's the key to your home. I don't know about you, but when I lose something like that the first thing I do is retrace my steps. At least in my mind, I go backwards in time step-by-step to remember where I put the thing I lost. Then, once I retrace my steps, I carefully reverse what I did wrong. I put the keys on the table where they are supposed to be, and the book goes back on the shelf. Retracing and reversing what I did is one of the best ways I know to find something I've lost.

Now, we have entitled this lesson, "Paradise Lost and Found," and we will focus our attention on Genesis 2:4–3:24, the story of Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden. We will see that Moses wrote about Adam and Eve losing paradise to encourage Israel to retrace and reverse the steps Adam and Eve took in that Garden of Eden. Only as Israel learned from this story could they hope to find paradise again, and we will see that the encouragement Moses gave to Israel is also God's message for us today. By going back to the steps of Adam and Eve, Christians today can find paradise too.

Our examination of Genesis 2 and 3 will divide into three parts: First, we will examine the literary structure of this passage. Second, we will focus on the original meaning of these chapters to discern why Moses wrote them as he did for the children of Israel. And third, we will draw attention to modern application by asking how the New Testament guides us toward the proper use of this passage in our lives. Let's begin with the literary structure of our passage.

LITERARY STRUCTURE

Although Genesis 2–3 is a rather long passage and touches many topics, it actually forms a unified narrative. To understand this passage properly, we need to focus on these two chapters as one literary unit. Our examination of the literary structure in Genesis 2–3 will have two main concerns: first, we will gain an overview of the major sections of the passage; and second, we will comment on some of the significant symmetries among these various sections so that we may grasp the heart of what Moses was saying to Israel. Let's begin with an overview of the literary structure of Genesis 2–3.

OVERVIEW

Apart from the brief title that appears in the first half of 2:4, these two chapters divide into four major sections, and these four major sections are indicated primarily by changes in topics and characters. We should walk through these four steps and summarize their basic content.

In Garden

The first dramatic step of our story appears in 2:4-17, where we read that God put Adam in the Garden of Eden. These verses begin with a panoramic view of the Garden of Eden, and as the passage tells us, the whole garden was Adam's splendid place to dwell and to work. Then the concerns of this section narrow down to the creation of Adam and his commission to work within the garden. Adam was given a great privilege by God's grace. He was to keep the garden on God's behalf.

Condition Enhanced

The second step of our narrative consists of 2:18-25, which we will designate humanity's "condition enhanced." In this material God added even greater blessings to Adam's life. This section begins by introducing a new problem which is noted in 2:18. There, God looked at Adam and said these words:

It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him (Genesis 2:18).

The rest of 2:18-25 reports how God dealt with this problem. Adam searched for a partner among the animals, but in the end, God formed a woman and brought her to Adam. In this way, God greatly enhanced the wonderful creation that he had made already for Adam and Eve.

Condition Cursed

The third step of our narrative is 3:1-21, which we will call humanity's "condition cursed." This material begins in 3:1 with the introduction of a new topic and character, the tempting serpent. From this point forward, 3:1-21 deals with the serpent's temptation and the results of his temptation. Eve falls prey to the serpent's temptation so that she and Adam eat from the forbidden fruit and fall under divine curses.

Out of Garden

The fourth element in the overarching structure of this passage is 3:22-24 which we have entitled humanity “out of the garden.” This section is marked by another significant shift in topic. We find God speaking about the problem of the Tree of Life. In 3:22 we read these words:

The man ... must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever (Genesis 3:22).

To deal with the potential problem of Adam eating from this tree, God drove Adam from the garden and placed cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the entrance to Eden. From that point on, human beings would no longer have access to the Garden of Eden apart from a direct intervention by God.

SYMMETRY

With the four major divisions of this passage in mind, we may now look more closely at Genesis 2–3 to see the dramatic symmetry that this passage displays. By juxtaposing different elements in these sections, Moses revealed the central concerns of his narrative. To explore the symmetries of this narrative, we will look first at the balance which exists between the beginning and ending of our narrative, and then we will look at the symmetry of the two middle portions of the story. Let’s look first at the beginning and ending of this passage.

Beginning and Ending

As we will see, Genesis 2:4-17 and 3:22-24 stand in sharp contrast with each other in at least three important ways.

The first contrast is in location. The account begins in 2:7 with God placing Adam within the paradise garden. Adam lived and worked in a place full of divine blessings; wonderful vegetation, life-giving water, precious metals and stones surrounded him on every side. By contrast, the narrative ends in 3:24 with God expelling Adam and Eve from the garden. This geographical contrast makes it clear that the most desirable place for human beings to be on earth was in the Garden of Eden.

A second difference in the focus in each section is on the special trees of the garden. Although 2:4-17 mentions two trees, the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, by the time we come to 2:17 attention moves just to the one tree, the Tree of Knowledge. This tree held the power to give human beings the experiential knowledge of goodness and sin. It could open their eyes to see things they had not seen before.

By contrast, at the end of the narrative in 3:22-24, God was no longer concerned with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, but exclusively with the Tree of Life.

This tree had the power to give human beings eternal life. But God banished Adam and denied access to this tree. This contrast made it clear that free access humanity once had to the garden, and all of the blessings that were there, had been lost until God decreed otherwise.

A third difference between the beginning and ending of our narrative is in humanity's commission. In 2:15 the first step reports that God commissioned Adam to blessed work in the garden with no pain and no difficulty. In 3:23, however, God banished Adam and Eve from the garden and condemned them to difficult toil outside of the garden. This contrast also provides an essential perspective on the story. Not only did humanity lose the wonder of life in Eden, we were also condemned to difficulty so long as we remained away from the garden.

These three contrasts between the opening and closing sections of Genesis 2–3 draw our attention to some of the most vital aspects of this narrative. Moses wrote about a major shift in the human condition that took place in primeval times. God originally ordained that human beings should dwell in his garden, but Adam and Eve's sin bound them to difficulty and trouble, and separated them from the tree that gives eternal life. Now, as we will see, this set of contrasts spoke directly to the situation in which the Israelites found themselves as Moses led them toward the Promised Land. The Israelites had been far from Eden as they suffered under the cruelty of slavery in Egypt. They needed to regain the blessings which God provided in Eden.

Middle Portions

With the contrasting symmetries of the outer portions of the story in mind, we should turn our attention to the middle portions of the story, 2:18-25 and 3:1-21. These two inner steps fill in the gap between the beginning and ending and they form their own set of contrasting symmetries in at least three ways.

One contrast focuses on humanity's relationship with God. In the second step we see a harmonious relationship between Adam and God. In 2:18 God expressed concern for Adam and brought Adam a perfect partner in Eve. The picture here is that of God and the human race in intimacy and at peace. Yet, in the third portion of the narrative, disharmony replaces the initial harmony between God and the human race. Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command, and in 3:8 they hid from God's approach, and God spoke angrily against Adam and Eve.

A second contrast exists in human relationships. In the second step of 2:18-25, Adam and Eve were in perfect bliss. In 2:23 Adam broke forth with the first love poem in the Bible, saying that Eve was "bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh," and they lived together naked and without shame. By contrast, however, in 3:16 God pronounced a curse on this relationship, declaring that strife would persist between the man and woman. The woman would desire her husband, and he would rule over her. These words revealed that the sin of Adam and Eve not only disrupted their relationship with God, but with each other as well. And from that point forward, human relationships have been characterized by difficulty and struggle.

A third contrast appears in humanity's relationship with evil. In the second step, evil is absent from the story. Adam and Eve were entirely innocent and separated from

the power of evil. But by the third section, humanity had fallen prey to the serpent and was locked into a long-term struggle with evil. In 3:15 God promised that Eve's seed would one day overcome the serpent, but no immediate victory was offered to Adam and Eve.

These contrasts between the second and third portions of the narrative help us see a number of concerns which Moses had as he wrote this narrative. Moses wrote about Adam and Eve in ways that connected to Israel's experience. Sin continued to wreak havoc in Israel's life. It damaged the peoples' relationship with God and with each other, and more than this, every day of hardship they endured reminded Moses and Israel that, just like Adam and Eve, they had to wait for the time when God would finally give victory over evil to his people.

With the literary structure of this material in mind, we are able to delve into the original meaning of this passage. Why did Moses write this account of humanity's expulsion from God's garden? What message was he conveying to the nation of Israel as he led them toward the Promised Land?

ORIGINAL MEANING

Now, to be sure, on a very basic level, Moses wrote this narrative to teach some general theological themes to the Israelites whom he led. He told them a lot about the origin, and the nature, and the results of sin in the world. And these were very important themes. Yet, as we saw in the previous lesson, Moses did not write his primeval history simply to inform Israel about such general historical and theological issues. Instead, like many other ancient writers, Moses wrote his primeval history to give his people practical instruction about current religious and social programs, mainly, in this case, leaving Egypt and going to Canaan.

To see how Moses connected the primeval Garden of Eden and Israel's conquest of Canaan, we will look at three elements of his story: first, Moses' portrait of the Garden of Eden; second, his focus on the requirement of loyalty from Adam and Eve; and third, his depiction of the curses placed on Adam and Eve. Let's look first at Moses' description of the Garden of Eden.

GARDEN

Moses' description of the garden is so complex that many of our modern questions about Eden will always remain unanswered. Yet, it is possible for us to grasp the central concerns in Moses' presentation. As we will see, Moses described the Garden of Eden in ways that identified Eden with the Promised Land. From Moses' perspective, the land to which he was leading Israel in his day was actually the location of the primeval land called Eden.

Many aspects of Genesis 2–3 make it clear that Moses wanted Israel to connect Canaan with the land of Eden, but two features of his account are particularly important:

first, the identity of Eden; and second, the holiness of Eden. Let's look first at the identity of Eden.

Identity

In Genesis 2:10-14 we read these words:

A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold... The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates (Genesis 2:10-14).

Moses wrote that a single river flowed from Eden and divided into four headwaters. These headwaters were the Pishon, the Gihon, the Tigris, and Euphrates Rivers. One central river in Eden fed into these four rivers. It was their central source.

Now, as we explore Moses' description here, we must always remember that many geographical changes have taken place throughout our planet's history since the beginning of the world. Even in Moses' day there was no longer a single river which fed these four headwaters. The Scriptures teach that this central source of water will appear only in the end of time. Yet, Moses' reference to the four rivers which were fed by this central source gives us an approximate picture of where he believed Eden had been located.

We can identify the Tigris and Euphrates mentioned in 2:14 with the region of the modern day Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The fact that Genesis refers to these rivers has suggested to most modern interpreters that Genesis agrees with Babylonian mythology, that Eden was in the region of Mesopotamia. In the Babylonian language, *edin* means "a plain," or "open flatland," a term well suited for the lower Tigris-Euphrates region. In Hebrew, however, *eden* does not mean "a plain". It means "a pleasant or delightful place." So, Moses was not using the Babylonian word at all. He used a Hebrew word that sounded like the Babylonian word for Eden, but his concept of this place was not the same. In fact, the account of Genesis explicitly states that Eden was not limited to Mesopotamia. As we saw in Genesis 2:10, the Tigris and Euphrates flowed from a greater river which was located in Eden. We read in verse 10:

A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters (Genesis 2:10).

This passage teaches that the river of Eden fed the Tigris and Euphrates, not that Eden was limited to the Tigris-Euphrates region. Moses mentioned the Tigris and Euphrates to provide a general orientation toward the eastern most extent of Eden. The great rivers in the east marked the eastern boundary region of Eden.

This outlook is confirmed by the locations of the other rivers mentioned in Genesis 2. In 2:11, 13 Moses mentioned another pair of rivers. He wrote that the river of Eden fed the Pishon, which winds through the Havilah, and it also fed the Gihon, which winds through the entire land of Cush. In the Old Testament, the lands of Havilah and Cush are often associated with the region of Egypt. We cannot be sure precisely how Moses understood these rivers in relation to the great river Nile, but it is safe to say that he pointed to the region of northern Egypt as the western border of Eden.

So we can see, in Moses' outlook, Eden was no small place. It was a large area extending from the Tigris-Euphrates to the border of Egypt — nearly all of the region that we now call the Fertile Crescent. Within this pleasant place was a special garden, the Garden of Eden, the centerpiece of the large territory of Eden.

At first, Moses' identification of Eden with the Fertile Crescent may not seem very important. But in reality, it is critical to understanding the significance of Eden for Israel as Moses wrote the book of Genesis. Elsewhere in the book of Genesis, Moses referred back to Genesis 2 to teach Israel that the land of Eden, the Fertile Crescent, was the land God promised to Israel, the land to which he was taking them. This perspective became especially clear when God spoke to Abraham in Genesis 15:18. Listen to the way God described the borders of the Promised Land in this passage:

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates” (Genesis 15:18).

We see here on the one hand that God promised Abraham that his land would extend to the Tigris-Euphrates region, and it would also reach to “the river of Egypt.” Many interpreters have suggested that “the river of Egypt” may refer not to the Nile itself, but to a smaller river in the Sinai border region of Egypt. In all events, it is evident that this verse alludes to the geographical boundaries of Eden as they appear in Genesis 2. This allusion to Genesis 2 makes it clear that Moses believed God had promised Abraham and his descendants the land that was once known as the land of Eden. From Moses' point of view, as Israel moved toward Canaan, they actually moved toward the location of the primeval land of Eden.

In order to highlight the importance of Israel going to Eden, Moses stressed the holy character of that place. He pointed to the holiness of Eden to teach Israel that the Promised Land to which he was leading them was the place where they could receive the blessing of entering into the special presence of God.

Holiness

The primary way in which Moses conveyed the holiness of Eden was to describe it in terms that he also used to describe the tabernacle. Although God is omnipresent, and lives in every place in a general sense, Moses built a tabernacle where God came in a special way to meet with his people, and at this tabernacle God would display his presence, give his law, receive the worship of his people and bless them with his favor. So, when Moses depicted the Garden of Eden in terms which he also used to describe the

tabernacle, he revealed that Eden, and thus Canaan, was the place of God's special presence on earth. There, Israel could receive the great blessings of God.

At least seven aspects of Eden indicate that it was a holy place of God's special presence, much like the tabernacle. First, in 3:8 Moses used a special expression when he said that God "was walking in the garden." The Hebrew expression translated "walking" is *mit halek* (מִתְהַלֵּךְ). This terminology is significant because it is one of the special ways in which Moses described God's presence at the tabernacle in Leviticus 26:12 and other passages.

Second, in 2:9 we read about the Tree of Life as a central feature of the Garden of Eden. This sacramental tree held the power to give eternal life to those who ate from it. And although the Bible does not say this explicitly, recent archaeological research has noted that many sites in the ancient world had stylized images of the Tree of Life in sacred places. This evidence strongly suggests that the menorah, the seven-pronged lampstand of Moses' tabernacle, was most likely a stylized representation of the Tree of Life. In this way, the Garden of Eden is shown to be the original holy place on earth.

A third way in which Moses noted the holiness of Eden was his focus on gold and onyx in the region. In 2:12 we learn that gold and onyx were bountiful in the region of Eden. As we might expect, Exodus 25–40 mention gold and onyx as important parts of the tabernacle construction.

A fourth connection between the Garden of Eden and the tabernacle is the presence of cherubim or angels. According to 3:24, God placed cherubim in the Garden of Eden to guard against access to the Tree of Life. In a similar way, cherubim appear throughout the decorations of the tabernacle in passages such as Exodus 25:18 and 37:9. These cherubim reminded Israel not only of the angels in heaven, but also the angels guarding the holy place in Eden.

Fifth, we read in 3:24 that the entrance of Eden was "in the east," that is, on the eastern side. This fact may seem insignificant until we realize that according to Exodus 27:13 and a number of other passages, the main entrance for the tabernacle was also on the eastern side. This was the case with most temples in the Ancient Near East. Once again, Eden is shown to be a holy dwelling of God.

Sixth, Moses spoke of Adam's service in Eden with language that he used elsewhere for Levitical service in the tabernacle. In 2:15 Moses described Adam's responsibility in the garden in this way:

[God] put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Genesis 2:15).

These terms also appear together in Numbers 3:7-8 and 8:26. There, Moses described the work of the Levites in the tabernacle using the same expressions. Adam and Eve served as priests in the Garden of Eden.

Seventh, it is significant that the formation of the Garden of Eden took place after the six days of creation. As we saw in the preceding lesson, the six days of creation climaxed in God's Sabbath observance in Genesis 2:1-3. Interestingly enough, according to Exodus 24:16 and following, Moses spent six days on the mountain with God, and God gave him the instructions to build the tabernacle on the seventh day.

These seven features of Eden show that Moses considered the Garden of Eden to be a holy place much like the tabernacle. It was the location of God's special presence in the world. And to be near that place was to near the blessings of God.

As we have already seen, Moses believed that Canaan was the location of Eden. As a result, in focusing on the holy character of Eden, Moses was also drawing attention to the holy character of Canaan. To be near Canaan was to be near the place God ordained from the beginning as his holy dwelling. One of the best passages for seeing Moses' teaching about this future holy place is Deuteronomy 12:10-11. There he wrote these words:

You will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety. Then to the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name — there you are to bring everything I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the Lord (Deuteronomy 12:10-11).

This passage reveals one of the central features of Moses' vision of the land of Canaan. He emphasized that one day Canaan would be the location of the permanent dwelling for the presence of God — the temple for Yahweh.

To be sure, the land of Canaan in Moses' day was a mere shadow of what Eden had originally been. Even when Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, the Promised Land was still not entirely redeemed from sin nor restored to its original perfection. Yet, as Moses wrote about the holiness of Eden, he held before the Israelites the vision of what their land could be one day. To reach the Promised Land was to move into the vicinity of Eden, the place of God's holy presence on earth. Just as God placed Adam and Eve in the wonderful temple garden in the beginning, God was now bringing Israel to Canaan, and once they dwelled in that land, the nation would begin to experience the blessings of living in the special presence of God.

Now that we have seen how Moses set forth Adam and Eve's blessings in Eden as a prototype of the grace that awaited Israel in the Promised Land, we are in a position to look at a second topic in Genesis 2–3: God's test of Adam and Eve's loyalty. This motif plays a crucial role in Moses' presentation.

LOYALTY

The theme of loyalty was crucial to Moses' story about Eden. Although Eden was a place of tremendous blessing, it was also the location which required moral responsibility. Moses emphasized this fact because he wanted the Israelites to remember that the Promised Land to which they were going also required Israel to be loyal to God's commands.

To understand why Moses emphasized this theme, we need to explore two issues: the requirement of loyalty in the Garden of Eden, and the requirement of loyalty in

Canaan. Let's look first at the loyalty God expected of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

In Eden

The motif of loyalty in the garden appears very early in Genesis 2 and it reappears time and again throughout chapters 2 and 3. And in many respects, it is the central theme of these chapters. Listen to the way God challenged Adam to fidelity in Genesis 2:16-17:

You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die (Genesis 2:16-17).

Now, it is not altogether clear why God restricted our first parents from this particular tree; after all, knowing good and evil is prized in other parts of Scripture. Yet, despite this uncertainty, it is clear that God was testing Adam and Eve to see if they would be loyal to him. If Adam and Eve were obedient, they would receive even greater blessings from God. But if they proved defiant, they would suffer God's judgment. Eden was a holy place, and the people living there had to be holy as well.

In Canaan

By focusing on the test of loyalty in the Garden of Eden, Moses stressed a parallel requirement of loyalty for the Israelites whom he led toward the Promised Land. As Moses led Israel toward the Promised Land, he frequently warned them that God required them to be faithful to him. Moses succinctly summarized his teaching on this matter in the eighth chapter of Deuteronomy. We read these words in Deuteronomy 8:1:

Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land that the Lord promised on oath to your forefathers (Deuteronomy 8:1).

From this passage it is clear that God required Israel to be loyal to him in order that they might enter and possess the land of Canaan. In fact, all through the wilderness wanderings of the nation, God tested the Israelites to teach them how to be holy. In Deuteronomy 8:2 we read these words:

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands (Deuteronomy 8:2).

Beyond this, Moses also made it clear that once the nation of Israel came to the holy land, they had to remain loyal to God or they would lose this privilege. Listen to the way he put it in Deuteronomy 8:10-20:

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day... If you ever forget the Lord your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. Like the nations the Lord destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 8:10-20).

Moses knew that the Israelites were prone to rebel against God's commands, just like Adam and Eve. And because of these tendencies, Moses focused on Adam and Eve's test in the garden to warn that God required loyalty of everyone who wished to dwell in Canaan. Of course, God did not require perfection from Israel, and it was only by God's grace that anyone was able to remain faithful. Yet, if Israel flagrantly violated the laws of God and turned away from him, like Adam and Eve did in the garden, they would not be able to enjoy the blessings of the Promised Land. As Moses encouraged Israel to move forward toward the Land of Promise, he was concerned that they remember this feature of life in the land.

With the teaching of Deuteronomy 8 in mind, we can see Moses' main reason for focusing on the loyalty required of Adam and Eve. He stressed this matter to inspire the Israelites to reverse what Adam and Eve had done by remaining faithful to the commands of God. Adam and Eve were tested in the garden and were driven out because they sinned. In Moses' day, Israel was still outside the Garden of Eden, but God tested them to prepare the nation to re-enter Eden and to dwell there in God's blessing.

So we see that Moses wrote about the test of loyalty in the Garden of Eden, he not only explained to Israel what had happened long ago in the primeval days of Adam and Eve. He also explained what was happening in his own day. God was offering to Israel the wonderful blessing of life in the Garden of Eden. Yet, just like with Adam and Eve, they could not enjoy these blessings unless they were loyal to God. Moses was calling Israel to live by faith as a holy people, fully devoted to the commands of God. Only then could they hope to enter the land and stay there in peace.

So far we have seen how Moses portrayed the land of Eden and the land of Canaan as the place of God's blessing on earth, and we have also seen how he conveyed the idea that both lands required loyal service from those who dwelled within them. Now we are going to focus on a third dimension of the original meaning of Genesis 2 and 3 for Israel: the consequences of Adam and Eve's disloyalty.

CONSEQUENCES

To see the consequences of infidelity in the garden, we will look at three results of Adam and Eve's sin: death, pain, and exclusion.

Death

In the first place, Moses explained that God threatened Adam and Eve with death as a consequence of sin. This motif first appears in God's warning to Adam in Genesis 2:17. There, God said:

“You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17).

The words “you will surely die” comprise a phrase that indicates the certainty of the death to come. This grammatical construction is very similar to the way Moses' law threatened capital punishment. When Mosaic Law threatened capital punishment against perpetrators of serious crimes, Moses declared, “he will surely die,” or “they will surely die.” The legal context of these passages strongly suggests that these expressions were formulaic ways of declaring a death sentence. God was not saying that Adam and Eve would die immediately, but that death would certainly follow sin.

In this light we may understand God's threat to Adam in Genesis 2:17 as stating that Adam would come under a sentence of death. He would be condemned to die. Moses certainly wrote of this consequence of Adam's sin to explain how death came into the world, but his purpose was also more directly related to the experience of the Israelites to whom he wrote. They were well acquainted with death. Moses' readers had seen most of the first generation leaving Egypt die in the wilderness, because they rebelled against God. As Moses wrote in Numbers 26:65:

The Lord had told those Israelites they would surely die in the desert, and not one of them was left except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun (Numbers 26:65).

Once again, we see the language “they would surely die” which alludes to the law of Moses, and the account of Adam and Eve in the garden.

In this respect, the Israelites, hearing the story of Adam and Eve, could connect their experience of death in the wilderness with Adam and Eve's violation of God's command. The consequences of infidelity to the command of God in the garden had been a sentence of death on humanity's first parents. And the same sentence still stood over the Israelites who proved to be severely unfaithful to the commands of God in Moses' day.

Pain

When we read the account of Genesis, it is clear that death did not come immediately to Adam and Eve. God first confined Adam and Eve to an existence characterized by pain. On the one hand, we read these words in Genesis 3:16:

To the woman he said, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children” (Genesis 3:16).

On the other hand, God also afflicted Adam with painful living. We read these words to Adam in Genesis 3:17:

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life (Genesis 3:17).

Of all the things that Moses could have said about the consequences of sin in the garden, this twofold focus on human pain fit well with his purpose in writing this account to Israel. They had experienced the kinds of pain mentioned here as they remained outside the land of Canaan. But listen to the way Moses described life in the Promised Land. In Deuteronomy 11:10-12 we read these words:

The land you are entering to take over is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot as in a vegetable garden. But the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. It is a land the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end (Deuteronomy 11:10-12).

In short, Moses was taking Israel to a place where the pain they had experienced outside of Canaan would be relieved. Consequently, when Moses wrote of the pain that came to Adam and Eve, he called his Israelite readers to avoid infidelity, which resulted in pain, and to be faithful to the Lord, so they could return to Canaan and could experience the joy of life in the blessings of God.

Exclusion

A third effect of Adam and Eve’s disloyalty appears in 3:22. Consider the words of Genesis 3:22:

And the Lord God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever” (Genesis 3:22).

This passage makes it clear that the Tree of Life was able to make humanity “live forever.” It was the final answer to the problem of pain and death. Yet, God did not want Adam and Eve to eat at this time. They were excluded from the garden and its Tree of Life.

It is important for us to remember that access to the Tree of Life was not forbidden to humanity forever. The rest of Scripture makes it clear that those who are

faithful to God will eventually be able to eat from this tree. Listen to what the apostle John said about the Tree of Life in Revelation 2:7:

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God (Revelation 2:7).

Now John spoke of the end of time when Christ returns to earth. Yet, his words explain why Moses wrote about this tree to Israel. When Adam and Eve had sinned, God had blocked the way to the Tree of Life, but in Moses' day, God was opening the way for Israel to receive at least a foretaste of the blessing of life as they returned to the land of Canaan. Listen to the way Moses put it in Deuteronomy 30:19-20:

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

If the Israelites would be faithful to God they would have the opportunity to receive long life and happiness in the land of Canaan.

Just as Adam and Eve lost access to the Tree of Life, in Moses' day, God was offering Israel a partial taste of the blessing of the life found there. This experience of life was not the full measure of the eternal life that we know when Christ returns. Yet, it would have been a partial foretaste of what was to come in Christ. Moses offered Israel the opportunity to enjoy the blessing of long life in the Land of Promise.

So we have seen that the story of Adam and Eve's rebellion in the Garden of Eden was much more than an account of the origin of sin in the world. By drawing connections between Eden and Canaan, Moses taught his Israelite readers about their own lives as well. They learned how wonderful the Land of Promise could be for them.

Now that we have seen the literary structure and the original meaning of Genesis 2–3, we are ready to ask a third question. How does the New Testament teach us to apply this passage today?

MODERN APPLICATION

It is clear to us that Moses wrote this passage to encourage his Israelite readers to avoid the mistakes of Adam and Eve, and to move back into paradise by entering Canaan. But what do these instructions to Israel have to do with us today? Put simply, just as Moses used the story of sin in the garden to encourage Israel to retrace and reverse the steps of Adam so that they could find the salvation of living in paradise once again, the writers of the New Testament taught that salvation in Christ is also a return to paradise.

We will explore the New Testament's use of Genesis 2–3 in relation to Christ in our usual fashion by focusing on the three phases of Christ's kingdom. We will begin by looking at how this passage is applied to the inauguration of the kingdom in the first coming of Christ, and then we will see how it speaks to our lives in the continuation of the kingdom of God today. And finally, we will see that the New Testament draws upon this passage as it teaches about the consummation of Christ's kingdom in his second coming. Let's look first at the inauguration of the kingdom.

INAUGURATION

One way in which the New Testament speaks of the salvation Christ brings to the world is in his earthly ministry. In the inauguration of the kingdom Christ retraced and reversed what Adam and Eve had done in the Garden of Eden. In his earthly ministry, Christ fulfilled God's commands where Adam and Eve failed. We will investigate this aspect of New Testament teaching by looking first at how this theme appears in Paul's letters, and second, how it appears in the gospel of Matthew. Let's begin with Paul's outlook.

Paul

Paul summarized his viewpoint succinctly in Romans 5:14. There he wrote:

Death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come (Romans 5:14).

Notice that Paul said Adam was a type of one to come. The rest of Romans 5 makes it clear that "the one to come" was Christ. Listen to the way Paul summarized the matter in Romans 5:18-19:

Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous (Romans 5:18-19).

Notice how Paul put it here. Adam's one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, but Christ's one act of righteousness resulted in justification for all men. Why was this so? Because the disobedience of the one man, Adam, made us sinners. But the obedience of the one man, Christ, made us righteous.

This teaching is familiar to most Christians. As Moses taught in Genesis 2–3, Adam was just one man, but his actions had consequences for all who are identified with him. Adam's sin brought death to the entire human race because he was our federal or

covenant representative before God. As a result of Adam's sin, we are all born outside the paradise of God's blessing and under the curse of death. But at the same time, the New Testament teaches Christ is the federal or covenant representative of everyone who has faith in him. In contrast with Adam's disobedience, however, Christ's obedience to God brings righteousness and life to all who are counted in him.

From this teaching we learn something very important about applying the story of Adam's sin to our lives. The only way for paradise lost to be found again is through the righteous obedience of Christ. We cannot enter the paradise of salvation as individuals standing on our own merits before God. We need an absolutely perfect representative to enter paradise before us, and Christ is that representative. We find the salvation of eternal life in God's presence only because Christ was fully obedient to the Father. In his earthly ministry, Jesus earned the right to enter into paradise, and only those who place their faith in him may enter along with him.

Paul's correlation between Adam and Christ was shared by other New Testament writers as well. Let's consider how this theme appears in the gospel of Matthew.

Matthew

Matthew in particular drew attention to the way Christ retraced and reversed Adam's sin in his account of Christ's temptation in Matthew 4:1-11 (the parallel passage of which is found in Luke 4:1-13).

In a number of different ways, the story of Christ's temptation parallels both the experience of Adam and Eve in the garden, and the challenge Moses brought to the Israelites as he wrote about Adam and Eve. In the first place, the location of Christ's temptation connects it with Israel as the Israelites followed Moses. According to Matthew 4:1, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert, just as God had led Israel into the desert. It was in the wilderness that God tested Israel to see if she would be obedient, and Christ was tested in the wilderness also.

Second, the length of time Jesus spent in the wilderness paralleled the experience of Israel. Just as Israel was in the wilderness for forty years, according to Matthew 4:2, Christ was in the wilderness for forty days.

Third, hunger was an important feature in Christ's temptation. In Matthew 4:3 Satan tempted Christ to turn the stones into bread. This dimension of Christ's temptation paralleled the testing of Israel over water and food in the wilderness.

Fourth, Jesus himself connected his experience with Israel's testing in the wilderness in the ways that he used the Scriptures. In Matthew 4:4 Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 8:3. In Matthew 4:7 he quoted Deuteronomy 6:16, and in Matthew 4:10 he referred to Deuteronomy 6:13. These Old Testament passages come from portions of Deuteronomy where Moses described Israel's test in the wilderness. By quoting these passages, Jesus directly connected his experience of temptation with that of the testing of the nation of Israel.

So we see that Matthew's account of the temptation of Jesus connects to the message which Moses originally gave to Israel through Genesis 2-3. Through his active obedience, Jesus succeeded where Adam and Israel both failed. Christ was faithful to the commands of God. This is why Jesus said those well-known words found in Luke 23:43.

Just as Israel faced her trials in the wilderness to prepare her for entry into the paradise of Canaan, Luke 23:43 records that on the cross Jesus told the repentant thief these words:

I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise (Luke 23:43).

Christ's reward for his righteousness was eternal life in paradise.

So we see that the New Testament relates the temptation of Adam and Eve, as well as the testing of Israel in the wilderness to the inauguration of the kingdom in Christ's earthly ministry. Christ was the last Adam who succeeded where the first Adam failed. Moreover, Christ overcame temptation in the wilderness, reversing Israel's failure. And for this reason, he entered eternal paradise.

Now that we have seen how the New Testament relates Moses' account of Adam and Eve in the garden to the first coming of Christ, we should move to our second concern: How does the New Testament apply these principles to the continuation of the kingdom, the time in which we now live?

CONTINUATION

Several passages in the New Testament stand out in this regard. But we will look at only two: first, Paul's focus on these chapters of Genesis, and second, the way James wrote about these issues.

Paul

Let's look first at Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 11:3:

But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3).

As Paul continued in this chapter, he explained that he was deeply concerned that the Corinthians would turn to another gospel. We see here that Paul appealed to Eve's negative example to warn against the worst kind of disloyalty — turning from the true gospel of Christ. Just as Moses used the story of Eve's temptation to warn Israel to move faithfully toward the Promised Land, Paul used the same story to warn believers in his day about the basic loyalty required of all who follow Christ. During the continuation of the kingdom, many people in the visible church face the danger of turning away from essential truths of the gospel. The church must guard against this rank apostasy because the consequences are as horrible as they were for Adam and Eve.

James

James took a posture similar to Paul's as he explained the role of testing and trials in the Christian life. In James 1:12-15 we read these words:

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him... each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death (James 1:12-15).

It is clear that James alluded to Genesis 2–3. In 1:14 he focused on human “desire” as the power behind enticement to sin, and it was Eve’s desire for the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil that caused her to sin.

Second, James explained that those who pass the test will “receive the crown of life.” By contrast the result of sin is that it “gives birth to death.” The contrast here between life and death parallels the contrast between life and death in the story of Adam and Eve.

Just as Moses encouraged faithfulness in Israel during the trials in the wilderness by appealing to the temptation of Adam and Eve, Paul and James encouraged us to fidelity during the trials of the continuation of the kingdom. Tests during the Christian life reveal our true character and prepare us for eternal life. By God’s grace, we must do all we can to remain faithful to Christ so that we may be honored with the gift of eternal life in paradise.

Having seen how the New Testament applies the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden to the inauguration and continuation of the kingdom, we should turn our attention to the final stage, the consummation of salvation in Christ at his second coming.

CONSUMMATION

This theme also appears many places in the New Testament, but we will touch on only two passages: one in Romans and another in the book of Revelation.

Romans

In the first place, listen to the way Paul gave hope to the believers in Rome as he closed his epistle to them. In Romans 16:20 he wrote these words:

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you (Romans 16:20).

In these words, Paul reminded the Roman Christians of their great hope in the second coming of Christ. But he did so by referring back to the promise of salvation in Genesis 3.

As we have seen earlier in this lesson, in Genesis 3:15 God told the serpent that one day Eve's seed, the human race, would crush the head of the seed of the serpent. In this passage Paul said that Satan will be crushed under the feet of Christians when Christ returns. Christ himself will destroy Satan and our powerful enemy, death. Then we will reign with Christ in victory and glory.

Revelation

Another place in the New Testament where the themes of Genesis 2–3 are related to the consummation of the kingdom is the book of Revelation. John referred to the Tree of Life on a number of occasions in this book. Listen to the way John put the matter in Revelation 2:7:

**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life,
which is in the paradise of God (Revelation 2:7).**

The allusion to Genesis 3 here is obvious. We know that Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden precisely to keep them from eating of the Tree of Life. Yet, when Christ returns, God will give his people the right to eat from the Tree of Life. Notice also where this tree is located. John explicitly said that it is “in the paradise of God.” Just as Moses called Israel to enter Canaan because long life could be found there, Christians have as their hope entering an even greater, more fully restored paradise.

In the third place, we see another connection with Genesis in the identification of those who will eat from the tree. John said that the right will be given “to him who overcomes.” Just as Moses spoke of the Tree of Life to encourage Israel to be faithful to God, John explained that only the one who overcomes sin by remaining loyal will be able to eat from the Tree of Life.

Finally, we should look at Revelation 22:1-2. As John looked ahead to the new world, this is what he saw:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1-2).

The perspective of the New Testament is plain. When Christ returns to consummate his kingdom, those who trust Christ will enter the paradise of Eden. Satan will be crushed under our feet and we will eat from the Tree of Life and live forever in God's new creation.

CONCLUSION

We have seen in this lesson that Moses wrote about Adam and Eve in the garden to help the Israelites as they moved toward the Promised Land. He called the nation to retrace and to reverse the events in the Garden of Eden. In many respects, the message of this passage is very similar for us today. By hearing Moses' call to Israel to move forward toward the Promised Land, we can see how we too must retrace and reverse the steps of Adam and Eve. By trusting and remaining faithful to Christ, we will discover the salvation of paradise, lost and found.

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The Primeval History

LESSON
THREE

A WORLD OF VIOLENCE



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The Primeval History

Lesson Three

A World of Violence

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed how young children often go fearlessly into dangerous situations? They walk into the middle of the street without a care in the world. They pick up sharp knives without caution. And sometimes they even go right up to strangers, take their hands, and start to walk off with them — completely oblivious to the violence other people can pose.

But of course, adults know that the world is full of all kinds of trouble. Natural disasters destroy life and property. Diseases bring suffering. Machines can harm us. And we know that perhaps the greatest dangers of all are those posed by other people. Men and women commit violent acts of assault, murder, and war on their fellow human beings. If we are aware of human history, or if we are just paying attention to current events, it is nearly impossible to deny that human beings have filled this world with violence.

We have entitled this lesson, “A World of Violence,” and we are going to look at Genesis 4:1–6:8 where Moses described the troubles and violence that took place in the world shortly after humanity’s fall into sin. In these chapters, Moses described how human beings began to fill the world with violence, and how God reacted to those troubles. We will examine three aspects of this portion of Genesis: first, we will look at the literary structure of this material; second, we will focus on the original meaning of these chapters; and third, we will explore how the New Testament teaches us to apply these passages in our own day. Let’s look first at the literary structure of Genesis 4:1–6:8.

LITERARY STRUCTURE

These chapters in Genesis touch on a number of different topics, and include both narratives and genealogies. Now, these complexities often leave us with the impression that the chapters don’t fit together very well. But when we examine this portion of Genesis more closely, we’ll see that it is a carefully crafted literary work with a unified purpose. As we look at Genesis 4:1–6:8, we will see that this portion of Genesis divides into two main sections. The first section consists of 4:1–5:32, and we have entitled it “early violence and hope.” The second section consists of 6:1–8, and we have called it “later violence and hope.”

EARLY VIOLENCE AND HOPE

The early scenario of violence and hope of deliverance in Genesis 4–5 divides into four parts, and these parts form two parallel sets of narratives and genealogies: 4:1-16 forms a narrative which parallels a second narrative in 4:25-26, and 4:17-24 forms a genealogy which corresponds to a second genealogy in 5:1-32. We will examine these materials by exploring some of the relationships between the corresponding narratives, and then we will give attention to the parallels between the two genealogies.

Narratives

In the first place, Moses began by writing a story about sinful Cain in 4:1-16. This passage is the well-known record of the time when Cain broke into a fit of jealous rage and murdered his brother Abel. When we look more closely at this passage, it becomes apparent that it divides into five dramatic steps. The story begins with Cain and Abel living together harmoniously in verses 1-2a. Even so, when we turn to the end of the narrative in verse 16, we find a very different circumstance. Cain is alone, banished from the good land, from his family and from God's special presence.

The second step of the story, found in verses 2b-7, touches on the events that led Cain to murder Abel, specifically the distinction between the sacrifices each offered to God. Put simply, God was pleased with Abel's sacrifice, but he rejected Cain's sacrifice. God also warned Cain about the power of sin seeking to master him, but Cain paid no attention.

The third section of this narrative, verse 8, forms the turning point of this story. In this section, Cain murdered his brother Abel. Cain and Abel went away from the place of sacrifice into a field, and there, just as God had warned, sin mastered Cain and turned him into the first murderer in human history.

The fourth section of this narrative appears in verses 9-15 and describes the curse and protection God gave to Cain. God placed a curse on Cain by banishing him to wander far from the land of Eden, but he also protected him from being attacked by other people.

So we see that Genesis 4–5 begin with the story of Cain's terrible sin. He was so corrupted by sin that he actually murdered his righteous brother Abel, and as a result, he was destined to live far from the place of God's blessing.

Now that we have seen the structure of the opening narrative of Genesis 4–5, we should turn to the second narrative which appears in these chapters, the corresponding account in 4:25-26. This passage turns attention away from sinful Cain to Adam's third son, righteous Seth.

The report of righteous Seth divides into three short steps. First, in 4:25, Eve gives birth to Seth. The second step in this report appears in 4:26a where Moses noted that Seth also had a son, Enosh. Nothing much is made of this event, but Moses followed his report of Enosh's birth with a third step in 4:26b, where he added a telling comment on the spiritual character of this family. In 4:26b Moses wrote these words:

At that time men began to call on the name of the Lord (Genesis 4:26b).

Put simply, Seth and Enosh were men who called out to God in prayer. In contrast with sinful Cain, these men were righteous before God, and they demonstrated this righteousness through faithful worship and prayer.

Genealogies

With the basic contrasts of these parallel narratives in mind, we should now turn to the parallel genealogies in chapters 4–5. The genealogies of Genesis 4–5 often seem to be little more than obscure records of biological descent, and for this reason, many interpreters overlook their importance. Yet, a closer look at the genealogies reveals that they contain vital information that served Moses' purposes in writing this portion of his primeval history.

On the one hand, the first genealogy records Cain's sinful lineage in 4:17-24. In these verses, Moses listed a number of Cain's descendants and reflected on how sin had turned this family into a proud, boastful, and threatening clan.

The second genealogy consists of Seth's righteous lineage in 5:1-32. In this passage, Moses recorded a number of important names in Seth's family. Yet, in contrast with the line of Cain, this family continued to be righteous and faithful.

One of the ways we can see this intention is to notice the way Moses included two names in both lists. Both Cain's genealogy and the lineage of Seth contain the names Enoch and Lamech, and Moses explicitly contrasted these men with each other. Consider first what Moses said about the two men named Enoch. On the one side, in Genesis 4:17 we read these words about Cain's descendant Enoch:

Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch (Genesis 4:17).

Cain and his son Enoch exalted themselves in great pride by naming the city after Enoch. We can see the significance of this comment when we notice what Moses wrote about the Enoch of Seth's line. In 5:24, Moses commented on Seth's Enoch in this way:

Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away (Genesis 5:24).

It would be hard to imagine a more striking contrast between two men than we find here between the sinful Enoch and the righteous Enoch.

In addition to the contrasts set up between the two men named Enoch, Moses also mentioned a Lamech in Cain's line and a Lamech in Seth's line. Once again, strong contrasts stand out between these two men. On the one hand, Cain's Lamech was a horrible figure. Genesis 4:23-24 report that Lamech was a murderer, and took great pride in his murderous exploits.

By contrast, to display the character of Seth's Lamech, Moses recorded Lamech's words at the birth of his son in 5:29:

[Lamech] named him Noah and said, “He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the Lord has cursed” (Genesis 5:29).

As was the custom in biblical times, Seth’s Lamech named his son as a prayer to God, expressing the hope that his son Noah would bring deliverance from the terrible condition of life which began when God cursed the ground in the days of Adam and Eve.

Now that we have noticed how Genesis 4–5 convey a pattern of early violence and hope of deliverance, we should turn to the second scenario of violence and hope as it appears in Genesis 6:1-8.

LATER VIOLENCE AND HOPE

When we look more closely at these verses, it becomes apparent that 6:1-8 divide into three steps: first, verses 1-3 concern characters known as the “sons of God.” Second, verses 4-7 focus on other characters known as the “Nephilim.” Following these two steps, Moses added an afterword in verse 8 mentioning Noah once again, the man in whom there was hope of deliverance.

Sons of God

The two main steps of these verses describe a series of threatening events that took place on earth, and then reveal how God reacted to these events. Let’s look first at the threat of the sons of God and at God’s reaction in 6:1-3.

Unfortunately, these verses are among the most difficult to interpret in the book of Genesis. The difficulty primarily centers on verse 2 where we read these words:

The sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose (Genesis 6:2).

Moses did not explain precisely who these sons of God and daughters of men were. Apparently, he expected his original readers to understand what he meant. But it has been impossible for modern readers to settle the identities of these characters beyond question.

In the history of interpretation, three reasonable identifications have been suggested. First, the sons of God may be Sethites who married women descended from Cain. This interpretation has some merit because of the contrasts set up between the Cainites and Sethites in chapters 4–5 of Genesis. A second option is that the sons of God may be angels, and the daughters of men were mere humans. This view also has some merit because angels are often called “sons of God” in the Old Testament in passages like Job 1:6 and Psalm 29:1. A third option is to understand the sons of God as kings or noblemen who took peasant women. This outlook has merit as well, because in the Ancient Near East kings were often called sons of God, just as the son of David is called

God's son in 2 Samuel 7:14 and in Psalm 2:7. Although I favor this third interpretation, we should not be dogmatic about any particular position.

Even though we cannot be sure who these characters were, we can be more certain of what they did. You will recall that in Genesis 6:2 we read that:

The sons of God ... married any of [the daughters of men] they chose (Genesis 6:2).

This is not ordinary language in the Old Testament for legitimate marriage, and it strongly suggests that neither the women nor their families consented to these relationships. Rather, the sons of God, who may have been powerful noblemen, forcefully took women without their consent. The language here may even mean that the sons of God actually raped these women at will. In all events, the violence exemplified earlier in the exploits of Cain and his descendants reached another area of life — the violation of women.

After Moses described the threat of the sons of God, he turned to his main concern — God's reaction to these events. We read these words in Genesis 6:3:

My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal; his days will be a hundred and twenty years (Genesis 6:3).

God grew tired of the ways sin continued to bring violence to the human race, and declared that he would not tolerate this corruption forever. Nevertheless, God graciously determined to allow humanity another hundred and twenty years before executing his judgment.

A second set of actions on earth and divine reaction appears in Genesis 6:4-7, the account of the Nephilim.

Nephilim

In verse 4 we first read about another threatening circumstance that developed:

The Nephilim were on the earth in those days — and also afterward — when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown (Genesis 6:4).

Now, some older Bibles simply follow the Septuagint and translate the Hebrew word “Nephilim” as “giants.” But this translation is unfortunate because it does not convey the connotations of the word. Scholarly opinion is divided over the precise meaning of the term, but it is most likely that it refers to strong warriors or warlords.

In this passage, Moses specifically described these Nephilim as “heroes of old, men of renown.” The term “heroes,” or *hagiborim* (הַגִּבּוֹרִים) in Hebrew, denotes warriors or powerful soldiers. In this context, the military notoriety of the Nephilim should be taken negatively. These men were known for their exploitative warfare and violence as

they inflicted terror on those around them. The violence that began when Cain killed his brother Abel, and continued in Cain's descendant Lamech, had now reached even greater proportions as the Nephilim soldiers threatened violence at every turn. As we read in verse 5:

The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time (Genesis 6:5).

With the appearance of the Nephilim, the corruption of the human race had grown to such proportions that sin utterly dominated humanity. As a result, we read in verses 6-7 that:

The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth — men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air — for I am grieved that I have made them" (Genesis 6:6-7).

God saw how the Nephilim terrorized his world, and determined that it was time to intervene with massive, worldwide destruction.

Afterword

Happily, Genesis 6:1-8 do not end with words of judgment. Instead, in keeping with the overarching patterns of this portion of his primeval history, Moses added an afterword of hope in verse 8. There we read that even though God determined to destroy humanity because of the corruption of sin, there was one man who provided hope:

Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8).

In these few words, Moses completed the scenario of threat and hope of deliverance. The destruction of violent, sinful humanity through the flood would actually result in a deliverance for future generations.

From our explorations of the literary structures of Genesis 4:1–6:8, we see that these chapters in Genesis focus on two major issues: first, they focus on the threat of violence from those who rebelled against God in the days of Cain and his descendants; second, they focus on the threat of sinful people in the days of the sons of God and the Nephilim. In both cases, however, Moses indicated that God would bring deliverance through the one special son of Seth, the man named Noah.

Now that we have seen the basic structure and central concerns of this portion of Genesis, we are in a position to ask a second question. What was the original meaning of these chapters? What was Moses communicating to the Israelites as he led them from Egypt to the Promised Land?

ORIGINAL MEANING

To grasp the original meaning of this portion of the primeval history, it will help to consider two matters: first, we will see how Moses connected this portion of his primeval history to Israel's experience; and second, we will explore the implications of these connections for Moses' original Israelite readers. Let's look first at the ways Moses connected these chapters to the experiences of the Israelites whom he was leading.

CONNECTIONS

Moses related these chapters of his primeval history to his contemporary world by describing the violence of early human history in ways that closely resembled the experiences of violence which Israel had endured. By doing so, he pointed out that the troubles which Israel faced were very similar to the troubles of the primeval world.

Now, to explore how Moses established these similarities, we will look once again at the two major sections of Genesis 4:1–6:8: the first scenario of early violence and hope of deliverance in chapters 4–5, and the second scenario of later violence and hope of deliverance in 6:1-8. Let's look first at how Genesis 4–5 connected to Israel's experience.

Early Violence and Hope

As we look at the characteristics of the wicked and righteous in Genesis 4–5, it becomes apparent that Moses shaped this material so that his readers would associate Cain and his family with the Egyptians, and so that they would associate righteous Abel, Seth, and the Sethites with themselves as the people of God. Now, how did Moses build these connections?

Narratives. We should begin by examining the story of sinful Cain in Genesis 4:1-16. In this story, Moses focused on at least five concerns that allowed the Israelites to connect this passage to their own day. In the first place, Moses mentioned the occupations of Cain and Abel to create these associations.

Listen to the way Cain and Abel were initially distinguished in Genesis 4:2:

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil (Genesis 4:2).

As this passage indicates, Cain was a settled agriculturalist, a farmer, while Abel was a shepherd. In ancient and modern times, it has been common for tensions to arise between settled, agriculturally-based societies and nomadic shepherds. And as the book of Genesis itself indicates, Moses and the Israelites were quite aware of this kind of tension and how it led to serious trials while they were in Egypt. In Genesis 46:33-34, Joseph instructed his brothers in this way when they came to Egypt:

When Pharaoh calls you in and asks, “What is your occupation?” you should answer, “Your servants have tended livestock from our boyhood on, just as our fathers did.” Then you will be allowed to settle in the region of Goshen, for all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians (Genesis 46:33-34).

Joseph’s instructions here give us insight into why Moses mentioned that Cain was a farmer and Abel a shepherd. He wanted his Israelite readers to associate Cain, the agriculturalist, with the Egyptians, and he wanted Israel to associate themselves with Abel, the victimized shepherd.

A second connection between this story and Moses’ original audience appears in the motif of the sacrifices offered by Cain and Abel. As Genesis 4 tells us, God rejected Cain’s sacrifice but was pleased with Abel’s sacrifice. The reason for God’s distinction between these sacrifices is made explicit in Genesis 4:3-4, where we read these words:

Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock (Genesis 4:3-4).

Notice the way Moses described the sacrifices. In verse 3 he said that Cain offered “some of the fruits of the soil,” but in verse 4 he wrote that Abel offered “fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.” This distinction is very important. Cain simply brought whatever fruits of his field he happened to gather. His worship was nominal at best because he did not reserve the best of his crop for God. But Abel fulfilled the law of God with a sincere heart by bringing the fat portions (which were highly prized for Old Testament sacrifices) from among the firstborn of his flocks (which were the most highly prized animals according to the Law of Moses). Cain’s sacrifice was little more than an insincere ritual. But by contrast, Abel offered sincere devotion to God.

Moses also used this distinction between the sacrifices of Cain and Abel to draw further associations with the Egyptians and Israel. This background is striking when we remember that Moses first approached Pharaoh to ask for the release of Israel because he wanted to offer sacrifices to Yahweh. As we read in Exodus 5:3, Moses and Aaron said these words to Pharaoh:

The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the desert to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God (Exodus 5:3).

But Pharaoh refused their request. As Moses recorded in verse 4, Pharaoh told them:

“Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their labor? Get back to your work!” (Exodus 5:4).

So we see that just as Cain had dishonored God with his nominal sacrifices, the Egyptians did not offer true worship to Israel’s God. Yet, just as Abel offered sincere and

acceptable sacrifices, so the Israelites sought the true worship of Yahweh. In this way, Moses established another association of Egypt with Cain, and of Israel with Abel.

A third way Moses created connections with Israel's experience was through the motif of murder. Cain murdered his brother Abel, and the significance of this event becomes evident when we remember the murders of the Israelites that took place in Egypt. In Exodus 1–2 we read that the Egyptians not only overworked the Israelites, but actively murdered many of them, including their infant children. In this way Moses developed still more associations between Cain and the Egyptians, as well as between Abel and the Israelites.

A fourth way in which Moses created these associations was by describing Cain's location on the earth. When God cursed Cain for murdering Abel, he banished Cain from the fertile land. As we read in Genesis 4:11-12:

Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground... When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you (Genesis 4:11-12).

Cain was cursed to live in places where his farming would yield very little produce. This description of Cain's location fit nicely with Moses' assessment of the land of Egypt and of the land where he was taking Israel. Listen to the way Moses contrasted Canaan and Egypt in Deuteronomy 11:10-12:

The land you are entering to take over is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot as in a vegetable garden. But the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. It is a land the Lord your God cares for (Deuteronomy 11:10-12).

God sent Cain to a place far from Eden, to a place like Egypt, where farming required much effort. This fact was another way in which Moses' Israelite readers were to associate Cain with the Egyptians.

A fifth way in which Genesis 4–5 connected Cain with Egypt and Abel with Israel was in the theme of Cain's protection. Even though Cain killed his brother Abel, God still protected him from harm. We read these words from God in Genesis 4:15:

If anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over (Genesis 4:15).

God protected Cain from harm even though he was a murderer. Once again, we see that Moses described these events so that Israel would associate them with their own experience in Egypt. God had given great protection to Egypt. Even though they were murderous and deserved divine judgment, for a long time God extended special protection to Egypt.

So, we see that in at least five ways Moses established meaningful parallels between this primeval period and Israel's exodus experience. The themes of occupations,

worship, murder, location, and protection all indicate that Moses wanted his Israelite readers to apply this story to their lives by associating Cain with the Egyptians, and by associating Abel with themselves as the people of God.

Now that we have seen the associations established in the story of sinful Cain, we should turn to the parallel narrative concerning righteous Seth in Genesis 4:25-26.

As we have seen, Moses made one significant comment about Seth and his son, Enosh. In Genesis 4:26 we read these words:

At that time men began to call on the name of the Lord (Genesis 4:26).

Moses mentioned this fact about Seth and his son so that his readers would identify themselves not only with Abel, but also with Seth, Adam's son who replaced Abel.

In the first place, Seth used the divine name Yahweh, and this use associated him with Israel. Interestingly enough, the book of Exodus makes it clear that the name Yahweh rose to prominence in the days of Moses. For example, God spoke to Moses in this way in Exodus 3:15:

Say to the Israelites, “The Lord [in Hebrew, ‘Yahweh’], the God of your fathers — the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob — has sent me to you.” This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation (Exodus 3:15).

Although the biblical record indicates that the name Yahweh was used from the time of Seth, during the time of Moses, this name became the principal name used for God. For this reason, faithful Israelites under Moses' leadership would have associated themselves with righteous Seth. Like him, they also cherished the name Yahweh.

In the second place, the Israelites should have associated themselves with Seth through the theme of prayer. This motif also appears in Genesis 4:26 where Moses wrote that Seth's family “began to call on the name of the Lord.” In the Old Testament, “to call on the name of the Lord” often meant to cry out for divine help in a time of trouble or need. In this light we can see that Moses drew a second connection to Israel in his own times. From the rest of the Pentateuch, we learn that in the Exodus from Egypt, Israel called on Yahweh for help during many crises, much like Seth and Enosh had called on him.

So we see that the Moses designed the narratives about sinful Cain and righteous Seth to form parallels with his contemporary world. He wanted his readers to notice that the Egyptians were like Cain. He also wanted his readers to see that they themselves were like Abel and Seth.

With these basic connections in mind we are in a position to turn to the genealogy of Cain and the genealogy of Seth.

Genealogies. As we will see, Moses also shaped these genealogies so that the Israelites would continue to associate the Egyptians with the wicked and themselves with the righteous. To further his main purpose, Genesis 4:17-24 characterizes the line of Cain in ways that drew indisputable associations with Egypt. These connections appear in at

least six ways. First, Moses focused on Cain as a city builder. As he wrote in Genesis 4:17:

Cain was then building a city (Genesis 4:17).

Needless to say, the Israelites knew all too well that the Egyptians were great city builders — building cities for the Egyptians had been part of what the Israelites did as they were slaves in Egypt. For this reason, these words about Cain would have created strong associations with the Egyptians.

Second, we should also take note of the name of Cain's city. Again, in Genesis 4:17, we read these words:

Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch (Genesis 4:17).

For Israelites in the days of Moses, this fact reminded them of an Egyptian practice. As Moses reported in Exodus 1:11:

[The Egyptians] put slave masters over [the Israelites] to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh (Exodus 1:11).

The city Rameses was named in honor of the Pharaoh Rameses. Just like Cain, the Egyptians also named cities after themselves for their own glory and honor. In this way, Cain's genealogy established another connection between Cain and the Egyptians.

A third association between Cain's line and Egypt appears in the pride which Cain's descendant Lamech took in his act of murder. In 4:23 we read that Lamech actually sang a song of praise to himself before his wives:

**Adah and Zillah, listen to me;
wives of Lamech, hear my words.
I have killed a man for wounding me (Genesis 4:23).**

Lamech's boasting of his atrocities should also have associated Lamech with the Egyptians in the minds of ancient Israelites. The Israelites would have been quite aware that many ancient Egyptian inscriptions praised the Pharaohs and their armies for their murderous exploits.

A fourth association appears in Moses' attention to the death of children. Listen again to what Lamech said. In 4:23 we read:

**I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for injuring me (Genesis 4:23).**

The Hebrew term translated "young man" here is *yeled* (יָלֵד), which is often translated simply "boy." One of Lamech's victims was in all likelihood little more than a child. As we all know, in the first chapter of the book of Exodus, Pharaoh ordered the death of

Israelite boys. Like Cain's Lamech, the Egyptians struck out against the defenseless of Israel, against their male children.

A fifth association between Cain's family and the Egyptians appears in Lamech's claim to increased protection. In Genesis 4:24, Lamech claimed to enjoy even more protection than Cain:

**If Cain is avenged seven times,
then Lamech seventy-seven times (Genesis 4:24).**

Just as Lamech thought that God protected him, the Pharaohs of Egypt were confident of protection from their gods. As a matter of fact, it had certainly appeared for many years that the Egyptians enjoyed more and more protection from harm.

In the sixth place, we should note the cultural sophistication of Cain's line. Listen to the ways these three Cainite brothers, Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-Cain are described in Genesis 4:20-22:

**Jabal ... was the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock...
Jubal ... was the father of all who play the harp and flute... Tubal-
Cain ... forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron (Genesis 4:20-
22).**

With these words, Moses characterized Cain's family as very sophisticated. Jabal was no mere shepherd; he invented animal husbandry. Jubal invented music, and Tubal-Cain invented sophisticated metallurgy. It would have been very difficult for Israelites in Moses' day to have missed this connection. Compared to the simple, nomadic lifestyles of Israel's patriarchs, the culture of Egypt was highly sophisticated. Moses described the sinful line of Cain this way to confirm the association he wanted his readers to make between Cain's lineage and the Egyptians.

So we see that in at least six ways Moses drew connections between the Cainite genealogy and the Egyptians. His descriptions of city building, naming cities, pride in murder, violence against children, divine protection, and cultural sophistication in Cain's family were designed to create these connections.

Now we should turn to the genealogy of Seth in Genesis 5:1-32. As we might expect, Moses constructed the Sethite genealogy so that his Israelite readers would identify themselves with Seth's lineage. This association was built on at least four factors. In the first place, we should note that on a biological level, the nation of Israel descended from the line of Seth. In Genesis 5:32 we read the names of Noah's three sons:

**After Noah was 500 years old, he became the father of Shem, Ham
and Japheth (Genesis 5:32).**

The name Shem was particularly important to Moses because Shem was the ancestor of Israel. In modern languages we derive the term "Semitic" or "Semite" from the name Shem. Although other nations also came from the seed of Shem, the Israelites were God's special chosen people, and they were from among the descendants of Shem.

So, in this simple biological sense, Moses connected his Israelite readers with Seth's genealogy.

A second association between Seth's line and Israel appears in the repeated focus on the righteousness of Seth's descendants. Seth's line is characterized as faithful and righteous. For instance, according to Genesis 5:24:

Enoch walked with God; then he was no more (Genesis 5:24).

In the Hebrew Bible, the expression translated "walked with God" only occurs with reference to Enoch and Noah. Yet, time and again, especially in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses told Israel that they were to be like Enoch by walking in the ways of Yahweh. In this way, the faithful Israelites following Moses found another point of identification with the line of Seth. It was their goal to be like Enoch.

A third connection between Seth's genealogy and Israel's experience appears in Moses' emphasis on the numbers of Sethites. In Seth's genealogy, we learn that his descendants became quite numerous. Moses brought out the numerical increase of Seth's family by repeating the fact that "other sons and daughters" were born to the Sethites. In fact he wrote this comment nine times in Genesis 5. This emphasis on numbers of people in Seth's line was significant for Moses' Israelite readers because they knew that God had greatly blessed them numerically while in Egypt and during the Exodus.

In the fourth place, Moses also stressed the long lives that many Sethites enjoyed in order to connect Israel with the Sethites. For example, we all know that Seth's descendant Methuselah lived longer than anyone in biblical history. According to Genesis 5:27, he lived 969 years. Many other Sethites lived long lives as well. Moses' attention to the long lives of Seth's line was important because, as the law of Moses indicates, long life in the Land of Promise was to be the goal of the faithful in Israel. By pointing out the long lives of Seth's descendants, Moses drew another connection between the Sethites and Israel.

So it is that Moses wrote about the early violence and hope of deliverance in the primeval history in order to draw firm associations with his contemporary world. Cain and his descendants were to be connected with the Egyptians who inflicted violence on Israel. And Abel, Seth, and Seth's descendants were to be connected with the Israelites who were victims of Egyptian violence. These associations were at the heart of Moses' strategy in this portion of his history.

Now that we have seen how Moses handled his record of early violence and hope, we should turn briefly to Genesis 6:1-8 — later violence and the hope of deliverance.

Later Violence and Hope

Let's look especially at 6:4 where Moses described these men:

The Nephilim were on the earth in those days — and also afterward — when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown (Genesis 6:4).

We have already noted that the Nephilim were mighty warriors, well-known for their exploits. But notice that Moses made an important comment about the Nephilim. He said that the Nephilim existed on the earth in the primeval days “and also afterward.”

By adding this allusion to Nephilim warriors living after the flood, Moses reminded his Israelite readers that they had encountered Nephilim in their recent history. The only other place where the term Nephilim appears in the Bible is in Numbers 13:32-33. There, the spies Moses sent into Canaan reported seeing Nephilim. They said these words:

The land we explored devours those living in it... We saw the Nephilim there... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them (Numbers 13:32-33).

The unfaithful spies reported that the land of Canaan was a terribly violent and threatening place, and that among the inhabitants of Canaan were Nephilim, vicious warriors who struck fear into their hearts. Unfortunately, this report led the first generation following Moses to turn away from God’s call to conquest. And God was so disturbed by this lack of faith that he sent the Israelites into the wilderness to wander aimlessly until the first generation had died off and a new generation was prepared to take up the cause of conquest.

In this light we can understand how Moses drew another strong connection between this portion of his primeval history and the experience of Israel. He wanted his Israelite readers to associate the primeval Nephilim of Genesis 6 with the terrifying Nephilim warriors of Canaan. In this way, the violence and hope of deliverance in Genesis 6:1-8 spoke directly to the threat of violence in the conquest of Canaan.

So far in our examination of the original meaning of Genesis 4:1–6:8 we have seen the primeval characters associated with people in Israel’s contemporary experience. Now we should ask a second question: What were the implications of these associations for the people of Israel as they followed Moses toward the Promised Land?

IMPLICATIONS

To understand the heart of Moses’ message to Israel, we need to remember the basic scenario that appears twice in this material. You will recall that Genesis 4:1–6:8 contains two scenarios of violence and hope of deliverance; 4:1–5:32 focused on the violence of Cain and his descendants. Yet, 5:29 and 32 mention Noah in order to indicate that deliverance would come through him. In much the same way, just as Genesis 6:1-8 reports the violence of the sons of God and the Nephilim, Genesis 6:8 mentions Noah once again to indicate that God intended to deliver from these threats as well.

For the Israelites following Moses, these scenarios should have been good news. They revealed what God had already done for them and what he was about to do for them. On the one hand, just as God had used Noah to deliver Israel’s ancestors from the Cainites, he had already used Moses to deliver the Israelites from the Egyptians. On the other hand, just as God had used Noah to bring deliverance from the primeval Nephilim,

he was about to use Moses to deliver the Israelites as they faced the threat of Nephilim in the land of Canaan.

Now that we have seen the structure and the original meaning of Genesis 4:1–6:8, we should turn to our final topic: modern application. How does the New Testament teach us to apply this portion of Moses' primeval history to our modern lives?

MODERN APPLICATION

In our usual fashion, we will explore how the New Testament elaborates on these themes in terms of the three stages of Christ's kingdom: first, the inauguration of the kingdom, which took place when Christ first came to this earth; second, the continuation of the kingdom, which extends throughout the history of the church; and third, the consummation of the kingdom, when Christ returns in glory and brings the new heavens and new earth. These phases of Christ's kingdom should be explored separately to reach a fuller understanding of the ways violence and deliverance apply to Christians today. Let's look first at the motifs of violence and hope of deliverance in the inauguration of the kingdom.

INAUGURATION

The inauguration of the kingdom in Christ's first coming recalls the world of violence in the primeval history in at least two ways: first, we see connections with the violence Jesus suffered while on earth; and second, we find connections with the deliverance which Jesus brought to his people. Let's look first at the suffering Jesus experienced in his first coming.

Violence

Anyone familiar with the life of Jesus knows that Jesus suffered persecution from the world in many ways. As he ministered to the downtrodden, he bore their grief and pain. Yet, there can be no doubt that according to the New Testament, the climax of violence perpetrated against Christ was his death on the cross. By suffering one of the worst forms of execution known in his day, Jesus actually experienced a fate worse than that suffered by the righteous in the primeval times.

In this light it is not surprising that one way the New Testament describes the suffering of Jesus is to compare his death on the cross to the violence of the primeval world, or to be more specific, to the death of Abel. The writer of Hebrews knew that Christ had suffered innocently at the hands of wicked men, and for this reason, he compared Christ's death to Abel's death in 12:23-24 of his epistle:

You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:23-24).

The allusion here to Moses' primeval history is clear. Christ's shed blood spoke a better or greater word than the blood of Abel. That is to say, Christ's death was even more significant in the eyes of God than the death of Abel was. Jesus' death was no ordinary event. His death atoned for the sins of his people because he suffered in the place of everyone who believes in him. But beyond this, Christ's death stirred the just wrath of God more greatly than had the blood of Abel.

In this light, when we read Moses' account of the violence of the primeval history, we should not simply take note of why Moses wrote these chapters for his original Israelite readers. From the New Testament perspective, we should also see that the violence inflicted on the righteous in the primeval history anticipated the suffering of Christ in the inauguration of the kingdom.

Now that we have seen how the New Testament draws connections between the primeval world of violence and Christ's suffering, we should turn to a second way the inauguration of the kingdom touches this portion of Genesis. A significant link also occurs in the hope of deliverance Jesus brought to the world.

Deliverance

Jesus spent most of his public ministry proclaiming a message of hope — the gospel, the message that one day the suffering of life would be over for those who followed him. Jesus' devotion to this gospel message appears throughout his teachings. But consider how prominent the message of deliverance appears in the Beatitudes, the opening statements of blessing in the Sermon on the Mount. As Jesus began this well-known sermon, he said these words in Matthew 5:10-12:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven (Matthew 5:10-12).

These Beatitudes reveal that one of the central concerns of Jesus' teaching ministry was to bring the hopeful message that God had not deserted his people. Jesus encouraged his followers to have hope that God would one day deliver them from all suffering.

But Jesus did not simply teach the good news of hope for deliverance — through his death and resurrection he actually accomplished the deliverance which he announced. Because Jesus was the perfect son of David, his death made atonement for the sins of God's people. His death paid the price for sin so that his followers would no longer have to fear the terror of death. As we read in Hebrews 2:14-15, Jesus died so that:

... by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil — and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15).

So we see that the themes of violence and hope of deliverance readily apply to the inauguration of the kingdom in Christ. As Moses wrote to acknowledge the threats against Israel and to teach Israel about the power of God to deliver, the New Testament reveals that Christ came to suffer violence and to bring deliverance for his people from the power of wickedness in the world.

Now that we have seen some of the ways that the New Testament links Jesus' first coming to the primeval history, we should also notice how the New Testament applies this portion of primeval history to the continuation of the kingdom, the time between the first and second comings of Christ.

CONTINUATION

There are at least two ways in which the New Testament explains how the continuation of the kingdom touches on the themes of Genesis 4:1–6:8, and these references provide basic guidance as we apply this portion of Scripture to the Christian church. On the one hand, the New Testament teaches that we should expect a continuation of violence against the people of God, and on the other hand we are encouraged to endure these difficult times by continuing to have faith in Christ for deliverance. Consider first the fact that we should expect violence against Christ's followers.

Continuing Violence

On a number of occasions Jesus taught that his followers would suffer hatred and persecution from the world. But in Matthew 23:34-35, Jesus himself drew attention to the fact that this suffering was connected to the suffering of the righteous in the primeval world. Jesus said this to the Pharisees:

I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah (Matthew 23:34-35).

Jesus predicted that when he sent followers into the world, they would be severely persecuted. But notice also how Jesus connected this prediction with the primeval history. He said that the violence to come against his followers would continue the pattern of

violence that reached all the way back to the blood of righteous Abel whom Cain murdered.

Continuing Faith

When we realize that followers of Christ will always suffer persecution during the continuation of the kingdom, we can also see the importance of maintaining our faith in Christ. The writer of Hebrews touched on this matter in chapter 11 of his epistle. We read these words in 11:4:

By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead (Hebrews 11:4).

The main idea in this passage is that followers of Christ throughout the ages must follow the example of Abel. Although Abel's righteousness brought him trouble from his wicked brother, Abel stands as an example of faithfulness for all believers to follow even in our day.

So we see that the themes of violence and deliverance in the primeval history also apply to followers of Christ during the continuation of the kingdom. On one side, we should be ready to suffer opposition and violence in our age. But on the other side, as we endure these times of hardship, we will overcome only as we are faithful, and hope that Christ will deliver us one day.

Having seen how the themes of violence and deliverance fit within the inauguration and continuation of the kingdom, we should turn to the final stage of the kingdom of Christ, his second coming.

CONSUMMATION

Put simply, the New Testament teaches that at the return of Christ, we will see an end of violence against the people of God and we will experience a final deliverance to a world of everlasting blessing.

End of Violence

The end of violence is a central aspect of the New Testament portrait of the consummation. When Christ returns, he will bring about a wholesale renewal of the creation, free of all violence. Listen to the way the apostle John described the return of Christ in Revelation 21:1-5:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying... “God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” (Revelation 21:1-5).

Final Deliverance

At the same time, however, the consummation of Christ’s kingdom will not simply bring violence to an end. When he returns, he will grant endless blessings of life and peace to his people. Our deliverance will be full and final. In Revelation 22:1-2 we read this description of our final deliverance:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1-2).

This hope of final deliverance in the second coming of Christ appears throughout the New Testament. It expresses the pinnacle of Christian belief. We long for the day when the trials and difficulties of this world will be replaced by the life-giving wonders of the world to come. Suffering will be exchanged for joy. Struggle will be exchanged for victory. And death will be exchanged for everlasting life.

So we see that just as Moses wrote about the primeval world of violence to encourage Israel to move forward toward Canaan, the New Testament teaches us to yearn for the new world to come at the consummation. When Christ returns, all who have trusted him will see an end to violence, and they will inherit a full and glorious deliverance into an eternal world of salvation.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have looked at several aspects of the primeval world of violence described in Genesis 4:1–6:8. We have noted the structure of this portion of Genesis. We have also seen how Moses originally wrote this material to encourage the Israelites who followed him toward Canaan. And we have also learned that as Christians we must apply this portion of the primeval history to our New Testament faith.

When we look at this portion of Genesis as Moses originally intended it for Israel, it becomes much more than a mere record of the past. Instead, we can see that as God

delivered from violence in the primeval world, and as he later delivered Israel in Moses' day, we can increase our hope that Christ will one day deliver us from this world of violence as well.

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The Primeval History

LESSON
FOUR

THE RIGHT DIRECTION



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The Primeval History

Lesson Four

The Right Direction

INTRODUCTION

I recall a time when I was teaching in the Ukraine, and had only a few minutes to reach my destination by Metro. I rushed to the station, ran down the stairs and jumped on the train just as the doors were closing. It was going to be a ride all the way across town, so I sat back to catch my breath and relaxed for a few minutes. Then after a while it suddenly dawned on me. I had taken the train going in the wrong direction! Now naturally, the next metro station was miles away, and it took forever to reach it. By the time I got turned around and started back, it was clear that I was going to be very late. I can remember thinking to myself, “Well, this situation isn’t all I had hoped it would be, but at least now I’m going in the right direction.”

I guess that’s the way it is in most areas of life. Our situations are never perfect, and most of the time they’re not even close. We face lots of problems and challenges everywhere we go. Yet, we all know that it is still better at least to be going in the right direction, rather than the wrong way.

We have entitled this lesson “The Right Direction,” and in it we are going to explore Genesis 6:9–11:9 where we will discover the direction God established for his people to follow after the great flood in the days of Noah. As we will see, in these chapters of the primeval history, Moses gave the people of Israel a clear direction to pursue. It may not have been all that they wanted, but it was ordained by God to bring them toward great blessings. And this portion of the primeval history is very important for Christians too, because we should be following this same direction as well.

Our study of Genesis 6:9–11:9 will divide into three parts: first, we will examine the literary structure of these chapters; second, we will explore their original meaning by discerning why Moses wrote this material for Israel; and third, we will look to the New Testament for guidance in applying these chapters to our lives. Let’s begin our study of the right direction by exploring the literary structure of these chapters.

LITERARY STRUCTURE

Genesis 6:9–11:9 is a large portion of the primeval history, and it may be outlined in a number of different ways. For our purposes, we have segmented these chapters into two main parts. The first section includes 6:9–9:17, and we have entitled it “The Flood of Deliverance.” In this part of Genesis, Moses described the flood of Noah’s day. The second part of this material is Genesis 9:18–11:9, which we have entitled “The New Order.” It describes several crucial events that took place after the flood, and which set enduring patterns that characterized the world after the flood. To gain a better understanding of the literary pattern of these chapters, we will look into both of these

major parts. Let's begin by examining the structure of the story Moses wrote about the flood of Noah's day.

FLOOD OF DELIVERANCE

In recent years a number of interpreters have noticed that the story of Noah's flood displays a relatively clear literary pattern. Although it is possible to describe this pattern in a number of ways, in this study we will point out how these chapters form a symmetrical five-step drama.

Initial Covenant

The first step of this narrative appears in Genesis 6:9-22, and we will call it the "initial divine covenant" with Noah. In this portion of the narrative, Moses noted that Noah was a righteous man in a world that had gone sour. God spoke to Noah and revealed why he planned to destroy the human race. We read these words in Genesis 6:13:

So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth" (Genesis 6:13).

Yet, the first step of this narrative also tells us that God planned to start over again by delivering one man and his family, namely, righteous Noah. To assure Noah of his intention, God entered into an initial covenant with Noah. In Genesis 6:17-18, we read that God said these words to Noah:

Everything on earth will perish. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark — you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you (Genesis 6:17-18).

At the beginning of the flood narrative, God swore a covenant oath to rescue Noah and his family from the coming flood. This covenant secured Noah's deliverance, and established him as the head of a new humanity after the flood.

Now that we have seen how the flood story opens by focusing on God's initial covenant with Noah, we should turn to the last portion of the story which balances the first, 8:20–9:17, which we have entitled the "enduring divine covenant" with Noah.

Enduring Covenant

As our title suggests, in this passage God returned to Noah after the flood and made another covenant with him. God decided to give humanity the opportunity of a new order in the world. As we read in Genesis 8:22:

As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease (Genesis 8:22).

To establish the certainty of this new course, God entered into a second covenant with Noah at the end of the flood narrative in Genesis 9:11-15.

I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth... I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind (Genesis 9:11-15).

So we see that the story of Noah's flood ends with the covenant promise that a flood will never again destroy the earth, and with God setting his bow in the clouds as a sure sign that he would never forget this promise. This closing covenant promise points to the great importance that Noah had in the primeval history. He was the mediator of a covenant, a covenant which extended to all future generations.

With the opening and closing sections of this story in mind, we are in a position to explore the inner workings of the flood narrative. The middle portion moves from God's initial covenant to the new order of the final covenant in three main steps.

Escape from Water

The second step of this narrative appears in 7:1-16, which we have entitled Noah's "escape from water." This material is rather straightforward. Noah prepared the ark and brought animals of every kind into it, and floodwaters began to burst into the world, but Noah, his family, and the animals he had gathered were safely sealed in the ark.

Exit to Dry Land

The fourth section of the story of Noah's flood forms a dramatic counterpoint to the second step. It describes Noah's exit to dry land in Genesis 8:6-19. After the flood had begun to subside, Noah longed for dry land to appear so that he could leave the ark. After a period of waiting, dry lands appeared and God commanded Noah to leave the ark, just as he had previously ordered him to enter it.

Divine Remembrance

Now we are in a position to look at the center, or turning point, of this narrative, Genesis 7:17-8:5, which we have entitled the "divine remembrance" of Noah. These

verses begin with a description of the flood raging and destroying every living thing on earth. But by the end of this section, the flood has begun to subside.

Now, at the very heart of this section is a simple but profound sentence which indicates why God began to calm the raging flood. In Genesis 8:1 Moses wrote that in the midst of the storm:

God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded (Genesis 8:1).

In great mercy, God did not forget the covenant he made with Noah and those with him. He remembered the passengers of the ark, and moved on their behalf against the raging flood.

This outline of Noah's flood brings to light the primary concerns of the story. Moses wrote about the flood as a story of deliverance. Although judgment came on the wicked of the earth, Moses' chief concern was to show that through Noah God brought humanity into a world of tremendous blessings.

Now that we have explored the first portion of Genesis 6:9–11:9, we should turn to the second major section, the new order, in Genesis 9:18–11:9.

NEW ORDER

Moses' account of the new order in chapters 9–11 divides into two basic units. On the one hand, Genesis 9:18–10:32 focuses on the sons of Noah. On the other hand, Genesis 11:1–9 concern the defeat of the city of Babel. Although these passages may seem unrelated at first, we will see that they actually work together to create a pattern for the new order of the world. They set forth the central features of world history from that time forward. Let's look first at the account of the sons of Noah and the contribution it makes to this portrait of the newly ordered world.

Sons of Noah

Moses' record of the sons of Noah in chapters 9–10 of Genesis consists of a title and two main sections. In 9:18–19 we find a title which indicates that this portion of Genesis focuses primarily on Noah's three sons, and how they were distributed over the earth.

In line with this title, Moses' record of Noah's sons divides into two main sections. In the first place, the story in 9:20–29 sets forth distinctions among the sons. And in the second place, 10:1–32 describes the distribution of Noah's sons and their descendants. It will be helpful to look at these sections separately.

Chapter 9:20–29 is that well-known passage in Genesis that speaks of the curse on Ham's son Canaan. Listen to what Moses wrote in Genesis 9:24–27:

When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him, he said, “Cursed be Canaan!” ... He also said, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem! ... May God extend the territory of Japheth” (Genesis 9:24-27).

Put simply, this narrative reports the events that led to a major distinction among the descendants of Noah. Noah cursed Canaan, the son of Ham. Canaan would be the lowest of slaves to his brothers. Yet, Noah pronounced blessings on his other sons Shem and Japheth, because they had treated him with respect.

Moses included this story in his description of the new order after the flood because the entire human race came from the three sons of Noah. The distinctions made here led to the dynamics of human relationships seen from this time forward in biblical history.

This outlook on the distinctions among Noah’s sons is confirmed by chapter 10: the distribution of Noah’s sons. Looking to the generations which came long after the days of Noah, in Genesis 10, Moses gave a sample listing of the places where the descendants of Ham, Shem, and Japheth went throughout the world. According to Genesis 10, the Japhethites occupied territories to the north, northeast, and northwest of Canaan. With a few exceptions, the Hamites moved toward Northern Africa, and the special son of Ham, namely Canaan, dwelled in the land of Canaan, Israel’s Promised Land. The Shemites or Semitic people largely occupied the territories of the Arabian Peninsula.

The record of Genesis 10 is highly selective and designed to provide only general patterns of migration. But these general patterns were enough for Moses to illustrate some long-term patterns that characterized human interaction in the new order after the flood.

Now that we have seen the literary structure of Moses’ attention to Noah’s sons in Genesis 9–10, we are in a position to look at the second portion of the new order after the flood: the defeat of the city of Babel in 11:1-9.

Defeat of Babel

The story of the tower of Babel divides into five symmetrical dramatic steps. The first step of verses 1 and 2 begins with the vast majority of humanity together. But by contrast, this narrative ends in verses 8 and 9 where we learn that God dispersed humanity over the earth as he confused human language. Just how did humanity move from being together with one language to being scattered and having many languages? The middle portion explains what happened.

The second step of verses 3 and 4 reports a plan which the people had. They intended to build a city with a great tower reaching to heaven so that they would be famous for all time and utterly invincible. Nevertheless, the fourth step of this narrative in verses 6 and 7 balances this human plan by reporting God’s counter-plan. God called his heavenly army to attack the city by confusing the language of the people and thereby to stop the construction of the city and its tower.

The turning point of this story appears in verse 5, where God investigated the city and its tower. Once God saw the city and the proud plans of its inhabitants, he determined to bring an end to the city of Babel.

So we see that according to Moses, life after the flood was far from the paradise we might have expected. On the contrary, the account of Noah's sons shows that the new order includes complex interactions among different groups of human beings. It also includes more defiance of God, as well as God's eventual defeat of those who defy him. Although these structures of the new order may seem strange to our modern ears, we will see that they spoke rather plainly to the experiences of the Israelites to whom Moses first wrote these chapters.

Now that we have seen the literary structure of Genesis 6:9–11:9, we are in a position to ask a second question: Why did Moses write this account of the flood and the resulting new order? What lessons was he teaching the Israelites as they followed him toward the Promised Land?

ORIGINAL MEANING

Needless to say, we can be sure that Moses wrote about Noah's flood and the course of the new order to inform Israel of the facts of this period of primeval history. Yet, his record is far too selective and oriented toward particular themes to think that this was all he had in mind. Moses wrote not just to report the past, but to guide Israel in his own day as well.

We will unfold Moses' purpose by looking at three portions of Genesis 6:9–11:9: first, we will examine the original meaning of the flood narrative; and then we will turn to Moses' record of Noah's sons; and finally, we will give attention to the original implications of the last portion of the primeval history — the defeat of Babel. Let's look first at the ways Moses related the flood of Noah to the experience of Israel in his day.

FLOOD OF DELIVERANCE

To discern Moses' use of the flood narrative, we will look at two aspects of the story: first, the connections he established between the flood and the exodus; and second, the implications of these connections for Israel. Moses established connections between the flood and his own day by portraying Noah in ways that closely resembled his own life and ministry. Now, to be sure, the lives of Noah and Moses were different in many ways, and these differences should not be ignored. Yet, it is also evident that Moses purposefully depicted Noah so that his Israelite readers would see Noah as a precursor or foreshadowing of Moses.

Connections

There are at least eight significant connections between Noah and Moses. In the first place, Moses drew a connection between himself and Noah in the motif of violence. You will recall from Genesis 6:13 that Noah's flood came because the world was filled with violence. As Exodus 1–2 make clear, the Egyptians had inflicted much violence on the people of Israel prior to the call of Moses. Moses' deliverance from Egypt came in response to the violence inflicted on the people of Israel. So, the work both of Noah and of Moses was to deliver from violence.

A second association appears in Moses' use of the term "ark." The Hebrew word for Noah's ark throughout Genesis 6–9 is *tevah* (תֵּבָה). Interestingly enough, the only other place where Moses used the term *tevah* was in Exodus 2:3,5. There he referred to the basket in which his mother placed him as an ark, or *tevah*. Although Noah's ark was mammoth while Moses' ark was very small, Moses pointed to the fact that both he and Noah had been delivered from watery deaths by means of an ark, or *tevah*.

In the third place, the importance of divine covenants also establishes Noah as a precursor of Moses. As we have seen, according to Genesis 6:18 and 9:11–17, Noah entered into covenant with God on behalf of the entire human race. But of course, we know that one of Moses' primary services to Israel was to mediate a divine covenant. As Exodus 19–24 illustrate so well, Moses was chosen to lead the people of Israel into a special covenant with Yahweh as they came to Mount Sinai.

The central role of judgment through water also establishes a fourth connection between the two men. In Genesis 6–9, God delivered Noah and his family by taking them safely through a flood that destroyed the wicked of the earth. And in much the same way, as Exodus 13–15 tell us, Moses brought Israel out of Egypt by passing through the waters of the Red Sea, which waters in turn destroyed the army of the Egyptian oppressors.

In the fifth place, God sent wind to drive back the waters in both the days of Noah and the days of Moses. As we have read, according to Genesis 8:1, God sent a wind to drive back the waters of Noah's flood. Similarly, according to Exodus 14:21, at the Red Sea, "the Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind."

A sixth connection appears in the emphasis put on animals. As Genesis 6:19 tells us, God commanded Noah to bring animals into the ark. On no less than four occasions, the book of Exodus mentions the many animals that left Egypt with the Israelites. Just as God ordained for Noah to bring animals into the world of his day, God also ordained that Moses should bring animals into the Promised Land.

Seventh, the theme of divine remembrance also joins Noah and Moses. You will recall that in Genesis 8:1, as the waters raged in the days of Noah, God acted on Noah's behalf because he remembered him. God had made a covenant with Noah that he would bring him safely through the flood, and he remembered that covenant. In much the same way, God declared to Moses that he delivered Israel from Egypt because he remembered his covenant. Listen to what God told Moses in Exodus 6:5:

Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant (Exodus 6:5).

Divine remembrance played a vital role in the flood and in the exodus.

Finally, the blessing of nature also associates Noah with Moses. Noah brought the human race into a new world where God promised there would be a lasting and stable natural order that would benefit humanity. In a similar fashion, Moses told Israel that in the Land of Promise, nature would remain constant and beneficial in much the same way.

With these connections between Noah and Moses in mind, we are in a position to see the implications of these parallels for the nation of Israel. Why did Moses establish these connections?

Implications

To grasp the original implications of this material, we must remember that the people of Israel had seriously rebelled against Moses, questioning his authority and the wisdom of his program of exodus and conquest. These challenges to his ministry led Moses to establish connections between himself and Noah.

God had used Noah in the flood of deliverance to redeem humanity from horrible primeval violence and to re-establish the human race in a new world of great blessings. And in much the same way, God had chosen Moses to deliver Israel from the horrible violence of Egypt and to bring Israel into a new world of the Promised Land. Moses' design for Israel was so similar to the flood of Noah that no one could rightly deny it had come from the hand of God.

Now that we have seen the original meaning of the flood of deliverance, we should turn to Moses' record of the sons of Noah in Genesis 9:18–10:32.

NOAH'S SONS

Why did Moses include this material in his primeval history? What was his purpose in bringing these matters to Israel's attention? To examine this portion of Moses' record, we will look at three issues: first, his special focus on Canaan; second, the theme of conflict; and third, the implications of these motifs for Israel. Consider first the way that Moses gave attention to Canaan.

Canaan

You will recall that Noah awoke from his drunken sleep and realized that Ham had dishonored him, and that Shem and Japheth had honored him. Now it would seem only reasonable for Noah to have been angry with Ham and to have cursed him, just as he blessed his other sons. But this is not what happened. Listen to the entirety of what Noah said in Genesis 9:25-27:

**“Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.”
He also said, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem! May Canaan be
the slave of Shem. May God extend the territory of Japheth; may**

**Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave”
(Genesis 9:25-27).**

As we see in this passage, Shem and Japheth received appropriate rewards for their righteousness, but Ham was not even mentioned here. Instead, it was Canaan, the son of Ham, who received Noah’s curse.

When we look carefully at this story, we see that Ham serves a different role than his brothers. In short, Ham has little significance apart from the fact that he was the father of Canaan. Notice the way Moses wrote of Ham in this narrative. In 9:18 we read:

The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan) (Genesis 9:18).

The same identification appears in 9:22 as well:

Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness (Genesis 9:22).

In many respects, Ham fades into the background of this story and his son Canaan takes his place alongside Shem and Japheth.

With Moses’ special emphasis on Canaan in mind, we may turn to a second concern that appears in his treatment of the sons of Noah — conflict in the new order after the flood.

Conflict

The theme of conflict plays a major role in Moses’ attention to Noah’s sons. To miss this theme is to miss the most important aspect of the story. The idea of conflict also appears in Genesis 9:25-27:

**“Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.”
He also said, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem. May God extend the territory of Japheth; may Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave”
(Genesis 9:25-27).**

Notice how Moses stressed the certainty of conflict by repeating Canaan’s curse three times in this passage. In verse 25, he pronounced the curse that Canaan would be the “lowest of slaves,” or the lowest kind of slave imaginable. In verse 26, Noah predicted that Canaan would be the slave of Shem. And in verse 27, Moses added that Canaan would become Japheth’s slave as well. Through this repetition, Moses stressed the fact that Canaan would certainly be conquered by his brothers.

Beyond this, it’s important to note that these verses portray Shem as the principal victor over Canaan. In verse 27, the words “may Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave,” may be better translated, “may Japheth live in the tents of Shem so that Canaan may be his slave.” Noah’s idea seems to be that Canaan will

become subservient to Japheth only to the extent that Japheth joined forces with Shem. In effect, Moses believed that Shem was to take the lead in subjugating Canaan.

So we see in this passage that Moses established an important feature of the new order after the flood, which could hardly have been expected. He understood that the future of humanity would entail a dramatic conflict in which the descendants of Shem would subjugate the descendants of Canaan.

In light of Moses' attention to Canaan and the theme of conflict, we are able to see the original implications of Noah's sons for ancient Israel.

Implications

Why did Moses include these events in his record of the new order after the flood? Well, Moses had a very specific reason for describing the new order in this way. The conflict between Shem and Canaan spoke directly to the needs of his Israelite audience. It addressed a crucial dimension of their lives.

The key to understanding Moses' purpose appears in Genesis 10:18-19. After listing some of the descendants of Canaan, Moses wrote that:

Later the Canaanite clans scattered and the borders of Canaan reached from Sidon toward Gerar as far as Gaza, and then toward Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha (Genesis 10:18-19).

These rather specific geographical references were familiar to Moses' Israelite readers. The descendants of Canaan, or the Canaanites, had settled in the region that stretched north to south from Sidon to Gaza, and to the region of Sodom and Gomorrah. Moses was especially concerned with those descendants of Canaan who had settled in the Promised Land. As the Shemite nation specially called by God, the people of Israel were to move into this land of the Canaanites and to claim it as their own.

So we see that Moses' account of the sons of Noah was not simply designed to give an account of the past. It was designed to give a background to Moses' call to Israel to move forward into the conquest, just as God had ordained in the primeval history. As a result, the Israelites who resisted Moses' call to take the land of Canaan were not simply resisting Moses. They were actually resisting the plan of God, the order that God had established for the world after the flood.

Now that we have seen how the accounts of the flood and of Noah's sons apply to the original Israelite readers, we should turn to our third focus: Moses' original intention when writing about the defeat of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9.

DEFEAT OF BABEL

To grasp how Moses wanted the Israelites to apply the story of Babel's defeat to their lives, we will look into three aspects this passage: first, Moses' description of the

city; second, his description of Yahweh's victory; and third, the implications for the Israelites as they moved toward the Promised Land. Let's look first at the description of the city.

City

We should note that the name of the city, Babel, corresponds to the city which later came to be known as Babylon. By the time of Moses, the city of Babylon was well known in the Ancient Near East. It had been a center of civilization for many years, and its reputation had reached mythic proportions. So when Moses wrote about a place called Babel after the flood, his Israelite readers would have immediately recognized this place as the primeval origin of a great urban center.

Victory

A second important aspect of Genesis 11:1-9 is the way in which Moses described Yahweh's victory over this great primeval city. At several points in this story, Moses displayed the grandeur of God's victory by contrasting the outlooks of the inhabitants of Babel with his own true outlook. For example, consider the way Moses handled the theme of scattering, or in Hebrew, the verb *puts* (פָּצַח). On the one hand, the inhabitants of Babel were deeply concerned with the possibility that they might be scattered. In 11:4 we find that they built the city so that they may "not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

But by contrast, Moses reported twice that God did precisely what the people of Babel did not want to happen. In 11:8 we read that:

The Lord scattered them ... over all the earth (Genesis 11:8).

And again in 11:9 we find that:

From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth (Genesis 11:9).

Frequently in the Old Testament, the term "scatter" has the very negative connotation of utter defeat in battle. Defeated soldiers are scattered as their enemies chase them away, slaughtering them as they flee. And this is the connotation in this story as well. Moses presented this story as an account of an astonishing victory for Yahweh. Yahweh called his heavenly host to war against the city of Babel, and to chase away its fleeing inhabitants across the face of the earth.

Another way in which Moses contrasted his outlook with that of the inhabitants of Babel was with respect to the size of the city and its tower. According to Genesis 11:4, the inhabitants of Babel wanted a tower that reached to the heavens, the place of their gods. But Moses scoffed at this idea. Instead, in Genesis 11:5 he wrote that:

The Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building (Genesis 11:5).

The Hebrew word *yarad* (יָרַד), which is here translated “came down,” has a rather specific connotation in this story. God did not simply notice the city; he did not even simply come to the city. Instead, whereas the inhabitants of Babel wanted to build a tower that reached to the heavens, Moses insisted that Yahweh had to come down from the heights of heaven just to see the city. So we see that Moses jeered at the pretense of the inhabitants of Babel. From Yahweh’s point of view, this city was little more than a tiny speck.

Finally, we should note how the defeat of Babel led Moses to deride the reputation of this primeval city. The inhabitants of the city called it Babel. In the languages of Mesopotamia, the term *babel* meant “the gate of god.” This name expressed the belief that their ziggurat actually formed a gateway to the gods, and that they were secured by the powers of heaven.

But Moses had a different viewpoint on the name of the city. Since Yahweh had severely defeated Babel, the city was clearly not the gate of God. So, what then did the name mean? Moses’ strikingly sarcastic answer appears in Genesis 11:9:

That is why it was called Babel — because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world (Genesis 11:9).

To understand Moses’ sarcasm in this verse, we need to understand how he played with the sounds of two Hebrew words. First he said, “That is why it was called Babel.” The Hebrew word for “Babel” is simply *babel* (בָּבֶל), a Hebrew version of what the Mesopotamians called that place. But then Moses explained that the city had this name because the Lord confused human language there. The Hebrew word translated “confused” is *balal* (בָּלַל), which sounds similar enough to *babel* in Hebrew that Moses’ sarcasm worked. He reviled the ancient city by saying that the real reason it was called Babel was because of *balal* or confusion took place there. So, from Moses’ point of view, the name “Babel” was appropriate for this place, not because it was the gate of God, but because it was a place of confusion, confusion for the whole world. Through this sarcasm, Moses utterly reversed the awesome reputation that Babel had in his day. He led the Israelites in delightful laughter as he told them that the victory of their God Yahweh had made a joke out of the greatest city of primeval history.

With the description of the city and Yahweh’s victory in mind, we are in a position to see the implications of this story for the people of Israel as they moved toward the Promised Land.

Implications

As we know, at Kadesh Barnea, Moses sent spies into the land of Canaan who returned with bad reports. They claimed that Israel could not conquer the land of Canaan

because the forces there were too great. As a result, the Israelites turned away from the conquest and spent the next forty years wandering in the wilderness. It was only when the next generation came to adulthood that Moses was ready to move Israel against Canaan once again.

One aspect of these bad reports helps us understand the significance of the defeat of primeval Babel. Listen to what the spies said about the cities of Canaan as reported in Deuteronomy 1:28:

The people are stronger and taller than we are; the cities are large, with walls up to the sky (Deuteronomy 1:28).

Unfortunately, most modern translations of this verse fail to draw the connection between this description of the Canaanite cities and the tower of Babel. When the spies spoke of “walls up to the sky,” the term for “sky” is the Hebrew word *shamayim* (שָׁמַיִם), which is often translated “heaven.” In fact, it is the same term used about the tower of Babel when it is described as “a tower that reaches to the heavens” in Genesis 11:4. In both cases, the idea was that the cities were invincible because they reached to the heights of heaven.

So it is that Moses drew a connection between the primeval city of Babel and the cities of Canaan. The Israelites thought that the walls surrounding the cities of Canaan reached to heaven, much like those who built the tower at Babel thought that their ziggurat had reached heaven. This connection between the city of Babel and the cities of Canaan brings Moses’ purpose to light. Put simply, the Canaanite cities before the people of Israel may have seemed to reach to heaven, but they were still no match for the power of Yahweh. In the primeval days, Yahweh moved against the greatest city known to humanity, whose tower supposedly reached to heaven as well. Yet, this primeval city, which was greater than any city of Canaan, was easily destroyed by Yahweh.

Just as God had delivered the human race into a new order through the primeval flood, he had delivered Israel from Egypt. And just as God had ordained conflict between Shem and Canaan, Moses was leading Israel toward the land of the Canaanites. And just as God defeated the great city of Babel, he would soon give victory to Israel against the cities of Canaan. From these chapters of the primeval history, the people of Israel should have understood that to follow Moses toward the Promised Land was to move in the right direction.

So far, we have seen the literary structure and original meaning of Moses’ record of Genesis 6:9–11:9. Now we are ready to ask a third question: what are some of the ways we should apply this material to our lives today?

MODERN APPLICATION

In our usual fashion, we will approach the question of modern application by following the New Testament’s description of the three stages of Christ’s kingdom. We will look first at how the flood of deliverance and the resulting new order apply to the inauguration of the kingdom in the first coming of Christ. Then we will turn to the

relevance of these matters for the continuation of the kingdom throughout the history of the church. And finally, we will examine how the New Testament applies this portion of the primeval history to the consummation of the kingdom when Christ returns in glory.

As we approach the final chapters of Moses' primeval history in this way, we will discover that the New Testament extends Moses' original purpose for Israel into the three stages of Christ's kingdom, his work in the past, in the present and in the future. Let's look first at the ways in which the New Testament views these themes in light of the first coming of Christ.

INAUGURATION

In the inauguration of the kingdom, Christ accomplished a great salvation on the behalf of his people in ways that corresponded to the themes Moses emphasized in Genesis 6:9–11:9. We can see these connections in at least two ways: the covenant which Christ mediated, and the victory he accomplished.

Covenant

On the one hand, Christ brought deliverance to his people by means of a covenant that rescued them from the judgment of God. As we have seen, Noah played a special role as the mediator of a covenant, and Moses drew upon this fact as he explained his own ministry to Israel. In a similar fashion, the New Testament teaches that Christ is our deliverer because he mediated a new covenant when he came to this earth.

All too often, Christians fail to realize that Christ came to this earth when God's people were under divine judgment. Because Israel so flagrantly violated the covenants of the Old Testament, in 586 B.C. the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the people of Israel never fully recovered from foreign domination. But the prophet Jeremiah predicted that God would redeem a people out of the fire of exile by establishing a new covenant in the future. In Jeremiah 31:31 the prophet announced:

“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31).

As most Christians know, the New Testament teaches that Jesus came to this earth as the mediator of this new covenant. Jesus himself acknowledged this role for himself when he spoke to his disciples at the Last Supper. As we read in Luke 22:20, he told them:

This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you (Luke 22:20).

So we see that just as Noah delivered from judgment as the mediator of a divine covenant, in the inauguration of the kingdom Jesus delivered those who trusted him from judgment by mediating the new covenant through his blood, which he shed on the cross.

Victory

In addition to bringing a new covenant, Jesus' earthly ministry fulfilled the theme of victory in holy war. Moses' focused on the theme of holy war as a part of the new order after the flood. He established that the new order of the world required Israel to move forward into the conquest of Canaan, and he assured them of a great victory. In comparison, listen to the way Paul described Christ's victory at the inauguration of the kingdom in Colossians 2:15:

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15).

As we see here, Jesus' victory in his first coming was not political, but spiritual. Jesus' death and resurrection initiated the defeat of the evil powers and spiritual authorities that ruled over the world in his day. His work of redemption made a public spectacle of them much like Yahweh had made a spectacle of the primeval city of Babel, and later had destroyed the great cities of Canaan.

In this sense, Jesus not only delivered through his new covenant, but he was also victorious over the spiritual forces of darkness in his death and resurrection. Followers of Christ look to Christ's earthly ministry as the beginning of the final victory promised long ago in the book of Genesis.

As we should expect, the New Testament does not simply relate the themes of Genesis 6:9–11:9 to the first coming of Christ. They also apply to the continuation of the kingdom, the time in which we now live.

CONTINUATION

The New Testament describes the time between the first and second comings of Christ in at least two ways that relate to the last chapters of Moses' primeval history. These perspectives relate directly to the importance of baptism and spiritual warfare in the Christian life. As we live the Christian life in this age, we come into contact with the significance of Noah's flood and the new order established after that flood.

Baptism

One New Testament passage in particular describes baptism in connection with the flood of deliverance in Noah's day. Listen to what the apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:20-22:

God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also — not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand — with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him (1 Peter 3:20-22).

In this remarkable passage, Peter directly connected every person's experience of salvation during the continuation of the kingdom to the flood of Noah's day. He began by noting that Noah and his family were saved through water. Their deliverance through water opened the way for humanity to enter a renewed world of blessing.

But also notice that Peter drew a direct relationship between the water of Noah's flood and the Christian life by focusing on baptism. He said that the water in Noah's day symbolized, or anticipated the water of Christian baptism. As we have seen in this lesson, the water of Noah's day cleansed the world of horrible corruption and opened the way for a new beginning, much like Moses' passing through the Red Sea removed the tyranny of Egypt and brought a new beginning for the nation of Israel. Well, in a similar way, the water of baptism cleanses believers of their sins and grants them a new beginning of everlasting life in Christ.

Now we must note carefully that 1 Peter 3:21 states that baptism saves only in the sense that it is the pledge of a good conscience toward God. In other words, mere washing with water during baptism does not save anyone. Instead, it is only as baptism is the pledge of a heart forgiven and cleansed from sin by faith in Christ that it symbolizes salvation. So it is that the New Testament applies the flood of deliverance in Noah's day to the continuation of the kingdom by asserting that every time an individual comes to Christ in saving faith, he or she is taken through the cleansing water of baptism and into a new life, much like Noah was brought through the flood into a new world.

Spiritual Warfare

As we have seen, however, Moses' primeval history indicated that the water of Noah's day delivered humanity into a holy war. Moses originally drew attention to this fact to encourage Israel to conform to this new order by moving into the conquest of Canaan. In a similar fashion, the New Testament applies this teaching to the continuation of the kingdom as it describes the spiritual warfare every believer faces. Listen to the way Paul put the matter in Ephesians 6:11-12:

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:11-12).

This and other New Testament passages plainly teach that Christians today are at war with evil. Unfortunately, many Christians today fail to embrace this dimension of their spiritual lives, much like the Israelites following Moses tried to avoid the conquest of Canaan. But the New Testament's perspective is clear. We must join in this spiritual battle. As Paul put it in Ephesians 6:13:

Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand (Ephesians 6:13).

If we don the armor of God, we will be victorious in our spiritual warfare.

So we see that just as the New Testament connects Noah's deliverance through the flood to our deliverance through baptism, it also teaches that just as the primeval world was delivered to warfare, Christian baptism delivers us to engage in spiritual warfare every day of our lives.

CONSUMMATION

In light of the way the New Testament applies the last chapters of the primeval history to the inauguration and continuation of the kingdom, it is not surprising to discover that the consummation of the kingdom is also described in terms of Noah's flood and the warfare of the new primeval order.

Final Cataclysm

New Testament writers made these connections by describing the return of Christ in glory as the final cataclysm and the final battle. In 2 Peter 3 we find an explicit association of Noah's primeval flood with the return of Christ in glory. Listen to the way Peter began his discussion in verses 3-6.

You must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed (2 Peter 3:3-6).

In this passage Peter corrected scoffers who pointed to the uniformity of the order of nature as proof that Jesus would not return. They believed that from the time of creation, everything had remained uniform. Nothing had ever disrupted the world from the way God had made it in the beginning. And since nothing had ever changed, they believed that nothing ever would.

But Peter appealed to Moses' record of Noah's flood to prove otherwise. God created the world in the beginning out of water, but during the days of Noah, the world was destroyed by a flood. A major cataclysm had occurred in the history of the world. God had intervened and destroyed the world in the days of Noah. But listen to Peter's conclusion in 2 Peter 3:7:

By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men (2 Peter 3:7).

Put simply, Peter argued that just as the primeval world had come to an end through the flood, the present heavens and earth would come to an end at the return of Christ in judgment. To be sure, this time, judgment will come by fire and not by water, but we can be sure that when God decides to act against sin in the world for the final time, it will be through a great cosmic destruction, much as it was in the primeval flood.

In this way, the New Testament teaches us to view the return of Christ in terms of Noah's flood. In the days of Noah, the wicked were judged and removed from the earth by a great cosmic upheaval. In an even greater way, when Christ returns in glory, there will be a cataclysm that utterly disrupts the world as we know it. The wicked will be removed from the earth, and all who follow Christ will be delivered into a grand and eternal new heavens and earth.

Final Battle

As we have seen, however, in the primeval history Noah's flood was accompanied by conflict and war between the people of God and the enemies of God. In line with this association, the New Testament also describes Christ's return as a final cosmic battle. Listen to the way the apostle John wrote about the return of Christ in Revelation 19:11-16:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS (Revelation 19:11-16).

In spectacular language of apocalyptic vision, John declared that the return of Christ would be a worldwide battle in which Christ himself would appear and destroy all of his

enemies. The glory of an eternal victory will come to those who have trusted Christ for salvation, but judgment and destruction will fall upon those who have rejected him.

So we see that the New Testament presents the consummation of the kingdom of Christ as the ultimate experience of God's victory over evil. God remains determined to establish his kingdom against all foes. When Christ returns in glory, this divine purpose will be fully realized. The wicked will be destroyed and the people of God in Christ will enjoy eternal victory and peace in the new heaven and new earth.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have looked at Genesis 6:9–11:9. In this portion of Scripture, Moses revealed the right direction for the people of Israel to follow as he led them toward the Promised Land. We have seen the literary structure of these chapters, and how Moses designed them to encourage Israel to move forward with confidence toward the conquest of Canaan. And we have also seen how the New Testament applies these themes to the three stages of Christ's kingdom.

As we face the struggles and challenges of living for Christ in this fallen world, we must take to heart the message which Moses gave the people of Israel long ago. In Christ, God has delivered us from the tyranny of sin, just as he delivered the primeval world through Noah. But he has also set us on a path that requires a period of conflict and struggle as we wait for the day when Christ brings ultimate victory to his people. Until that time, we know that the world in which we live is not yet perfect, but we can be sure that following Christ in his spiritual battle for the world is going in the right direction.

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Father Abraham

LESSON
ONE

THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM: STRUCTURE AND CONTENT



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Father Abraham

Lesson One

The Life of Abraham: Structure and Content

INTRODUCTION

We all know that there are many differences among the nations of the earth. They all have their own geography, distinguishing ethnic groups and unique traditions. But at least one thing is common among most countries: we all have stories about how our nations began. So many of us love to hear about the sacrifices and accomplishments of the people who founded our countries. We sing the praises of their heroism.

Why do we cherish and share these stories of origin so much? Why is this such an important part of nearly every human culture?

Well, there are at least two reasons. On the one side, we talk about the origins of our nations to pass on memories of the past. We want our children to remember their roots, where they came from. But on the other side, we also want to remember the ideals that guided our nations in the past so that we can find direction for the future.

Well, something like this was true for the people of God in the Old Testament as well. The ancient Israelites cherished stories about their beginnings and passed them from generation to generation for the same two reasons. They told about the days of their ancestors to remember events long ago so that the great accomplishments of the past would not be forgotten. But they also passed these stories from generation to generation to remind themselves of the direction they should go in the future.

This is the first lesson in our series entitled, *Father Abraham*. In this series we will explore the stories that ancient Israelites told about Abraham, their great patriarch. And we will see that Moses wrote these stories in the book of Genesis so that the Israelites in his day would remember the past, and so that they would also understand more clearly the future God had in store for them.

This is the first of three lessons in this series, and we have entitled it, “The Life of Abraham: Structure and Content.” In this lesson we will begin our overview of Abraham’s life by concentrating on the structure and content of the chapters in Genesis that speak about him. How did Moses structure his account of Abraham’s life? What were the main concerns of these chapters?

We will explore the structure and content of Abraham’s life in two parts: first, we will look at the literary design of this material. And second, we will examine the major themes of these chapters. Let’s look first at the literary design of Abraham’s life.

LITERARY DESIGN

Whenever we approach portions of Scripture like the life of Abraham that consist primarily of narratives or stories, we must remember that biblical writers did more than simply tell us the truth about what happened long ago. Because the Holy Spirit inspired

them to be God's spokesmen, the history that they wrote was entirely true. But the Holy Spirit inspired them to address the needs of the people for whom they wrote, so biblical authors also wrote about history with their readers in mind. They intentionally designed their stories so that these stories would be relevant to the lives of the people who received them.

As we approach the record of Abraham's life in Genesis, we can be confident that these stories do not misrepresent what actually happened in Abraham's life. But in order to understand how these stories applied to the lives of Moses' original readers, we must also be aware of *how* Genesis portrays Abraham's life. And one of the chief ways we can begin to understand how Abraham is portrayed is to explore the literary design of Abraham's life in Genesis.

We'll explore the literary design of Abraham's life in two steps. In the first place, we will present an overview of the book of Genesis as a whole, and we will see how Abraham's story fits within the larger picture of Genesis. And in the second place, we will look at the structure of the stories that focus on Abraham's life. Let's begin with an overview of the entire book of Genesis.

GENESIS

Throughout the centuries, different interpreters have understood the overarching structure of Genesis in different ways. One approach has been to divide Genesis into ten segments based on the repetition of the so-called "generations" or "*toledot*" passages scattered throughout the book of Genesis. And we should admit that there is some value in this large-scale outlook. But we have suggested in other series' that it is much more helpful to think of Genesis in three large sections: the primeval history in Genesis 1:1–11:9; the early patriarchal history in 11:10–37:1; and the later patriarchal history in 37:2–50:26.

The primeval history of Genesis 1:1–11:9 presents God's revealed truth about the origins of the world. It speaks of the creation, the corruption of creation, and the reshaping of creation through a worldwide flood. And it holds together as a literary unit in the ways it resembles the patterns of many ancient near eastern primeval histories.

The later patriarchal history in 37:2–50:26 tells the story of Joseph. It begins with the story of conflict between Joseph and his brothers, then moves to Joseph's rise to power in Egypt and Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers in the end. Many interpreters have described this large, unified storyline as a *novella* about Joseph.

Between these first and last sections is Genesis 11:10–37:1. These chapters contain the early patriarchal history, collections of stories about the first fathers of the nation of Israel. In this series, we are concerned with one portion of this middle segment of Genesis.

In general terms, the early patriarchal history divides into two parts: the life of Abraham in 11:10–25:18 and the life of Jacob in 25:19–37:1. Now this twofold division may be surprising at first because in Scripture we frequently hear mention of *three* early patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So, we might have reasonably expected the literary structure of these chapters to be threefold as well, first telling us about Abraham, then about Isaac and then about Jacob. But in actuality, no portion of the early patriarchal

history is devoted to Isaac as the main figure. Instead, he serves only as a transitional figure. His life is told first as a part of Abraham's life and then as a part of Jacob's life. And as a result, the early patriarchal history actually divides into only two main parts: the life of Abraham and then the life of Jacob. Our concern in this series is with the first half of the patriarchal period, Moses' record of Father Abraham. So let's take a closer look at the structure of Abraham's life as it is presented in Genesis 11:10–25:18.

ABRAHAM

Now that we have seen where the life of Abraham fits within the overarching structure of Genesis, we should turn to our next concern: the structure of Abraham's life in Genesis 11:10–25:18. To explore the structure of Abraham's life, we will look at these chapters on two levels: on the one hand, we will simply identify the *basic units* or episodes of Abraham's life, and on the other hand, we will examine how these various episodes have been arranged into the portrait of Abraham we have in Genesis. Let's first identify the basic units or episodes of Abraham's life.

Basic Units

Moses wrote about Abraham's life in seventeen basic segments or episodes:

1. First, Abraham's favored lineage (in 11:10-26), a genealogy that describes Abraham's family heritage.
2. This passage is followed by an account of Abraham's failing father (in 11:27-32), a second genealogy that describes Abraham's travels with his father Terah.
3. Abraham's migration to Canaan (in 12:1-9), the story of Abraham's initial call and travel to the Promised Land.
4. Abraham's deliverance from Egypt (in 12:10-20), the time when Abraham sojourned in Egypt and God delivered him.
5. Abraham's conflict with Lot (in 13:1-18), the story of struggle between Abraham's men and Lot's men.
6. Abraham's rescue of Lot (in 14:1-24), the time when Abraham went to war to rescue Lot from kings who had captured him.
7. Abraham's covenant promises (in 15:1-21), the account of God's covenant assuring Abraham that he would have many descendants and a permanent homeland.
8. Abraham's failure with Hagar (in 16:1-16), the time when Abraham had a child, Ishmael, with Sarah's handmaiden, Hagar.
9. Abraham's covenant requirements (in 17:1-27), the account of God's covenant that reminded Abraham of the necessity of loyalty to the commands of God.

10. Sodom and Gomorrah (in 18:1– 19:38), the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and Lot's rescue from that destruction.
11. Abraham's intercession for Abimelech (in 20:1-18), the time when Abraham prayed for Abimelech the Philistine.
12. Abraham's sons Isaac and Ishmael (in 21:1-21), the story of Isaac's birth and the expulsion of Ishmael from Abraham's family.
13. Abraham's treaty with Abimelech (in 21:22-34), the time when Abraham entered into an agreement with Abimelech over land and water rights.
14. Abraham's test (in 22:1-24), the well-known episode in which God called Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac.
15. Abraham's burial property (in 23:1-20), the story of Sarah's death and the purchase of a burial site.
16. A wife for Abraham's son Isaac (in 24:1-67), the time when Rebekah became Isaac's wife.
17. And finally, Abraham's death and heir (in 25:1-18), the closing story of Abraham's passing and the record of his descendants.

As we can see, the story of Abraham's life follows the basic order of events as they occurred in his life. The stories begin with him relatively young and under the authority of his father, and they end up with Abraham growing old and dying. On occasion, there are allusions and implicit connections among the various episodes of Abraham's life. But by comparison with other portions of the Old Testament, Abraham's life story consists of a series of seventeen relatively independent episodes. Each of these episodes was designed to report events in Abraham's life and to teach specific lessons to Moses' original Israelite audience. As Moses led them from Egypt toward the Promised Land, each of these episodes was to have much to offer them as they lived their lives just as it has much to offer us as we live our lives today.

Having introduced the basic episodes of Abraham's life, we are now in a position to explore how these units hold together. How is the story of Abraham unified? What logic organizes them? Simply put, the episodes of Abraham's life cluster around specific themes and these clusters form five symmetrical or balancing steps.

Arrangement

First, as we might expect at the beginning of the patriarch's life, Moses' record begins with Abraham's background and early experiences with God. This section includes: Abraham's favored lineage, his failing father, and his migration to Canaan. These chapters explain how Abraham entered into his special relationship with God by focusing on his family's background and his initial migration to the Promised Land.

The second cluster of episodes in Abraham's life concentrates on Abraham's earlier contacts with other peoples in 12:10 through 14:24. It includes his deliverance from Egypt, his conflict with Lot, and his rescue of Lot. These three episodes hold together because they concentrate primarily on Abraham's encounters and interactions with representatives of several groups of people. In these chapters the patriarch dealt primarily

with the Pharaoh of Egypt, his nephew Lot, invading kings, the king of Sodom and Melchizedek the king of Salem.

The third and central section of Abraham's life focuses on Abraham's covenant relationship with God in 15:1–17:27. This portion of the patriarch's life consists of three episodes: Abraham's covenant promises, Abraham's failure with Hagar, and Abraham's covenant requirements.

The fourth section, which appears in 18:1–21:34, turns to Abraham's later contacts with other peoples. These chapters hold together primarily because they concentrate on Abraham's interactions with other groups of people. These chapters describe Abraham in relation to Sodom and Gomorrah. We find Abraham's intercession for Abimelech, Abraham in relationship with Isaac and Ishmael, and Abraham's treaty with Abimelech. These four episodes further illustrate how the patriarch interacted with Lot and his family, as well as how he related to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and to the Philistine Abimelech.

As we might expect, the fifth and final section of the patriarch's life in 22:1–25:18, deals with matters toward the end of Abraham's life, especially with his progeny and death. It records how God tested Abraham. It records Abraham's purchase of burial property. It records how Abraham found a wife for his son Isaac. And it also records Abraham's death. These chapters focus on Abraham's wife Sarah and her son Isaac (the true heir of Abraham), giving them honor over Abraham's other wives and their sons.

Because the episodes of Abraham's life are relatively independent of each other, when people first read about Abraham, they often have a sense of wandering aimlessly from one event to another. They read the stories of Abraham as if Moses mentioned this event and that event with little forethought or planning. But despite this first impression, the stories of Abraham's life are actually organized into batches or groups of episodes that share central themes. Our simple five-step outline reveals that Moses actually planned what he was going to say about Abraham. On a large scale the record of Abraham's life takes the shape of a symmetrical drama. Each part balances with a corresponding part in the drama.

In 11:10–12:9, we find attention focused on Abraham's family background and on his initial experiences with God. In contrasting balance with these initial concerns, the closing material in 22:1–25:18 gives attention to Abraham's final years and to his progeny.

Beyond this, the second section of Abraham's life consists of episodes that primarily delineate Abraham's interactions with people from other tribes and nations. And by circular symmetry, returning to similar themes handled in the second part, the fourth section of Abraham's life returns to a focus on more examples of Abraham's encounters with others.

Finally, in the middle of Abraham's life, are three pivotal chapters that focus especially on Abraham's covenant with God. These chapters form the pivotal center of Abraham's life and explain the fundamental dynamics of the covenant relationship that Abraham and his descendants had with God.

The shape of these chapters reveals that Moses carefully crafted his account. He constructed a literary portrait of Israel's first patriarch to draw attention to certain aspects of his life: Abraham's selection to blessing and his rightful heir, Abraham's earlier and later interactions, and Abraham's covenant relationship with God. And as we are going to

see, this literary focus was designed to address the needs of the Israelites to whom Moses first wrote these stories. The life of Abraham taught the Israelites how they were to follow in the footsteps of Abraham as Moses led them toward the Promised Land. And as we approach this portion of Genesis, we are going to see the importance of this intentional design time and time again.

Having seen the overarching literary design of the life of Abraham, we should turn to the second topic of our lesson on the structure and content of Abraham's life: the main themes of Genesis 11:10–25:18. Although there are many ways to describe the content of these chapters, we will see that the outline we have suggested roughly corresponds to the prominent themes of these chapters.

MAJOR THEMES

Needless to say, it is difficult to describe the main themes of any portion of Scripture that is as long and complex as Abraham's life. It is just not possible to mention every motif or theme that appears in these chapters. But it is possible to isolate several motifs that are more prominent than others. And as we will see, these major themes in these chapters unify the stories of Abraham's life, and they help us understand the main ideas Moses wanted his original Israelite readers to draw from the life of Abraham. And more than this, we can also see, in these main themes, what God intends for us to learn from this part of Scripture.

We will look into the main themes of Abraham's life in two ways: First, we will examine a key passage that introduces the four main themes of Abraham's life. And second, we will explore the ways these themes are unfolded throughout the chapters of Abraham's life. Let's turn first to a key passage that introduces the themes of the story of Abraham.

KEY PASSAGE

I'm sure you will recall that near the opening of the story of Abraham's life, we find God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. While Abraham still lived in Ur of Mesopotamia God called Abraham to go to the Promised Land. For many years now, interpreters have recognized that these verses introduce some of the most crucial motifs found in the larger story of Abraham's life. Listen to what Moses wrote in these verses:

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:1-3).

These three verses are packed with significance and can be summarized in many different ways. On a grammatical level, they begin with an introduction in the first portion of verse 1. Then they continue with God's words to Abraham, which divide into two parts. Part one, in the second half of verse 1 through most of verse 2 consists of an imperative followed by three independent verbal expressions. Part two of what God said to Abraham appears in the last portion of verse 2 and in verse 3. This second half follows the same grammatical pattern as the first half. It is introduced by an imperative that is followed by three independent verbal expressions. By looking at these three divisions of Genesis 12:1-3 we can gain some important insights into the significance of this passage.

Introduction

Listen first to the simple way Moses introduced God's words to Abraham in verse 1:

The Lord had said to Abram (Genesis 12:1).

A number of modern translations correctly observe that the verb in this line should be translated "the Lord *had said*" instead of "the Lord said." This translation is important because according to Stephen's speech in Acts 7:2-4, Abraham received his call in Ur before his father, Terah, died in Haran. But in the literary presentation of Genesis, we learn first that Terah died in 11:32 and then we learn in Genesis 12:1 that God called Abraham. For this reason, Genesis 12:1 represents a flashback, a regression in time, and should be translated "the Lord had said." This verse recalls an earlier moment before Abraham had begun to do anything in response to God, long before he had begun to move toward the Promised Land.

Part One

Following this introduction, we come upon the first half of God's words to Abraham. This first half begins with an imperative verb indicating a command. In Genesis 12:1 we read these words:

Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you (Genesis 12:1).

As we can see, this section opens with the imperative, "leave" (or as the NIV paraphrases it "leave ... and go"). God commanded Abraham to do something: to go to the land of Canaan. This is the first and primary command God gave to the Patriarch.

After the command to leave for the Promised Land, the first part of God's words to Abraham divides into three sections indicated by three independent verbal expressions in the first part of verse 2. Look again at Genesis 12:2:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; and I will make your name great (Genesis 12:2).

These words focus on blessings that God presented to Abraham as he called him. First, God said he would make Abraham into a great nation. Second, he offered to bless Abraham with prosperity. And third, he said he would give Abraham and his descendants a great name, or reputation.

Part Two

Now we come to the second half of God's words to Abraham. Although most modern translations do not enable us to see it, the second part of God's words to Abraham parallels the grammatical structure of the first half. It begins with an imperative followed by three independent verbal expressions. In Genesis 12:2-3 we read these words:

And you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:2-3).

The Hebrew verb, translated here, "You will be a blessing," is imperative in form, and probably designed to parallel the form of the command "leave" in verse 1. But this imperative does not function as a command. It may be translated in a number of ways such as: "and you will be a blessing," or "and may you be a blessing," or even, "and you will certainly be a blessing." In all events, this imperative marks an important transition in thought. It shifts attention away from Abraham receiving blessings (as we have seen in the first part of verse 2) to Abraham becoming a conduit of blessings to others.

This second imperative form is also followed by three independent verbal expressions. These three verbs indicate the process by which Abraham would become a blessing to others. First, God said, "I will bless those who bless you ..." That is, God would give good things to those who dealt positively with Abraham. When people treated Abraham well, God would treat them well. Second, God promised, "whoever curses you, I will curse ..." That is, God would curse those who disdained Abraham. God promised to protect Abraham from harm by responding harshly to those who made themselves Abraham's enemies. But in the third place, God said, "all peoples ... will be blessed through you." At first glance, this third focus may seem to contradict the theme of cursing for Abraham's enemies, but God promised Abraham that by means of a twofold process of blessing Abraham's friends and cursing his enemies, God would extend his blessings ultimately to all the families of the earth. So we see that the grammar of the opening of Genesis chapter 12 divides into three main parts: an introduction, a focus on blessings God would give to Abraham and a focus on the blessings that God would bring to the whole world through Abraham.

Understanding the structure of these verses in Genesis chapter 12 is important because in many respects the stories of Abraham in Genesis illustrate how these promises God made to Abraham were fulfilled in his life. As Moses wrote about the patriarch, he

shaped his stories in ways that drew attention to the words that God spoke to Abraham as he called him to the Promised Land.

With this grammatical structure in mind, we are ready to see how the main themes of Abraham's life unfold from Genesis 12:1-3.

UNFOLDING

We will note that there are four major themes that appear in these verses. We will begin with divine grace toward Abraham. Then we will continue with the requirement of Abraham's loyalty to God, then God's blessings to Abraham, and finally God's blessings through Abraham.

Divine Grace

The first motif, which occurs many times in the life of Abraham, is that God's relationship with Abraham was based on his grace. Divine grace appears in a subtle way in the introductory words of Genesis 12:1. As we have seen, there we read these words:

The Lord had said to Abram (Genesis 12:1).

These simple words reminded Moses' original audience that Abraham's relationship with God came about because God had entered into Abraham's life long before Abraham had done anything in service to God.

Abraham's call came very early in his adult life. He had not left for Canaan; he had not conquered enemies; he had not committed to covenant faithfulness; he had not prayed for the righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah; he had not passed any test of faith. On the contrary, God called Abraham as his special servant simply because it pleased God to be gracious to Abraham.

Now of course, God's grace was not only shown in the initial stage of Abraham's walk with God. The grace of God is a theme that appears throughout the stories of Abraham because God also showed mercy to the patriarch at every moment of his life. Because Abraham was a sinner, Abraham was in need of God's mercy all the time. For example, in the well-known verse Genesis 15:6 we learn that even Abraham's saving righteousness was a gift of mercy. There we read these words:

Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

As the apostle Paul pointed out in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6 the fact that God credited Abraham with righteousness indicated that this was an act of mercy, not a reward for good works. And it was through divine grace and mercy that Abraham received this and many other blessings from God.

As Christians we all know the importance of God's grace in our lives. We know that God initiates our relationship with him by his grace and we know that he sustains us in our relationship with him by his grace. Where would we be without the mercy of God? Well, the same thing was true for Abraham. And more than this, God's grace was also essential for the lives of the Israelites for whom Moses wrote about Abraham. They too needed God's mercy in their lives in their day, day after day. And for this reason, as Moses composed his stories of Abraham's life, he drew their attention over and over to God's grace.

Abraham's Loyalty

In addition to the theme of God's grace, we should also notice that Genesis 12:1-3 stresses Abraham's loyalty. God did not merely choose Abraham to receive his mercy; he showed mercy to the patriarch so that Abraham would respond with faithful obedience. As we have seen, the first imperative of Genesis 12:1 stresses Abraham's responsibility to be faithful to the Lord in a particular way. God commanded him there:

Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you (Genesis 12:1).

It doesn't take much imagination to see that this divine call required enormous loyalty from Abraham. He was to leave his homeland and his father's estate behind and to go to a place yet to be shown him. Yes, God had shown mercy to Abraham, but Abraham was also expected to show deep-seated, loyal service to God.

Unfortunately, many Christians tend to think of Abraham merely as an example of faith and trust in God. This is an important theme in Abraham's life and it is highlighted in several New Testament passages. But we must never overlook the fact that God commanded Abraham to be obedient, to give him his loyal service. God required loyalty from the patriarch many times. He was to be faithful to God in every circumstance.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of a time when Abraham was required to show his loyalty to God is found in Genesis 22, a time when God commanded the patriarch to sacrifice his son Isaac to prove that he loved God more than he loved his son. It would be hard to imagine a higher requirement from God.

Although Abraham was required to show faithfulness in this and many other ways, Genesis 12:1 makes clear one of the most important responsibilities Abraham had. There God said:

Go to the land I will show you (Genesis 12:1).

As this passage demonstrates, Abraham was required to go to the land that God would show him. Abraham was to inhabit the land of promise, and this theme appears many times in the stories about the Patriarch. It was very important to the larger plan of God both for Abraham and his faithful descendants that the Patriarch go to the Promised Land.

And when we recall that Moses wrote these stories about Abraham for Israelites whom he was himself leading toward the Promised Land, it is not surprising at all to see this emphasis.

As followers of Christ, we understand that although salvation is a free gift of God's grace, God expects us to show our gratitude to him by doing our best to obey his commands. Moses understood this principle as well. He knew that God's grace to Abraham led Abraham to be loyal to God. And for this reason, we are going to see that the requirement of loyalty appears many times as we study the life of Abraham. Moses knew something about his original Israelite audience. They were prone to forget the importance of faithful living before God. Although God had shown them much mercy as he delivered them from Egypt and sustained them in the wilderness, they turned from God's commandments. And for this reason, one of the main themes in the stories of Abraham was Abraham's loyalty to God. This theme appears so frequently because Moses' original audience, and we today as well, need to be motivated to serve God in faithful obedience.

Blessings to Abraham

As we have seen so far, God showed much grace to Abraham, and required faithful devotion from him. The third theme we should notice in Genesis 12:1-3 is the blessings offered *to* Abraham. You'll recall that God said this to the Patriarch in Genesis 12:2:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great (Genesis 12:2).

God offered the patriarch three blessings. In the first place, God said that Abraham would become a great nation. His progeny would grow beyond number. And his descendants would actually become an empire, a grand nation. At that time Abraham and those who were with him were relatively few in number. And Abraham had no children of his own. Yet, God promised that the number of Abraham's descendants would one day be more than the stars in the sky.

In the second place, God told Abraham that he would bless him. In all likelihood, this expression means that Abraham and his descendants would receive the blessing of tremendous prosperity. Abraham and his descendants would live in abundance and wealth. They would not be wanderers on the earth, nor would they be mere settlers. As Abraham and his children proved faithful, they would enjoy great prosperity.

In the third place, God's offer of blessing entailed the bestowal of a great name on Abraham. In other words, if Abraham would go to the Promised Land and serve God faithfully, the massive numbers and prosperity of his descendants would make him, and them, honored throughout the world. Great glory would come to the patriarch and his faithful descendants.

In fact, throughout the stories of Abraham, Moses pointed out over and over that these kinds of blessings were poured out on Abraham. Abraham had sons; he gained wealth as he went from one experience to another. He became a well-known figure in the

region. For the Israelites who heard these stories, Abraham's blessings brought great hope for their future blessings as well. The gifts of descendants, prosperity and fame given to the patriarch were mere foreshadows of even greater gifts God would give to Abraham's faithful descendants.

As Christians, we have received so many blessings from God that we can hardly name them all. And of course, the Israelites who followed Moses toward the Promised Land had also received countless blessings from God. They had been delivered from slavery; they had increased in number; they had been protected and sustained throughout their entire journey and they were on their way to the land of promise, a land of great blessing in the future. But the Israelites were like us, prone to forget all that God had done for them and what was in store for them. So Moses wrote about God's blessings to Abraham to remind his Israelite audience of the blessings that God had given them in their lives so that their hearts would be filled with gratitude.

Blessings through Abraham

In addition to God's mercy, Abraham's loyalty, and God's blessings to Abraham, Genesis 12:1-3 also draws attention to the fact that blessings would come *through* Abraham to other peoples. Remember what God said in Genesis 12:2-3:

And you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:2-3).

These words explained that Abraham would not only receive blessings but that all peoples on earth will be blessed through him. God did not call Abraham to the Promised Land simply to enrich his life and the lives of his descendants. God called Abraham to be a conduit of divine blessings to all the families of the earth. Now it is important to remember that this passage teaches that Abraham's worldwide blessing would come about in two ways. In Genesis 12:3 God said:

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse (Genesis 12:3).

According to this passage, Abraham would serve as a double-edged sword among human beings. Because Abraham was favored by God, when people from other nations blessed Abraham, that is, when they honored him and thus honored the God whom he served, then God would bless them. But when people of other nations cursed or attacked Abraham and thus disdained Abraham's God, God would punish them. The fates of other peoples depended on how they treated Abraham.

In his lifetime, Abraham came into contact with many people representing other nations such as the Philistines, the Canaanites, the Egyptians, and his nephew Lot, who was the father of the Moabites and the Ammonites. These interactions were significant because they showed specific ways in which God kept his word to bless and curse other

peoples depending on how they treated Abraham. They also indicated that even in his own lifetime Abraham had begun to become a blessing to the world.

All too often it is easy for God's people to forget this important teaching. The Israelites in Moses' day were like many Christians living today. We enjoy the blessing of salvation from God and life from God, but we forget why these blessings have been given to each of us. Each and every blessing God gave to Israel under Moses' leadership and each and every blessing he gives to his church today is designed for a greater purpose. We have been blessed so that we will spread the blessings of God throughout the world. God called Abraham to himself so that Abraham would lead the nations of the world into God's blessings. God called Israel to himself in Moses' day so that they would lead the nations of the world into God's blessings. And God has called the church to himself today so that we may lead the nations of the world into the blessings of God. This theme was so important for the Israelites who first received the stories of Abraham. And it is important for us too as we follow Christ in our day.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have taken our first look at an overview of the life of Abraham. And we have focused our attention on the structure, or design, of this portion of Genesis. And we have also examined the main themes, or content, that Moses presented in Abraham's life in the context of this literary structure.

As we move forward in these lessons, we will return to the topics of this lesson time and again. We have seen that the story of Abraham's life has a five-step symmetry. And we have also seen that there are four main themes in Abraham's life: God's benevolence to Abraham, Abraham's loyalty, the blessings of God to Abraham, and the blessings of God through Abraham. These themes not only give us insights into what the story of Abraham's life meant long ago when it was first written for Israel, but they also make it possible for us to apply this portion of Scripture to our lives today.

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Father Abraham

LESSON
TWO

THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM: ORIGINAL MEANING



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Father Abraham

Lesson Two

The Life of Abraham: Original Meaning

INTRODUCTION

Sincere followers of Christ love the Scriptures. We find that they speak to our lives in many different and very personal ways. This is a precious truth about Scripture that Christians should never forget. But many times this wonderfully personal dimension of Scripture can actually cause us to lose sight of something that we must always remember. The Bible was not written directly to you or me. In the first place, Scripture was written to other people who lived thousands of years ago. So as we try to understand how the Scriptures apply to our lives today, we must always be careful to base our modern applications on the original meaning of Scripture.

This is a series of lessons that we have entitled *Father Abraham*. And in these lessons we are exploring the account of Abraham's life that appears in Genesis 11:10–25:18.

This is the second of three introductory lessons, and we have entitled this lesson “The Life of Abraham: Original Meaning.” In this lesson we will see how important it is to read the stories of Abraham's life in light of when they were written and to whom they were written. We will explore the original impact these stories were intended to have on the nation of Israel as they followed Moses toward the Promised Land.

We will explore the original meaning of Genesis 11:10–25:18 by looking at two main issues. First, we will point out how Moses drew connections between the history of Abraham's life and the experiences of his original audience. And second, we will summarize some of the implications these connections had for the original audience.

Before we look at the original meaning of the life of Abraham, we should take a moment to review what we saw in the previous lesson. Up to this point, we have focused on two critical issues. First, we suggested that Genesis 12:1-3 reveals four major themes in the story of Abraham. God's kindness to Abraham (the many ways God showed mercy to the patriarch), Abraham's responsibility to be loyal to God (the many ways God expected Abraham to obey him), God's blessings to Abraham (the promises of a great nation, many children, a land, and a great name) and God's blessings through Abraham to others (the promise that Abraham would be a blessing to all the families of the earth).

Beyond this, we also saw that these major themes shaped the way Abraham's story was told in Genesis. We learned that the story of Abraham divides into five symmetrical steps. First, we begin with Abraham's background and early experiences in 11:10–12:9. Second, several episodes concentrate on Abraham's earlier interactions with representatives of other peoples in 12:10–14:24. The third and central segment of Abraham's life focuses on the covenant that God made with Abraham in 15:1–17:27. The fourth section of Abraham's life turns to Abraham's later interactions with representatives of other peoples in 18:1–21:34. And the fifth segment deals with Abraham's progeny and death in 22:1–25:18.

These five steps present the patriarch's life in a symmetrical pattern. The third section of 15:1–17:27, which deals with God's covenant with Abraham, serves as the centerpiece of Abraham's life. The second and fourth sections correspond to each other as they both focus on Abraham's interactions with other peoples. The first and last sections correspond to each other further by providing bookends to Abraham's life, tracing his family line from the past and into the future.

In many respects, this lesson will build on these insights into the structure and content of Abraham's life. With this review in mind, we are ready to move into the main concerns of this lesson, the original meaning of the life of Abraham in the book of Genesis. Let's begin by exploring the connections that exist between the stories about Abraham and the experiences of Israel who first received these stories.

CONNECTIONS

In this series of lessons we are building our interpretation of the life of Abraham on the assumption that these stories were originally written in the days of Moses, and that they are substantially the same now as they were then. Most critical scholars believe that these stories were not written in the days of Moses, but other portions of the Old Testament as well as Jesus himself insisted that Moses did write Genesis, and because of this modern Christians should have affirmed the Mosaic authorship of this book. But in this series we are also concerned with going a step further. We want to grasp not just the fact that Moses wrote these stories; we want to know why he wrote them. What was his perspective on the life of Abraham? What was his purpose in writing? One of the best ways to begin to explore the original meaning of Abraham's life is to look for the ways Moses connected his stories about Abraham with the experiences of his original audience, the Israelites who followed him away from Egypt and toward the Promised Land.

To explore how Moses connected his stories about Abraham to his original audience, we will touch on three matters: first, we will explore what we mean when we speak of these connections. Second, we will look at some types of connections that appear within the stories of Abraham's life; and third, we will summarize the connections in these stories by looking at each of the five major steps in the structure of Abraham's life story. Let's begin with what we mean when we speak of connections.

DEFINITION

In many ways, when Moses composed his history of Abraham's life, he found himself in a situation that all writers of biblical narratives found themselves. He stood between two worlds. On the one hand, Moses had received accounts of what we will call "that world": the world of Abraham. He knew about what had happened in Abraham's life some 500 to 600 years earlier both from tradition and from extraordinary revelation

from God. In this sense, Moses dealt in the first place with the ancient world of Abraham's life.

But on the other hand, Moses also dealt with the world in which he lived, what we might call "their world": the world of Moses and the Israelites who followed him. As the leader of God's people at that time, Moses wrote his stories about the ancient world of Abraham's life for the sake of meeting the needs of their world.

As Moses mediated between "that world" of Abraham's life and "their world" (his contemporary world), he drew connections between the patriarch's life and the lives of his readers so that they could see the relevance of the stories that he wrote. That is to say, Moses selected and shaped his stories in ways that made it possible for the Israelites following him to see that Abraham's life had connections to their lives. In large part, Moses did this by writing so that his audience could draw comparisons and contrasts between Abraham and their own contemporary experiences. Sometimes these comparisons and contrasts were only slight and other times they were more extensive, but in every episode Moses somehow drew attention to these kinds of connections between Abraham's life and the lives of his original audience.

Now that we have seen the basic idea of connections and original meaning, let's turn to our second concern, the types of connections that Moses established between Abraham's life and the experiences of his original Israelite audience.

TYPES

For any story to have relevance for its readers, it must portray a world that its readers can understand. If the world of a story is completely different from the real world, if readers cannot relate to the story's characters and themes, then the story will not communicate. Or to put it in terms of this lesson, if "that world" of Abraham was completely different from "their world" of Moses and the Israelites, the stories about Abraham would not have been meaningful or relevant to the Israelites. So, Moses worked very hard to draw connections between Abraham's world and the world of the Israelites who were moving toward the Promised Land.

The question before us in this lesson is how Moses made these connections clear. How did he shape his stories about Abraham so that they connected to his readers' world? As we move forward in this series, we will see that Moses connected his accounts to the experiences of the Israelites in three main ways. First, he wrote his stories so that they told the Israelites about the historical backgrounds of things they experienced. And second, he wrote so that his narratives provided the Israelites with models or examples to follow or to avoid. And third, he wrote to show that many of the patriarch's experiences foreshadowed or adumbrated the Israelite's experiences. Because we will refer to these kinds of connections many times in future lessons, we should introduce all three of these techniques that Moses used to show the relevance of Abraham's life for his original audience. Let's look first at how Abraham's life provided backgrounds for Israel's experience in Moses' day.

Backgrounds

In many ways, this is the easiest of all connections to identify. It is quite common for people in all walks of life to tell stories to each other for the main purpose of explaining the historical backgrounds of things they experience. Parents often do this with children, teachers illustrate their teachings in this way, pastors, and even political leaders do the same. We often connect stories to our audiences by drawing attention to the way they provide historical backgrounds.

Now with respect to the life of Abraham, we can describe this connection in this way: we find the connection of historical backgrounds when Moses pointed to ways in which Israel's experiences were historically rooted in the events of Abraham's life. Take for instance, the way Moses explained the historical background of viewing the land of Canaan as Israel's homeland. You will recall that a number of times during the exodus the Israelites wondered why they had to go all the way to the land of Canaan. Why would Moses not allow them to stop short of entering that land?

On a number of occasions, Moses addressed this very issue by providing certain details about the historical background of Abraham's life. In a word, he showed that God had specifically given Abraham a homeland in Canaan so that the Israelites could see why he insisted that they too had a homeland in Canaan. For instance, we read these words that God spoke to Abraham in Genesis 15:18:

To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates (Genesis 15:18).

This passage established the origin or historical background of Moses' insistence that Israel possess Canaan. God had given that land to Israel's great father and he had given it to them as his descendants, so settling in some other land would not do.

As we explore more details of Abraham's life we will see that Moses frequently pointed to these kinds of historical backgrounds. A second main way that Moses connected the life of Abraham to Israel in his day was by providing them with models. Let's see how modeling worked in these stories.

Models

Moses did not want his original readers to receive the stories of Abraham as mere background information; he described many situations in the patriarch's life so that they could see a significant number of similarities between the circumstances of Abraham's life and their own circumstances. These similarities raised moral issues for Moses' audience. Moses pointed out that these similarities made it possible for Israel to see examples to follow and to reject.

Telling stories for the sake of providing models or examples is a common way to connect stories to our listeners. It happens all the time. When we warn someone at work not to do this or that, we often add a story about what happened the last time someone made this mistake. If we are teaching children why they should work hard in school, we

often reinforce instruction with stories that give examples of people who have a great success because they have worked hard in school.

Moses often did the same thing to connect his stories about Abraham to his original Israelite audience. He presented Abraham's story so that his characters could serve as models for Israel to follow or reject. Consider for instance, how Moses exhorted the Israelites to boldness against the threat of the Canaanites who occupied the Land of Canaan. We know from the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy that the Israelites following Moses refused to enter Canaan because powerful Canaanites occupied the land. Their hearts were full of dread because the Canaanites seemed to be an invincible foe. In Deuteronomy 1:26-28 we read these words of Moses to the tribes of Israel:

But you were unwilling to go up; you rebelled against the command of the Lord your God. You grumbled in your tents and said, "The Lord hates us; so he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us. Where can we go? Our brothers have made us lose heart. They say, 'The people are stronger and taller than we are; the cities are large, with walls up to the sky'" (Deuteronomy 1:26-28).

One of the ways Moses addressed this fear of the Canaanites was to provide his readers with the example of Abraham facing Canaanites in his day. For instance, we find the first reference to Canaanites in Abraham's life in Genesis 12:6:

Abram traveled through the land ... At that time the Canaanites were in the land (Genesis 12:6).

And in a similar way, in Genesis 13:7 we read these words:

The Canaanites and the Perizzites were also living in the land at that time (Genesis 13:7).

Why did Moses mention the Canaanites' presence in the land of promise twice in two adjacent episodes? One of his purposes was to show Israel that Abraham's situation was very similar to theirs. Canaanites were in the Promised Land in Abraham's day, just as they were in the days of Moses in Israel. Yet, Abraham believed the promises of God and went forward boldly into the land occupied by Canaanites. In this way Moses encouraged his readers to imitate Abraham's boldness by trusting the promises of God and by going into the land even though Canaanites still occupied it. In this way Abraham became their example to follow.

As we make our way through the life of Abraham, we will find many passages that offer positive and negative examples. But in the third place, there were times when Moses connected the life of Abraham to the lives of his readers by showing how events in the patriarch's life foreshadowed or adumbrated events that took place in his day.

Foreshadows

In many respects, the connection of historical backgrounds requires very little similarity between the story and its audience to accomplish its purpose; examples or models require more similarity between the story and its audience for the example to be relevant. But foreshadowing occurs only when there are many similarities, so much so that “that world” of Abraham looks almost exactly like “their world” of Israel. Now this kind of extensive connection occurs infrequently in the stories of Abraham’s life, but from time to time, Moses described the days of Abraham in ways that closely resembled events in his own day.

Many of us have heard the adage, “History often repeats itself.” Of course, we all know that no two sets of historical events are ever exactly alike. But sometimes events are so similar that the second seems to be a repetition of the first. When biblical writers saw events in the past seemed to be repeated in the lives of their audiences, they often made this connection clear. And this literal technique is known as foreshadowing.

One example of foreshadowing appears in the well-known episode that describes Abraham’s covenant with God in Genesis 15:1-21. God gave Abraham assurance that his descendants would one day possess the land of Canaan by calling him to prepare for a covenant ritual. Abraham prepared by cutting some animals in half and by placing the pieces of their torn flesh on either side of a path. After the patriarch had fallen asleep, he had a vision of something that closely resembled an experience the original audience had in their day. In Genesis 15:17 we read these words:

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces (Genesis 15:17).

In the larger context of this passage we learn that this smoking pot and blazing torch represented God himself passing among the torn flesh of animals as an assurance that he would surely give Abraham’s descendants the land of promise.

Now get the picture. In Genesis 15:17 God passed before Abraham as smoking fire to assure him that God would give his descendants the land of promise. Now, to us as modern readers it may seem strange for God to assure Abraham by appearing as smoke and fire. But when we remember that Moses wrote about Abraham’s life for the Israelites following him toward the Promised Land, it is not surprising at all that he would include this detail. Throughout the Israelites’ travels, God had appeared before Israel in a way that resembled the smoking pot and flaming torch. In the glory cloud that led them toward the Promised Land, God appeared to them too as smoke and fire.

So, in this way God’s appearance to Abraham foreshadowed the way he appeared to the Israelites in Moses’ day. And as Abraham gained assurance of possessing the land because God went before him in this manner, the Israelites hearing this story should have gained assurance of possessing the land in their day as well.

Another, even more extensive foreshadowing occurs in the episode of Abraham’s deliverance from Egypt found in Genesis 12:10-20. This passage was written to guide Israel in their outlooks on Egypt. In this case, Moses constructed the entire episode so that it closely paralleled the experience of Israelites under his leadership. In Genesis

12:10-20 Abraham began a sojourn in Egypt because of a famine in the Land of Canaan, he was delayed in Egypt when Pharaoh took Sarah into his harem, but God delivered Abraham by sending diseases on Pharaoh's house. Pharaoh then sent Abraham away from Egypt and Abraham left Egypt with great wealth.

This story about Abraham was clearly designed to foreshadow the experience of the nation of Israel generations later. Just like Abraham, they sojourned to Egypt because of a famine in the Land of Canaan, they were held there by Pharaoh they were delivered by disease sent from God to the house of Pharaoh, Pharaoh ordered Israel's release, and Israel left Egypt having plundered the riches of the Egyptians. Moses purposefully shaped this account so that it foreshadowed the experiences of his audience. This kind of extensive foreshadowing is rare in the stories of Abraham, but such connections appear here and there in Abraham's stories.

As we read through the life of Abraham we will see all three connections in different ways and at different times. Moses connected "that world" of Abraham's life to "their world," the world of his original audience, by giving them the historical backgrounds of their experiences, by providing them with models to follow and reject, and by showing how Abraham's life foreshadowed many of their experiences.

Now that we have seen the types of connections that Moses established between Abraham and his Israelite audience, it will be helpful to summarize how each major step of Abraham's life connected to the lives of the original audience.

SUMMATION

You will recall that Abraham's life divides into five symmetrical steps. In each of these sections Moses found ways to connect the stories about Abraham to the circumstances of his original audience.

First, Moses told about Abraham's background and early experiences in ways that connected to the background and early experiences of the people who had followed him out of Egypt. Both Abraham and Israel descended from the same family. And both Abraham and Israel had been called by God to inhabit the land of Canaan. So, Moses gave historical backgrounds, set up Abraham as a model, and even showed ways that Abraham's life foreshadowed the experiences of the original audience.

Second, Moses also described Abraham's early interactions with others in ways that connected to his audience. He spoke of how Abraham interacted with Egyptians because Israel interacted with Egyptians in their day. He spoke about Abraham and Lot because Israel interacted with descendants of Lot, the Moabites and the Ammonites. He wrote about kings from the east and the Canaanite king of Sodom because Israel had similar experiences with foreign kings and Canaanite cities.

Third, Moses wrote about God's covenant with Abraham because Israel had entered into covenant with God as well. Abraham's covenant with God foreshadowed the covenant God made with Israel in many different ways.

Fourth, Moses wrote about Abraham's later interactions with other peoples. He wrote about the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, and Abimelech the Philistine because Israel faced similar people in their day: the Canaanite cities, the Moabites and the Ammonites, and the Philistines.

And fifth, Moses wrote about Abraham's progeny and death in a way that connected with his Israelite readers. He focused on Isaac as Abraham's special son and heir because his Israelite audience was descended from Isaac. He drew attention to the burial ground for Sarah because that ground was in the land God promised to Israel. He drew attention to other sons of Abraham who were not Abraham's heirs, especially Ishmael, because Israel had to deal with the Ishmaelites in their day.

So we see that as Moses wrote about Abraham he drew many different connections between his stories and the experiences of his Israelite audience. And he did this in order to provide significant guidance for the Israelites as they followed him toward the Promised Land.

Now that we have seen the main ways Moses connected Abraham's life to his original Israelite audience, we need to ask another important question about the original meaning. What were the implications of these connections for the original audience? What were they to learn from the stories of Abraham's life?

IMPLICATIONS

There should be little doubt that when people take time to write a history as complex as Abraham's life in Genesis, they have all kinds of motivations and goals. They want their stories to have multiple impacts on their audiences. In fact, when Moses wrote the life of Abraham, his intentions were so manifold that it is impossible to decipher them completely, much less to state them all in a few sentences. At the same time, it is possible to summarize the chief implications Moses hoped his original audience would draw from his stories about Abraham.

We will explore the original implications of the life of Abraham in three steps. First, we will describe the basic impact that these stories were designed to have on the original audience. Second, we will see how the impact of these stories unfolds in the four major themes of Abraham's life. And third, we will summarize the original implications of each of the five steps in Moses' stories about Abraham. Let's look first at the basic impact these stories were designed to have.

BASIC IMPACT

In very general terms, it helps to summarize the purpose of Abraham's story in this way: Moses wrote about Abraham to teach Israel why and how they were to leave Egypt behind and to continue toward the conquest of the Promised Land. In other words, by seeing the historical backgrounds of their lives in Abraham, by finding models or examples to follow and reject in the stories of Abraham, and by discerning how his life foreshadowed their lives, the Israelites following Moses could see the ways they were to pursue God's purpose for them.

Although we can be confident on the basis of the testimony of Scripture and even Jesus himself that the book of Genesis comes from the days of Moses, we should note

that we cannot be sure precisely when Moses completed these stories as we have them now. Whatever the case, we may safely say that Moses' main concern when writing the history of Abraham would have been very similar for either generation. He wrote about Abraham to turn their hearts away from Egypt and toward possessing the Promised Land.

This general implication for the original audience can hardly be overemphasized. Moses wrote to encourage the nation of Israel following him never to return back to Egypt and to succeed in the conquest of Canaan and this broad implication guides us in our modern application of Abraham's life. As Christians we are on a journey, a journey that actually completes the journey begun by Israel in the days of Moses. We are moving toward the new heavens and new earth. So, for us to apply Abraham's stories properly to our lives, we must pay attention to the ways they instructed the original audience to keep moving toward Canaan.

To unpack this overarching focus a bit, we should look into Moses' purpose in more detail by returning to the four major themes we have already identified in this portion of Genesis.

MAJOR THEMES

You will recall that earlier in this lesson we suggested that Genesis 12:1-3 presents at least four themes that give coherence to this part of the patriarchal history. These four themes express the central impact Moses designed his stories to have. First, he focused on divine grace to Abraham; second, he concentrated on Abraham's loyalty; third, he was concerned with blessings *to* Abraham; and fourth, he focused on blessing *through* Abraham. It helps to think of Moses' original purpose for writing about Abraham in terms of these four motifs.

Divine Grace

In the first place, Moses wrote about the ways God had shown mercy to Abraham. In broad terms, we have already seen that God showed much grace to Abraham, both in the early years of his relationship with God and on a daily basis throughout his entire life. The motif of divine grace was designed to remind the Israelites in Moses' day that God had shown great mercy to them as well. God had shown them early grace when he brought them from Egypt to Sinai. And day after day, he continued to show them mercy, even as he prepared them for the future conquest of Canaan.

The well-known words God spoke at Sinai in Exodus 19:4 speak of God's grace in this way:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself (Exodus 19:4).

Sadly, the Israelites who Moses led had forgotten how much mercy they had received from God. Early on they complained that God and Moses had cheated them by taking

them away from the comforts of Egypt. They complained about food and water in the wilderness. They thought God had asked too much of them when he called them to enter the conquest for the Promised Land. So, Moses frequently stressed the ways God showed mercy to Abraham to remind his original audience of the ways God had blessed them, the mercies God had shown to them over and over.

Abraham's Loyalty

In the second place, we have seen that Moses also emphasized Abraham's loyalty by drawing attention to the many ways God held Abraham responsible to obey his commands. Moses repeatedly emphasized that God expected the patriarch to be faithful to his commands because this focus was also relevant for the Israelites who followed him. This focus on the requirement of loyalty also spoke to Israel in Moses day. Listen to the way God continued to address Israel at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:4-5:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession (Exodus 19:4-5).

Notice here that the blessings of becoming a treasured possession were dependent on Israel's faithfulness. Although God had shown much mercy to the nation, the status of each person in each generation depended on how they responded to the commands of God.

Now, as we have seen, the main responsibility given to Abraham was that he go to the land of Canaan. Moses stressed this responsibility because he wanted Israel following him to stay the course for the land of Canaan as well. And of course, as Moses wrote about Abraham's other responsibilities, he did so to teach the Israelites of his day about their many other responsibilities. The many requirements of loyalty from Abraham spoke plainly to the fact that the original audience was to be loyal and faithful to the commands of God as well.

Blessings to Abraham

In the third place, we have also seen the importance of the theme of God's promised blessings to Abraham. In his stories about Abraham, Moses focused on the promised blessings of a great nation, prosperity and a great name for Abraham and his descendants. And on a number of occasions we even see that Abraham experienced some foretastes of these blessings in his own lifetime. And on many other occasions the stories of Abraham focused on the future fulfillments of these blessings in generations to come. Moses focused on Abraham's blessings these ways because these promises were also for Abraham's descendants, the people of Israel whom Moses led. The people of Israel were promised great blessings too. They were to become a great nation, to experience

unprecedented prosperity and to receive a great name when they entered into the Promised Land.

In fact, much like Abraham, Israel had also experienced many foretastes of these blessings by the time the book of Genesis was written. They had already begun to see fulfillments of some of these promises in their own lives. Yet, there were still many future fulfillments of these blessings to come once they entered the land of promise. God spoke of these future blessings for Israel at Sinai in this way in Exodus 19:6:

You will become for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6).

Moses wrote of the blessings God promised Abraham to raise the hopes of Israel in his day. As they read of God's promises to the patriarch, they could clearly see how God had great blessings in store for them as well.

Blessings through Abraham

In the fourth place, we have also seen that the stories of Abraham revealed that God's blessings would also come through the patriarch to the entire world. As you will recall, the blessings through Abraham would not come in a simple fashion. In Genesis 12:3 we learn that God would give Abraham success through a process of blessing Abraham's friends and cursing his enemies. In a variety of episodes, Moses pointed out how God gave Abraham foretastes of this process in his own lifetime as he interacted with other peoples representing different nations. And on a number of occasions in his stories of Abraham's life, Moses pointed out that many fulfillments would come in the future.

Moses stressed this motif because it was so relevant to the people of Israel who followed him in his day. God assured them of success in being a blessing to others because he would bless their friends and curse their enemies. They too had seen foretastes of these promises as they interacted with various groups of people in their own day. They had already seen God bless those who were their friends and curse their enemies on a number of occasions. And beyond this, Moses also focused on these matters to turn the eyes of the Israelites toward future fulfillments as they entered the Promised Land and spread the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth. As we have just seen, in Exodus 19:6 God said this to Israel:

You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6).

This vision of the nation as a kingdom of priests did not simply point out that the nation itself would be blessed with the privilege of being a holy people serving God, but also pointed out that the children of Israel would serve God's purposes throughout the world.

As Moses inspired Israel to move toward the Promised Land, his stories about Abraham were designed to instill within them the vision of how God was going to use Israel to spread his kingdom and thus his blessings to the entire world.

Now that we have seen the implications of the four major themes of Abraham's life for the original audience, let's briefly summarize the impact of Abraham's stories on the original audience by looking at each major step in the structure of the patriarch's life as it is recorded in Genesis.

FIVE STEPS

You will recall that the stories about Abraham's life divide into five main steps. First, Abraham's background and early experiences in 11:10–12:9; second, Abraham's earlier interactions with representatives of other peoples in 12:10–14:24; third, the covenant that God made with Abraham in 15:1–17:27; fourth, Abraham's later interactions with representatives of other peoples in 18:1–21:34; and fifth, Abraham's progeny and death in 22:1–25:18.

Each of these major steps divides into a number of smaller segments or episodes. We will briefly summarize the content and some of the main implications that these episodes had for the original audience for whom Moses wrote.

Background and Early Experiences

The first step of Abraham's life, his background and early experiences, reported several features of Abraham's family and the time when God first called Abraham into his service. In general terms, Moses designed this first step to show his original Israelite audience how they could learn about their own family background and their call from God from these events in Abraham's life.

This first step divides into three episodes or segments. The life of Abraham begins with a genealogy that presents Abraham's divinely-favored lineage in 11:10-26. These verses establish that Abraham was a climactic character in the family of Shem, a family that held a favored status before God as God's special chosen people. This genealogy in turn should have reminded Moses' original Israelite audience that as the family line of Abraham, they shared this same favored status. They were God's special chosen people.

The second episode of Abraham's background and early experiences is another genealogy in 11:27-32. In a nutshell, this passage depicts Terah as an idolater who attempted to go to the land of Canaan but failed. Moses' original audience easily would have seen the similarity between Abraham's circumstances and their own. Their parents had been involved in idolatry and had failed to reach the land of Canaan as well. So, just as Abraham had to avoid repeating his father's failures, the Israelites who followed Moses also had to avoid repeating the failures of their fathers and mothers, the idolaters of the first generation of the exodus who failed to reach Canaan.

Abraham's background and early experiences then move to the story of Abraham's migration to Canaan in 12:1-9. God called Abraham to the land of Canaan,

and Abraham obeyed the call of God despite many difficulties. In much the same way, God called Moses' original Israelite audience to the land of Canaan, and they were also to obey despite many difficulties. So the story of Abraham's migration to Canaan had the original implication that the Israelites in Moses' day were to follow the footsteps of Abraham and migrate as he did to the land of Canaan.

With these three segments, Moses introduced Abraham's life and offered significant guidance for his original audience as they faced the challenges of their own service to God.

Early Contacts with Others

The second major step in the Genesis account of Abraham's life concentrates on the patriarch's earlier interactions with other peoples. These chapters depict the patriarch interacting with other groups of people in a variety of ways to guide the original Israelite readers as they interacted with others.

In the first episode, Moses described Abraham's deliverance from Egypt in Genesis 12:10-20. You will recall that the patriarch sojourned in Egypt because of a famine, but God delivered him from Egyptian bondage by sending diseases on Pharaoh's house. Because of God's great deliverance Abraham left Egypt with many riches and never returned. Abraham learned very clearly that Egypt was not his home.

Moses' original Israelite readers could see that their own experiences reflected many aspects of Abraham's story. They had gone to Egypt because of a famine, they had also been delivered when God sent diseases on the Egyptians, and they had left Egypt with many riches from the Egyptians. Unfortunately, as the Israelites faced difficulties in their travels, many of them began to idealize life in Egypt and wanted to return. This episode should have made it clear to the original audience that Egypt was not their home. They were to remember how God had graciously delivered them, and to leave Egypt and the Egyptians far behind.

The second segment of Abraham's earlier interactions with others is the story of his conflict with Lot in 13:1-18. This is the well-known story of struggle between Abraham's men and Lot's men, when the two groups quarreled over natural resources for their sheep. In this struggle, Abraham treated Lot with kindness, allowing Lot to live in peace in the lands he chose. The original readers of Genesis would have had little trouble understanding what this story meant for them. According to Deuteronomy 2, as they traveled towards the Promised Land Moses commanded the Israelites to treat Lot's descendants with kindness, to let them live at peace in their ancestral land. In effect, Abraham's kind treatment of Lot showed the Israelites how to treat the Moabites in their day.

The third episode of Abraham's earlier interactions with others is the story of Abraham's rescue of Lot in 14:1-24. This complex story described how Abraham defeated powerful, tyrannical kings who had come from afar, and how he showed further kindness to Lot by rescuing him from these tyrannical kings. This story spoke rather plainly to the Israelites following Moses. As Israel passed through the lands of the Moabites and Ammonites, who descended from Lot, the army of Israel defeated the tyrannical kings Sihon of the Amorites, and Og of Bashan, both of whom had oppressed

the Moabites and Ammonites. By rescuing the Moabites and the Ammonites in this way, Israel followed the model that Abraham had set for them.

And so it is that in each episode of this step of Abraham's life, Abraham was presented as a model for Israel to follow in their own times.

Covenant with God

Now we come to the third major step of Abraham's life, the covenant that God made with Abraham in 15:1–17:27. In general terms, this step focuses on God's covenant with the patriarch in ways that reveal the character of Israel's covenant relationship with God. These chapters divide into three main segments.

The first episode focuses especially on God's covenant promises to Abraham in 15:1-21. This chapter is the well-known account of the time when God entered into a covenant with Abraham. God promised to give Abraham progeny and land. Specifically, God promised that Abraham would have a multitude of descendants, and that after a time of mistreatment in a foreign land, Abraham's descendants would be brought back to the land of promise. This passage was designed to remind the Israelites that God had made a similar covenant with Israel through Moses. And more than this, it showed them that they themselves were experiencing the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham. The Israelites were Abraham's promised progeny, and they were returning to the very land that God had promised to their patriarch. To doubt these facts was to doubt the gracious covenant promises God had made to Abraham and reaffirmed with Moses.

The second episode that focuses on God's covenant with Abraham is the patriarch's failure with Hagar in 16:1-16. This sad story recalls how Abraham and Sarah turned from the covenant promises of God by seeking a child through Sarah's Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar. Abraham and Sarah failed to trust God's covenant promises, but God rejected their alternative plan by not accepting the child Ishmael as Abraham's true seed. Moses' original audience repeatedly turned from God's promises in covenant and desired the comforts of Egypt. And this story from Abraham's life taught them that just as Abraham's plan had been rejected, their alternatives to God's plan would also be rejected.

The third episode focusing on God's covenant with Abraham is the account of Abraham's covenant requirement in 17:1-27. In this passage, God confronted the patriarch over his failure to follow God's plan. The Lord also reasserted the need for covenant loyalty by instituting circumcision as a covenant sign that was to be applied to Abraham and his sons. By this sign, God reminded Abraham that his covenant relationship entailed the responsibility of loyalty, and that loyalty would lead to great blessings. Moses recounted this side of Abraham's covenant to confront the Israelites in his day over their failures to remain faithful and to reassert the Israelites' need for covenant loyalty. Only as the Israelites were faithful to their covenant God could they rightly hope for his great blessings.

So, the centerpiece of Abraham's life, his covenant with God, drew attention to the grace of God's marvelous promises to Israel. But it also forcefully reminded his audience that they were obligated to display loyal service to their covenant God.

Later Contacts with Others

Now we come to the fourth step of Abraham's life: his later interactions with others in 18:1–21:34. In these chapters Abraham encountered various people who were associated with people living in Moses' day. Abraham interacted with the Canaanite inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, Abimelech, and Ishmael. In general terms, Abraham's interactions with these people taught Israel how they would interact with the Canaanites, the Moabites and Ammonites, and the Philistines and Ishmaelites of their day.

The first story of this portion of the patriarch's life is the account of Sodom and Gomorrah in 18:1–19:38. This well-known narrative tells of the threat of divine judgment against the evil Canaanite cities. It tells about Abraham's concern for the righteous in the cities, and the destruction of these cities as well as Lot's rescue. These events spoke directly to the situation facing Moses' original audience. They helped them understand what was happening with people living in their day: God's threat against the Canaanites, the concern they were to have for the righteous among the Canaanites (like Rahab whom they would encounter in Jericho), the destruction that was sure to come against the Canaanite cities, and their relationship with Lot's descendants, the Moabites and Ammonites.

The second portion of Abraham's later interactions with others appears in 20:1–18. In this story Abraham once again interceded for an inhabitant of the land, namely for Abimelech the Philistine. You will recall that Abimelech threatened Abraham's future by taking Sarah from Abraham, not knowing she was his wife. Then, God brought judgment against Abimelech, and Abimelech proved to be righteous by repenting of his actions. As a result of this repentance, Abraham interceded on Abimelech's behalf, and Abraham and Abimelech enjoyed lasting peace and friendship with each other.

This story spoke to the Israelites in Moses' day about the attitudes they were to have toward the Philistines in their day. In a variety of ways, the Philistines threatened Israel. But when the threat of God's judgment brought repentance among the Philistines, the Israelites were to intercede on their behalf, and to enjoy lasting peace with them.

The third narrative of this section, found in 21:1–21, focuses on the difficult relationship between Isaac and Ishmael. Isaac and Ishmael were both sons of Abraham. But when tensions rose between them, God instructed Abraham to separate Ishmael from the family. God still blessed Ishmael, but made it very clear that Abraham's only rightful heir was Isaac. As Moses informed his original Israelite audience of these events, he helped them understand the nature of their relationship with the Ishmaelites of their day. When tensions rose between Israel and the Ishmaelites, the Israelites were to remember that God had ordained a separation between them. Although God blessed the Ishmaelites in many ways, the Israelites were the true heirs of Abraham.

The fourth episode of Abraham's later interactions with others is the story of Abraham's Treaty with Abimelech in 21:22–34. This story reports how the Philistine Abimelech acknowledged God's favor toward Abraham, and how Abraham agreed to live in peace with Abimelech and his descendants. It goes on to tell how controversy arose over water rights for Abraham's sheep, and how Abimelech and Abraham entered a formal treaty at Beersheba, pledging mutual respect and honor.

Abimelech and his commander reminded Moses and the Israelites of the potent threat the Philistines were in their day. Here, Moses taught his followers that if the Philistines would acknowledge God's blessing on Israel, then Israel should follow Abraham's example and live in peace with them. The well called Beersheba still remained in Moses' day, reminding Israel of the treaty made there, and of how they were to pursue peace and mutual honor with the Philistines.

So, we see that the stories of Abraham's later interactions involved many characters who corresponded to people who Moses and Israel encountered. By looking at Abraham's actions the Israelites could learn many lessons for their day.

Progeny and Death

Now we come to the final step of Moses' record of Abraham's life, his progeny and death in Genesis 22:1–25:18. These episodes focus on Abraham's legacy, which extended his covenant relationship with God to future generations. In general terms, the Israelites who first received these stories from Moses should have learned much about their own status as Abraham's heirs, and about the hopes they were to have for their own progeny.

The first episode in this portion of Abraham's life is the well-known story of Abraham's test in 22:1-24. This test was designed to determine if Abraham loved God more than he loved his son Isaac. God initiated a difficult test, calling Abraham to sacrifice his son. Abraham complied, and God assured Abraham that the result of his compliance would be a very bright future for Isaac.

Although there were countless implications of this story for the Israelites following Moses, the most prominent feature of this passage was that it reminded them that God was testing the nation of Israel to see the depth of their loyalty to him. God initiated many tests for the nation of Israel in Moses' day. And Abraham's compliance to his test reminded them of their own need to comply with these tests, no matter how difficult they were. And the affirmation of Isaac's grand future as Abraham's progeny reminded the Israelites of the grand future they themselves would have if they passed these tests.

The second episode of the last step of Abraham's life is the story of the patriarch's purchase of burial property in 23:1-20. This story describes how Abraham acquired a family burial site in Hebron when his wife Sarah died. The narrative emphasizes that the patriarch did not accept this property as a gift, but rather that he purchased it. This deed of property established his family's legal right to see the land of Canaan as their homeland.

The Israelites following Moses understood the importance and implications of this purchased burial site for their own lives. It was their ancestral burial site. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were all buried there. They understood that it was their legal possession in the land, even prior to the conquest. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob spent much of their lives in and around Hebron. The Israelites were so committed to Hebron as their ancestral homeland that they even carried the bones of the patriarch Jacob back to Hebron for burial. This story about Abraham's purchased burial land demonstrated that the proper place for his descendants was none other than the land of the Canaanites.

The third episode of Abraham's progeny and death is a touching story about Abraham's daughter-in-law, Rebekah, who became the wife of his special son Isaac in 24:1-67. In this story, in order to ensure that Isaac would avoid Canaanite corruption, Abraham insisted that Isaac not marry a Canaanite woman. But Abraham also insured that Isaac would remain in the land of Canaan, the land of promise, by sending a servant to bring a wife to Isaac. By finding a wife for Isaac in this way, Abraham insured a great future of blessings from God for Isaac and his descendants.

The Israelites following Moses should have learned from this story that Isaac, their ancestral connection to Abraham, remained pure from Canaanite corruption even as he maintained his homeland in Canaan. Isaac's bright future of blessing would be their future as well, so long as they also resisted the corruption of the Canaanites who dwelled in the Promised Land.

The final episode of Abraham's life is the story of the patriarch's death and heir in 25:1-18. This collection of several brief accounts lists Abraham's sons by wives other than Sarah. Then it turns to the patriarch's death, during which Isaac received Abraham's final blessing as his legal heir. Finally, it closes with a contrasting section that briefly lists Ishmael's descendants.

This closing of Abraham's life had many implications for the original audience. It listed the other sons of Abraham to distinguish them from the Israelites. It highlighted Abraham's final blessing on Isaac to assure the Israelites following Moses that they were the true heirs of Abraham's promises. And it mentioned Ishmael's descendants to dispel any claims the Ishmaelites might have made to Abraham's inheritance. By closing his account of Abraham's life in this way, Moses settled the identity, rights and responsibilities of Abraham's true descendants, the Israelites whom he led toward the Promised Land.

So we see that Moses wrote his stories about the life of Abraham to teach the Israelites he led why and how they should leave Egypt behind and move toward the conquest of the Promised Land. To accomplish this goal, Moses stressed in various ways in each episode of the patriarch's life how they were the heirs of the grace given to the patriarch, how they were responsible to be loyal to God as the patriarch had been responsible, how they would receive blessings from God as Abraham had, and how they would one day bless all the nations of the earth. Moses' account of Abraham's life had immeasurable implications for the Israelites who followed him toward the Promised Land.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have looked at the original meaning of the account of Abraham's life in Genesis. And we have looked in two main directions to explore this original meaning: on the one hand we have examined the connections Moses established between these stories and the experiences of the Israelites to whom he wrote. And on the other hand, we have looked at how Moses designed his stories to impact his original audience as they left Egypt behind and moved toward the conquest of Canaan.

As we learn more about the connections Moses drew between Abraham and the original Israelite readers, and the impact he expected his story to have on his audience, we will discover how each episode of Abraham's life was intended to guide the Israelites. And we will also be better able to discern how these stories should apply to our lives today.

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Father Abraham

LESSON
THREE

THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM: MODERN APPLICATION



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Father Abraham

Lesson Three

The Life of Abraham: Modern Application

INTRODUCTION

If there is one thing that many modern people find difficult about the Bible, it is this: it's hard to imagine that stories written thousands of years ago have the ability to guide our lives today. And this is certainly true about the accounts of Abraham in the Bible. Abraham himself lived about four thousand years ago, and the stories about him were written nearly 3600 years ago. But as followers of Christ, we are committed to the fact that these stories are part of Scripture and therefore are profitable even for modern people.

But even with this commitment the question still remains: how do these stories about Abraham apply to our lives today? How do we bridge that 4000-year gap separating us from Abraham?

We have entitled this series, Father Abraham, because we are exploring the life of Abraham as it appears in the book of Genesis. This lesson is the third of three introductory lessons in this series, and we have entitled it, "The Life of Abraham: Modern Application." In this lesson, we will conclude our overview of Abraham's life by concentrating on the proper way to draw modern applications from the chapters in Genesis that speak of Abraham. How should we apply the stories about Abraham to our lives? What kinds of impact are they to have on us today?

To understand how the life of Abraham applies to our world, we will look in two basic directions: first, the connections that exist between Abraham and Jesus, and second, the connections that exist between the original audience of Israel and the modern audience of the church.

Before we look at the modern application of Abraham's life we should take a moment to review what we have seen in previous lessons. We have learned that the story of Abraham divides into five symmetrical steps. First Abraham's life begins with Abraham's background and early experiences in 11:10–12:9. Second, several episodes concentrate on Abraham's earlier interactions with representatives of other peoples in 12:10–14:24. The third and central segment focuses on the covenant that God made with Abraham in 15:1–17:27. The fourth section turns to Abraham's later interactions with representatives of other peoples in 18:1–21:34. And the fifth segment deals with Abraham's progeny and death in 22:1–25:18. These five sections present the patriarch's life in a symmetrical pattern. The third section, which deals with God's covenant with Abraham, serves as the centerpiece of Abraham's life. The second and fourth sections compare to each other as they both focus on Abraham's interactions with other peoples. And the first and last sections correspond to each other by providing bookends to Abraham's life, tracing his family line from the past and into the future. Beyond the basic structure of Abraham's life, we have also seen in previous lessons that Moses had a purpose in writing Abraham's life. Moses wrote about Abraham to teach Israel why and how they were to leave Egypt behind and to continue toward the conquest of the

Promised Land. In other words, by seeing the historical backgrounds of their lives in Abraham, by finding models or examples to follow and reject in Abraham's stories and by discerning how Abraham's life foreshadowed their own lives, the Israelites, following Moses could see the ways they were to pursue God's purpose for them. With this review of previous lessons in mind, we are now ready to turn to the modern application of Abraham's life story.

ABRAHAM AND JESUS

Let's look first at the connections that exist between Abraham and Jesus. Unfortunately, many times Christians apply Abraham's life more or less directly to modern lives. We approach the stories of Abraham as simple moral stories that speak directly to our lives. As Christians however, we know that our relationship with Abraham is mediated; Abraham's life is relevant for us because we have been joined to Abraham's special seed, Christ. Christ stands between us and Abraham. And for this reason, we must always view the biblical stories about Abraham in the light of Christ and what he has done.

To understand the connections between the patriarch and Christ we will touch on two issues. On the one hand, we will explore how the New Testament teaches that Christ is the seed of Abraham. And on the other hand, we will see how the four major themes we have noticed in the life of Abraham apply to Christ as the seed of Abraham. Let's look first at the concept that Jesus is Abraham's seed.

SEED OF ABRAHAM

Now there is a sense in which Abraham is the father of all believers throughout history — men, women and children. We are all a part of his family, his children and his heirs. But as we will see, the New Testament makes it very clear that we enjoy this status because we have been joined to Christ who is the special seed of Abraham. To grasp how the Scriptures teach this perspective we will touch briefly on two matters: first, the singularity of the concept of "seed;" second, the concept of Christ as the unique seed of Abraham.

Singularity

Let's think first of the ways the Bible draws attention to the singularity of Abraham's seed. Perhaps the most significant passage that focuses on this issue is Galatians 3:16. There we find these words:

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ (Galatians 3:16).

In this passage, Paul referred to the fact that in Genesis God made promises to Abraham and to his seed, or offspring. But notice how Paul commented specifically on the expression “seed,” saying that God did not make promises to Abraham and to his seeds — that is, to many people — but to Abraham and his seed, that is to one person, Christ.

Paul argued this way by noting that the Hebrew word *zera* which is translated “seed” is a singular word. The same was true for the Greek word *sperma* in the Greek translation of the Old Testament available in Paul’s day. As Paul noted, God did not say to Abraham that the promise was to Abraham and his *seeds* (in the plural) but to his *seed*, in the singular.

Now on the surface, it would appear that Paul’s point of view was straightforward. Abraham’s inheritance came to just one seed, or one descendant because the word is singular. But Paul’s argument about the singularity of the word “seed” has raised all kinds of difficulties for interpreters. The problem may be put in this way. It is true that the word “seed” or *zera* is singular in form, but many times in the Old Testament, including in the stories of Abraham’s life, the word “seed” in its singular form must be taken as a collective singular in meaning, a singular word that refers to a group. The Hebrew word *zera* or “seed” is much like our English word “offspring.” Even though this word is singular in form, it can refer to just one offspring or “descendant” or it can refer collectively to many offspring or “descendants.”

For instance, the term “seed” or *zera* is definitely plural in meaning in Genesis 15:13. There we read these words that God spoke to Abraham.

Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years (Genesis 15:13).

Here, the word “descendants” translates the singular Hebrew word *zera*, but the word is clearly plural in meaning. This verse speaks of the seed as “their own” in the plural, and the verbs “they will be enslaved and mistreated” are also plural in Hebrew.

Of course, Paul knew that the singular form of the word “seed” referred to more than one person many times in Genesis. In fact, Paul himself used the word seed in a plural sense in Galatians 3:29 where he wrote these words,

You are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:29).

In the Greek of this verse, the phrase “you are” translates *este*, a plural verb. And “Abraham’s seed” is synonymous with the word “heirs,” *kleronomoi*, which is also plural.

In this light we have to ask a question. If Paul knew that the singular form of the term “seed” could refer to more than one person, why then did he stress its singularity? In all likelihood, Paul had in mind one particular passage in the life of Abraham, Genesis

22:16-18. In these verses, the term “seed” is definitely singular in meaning. Listen to this literal translation of these verses:

By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you ... have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice (Genesis 22:16-18, literal).

Unfortunately, many modern translations render this passage as if “seed” were a collective singular. But we have to remember that this verse is part of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. And here the word “seed” referred not to Abraham’s descendants in general, but to Isaac, Abraham’s son. The verb, “shall possess,” is singular in the Hebrew, and notice also that the pronoun in the phrase “his enemies” is singular. As we will see in later lessons, Genesis chapter 22 and the chapters that follow spend time distinguishing Isaac, the son of Sarah, from his other sons, the son of Hagar, and the sons of Keturah. Isaac was the special seed of promise, the one whom God had chosen as Abraham’s only heir. So, before Isaac’s birth, Genesis usually speaks of Abraham’s “seed” as a collective, meaning “descendants” in the plural, but here the word has a focus on Isaac as the special singular descendant who would inherit Abraham’s promises.

In this light we can understand Paul’s basic point when he referred to the single seed of Abraham. Paul noted that in Genesis chapter 22 God did not make promises to Abraham and directly to all of his descendants. He pointed out that the singularity of the word “seed” in Genesis 22:16-18 indicates that the promises were passed to Isaac, Abraham’s special son and heir.

Christ as Seed

With the singularity of the seed of Abraham in mind, we should now turn to the teaching that Christ is the seed of Abraham. Listen again to what the apostle said in Galatians 3:16.

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ (Galatians 3:16).

In this passage Paul not only drew attention to the fact that the seed of Abraham was singular but that the one seed of Abraham is Christ. Now, as we have already seen, in terms of the original meaning of Genesis the singular seed of Abraham of whom Moses wrote was none other than Isaac, the special son of promise born to Sarah. How then should we understand Paul when he wrote that Abraham’s one seed is Jesus?

Think of it this way. Abraham’s inheritance was a family inheritance that belongs to his descendants. But at a number of crucial points in the history of Scripture, God

chose several key figures to serve as special heirs who received and distributed Abraham's inheritance to others. In the case of Isaac, he was the special seed in distinction from Abraham's other sons. When Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau, God chose Jacob to be the special seed of Abraham and excluded Esau and his descendants. From Jacob came the twelve patriarchs of the tribes of Israel. But among the tribes of Israel several figures were special heirs of Abraham. Moses, for instance, was the leader and mediator of God's people as they moved from Egypt to the Promised Land. And later, as Israel became a full fledged empire, David and his sons held the special role of mediating the inheritance of Abraham.

It is this special role of David and his sons that led Paul to refer to Christ as the last great seed of Abraham because Jesus is the rightful heir of David's throne. He was chosen by God to be the permanent king of his people. He is the great eternal royal seed of Abraham, the Messiah. And as such, Christ is the only one through whom anyone else can participate in Abraham's inheritance. No one separated from Christ will ever receive the promises of Abraham.

So, we can summarize Jesus in relation to Abraham in this way. From a Christian point of view, Jesus is the unique, final seed of Abraham. And as Christians when we want to apply the life of Abraham to the modern world, we must always keep in mind that the connection between Abraham and our world is that Abraham's great blessings are passed to Christ as he inaugurated his kingdom, as he continues to build his kingdom now and as he will bring his kingdom to its consummation.

The New Testament teaches that Christ receives and distributes Abraham's inheritance in three main stages. First, in the inauguration of his kingdom that occurred in his first coming; second, in the continuation of his kingdom that extends to all of history after his first coming but prior to his return; and third, at the consummation of his kingdom in his glorious second coming. He continues to receive and distribute Abraham's inheritance in increasing measure as he reigns over all at the right hand of God the Father. And he will one day fully receive and fully distribute Abraham's inheritance when he returns in glory.

In a word, it is important to realize that in Galatians 3:16 Paul encapsulated a rather complex theological outlook in just a few words. When Paul said that the promise was to Abraham and his singular seed, and then identified that seed as Christ, he was not saying that the word "seed" in Genesis referred directly to Jesus. Instead, Paul spoke in an abbreviated fashion of a typology that exists between Isaac and Christ. To state the matter more fully, we could put it this way: like Isaac was the chief heir of Abraham in his generation, Christ is Abraham's greatest son, and the chief heir of Abraham in the New Testament age.

MAJOR THEMES

To see more fully the significance of Christ as the seed of Abraham, it will help to explore these matters in terms of the four major themes that we have seen in Abraham's stories. You will recall that we have seen four major themes in these chapters of Genesis: divine Grace, Abraham's loyalty, God's blessings to Abraham, and God's blessings

through Abraham. How should we understand these motifs in light of the connections that exist between Abraham and Christ?

Divine Grace

In the first place, we have seen that God demonstrated much grace in Abraham's life. Of course, Abraham had to have personal grace because he was a sinner, but beyond this, God's mercy toward Abraham was also an objective display of God's kindness. By building a relationship with Abraham, God actually furthered the redemption of the entire world.

Now as much as God showed kindness in Abraham's life, as Christians we believe that the grace of God toward the patriarch was little more than a shadow of the mercy God displayed in Christ. Of course, Christ himself was without sin so he did not receive saving grace himself, but still the coming of Christ as the seed of Abraham was a great objective act of God's mercy to the world.

God demonstrated much mercy in Christ's first coming, the inauguration of the kingdom. His life, death, resurrection, and ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit were magnificent displays of God's grace. And God extends even more mercy as Christ reigns now in heaven, during the continuation of His kingdom. As salvation has spread throughout the world, God has demonstrated the kindness revealed in Christ in the undeniable transformation of the world throughout history. And when Christ returns, the consummation of the kingdom will bring immeasurable mercy. Christ will return and bring a new heavens and a new earth. As followers of Christ, every time we see God showing kindness in the stories of Abraham, our hearts and minds should turn to the mercy God revealed in these three stages of His kingdom in Christ.

Abraham's Loyalty

In the second place, another important theme in Moses' presentation of Abraham's life was Abraham's loyalty to God. Initially, God required Abraham to fulfill the responsibility of migrating to the Promised Land. But God also required many other things of Abraham throughout his life. As Christians when we read about the responsibilities Abraham faced, we should find our hearts and minds moving toward Christ the seed of Abraham and toward his loyalty to his heavenly Father.

And of course, Christ was loyal to the Father in all three stages of his kingdom. In the inauguration of the kingdom, Christ himself proved to be utterly faithful to God's requirements of loyalty. Although Abraham was loyal to God in very significant ways, Christ was perfectly faithful at every moment of his life. And beyond this, as king over all during the continuation of the kingdom Christ remains true and faithful to his heavenly father. He reigns over all serving the purposes of God perfectly by extending the gospel and the redemption of his people.

Finally, when Christ returns at the consummation of the kingdom he will finish the works of righteousness he began in his life on earth. He will destroy all of God's

enemies and make all things new for the glory of his father. So, every time we see the theme of Abraham's loyalty to God we know that as Christians we can properly apply these matters to the modern world only as we connect them properly to Christ, the seed of Abraham.

Blessings to Abraham

In the third place, as Christians we are not only interested in seeing how these themes of divine grace and human loyalty apply to our day in Christ, we are also keenly interested in the third main theme of Abraham's life: the blessings of God to Abraham. God told Abraham that Israel would become a great nation, that prosperity would come to the nation in the land of promise, and that Abraham and Israel would have a great name, worldwide notoriety.

Now, once again as Christians our minds should move toward the blessings that God gave to Christ, Abraham's seed. At his first coming, Christ was raised from the dead and received all authority in heaven and earth; and there is no name in heaven and earth that is as great as the name of Jesus. Jesus continues to enjoy the increase of blessings now during the continuation of the kingdom. He gains more and more glory for himself as he rules the world according to the will of God. But in the consummation, when Christ returns in glory he will enjoy these blessings beyond measure. He will be exalted over all and every knee will bow to him, the great son of Abraham. So it is that whenever we see Abraham receiving blessings from God, our eyes should turn toward Christ who inherits Abraham's promises and enjoys God's blessings in even greater measure.

Blessings through Abraham

Finally, the fourth major theme in Abraham's life is the blessings that would come through Abraham to others. God said that through a process of blessing and cursing, all peoples on the earth would be blessed through Abraham. This grand promise is the focus of much attention in the New Testament. Listen to the way Paul referred to this promise to Abraham in Romans 4:13. There he says,

It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith (Romans 4:13).

Notice here that when God promised Abraham that he would bless all nations, he promised that this would come about by Abraham taking possession of all nations and spreading the kingdom of God to all the world. Abraham and his offspring were to be heirs of the world, with all the nations under their headship. As Adam and Eve were originally told to subdue the entire earth, God promised that Abraham and his descendants would inherit the entire earth by spreading God's blessings to all the families of every nation.

Now, this final theme of the worldwide distribution of Abraham's blessings applies to Christ as well because he is the seed of Abraham and heir to Abraham's promises. In the inauguration of the kingdom, Christ called a faithful people from the nation of Israel. But when he rose from the dead and ascended to his throne in heaven, he was raised as the king of all the earth and told his faithful remnant to spread the blessings of Israel to all nations. During the continuation of the kingdom, the spread of Christ's kingship over all nations through the gospel is the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham to bless all nations. And when Christ returns at the consummation of the kingdom, He will extend the blessings of God to all the nations of the earth. As we read in Revelation 22:1-2:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1-2).

The promise that Abraham would be a blessing to all nations is ultimately fulfilled in the inauguration, continuation and consummation of Christ's kingdom.

So, we can sum up the matter in this way. Proper modern application of Abraham's life to our world must always involve at least an implicit recognition of the role of Christ as Abraham's seed. As the special seed of Abraham, Christ is the one who fulfills or completes the themes we encounter in Abraham's life. God's mercy is shown in Christ; true and perfect loyalty is found in Christ; Christ receives all the blessings promised to Abraham, and in Christ we see the spread of Abraham's rich blessings to the ends of the earth. Whatever else we may say about modern application, it is essential that we remember these connections between Abraham and Jesus.

Now that we have seen how the relationship between Abraham and Jesus forms a vital connection between the stories of Abraham and our world today, we should turn to a second aspect of modern application, the connection between Israel and the Church.

ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

We must always remember that when Moses first composed his account of Abraham's life, he wrote about these things to encourage the people of Israel to leave Egypt behind and to enter into the conquest of the Promised Land. They were to find the historical background of this vision in Abraham's life; they were to fulfill it by finding examples to follow and to reject in the stories of Abraham's life; and they were even to see foreshadows of their experiences in Abraham's life. For this reason, if we are going to see how the stories of Abraham apply to the modern world, we must take into account what the NT teaches about the connections between the nation of Israel following Moses and the Christian church today.

To explore this relationship between Israel and the church, we will touch on two topics that parallel our previous discussion. First, we will explore further the theme of the seed of Abraham as it applies to the nation of Israel and to the church of Christ. And second, we will see how the theme of Abraham's seed is expressed in the four major themes of the stories of Abraham's life. Let's look first at Israel and the church as the seed of Abraham.

SEED OF ABRAHAM

To see the connections between Israel and the church as the seed of Abraham we will touch briefly on four matters. First, we will see the numerical breadth of Abraham's seed. Second, we will take notice of the ethnic identity of his seed. Third, we will focus on the spiritual character of Abraham's seed. And fourth, we will look at the historical situation of Abraham's seed. Consider first the numerical breadth of the seed of Abraham.

Numerical Breadth

Now as we have just seen, the book of Genesis makes it clear that the term "Abraham's seed," referred on occasion to one special person, Isaac, and the New Testament draws upon this to establish a connection between Abraham and Christ. But now we must expand our vision to see another feature of the biblical view of Abraham's seed. Isaac was not the only person in the stories of Abraham who was called Abraham's seed or offspring. Isaac did not receive Abraham's inheritance for himself alone. He was also the conduit through whom many would enjoy the status of being Abraham's descendants. For this reason, over and over Moses also spoke of the nation of Israel as Abraham's seed. And in much the same way, when we apply the stories of Abraham to our modern world, while it is important to remember that Christ is the supreme seed of Abraham in the New Testament, we must also remember that the Christian church is the seed of Abraham. As Paul put it in Galatians 3:29,

**You are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise
(Galatians 3:29).**

As Paul made clear in this passage, we are connected to Abraham because we are joined to Christ. We, like the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, are the seed of Abraham. For this reason, Abraham's stories do not simply apply to Christ himself, but also to the breadth of the many children of Abraham who are identified with him in the church.

Ethnic Identity

Now beyond the fact that the seed of Abraham was Israel in the Old Testament and the Christian church today, we should also comment on the ethnic identity of Abraham's seed in both Testaments. As we have seen, the stories of Abraham were written in the first place for the nation of Israel who followed Moses. While it is certainly true that the vast majority of the original audience consisted of ethnic Jews, that is Abraham's physical descendants, it is a mistake to think that the original audience was entirely or purely Jewish. The vast numbers of people who followed Moses were a mixture of Jews and Gentiles who had been adopted into Israel. As a result, on a number of occasions, the Scriptures make it clear that the original audience of Genesis was not exclusively Jewish.

Listen, for instance, to the way those who followed Moses are described in Exodus 12:38:

Many other people went up with them, as well as large droves of livestock, both flocks and herds (Exodus 12:38).

Notice here that included among the Israelites were "other people." This company consisted of Gentiles who had joined with Israel and left Egypt with them. This group is mentioned on a number of occasions in Scripture. In much the same way, later portions of the Old Testament reveal that well-known Gentiles like Rahab and Ruth were engrafted into Israel in later generations, and the genealogies of First Chronicles 1–9 include Gentile names among God's people.

So we see that the seed of Abraham to whom Moses originally wrote the stories of Abraham was ethnically mixed. It included Abraham's physical descendants and Gentiles who had been adopted into the family of Israel. Both groups learned about their future in the Promised Land through the stories of Abraham.

In much the same way, the Christian church today is ethnically diverse. It consists of Jews who claim Christ as their Lord and Gentiles who have been adopted into the family of Abraham because they too claim Christ as Lord. Now, to be sure, as history has unfolded the New Testament church has grown to have more adopted Gentiles than fulfilled Jews, but the ethnic diversity of Abraham's seed is still a reality today as it was in the Old Testament. So, just as Abraham's stories were first given to Jews and Gentiles counted as Abraham's seed, we must be ready to apply Abraham's stories to Jews and Gentiles today who are now counted as Abraham's seed because they are in the church throughout the world.

This is a very important aspect of modern application because so many Christians have endorsed the false teaching that the promises given to Abraham are to be applied only to ethnic Jews today. In this view, God has a separate program for Gentile believers. Apart from a few spiritual principles here and there, Gentile believers are not the heirs of the promises given to Abraham. Now as popular as this outlook may be, we must always remember that the seed of Abraham was ethnically diverse in Moses' day and that the seed of Abraham today continues to be an ethnically diverse people. What Moses taught the nation following him applies to the continuation of that nation today, the church of Jesus Christ.

Spiritual Character

In the third place, modern application of Abraham's life must also take into account the spiritual character of Israel and the church as the seed of Abraham. As we have seen, the Old Testament identifies the visible nation of Israel as the seed of Abraham, the corporate seed of Abraham, but we need to realize that there was spiritual diversity within the visible nation of Israel. There were both unbelievers and true believers. The record of the Old Testament makes it very clear that many of the men, women, and children in the nation of Israel did not truly believe, but others were true believers who trusted the promises of God. To be sure, everyone in Israel, both believers and unbelievers, received many special temporary blessings from God. All of them had been delivered from slavery in Egypt; they were all brought into covenant relationship with God at Sinai; they all had many opportunities for faith and they all were offered entry into the Promised Land. But there were important differences as well. On the one hand, unbelievers within Israel showed the true character of their hearts by infidelity. And the stories of Abraham were designed to call them to true repentance and saving faith.

On the other hand, true believers within Israel believed the promises of God and demonstrated the true character of their hearts by their fidelity. The stories of Abraham were designed to encourage these true believers to grow in their faith. Now due to their infidelity, unbelievers within Israel only received temporary blessings. But in eternity they would receive God's final, eternal judgment. It was the true believers who were Abraham's true seed, his spiritual descendants, the children who not only enjoyed many temporary blessings but would also one day receive the eternal blessing of Abraham's inheritance in the new heavens and new earth. Paul argued this outlook rather forcefully in Romans 9:6-8. Listen to what he said there.

For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring (Romans 9:6-8).

Well, it isn't difficult to see that the same kind of spiritual diversity also exists in the church of Christ. Those who are associated with the visible church in the New Testament through baptism consist of two kinds of people: unbelievers and believers. Of course, just as all in Old Testament Israel enjoyed many temporary privileges because of their association with God and his people, there are many temporary blessings for all people involved in the church of Christ. They have a loving community; they have the word of God and the sacraments; they have the gospel explained and offered to them. But many within the visible church show the true character of their hearts by their infidelity. And the stories of Abraham are to be applied to these unbelievers in the church by calling for true repentance and saving faith.

But also within the visible church are true believers who trust the promises of God and demonstrate the character of their hearts by their fidelity. The stories of Abraham are

to be applied to these true believers by encouraging them to grow in their faith throughout their lives. Now due to their infidelity, unbelievers within the church will only receive temporary blessings. In eternity, they will receive God's eternal judgment. But the true seed of Abraham, the true children of Abraham, those who have trusted in Christ will not only receive many temporary blessings, but will also one day receive their eternal reward, Abraham's inheritance in the new heavens and new earth.

This is why James wrote about Abraham as he did in James 2:21-22. Writing to the visible Christian church with both unbelievers and true believers in it, he said these words,

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did (James 2:21-22).

James' main idea here was that the stories of Abraham challenge unbelievers in the church to turn from their hypocrisy and they encourage true believers in the church to continue to express their faith through faithful living. And we must follow James' example by recognizing the spiritual diversity of the church today as we make modern application of Abraham's stories.

Historical Situation

In the fourth place, to apply Abraham's life to the modern world, we must also remember that there is significant similarity between the historical situations of Israel following Moses and the Christian church today. You will recall that Moses wrote about the life of Abraham to Israelites who were on a journey. Whether he wrote for the first or second generation of the exodus, his original audience traveled between two worlds. On the one hand, they had left slavery in Egypt. But on the other hand, they had not yet entered the promised land of Canaan. Or to put it another way, the nation of Israel had received initial deliverance from their old world, but they had not yet entered into their new world. And as a result, Moses wrote to Israel to encourage them to discard all of their attachments to Egypt and to move forward toward victory in the land.

The historical situation of the original audience is important for modern application because the Christian church today is in a parallel historical situation. Just as Israel had been delivered from slavery in Egypt but was still headed toward a glorious life in the Promised Land, the church of Christ has been delivered from the dominion of sin by the work that Christ did when he was here on earth, but it is still headed toward the glory of the new creation that will come when Christ returns. These parallel situations provide us with a frame of reference for making applications of Abraham's life to the church today. Just as Moses wrote about Abraham to encourage and guide Israel on her journey from one place to the other, his stories encourage and guide us on our journey from the world of death to the new world of everlasting life.

We can be sure that these historical parallels provide us with this kind of orientation toward application because the apostle Paul drew upon them as he applied the

Old Testament to the church at Corinth. Listen to the way he noted the historical parallels between Moses' audience and the church in 1 Corinthians 10:1-6.

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact brothers that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them. Their bodies were scattered over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did (1 Corinthians 10:1-6).

Put simply, Paul noted that the Israelites following Moses through the wilderness had experienced things that paralleled the experiences of Christians. They had been delivered by Moses as we have been delivered by Christ. They had been baptized in Moses as Christians have been baptized in Christ. They ate manna and drank water from God much like Christians eat and drink in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Yet, these early experiences of grace set Israel into a period of probation, a period of testing as they moved toward the Promised Land. And sadly, in the days of Moses God was not pleased with most of the Israelites and they died in the wilderness. So Paul concluded that Christians should learn from Israel's experience the nature of their journey as the church. From Paul's example, we can learn much about how to apply Abraham's life to the Christian church.

Moses' stories of Abraham's life encouraged Israel to remain faithful as they looked back at what God had done in delivering them from Egypt and as they moved forward toward the Promised Land. In much the same way, we should apply Abraham's stories to the church today in ways that encourage us in our journey. We must remain faithful to Christ because of what he has done in the inauguration of the kingdom. We must continue to be faithful to him as his kingdom grows in our day and we must long for the day when our spiritual journey is over, when we enter into the new heavens and new earth.

So we see that as we move toward modern application of the life of Abraham, we should not only concern ourselves with the connections between Abraham and Jesus. We must also give attention to the connections between the nation of Israel who first received the stories of Abraham and the Christian church. Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church are the seed of Abraham; we both are of mixed ethnic identity; we are both spiritually diverse and we are both on a journey toward the goal of the glorious kingdom of God.

MAJOR THEMES

Having seen that the stories of Abraham's life apply to the Christian church as the continuation of Abraham's seed in the world today, we should also see how this process

of application touches on the four major themes of the chapters given to Abraham's life. What do these motifs have to say about our daily lives in Christ?

As you will recall the stories of Abraham touch on four main issues: divine grace, Abraham's loyalty, God's blessings to Abraham, and God's blessings through Abraham. In the lessons that follow, we will point out again and again how these themes speak to our lives as Abraham's seed. At this point, we will briefly offer some general directions we should follow. Consider first the theme of divine grace.

Divine Grace

God showed much mercy to Abraham, not only at the beginning of his life, but every day of his existence on earth. And as the Scriptures clearly teach, just as God showed mercy to Abraham, God also shows grace to Christians today that initiates and sustains us in Christ. As Paul put it in Ephesians 2:8-9,

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Salvation in Christ is God's gracious gift; even the faith we have comes from him. We depend so much on God's mercy that every day of our Christian lives we are to continue to live in that mercy. Without God's sustaining grace, all of our efforts to remain faithful are futile.

For this reason, just as the Israelites following Moses should have learned the wonder of God's grace in their lives as they heard the stories of Abraham's life, every time we read of God showing mercy to Abraham, as followers of Christ, both together and as individuals, we have opportunities to learn how to be grateful for what God has done for us. God has shown much mercy to us and we must learn how to seek and depend on his mercy.

Abraham's Loyalty

In much the same way, the theme of Abraham's loyalty also applies to followers of Christ on many levels. As we read the life of Abraham, we see many situations in which Abraham was commanded to serve God in obedience. Of course, he did not reach perfection in this life, but he did show the fruit of true faith. Now, it is important to remember that even in the Old Testament, faithful obedience was always based on the mercy and grace of God. So, we must not mistake this emphasis as some form of legalism. Nevertheless, just as in the Old Testament, true believers today are expected to respond to God's grace with faithful service to God.

This is why the New Testament frequently emphasizes the responsibility of loyalty for followers of Christ. Listen to the way Paul connected grace and loyalty in Ephesians 2:8-10.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:8-10).

As verse 10 makes clear, Christians today have the responsibility to perform good works. God grants us saving faith so that we will be faithful to him. So, every time we see how Abraham's life raises issues related to human loyalty, we are in a position to apply those moral responsibilities to our lives.

Blessings to Abraham

In the third place, we should also be cognizant of the ways in which the blessings given to Abraham apply to the Christian life. You will recall that God promised great blessings to Abraham and his seed. Ultimately, they would become a great, prosperous nation of grand renown. And throughout the stories of Abraham we find times when God blessed the patriarch with foretastes of these ultimate blessings.

Just as the original audience of Israel could see the promises to Abraham being fulfilled in their lives as they waited for their ultimate blessings, as Christians today we experience many foretastes of these same blessings here and now as we wait in hope for the day when they will come to us in all of their fullness. The blessings we see in this life can give us much encouragement as we live our daily lives in hope of the ultimate blessings that will be ours when Christ returns.

Blessings through Abraham

Finally, as Abraham's stories focus on the blessings God would give to the world through Abraham, Christians also have opportunity to reflect on the blessings that come through us to the world. You will recall that Abraham was promised protection from enemies and blessings for his friends so that one day he would share God's blessings with all the nations of the earth. And more than this, throughout Abraham's stories, we see that God used Abraham now and then as the instrument of his blessings to all kinds of people.

When the original audience of Genesis learned of these events, they had many opportunities to reflect on events in their day. They found guidance for the ways they were to serve as God's instruments of blessing to the world as they encountered different groups of people. They could be sure of God's protection against enemies and they could move forward with efforts to spread the blessings of God's kingdom to their neighbors.

In much the same way, we Christians today should apply this motif to our lives. We too can have assurance of God's protection and we can find encouragement to be a blessing to all nations of the earth by extending God's kingdom to the ends of the earth.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on the modern application of Abraham's life, we have explored how the chapters in Genesis devoted to the patriarch are relevant to our world today. We noted first that a Christian approach to this part of the Bible draws attention to Christ as the great seed of Abraham. It looks for ways that Christ fulfills the motifs we discover in Abraham's life. But beyond this, we also looked at how the life of Abraham applies to the church, the corporate seed of Abraham. How men, women and children in Christ are to live according to the teachings of this part of the Scriptures.

As we look more closely at the life of Abraham in Genesis, we will have many opportunities to apply the Patriarch's life to our lives today. We will find that Moses' account of Father Abraham not only draws our hearts toward the patriarch, but also toward Christ the seed of Abraham, and toward the wonder that in Christ we too are Abraham's children and heirs of the promises given to Abraham.

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The Pentateuch

LESSON
NINE

THE PATRIARCH JACOB



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The Pentateuch

Lesson Nine

The Patriarch Jacob

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever known people who are so deceitful they seem to be beyond hope? Their deception and dishonesty might benefit them — at least in the short run — often making them even worse. But happily, when God wants to use such people in special ways, they aren't beyond his reach. God will bring hardships into their lives to humble them and to shape them into the kinds of people who are ready to serve him. And more often than not, those that God reaches in these ways end up becoming models of humility and faith for others.

This lesson is devoted to a portion of *the Pentateuch* that focuses on one of the most deceitful men in the Bible, “The Patriarch Jacob.” But, as we’ll see, this portion of Genesis from 25:19–37:1, not only reveals how Jacob was deceitful, but also how God humbled and shaped him into one of the most admired patriarchs of Israel.

In other lessons, we’ve seen that the book of Genesis can be divided into three major sections. The first section is the primeval history in 1:1–11:9. Here Moses explained how Israel’s call to the Promised Land was rooted in what happened in the earliest stages of world history. The second section covers the earlier patriarchal history in 11:10–37:1. In this section, Moses clarified how the journey to the Promised Land was to be viewed against the backdrop of the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The third section is the later patriarchal history in 37:2–50:26. In these verses, Moses told the story of Joseph and his brothers to address issues that had emerged among the tribes of Israel as they moved toward the Promised Land.

The record of the patriarch Jacob is a part of the second division; the earlier patriarchal history that deals with Israel’s three well-known patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The events of Isaac’s life are woven into both the record of Abraham in 11:10–25:18, and also into the record of Jacob in 25:19–37:1. So, in this lesson, we’ll focus on the second half of this division: the life of Jacob.

Our lesson on the patriarch Jacob will divide into two main parts. First, we’ll examine the structure and content of this portion of Genesis. Then we’ll look at the major themes Moses emphasized for his original audience, and how these themes apply to modern Christians. Let’s begin by looking at the structure and content of Jacob’s story.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Most students of the Bible are familiar with the events of Jacob’s life. But at this point in our lesson, we want to see how Moses organized the record of these events in the book of Genesis. Keep in mind that, when we read the Scriptures, we must ask both what they say and *how* they say it. In other words, how do the content and structure of every

passage work together? Understanding this relationship helps us discern biblical authors' purposes for their original audiences. And it helps us know how we should apply their texts in our modern world.

There are many ways to outline a portion of Scripture as long and complex as Genesis 25:19–37:1. But, for our purposes, we'll identify seven major divisions of the account of Jacob's life.

- The first division is what we may call the beginning of struggle in Genesis 25:19-34. It raises the dramatic problem of the struggle between Jacob and Esau, and subsequently the nations that descended from them. This struggle rises and falls in intensity throughout the account of Jacob's life. The end of this first division is marked by a shift away from Jacob and Esau to their father, Isaac, as the protagonist.
- The second division turns to peaceful encounters between Isaac and Philistines in 26:1-33. This division ends with a shift back to Esau and Jacob as the main characters.
- The third division deals with Jacob and Esau's hostile separation in 26:34–28:22. This division ends with Jacob's move toward Laban and his relatives outside the Promised Land.
- The fourth division describes Jacob's time with Laban in 29:1–31:55. This division ends as Jacob returns to the Promised Land.
- The fifth division reports Jacob and Esau's peaceful separation after Jacob had returned to the Promised Land in 32:1–33:17. This division then shifts away from Esau to Jacob's dealings with Canaanite opponents.
- The sixth division focuses on encounters between Jacob and Canaanites in 33:18–35:15. At the end of this division, attention moves to Jacob's lineage.
- Finally, the seventh division of Jacob's life tells about the end of struggle for the brothers in 35:16–37:1.

A number of commentators have noted that this basic outline of the life of Jacob forms a large-scale chiasm:

A literary structure in which sections before and after a centerpiece parallel or balance each other.

Any time you talk about the outline of a section or a part of the Old Testament you have to keep in mind, that with rare exception, biblical writers did not write their stories, or their poems and the like, with an outline in mind. As if, “Now I’m on part one. Now I’m on part two. Now I’m on part three.” Instead, what we’re talking about is interpreters looking at texts that were written and finding patterns that are identifiable, which means then that every outline is using certain criteria to analyze the structure and the logical connections. And depending on what criteria you use, you’re going to come up with different outlines. Well, one of the criteria that you can use is that of balance, or echo, or reflection, or parallels between earlier sections

and later sections ... but when you find even more detailed parallels — say, between the first section and the last section as in the case of Jacob — then you come to the point where, if you have enough of these parallels, you could actually call it an "intentional chiasm," where the writer is thinking in terms of, "I've done this. I've done this. I've done this in the first part; now I'm going to do these things that have rough correlations back to the earlier part" ... and because of those correlations that come out in that kind of a structure, you have the opportunity then to compare and contrast the correlating sections. And that's what's valuable when it comes to the story of Jacob. The early parts of Jacob's life correlate to later parts of Jacob's life. And when you see those correlations — which involve both contrasts and comparisons — when you see both of those together and they pop up between these various sections, then you have the opportunity to see what Moses as the author is emphasizing in both of those sections. Comparisons and contrasts, that's the key for understanding the significance of a chiasm.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

As we've just noted, the first division in the story of Jacob recounts the beginning of struggle for brothers Jacob and Esau. This section is balanced by the seventh and final division where we read about the end of their struggle. Both divisions deal with the struggle between not only the brothers, but also the nations that descended from them.

The second division focuses on Isaac and his interactions with Philistines. It corresponds to the sixth division where we see Jacob and his interactions with Canaanites. These divisions balance each other because they both describe encounters that took place between the patriarchs and other groups in the Promised Land. The third division records Jacob and Esau's hostile separation. It balances with the fifth division regarding Jacob and Esau's peaceful separation. Clearly, both divisions focus on the dynamics surrounding the times when the brothers parted ways. And finally, the fourth division looks at Jacob's time with Laban. This division stands alone as the center, or hinge, of the chiastic structure. As such, it forms a turning point in the drama of Jacob's story.

Keeping this overarching symmetrical design in mind, we'll examine the content of Moses' account by comparing and contrasting each paired division. For the sake of convenience, we'll start with the two outermost divisions and work our way toward the central division. Let's look first at the beginning of the brothers' struggle in Genesis 25:19-34.

BEGINNING OF STRUGGLE (GENESIS 25:19-34)

This section consists of three simple episodes that show how the struggle between the brothers began. The first episode takes place before the twins' birth, in 25:19-23. It

reports that the twins fought in their mother's womb. Listen to Genesis 25:23, where God explained this prenatal struggle to Rebekah:

Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger (Genesis 25:23).

As we see, God said that the struggle between Jacob and Esau was much more than a personal struggle between two brothers. It anticipated a struggle between “two nations” or “two peoples.” So, what two nations did God have in mind? We find the answer in the second and third episodes of this section.

The second episode tells us about the brothers' struggle at birth in 25:24-26. This short passage gives us the first identification of the two nations referred to earlier. Genesis 25:25 describes the firstborn child, Esau, as “red” at birth. The Hebrew term translated “red” is אָדָמוֹנִי (*admoni*). This terminology represents a subtle play on words because it derives from the same family of Hebrew terms as the word אֶדוֹם or *Edom*. This indicated that Esau was the ancestor of the nation of Edom. We learn of the second nation in Genesis 25:26, where the second son is called Jacob. Jacob, of course, was the well-known father of the nation of Israel.

The third episode reports on the rivalry between Jacob and Esau as young adults in 25:27-34. In these verses, Jacob enticed Esau to exchange his birthright for “red stew,” or אֶדָם (*adōm*) in Hebrew. This Hebrew word echoes the earlier “red” color of Esau himself at his birth. And Genesis 25:30 explicitly notes that this is why Esau was also called “Edom.”

As we've just seen, from the outset Moses provided his audience with a crucial orientation toward his account. His audience was about to learn of what happened between Jacob and his brother Esau. But this struggle was much more than a struggle merely between two brothers. These two brothers were the heads of two nations, Israel and Edom, and as such, their personal struggle foreshadowed the struggle between their descendants in these two nations.

When we think about the diplomatic relations, the political intersection, interface between Israel and Edom ... it's a relationship that is not a happy one... Even when they're in the womb of Rebekah, right? They're fighting and then one is trying to supplant the other. Of course, Esau comes out first; so he is the firstborn. But Jacob is right behind him and he wants to supplant him, which is his name. Jacob is “the supplanter,” right? “The one who supplants.” And so, that's the backdrop. And then, very young — two very different temperaments — Jacob likes to hang out in the tent and eat and stay at home and Esau is the hunter, right? But Jacob wants what Esau has, which is the inheritance of the firstborn. So he cooks him a meal. He comes home from the field very hungry and he makes this stupid deal with his brother. And Jacob says to Esau, “You know what? I'm just gonna make you a nice meal and you can give me your inheritance.” The guy is so hungry, he says, “Sure, I'll do it.” And

then he realizes what's happened and then he wants the blessing from his father. And now, in cahoot with his own mom, Jacob pretends to be Esau. And Esau is the, you know, the "He-Man" — hairy, everything, right? And so, he puts some skins on his arms and goes in and pretends to be Esau and asks for the blessing from the patriarch of the family. And Isaac says, "Okay, you can have the blessing." And so, all the way, Esau is being stolen out of his inheritance. And so, of course it creates bad blood. And then Jacob has to leave because he's going to get murdered by his brother. So, that is not a good relationship between the two brothers... And then this gets amplified when they become nation-states; they hate each other. And they have the history to prove it.

— Dr. Tom Petter

This focus on Jacob, Esau and their descendants in the first division helps us understand the seventh or last division, the end of struggle for the brothers in 35:16–37:1.

END OF STRUGGLE (GENESIS 35:16–37:1)

In this division, Moses focused once again on Jacob and Esau and the two nations they represented. He did this in three parts. First, he recorded Jacob's lineage in Genesis 35:16-26. This section elaborates on how Jacob's descendants formed the nation of Israel. It includes short notes about Benjamin and Reuben and ends with a list of the patriarchs of Israel's twelve tribes.

Second, Moses described the behavior of Jacob and Esau at Isaac's death in Genesis 35:27-29. This short passage reports that both Esau and Jacob buried Isaac. The poignancy of this report becomes clear when we recall that in Genesis 27:41 Esau threatened to kill Jacob as soon as their father died. In this light, the description of Isaac's death points out that the struggle between the brothers was over.

Third, Moses gave a detailed account of Esau's lineage in Genesis 36:1-43. This account combines two genealogies that report various segments of Esau's line. The section ends with the kings who ruled in the region of Seir. Then Moses added an afterword in 37:1 explaining that Jacob continued to live in the land of Canaan. By ending Esau's lineage in this way, Moses made it clear that, although the struggle between Jacob and Esau had ended, the brothers had separated. The descendants of Jacob lived in Canaan and the descendants of Esau lived in Edom.

With the content of the first and last divisions of Jacob's life in mind, let's move one step closer to the center of Moses' account, to the second and sixth divisions that deal with the patriarchs' encounters in the Promised Land.

ISAAC AND PHILISTINES (GENESIS 26:1-33)

These divisions contrast peaceful encounters between Isaac and Philistines, in Genesis 26:1-33, with hostile encounters between Jacob and Canaanites in Genesis 33:18–35:15. We'll start with the second division that describes Isaac and his encounters with Philistines.

Now, many critical interpreters have argued that this chapter of Genesis is out of place. We can all see that it focuses on Isaac instead of Jacob. And it may very well be true that these events took place before the births of Jacob and Esau. But as we'll see, this division is vital to Moses' focus on Jacob's life.

This material divides into two closely related episodes. The first episode describes Isaac's initial peace with the Philistines in 26:1-11. In these verses, Isaac deceived the Philistine king, Abimelech, into thinking that Rebekah was his sister. Upon discovering Isaac's deceit, Abimelech returned Rebekah to Isaac. He then gave Isaac permission to stay in the region and ordered his people not to harm them in any way.

The second episode reports Isaac's enduring peace with the Philistines in 26:12-33. In this section, God blessed Isaac but his many flocks and herds caused the Philistines to envy him. So, Isaac avoided violence by moving from well to well. The episode closes as Abimelech acknowledged God's blessing on Isaac and the two made a treaty of peace between them at Beersheba.

This narrative of Isaac's peace with Philistines highlights the fact that Isaac, and in turn his son Jacob, were Abraham's successors. When we compare the content of this division with the life of Abraham, we find a number of parallels to Abraham's life. Abraham dealt with a Philistine king, also named Abimelech, in Genesis 20:1-18. Abraham dug wells and lived among the Philistines in Genesis 21:30 and 34. Abraham also entered into a treaty with the Philistines at Beersheba in Genesis 21:22-34. Moses designed these comparisons with Abraham to remove all doubt that God approved Isaac's peaceful relationship with the Philistines.

Now let's turn from Isaac's interactions with Philistines to the sixth division of Jacob's life that focuses on encounters between Jacob and Canaanites in 33:18–35:15.

JACOB AND CANAANITES (GENESIS 33:18–35:15)

Jacob's conflict with Canaanites also consists of two closely connected episodes. The first episode concerns Jacob's conflict at Shechem in 33:18–34:31. While Jacob was among the Canaanites, Shechem son of Hamor violated Jacob's daughter, Dinah. In response to this attack on their sister, Jacob's sons tricked the Shechemites into believing all would be forgiven if they would be circumcised. But once the Shechemites were disabled by their circumcisions, Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi attacked and killed them all. Afterwards, Jacob expressed fear that the Canaanites would seek revenge and destroy his family. Even though Jacob's sons insisted that they had done the right thing, Jacob's final words about Simeon and Levi in Genesis 49:5-7 indicate otherwise.

In the second episode, Jacob received a dramatic assurance from God at Bethel in Genesis 35:1-15. In 35:2-4, Jacob consecrated himself and his entire family to God in

preparation for building an altar at Bethel. As a result, the terror of God fell on the Canaanites and they didn't pursue Jacob. Then, after Jacob built the altar at Bethel, God spoke to him and assured him that he was his father's successor. We see this particularly in 35:10-12 where God's words parallel his earlier words to Isaac in 26:3-4. The episode closes with Jacob giving thanks for this blessing.

And much like in the second division, we see several parallels between Abraham and Jacob in these chapters. In Genesis 33:20, Jacob set up an altar to the Lord in Shechem much like Abraham had done before him in Genesis 12:7. Moreover, in 35:6-7, Jacob moved from Shechem to Bethel and built an altar there much like Abraham had done in Genesis 12:8. As in the second division, these positive connections to Abraham's life showed that God approved of Jacob's conflict with the Canaanites.

Now let's turn to the third and fifth divisions that deal with Jacob and Esau's times of separation. These narratives focus on two distinct times when the brothers parted ways. The third division describes Jacob and Esau's hostile separation in 26:34–28:22. And the fifth division describes Jacob and Esau's peaceful separation in Genesis 32:1–33:17. Let's look at Jacob and Esau's hostile separation.

HOSTILE SEPARATION (GENESIS 26:34–28:22)

This section focuses on four accounts that alternate between Esau and Jacob to display the moral complexities of these events. First, 26:34 gives a brief report that Esau discredited himself by taking Hittite wives against his parents' wishes. Second, in 27:1–28:5, we read a lengthy narrative of how Jacob's deception secured Isaac's blessing. In this well-known story, Jacob secured the blessing that was meant for Esau by deceiving his father Isaac. Upon learning what had happened, Esau became so enraged that Rebekah feared for Jacob's life. She convinced Isaac to send Jacob to Paddan Aram where Jacob might find a wife from among their relatives. Third, to keep the audience from feeling too much sympathy for Esau, Moses reported in 28:6-9 that Esau took Ishmaelite wives in defiance of his parents. The fourth and last segment affirms God's choice of Jacob as Isaac's heir by reporting Jacob's blessing through a dream at Bethel in 28:10-22.

PEACEFUL SEPARATION (GENESIS 32:1–33:17)

In contrast to the third division's narrative of Jacob and Esau's hostile separation, the fifth division of Jacob's life reports the brothers' peaceful separation in 32:1–33:17. This division involves two closely connected episodes. First, we see Jacob's preparation for Esau in 32:1-32. Years after their hostile separation, Jacob prepared to meet Esau by sending messengers and gifts ahead of him. According to Hosea 12:4, the night before meeting Esau, Jacob was humbled as he wrestled with an angel and received God's blessing.

We see that the promise had already been made to Rebekah that Jacob would be the one who would receive the blessing but the way that Jacob went about getting the blessing ... he deceived his father and he, when he was asked his name, he said, “My name is Esau, your firstborn.” He lied... But God blesses him; God multiplies, gives him all the children so that the promise to Abraham is beginning to be fulfilled — “As the stars are, so shall your seed be” — and yet, when he’s coming back to the Promised Land, he has to face up to his past. And this time, the night before he’s to meet Esau, he’s wrestling with an angel and he’s asked, “What is your name?” And this time he tells the truth. He says, “My name is Jacob.” And he’s given a new name, Israel.

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

The second episode in 33:1-17 reports Jacob’s reconciliation with Esau. In this section, the brothers meet and then part on peaceful terms. The contrasts between this division and its parallel are obvious. Jacob was no longer deceitful but sincere and humble. Esau no longer sought revenge but granted forgiveness. In the end, the earlier hostility between the twins took a turn toward resolution and they went their separate ways in peace. This division ends as Esau disappears from the storyline. Then, in chapter 34, Canaanites and a new geographical setting appear. All of this brings us to the fourth, pivotal division of Jacob’s time with Laban in Genesis 29:1–31:55.

TIME WITH LABAN (GENESIS 29:1–31:55)

Jacob’s time with Laban divides into five main segments. It begins in 29:1-14 with Jacob’s arrival in Paddan Aram. We then learn in 29:14-30 of Laban’s deception of Jacob as he gave Jacob his daughters in marriage. Following Jacob’s marriages, in 29:31–30:24 we read of the births of Jacob’s children, the tribal patriarchs of Israel. Then, to balance Laban’s earlier deception, in 30:25-43 Moses reported Jacob’s deception of Laban as he sought wages for his years of work. Finally, in 31:1-55, we find Jacob’s departure from Paddan Aram, including a covenant of peace made with Laban. These pivotal chapters deal with a variety of deceptions and conflicts. But, as we’ll see in a moment, they brought about a radical transformation in Jacob.

When we look at the Jacob narrative in Genesis 25–37, we see a remarkable series of transformations that took place in Jacob’s life. As he begins, as the deceiver, then he has that amazing gracious revelation from God in which God does not refer to the deception that Jacob has practiced but instead renews all the promises of Abraham to him. And Jacob becomes the dealer as he makes a deal with God that, if God will keep those promises, he will give him a little cut. But what a deal it was because God kept his promises when Jacob met a

man who was crookeder than Jacob was in the person of Laban. And as Jacob senses God's blessing in his life, it's very clear that he becomes more and more willing to trust God — at least in minimal ways — so that when God says to head home, he's willing to do it. And finally then, the deceiver, the dealer is defeated when he hears the word that his brother is coming with all those armed men. And then the defeated is delivered when God comes and Jacob says, "It's *your* blessing I have to have — not my father's, not Esau's. It's yours!" And ultimately then, in this way, he's brought to the place where he is willing and able to trust God and no longer needs to be the manipulator who makes everything work for himself.

— Dr. John Oswalt

Up to this point in our lesson on the patriarch Jacob, we've explored the structure and content of Jacob's life in the book of Genesis. Now we should turn to our second main topic: the major themes that appear in these chapters.

MAJOR THEMES

Unfortunately, followers of Christ often act as if Jacob's story was written primarily for individual believers to apply directly to their personal lives. Of course, this part of Genesis has much to say about how individuals should live. But we always have to remember that Genesis was not written with the expectation that the average individual believer would be able to read it. Only the leaders of ancient Israel had direct access to the Scriptures. So, the life of Jacob was primarily written to address matters related to the nation of Israel as a whole. God had set Israel on a mission to build his kingdom in the Promised Land. And from there they were to spread his kingdom to the ends of the earth. And this kingdom-building mission helps us identify the major themes of Jacob's life for ancient Israel and for you and me living in Christ's kingdom today.

In our lessons on the life of Abraham, we saw that Moses emphasized four main themes: God's grace to Abraham, Abraham's loyalty to God, God's blessings to Abraham and God's blessings through Abraham to others. These same themes appear again in the life of Jacob. For this reason, we'll consider how the story of Jacob's life emphasizes these four major themes. First, we'll discuss God's grace to Israel; second, the requirement of Israel's loyalty to God; third, God's blessings to Israel; and fourth, the most important feature of these chapters, God's blessings *through* Israel to others. Let's begin with some of the ways Jacob's story focuses on God's grace to Israel.

GOD'S GRACE TO ISRAEL

We'll explore God's grace to Israel in two ways. On the one hand, we'll see how this theme was a focus of Moses' original meaning, how he wanted to impact his ancient Israelite audience. On the other hand, we'll note some of the ways the theme of divine grace should affect our modern application of this part of Genesis. Let's look first at Moses' original meaning.

Original Meaning

In general terms, to teach the people of Israel about God's grace in their own lives, Moses stressed divine grace in Jacob's life in three ways.

Past Grace. First, Moses noted how God had shown Jacob past grace even before he was born. The opening episode of Jacob's story draws attention to this theme. Listen again to Genesis 25:23 where God said to Rebekah:

Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger (Genesis 25:23).

In Romans 9:11-12, the apostle Paul made the comment that Jacob received God's mercy even before he had done anything right or wrong. In much the same way, God's favor to the tribes of Israel that were following Moses toward the Promised Land also rested on God's mercies in the past. In Deuteronomy 7:7-8, Moses put it this way:

The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples ... But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).

Ongoing Grace. In the second place, Moses also highlighted the need for God's ongoing grace in Jacob's life. This taught the Israelites how much they needed God's ongoing grace in their own lives. This focus first appears in the account of Jacob's birth in Genesis 25:24-26. Listen to Genesis 25:26:

After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob (Genesis 25:26).

Jacob received his name because he was "grasping Esau's heel" as they were born. The name Jacob, יַעֲקֹב (*yacob*) in Hebrew, is from the same root as the word translated here "heel," אָקֵב (*akeeb*) in Hebrew. In effect, Jacob's name meant, "he grabs the heel." But, in this case, his name had connotations of subversion and deception

because Jacob tried to gain the position of firstborn as early as the day of his birth. We might even say that the name Jacob meant something like “the trickster.” This explains Esau’s reaction in Genesis 27:36 after Jacob had tricked Isaac into giving him Esau’s blessing:

Esau said, “Isn’t he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he’s taken my blessing!” (Genesis 27:36).

Jacob’s name aptly matched his actions and made it clear that he needed God’s ongoing grace every day of his life. Moses often drew attention to displays of God’s ongoing grace that were particularly relevant for his original audience.

By way of illustration, in Genesis 26:26-33, God showed mercy to Jacob’s father, Isaac, by giving him safety among Philistines. When Moses wrote these chapters, his Israelite audience also needed God’s grace to secure their own protection from the Philistines. In addition to this, in 34:1-31, God graciously gave Jacob victory over Canaanites. By this example, Moses’ original audience learned how they needed God’s ongoing grace to give them victory over Canaanites in their own day.

Future Grace. In the third place, the story of Jacob also focuses on God’s future grace. Once again, we see this theme first in the opening episodes of Moses’ account. As you’ll recall, in Genesis 25:23, before Jacob’s birth, God promised:

One people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger (Genesis 25:23).

This promise indicated that the Israelites would be so well established in the Promised Land that they would extend their rule — and thus *God’s* rule — over the land of Esau’s descendants as well. And this promise of future grace was particularly relevant for Moses’ original audience as they dealt with Edomites in their own day.

And God made a number of other promises of future grace in the story of Jacob’s life. For example, in Jacob’s dream at Bethel in Genesis 28:10-22, God assured Jacob of many future mercies. And later, God reaffirmed similar promises of grace in Jacob’s worship at Bethel in 35:11-12. These promises of future grace to Jacob showed Moses’ audience the bright future that God offered them as they moved toward the conquest and settlement of Canaan.

To understand how the stories of Jacob emphasize that Israel has a right to the Promised Land, we have to remember at least two different things. One is that these stories are primarily about the contrast between Jacob and Esau — groups that would have been competing, as it were, as the rightful heirs of Abraham’s promises. And the stories of Jacob and Esau, the contrast between them shows very plainly that Esau went south toward the Edomites and that God gave him that land — that that’s where God established him — and that Jacob, rather, is the rightful heir of the promise given to

Abraham for the Promised Land. But you can also find it in the story of Laban when Jacob leaves. These are northern neighbors, relatives of his, but he doesn't stay there but for a period of time. But more important than just these contrasts, between Jacob/Esau, Jacob and Laban, is the fact that as Jacob is leaving the Promised Land, having deceived his father, deceived his brother; he's leaving the Promised Land. In chapter 28, he has that well-known dream at Bethel where he finds God and the angels appearing to him and then Jacob says, "Will you please just assure me that I am going to come back to this land?" And God does assure him that he will do just that. And then in chapter 35, you have a recollection of that event where God says, "Go to Bethel; build an altar. Build an altar at the place that I told you I would bring you back to." And Bethel, as we know, is in the Promised Land. And those two passages in the life of Jacob positively emphasize the idea that this is the land that God had given to Jacob despite all of his failings, despite that he deceived his brother, deceived his father, even did things up in the land of Laban that were questionable. Despite all of that, God chose Jacob as the one who would inherit the land that had been promised to his forefather Abraham.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Now that we've looked at God's grace to Israel with the original meaning in mind, let's touch on some of the ways God's grace should affect the modern application of Jacob's story.

Modern Application

Of course, there are countless ways to apply the theme of God's grace to our lives as followers of Christ. But for the sake of convenience, we'll think in terms of the inauguration of Christ's kingdom, the continuation of his kingdom throughout church history, and the consummation of the kingdom at his return in glory. These three stages of Christ's kingdom represent some of the main ways the New Testament teaches Christ's followers to find God's past, ongoing and future grace in their lives.

In the first place, as followers of Christ, when we see displays of past grace in Jacob's life, we should recall how God revealed his past grace to us especially in the inauguration of his kingdom in Christ. The first advent of Christ stands at the end of a long history of grace that ran throughout all of the Old Testament. And as passages like Romans 5:20 indicate, God showed more grace and mercy in the first advent of Christ than ever before. As Paul put it:

Where sin increased, grace increased all the more (Romans 5:20).

In the second place, God's ongoing grace in Jacob's life reminds us to seek and depend on God's ongoing mercies during the continuation of Christ's kingdom. As passages like Hebrews 4:16 tell us, Christ's followers can "approach [God's] throne of grace with confidence." And we'll "find ongoing grace to help us in our time of need."

And third, when we see God's assurances of future grace to Jacob, we should remember God's future grace for us that will appear at the consummation of Christ's kingdom. Much like Moses' original audience learned about God's future grace in the Promised Land, followers of Christ long to see God's promises fulfilled in the new creation. Passages like Ephesians 2:7 remind us that, at Christ's return, we'll experience "the incomparable riches of [God's] grace."

ISRAEL'S LOYALTY TO GOD

Now that we've touched on the major theme of God's grace to Israel, we should turn to the second major theme: the requirement of Israel's loyalty to God. Both the Old and New Testaments make it clear that eternal salvation is granted entirely by the grace of God. No one has ever been able to gain salvation by works. But the Scriptures also make it clear that when people receive the saving grace of God, God's Spirit begins to transform them, and they seek to obey God's commands out of heartfelt gratitude for his many mercies. This is the fruit of God's Spirit within us. As we look at the theme of loyalty to God in Jacob's life, we must always keep these basic theological outlooks in mind.

To see what we mean, we'll look at Israel's loyalty to God as a facet of Moses' original meaning and then move toward the modern application of this theme. Let's consider first Moses' original meaning.

Original Meaning

In general terms, Moses stressed Jacob's loyalty to God to call his original audience to be loyal to God in their own day. One of the most obvious ways Moses did this was to point out how God transformed Jacob into his loyal servant. In the early divisions of Jacob's story, the patriarch is largely portrayed in a negative light. Jacob's birth depicts him as grasping his brother's heel, and thus trying to grasp the position of the firstborn. In his young adulthood, we learn that Jacob took advantage of Esau's hunger to secure Esau's birthright for himself. He also deceived his aged father to get the blessing reserved for Esau. The only exception to this early negative characterization is Jacob's vow at Bethel where he swore that if God would protect him, the Lord would be his God.

Now, following this vow, Jacob went to live with Laban. Apparently, the seed of loyalty to God sown in Jacob's heart at Bethel must have continued to grow. Despite being mistreated by his father-in-law, when Jacob returned from his time with Laban, he became a new man.

Moses made this transformation evident in at least four ways. First, Moses reported that Jacob showed contrition toward Esau. In 32:4-5, Jacob instructed his servant to address Esau on his behalf as “my master.” And when Jacob himself finally met Esau in Genesis 33:8, he directly addressed him as “my lord.”

Second, Jacob showed contrition toward God. For instance, in Genesis 32:10 Jacob confessed to God:

I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant (Genesis 32:10).

Third, Jacob received a new name from God. In Genesis 32:22-32, Jacob wrestled with an angel at the ford of the Jabbok River. In verse 27, Jacob essentially confessed to the angel that he’d been a “trickster” by admitting that his name was Jacob. But the angel responded to Jacob’s confession in Genesis 32:28 by saying:

Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome (Genesis 32:28).

Like so many other names in the Bible, the name *יִשְׂרָאֵל* (*Israel*) was, at some point in its history, a praise to God meaning, “God struggles” or “fights.” It derives from the Hebrew verb *סָרָה* (*sarah*), which is translated in verse 28 as “you have struggled.” The angel explained that this name applied to Jacob in a special way because he had “struggled with God and with men and [had] overcome.” Jacob’s struggle with God refers to his wrestling for a blessing in this very scene. And, in all likelihood, Jacob’s struggle with men refers to his struggles with Esau and Laban. In terms of Jacob’s life, his new name indicated that he was a new man. Rather than remaining a trickster, Jacob had become “Israel,” one who had struggled and had overcome.

You read in the book of Genesis the interesting story of Jacob’s name being changed by God himself to Israel. Jacob had wrestled an angel and he realized that that angel represented God; it was the Angel of God. And he realized that God had a special plan for him. God had paid attention to him, had visited him, had a purpose for him that was very, very significant. And so, he got his name changed... In ancient Israel, we know that people did not name babies until they were born. They didn’t name them in advance. They didn’t say, if it’s a boy we’ll give him this name, and if it’s a girl we’ll give her that name. Instead, what they did was to wait for some kind of signal, some kind of sign, some kind of indication. Now, this had happened to Jacob when he was born because he was grabbing on — when he came out of the womb — to his brother Esau’s heel. So, he got a name, “*Yakov*” in Hebrew, that means “heeler” or “holder of the heel,” or “heel-type person.” And he carried that through his life... But he was really in a new life when God met him. When God got ahold of Jacob and gave him that sense of his real purpose, that he would be the father of a nation, in an even more direct way than his own father Isaac or his

own grandfather Abraham were — a very direct way... And so that change from Jacob to Israel is really a beautiful thing and we appreciate God's role in it, in calling the immediate father of the nation of Israel to serve him and to produce the children that he would use to form his first people on the earth.

— Dr. Douglas Stuart

It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of Jacob's new name for Moses' original audience. "Israel" was the national name of the twelve tribes Moses led from Egypt to the Promised Land. When they heard of the patriarch's new name as God's loyal servant, they were reminded that, being Israel, they were called to struggle and overcome just as Jacob had.

A fourth, positive depiction of Jacob, after his time with Laban, was his sincere worship when he returned to Bethel. Just as he promised loyalty to God at Bethel in Genesis 28:20-21, Jacob built an altar and worshipped the Lord in all sincerity at Bethel in Genesis 35:3.

Moses' account of Jacob's transformation had two chief implications for his original audience. He presented Jacob's *disloyalty* because his audience needed to face the many ways they had been disloyal to God. But he also presented Jacob's transformation into a loyal servant of God to encourage his audience to imitate Jacob's *loyalty* in their own day. And as much as Moses' original audience needed to rely on God's grace, they also needed to commit themselves to loyal service to God as they faced the challenges of life in the Promised Land.

Now that we've observed the theme of Israel's loyalty to God with regard to Moses' original meaning, we should look at this theme as a facet of our modern application of Jacob's life. For our purposes, we'll turn once again to how this dimension of Jacob's life also applies to us in terms of the inauguration, continuation, and consummation of Christ's kingdom.

Modern Application

In the first place, anytime the record of Jacob's life leads us to consider our responsibility to be loyal to God, we should keep in mind how Christ himself fulfilled all righteousness in the inauguration of his kingdom. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Christ was tempted just like we are, but he never sinned. In fact, Christ was so loyal to God's commands that he willingly died on the cross under God's judgment in the place of all who believe in him. And his perfect righteousness is now imputed to us by faith. Christ's own personal loyalty to God in the inauguration of his kingdom keeps us from reducing the application of Jacob's life to moralism — "Do this; don't do that." Every moral implication of Jacob's life should be viewed first in terms of Christ's own fulfillment of all righteousness on our behalf.

In the second place, when we see the theme of loyalty in the story of Jacob, we find guidance for our own loyal service to Christ today. During the continuation of

Christ's kingdom, Jacob's life still calls on us to consider our own loyalty to God. We're reminded of passages like Hebrews 12:1-2 that encourage us to imitate the faithfulness of those who have gone before us, including Jacob.

And in the third place, every facet of Jacob's story that touches on the requirement of human loyalty should turn our hearts toward loyalty to Christ at the consummation of God's kingdom. The theme of loyalty reminds us that we who follow Christ will one day be transformed into God's perfected, faithful servants. As passages like 1 John 3:2 teach, when Christ returns, "we will be like him."

We can apply the Jacob stories to our own lives today by seeing that Jacob was promised God's blessing. It was God's word that had promised that he had set his love on Jacob and yet, Jacob spent much of his life trying to gain, by hook or crook, what God had already promised him. So, we're often like Jacob. We strive to gain in life — through any means necessary sometimes — what God has already promised us, in fact, has already given us in Christ. No verse in the New Testament speaks to that perhaps as well as Romans 8:32: "If God did not spare his own Son, how much more will he not give us all things in him?" Through Christ we can especially hear the words of Psalm 46: "Cease striving and know that I am God (NASB)," and — if I may add — know that he is a good God, kindly disposed toward his covenant children.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Having looked at the major themes of God's grace to Israel and Israel's loyalty to God, we should turn to a third major theme in this part of Genesis: God's blessings to Israel.

GOD'S BLESSINGS TO ISRAEL

We'll examine God's blessings to Israel in the same way that we explored Moses' other themes. We'll think first in terms of Moses' original meaning, and then we'll consider our modern application of this theme. Let's begin with Moses' original meaning.

Original Meaning

In general terms, God's covenant relationship with his people always involves blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. There's no doubt that Jacob experienced negative consequences from his disobedience. For instance, after deceiving his brother and father, Jacob had to flee for his life. He also experienced hard times from his father-in-law, Laban.

But Moses clearly placed much more emphasis on the *blessings* that God gave to Jacob to remind his original audience that God had given them many blessings as well. God's blessings in Jacob's life fall roughly into two groups: blessings despite Jacob's disobedience and blessings in response to Jacob's obedience.

On the one hand, Jacob received blessings despite his disloyalty. For instance, in Genesis 27:27-29, Jacob received God's blessing through Isaac even though he acquired it by deceiving Isaac. Jacob also received God's blessings at Bethel in 28:13-15 despite the fact that he was fleeing for his life from Esau.

On the other hand, in the later divisions of Jacob's story, God's blessings came in response to Jacob's loyalty. For instance, in Genesis 29:1–31:55, God granted Jacob blessings of family and wealth through Laban. After Jacob humbled himself, God granted him blessings through Esau in Genesis 32:1–33:17. In a similar way, in Genesis 33:18–34:31, Jacob received God's blessings at Shechem after his sons engaged in conflict with the Canaanites. God also gave Jacob blessings at Bethel in 35:9-13 when the patriarch devoted himself to the worship of God.

Moses knew that the Israelites who followed him toward the Promised Land were going to face many challenges in the exodus and conquest. So, in these and many other passages, Moses focused on God's blessings to Jacob to inspire gratitude in his original audience and to motivate them to pursue God's blessings even further. Once we see the original meaning in the theme of God's blessings to Israel, it isn't difficult to grasp the significance of these matters for modern application.

Modern Application

In line with our earlier discussions, we'll speak once again in terms of the inauguration, continuation and consummation of Christ's kingdom. We should first turn our hearts toward Christ himself during the inauguration of the kingdom. In contrast with Jacob, Jesus didn't receive any blessings in spite of disloyalty; he had no sin. But because he was faithful to the Father, Jesus received great blessings during his lifetime on earth and even greater blessings when he ascended into heaven. What is most remarkable about Jesus' own blessings is that, as passages like Ephesians 1:3 teach, through our union with Christ, *we* share in the blessings Jesus obtained.

In addition to this, the New Testament teaches that Christ pours out blessings on his people throughout the continuation of his kingdom. Just as he did with Jacob, God blesses us, sometimes despite our disloyalty and at other times in response to our loyalty. Now, life is full of self-denial and suffering for Christ's followers. But passages like 2 Corinthians 1:21-22 and Ephesians 1:13-14 make it clear that God has promised to seal each of us with the wondrous blessing of his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit lives in and among us as the guarantee of our even greater inheritance in the world to come.

So, whenever we see God's blessings to Jacob in the book of Genesis, we're reminded of the immeasurable blessings we'll receive at the consummation of Christ's kingdom. As passages like Matthew 25:34 teach so clearly, when Christ returns, God will welcome us into "the kingdom prepared for us since the creation of the world."

Having looked at the major themes of God's grace to Israel, Israel's loyalty to God, and God's blessings to Israel, let's turn to the fourth, and clearly the most prominent theme in Moses' record of Jacob's life: God's blessings *through* Israel to others.

GOD'S BLESSINGS THROUGH ISRAEL

As before, we'll explore the theme of God's blessings *through* Israel in terms of Moses' original meaning and then turn to the theme's modern application. Let's look first at Moses' original meaning.

Original meaning

To understand the significance of this theme for the original audience, we need to recall God's special commission to Abraham as the father of the nation of Israel. The story of Abraham in Genesis explains that God commissioned the people of Israel to take the lead in fulfilling humanity's original commission. They were to multiply and fill the earth with faithful images of God. And one way they were to do this was by spreading God's blessings to other peoples throughout the earth. As we read in Genesis 12:2-3, God said to Abraham:

You will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:2-3).

Notice here that God called for Abraham to spread the blessings of God's kingdom to "all peoples on earth." But notice that even though God's blessings would spread throughout the entire earth, not every person would be blessed. God said: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse." In other words, some would reject Israel's efforts, and others would accept them. And God promised to bless and curse other peoples accordingly.

Interestingly enough, the same twofold process of blessing and cursing that God revealed to Abraham was repeated to Jacob in Genesis 27:29 when Isaac blessed Jacob, saying:

May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed (Genesis 27:29).

Moses devoted most of his record of Jacob's life to pointing out how the patriarch interacted with various people in his day. These were the ancestors of people groups that interacted with the Israelites in Moses' day. So, in this way, Moses taught Israel how to treat this or that group. Should they go to war? Or should they establish peace? For instance, the stories of Jacob deal with two people groups within the borders of the Promised Land.

On the one hand, the sixth division reports encounters between Jacob and Canaanites in 33:18–35:15. In Genesis 15:16, God made it clear that he would not bring Israel out of Egypt until “the sin of the Amorites” — another term for Canaanites — had “reached its full measure.” With few exceptions, like Rahab, the Canaanites had so defiled the Promised Land by the days of Moses that God commanded Israel to destroy them. So, it’s not surprising that Moses reported Jacob’s defeat of the Shechemites and God’s protection of Jacob from other Canaanites.

On the other hand, the second division of Jacob’s life tells of encounters between Isaac and Philistines in 26:1-33. Unlike Jacob’s conflict with Canaanites, this division focuses on Isaac’s *peace* with Philistines. We know from Joshua 13:1-5 that Philistines lived in the lands God had promised to Israel. But their name indicates that the Philistines were a seafaring people who came from Caphtor. For this reason, they didn’t immediately come under God’s judgment against Canaanites. This policy was supported by the examples of Abraham in Genesis 21:22-34 and Isaac in 26:26-33. Both of these patriarchs made treaties of peace with the Philistines. As a result, the Israelites in Moses’ day were to emulate Abraham and Isaac by seeking to live alongside Philistines in peace. It was only after the Philistines broke this peace in later generations that Israel waged war against them.

Beyond these examples, Jacob’s story also deals with people who lived outside of the Promised Land. For example, the central division of Jacob’s time with Laban in 29:1–31:55 focuses on the Israelites’ distant relatives who lived in Paddan Aram, just north of the Promised Land. The record of Jacob’s time there warns against the deceit that characterized Laban and his family. But Genesis 31:51-55 indicates that Jacob and Laban swore to honor the geographical boundary between them and to live at peace with each other. This made it clear that the Israelites following Moses were to live at peace with their relatives on the northern border. It was only later that Israel was to spread the kingdom of God to this place as well.

In addition to dealing with peoples who lived in the Promised Land and on the northern border, the majority of Jacob’s life story focuses on his interactions with his brother Esau. As we’ve noted, the beginning of struggle for the brothers and nations in Genesis 25:19-34 stressed the fact that Jacob and Esau’s interactions foreshadowed Israel’s interactions with the Edomites who lived in Seir, the southernmost border of the Promised Land.

Edom was particularly important for the original audience of Genesis because they’d faced Edomite hostility as they moved along the southern border of the Promised Land. God had directed the Israelites to make war with other peoples in this region, but in Deuteronomy 2:4-6 and Numbers 20:14-21, we learn that Moses specifically directed Israel to live humbly and at peace with their relatives, the Edomites.

The story of Jacob reminded the Israelites that Jacob had gained God’s blessing through deceit. It also pointed out that Jacob humbled himself toward Esau. And more than this, the stories about Jacob focused on the peaceful, geographical separation of Jacob and Esau and their descendants. These dimensions of Moses’ account spoke directly to the ways the Israelites following him were to treat the Edomites. It wasn’t until much later, when the Edomites troubled Israel that Israel went to war with them.

Now that we’ve touched on the original meaning of God’s blessings through Israel to others, we should turn to the modern application of this theme.

Modern Application

This theme has many implications for our lives, but for the sake of convenience we'll focus once again on the three phases of Christ's kingdom. First, in the inauguration of his kingdom, Jesus, Israel's King, came offering God's blessings to all people on earth. Passages like John 12:47-48 tell us that, in his first advent, Jesus came to defeat Satan and his demonic forces. But he also came with terms of peace to every nation on earth. Jesus and his apostles and prophets met resistance, but they patiently offered reconciliation with God through the proclamation of the gospel. They also warned of God's judgment on the last day against those who rejected the gospel.

Second, during the continuation of Christ's kingdom, God's blessings continue to spread to the nations through the ministry of the church. Following the example of Christ and his apostles and prophets, we move against evil spirits who continue to deceive the nations. As passages like 2 Corinthians 5:20 put it, we are "Christ's ambassadors." We offer terms of peace and reconciliation with God to the entire world, even as we warn of God's judgment on the last day.

Third, we should apply Jacob's interactions with others with a view to the consummation of Christ's kingdom. In Old Testament times, Israel's offer of peace to others was often withdrawn when God determined that it was time to bring judgment. In a similar way, when Christ returns in glory, the offer of peace to the nations will be withdrawn completely from all who have resisted Christ and his kingdom. At that time, the wicked will fall under God's judgment, but as passages like Revelation 5:9-10 tell us, countless people from every corner of the earth who have trusted Christ will enter the worldwide kingdom of God.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've explored Moses' presentation of the patriarch Jacob's life in the book of Genesis. We've seen how Moses masterfully integrated the structure and content of his record so that the life of Jacob would touch the lives of the Israelites that followed him toward the Promised Land. We've also noted how Moses' major themes of God's grace to Israel, Israel's loyalty to God, God's blessings to Israel and God's blessings through Israel, not only provided practical guidance for the nation of Israel in Moses' day, but continue to guide followers of Christ as we seek to serve God in our own day.

The story of Jacob is a wonderful story of hope for all who trust in Christ. It first helped Moses' original audience as they dealt with their own failures and successes. And it guided their interactions with other peoples as they moved toward the Promised Land. It also does something similar for you and me today. In the life of Jacob, we are reassured that no one is beyond the reach of God's mercy. And as those who are joined to Christ, despite our many failures, we can learn from Jacob how we are to extend the blessings of God's kingdom throughout the world until Christ returns in glory.

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The Pentateuch

LESSON
NINE

The Patriarch Jacob Faculty Forum



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The Pentateuch

Lesson Nine: The Patriarch Jacob

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer
Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.
Rev. Michael J. Glodo
Dr. Douglas Gropp
Rev. Dr. Cyprian K. Guchienda

Dr. Carol Kaminisk
Dr. David T. Lamb
Dr. Erika Moore
Dr. John Oswalt

Dr. Tom Petter
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.
Dr. Brian D. Russell
Dr. Douglas Stuart

Question 1:

**What is the broad literary structure of Jacob's story in
Genesis 25:19–37:1?**

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

When it comes to the story of Jacob, this is certainly the case that we can see very plainly, just obviously, that Jacob's story divides into three main parts. The middle section of chapters 29–31 is where Jacob's with Laban. That's the centerpiece of this story of Jacob's life because on the front side of that you have the events between Jacob and Esau, and on the backside of that you have events concerning Jacob and Esau... So obviously then, the story of Jacob divides into these three main parts, and the first part correlates with the last part, and the middle section on Jacob and Laban in chapters 29–31 is something of a hinge or a transition piece between that first and that last part. Now, you could call that a chiasm if you want to, and to say that the centerpiece is the crossing of the two others, and that sort of thing, but when you find even more detailed parallels, say, between the first section and the last section, as in the case of Jacob, then you come to the point where, if you have enough of these parallels, you could actually call it an intentional chiasm... The early parts of Jacob's life correlate to later parts of Jacob's life, and when you see those correlations which involve both contrasts and comparisons, when you see both of those together and they pop up between these various sections, then you have the opportunity to see what Moses, as the author, is emphasizing in both of those sections.

Dr. Erika Moore

Now, we read about the Jacob story in Genesis 25 all the way to chapter 35, and it's interesting that this cycle, if you will, is sandwiched by two accounts of the non-elect line, so that we have the account of Ishmael's sons in 25:12-18, and the account of Esau's descendants in chapter 36. And in between we get the Jacob cycle. And the broad structure seems to be one of conflict, a conflict that goes back and forth between Jacob having conflict with both people and with God. And at the center of that structure are chapters 29, or the end of 29, and 30. And what do these focus on? Well, right at the center of this structure is an account of Jacob's children, and that's at 29:31-35. Then it goes on into chapter 30, and then in 30:25 and following, an

account of Jacob's flocks increasing. So, you have this Jacob cycle buttressed by the account of the non-elect line, and then when we get to Jacob and Esau themselves, we see the conflict. There's conflict between Jacob and Esau in the womb; there's conflict between the mother and father; there's conflict between the nephew and the uncle. And right in the middle is, once again, God's gracious covenant faithfulness, his *chesed*, if you will, where he blesses Jacob with both progeny and with productivity. So, what we see here is in the context of conflict, and part of that conflict we see that getting resolved where Jacob wrestles with a man? God? The text says both. And I think there's a built-in ambiguity there because that's within his whole life, wrestling with both individuals and with God, and we see that becoming resolved in that wrestling match and then in the reconciliation with his brother Esau. But in the middle of the cycle is God's determination to bless this less-than-stellar character in the covenant community.

Question 2:

What were the causes of the conflict between Jacob and Esau?

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

When I take a look at the book of Genesis and I'm thinking about the conflict between Jacob and Esau... the conflict originates with the fact that God is going to choose, not the person who in their culture would probably be normally chosen, the oldest, but choose the youngest. And so, therefore, that's going to prove to be part of the reason for the conflict, especially Esau not getting what everyone else, perhaps, in his society is getting as the firstborn. And at the end of Genesis 25, Jacob takes advantage of his brother in his famished condition and deceives him. Well, not quite deceives him, but certainly takes advantage of him and, feeling that he's able to get Esau to sell him his birthright, he trades that, of course, for a bowl of stew... In chapter 27 of Genesis we see another occurrence where the conflict is augmented. Jacob, along with help from his mother Rebekah, deceives father Isaac and therefore is able to get rid of any blessing that might be coming to Esau. Apparently Isaac is going to give some sort of final blessing and perhaps it would delete, or perhaps at least adjust any selling of the birthright, and Esau is hoping for that. And when he finds out that his brother Jacob has deceived him, he wants to kill him.

Dr. John Oswalt

One of the great things about the Bible is its ability to represent human experience with such an air of reality. In my mind, this is one of the marks of inspiration. As you look at other literatures, you don't find that air of realism. So, for instance, in the case of Jacob and Esau, the picture there of Jacob's need as the second son to somehow put himself into a position of priority, how many hundreds of thousands of times has that taken place in the human experience? But it's not presented in just sort of a stereotypical way; it's presented very, very realistically. So, you have Jacob needing two things if he's to fulfill that dream about his priority that his mother got. He's got to have the birthright, which is basically the position of the firstborn getting a double

portion of the inheritance and having the authority as family leader, so he's got to maneuver his brother into that. But he's also got to have the fatherly blessing. There's a sense in which the birthright is the legal authority in the family, and the blessing is the spiritual authority, and he's got to have both of those, so that his need to deceive rather than to trust God to work this out in his way is ultimately the base problem there.

Dr. David T. Lamb

The book of Genesis is full of fratricidal conflicts from Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 all the way to the end of the book with Joseph and his older brothers. In the middle, we see this conflict, yet another fratricidal conflict between Jacob and his older brother Esau. I would say the conflict begins in the womb of their mother Rebekah. There's a battle going on in her belly, and she's like, "Why is this happening?" God speaks to her and tells her, "There are two nations in your womb." I mean, ultimately we'd say God is the source of this conflict, on some level, orchestrating this in Rebekah. When they're grown up, Esau comes back — Esau's the hunter — he comes back, he's hungry, he didn't catch anything in his quest, and his younger brother Jacob is cooking, and he's got food. And Jacob basically tricks his older brother into giving him over the birthright. So, God's sort of behind the first one, Jacob's behind the second one. The third element of the conflict comes later when Rebekah, the mother, now comes up with an idea to trick her husband Isaac and basically... get the blessing — from the older brother Esau. But Rebekah comes up with a scheme to trick him. So, it's a combination of factors, really, beginning with God, Jacob, and then finally Rebekah, all scheming and then to deceive older brother Esau. And when Esau finds out what's happened, he wants to kill his brother. And a theme of the book, we see it in perhaps the most dramatic way in this conflict between Jacob and Esau.

Question 3:

What lessons might Israel have learned about their relationship with Edom from the stories of Jacob and Esau?

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

The original audience of Genesis, the first generation of Israelites, would have had a lot of lessons they could have learned about the story of Jacob and his relationship with Esau because the descendants of Esau were the Edomites. They would have in that story an example of how they were to relate to some people, not as they related to Canaanites as idolaters and enemies, but rather, near relatives, and they were to treat them as neighbors. And, in fact, the way that Jacob strives to grasp God's blessings when they've been promised to him, Jacob's striving actually produces strife with Edom who is his brother. And so, Israel would have known that instead of striving and trying to obtain by human ingenuity God's covenant blessings, at the expense of their relations with their neighbors, that they should trust God to grant his covenant promises in his time so that they could live peacefully with tribes like the Edomites. And this is really a reflection of what was promised, or was foretold, in the closing

chapters of the flood story where Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. Shem would be the covenant line. Ham would be the one from whom the Canaanites would descend, and they would be cursed. But Japheth would be blessed by living in the tents of Shem. So, the Israelites had a taxonomy coming from the Noah story that said there were three kinds of people in the world: there were the covenant people to whom God would give the covenant promises; there were those who would share in the blessings of the covenant because of their relation to and drawing near to the covenant people; and then there would be the cursed enemies of God, the idolaters. And so, Israel wasn't to treat everyone in the world like a Canaanite, and the story of Jacob and Esau would be a great example of that.

Dr. Tom Petter

The stories of Jacob and Esau in Genesis are... this is a great illustration for me, to me about tribal relationships. And it goes back to... We could take the story of Moab, too, and the Bene Ammon, the sons of Ammon, because it's part of Genesis. It's the start of the nations that will be neighbors to Israel during the monarchy. So, Edom is a nation that's across the river, across Jordan, in the southern region of the area, and then Moab is to the north, and then Ammon is to the north of Moab. So, you've got these three nations that are neighbors to Israel during the monarchy. But they're not friendly neighbors at all. And so, for the people in Israel during the time of their history, to know where Edom comes from is very significant, because it's a constant thorn in the flesh of Israel, especially Judah. I mean, the kingdom of Judah and Edom are at each other's throats regularly. And so, the Genesis stories composed and written by Moses provide a tremendous backdrop to an Israelite history with Edom that's not a friendly one at all. In fact, they build a fortress in Arad, in the south of Judah, just to protect themselves from these pesky Edomites. And then, but at the end, Yahweh has the final words with the Edomites, and it comes through that little prophet who packs a major punch, Obadiah, because then Edom gets the judgment from Yahweh, because Yahweh has not forgotten that Edom is connected to Israel. And how is that? Because Jacob and Esau are brothers. And they are at each other's throat from the beginning, and that just kind of perpetuates itself throughout the history. And finally at the end, Yahweh says, via the prophet Obadiah, "Enough is enough. Edom, you have been neglecting your brother, you have gloated when your brother Israel, Judah, has been under my judgment and you've not helped them, you've not come to their help and, therefore, I'm going to judge you too." So it's a, I mean, the Jacob and Esau narrative is just a microcosm of a conflict between brothers that's going to explode later on in Israelite history. And so, a compelling story, and the details of the fight between Jacob and Esau are great to look at considering where this is all going.

Question 4:

Why did God change Jacob's name to Israel?

Dr. David T. Lamb

In Genesis 32 Jacob is worried. His brother Esau is coming with 400 men. He prays. God answers his prayer in an unexpected way. As he's going to bed he gets attacked. It's near a river; it's in the middle of the night. I like to think of it as mud wrestling. And all night long he wrestles with a creature that the text calls both a man and God. It's kind of unclear exactly what's going on. At the end of this mud wrestling event, Jacob gets renamed Israel — literally maybe, "God striver." I like to say, "God wrestler." Jacob strove with humans and with God, and somehow he prevails. Now, interestingly, Jacob's twelve sons become the twelve tribes of Israel, but they're not called Jacob, the nation is not called Jacob. They're called "Israel" after the God wrestler. And I think, as we look at the story of Israel, we see that this in some ways characterizes the nation. They are constantly struggling, striving in conflict, in some ways with God... The thing about wrestling, there is no sport that's closer, that's more intimate, that's more physical than wrestling. You're totally connected. I think that's a beautiful image for the relationship between God and his people. And as Christians today, we are the new Israel. We are a nation; we are a people who continue to strive and struggle and wrestle with God in this situation in this kind of intimate way. And I think God likes it.

Dr. Douglas Gropp

There are actually two points in the Jacob narratives where Jacob's name is changed by God to Israel. One is in Genesis 32 when he wrestles with this mysterious man, and the other one is when he comes back to Bethel, as he promised to do to pay his vows to the Lord, it's changed to Israel there in Genesis 35... There's no explanation of the name change there, but it resonates very much with the name change from Abram to Abraham in Genesis 17 and from Sarai to Sarah, also in Genesis 17. And I think we should probably make a distinction between modern scientific etymologies based on Semitic cognates and so on from the more folk kind of etymologies and sound plays that we find embedded in the actual biblical narratives. In terms of a scientific etymology, the name Abram and Abraham are really the same name, meaning the exalted father and probably the father referred to as a divine father who is father to the bearer of the name. Similarly, Sarai and Sarah both mean the same thing — two forms of the same name that essentially means either princess or noble lady, or even possibly queen. And the original name Jacob that we know from Ethiopic cognates probably originally meant that "God will protect the bearer of the name." And the name Israel probably originally meant that "God fights for Israel," will fight for Israel. But in the narratives there is a play on the name Jacob so that it's related to the word for heel, and it means something like "to grasp the heel," the one who will grasp the heel and so cheat somebody or trick somebody out of something, get the better of somebody, and that's how it's used in those narratives. And that depicts Jacob's character in those early narratives. And then, the way "Israel" is used in that narrative, in Genesis 32, is it's explained by this mysterious man he wrestles

with: “You have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.” In that same narrative, there’s another name, Peniel which means “face of El,” or “face of God,” and Jacob explains the name as he names the place Peniel, “for I have seen God face to face and somehow I got away with my life.” Those two names express from different angles, I think, the same significance to that narrative... The name Israel, “*Yisrael*,” expresses the meaning of the incident from the point of view of divine condescension, that you have wrestled, you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed. How could Jacob prevail over God? It can only be on the analogy of something like a child wrestling with his father and the father allowing him graciously to win. Then the name Peniel expresses the significance of the incident from Jacob’s perspective, because, as Jacob explains the name, “For I have seen God face to face and have gotten away with my life.” Jacob knows that he’s underserving and that he’s wondering at the divine favor that he’s received. The interesting thing for me is that this unexpected favor from God in this close encounter actually comes home to Jacob at a later point when Jacob, who fears greatly meeting Esau again after Jacob has wronged Esau, when he actually comes face to face with Esau in chapter 33, he says, “I have seen your face like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me; you have favorably accepted me,” he says. So, he receives the forgiveness from Esau as if he were receiving the forgiveness from God.

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

The incident in Genesis where God changes Jacob’s name is actually found in two places: in Genesis 32 and again in Genesis 35. In Genesis 32, Jacob, whose name means “heel-catcher,” the one who is grabbing on for what his brother has, is changed to Israel, meaning “he struggles,” or “he strives with God.” And it comes from that incident where a man wrestled with Jacob during the night and I believe it’s the Lord God because he ends up blessing Jacob. And so he changes his name saying, “No longer will you identify with the one who is grasping after; you will now be identified with the one who realized that he needs my blessing in order to have all of these promises fulfilled.” And when he comes back into the land, when he returns to the place of Bethel where earlier God had given him the promise as he had the angels coming up and down the ladder before Jacob left the land, again God reiterates that his name is Israel. He is a changed person. He has come back to the land, and God is prepared to bless him as he continues to stay close to the Lord and not seek that blessing on his own.

Question 5:

How would the Jacob stories reinforce God’s promise that Israel would one day inhabit the Promised Land?

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

The Jacob stories would serve to reinforce the idea for the first generation that it was God’s will to bring them to the land, the Promised Land. We see this in the Jacob story, for instance, as he is leaving the Land of Promise out of fear of Esau, that at

Bethel God promises him, “I will be with you.” And even during his time away from the Land of Promise, we see evidence that God was with Jacob in how he blessed him and prospered him and brought him to the house of Laban where he found Rachel and Leah, his wives. And so, all that happened to Jacob during his time outside of the land was seen to be under God's sovereign control. And then even as Jacob came back to the Promised Land and he faced his angry brother Esau, he wrestles with God till the break of day with that unnamed angel of the Lord at the brook of Jabbok by Peniel, we can see that God is finalizing his lesson with Jacob: “Don’t contend with me, don’t strive with me because I have promised to bless you.” And so, Israel... would have seen God had been with them in Egypt, and God would bring them back... They would know not to strive with God as they did in the wilderness but, rather, to trust him to bless them and bring them to the Land of Promise. So, there are both positive and negative lessons they could have taken from the life of Jacob.

Dr. Douglas Stuart

Beginning with Abraham, God promised a people would come, and that people would be a blessing to the earth, would have important roles to play. But one of the things also would be that he give them a land. That’s key to who the Israelites were. They were a people who, when they finally left Egypt and got that land, understood that they didn’t deserve it. God had paved the way for them to get a place on the planet that they hadn’t earned, that they didn’t have any right to, but that he gave them by his own promise and his certain plan to make it happen. Now, Jacob, also called Israel, is key in that, partly because he is the one who builds up the small but growing people of Israel in his own family, so that by the time they get to go down to Egypt, helped by one of his sons, Joseph, who invites them down, once Joseph has revealed himself as a high official in Egypt to his brothers, there are seventy of them that go. It’s a big crowd; it’s a big family! So, you’ve got Jacob and you’ve got his twelve sons, and you’ve got their own families, in some cases with fairly grown children, and it’s a big crowd from which an even greater nation, by far, can grow in Egypt and come back into the Promised Land. So, first, there’s just the simple fact of Jacob as the progenitor, the dad, the father, the ancestor of all of these people, the producer of the family. But secondly, Jacob has to have the faith to believe the promises. If you look in the book of Genesis, the promise of land is given to Abraham, but it’s given also to his son, Isaac, and it’s given *also* to his son Jacob. Jacob has the faith. He’s not a perfect person; he’s not sin-free. He does some mean things. He often is a poor parent, and we see that. He makes mistakes, gets himself in trouble sometimes, but he’s got the faith to trust that God's promises are true. And when the time comes to preserve that family, he takes them down to Egypt and they’re there for hundreds of years, but they come back and they’re still called the children of Israel.

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

In the stories about Jacob we have numerous times God reiterating the Abrahamic covenant to him and promising him that the land would belong to him and to his descendants. But one of the neat times is when Jacob is in Bethel about to leave the land, and yet God assures him that he will return to the land, and the land would be his. I can’t help but think that the children of Israel, when they’re in exile, when

they're no longer in possession of the land, would look back at that and say to themselves, "The land is not just ours because we have continual occupation in it, it is ours because it is based upon a promise of God." And so I think the children of Israel, down through the years, even when they were being disciplined by God, when they were running for their lives, as Jacob was running from his brother Esau, would remember God has made a promise and that someday the land will be our possession.

Question 6:

What did God's words to Jacob in Genesis 28:14 teach Israel about its role as a blessing to the nations?

Dr. Erika Moore

We read in the Jacob cycle this interesting promise from the Lord, and I'm reading here from Genesis 28:14:

Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring (Genesis 28:14).

Well, where have we heard that before? Well, we heard that in Genesis 12 when the Lord calls Abram and says, "I'm going to make your family a great nation, and out of you all the nations of the world will be blessed." And we see the Jacob cycle, we see that Jacob is to be a blessing to the people that he comes in contact with, and yet there's a very sobering story in chapter 34. It's the story of Dinah and Shechemites... Back in 28 he said that he would come back to Bethel. But he stops 20 miles short because we're told in chapter 33:16 that he stops in Shechem, which is about 20 miles short, and he sets up camp there. And one day one of his daughters, Dinah, goes out to the town, and one of the prince's sons sees Dinah and violates her. And then the story is told how Jacob's sons dupe the Shechemites into getting circumcised, and then they destroy them. What's going on here? Well, it's similar to what... It's a parallel situation to Genesis 12. As soon as the Lord tells Abraham, "You're to be a blessing to all the nations," he goes to Egypt because of a famine, and what does he do? He pawns Sarah off as his half-sister. And then, instead of blessing, cursing comes to Egypt because Abraham is not trusting in the Lord. So, too, here Jacob is not trusting the Lord. He doesn't go all the way to Bethel as he had promised back in 28, and the result is that the nations, in this case the Shechemites, are cursed because of his disobedience. So, we see that the purpose of the Lord calling Abram and then Jacob and his sons was so that all the nations of the world could be blessed. But when they sin, we see that it has the opposite effect and they actually end up cursing the nations, which just shows us that this all points to we need a true Israel, we need Jesus, who can be the one through whom all the nations of the world are blessed.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Among other things, God promised Abraham in Genesis 12:3 that Israel, his descendants, would become a blessing to every family, every nation on the earth. And, of course, this is what Christians believe comes through Jesus as the gospel goes to every nation in the world. But that theme of God blessing all the nations through Abraham also reappears in Genesis 28:14 in the life of Jacob. Jacob at Bethel receives this blessing: that he will have many descendants, they will live in the Promised Land, but then they will spread to the east, to the west, to the north and the south, and because they spread out, they will then become a blessing to all the nations of the world. And then the story of Jacob also emphasizes this as Jacob interacts with Esau — the father of the Edomites, who are the people of the south — and of Laban, when he interacts with Laban, and these are the people of the north. And so, as you deal with those two boundaries or those two borders of the Promised Land, Edom and Laban up north, then what you have is interactions of Jacob with people around him, other people other than his own descendants. And we see in both of those stories that Jacob interacts both positively and negatively with those people. It's important to realize that in Genesis 12:3 when God says that Abraham will become a blessing to all the nations, which is then repeated in chapter 28:14 for Jacob, that God also says this to Abraham: "Those who bless you I will bless, and those who curse you" — or disdain you — "I will curse." And so this interaction with other peoples that will lead eventually to the blessings of all the nations isn't just positive, it's also negative. And so, blessings and curses work together in God's economy, or God's providence, eventually will lead to Jacob becoming a blessing to all the nations. This is the theme that comes out for the people of Israel in the days of Moses. They were going to the Promised Land. But why were they going to the Promised Land? What was the endpoint? What was the goal? What was the destiny? Was it that God would just bless them, that God would give them good things, that God would save them from their sins and give them eternal life? No. It was that they, as the instruments of God, would become the conduit of blessings to all the families of the earth, something that we see repeated over and over in the book of Genesis but also we see later on in the Bible as well, say in Psalm 72, where it is said that the blessing will be given to all peoples in fulfillment of Abraham's promise by means of the house of David. Psalm 72 in many respects for the Old Testament is the climax of this, the hope that then is centered in the house of David as the one to whom, through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

Question 7:

What are some major themes that can be found within the Jacob stories?

Dr. Douglas Gropp

I think the overall theme of the narratives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the patriarchs, is the promise to the patriarchs, which I would regard as threefold: having to do with many descendants, the promise of the land of Canaan, and a relationship to

the nations, either for blessing or for curse. And we can abbreviate those as seed, land and nations. But within each of the segments of the patriarchal narratives, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, I think we can speak of subthemes as well. And in the Jacob narratives in particular, I would pinpoint two themes, two subthemes. One has to do with struggle, and Jacob struggles. He struggles with Esau, he struggles with his relative Laban in Haran, and then his wives struggle among themselves, particularly Rachael and Leah, but the central struggle he has is with God that we see in his wrestling match in Genesis 32. So that's one set of subthemes. The other is his relationship to the land. Jacob begins in the land, and he is exiled from the land in part because of his hostile relationship that develops with Esau and he has to come back into the land. And there's a question there of whether God will fulfill his promise to him, as a child of the promise, of possessing the land in all of that. And the two themes come together in... Genesis 32:23-33, the passage where he wrestles with this mysterious man. That man seems to be barring his way back into the Promised Land in some sense, perhaps guarding the holiness of the holy land, the holiness of God's presence in the land.

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

Well, as I prepare to teach the Jacob stories, I recognize there are two, maybe three major themes. One would be the sovereignty of God. God is in control of things, he has a plan for Jacob, and he is bringing it to fruition. Related to that is the providential protection and provision of God. All along the way, Jacob is doing really stupid, selfish things... but the Lord counters that by bringing Jacob through those difficult times and teaches him a lesson. And then that leads us to the third major theme, which is the importance of trusting God rather than our own wits and schemes and deceptiveness. We need to trust that God is working in our lives, and we don't need to do dishonest things to try to get ahead.

Dr. Brian D. Russell

Jacob confronts us with some interesting problems, because at some level Jacob doesn't act in ways that we might expect, to being one of the heroes of the Bible. He starts off kind of cheating his brother; he cheats his father-in-law; he gets himself into all kinds of trouble. And one of the things when we're trying to preach or teach from it, we have to deal with that. So one of the key goals is to sort of release ourselves from trying to make Jacob look good in places where he really doesn't. Now, he changes in the story, but early on we don't have to make the guy look good; let's let the Scriptures do with what they want, because God is trying to do something bigger in the Jacob story. One of the key themes that we don't want to miss is promise. That extends through to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Genesis 12 to 50 are less about how great Israel's ancestors were and a lot more about how God is completely faithful to his promises. He calls broken people to be his agents of blessing. Some of these characters do a little better than others. Joseph is exemplary, for example. But Jacob, he makes... he challenges that whole notion, because Jacob tries to use human power and human means to advance, ultimately, Jacob's purposes. But in God's mission, it's God advancing God's purposes. So we want to remember that God's promises frame this. God has called Israel to be his people, his agents of blessing to

the nations, and Jacob receives that and he's going to carry that promise. We know that from even before he was born... And so Jacob is going to supplant his older brother as God's choice. So one of the... And that's an interesting theme. We have... The theme of the firstborn is a thread that goes through Genesis, and we see it in Jacob's account. And sometimes you can read that and think this is really unfair, but God's trying to make a point in this. And this is a key thing for preachers. God's trying to demonstrate that God's salvation doesn't come through typical human channels. And so, Jacob, as the second born, just like Isaac as the second born, demonstrates that typical human culture in the ancient world — and we still see this today in some contexts — the firstborn son was the means by which a family would secure it's fortune, and it would essentially give all the wealth to that firstborn son to make sure that one member of the family carried on that family tradition. But if God is going to demonstrate that he's the Savior, we really wouldn't expect God to use typical human means, so God uses the second born to remind us that we're saved not by power or by our own ingenuity or by human culture, but by God's grace.

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

When I think of the Jacob stories, there are some wonderful little ethical, moral lessons it can teach. But I would want to emphasize some themes that are broad that go throughout the story. And it seems to me that one theme is the reliability, the trustworthiness of the promises of God. It's repeated over and over again, and although at the very end of Jacob's story he is down in Egypt, God's promise of bringing him back to the land and promising to his descendants the land is a theme that is important. God's word comes true. I think another theme I would emphasize would be the fact that God keeps his promise and works with people even when they are disobedient. Jacob is a heel-catcher, he's a deceiver, he's one who early on in his life was always trying to do it himself by manipulating people, and yet God works with him. The disobedience of Jacob doesn't undo the fact that God can still carry out his will and his promises. And I think, thirdly, I would emphasize that God can change people. Too often I hear, "Well, that person's been like that for so many years," and yet, Jacob, after being out of the land for 20 years and being deceived by others, God comes into his life and is able to change his life. And so, not only now can God's will be done, but Jacob can enjoy the blessing of cooperating with God and allowing God's promises to come true.

Question 8:

How do the Jacob stories illustrate God's grace?

Dr. Erika Moore

The Jacob stories illustrate over and over again for us God's gracious dealings with his people. First of all, Jacob; he's one of the chosen. So, we see that God has kept his promise to Abram. And we see that God is not bound by conventions of the day. So, he takes Jacob over Esau, he chooses the younger over the older. And it's not because Jacob is such a stellar example of grace and faithfulness. It's because God chose him.

And so, we see God's grace. In fact, I think that when you read the text in the Jacob cycle, we see Esau is just represented as this gruff man who has no interest in covenantal things. But we look at Jacob and we see that he too has reprehensible features; he's a deceiver. And we see the irony in that later. He himself will be deceived by his uncle Laban. But we see God's grace working through this reprehensible man named Jacob, and we see a transformation taking place in chapter 32, when he returns from Laban, and he doesn't return empty-handed. Right? He leaves empty-handed. He's on the run, his brother Esau wants to kill him, and yet he returns with a wife, with several wives, with children, with numerous flocks, and again, it's not because of his faithfulness. I mean, his peculiar, ill-conceived ideas about animal husbandry, his roughness, we see that God, in spite of these things, works through these things, and God in his grace continues to bless Jacob, so that we see God's graciousness is not dependent on the faithfulness of Jacob. It's dependent on God's own love and his own commitment to Abraham that he will bless his family, they will become a nation, and out of that nation, all the nations of the world will be blessed.

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

As we read through Genesis 25–37, we discover that God, through a series of events, transformed Jacob's life. I have a sermon on Jacob's life, which I entitle "Transformation of a Trickster from Self-Sufficient Schemer to Dependent Worshiper." And God has to get Jacob's attention. God wants to do some great things through him, and he gives him a promise. And it's amazing, in Genesis 28 Jacob stiff-arms God. He holds God out and he says, "Well, I'm not so sure I want to cut a deal with you yet. If you bring me back safely, then you will become my God." So, that's the kind of person Jacob is. He really relies on his own wits and skills, and God has to teach him a lesson. He uses Laban to do that, because there is somebody out there who's better at scheming and deceiving than Jacob is. And Jacob eventually realizes this and comes to the point where he realizes that his future is dependent on God's blessing and God's providence, not his own schemes. And so, that whole series of events is designed to bring Jacob to that point.

Dr. Carol Kaminski

The story of Jacob is just one of those rich stories in the book of Genesis. And sometimes we can go to the book of Genesis, and we look at the patriarchs like Abraham or Isaac, Jacob, and we can go to them and look to them for... to be examples of moral behavior. We can kind of look quickly and then say, "Okay, something else is going on here. What else is going on?" So, what do we know about Jacob? You know, you see early on with the story with Jacob that God has placed a blessing upon him, a call upon him, but you see him struggling with his brother. And of course, the most pitiful scene is when his dad's old in age and he dresses up like his brother and his dad says to him, "Is that you Esau?" and he says, "It is I." And he says, "Come closer. Is it you?" And it's just a pitiful scene. And I remember the first time that I translated that passage in Hebrew, and all my sympathies were with Esau. I just thought, oh, this is just awful, and his dad's old. And so, you know, his dad blesses Jacob, and then Esau comes in and is furious and says, "Don't you have a

blessing for me?” And of course this leads to the rivalry between the two of them. But immediately after the story of Jacob, he flees, and what happens next? God comes to him in a dream and he blesses him. And I remember the first time I read that, and I thought, you’ve got to be kidding me. Why is it that God is blessing Jacob? And of course, Paul picks this up to say that Jacob wasn’t chosen because he was a good man. And so the patriarchs are under divine grace, and we see this with Jacob in that God is not choosing him based on him being good, based on him being righteous, but it is based on his sovereign hand upon him and his grace and his mercy that comes to him. And so, what actually happens in the story of Jacob... And Jacob knows the grace and mercy of God, because in the story when he, a number of years later after he’s had lots of children and wives, and then he goes to meet Esau, and Esau comes at a distance, and he’s absolutely afraid for his life. And he goes to meet Esau, and he gives him all these gifts, and he’s trying to kind of buy Esau’s favor; that’s what he says, “If I’ve found favor,” and he gives him all these gifts. Now, when Esau comes to him, he just weeps and embraces him. And Jacob says, “I have seen you as one who’s seen the face of God for you have accepted me favorably.” And so, I think one thing we want to take home from Jacob is that when God calls people, he’s not calling good people or righteous people — and this is the founder of Israel! He’s calling people like you and me, and he gives them his grace and his mercy. And what we also see with Jacob is on this journey there is one particular key moment in the journey where he’s carried these idols with him, and he goes back home and he buries his idols. And the Scripture then talks about, he doesn’t then call upon the God of Abraham and Isaac, but he calls upon “my God.” And so, I think he comes to know the God of the Old Testament, and it is beginning in his sin and in his messiness, and yet God also changes his name to Israel, that, rather than being deception, there’s a new identity that he starts to have because the God of Israel comes to him. He doesn’t come to him when he’s a good person but comes to him amidst the mess of it all, and he’s going to make a change in his life.

Question 9:

What are some practical ways we can apply the Jacob stories to our own lives today?

Rev. Dr. Cyprian K. Guchienda

Some of the practical ways we can apply Jacob’s stories in our lives today are like ... Jacob wrestling with God. You know, there’s no way any one of us can wrestle with God when we sit and think about it, because we know God is powerful; God is Creator; God is able. We are not all that. So, but we know that Jacob wrestled with God and he earned a limp. And we find ourselves wrestling with God, asking questions. When bad things happen in our lives, asking, “Where is God in this?” we wrestle with him. Or asking, “Why is God not coming through for this difficult challenge?” And this is a Christian; this is a believer. And we can see others who do not believe in God doing well. We look at those things and wrestle with God, and that

teaches us that, as human beings, we are created; we have some inadequacy in us. And that inadequacy can only be found in God. It cannot be found in anything else.

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

Well, there are many ways that we can apply the Jacob story to our own lives. I'll mention a couple, the two major ways, I think. One is that we need to trust God. When God promises us something, he will bring that to fulfillment through his providence, his intervention, and we really need to really trust God, that God is in control of our lives and leading us toward the goal that he has for us as individuals, as a church, as his people. We also need to learn from Jacob's experience that we don't accomplish things through our own wits and schemes and deceiving and cheating and self-reliance. Jacob felt as if success were dependent on his ability to, kind of, forge his way and trick other people, if necessary, and we should not be doing that as the people of God.

Dr. John Oswalt

When we think about the biblical story of Jacob, it illustrates so very well the terms and the character of all of our lives. The fundamental issue there is trust. Will we trust that God has our best interests at heart? Will we trust that he knows our needs better than we will? Or will we insist on somehow trying to meet our needs ourselves? That was Jacob's problem, and it was really not until coming to that place where he knew himself to be helpless, where he knew that unless he had the blessing of God, nothing that he had was worth anything. It was only when he came to that place that he was really able to move forward and be the kind of man that God wanted him to be. I think that's true for all of us. Every one of us has to come to that place where we surrender our needs into God's hands, where we do believe that he is for us, and knowing that, can receive from him all he wants to give us.

Dr. David T. Lamb

One of the big themes throughout Scripture is waiting. God makes Abraham wait for a son. God makes Jacob wait for a wife. And God also makes Jacob wait to get reconciled. We see the theme of waiting show up in a big way in the book of Genesis. And I think waiting is always difficult. And Jacob, as he was waiting, did not always respond faithfully. But I think it's great that his story is in Scripture, and God is still able to work through this flawed patriarch during his time of waiting. So, one of the things, when I talk to my students about this, is a lot of them are waiting for a child, maybe they're waiting to get married like Jacob, or they're waiting for something else, for a home or for a job or whatever. Waiting is a big theme. The question that God has for us is, can we trust God while we are waiting? Jacob didn't always trust him. He had that vision of this ladder connecting the heaven to the earth, with the angels coming up and down, kind of a symbol that God was somehow with him and aware of what's going on for him. So, he could hold onto that. But it's hard to wait, and I think the story of Jacob shows us how God's still looking out for his people and may sometimes make them wait for a long time, but he can still be trusted. And we can wait for him and know that he will be faithful to give us what he has promised.

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The Pentateuch

LESSON
TEN

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS



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The Pentateuch

Lesson Ten

Joseph and His Brothers

INTRODUCTION

Siblings in families with large estates often struggle with each other over who will receive the largest inheritance. When it comes time for the estate to be passed from one generation to the next, even brothers and sisters who once loved each other dearly can become so divided that only God can re-establish the bonds of love. The book of Genesis teaches us that this is how it was for the family of Israel's patriarchs, Joseph and his brothers. Their rivalry over the inheritance of their father, Jacob, became so bitter that it seemed impossible to resolve. But as we'll see in this lesson, God reconciled Joseph and his brothers and re-established their bonds of love. This resolution charted a course for the relationships amongst the twelve tribes of Israel throughout the Old Testament. And it still directs relationships among Christ's followers today.

This lesson on *the Pentateuch* is devoted to the portion of the book of Genesis that deals with "Joseph and His Brothers." We'll look in some detail at Genesis 37:2–50:26, the story of Joseph's troubled relationship with his siblings.

Before we turn to our main topic, it will help to review the basic content of the book of Genesis. In other lessons, we've seen that Genesis divides into three main parts. Each part was designed to address Moses' original Israelite audience in particular ways. The first part deals with the primeval history, found in Genesis 1:1–11:9. In this section, Moses showed the Israelites that their call to the land of Canaan was established in what God had done in the earliest periods of world history. The second part records the earlier patriarchal history in Genesis 11:10–37:1. Here, Moses addressed how the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob spoke to issues faced by the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. And the third part, the later patriarchal history, in Genesis 37:2–50:26, tells the story of Joseph and his brothers. Our lesson will focus on this last section of Genesis.

As we'll see, Moses' purpose in this part of Genesis involved a number of lessons for his original audience. But in general:

The story of Joseph and his brothers taught the tribes of Israel how to live together in harmony as they faced the conquest and settlement of the Promised Land.

Our lesson on Joseph and his brothers will divide into two main parts. First, we'll examine the structure and content of these chapters, how their literary design and subject matter go hand in hand. Second, we'll look at a number of major themes Moses emphasized for the tribes of Israel and how these themes apply to modern Christians. Let's begin by looking at the structure and content of this part of Genesis.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Everyone familiar with the story of Joseph and his brothers knows that it involves many characters, different cultural settings and a number of intricate subplots. These features are so complex that it's easy to become preoccupied with the details and lose sight of the overarching literary structure that holds it all together. But paying attention to how the structure and content of these chapters work together is especially important because the account of Joseph and his brothers is a highly unified drama.

Moses' presentation of Genesis 37:2–50:26 forms a highly integrated, five-step drama:

- The initial problem of the story, in Genesis 37:2-36, depicts patriarchal disharmony over the prospect of Joseph's rule.
- The second step, or rising action, in 38:1–41:57 focuses on Joseph's threatening rule — his rise to power in Egypt.
- The third step, in 42:1–47:12, is the turning point of the drama. It deals with the patriarchs' reconciliation and reunion in Egypt.
- The fourth step, or falling action, in 47:13-27 reports Joseph's benevolent rule in Egypt.
- And the final resolution of the drama, in 47:28–50:26, describes patriarchal harmony under Joseph's rule.

In recent decades, a number of interpreters have attempted to show that these chapters in Genesis form an extensive concentric chiasm. A chiasm is:

A literary structure in which sections before and after a centerpiece parallel or balance each other.

Most of these attempts press this outlook too far. But they do point toward a large-scale dramatic symmetry that brings coherence to the entire record of Joseph and his brothers.

It isn't difficult to see that, in general, the account begins with patriarchal disharmony, and ends with patriarchal harmony in the final resolution of the drama. The rising action of Joseph's threatening rule in Egypt balances with the falling action of Joseph's benevolent rule in Egypt. And the turning point, or hinge — the transition from disharmony and threat to benevolence and harmony — is the reconciliation and reunion that takes place in Egypt. We'll look at these episodes in the order Moses presented them. But understanding this basic dramatic symmetry will help us as we examine a number of details in the story of Joseph and his brothers.

The content of the story of Joseph and his brothers displays more literary complexity than any other portion of Genesis. It has a long roster of characters and portrays many of them as three-dimensional, changing characters. Scenes are depicted vividly. Irony, humor, and tragedy appear throughout. The narrative contains many unexpected turns of events that recollect and anticipate other events. As such, this part of Genesis would have called the original Israelite audience to consider far more than we can possibly explore in this lesson. So, for the sake of time, we'll limit ourselves to just a few comments on the content of each chapter.

PATRIARCHAL DISHARMONY (GENESIS 37:2-36)

Moses began his narrative in Genesis 37:2-36 with the initial dramatic problem of patriarchal disharmony over Joseph's future rule. This opening chapter consists of two parts that together show how disharmony in Joseph's family worsened over time. The first part, in 37:2-11, illustrates how Joseph increasingly agitated his brothers. And the second part, in verses 12-36, tells of how the brothers sold Joseph into slavery. Let's look at the way Joseph agitated his brothers.

Joseph Agitated Brothers

Moses first portrayed Joseph as a naïve young man who was favored by his father. For example, in verse 3, Jacob gave Joseph an ornate robe that drove his brothers to jealousy. Verse 4 tells us "they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him." Then, to make matters worse, in two additional vignettes, Joseph boasted about his dreams of future exaltation over his family. Because of this, in both verse 5 and verse 8, Moses wrote that Joseph's brothers "hated him all the more." And verse 11 tells us, "His brothers were jealous of him."

The causes of disharmony between Joseph and his brothers... I can pick two. One is that his father made him the most beautiful robe, and that robe, the other brothers looked at it and said, "My, I think I need to have that. It needs to be mine." And when we look at ourselves, we have disharmony even in this society because some people are living better lives and we see disharmony in others asking themselves, "Why am I not like this other person?" Even in *church* we have it. We look at somebody that is sickly and others are healthy, and we ask ourselves, "Why are we not healthy?" So, the giving of the best to Joseph when these others didn't have, caused some disharmony. Number two: the brokenness of human nature. The brothers were envious, and because his brother had a better, you know, gown than them, was more beautiful than theirs, they became envious. And we find the seed of envy in all of us. It was not only those brothers, but it's all in us. But as Christians we are called to identify it first and know that's it's a sin of envy and we can put a stop to it.

— Rev. Dr. Cyprian K. Guchienda

After presenting the patriarchal disharmony that resulted when Joseph agitated his brothers, Moses turned to the second part of 37:12-36. These verses contain a short narrative explaining how the brothers sold Joseph into slavery.

Brothers Sold Joseph

Here we see that the brothers captured Joseph, stripped him of his ornate robe, and planned to kill him. The eldest brother, Reuben, tried in vain to help Joseph escape. But in the end, it was Judah who convinced the others that they should sell Joseph into slavery rather than kill him. This episode ends with the brothers' tragic, deceitful report to Jacob that Joseph had been devoured by a wild animal. The brothers presented Jacob with Joseph's blood-stained robe, and Jacob fell into severe mourning.

Together, these two episodes introduce the dramatic problem that sets the course for the entire story of Joseph and his brothers. This was the beginning of the tragic disharmony among Israel's tribal patriarchs.

After the initiating problem of patriarchal disharmony over Joseph's future rule, Moses moved to the second step. In 38:1–41:57, Moses told of the rise of Joseph's threatening rule.

JOSEPH'S THREATENING RULE (GENESIS 38:1–41:57)

In this step, Moses employed dramatic irony by giving his audience insights that characters in the story didn't have. First, Joseph's brothers — represented here by Judah — lived in Canaan, apparently confident that they had stopped Joseph from gaining superiority over them. But, unknown to the other characters, Joseph's rule far away in Egypt was increasing. God had turned Joseph's slavery into a path toward exaltation over his family.

The focus on Joseph's threatening rule divides into two main sections. In the first place, 38:1-30 describes Judah's sin against Tamar in Canaan. Then, in 39:1–41:57, we learn of Joseph's success in Egypt. Let's look at Judah's sin in Canaan.

Judah's Sin in Canaan (Genesis 38:1-30)

Judah moved to center stage in this chapter because he, rather than Reuben, kept his brothers from killing Joseph in the preceding episode. So, this section represents the actions of Jacob's son who had the highest standing among his brothers. The episode of Judah's sin in Canaan begins in 38:1-5 with birth reports of Judah's sons. The moral tone is set in verse 2 when we learn that Judah married a Canaanite woman.

In verses 6-11 we find an account of Judah's sons and Tamar. First, Judah gave Tamar to his eldest son, Er. When Er died, Judah gave Tamar to his second son, Onan. The practice of levirate marriage, or marriage by the brother-in-law of a childless widow, was commanded in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. This practice insured an heir for the brother who had died, and protected his widow. But in verse 9, Onan refused to give Tamar a child. So, in verse 10, God took Onan's life as well. Judah feared that his third son, young Shelah, might face the same fate. So, he refused to allow him to marry Tamar. Instead, he sent Tamar back to her father in shame.

In verses 12-26 we find the account of Tamar's seduction of Judah. When Tamar realized that she was not going to be married to Shelah, she disguised herself as a prostitute and seduced Judah. She cleverly tricked Judah by keeping his seal and its cord and a staff he had given her in lieu of payment. Three months later, in verses 24-26, Judah heard that Tamar was pregnant and indignantly ordered her execution. But Tamar produced the seal, cord and staff that Judah had given her. And when Judah realized what he had done, he admitted his guilt. Listen to Genesis 38:26 where Judah said:

She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah (Genesis 38:26).

As this verse indicates, the patriarch Judah admitted that his sin was much worse than anything Tamar had done. And he was exemplary in his humble confession and repentance. As a result of this change of heart, the story of Judah's sin against Tamar has a positive ending. In contrast with the opening segment about Judah's sons by a Canaanite woman, Moses closed this section, in verses 27-30, with a birth report of Judah's sons by Tamar. Both Perez and Zerah became prominent names in the tribe of Judah.

With the events of Judah's sin in Canaan in mind, let's turn to the second section associated with Joseph's threatening rule. This section, found in Genesis 39:1–41:57, is a lengthy account of Joseph's success in Egypt.

Joseph's Success in Egypt (Genesis 39:1–41:57)

This section divides into three main segments. The first segment reports Joseph's move from Potiphar's house to prison in 39:1-23. After Joseph arrived in Egypt, he quickly received favor from Potiphar and ruled over his household. But Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce Joseph. When she failed, she accused Joseph of misconduct. Although Joseph resisted her advances, Potiphar believed his wife's false accusations. He sent Joseph to Pharaoh's prison, where Joseph quickly won the confidence of the jailor. Because this episode follows the narrative of Judah's sin with Tamar, it clearly contrasts Judah's earlier immorality with Joseph's moral purity.

When I read the story about Judah and Tamar, I almost feel like I should do a little bit of cutting and pasting, taking the story and placing it somewhere else. And yet, when you actually read the context, you realize exactly why God would have put that story after he'd already started the Joseph story. I think he does that because he wants to show the contrast between an unrighteous man and a righteous man. Joseph is willing to resist the sexual temptation of Potiphar's wife. Judah actually willingly engages in prostitution, perhaps even religious shrine prostitution. And so you see that contrast, and the fact is that God is going to bless Joseph with the

double portion of the firstborn, although he is not the firstborn, but he's the one who leads his family in a righteous way.

— Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

Second, in 40:1–41:45, Joseph moved from prison to Pharaoh's court. In this segment, Moses explained how Joseph rose to power by interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh's officials. Then later, he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams concerning seven years of plenty and seven years of famine.

In the third segment, 41:46–57, Moses summarized Joseph's rule in Pharaoh's court. In this segment, Moses reported several ways Joseph exercised authority in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. In each segment of Joseph's success, Moses made it clear that Joseph rose to power, not by his own ingenuity, but by the hand of God.

Now that we've explored the patriarchal disharmony over Joseph's future rule, and Joseph's threatening rule in Egypt, we should move to the central turning point of the story: the patriarchs' reconciliation and reunion in Egypt, recorded in Genesis 42:1–47:12.

RECONCILIATION AND REUNION (GENESIS 42:1–47:12)

This central narrative of reconciliation and reunion consists of three closely connected journeys taken by Joseph's family from Canaan to Egypt. The first journey is in Genesis 42:1–38. The second journey is found in 43:1–45:28. And the third journey can be seen in 46:1–47:12. Let's take a look at the first journey.

First Journey (Genesis 42:1–38)

The first journey is the simplest of the three accounts and can be divided into three sections. First, in 42:1–5, the brothers traveled from Canaan to Egypt because of the great famine. In this section, Jacob sent all of Joseph's brothers, except Benjamin, to purchase food in Egypt.

The second section, in 42:6–28, deals with events in Egypt when Joseph first recognized his brothers. Joseph didn't reveal his identity, but tested the character of his brothers by sending them back to Canaan to retrieve Benjamin. At first, Joseph threatened to hold all but one of them in prison until Benjamin arrived in Egypt. As a result, the brothers began to realize that their time of reckoning had come. In 42:21 they said to each other: "Surely we are being punished because of our brother." Three days later, Joseph sent all but Simeon back to retrieve Benjamin. He ordered that their bags be filled with grain *and* with the silver they had brought to purchase the grain. As the brothers traveled back, one of them discovered the silver in his bag. The brothers were afraid and exclaimed in verse 28, "What is this that God has done to us?"

The third section, in verses 29-38, reports what happened when the brothers returned to Canaan. They tried to persuade their father to send Benjamin back with them to Egypt, but Jacob refused. So, the brothers remained in Canaan.

Second Journey (Genesis 43:1–45:28)

Having looked briefly at the first journey, let's turn to the events of the second journey in Genesis 43:1–45:28. Although somewhat more complex than the first journey, the second journey also divides into three main segments. The first segment, in 43:1-14, precedes the brothers' travel to Egypt. After their supply of food was gone, Jacob finally agreed to send Benjamin along with his brothers back to Egypt.

The second segment, in 43:15–45:24, consists of lengthy depictions of events in Egypt. First, in 43:15-34, Joseph welcomed his brothers to a great feast at his house. But, he continued to keep his identity a secret. According to 43:30, Joseph was *so* moved at the sight of Benjamin that he left the room to weep in private.

In 44:1-13, Joseph further tested his brothers. He ordered his steward to fill their sacks with grain and silver and to place a silver cup in Benjamin's sack. Then Joseph sent his brothers back to Canaan. But at Joseph's behest, the steward caught up with the brothers. He "found" the silver cup in Benjamin's sack, and brought the brothers back to Joseph's house.

In verses 14-34, Judah pled for mercy from Joseph and admitted in verse 16: "God has uncovered your servants' guilt." Judah then selflessly offered to stay in Egypt himself in the place of Benjamin. Joseph was moved by Judah's humble plea. And in 45:1-15, Joseph finally revealed his identity to his brothers. Chapter 45:2 tells us, "[Joseph] wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it." Joseph explained in verse 7 that God had sent him to Egypt "to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance." He then ordered his brothers to bring their father, Jacob, to Egypt. This scene closes in verses 14-15 with a touching scene of Joseph and Benjamin weeping as they embraced each other and with Joseph kissing and talking with all of his brothers.

The middle section of the story of Joseph is about the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. He's already gone to Egypt, struggles have come up, Joseph's brothers come seeking food and relief from the famine, but in the middle of that, in chapter 45 especially, we have this magnificent image — it's magnificent, actually — it's one of the most dramatic and emotional sections of the whole book of Genesis, and that is when Joseph and his brothers finally reconcile. And what you find is that they're hugging each other and they're weeping and weeping and weeping. They weep so much in that chapter and the one just slightly before that, that even the Egyptians are wondering why all the crying is going on. And so, it's a lovely picture because there has been such disharmony among the brothers, but at that moment they are completely unified. And that unification

comes from the fact, first, that Joseph had tested his brothers and found out that they were changed people. They were not like they were in the beginning when they sought his life, when they deceived their father and those kinds of things. They were changed people, and certain ones of them, like Judah, stand out in particular as *changed* people... The reconciliation comes from the fact that these brothers have been changed and that Joseph has been changed. He's changed from this brash young man who was very prideful about his dreams and those sorts of things to one who now has mercy from a position of power. And as you see those changes taking place in those chapters, or recognize in those chapters, this scene of them crying and holding onto each other is very precious and would have obviously stuck in the minds of Israelites in the days of Moses.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Then, in 45:16-24, Pharaoh ordered Joseph to send his brothers to retrieve Jacob. And Pharaoh promised Joseph in verse 20: “the best of all Egypt will be yours.” Joseph complied and directed his brothers to continue in their newly found harmony. In verse 24 Joseph instructed them, “don’t quarrel on the way!”

In the final segment of the second journey, in 45:25-28, the brothers returned to Canaan. They told Jacob what had happened in Egypt, and Jacob agreed to return to Egypt with them.

After looking at the patriarchs’ reconciliation and reunion in the first journey and the second journey, we come to the third journey in Genesis 46:1–47:12.

Third Journey (Genesis 46:1–47:12)

The third journey divides into two main segments. First, 46:1-27 reports the brothers’ travel to Egypt again, but this time with Jacob. In verses 1-7, we learn the travel itinerary and God’s reassurance that Jacob would be blessed in Egypt. The travel sequence then closes, in 46:8-27, with a list of Jacob’s sons and grandsons who went to Egypt.

Second, just as in the first and second journeys, 46:28–47:12 provides a segment on events in Egypt. Chapter 46:28-30 deals with Jacob’s reunion with Joseph in which Judah played a leading role. And following this, in 46:31–47:12, Pharaoh welcomed Joseph’s family and ordered them to live in Goshen under Joseph’s care.

After writing of the patriarchs’ reconciliation and reunion, Moses then turned to the fourth step, or falling action, in his story. In Genesis 47:13-27, Moses told of Joseph’s benevolent rule in Egypt.

JOSEPH'S BENEVOLENT RULE (GENESIS 47:13-27)

In 47:13-26, we learn that the famine worsened over time. Joseph made food available throughout Egypt and Canaan. And he consolidated Pharaoh's power by purchasing the livestock and land of the people of Egypt and Canaan in order to feed them. In the process, he saved countless lives.

At the end of this account, in Genesis 47:27, Moses commented on how Joseph's rule benefitted Jacob and his sons. Moses wrote:

Now the Israelites settled in Egypt in the region of Goshen. They acquired property there and were fruitful and increased greatly in number (Genesis 47:27).

Following the initial patriarchal disharmony, the rise of Joseph's threatening rule, the reconciliation and reunion of the brothers, and Joseph's benevolent rule in Egypt, we come to the last step of Moses' record of Joseph and his brothers. In Genesis 47:28–50:26, Joseph's family experienced patriarchal harmony under Joseph's rule.

PATRIARCHAL HARMONY (GENESIS 47:28–50:26)

This last step resolves the opening problem of disharmony among the patriarchs. And by focusing on the harmony of Joseph's family, it establishes blessings to Israel that were particularly important to Moses' first audience.

The chapters on patriarchal harmony divide into two main sections. In the first place, in Genesis 47:28–50:14, Moses drew attention to Jacob's enduring familial arrangements established in his last days. Then, in Genesis 50:15-26, we see Joseph's enduring familial arrangements. Let's look first at Jacob's familial arrangements.

Jacob's Familial Arrangements (Genesis 47:28–50:14)

This section begins with Jacob near the time of his death. In 47:28-31, Moses explained that Jacob required Joseph's oath to bury him in Canaan. Then, in 48:1–49:28, we read of two separate meetings involving Jacob's blessings.

In the first meeting, in 48:1-22, Jacob privately blessed Joseph and his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Here, Joseph received the honor of a double inheritance, normally given to the firstborn, because Jacob determined to treat Ephraim and Manasseh as equal to their uncles. But unexpectedly, Jacob gave Ephraim, Joseph's second son, prominence over Manasseh, the firstborn.

Then in 49:1-28, after exalting Joseph and his sons privately, all of Jacob's sons received his final blessings. Jacob gathered all of his sons together, and one by one the patriarch blessed them in ways that were appropriate for how they had lived. As Jacob's final blessings, these arrangements were intended to endure for generations to come.

This section closes in Genesis 49:29–50:14, where we learn of Jacob’s death and burial. In these verses, Joseph fulfilled his father’s wishes to be buried in Canaan. Then he returned to Egypt.

The patriarchal harmony under Joseph’s rule not only includes a section on Jacob’s familial arrangements; it also incorporates Joseph’s familial arrangements in Genesis 50:15-26.

Joseph’s Familial Arrangements (Genesis 50:15-26)

This brief section divides into two short reports. In 50:15-21, Joseph reassured his brothers of his kindness toward them. Joseph’s brothers appealed to him for forgiveness, and Joseph graciously forgave.

One of the things that we see in the story of Joseph and his brothers is the power of forgiveness, the power of trusting in God's good purposes for us even when circumstances are extremely difficult for us, and we can see those who aren't in the same difficult circumstance. We might even be able accurately to say, "They put me in this circumstance." But Joseph's response to his brothers, essentially selling him into slavery, we discover, is trust and obedience toward the Lord and a fulfillment of a unique and important purpose that God had destined him for.

— Rev. Dr. Michael Walker

In Genesis 50:19-21 Joseph told his brothers:

Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children (Genesis 50:19-21).

The entire story of Joseph and his brothers closes in Genesis 50:22-26 with an oath Joseph required from his brothers. Listen to Genesis 50:25:

Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place" (Genesis 50:25).

In the record of Genesis, this oath was Joseph’s last interaction with his brothers before he died. Joseph’s brothers promised on behalf of their descendants that when God delivered Israel from Egypt, they would continue to honor Joseph by taking his bones with them for burial in the Promised Land.

Joseph's last words are these: "God will surely take care of you" — speaking to his brothers and his family basically — "and you shall carry my bones up from here." As an Egyptian ruler, it's very likely that once Joseph died he was embalmed, placed in a sarcophagus... Each time they would see this sarcophagus, they would think of the promise that was given by Joseph and by the promise that was given to the patriarchs that you will return to the land. Joseph said "Carry my bones with you; put them in the Promised Land with you." That's part of him accepting the promise of God... And so, when the Jews left Egypt, Moses took with them the bones of Joseph. Again, in those forty years it became a symbol, a visual aid, of the great promise that was given by God for the people of Israel to be in a promised land. So the bones then were finally buried at Shechem, and the principle here, I think, is very simple: the promises of God must be more real than anything else in life. God keeps his promises.

— Dr. Larry J. Waters

Up to this point in our lesson on Joseph and his brothers, we've looked at the structure and content of Moses' account. Now, we should turn to the second main topic of our lesson, the major themes of these chapters.

MAJOR THEMES

The story of Joseph and his brothers had many implications for the original audience of Genesis, far more than we can mention here. And the same is true for modern application. Still, if we look at these chapters within the setting of the original audience, certain themes move to the foreground. These major themes don't cover all the ways Joseph's story was designed to impact its original audience. Nor do they represent all of the ways we should apply them today. But these major themes give us an orientation toward some of the most crucial features of this part of Genesis.

We'll look at some of the major themes of these chapters in two ways. First, we'll make a few comments on how we may approach some shared emphases that appear in both Joseph's story and in the records of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And second, we'll look more carefully at two special emphases that are highlighted in the story of Joseph and his brothers. Let's look first at a number of shared emphases.

SHARED EMPHASES

As we've seen in other lessons on Genesis, four main themes appear in the narratives concerning the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These topics appear in the story of Joseph and his brothers as well: an emphasis on God's grace to Israel, the

requirement of Israel's loyalty to God, God's blessings to Israel, and God's blessings through Israel to others. Let's reflect for a moment on how to approach the theme of God's grace to Israel in this part of the Bible.

God's Grace to Israel

Scripture uses specific terms for divine grace, mercy, and kindness, but we rarely see these terms in Joseph's story. Nevertheless, we find the *theme* of God's grace throughout these chapters. In what we'll call "that world" of Joseph's day, God occasionally reminded Joseph and his family of his past grace, grace he had shown before their time. God also displayed his ongoing grace to Joseph and his family at every turn. And when God pointed to events in the future, he often indicated how Joseph and his family would one day receive his future grace, especially the grace of returning to the Promised Land.

But these three types of grace didn't shape just Joseph's story. Moses' wrote of God's grace in Joseph's world so his original audience could reflect on the many ways God had shown them grace in "their world."

In much the same way, as followers of Christ, we can apply the grace God showed Joseph and his family to our world as well. There are many ways to do this, but it's often helpful to think in terms of the three stages of Christ's kingdom. From our New Testament perspective, God's past grace shown to Joseph and his brothers applies to us as it was displayed in Christ's first advent, in the inauguration of his kingdom. Every time we see God's ongoing grace in the story of Joseph, we're reminded of his ongoing grace in our daily lives throughout the continuation of Christ's kingdom. And just like Joseph and his family expected God's future grace, we may hope in God's mercies at the consummation of Christ's kingdom in the new heavens and new earth.

Along with the shared emphasis of God's grace to Israel, let's look at the requirement of Israel's loyalty to God.

Israel's Loyalty to God

One of the most unusual features of Moses' narrative of that world of Joseph and his brothers is that Moses never cited verbal instructions or commands from God. Instead, Moses expected the Israelites to evaluate Joseph's loyalty to God in that world in light of the law they'd received in their world.

Now, of course, Moses knew that the patriarchs couldn't earn their salvation through loyalty to God's law. That's always been impossible. But their obedience and disobedience displayed the true condition of their hearts in each step of the story. And Moses called his audience to examine their own hearts in light of Joseph's story.

For instance, on the negative side, Moses didn't have to speak directly of God's disapproval of the brothers' plan to kill Joseph. His audience already knew that this broke the sixth commandment against murder in Exodus 20:13. Selling Joseph into slavery violated laws like Deuteronomy 24:7. The brothers broke the commandment in Exodus

20:12 to honor father and mother when they deceived Jacob. When Judah slept with Tamar, thinking she was a prostitute, he violated commandments against sexual immorality in Exodus 20:14 and other laws like Leviticus 19:29.

But on the more positive side, Moses also relied on his audience's knowledge of God's law to identify when Joseph and his brothers were loyal to God. For instance, Joseph conformed to the seventh and tenth commandments in Exodus 20:14 and 17 when he exhibited sexual morality by resisting the seduction of Potiphar's wife. Later on, in passages like Genesis 46:29-34, Joseph and his brothers honored their father in accordance with the fifth commandment in Exodus 20:12. The brothers' repentance and humility before Joseph reflected laws like Leviticus 5:5. Joseph's kindness and mercy toward his brothers was true to passages like Leviticus 19:18. So, we can see that, as Moses described disloyalty and loyalty in that world, he called attention to the disloyalty and loyalty of his original Israelite audience in their world.

As modern Christians, there are at least three main ways we should deal with loyalty and disloyalty to God in the story of Joseph. First, we should compare and contrast these examples with Jesus' perfect obedience to God, especially in the inauguration of his kingdom. Second, we should be ready to apply the moral principles of the story of Joseph to our daily lives during the continuation of Christ's kingdom. And finally, the requirement of loyalty in the story of Joseph should draw our attention to what will happen at the return of Christ in the consummation of his kingdom. At that time, all who've exercised saving faith in Christ will be fully vindicated and transformed into perfectly obedient servants of God in the new heavens and new earth.

We've looked at the shared emphases of God's grace to Israel and Israel's loyalty to God. The third emphasis shared by both Joseph's story and the earlier patriarchal history is the theme of God's blessings to Israel.

God's Blessings to Israel

In terms of "that world" of Joseph and his brothers, we should mention that God poured out his blessings sometimes in spite of the disloyalty of the patriarchs and at other times in response to their loyalty. Moses designed the theme of God's blessings to his people in that world to make his original audience aware of the countless ways God had blessed them in their world — both in spite of their disloyalty and also in response to their loyalty.

In much the same way, God's blessings in the story of Joseph and his brothers apply to our world today. Sometimes this is in spite of our disloyalty and at other times in response to our loyalty. We find connections between Joseph's story and our lives by acknowledging the blessings God poured out on his people in the inauguration of Christ's kingdom. We also recognize how he blesses us now in the continuation of Christ's kingdom. And we look forward to how God will bless us at the consummation of Christ's kingdom.

Along with the shared emphases of God's grace to Israel, Israel's loyalty to God, and God's blessings to Israel, the story of Joseph also shares an emphasis on God's blessings *through* Israel to others.

God's Blessings through Israel

Passages like Genesis 12:3, 22:18, and 26:4 tell us that God blessed Israel and ordained Abraham and his descendants to spread his kingdom and its blessings to all nations. This theme appears in that world of Joseph primarily in the ways Joseph's rule in Egypt led to blessings for others. For example, Joseph was a blessing to Potiphar in Genesis 39:5. He was a blessing to the jailor in Pharaoh's prison in 39:22. And Joseph blessed Pharaoh when he interpreted Pharaoh's dream in 41:25. But the greatest blessings to others came at the height of Joseph's power when he blessed the Egyptians and many nations. As Genesis 41:56-57 reports:

When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians ... And all the countries came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the world (Genesis 41:56-57).

It's easy to see how the theme of Israel's blessings to others applied to "their world" of Moses' original audience. First, in hearing Joseph's story, the Israelites would have been encouraged to know that their patriarchs had blessed others already. They also would have realized that God had called them to bring God's blessings to others in their own day. And they would have looked forward to the future when their descendants would spread God's blessings to the entire world.

As you might expect, this theme also applies to us in our world. Christ granted blessings to the world in the inauguration of his kingdom. He blesses the world through the church during the continuation of his kingdom. And one day, he will bless every tribe and nation of the world at the consummation of his kingdom in the new creation.

SPECIAL EMPHASES

As we've explored the major themes in the story of Joseph, we've mentioned some of the shared emphases between Joseph's story and the rest of the patriarchal history in Genesis. Now we should focus on two special emphases found distinctly in Joseph's story. Earlier in this lesson we proposed that:

The story of Joseph and his brothers taught the tribes of Israel how to live together in harmony as they faced the conquest and settlement of the Promised Land.

As we've seen, much of this part of Genesis has to do with the disharmony and harmony between Joseph and his brothers. And Joseph and his brothers were the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. So, these interactions were connected directly with the interactions among the tribes of Israel in Moses' day. Listen to Joseph's last words in Genesis 50:24-25 where this connection moves to the foreground:

Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” And Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, “God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place” (Genesis 50:24-25).

It would be difficult to overemphasize the connection that this passage made between that world, of Joseph’s day, and their world, of Moses’ original audience. Moses closed the story of Joseph and his brothers with Joseph’s explicit anticipation of what was happening in the lives of the original audience of Genesis — their entry into the Promised Land.

There are many ways to sum up the implications of this connection between Joseph’s last words and the experiences of the original audience. But for our purposes, we’ll look at just two special emphases. First, we’ll see how the story of Joseph and his brothers was designed to promote national unity among the tribes of Israel in Moses’ day. And second, we’ll see how his words acknowledged the national diversity God had ordained among the tribes of Israel. Let’s look first at the theme of national unity.

National Unity

To see the importance of the theme of national unity, we need to point out that the story of Joseph and his family departs from a pattern that appears time and again in Genesis. We may call this pattern “exclusive succession.” By exclusive succession we mean the passing of God’s special favor over time through one main figure or patriarch.

Think about it this way: In the primeval history of Genesis 1:1–11:9, God first ordained that Adam and his descendants would fill and rule over the whole world. They were to spread God’s glorious kingdom throughout the earth. But with the introduction of sin, this promise passed exclusively to Seth and not to Cain. God’s special favor then passed through the line of Seth’s descendants until God confirmed his covenant exclusively with Noah. Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. But God’s promises were passed down exclusively through Shem’s lineage. And at the end of the primeval history, Shem’s descendant, Abraham, was the exclusive heir of God’s promises.

The earlier patriarchal history in Genesis 11:10–37:1 continues this pattern of exclusive succession. Abraham’s promises were passed only to Isaac instead of Ishmael and Abraham’s other sons. And God’s promises to Isaac were passed down exclusively to Jacob instead of Esau.

Now, as vital as this pattern of exclusive succession was in the first 36 chapters of Genesis, it comes to an abrupt end with the story of Joseph and his brothers. In this part of Genesis, Moses stressed “inclusive succession.” He believed that the special favor of God passed from Jacob to all twelve of his sons, not to just one. When Jacob died, all twelve of his sons and their descendants, the twelve tribes of Israel, shared jointly in

Jacob's inheritance of the Promised Land. And this inclusive distribution of Jacob's inheritance to all of his sons called Moses' Israelite audience to national unity.

As we read through the story of Jacob and then Joseph and his brother Judah, we realize there's a lot of turmoil in this family, a lot of conflict, jealousy, strife, and God does not want his covenant community to be living this way. And so the story becomes a paradigm, I think, for how God is working in the covenant community to bring about unity, as Joseph and Judah end up unified, not in conflict anymore. This is a good example for the people later. Joseph and Judah are two of the major tribes in Israel. It becomes a great example for them of the kind of unity that God wants to see in the covenant community and is trying to produce.

— Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

As we saw earlier, the story of Joseph and his brothers began with disharmony caused by the brothers' sins against each other. But it ended with harmony among the brothers. In this way, Moses' narrative made it clear to everyone following him that God had called the tribes of Israel to seek national unity. As Joseph's story illustrated, all Israel shared together in the inheritance of the Promised Land that God had given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

It's no wonder, then, that Moses addressed unity among the tribes of Israel in other places. For instance, in Exodus 19:8, he stressed that all of the Israelites agreed unanimously to enter into covenant with God at Mount Sinai. In Numbers 32 and Joshua 1:12-18, both Moses and Joshua insisted that the tribes should fight together in the land of Canaan before any of them separated from each other. Moses also gathered all of the tribes together for covenant renewal in Deuteronomy 29:2.

And beyond this, Israel's national unity continued to be emphasized by later Old Testament authors. Despite the failures of David and Solomon, the period of the united monarchy was considered Israel's golden age. The division of the nation into the northern and southern kingdoms fell far short of God's ideal for his people. Later on, Israel's prophets promised that the tribes would be reunited after the exile. And books like Chronicles insisted that representatives of every tribe must settle in the Promised Land after the exile.

Moses' emphasis on unity among the twelve tribal patriarchs in that world of Joseph and his brothers promoted national unity among the tribes of Israel in their world. This emphasis also points toward one of the main ways the story of Joseph and his brothers should be applied to our modern world. Just as the tribes of Israel shared a common inheritance, all followers of Christ everywhere in the world share a common inheritance in Christ. Jesus established this unity in the inauguration of his kingdom. We must pursue this unity throughout the continuation of Christ's kingdom. And we will one day delight in the perfect unity and harmony among God's people at the consummation of Christ's kingdom. Listen to Ephesians 4:3-6, where Paul said:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to one hope when you were called — one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:3-6).

Notice the logic of this passage. Paul called followers of Christ to “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit.” Like the shared inheritance among Israel’s tribes, we have so much in common: one body, one Holy Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God and Father.

The story of Joseph and his brothers gives followers of Christ today many opportunities to reflect on the disharmony that often comes between us. And it provides a great deal of practical guidance as we devote ourselves to the unity of God’s people throughout the world.

Joseph’s story encouraged national unity among the Israelites because Joseph was a person that was full of forgiveness. And forgiveness is the only uniting factor that we have, not only for Israelites, for us as Christians, for families, for the life that we live in this world. Joseph was mistreated so much by his brothers, but when they were in trouble, he saved them... And when we look at Joseph’s story and how he forgave, he forgave something that was so huge. They wanted him dead. They did not want him alive. They did not want to meet him any other time. But Joseph did not want to do harm to them. He had the power, he had the leverage to do that, but he became godly and became maturer in faith than them and included them. And that can be repeated, and it can be replicated in Israel among the twelve tribes, it can be replicated in us, in our own families, in our churches, and it can be replicated in society.

— Rev. Dr. Cyprian K. Guchienda

Now, as valuable as it is to realize that Moses’ special emphases promoted Israel’s national unity, it’s also important to realize why Moses needed to do this. In brief, Moses stressed the need for unity because God had also ordained national diversity for his people.

National Diversity

Put simply, all of the tribal patriarchs were Jacob’s heirs, but this didn’t mean that they were all treated in precisely the same. On the contrary, the rest of the Old Testament makes it clear that God gave the tribes of Israel different privileges and responsibilities. And Moses stressed the need for harmony among the tribes of Israel for one primary

reason: the unity of Israel could be maintained only as the Israelites acknowledged that God *himself* had ordained their diverse tribal privileges and responsibilities.

Like the theme of unity, the theme of diversity weaves its way through every step of the story of Joseph and his brothers. But it's particularly prominent in Genesis 47:28–49:33. In these chapters, Jacob distributed his inheritance to all twelve of his sons, but he also established enduring differences among them and their descendants.

In these chapters, Moses promoted the national diversity of Israel by differentiating all of Jacob's sons. However, for our purposes, we'll look at just two: Judah and his descendants and, of course, Joseph and his descendants. Let's consider first the honor given to Judah and his descendants.

Judah and Descendants. Moses moved the patriarch Judah to center stage several times in these chapters to confirm the prominence God had ordained for Judah and his tribe. Judah first appears in Genesis 37:12-36 when the brothers attempted to kill Joseph. In verses 26-27 Judah stood out from among his brothers and successfully intervened on Joseph's behalf. Judah affirmed the harmony that should have characterized the brothers by reminding them in verse 27 that "[Joseph] is our brother, our own flesh and blood." And we see here that Judah's leadership was acknowledged when his brothers agreed to his plan.

Judah appears again in 38:1-30 when Moses recounted the story of Judah's sin in Canaan. This episode contrasts Judah's immorality with Joseph's integrity in Potiphar's house. But, in 38:26, Moses revealed Judah's humble confession when Judah admitted, "[Tamar] is more righteous than I." It's clear that God accepted Judah's repentance because God then blessed Judah with twin sons, Perez and Zerah.

Moses drew attention to Judah's leadership again during the patriarchs' second journey to Egypt in 44:14-34. When Benjamin was accused of having stolen a silver cup, Judah stepped forward in Joseph's presence and pled for mercy. He spoke with humility, calling himself and his brothers Joseph's "servants." He expressed repentance over what he and his brothers had done by confessing that "God has uncovered your servants' guilt." He honored his father by noting "the misery that would come upon [his] father" if Benjamin did not return to Canaan. And he courageously offered to remain in Egypt "in place of the boy."

And finally, in 49:1-28, Judah moved to the foreground during Jacob's final blessings. In verses 8-12, Jacob declared that Judah and his tribe would be exalted to an unrivaled position of leadership. And the tribe of Judah would one day become the royal tribe of Israel. Listen to Jacob's words in Genesis 49:8-10:

Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down to you... The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his (Genesis 49:8-10).

Notice here that Judah's "brothers will praise [him]." He will place his hand "on the neck of [his] enemies," meaning that he will overcome everyone who opposes him. And Judah's "father's sons" — his brothers — "will bow down to [him]." True to his

earlier characterizations, Moses indicated that the tribe of Judah would have authority over the other tribes of Israel.

It's important to note that "the scepter" and "the ruler's staff," symbols of royalty, will be held by a descendant of Judah. Judah's royal family will continue to rule "until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his."

Genesis 49:10 gives us the first explicit reference in Scripture to the fact that a descendant of Judah will become the king over the whole world. This is a clear reference to the Messiah of David's house. And this future king will fulfill the promise of Genesis 12:3 where God told Abraham, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Through this king, God's kingdom will reach the entire globe. And "the obedience of the nations" will be given to this great king from Judah.

It isn't difficult to understand why Moses emphasized the exaltation of Judah in that world for his original audience in their world. Judah wasn't the first son of Jacob, and ordinarily he wouldn't have had such prominence. So, while Moses wrote about Joseph and his brothers to promote national unity, he also expected them to maintain this unity in light of the fact that God had exalted the tribe of Judah in this way.

There are also many implications of Judah's exaltation for modern followers of Christ in our world. But at the heart of it all is the fact that God promised a supreme king from Judah's tribe. And this promise is fulfilled in the perfectly righteous son of David, Jesus, the King of the universe. Jesus took his throne in heaven at the inauguration of his kingdom. He reigns throughout the continuation of his kingdom until all his enemies are put under his feet. And at the consummation of his kingdom, he will reign forever over the new creation.

Having seen how Moses emphasized national diversity within Israel by focusing on Judah and his descendants, let's turn to the obvious prominence of Joseph and his descendants in this part of Genesis.

Joseph and Descendants. As we've seen, Joseph is the main character of Genesis 37:2–50:26. But, unlike his brothers, Joseph is highly idealized in these chapters. In fact, the only time Moses hinted at a flaw in Joseph's character was in the opening episode. In 37:2-11 we learn that Joseph agitated his brothers. He brought his father bad reports about them and boasted to them about his dreams of the future. But even this one negative feature is subtle. And Moses minimized it in verse 2 by mentioning that Joseph was "only seventeen."

Apart from this hint of imperfection, the portrait of Joseph is entirely positive. Joseph served Potiphar faithfully. He resisted Potiphar's wife. He was without flaw in his service to Pharaoh. He wisely tested his brothers when they came to him. He was tenderhearted toward them even after the evil they had done to him. He showed love for his father and for Benjamin. He blessed many nations as the leader of Egypt. In these and many other ways, Moses painted Joseph just as Jacob described him in Genesis 49:26. Joseph was "the prince among his brothers."

Now realistically, we all know from common experience that Joseph must have sinned many times in his life. This has been true for every person in every age, except for Jesus. So, why did Moses idealize Joseph in this way? What was his purpose? The answer lies in the fact that God had given Joseph and his descendants special prominence among the tribes of Israel.

The prominence of Joseph and his descendants appears first in the special arrangements made for Joseph's sons in Genesis 48:1-22. In these verses, Jacob blessed Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh as if they were his own sons. According to 1 Chronicles 5:1, Reuben had lost his status as firstborn because he had committed incest. So, when Jacob adopted Ephraim and Manasseh as his own, it meant that Joseph received the double portion as Jacob's firstborn.

One of the most fascinating segments of this arrangement appears in 48:13-20 where Jacob blessed Ephraim over Manasseh. Joseph carefully set his sons before Jacob so that Jacob's right hand, the hand of greater blessing, would rest on Manasseh's head. Then Jacob's left hand, the hand of lesser blessing, would fall on Ephraim's head. This arrangement seemed appropriate because Manasseh was Joseph's firstborn son. But without explanation, Jacob crossed his hands as he reached out so that his left hand went to Manasseh and his right hand went to Ephraim. Joseph was displeased with this and tried to move Jacob's hands to favor Manasseh. But listen to what happened next in Genesis 48:19:

His father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. [Manasseh] too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother [Ephraim] will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations" (Genesis 48:19).

Or as it may be put, "a whole nation in themselves." Passages like Numbers 2:18-21 and Deuteronomy 33:17 indicate that Ephraim did become more numerous and prominent than Manasseh. In fact, Ephraim's dominance was so great that later, during the period of the divided monarchy, the entire nation of northern Israel was often called "Ephraim."

Now, all of this may seem irrelevant to modern followers of Christ. But the unexpected prominence given to Ephraim in that world of Joseph and his brothers pointed to a God-ordained arrangement that was particularly important to Moses' first audience in their world. As Moses wrote the book of Genesis, he was about to hand the leadership of the nation over to Joshua, his protégé. But Joshua was not from the tribe of Levi like Moses and Aaron. He was not from the royal tribe of Judah. No, Joshua was from the tribe of Ephraim, the tribe that God had blessed with prominence over all others. In effect, Moses highlighted Ephraim in this account to validate his choice of successor. It was only after Joshua's death that the tribe of Judah rose to distinction. Joshua, the Ephraimite, would lead the nation into the Promised Land.

As modern followers of Christ, this dimension of the story of Joseph and his brothers calls us to acknowledge the diverse blessings and roles that God has ordained in our world. In the inauguration of his kingdom, Jesus blessed his people with a variety of gifts. He gave some as apostles, prophets, teachers, and the like. He called different people to different sorts of duties and privileges. Christ established this diversity, not to fragment his people, but to bind them to each other. And throughout the continuation of Christ's kingdom, the Holy Spirit pours out his gifts as he wishes. And even at the consummation, we'll see diversity in the ways that God honors those who've followed Christ. As we apply the story of Joseph and his brothers to our world, we must acknowledge and value the variety God has ordained among his people in every age.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on Joseph and his brothers, we've looked at the structure and content of the last major division of Genesis. And we've seen how Moses used these chapters to promote major themes, including those that appear in earlier sections of Genesis, and Moses' special emphases in these chapters on the unity and diversity of the nation of Israel.

The story of Joseph and his brothers reveals how difficult it was for Israel's patriarchs to live at peace with each other. But in the end, God established enduring bonds of love among them. This story of disharmony, reconciliation, and harmony was originally written to call the twelve tribes of Israel to repentance and unity as the people of God in their day. And it calls us today to resist division and to promote the bonds of love that exist among us as followers of Christ. As the body of Christ, we are to share in Christ's inheritance. And the story of Joseph and his brothers offers indispensable guidance for how we are to devote ourselves to the unity of God's people today for the sake of his glorious kingdom throughout the world.

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The Pentateuch

LESSON
TEN

Joseph and His Brothers Faculty Forum



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The Pentateuch

Lesson Ten: Joseph and His Brothers

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer
Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.
Dr. Brandon D. Crowe
Prof. Thomas Egger
Rev. Michael J. Glodo
Dr. Douglas Gropp

Dr. Craig S. Keener
Dr. David T. Lamb
Dr. John Oswalt
Dr. Tom Petter
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.
Dr. Scott Redd

Dr. Douglas Stuart
Dr. David Talley
Rev. Dr. Michael Walker
Dr. Larry J. Waters

Question 1:

**Why is it important for evangelicals to become familiar with critical
How is the story of Joseph organized in Genesis 37– 50?**

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

When we take a look at the broader literary structure of the story of Joseph, it's actually quite different from the rest of the book of Genesis. When you think about, say, the section on Abraham, you get a very strong sense that these are individual episodes but that the episodes only fit together very loosely; same thing with the story of Jacob. But by the time you come to the story of Joseph, what we find is what many people call a "novella," actually a short story... And what's wonderful about this is that this story rises and falls just like you would imagine most stories do. It begins with some kind of initial problem in ... the disharmony among the brothers, but then that disharmony is resolved at the end of the story in chapters 47–50 where the brothers are harmonious together. It's really lovely to see that that creates bookends then on this entire novella, this entire short story given over to Joseph. As you move forward in that you get a sort of rising action where things become a little more complicated in chapter 38–41 because this is where Joseph is rising to power, but it creates threats for the brothers. The brothers are not really happy about this. I mean, Joseph's rise to power in Egypt is going to threaten them... But then when you come to the end of the story, the next to the last section of the story in chapter 47, what you have is Joseph ruling, but in this case while he's ruling in Egypt, it's to the benefit of his brothers. So, you can see the contrast — the beginning and end and then these middle sections as well. And then in the very center of the story you have this very dramatic time, this poignant moment when Joseph and his brothers are actually reconciled in chapters 42–47. It's complicated in the sense that Joseph keeps testing them to see what kinds of people they are, but at the same time it ends up with reconciliation. So, there's this rise of tension and a turning point in the center and a flow down to the resolution of that tension, and that creates a unified story throughout all of these chapters that focus on Joseph and his brothers.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

One of the beautiful things about the Joseph story is how, in a brilliant literary way, it's interwoven, in a sense, with the Moses story and sets up for the Moses story, which again, is a reason I think that the stories in the Pentateuch belong together, because Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers, whereas Moses, his family are slaves and they see to making sure that he's rescued. Joseph ends up being exalted as vizier over Egypt, but Moses, who is in a high position in Egypt, ends up identifying with the slaves. Joseph ends up marrying the daughter of the priest of On. Moses ends up marrying the daughter of the priest of Midian. Moses finds refuge among the Midianites. It's the Midianites who sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt. And you see these contrasts between what God used to get Israel to Egypt and what God used to get Israel out of Egypt; even the economy being built up through Joseph, and the plagues devastating the economy through Moses, even sometimes the small details like Joseph gets the title of being a father to Pharaoh, whereas Moses is a son to Pharaoh's daughter. And one thing, I think, that illustrates to us is that God works in different ways with different people and in different times, and we should be alright with that. We don't have to look at some model and say we have to be like that. God uses us in different ways, and that's good.

Question 2:**Why did Moses interrupt the Joseph story with the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38?****Dr. David T. Lamb**

As you're reading through the story of Joseph in Genesis, you find out at the end of chapter 37 that Joseph has been sold by his brothers into slavery. Chapter 38, we have the story of Judah, one of Joseph's brothers, and Tamar. It's a little bit of an interruption to the story. It's kind of strange... When we get to Genesis 39, we find out that Joseph's now a slave in Egypt. His master Potiphar has a wife. Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce Joseph. This test of sexual temptation Joseph passes; he does not succumb to the wiles of Potiphar's wife. As we go back, we see that Joseph's brother, Judah, has a similar sexual temptation test and he fails. Judah's wife has just died, and he encounters a prostitute who he ends up sleeping with. Now, we find out later that Judah's daughter-in-law, Tamar, has become pregnant. Judah says, "Let's kill her." Judah's daughter-in-law, Tamar, decides to send some precious things that were given to her as collateral because, as the story turns out, Tamar was the prostitute that Judah had slept with. When Judah realizes that he was the father of this child, he says, "Tamar is more righteous than I." It's an amazing statement. Previously in the story, Judah has not done anything right. The next thing Judah does in the story is he basically sacrifices himself for his younger brother, Benjamin, when Joseph has orchestrated a scenario to put Benjamin, to keep Benjamin as a slave. It's an amazing thing. What happened? He failed the sexual temptation test, but he somehow learned something about piety, ironically, from his daughter-in-law who was dressed up as a prostitute. As we take this story into the New Testament, we find

out that the very first woman mentioned in the New Testament — it's not Eve, and it's not Sarah or Rebekah — it's Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah. And I think it tells us something about the gospel, how God is at work in fallen people. And who is the tribe that Jesus came from? Well, that's Judah. David comes from the tribe of Judah. Jesus comes from the tribe of Judah. God is at work in fallen people. And I think it's an amazing story. Judah failed the test, but he was able to learn a lesson from it, and we see God's grace in the midst of that anyway.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

The story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 is very carefully arranged. First of all, it creates a lot of suspense — I mean, you leave Joseph off, he's become a slave in Egypt — but, it also serves another purpose. I think it challenges a double standard, because in Genesis 38 Judah gives way to sexual sin. In Genesis 39, Joseph resists sexual sin. And so you have a contrast that shows that, contrary to what you might expect in ancient Near Eastern culture, God expects men to behave sexually pure just as he expects women to behave in a sexually pure way. But there's even more than that when you look at the story as a whole, because in Genesis 37, the brother who takes the lead in selling Joseph into slavery is Judah. And eventually Judah's behavior catches up with him; his sin finds him out, so that in Genesis 38 he's still not behaving correctly. His first son sins, and the Lord strikes him dead. And of course, some people have said, well, you know, this is an immoral filthy story, but actually it's not. There are some really important morals there, one of which right up front is, don't do evil in the sight of the Lord like Ur did. Then Onan is supposed to raise up a seed for his brother, and the point of that is that in that culture it was expected that if one brother dies without having children, without having an heir, well, the wife is still supposed to be provided for, and there's supposed to be children who are supposed to be the heir, so the brother is supposed to go in and raise up a seed for him. But the eldest was to get the double portion, twice as much as any other brother, and as long as Ur has no descendants, then Onan gets the double portion. So, Onan is greedy and he spills his seed on the ground so that there won't be an heir. And he doesn't care about his brother's honor, he doesn't care about the custom, he doesn't care about caring for his sister-in-law, because she's going to be provided for if there's an heir. So, he spills his seed on the ground; he does evil in God's sight. God strikes him. Well, now Judah is afraid, so Judah says, okay, well, I 'm not going to give my youngest. But he doesn't even tell Tamar. He just sends her back to her father's house, and she's waiting for years until the youngest, Shelah, grows up. And so, finally, she realizes she's been tricked because Shelah is grown up. She disguises herself as a prostitute. Judah stops, and he doesn't have any cash with him, so to speak. He ends up giving her his staff and his signet ring, and then she disappears with them. And when she gets pregnant, he says, bring her out and let her be burned; she sends the staff and the signet ring. He's exposed as the one who got her pregnant, and he said, "She's more righteous than I." She doesn't get burned. But the point is that something happened to Judah at that point. It's not that Tamar did right but that Judah did worse, because he was not only a sinner, he was a hypocrite too. And later Judah acts differently. Joseph has received from Pharaoh his signet ring. The robe that they took from Joseph, well, now he's given a new robe by Pharaoh; he's exalted

as vizier over Egypt. But when Joseph is testing his brothers to find out if they've changed, and he says he's going to take Benjamin as a slave, Judah, the very one who sold Joseph into slavery says, "No, let me be the slave in his place." Judah has changed. Genesis 38 is very important because it shows that sometimes, through hardships or shame or other things, God gets our attention and turns us around. And it's a story about repentance and family reconciliation.

Dr. Brandon D. Crowe

As you read through Genesis, you come across sometimes some odd stories, and one of those is the story of Judah and Tamar, which occurs right next to the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. And, although this story could lead to some questions that may pique our curiosity, we should be assured that this story is not there simply to pique our curiosity, but it's there to tell us something about God's unfolding plan of redemption. What's interesting about this story is Judah, in his encounter with Tamar, is shown to be in the wrong, whereas Tamar is shown to be in the right. She does something that appears to be deceptive, yet after this encounter, Judah identifies Tamar as righteous. And we might ask, why would this odd encounter between Judah and Tamar lead to this assessment? And the reason appears to be, because of Tamar's interest in continuing the promise that was given to Abraham. She was more righteous than Judah in this context because she was interested in continuing the family line of Judah, which turns out to be the most important line for the Messiah from God's people, tracing back to Abraham. And so, when we come to the New Testament, we actually see that Tamar is in the genealogy of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, and we can trace this back to this odd encounter in the middle of Genesis. And what this shows us is that God had been working out his plan already in Genesis to establish the line of the Messiah through the tribe of Judah, and this scene in the middle of Genesis shows us that God already had that purpose in mind, and he was ensuring that his plan was being worked out, and he used the efforts of Tamar to this end.

Question 3:

What were the causes of disharmony between Joseph and his brothers?

Dr. David T. Lamb

When I teach the story of Joseph, we always have an interesting discussion about what was behind this tension. I mean, if you think you have bad siblings, let's assume that, let's *hope* that your siblings have never sold you into slavery. I mean, Joseph had sibling problems. So, when we talk about this, we see basically four causes of the tension between Joseph and his brothers. In Genesis 37 Joseph has these amazing dreams, and he's so excited to tell his brothers about them and how, in his dreams, the equivalence of his brothers all end up bowing down to him. And the students always say, "Well, Joseph seems kind of like a spoiled brat." And we've got to say Joseph is one of the major factors contributing to the tension. But one of the problems is Joseph's father, Jacob, has given Joseph this special coat, which has either got bright

colors or long sleeves, depending on which translation you follow, but it's a special coat. He practices favoritism, which you would think Jacob would know the problems with that because he experienced that from his own parents. But Jacob is contributing to the problem. And then obviously Joseph's brothers are contributing to the problem because they could have just shrugged off their, maybe, arrogant or spoiled younger brother and said, "Well, that's just Joseph." But they get angry, and they decide they want to kill him. But then the fourth character, which I always find as a little bit interesting, is who gave Joseph these dreams? Well, God ultimately was behind this. So Joseph, Jacob, Joseph's brothers, and ultimately God. And as we get to the end of Joseph's story in Genesis 50, we realize Joseph sees the sovereign hand of God in his whole tragic, amazing story. And we see this back in Genesis 37; God is ultimately behind it. As we encounter it also in Genesis 50, God is ultimately behind this.

Dr. Scott Redd

The causes of disharmony between Joseph and his brothers relate to very understandable circumstances. Here you have a wealthy father who is approaching older age, and his sons are mindful of that and mindful of his inheritance and how it will be divided up amongst the sons. Of course, in the ancient Near Eastern tradition, the oldest son would get the greater portion of the inheritance. But as we see in the story of Joseph, he actually is the one who is receiving the most favor from his father, and so jealousy arises amongst all of the brothers. Now, Joseph doesn't help his case very much in the way in which he blithely reports to them his visions of victory and success over them, and so of course that jealousy is heightened because of the favor that, at least, he seems to be shown, not merely by his father, but by God through these possibly prophetic dreams. So, the disharmony that we see develop amongst the brothers is quite understandable, and yet it also sets the stage for what we're going to see is a wonderful story of reconciliation that will be a model for God's people in the years to come.

Dr. John Oswalt

When we look at the Joseph narrative, we see the confirmation of a statement made that there are no functional families in the Bible, they're all dysfunctional! And certainly there is some truth in that comment. The disharmony between Joseph and his brothers begins, first of all, in parental favoritism. You would think that Jacob would have learned the problems with parental favoritism because of his father and mother playing off him and his brother against each other. But the truth is, poor parenting often breeds poor parenting, and so here we have Jacob clearly favoring his eleventh son over all the others, and he clearly set up Joseph in a rather tragic situation. But there's another factor, and that is Joseph's lack of wisdom. He received those two amazing dreams, and had he been more than seventeen, maybe he would have kept his mouth shut about that, but instead he goes out and says, "Hey, guys, what do you think those dreams mean?" As if there was any question. And we're told by the Scripture, "and his brothers hated him." Well, their hatred is not justified. Hatred is never justified. On the other hand, it's understandable. So, both from Jacob's side and his favoritism and from Joseph's side in his lack of wisdom, the situation is set up.

Question 4:**What should the tribes of Israel have learned from the story of reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers?****Dr. Scott Redd**

The reconciliation that we see take place between Joseph and his brothers provided a model of hope for the people of Israel as they were coming out of slavery, as they were anticipating their conquest in the land, and as, in the meantime, they're wandering in the wilderness as one people. Here we see brothers, who are terribly divided and terribly at war with one another, not only being reconciled but celebrating one another at the end of the story, and being able to share in their father's inheritance as one reconciled family. Likewise, the Israelites coming out of Egypt might have been concerned about the inheritance they were to receive in the Promised Land. How would the land be distributed? Who would receive the best portion? And so, you can imagine that there would be a diversity of opinion as to who should receive the best of the father's inheritance, and it's possible, we know from the biblical account that tensions did arise. And yet, what we see in the story of Joseph is that, while God's people are divided by these tribes, tribes that have their own unique gifts and responsibilities, they should also be reconciled as one family, one family under God, a covenant people.

Dr. John Oswalt

Genesis 50 is surely one of the most poignant chapters in the whole Bible as we see the interrelationship of Joseph and his brothers. And when we think about why Moses would have included that, and why he included it in that way, I think it's clear that there are lessons there for the tribes of Israel. The brothers, when their father dies, assume that Joseph is now going to take revenge; they're certain of it. And there's a degree in which that is projection. They're sort of saying, "Well, that's what we would do. We would get even if we had the chance, so obviously he's going to do that." And I don't think they are prepared for the degree in which Joseph's relationship with God had changed his whole perspective. And his amazing statement, "Am I in the place of God?" I don't have to get revenge on you guys. My life was never in your hands. My life was always in God's hands. Yeah, you were agents in it all, and you had bad motives in it all, but your bad motives were not the thing that really ran the program. And I think Moses is saying to them, and to us, that it's possible for us to have that altered focus where we no longer see the other person as the enemy that we have to get revenge on, but that we can truly believe what Paul says in the New Testament, "'Vengeance is mine' . . . says the Lord." If we have really placed our lives in God's hands, then we don't need to get our own back because we can trust God; he's going to take care of us. And, I think, had that idea ever prevailed among the tribes of Israel, you wouldn't have had the struggles between Judah and all Israel that begins to emerge almost immediately during the time of Joshua and continues on and on and on. It's always the assuming of bad motives. It's always the necessity, "I gotta get my own back," and never coming to the place of saying, "I'm not in the place of God. I'm in God's hands and I can trust him."

Dr. Tom Petter

There are a lot of compelling stories in the Pentateuch, but the Joseph story is, to me, it's got to take the prize just by virtue of the fact that it's the longest of the narratives in Genesis. I mean, of all the patriarchs, Joseph gets a big chunk of the parchment, as it were, of the space. And the Joseph story is one of, of course, strife between brothers — "been there, done that" — and by the time you hit Genesis 37, you've seen it over and over again: the brothers who don't get along, and a little brother who gets the inheritance at the expense of the older brother. And now, we're turning up the notch quite a bit because it's way down... you've got twelve brothers here, and almost down to the last one, this guy has these dreams, and he says, "I'm going to rule over you." And of course that speaks to Israel, to the audience later on because now they're forming their identity as tribal groupings. It's no longer the brothers, it's a full-on... It went from debate of the house of the father, to the clan, the *mishpachah* or "the family," now it's a tribe, right? And so there's a lot of teaching going on here, looking back at the story of Joseph... All the injustices of Joseph's life fit into a scheme so that Joseph becomes the savior of his brothers. And without Joseph saving the brothers, they all die, there is no line of Judah, there is no Jesus, there is no David. He is the savior of Israel, of the rest of his brothers. And so, you come to the end of the story, and the brothers finally realize who Joseph is, and Joseph has this magnanimous response to them: "Yeah, you were a bunch of crooks to me. You absolutely were. But God..." And he elevates the game and he says, "You meant it for evil, but God is using it for good. Look at where we are now." And I think for Moses' audience, when tribal warfare is the name of the game — it's the "M.O.," *modus operandi* — when you think of that, what Moses is trying to teach by giving this story to the people is, if Joseph, one of your ancestors, was able to forgive his brothers, you can certainly overlook the tribal disputes that are sure to come among yourselves. And unfortunately, though, the call was not heeded. You read in the book of Judges where you're supposed to have this tribal coalition... If one nation is in trouble, every other nation has to go help. Well, in Judges 5 there is a big fight with the Canaanites, and they need every hand on deck, as it were, and you've got Reuben doesn't show up; you've got a whole bunch of Judah; you've got a whole bunch of them that don't answer the call. And so it's very sad. So, the deductive, the teaching dimension of the Pentateuch, especially in Genesis, is lost on the early Israelite tribes in the land. But it's not lost in the whole picture of redemption because Joseph becomes a savior figure, right? He becomes the savior that puts himself through sufferings in order to save his brothers. And of course, this will be fulfilled in the suffering servant who comes to save us, those who were not worthy to be saved, right? They didn't deserve to be saved, the brothers of Joseph, and neither do we, because while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Question 5:

How would Joseph's last words have motivated the Israelites to enter the Promised Land and possess it?

Prof. Thomas Egger

The book of Genesis ends with a prediction, you might say. It's Joseph speaking to his brothers and he's looking ahead. There they are in Egypt, and if you think about how that story has unfolded — the Joseph story, where Joseph has risen to power and great prominence and fame, renown in Egypt, he has great favor with the pharaoh there, and he and his broader family receive this choice land, the land of Goshen, to dwell in, and he's going to provide for them and their families — it looks as if they're going to have a great cushy life, like maybe Egypt is their destination. And yet, at the end of Joseph's life, he summons his brothers and their families and he says to them, "God will surely visit you and bring you up from this place." In spite of all the splendor, the power, the provision, the recognition that they have in this place, it is not the place, ultimately, to which God has called their family and promised to them. And so, he uses this interesting, in Hebrew the grammar is interesting. It's a repetition of the same word twice for emphasis. So he says "*paqod yipqod*" — "God will *surely visit* you." And he says that twice there at the end. He makes them promise that when God does visit them and bring them up from the land, they'll take his bones with them. When the book of Exodus then opens and God appears to Moses at the burning bush and calls him to be the deliverer of the people from the land of Egypt, God uses that same grammatical construction with that same verb, and he says, "I now *surely visit* you and what has been done to you in Egypt." And the people, in chapter 4, when they hear this same language — it says, "When they heard that God had now *surely visited* his people, they believed and they worshipped." And everything that unfolds after that, now, is in fulfillment of this great promise and expectation. Now, did the people have that hope alive the whole time they were in Egypt because of Joseph's promise? Had that promise kind of fallen out of popularity, or had they stopped repeating it to themselves? We don't know, but when Moses comes and announces the day of visitation has come, they know that this now... the story is off and running. The long-promised event has come. God is visiting his people. And finally, when they're on their way out of Egypt, after the death of the firstborn in chapter 13, it reminds the reader that they stopped, they took up the bones of Joseph, who had been embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt, they take up his bones and Joseph's bones go out with them. And his words of promise are repeated. Just as he had said, "God will surely visit you and bring you up from this place."

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

The last words of Joseph to his brothers in the book of Genesis, in chapter 50, are very important for understanding the emphasis of the story of Joseph and his brothers. But often when people think about the last words that Joseph spoke, their minds go to 50:20-21 where Joseph says, "Now, I know all of you, you did these things for your own evil purposes, but God meant this for good, so don't worry about it. It's okay." We naturally gravitate toward that passage, verses 20-21, because they are easily

applied to the Christian life, like in passages like Romans 8:28 that God works all things together for good to those who love him. And that's fine, and that is what Joseph was saying... But those are not the last words that Joseph speaks to his brothers. Actually, the last words are found in 50:24-25, and in those verses, this is what Joseph says. He says, "Now, God is going to bring you up out of this land, and I want you to be sure to bring my bones up out of this land with you." And, in fact, in verse 25, he makes the brothers swear that they will do this. And so, the focus of the last words of Joseph in the book of Genesis are not so much on "God meant this for good," the goodness of God's providence, but rather on the hope that Israel is going to one day leave Egypt and go to the Promised Land. In fact, Joseph has his brothers swear that they will do this together, bringing even his body, his bones with them to the Promised Land. And what this emphasizes, of course, is that Joseph is looking at his brothers and saying, "Now, you're going to do this. You're going to leave this land of Egypt and go to the Promised Land together. Swear that that is the case." And they do. Those are the last words of Joseph, and they emphasize the main theme in the story of Joseph and his brothers: the unity of the patriarchs of Israel as they leave Egypt and go to the Promised Land.

Dr. Douglas Stuart

God's ultimate plan for Israel as a family when they were in Egypt was to bring them out of Egypt. He left them there for a lot of years. They learned a lot of patience if they were paying attention, because they were there for 430 years the Bible tells us. But he finally brought them out, and it was his plan that they should come into the Promised Land that he had originally promised to Abraham, then again to Isaac, then again to Jacob, and so on, and that they could count on his promise to give them that land that they didn't deserve. Now, it's a parallel to our own situation. Who are we if we belong to Christ, if we've accepted him as Savior and Lord? We're people who have become citizens of heaven. We aren't there yet, but it's a promise. We've got a place that we're going to join God in, the place he's always been in forever, and he's inviting us to come and live with him in his place. So, the Israelites are kind of prefiguring that, they're getting a taste, a touch of what a wonderful thing it is to have God provide a place for you. Now, Joseph figures into that in a special way with his very last words in the final chapter of the book of Genesis. And those words are, "Promise me." He says to his brothers on his deathbed, "Promise me you will bring my bones, my remains, out of this land and bring them up with you when you go into the Promised Land. Now, that was three hundred and some years later that it actually happened. It was a lot of years later that the promise was fulfilled. But, the Egyptians were very good embalmers; they were the best embalmers in the ancient world. They knew how to preserve a body, which is why we have so many Egyptian mummies still today, and we study them, and we look at them, and we can even tell in some instances the contents of what they were eating for their last meal. So, they did the same for Joseph, and in the form of a well-preserved Egyptian mummy, he rode on a cart up to the Promised Land of Canaan just as God had promised. Well, what's the point of it all? The point of it is that God's a fulfiller of promises. When God promises you something, it's going to happen. It's true. And God's promises from things like that, that even Joseph could be buried in the Promised Land because one

day, one day, centuries for his body, into the future, he would be part of the people who made it to the Promised Land. He'd be there only in his dead physical body, but he believed that promise, and so he made them promise him in their human promise that they wouldn't forget God's great promise.

Question 6:

How would the Joseph stories have encouraged national unity among the tribes of Israel?

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

The Joseph stories would have encouraged national unity among the tribes of Israel because it's a great story of how fraternal strife developed and how fraternal reconciliation was achieved. And the beginning of the story, where perhaps Joseph's arrogance about his future destiny as a ruler over them caused fraternal strife, at the end of the Joseph story, we see Joseph humble and accepting God's sovereign hand through the circumstances. And perhaps you would find there a lesson against pridefulness, depending on what tribe one was from. But we also see the humbling of the brothers. They see through their youngest brother, who was appointed eventually to be an authority over them, they see how God's sovereign hand had preserved them from famine in the Promised Land. And so, their humiliation, their humbling themselves at the end of the Joseph story, would show those other tribes that fraternal strife was not the way to go but rather fraternal unity. And above all things, for them, their own powerful brother's professed humbling of himself would have been a great example to them of what humility was like.

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

The Joseph stories would have contributed to unity among the tribes of Israel by giving them a paradigm of what God wanted. They were not to be jealous of one another; they were not to be deceptive; they were to be unified. And the change that we see in Judah goes a long way toward driving that point home, because Judah changes remarkably. And then Joseph forgives him. So, there's a place for change of character, and there's also a place for forgiveness even when you'd been wronged. And Joseph and Judah became two major tribes in the nations, and so they become a good example of what God wants in their offspring and their descendants, and the whole covenant community.

Dr. Scott Redd

The Joseph stories encouraged national unity amongst the tribes of Israel by giving them the story of their beginnings, a story that's marked by both betrayal and sin and deep wickedness, but also by righteousness, God's provision and reconciliation. They know that they're a diverse group of people; they know that they have diverse beginnings and that, ultimately, they'll have diverse ends, according to the prophetic song of Jacob at the end of the book of Genesis. But in the midst of that, God blesses them as a people, as we even see in the Joseph story. He blesses them and he

reconciles them even though they fall into such deep hostility towards one another. God is faithful even though they are not. And so, they should be united under that sign of God's faithfulness, united as they see that expressed in the Joseph story, and they too should seek unity, not only in the wilderness wandering, but in the conquest and the distribution of the land that is to come.

Question 7:

In what ways would the Joseph stories have fostered diversity among the tribes of Israel in Moses' day?

Dr. Scott Redd

The Joseph stories fostered not merely a sense of unity, but also a sense of diversity amongst the Israelites receiving the text in Moses' day. We see in the Joseph stories the full realization that God's people were a diverse group. They had different interests; they had different strengths. According to the blessings in the song of Jacob, at the end of the book of Genesis, we actually see that they'll have different futures. And so it was, from the beginning, a part of God's people that they would be diverse and that they would have diverse ways and means in which they interact in God's covenant. So, God's people in Israel and the people of Israel should also recognize that, as descendants of these patriarchs, as descendants of Joseph and his brothers, they too were a diverse group. They would have different strengths, different responsibilities within the people of God, particularly the Levites. And as a result, they would have different futures in ways in which they interact and the ways in which they serve God over the course of redemptive history. So, they should not merely acknowledge, but they should celebrate their diversity, and yet see in the midst of that that they are also one people under God.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

As important as the theme of unity among the people of God is in the story of Joseph and his brothers, we have to also remember that the reason unity is emphasized is because they were diverse. And diversity, in fact, in this story of Joseph and his brothers is not just negative, it's also positive. For instance, in chapter 48 and 49, these are the times when Jacob gives his blessings to his children. Chapter 48 is about Joseph, and it's divided. In fact, Joseph gets the double portion of Ephraim and Manasseh. Ephraim and Manasseh are grandchildren of Jacob, and they're treated as equal to the other tribes. Now, that's diversity, a problem for all the other uncles, as it were, of the other tribes who should have been treated as doubly important as Ephraim and Manasseh by common sense, but chapter 48 tells it very plainly that this is what God and the patriarch Jacob ordained. And then when you go through chapter 49 you find that every single one of the tribes is given a particular role, a particular place, certain things are said about them, positive and negative. And these blessings that Jacob gave to his sons, actually in many respects, establish the fact that there's going to be diversity among them, and if the people of God, as they move toward the Promised Land in the days of Moses, are going to live according to what God wants

for them, they're not just going to be together as if all of them are going to be the same, as if all of them are going to be living in exactly the same place with all the same responsibilities and all the same privileges. The words of Jacob both to Joseph — Ephraim and Manasseh in chapter 48, and then chapter 49 to the rest of the sons of Jacob — those chapters prove that there's going to be diversity among them, but in that diversity they are to be unified, as the rest of the story tells us.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

I believe the Joseph stories would have fostered diversity within the tribes of Israel because in the blessings that Jacob imparts to each of his sons individually, there are unique blessings. And so, those blessings from Jacob actually become, if you will, tribal personalities. You look at each of the tribes of Israel throughout their history as reflecting characteristics and attributes of Jacob's blessings. And so, that would have been a diversity that they would have embraced. They would have also embraced the diversity of status within the family because they would have learned the lesson from the strife of the Joseph story that they should not perceive one another as rivals. Judah would have an exalted role later on, but all the tribes would have the blessing of their covenant father, Jacob, and should embrace the tribal identities of their brother tribes as well.

Question 8:

What are some major themes that can be found within the Joseph stories?

Dr. Larry J. Waters

The major themes in the life of Joseph are made up, I think, of about five. First of all, I think his life. And one of the themes that we find is that his life was pivotal. Wherever he went and whatever he did, the area and what he did, changed everything. When he had the dreams, it changed the family; it changed the men that were in the prison with him; it changed Egypt when he had the dreams and interpreted them for Pharaoh. Very interesting that he is very pivotal in the story itself of how God is working out the redemption of his people. Secondly, I think that his life is exemplifying the idea of the theme of purity because he overcomes temptation; he overcomes hatred. He is a forgiving person. And this purity of his life, this integrity of his life, just flows out of the story itself. Also, I think we find that his life is very providential. Providential. And there are two passages of Scripture for this, which I think are very key to understanding the providential side of it, and that is Genesis 45:5-8. In verse 5 it says,

Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life (Genesis 45:5, NASB).

In verse 7 it says,

**God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth,
and to keep you alive by a great deliverance (Genesis 45:7, NASB).**

And in verse 8,

**Therefore it was not you who sent me here, but God [sent me]
(Genesis 45:8, NASB).**

And then, of course... one of the most familiar passages is Genesis 50:20:

**As for you, you meant [it] evil against me, but God meant it for good
in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people
alive (Genesis 50:20, NASB).**

This belief in God's destiny for him, this belief in the providence of God flows all the way through the story, but all the way through the Bible as well, even to Romans 8:28: "For God works all things together for good to them who love God and those who are called according to his purpose." Alistair Begg said this:

**An awareness of providence enables us to treat others with humility
— even those who have injured or wronged us. When we recognize
that God is ultimately in control of our circumstances, we can release
others and their actions to Him and be free of the bitterness and
resentment that rots the soul. Joseph's profound understanding of
providence was the key to his attitude toward his brothers and,
indeed, toward life itself.**

It's also prophetic. I think his life is very prophetic, and we talked about that earlier, and that is that his request to carry his bones was a prophecy of the exodus. It was also, I think, some feel, a prophecy of the resurrection; he wants to be in the land so that he will be resurrected with his people. And then finally, I think his life is, and shows the theme of, being a picture, being an example so that a life well lived, his life and lifestyle are a life worth living, worth emulating. Our character should never be altered by our circumstances. I think that's part of his story. And when tempted with Potiphar's wife and to do harm to his brothers, Gene Getz said this:

**In spite of Joseph's limited knowledge of God's laws, in spite of the
bad example both in his family and in Egypt, in spite of his own
natural desires and tendencies, and perhaps most significant, in spite
of the natural opportunity to cooperate in a relatively safe, secret sin,
Joseph still resisted.**

He is also our example of great forgiveness. Now, Donald Barnhouse said this:

To see God in all things, both good and evil, enables us to forgive easily those who injure us.

So, his life has themes throughout it, but five, I think, are very key: he's pivotal, he is pure, he is providential, he is prophetic, and he is a picture of a life that we should live. I think all of those are applicable to our lives.

Rev. Dr. Michael Walker

When preparing to teach or preach a sermon series on the story of Joseph, there are a few things that really rise to the surface as being of special importance from this story. The first would be the importance of trusting in God's providence. We've all found ourselves in circumstances that were extremely challenging, and we have probably all said to ourselves, "I can't imagine how something good could come from this." And if we have had that experience, Joseph had that experience so much more deeply or intensely. He found himself sold into slavery in Egypt. There, found himself wrongly imprisoned. And his response was to trust in God's providence. He didn't despair. He didn't lose hope. But instead, he responded — and this is the second significant theme — he responded with obedience to God. And his steady obedience to the Lord really paved the way and ends up telling the story of him rescuing the brothers who had sold him into slavery, and so many more, by being God's instrument there in Egypt. And finally, the theme of forgiveness and reconciliation is not only so important to the story of Joseph, you know, but it's so important to the story of every one of our lives and important to the story of every community of followers of Jesus Christ. And when we see or read about Joseph greeting his brothers, and when we imagine the surprise that his brothers had when Joseph reveals himself and their fear, and then experience the power of Joseph's embrace of them, it's a glimpse, it's a taste of what we too can experience when, like Joseph, we trust in the Lord's providence and respond to challenging circumstances with obedience and are willing to extend forgiveness and grace to one another like he has given to us.

Dr. Douglas Gropp

The Joseph story is set apart from the other patriarchal narratives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to some extent because Joseph isn't particularly a recipient of that promise that comes to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Rather, it's the twelve sons of Jacob as a whole that are recipients of the promise of the seed, the land and a relationship to the nations. The Joseph story is unusual in that it's a much more extended, involved, inter-tangled story than the shorter stories about the other patriarchs, but it does have one central theme, and that theme is God's preservation of a people for himself. The people are being preserved from the famine, which creates a crisis in the Land of Promise so that they're forced to go into Egypt, so that the promise doesn't seem to be being fulfilled in their case, and Joseph, through his faithfulness, becomes the agent of God achieving his purposes of preserving the life of his people. And this is in spite of the fact of his brothers' treatment of him so that, in a sense, God is favoring

his whole people represented by these twelve patriarchs in spite of their undeserving character in the way they treat Joseph their younger brother.

Question 9:

What are some practical ways we can apply the Joseph stories to our lives today?

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

There are three main ways that we can apply the Joseph stories to our lives today. The first is that through confession of sin, Judah and his brothers confess their sin; through forgiveness, Joseph had to forgive them, we can have unity as the people of God. We're going to hurt one another, and so it's very important that we confess our sin when we do that and that we're willing to forgive others when they confess their sins. And in that way, through that kind of selflessness and commitment to unity, God can produce in us what he wants to see. The second lesson that this story shows us is that people can change; even selfish, cruel, deceptive, unlovable people like Judah can change by the grace of God. But change doesn't come automatically. Sometimes that change will only take place through some very difficult lessons where God forces us to come to grips with who we really are. And that's what Joseph's tests, where he takes his brother through this series of tests, and kind of conjures up images from the past, and they are reminded what they did to their brother. And it must have been very painful for Judah, but he did change, and he came to the point where he was willing to sacrifice his future for the good of daddy's favorite, his new favorite, Benjamin, and for his father, whereas, before, he was ready to kill Joseph. A third important lesson comes from just looking at the experience of Joseph. Joseph was a victim. He was a victim of the jealousy of his brothers. He didn't ask for this kind of conflict. His father set it up by making him his favorite. And so, Joseph was a victim, and he was victimized. And he could have become bitter, but he remained faithful to God through all of these difficulties, even when the situation looked bleak. He was in a prison, God didn't seem to be around, but of course the text tells us that God was with Joseph even in the prison. And Joseph came through all of that because, I think, he remained faithful and loyal to God. He remained moral, did what was right, and trusted God's providence to bring him through, and in the end he was rewarded and blessed for that.

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

When I think of the Joseph story, I think of all sorts of practical moral lessons such as resisting temptation and not becoming bitter when someone has something against you. But it seems to me that there's a couple of large practical lessons that we need to learn from the story. God's word always comes true. In Genesis 15, God told Abraham many, many years before that his descendants would be in the land, that it would not be their own for 400 years. And God's word comes true. He takes Abraham's descendants down to Egypt, but God is not surprised by this. God's word will come true. In Genesis 37, Joseph has his dreams, and you just wonder, how in the

world will that ever come true where his brothers, and even his parents, will bow down to him? But we see God's word coming true... I think another thing that we can learn from the Joseph stories is that evil people cannot ultimately thwart God's predicted plan. Evil doesn't make the living of that story easy for the righteous person, but God is so big that even when evil people get involved, God is able to bring about his will. At the end of Genesis, Joseph says to his brothers, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." And I think that goes throughout the story, that God is in charge, and he's bringing about his plan, and evil ultimately cannot prevent that. I think another lesson that we can learn from the Joseph story is that our God is a creative God, that he is able to use sin and rebellion and forgetfulness of people and inactivity, and yet he's able to bring all of that into part of his plan. And so, when I'm looking around and wondering just how is this going to work out for God's glory, God can do it if I am willing to trust him. I sometimes say the most common word in heaven will not be "hallelujah" or "praise the Lord," but will be "oh," "Oh!" because when we get to heaven we'll understand how everything in our life actually worked together to accomplish God's purpose.

Dr. David Talley

I love the fact that Genesis focuses so much on Joseph's life, and I think there are so many takeaways for us, applications that are beneficial for us as believers today. One of the obvious aspects of Joseph's life, in my opinion, is that he seems to be walking in obedience; he's a godly young man who seems to make good decisions. But often times those decisions end up not working out very well for him. And as we step back and look at his life, it teaches us a very important lesson that, oftentimes, as we walk in obedience, life isn't going to work out the way we want it to, but that does not mean that God is not there behind the scenes accomplishing his purposes. Joseph shares this dream with his brothers, and they get angry with him and they sell him to a slave caravan, and so he ends up in slavery as a result of that. All he's doing is sharing a dream that God had given him, and he ends up in a very bad place. But we step back from the story and we recognize God's at work. God is sending Joseph before his family so that they can eventually have food during a very severe famine that's going to take place back in the land. And while he is down in Egypt, Joseph again runs into a series of problems where he seems to be a godly individual. He flees from Potiphar's wife, and he's doing the right thing there. She falsely accuses him; he ends up in prison. Again, God is behind the scenes. He's the one that's orchestrating all these details. Joseph's trying to be faithful. It's not working out for him, but God is still advancing his purposes. Through these events, Joseph eventually ends up in a very profitable place in the kingdom because he is remembered as one who interprets the dream, and there's a dream that needs to be interpreted, and so Joseph is called forth. God gives him wisdom. He's able to do so, and he rises to power in the land. Now he has the authority to save all of this food that not only is going to save Egypt, but it's going to provide food for his family. And so, his family ends up coming down to Egypt. They don't recognize him. He recognizes them. And at the end of the story we see the greatest lesson of all. Joseph looks at his brothers and he says, "You meant this for evil, but God meant it for good." Joseph was able to sit back and look at the details of his life, which I think would be difficult for many of us to go through, and

he was able to see God's hand in it. And as a result of that, he didn't hate his brothers; he didn't put them to death. Instead, he blessed them. He was good to them because he realized God had been at work all along.

Question 10:

How does the story of Joseph encourage us to remain faithful to God even in the midst of trials?

Dr. David T. Lamb

I love the Joseph story. It's one of my favorite parts of Scripture, Genesis 37 to Genesis 50. There's so much that we can learn from the story of Joseph... All of us at points in our lives are going to have crises. Hopefully, your crises will not be as bad as Joseph's. Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery, spent a period of time as a slave... His master's wife tried to seduce him. He resisted the temptation, but because she accused him falsely of basically sexual assault, he was thrown into jail, and he was in jail for a long time. We don't know how the breakdown of the text falls, but we know that from age 17, basically, to age 30 he was either a slave or a prisoner. During this point in time, he gives dream fulfillments to two of Pharaoh's servants, basically a butler and a baker. And he tells the butler, who's the one that gets the good dream fulfillment, "Remember me when you get reinstated." But what happened? The butler forgot him. Yet another series of people that had forgotten Joseph. Joseph had a rough life. And when we're in similar situations, it's easy to blame God, but the text makes it really clear that in the midst of all of Joseph's suffering, God was with him. And I don't know how Joseph knew that, but the narrators make it very clear: God was with Joseph. And, I think, to be asking ourselves in whatever crises we are facing, presumably not nearly as severe as Joseph's, if Joseph could somehow experience God and God's presence in this, we, in whatever crises we are facing, should be able to learn from him and say, "God is with me. I'm going to resist temptation and I'm going to keep focused on my God, and I know that God's dream, his promises, will be fulfilled, but I might have to wait awhile."

Dr. John Oswalt

Joseph had gone through one terrible circumstance after another. His father had treated him with favoritism that put him in a bad light with his brothers. He had made some unwise choices in shooting off his mouth to his brothers about his dreams. He had been sold into slavery. When he had been faithful in slavery, his master's wife had lied about him. He ended up in an Egyptian dungeon. And in the dungeon, when he told the dreams of the baker and the butler, and the butler was, in fact, delivered, and Joseph said, "Please remember me," and the butler said, "Oh yes, I'll remember you" — for about thirty seconds. I think most of us, if we think God is with me, then everything's going to work right in my life. If I have troubles, well, that means God isn't with me. But in fact, *in fact*, in all of those bad circumstances — not circumstances that God had caused but circumstances God had permitted — in all

those circumstance, God was at work for Joseph. And somehow Joseph knew that, because when he is a slave of Potiphar he is so trustworthy that Potiphar gives him all the authority in the house. When he is seduced by Potiphar's wife, he says, "How can I do this thing and sin against God?" When he is in the dungeon — Egyptian dungeons were not nice places — where he certainly could be expected to be living in an abyss of self-pity, no, he is trustworthy; he's put in charge of other prisoners. And when he comes in in the morning with breakfast, he's aware that those guys have had a bad night, not absorbed in himself. What that says to me is that we today can have that same experience of God's working in our lives and trust in his working in spite of difficult, painful circumstances that will enable us to be upright and true and faithful, and therefore, God can accomplish his purposes through us.

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The Pentateuch

LESSON
ELEVEN

AN OVERVIEW OF EXODUS



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The Pentateuch

Lesson Eleven

An Overview of Exodus

INTRODUCTION

Every organization goes through changes, but these changes can be quite disruptive when the leadership passes from one generation to the next. When the last founding member of a church dies, or the entrepreneur of a business retires, those left in charge face new challenges. So, one question that nearly always comes up is this: How much should the new generation follow the priorities and practices of the previous generation?

In many ways, the people of Israel faced this question as they camped on the border of the Promised Land. Moses was quickly approaching the end of his life, and the Israelites were facing many new challenges. So, they needed to know how much they should continue to follow the priorities and practices that Moses had established for them. Would they need to follow a different path? Or should they continue in Moses' ways? The second book of the Bible, the book we now call Exodus, was designed to answer these and similar questions.

This lesson looks at a portion of *the Pentateuch* that covers the second book of the Bible. We've entitled it "An Overview of Exodus." In this lesson we'll explore a number of basic issues that will prepare us to look more deeply into what Exodus meant when it was first written and how we should apply it to our lives today.

Our lesson will divide into three main parts. First, we'll look at some initial considerations we should keep before us as we study Exodus. Second, we'll investigate the structure and content of the book. And third, we'll look into some of the major themes of Exodus. Let's look first at a number of initial considerations.

INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

As followers of Christ, we rightly believe that the book of Exodus was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that it's God's Word. This belief reminds us that we aren't dealing with an ordinary book. Exodus is sacred Scripture that God gave to his people. So, in one way or another, as followers of Christ, this book has authority over you and me today. But at the same time, we should never forget that God first gave this book to people who lived thousands of years ago. So, it's important to ensure that our modern applications are true to the purpose of the book when it was first written.

We'll introduce four different initial considerations as we begin to look at Exodus. First, we'll touch on its authorship. Who wrote the book? Second, we'll explore its occasion, when and where the book was written. Third, we'll summarize the original meaning of Exodus. And fourth, we'll address how these matters should guide our modern application of the book. Let's look first at the authorship of Exodus.

AUTHORSHIP

The question of Exodus' authorship is part of a long and complex debate over the authorship of the Pentateuch as a whole. But in this lesson, we'll mention just a few ways this debate applies to Exodus.

A cursory reading of Exodus tells us, at the very least, that Moses had a great deal to do with the content of the book. Exodus repeatedly claims that God revealed much of it directly to Moses on Mount Sinai. This includes the Ten Commandments, the Book of the Covenant, and the instructions for Israel's tabernacle.

But, as we've seen in other lessons on the Pentateuch, most critical scholars have rejected Moses' authorship. They've argued that the theology of the Pentateuch, including Exodus, is far too advanced to have come from the days of Moses. And they maintain, instead, that it couldn't have been completed before the end of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C.

Although these critical outlooks are widespread, the historical and theological presuppositions behind them are highly speculative and unreliable. Also, from an evangelical perspective, it's crucial that we follow the authoritative testimonies found in the Scriptures. Old Testament authors and Christ and his apostles and prophets all unanimously endorsed the perspective that Moses was the one responsible for the entire Pentateuch, including the book of Exodus.

Now, evangelicals have rightly qualified this belief in Mosaic authorship by calling Moses the "fundamental," "real," or "essential" author of the book. This means it's highly unlikely that Moses simply sat down and wrote all of Exodus with his own hand. But Moses was a reliable eyewitness to every event reported in the book, except perhaps those involving his birth and early childhood. It's likely that he followed the custom of national leaders in his day and employed scribes, or amanuenses, to write under his direction. Still, whatever took place, we can be confident that Exodus was composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit sometime during the days of Moses.

The question of who wrote the book of Exodus is an important question, and as we read through the text of the book itself, and take seriously the history of the events that it records, there's no reason to think that Moses didn't write the bulk of the book of Exodus as we presently have it. Moses is portrayed in that book as God's spokesman. Throughout the Pentateuch he's portrayed as a unique spokesman, throughout the history of God's people, one who knew God like no other prophet after him until Jesus himself. And because he knew God so intimately, spoke with him face-to-face as a man speaks with a friend, and had that important role as God's spokesman to the people. And because the Old Testament, as it continues after the Pentateuch, refers back to this book of the Torah of Moses and encourages the people to meditate on it day and night, it makes sense to think that Moses is the author of the book. Now, there may be some updating that has happened of place names or even of some of the grammatical forms and things like that as time goes on, that happens

by an inspired hand, a prophetic hand in Israel. But yeah, I think the book of Exodus comes from Moses' pen, from Moses' stylus... And so, Moses is portrayed not only as God's chief spokesman in Israel, but also as an author, the writer of a book.

— Prof. Thomas Egger

With these thoughts about Mosaic authorship in mind, we should turn to a second set of initial considerations, the occasion, or circumstances, in which Exodus was written.

OCCASION

Broadly speaking, Moses wrote Exodus sometime between his call at the burning bush, in Exodus 3:1–4:31, and his death on the plains of Moab, in Deuteronomy 34:1-12. But the evidence enables us to be more precise than this. At least two references in Exodus reveal that the book was actually completed when Israel was encamped on the border of the Promised Land. Listen to Exodus 16:35 where we read these words:

The Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a land that was settled; they ate manna until they reached the border of Canaan (Exodus 16:35).

Obviously, these events must have occurred before the book of Exodus was completed. So, we know that Israel had already wandered for “forty years.” And they had arrived at “a land that was settled” or “the border of Canaan.”

A similar glimpse into the time of final composition appears in Exodus 40:38, the last verse of the book:

So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels (Exodus 40:38).

Notice that this passage mentions God's glorious presence over the tabernacle “during *all* their travels.” This historical note makes it evident that Moses completed the book of Exodus late in his life. He wrote *after* the Israelites had finished their forty years of wandering and had arrived on the plains of Moab.

So far, we've looked at several initial considerations concerning the authorship and occasion of the book of Exodus. Now, we're in a position to summarize its original meaning. Why did God have Moses compose the book of Exodus? And how did Moses hope to impact his original Israelite audience on the plains of Moab?

ORIGINAL MEANING

From the outset, we should note that Moses had a number of general goals that often appear in the Old Testament. For instance, Exodus is doxological because it consistently led Israel to praise and worship God. But it's also theological because it repeatedly explains truths about God. And the whole book is political in the sense that it was designed to shape the national life of Israel. It's also polemical because it opposes false points of view. It's moral because it reveals how Israel was to obey God. And it's motivational because it encourages loyalty to God and warns against disloyalty. These and many other similar goals generally characterize the entire book of Exodus.

While Exodus shares these and other characteristics with a number of biblical books, Moses also had a unique, prominent purpose for writing Exodus. It's helpful to summarize this unifying purpose along these lines:

The book of Exodus vindicated Moses' divinely-ordained authority over the first generation of the exodus to direct the second generation to acknowledge Moses' abiding authority over their lives.

This summary touches on three factors that give us a helpful orientation toward the original meaning of Exodus. First, it reminds us that, for the most part, the book was written *about* the first generation of the exodus, but at the same time, the book was written *for* the second generation of the exodus.

Everyone familiar with the book of Exodus knows that most of it describes events that occurred when Moses brought Israel out of Egypt. We may call this time, "that world" of history. Even so, everything Exodus says about "that world" of the first generation was designed to speak to the *second* generation of the exodus, what we may call "their world."

Now, it's important to keep in mind that very few ancient Israelites could read. So, when we speak of the second generation "audience," we don't mean that every man, woman and child picked up a copy of Exodus and read it for themselves. On the contrary, like other portions of the Old Testament, Moses wrote Exodus primarily for the *leaders* of Israel. Joshua, tribal elders, judges, and the priests and Levites were Exodus' primary focus. And it was these leaders' responsibility to deliver and explain the content of the book to the rest of Israel. For this reason, Exodus most directly addresses issues that the second generation faced as a nation.

It's also important to note that most of Moses' attention to "their world" remained implicit. Still, the second generation moves to the foreground often enough for us to be confident that Moses wrote with "their world" in mind. As we've already noted, both Exodus 16:35 and 40:38 refer to the second generation. In addition, the genealogical record in Exodus 6:13-27 extends to Phinehas, Aaron's grandson. And we'll see later that a number of other passages address matters that were particularly relevant for the second generation. These and similar references indicate that Moses took into account both the first and second generations of the exodus as he composed this book.

A second facet of our summary of Moses' original purpose for Exodus is that everything it said about "the first generation" was written, "*to direct* the second

generation.” That is to say, Moses wrote Exodus as a fully authoritative book that his original, second generation audience was to obey in service to God.

As we read the book of Exodus, it becomes clear that Moses carefully shaped his historical record to make it relevant for the second generation. In order to address those who camped with him on the border of Canaan, Moses had to pay careful attention to the many differences between the first and second generations. He was aware that they lived in different times and places, and that they faced different challenges. So, Moses skillfully designed each portion of Exodus to highlight points of contact between them. These connections allowed his original audience to bridge the gap between themselves and their forebears.

Backgrounds

Moses formed three basic types of connections that made the authority of his book evident to his original audience. His simplest connections consisted of historical backgrounds. These passages focused on the historical roots of the original audience’s privileges and responsibilities.

One type of historical background appears in Exodus 3:8 where God’s promise to Israel connects to the fulfillment of that promise. In this verse, God promised to bring Israel up out of Egypt into “a land flowing with milk and honey.” This prediction was relevant for Moses’ audience because they were on the verge of seeing it fulfilled in their day.

Another type of historical background appears in God’s commands to the first generation and the subsequent obligations of the second generation. For instance, in Exodus 20:1-17, Moses reported how God gave the first generation the Ten Commandments. This event formed the basis of the moral obligations for the second generation.

Models

In addition to historical backgrounds, Moses also provided his audience with historical models that they were to emulate or reject. To establish this kind of connection, Moses shaped some passages to point out substantial similarities between the first generation and the second-generation audience.

In many passages, Moses used these kinds of similarities to give his original audience negative models to reject. For instance, Israel’s repeated, rebellious grumbling during the march to Sinai, in Exodus 15:24, 16:2-12, and 17:3, represented negative models that the second generation was to reject.

By contrast, Moses also gave his audience positive models to emulate. For example, Israel complied with God’s instructions for tabernacle construction in Exodus 36:8-38. This represented a positive model for the second generation to emulate as they served God at the tabernacle later on.

And Moses also provided mixed models, characters that exemplified both positive and negative qualities. As just one example, in Exodus 7:8-13, Aaron obeyed God and threw down his staff before Pharaoh. His obedience contributed to Israel's release from Egypt. But, in 32:1-35, he made a golden calf for the people to worship, and his disobedience led to Israel's severe punishment. This gave the second-generation audience a mixed model to both emulate and reject.

Foreshadows

In the third place, on a few occasions Moses shaped his record of events to serve as historical foreshadows, or adumbrations, of his second-generation audience.

Often in biblical narrative, as in modern film and literature, authors will use foreshadowing. And we have a good example of this early on in the book of Exodus when Moses, having left Egypt, arrives at the well and he saves, or delivers, Jethro's daughters from these mean-spirited shepherds. And the text depicts Moses as being in the role of a deliverer, as it were. Well, that foreshadows what God is going to do through him. He's going to go to Egypt and deliver God's people from bondage.

— Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

This type of connection doesn't occur in Exodus as much as in some other Old Testament books. But in certain cases, Moses described events from the past in ways that almost perfectly matched the experiences of his original audience. These foreshadows indicated that history was, as it were, repeating itself in the days of the second generation. For example, in Exodus 13:18 the Israelites "went up out of Egypt armed for battle." This military arrangement of the first generation foreshadowed how the second generation was also arranged as an army ready to enter the conquest.

In a similar way, Exodus 40:34-38 notes that once the tabernacle was functioning properly, God appeared as smoke and fire as he led his people in their march. This historical reality anticipated how, after 40 years, the presence of God was about to lead the second-generation audience forward in their own day.

As we've just seen, Moses shaped his record of the first generation's history to serve as backgrounds, models and foreshadows for the second generation. He did this to direct them in service to God. But all of this brings us to the third, and perhaps most important, element in our summary of the original meaning of Exodus. The book of Exodus was designed primarily to vindicate Moses' divinely-ordained authority over the first generation so that the second generation would acknowledge Moses' abiding authority over their lives.

Now, it's important to mention that Aaron often appears alongside Moses in the book of Exodus. But even when Aaron is included, every substantial portion of Exodus called the second generation to affirm Moses' continuing authority over them. They were

to submit to Moses' theological outlooks, his moral principles, national policies, and the like. Later in this lesson, we'll see in some detail how pervasive this theme is. But, at this point we'll briefly mention just two ways the book emphasizes the importance of Moses and his authority over Israel.

First, it's not difficult to see that Moses occupied center stage in the drama of Exodus. To be sure, the first two chapters of Exodus don't immediately introduce Moses. But after we learn his name in Exodus 2:10, everything that happens in the book is somehow explicitly tied to Moses. When God was ready to deliver his people from Egypt, he called Moses. Moses was instrumental in every miraculous judgment against the Egyptians. The parting of the sea occurred as Moses obeyed God and stretched out his hand over the water. Moses served as Israel's leader when God led the nation from Egypt to Mount Sinai. God made his covenant with Israel through Moses. Moses delivered the tablets of the Law and the Book of the Covenant on God's behalf. God gave Moses his instructions for the tabernacle. Moses served God during the crisis of Israel's idolatry at the foot of Mount Sinai. And Moses led the construction of the tabernacle.

Second, the book of Exodus repeatedly highlights Moses' authority over Israel. The book deals with the fact that the Israelites questioned Moses' authority as their leader in passages like Exodus 2:14; 5:21; 15:24; 16:2 and 3; and 17:2. But at other times, the Israelites acknowledged Moses' authority over them in passages like Exodus 4:31; 14:31; and 20:19. And we read of God's reassurance, that he himself ordained Moses as Israel's authoritative leader, in passages like Exodus 6:1-8 and 10-13; 24:2; and 34:1-4. As just one example, listen to Exodus 19:9 where God explained his upcoming theophany, or divine appearance, to Moses on Mount Sinai:

I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you (Exodus 19:9).

As this passage points out, God appeared on Mount Sinai in "a dense cloud" so that when the Israelites heard God speaking with Moses they would "always put their trust in [Moses]." As we can see here, this verse draws attention to the most prominent reason Exodus was written. The book of Exodus vindicated Moses' abiding authority over Israel.

When evangelicals deal with a book like Exodus or, for that matter, any other book, they all have a natural tendency to be theocentric, and by that I mean make everything centered around God and to say that every book and every aspect of every book is *all* about God. But in reality, when you take a look at the book of Exodus, you don't quite get that impression. God is important, and in many respects, God is the main character, at least in the sense that he controls and he works the history that the book of Exodus talks about; he's the one that delivers Israel from Egypt; he's the one that gives the law; he's the one that gives the tabernacle. But at the same time, when you look at the literary portrait that's given of those events in the book of Exodus, what you discover is something that may seem strange at first, but I

think it's true, and that is with one exception, God doesn't do anything in the whole book of Exodus apart from doing it through Moses. And the only thing that God does explicitly in the book of Exodus that's separated from Moses is when God blesses the midwives in the first chapter. And so, what we find in the book of Exodus is that God appears and he does things for Israel, but Moses is always right there, because he's the instrument by which God's doing it. And the reason for this is because Moses and his life were just about over, and Moses was about to leave Israel, but God was not going to leave Israel. And so the reality is that as you read the book of Exodus, what you're dealing with is the book that's being completed on the plains of Moab, dealing with the fact that Moses was going to leave Israel. And as a result of all of that, when we take a look at the book of Exodus, Israel is asking questions like these: Who's supposed to lead us? How are they supposed to lead? What are the priorities they're supposed to have? What kind of authority should we follow in our day now that Moses is about to leave us? And the book of Exodus is designed to answer those kinds of questions. The fact is that God did deliver Israel from Egypt, but he delivered Israel from Egypt through Moses. Yes, God gave Israel the law, but God gave the law through Moses. Yes, God gave the tabernacle, his holy war tent, but he did that through Moses. And that's the emphasis of the book of Exodus. And so, the book of Exodus vindicates for the second generation the authority of Moses by telling stories about what happened in the first generation and how Moses was exalted by God before the people, and because of that exaltation, Moses is supposed to be exalted before the second generation, even though he was about to pass away.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Now that we've touched on some initial considerations related to the authorship, occasion and original meaning of Exodus, we should make a few comments on its modern application. How should the book be applied to followers of Christ today?

MODERN APPLICATION

A book as complex as Exodus can be applied to modern life in countless ways. We know this because every person is unique and faces different circumstances. And we'll look more carefully at modern application later in this lesson. But at this point, it will help to note some general outlooks we should always keep in mind as we apply Exodus to our lives today.

As followers of Christ, we know that the book of Exodus applies to us because it's the Word of God. But there are significant differences between us and the original

audience. And for this reason, we must always turn to the New Testament to guide us in our modern application. The New Testament offers us guidance by referring or alluding to Exodus around 240 times. But one New Testament passage is particularly helpful. Listen to 1 Corinthians 10:1-5 where the apostle Paul wrote:

Our ancestors were all under the cloud and ... they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:1-5).

As we see here, Paul referred to a number of events that are reported in the book of Exodus. But now look at 1 Corinthians 10:11, as the passage continues:

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Together, these verses explicitly affirm the relevance of the book of Exodus for followers of Christ. As Paul put it, “these things happened to them as examples.” And they “were written down as warnings for us.” Paul’s words here help us see that Exodus was written not only about “*that* world,” and not only for “*their* world,” but it was also written for “*our* world.” To put it in terms of this lesson, the book of Exodus wasn’t just designed to direct its original audience. It was also intended “for *us*,” for followers of Christ.

Listen to how the apostle described the world of Christ’s followers. We are those “on whom the culmination of the ages has come.” The word “culmination” is translated from the Greek word *τέλος* (*telos*), which is frequently translated “end” or “goal.” Christians live in the time when God’s plan for history is reaching its end or goal in Christ. In common theological terms, we who follow Jesus live in the “eschatological” or “last” age of history.

To understand what Paul had in mind, we must realize that when we come to saving faith in Christ, we become part of a journey. We actually enter the “last days” of Moses and Israel’s journey from slavery and tyranny in Egypt to freedom and blessings in God’s Promised Land.

The New Testament as a whole teaches that the eschatological age, or the last days in Christ, unfolds in three main stages. So, from a biblical perspective, this final phase of Moses and Israel’s journey began with Christ’s inauguration of his kingdom during his earthly ministry. And the journey of Moses and Israel in the book of Exodus moves forward in these last days as we live in union with Christ during the continuation of his kingdom throughout church history. And finally, just as Moses and Israel traveled from Egypt to the Promised Land, the last days of our journey in Christ will end with the consummation of his kingdom, when, in his glorious return, we’ll enter the new heavens and new earth.

So, as 1 Corinthians 10 indicates, we should apply every theme in Exodus to modern Christians in the light of the inauguration, continuation and consummation of the last days in Christ.

We can make these connections in several ways. For example, Exodus tells us that Israel entered into covenant with God in Moses at Mount Sinai. In a similar way, Christians enter into the new covenant in Christ. But this new covenant began with Christ's first advent; it continues now; and it will be completed at Christ's second advent.

As another example, Exodus reports God's presence in the tabernacle in Moses' day. The New Testament teaches that God's presence is even greater in Christ. Jesus himself was the presence of God who dwelt among us in the inauguration of his kingdom. In the continuation of the kingdom, the Holy Spirit now dwells in individual believers and corporately in the church. And at the consummation of history, God's glory will fill everything as the new creation is made his holy dwelling.

Exodus also reveals God's defeat of his enemies in Moses' day. And the New Testament teaches that Christ defeats sin and death. Christ began the final stages of this defeat as God's mighty warrior in his first advent. The church follows Christ now as his army by wearing the full armor of God in spiritual warfare. And when he returns in glory, Christ will complete his great cosmic war against the enemies of God.

Additionally, in Exodus, the Israelites were headed for their inheritance from God in the Promised Land. This was their first step toward spreading God's reign throughout the earth. The New Testament teaches that Christians gain their inheritance in Christ. Christ himself secured his inheritance in the inauguration of his kingdom. As Christians today we continue to enjoy the down payment of our inheritance in the Holy Spirit. And when Christ returns, he — and we in him — will inherit all things.

These and other broad connections clarify how Exodus' prominent focus on Moses' abiding authority still applies to us in Christ. In brief, Exodus called its original audience to remain faithful to Moses' authority in the light of what God was doing in their day. And Exodus now calls us to remain faithful to Moses' authority in the light of all that God has accomplished, is accomplishing, and will accomplish in Christ.

Now that we've touched on some initial considerations about the book of Exodus, we should turn to our second main topic in this lesson: the structure and content of the book.

STRUCTURE & CONTENT

The book of Exodus consists of forty chapters containing many different characters, settings and events. We find a variety of literary forms like narrative, song, genealogy, list, laws, speeches, prayers and instructions. And these complexities make it difficult at times to differentiate the major divisions, sections and smaller segments of the book. So, it's fair to say that Exodus can be outlined in many ways. But the basic structure and content of the book isn't difficult to discern when we remember the book's original purpose.

The book of Exodus has two main divisions. The first half, in 1:1–18:27, focuses on Moses and Israel’s deliverance from Egypt to Mount Sinai. The second half, in 19:1–40:38, deals with Moses and Israel’s preparation for Canaan at Mount Sinai.

We’ll look in particular at how these two major divisions focus on Moses’ abiding authority over the second generation of the exodus. Let’s start with Moses and Israel’s deliverance from Egypt to Mount Sinai.

DELIVERANCE FROM EGYPT (EXODUS 1:1–18:27)

Moses and Israel’s deliverance from Egypt begins with a focus on Moses’ authority *before* Israel’s deliverance. We find this in Exodus 1:1–4:31. Then, in 5:1–18:27, Moses centers on events *during* Israel’s deliverance. Let’s look first at what Exodus tells us about events before Israel’s deliverance.

Before Deliverance (1:1–4:31)

Events before Israel’s deliverance can be divided into two parts. First, Moses’ birth and upbringing begins in 1:1 and runs through 2:10. Following this, we learn of Moses’ rise to leadership over Israel in 2:11–4:31. We’ll start with the story of Moses’ birth and upbringing.

Birth and Upbringing (1:1–2:10). These verses spoke to any objections against Moses’ authority that may have arisen because Moses spent his youth in the courts of Egypt. As the story begins, Pharaoh feared a rebellion due to Israel’s increasing numbers. He devised three shrewd plans to control Israel’s population. But his imposition of hard labor failed. His command for midwives to kill Israelite boys at birth failed. And most importantly, his command for Israelite boys to be drowned in the Nile failed.

Irony runs throughout these episodes. But the greatest irony appears when Pharaoh’s own daughter foiled his last plan by rescuing Moses from the Nile. Then in 2:10, Pharaoh’s daughter gave Moses his name saying, “I drew him out of the water.” Now, in Egyptian, “Moses” simply meant “son,” indicating to most people that Moses was a member of the royal court. But Pharaoh’s daughter clearly explained that she chose the name Moses because it sounded like the Hebrew verb מָשַׁח (*mashah*), meaning “to draw out.” So, in the ears of faithful Israelites, Moses’ name didn’t indicate that he was Pharaoh’s son. Rather, the name Moses mocked Pharaoh by reminding Israel of how Pharaoh’s attempts to harm them had failed.

Rise to Leadership (2:11–4:31). The narrative of events before Israel’s deliverance from Egypt then turns from Moses’ birth and upbringing to questions about Moses’ rise to leadership over Israel in 2:11–4:31.

In Exodus 2:14, an Israelite slave confronted Moses and asked, “Who made you a prince and a judge over us?” This entire section answers this question by explaining how Moses became Israel’s authoritative leader. The answer to the Israelite’s question appears

in a six-step chiasm, a literary structure in which earlier and later sections parallel or balance each other.

First, Moses' flight from Egypt in Exodus 2:11-15 vindicated Moses as Israel's leader by explaining that he had fled from Egypt because he had killed an Egyptian in defense of an Israelite slave.

Second, Moses joined with a Midianite family in 2:16-22. Verse 22 notes that the name of Moses' son was, "Gershom." As this passage explains, this name sounded like the Hebrew expression גֵּר שָׁם (*ger sham*), meaning "a sojourner there." The name indicated that Moses felt like an alien among the Midianites. In other words, he never lost sight of his true Israelite identity.

The third segment, in Exodus 2:23-25, points to God's remembrance of his covenant. In this section, the Israelites cried out for help, and God responded by remembering his promise to Israel's patriarchs.

The fourth segment corresponds to the previous section. Chapter 3:1-4:17, tells of God's commission to Moses at the burning bush. Here, Moses' leadership is vindicated by the fact that God remembered his covenant with Israel's patriarchs by calling Moses to bring Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

The fifth section, in Exodus 4:18-26, corresponds to the second section of Moses' time with his Midianite family. This section describes Moses' departure from his Midianite family. The passage focuses again on Gershom because Moses failed to circumcise him. In this section, God threatened to kill Moses in accordance with his covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17:10-14. But even this event demonstrated God's support of Moses' leadership. We know this because God responded with mercy when Zipporah, Moses' Midianite wife, circumcised Gershom.

And finally, in balance with Moses' opening flight from Egypt, Exodus 4:27-31 reports Moses' return to Egypt with Aaron. Moses' rise to leadership is vindicated here as well. In 4:31 we learn that the Israelites believed and worshiped God because he had sent them Moses.

Listen, the way that we all tell stories, the way anybody tells a story, there's a beginning and an ending, there's a lead up, there's a turning point, and there's a lead down from, and that's going to be symmetrical... So, we shouldn't be surprised when we find this kind of symmetrical structure in biblical narrative. As a matter of fact, it's what we would expect to find in biblical narrative. Biblical storytellers, biblical narrators are not fabricating their material. They're not manipulating their material to get it to work this way artistically; this is just the way that we tell stories and we would expect to find it. And expecting to find it, knowing how a narrative plot works, gives us a tool in terms of what to watch for and what to look for.

— Dr. Gordon H. Johnston

Now that we've looked at Moses and Israel's deliverance from Egypt in the period before Israel's deliverance, we should turn to Moses' activities *during* Israel's deliverance in Exodus 5:1–18:27.

During Deliverance (5:1–18:27)

Moses' activities during Israel's deliverance begin with his time in Egypt, found in Exodus 5:1–13:16. Following this, we learn of Moses' leadership in the march from Egypt to Mount Sinai in Exodus 13:17–18:27. Let's look at Moses' time in Egypt.

In Egypt (5:1–13:16). Moses' time in Egypt answers objections that may have come against Moses because his initial efforts in Egypt inadvertently contributed to the Israelites' suffering.

In 5:1–6:27, we read two parallel sequences that both involve Israel's rejection of Moses' leadership, Moses' lament, and God's reassurance. The first sequence appears in 5:1–6:8. The Israelites rejected Moses for provoking Pharaoh against them. Moses humbly lamented. And God reassured him of his call to lead Israel.

The second sequence, in 6:9–27, follows a similar pattern. But following Israel's second rejection of Moses, and Moses' second lament, God's reassurance comes in the form of a genealogy. Chapter 6:13–27 traces the line of Moses and Aaron from their ancestor Levi to Aaron's grandson Phinehas. Levi, of course, was one of the twelve patriarchs of Israel. And, Phinehas, according to Numbers 25 and 31, led the Israelites in faithful service to God in the days of the second generation. Here, God reassured the second generation that Moses and Aaron were true Israelites, descended from the tribes of Jacob. And in Phinehas, they could see first-hand the faithful legacy of Moses and Aaron and be assured that these men had been called by God to lead them.

This brings us to the second main portion of Moses' activities in Egypt: God's miraculous judgments on Egypt in Exodus 6:28–13:16. These chapters vindicated Moses' authority by pointing to the crucial role he played in God's supernatural acts of judgment against the Egyptians.

The introductory judgment of snakes appears in 6:28–7:13. Aaron's staff miraculously changed into a snake and demonstrated God's power over Egypt by swallowing the snakes produced by Pharaoh's magicians. After this introductory miracle, a series of nine judgments appears in Exodus 7:14–10:29. These nine judgments divide evenly into three series, each of which begins with Moses confronting Pharaoh at the Nile.

The first series runs from 7:14–8:19. It includes the miracles of water turning to blood, frogs covering the land, and gnats rising from the dust. The second series runs from 8:20–9:12 and includes a plague of flies, a plague on the Egyptians' livestock, and a plague of boils. The third series runs from 9:13–10:29. It includes judgments of hail, locusts and darkness. Moses' crucial role in all of these miraculous judgments vindicated his authority as Israel's leader. Finally, the last judgment of Passover closes this section in 11:1–13:16. After God killed every first-born son in Egypt, Pharaoh finally let Israel go.

Having looked at the events during Israel's deliverance that took place in Egypt, we should turn to the ways God also vindicated Moses' authority in the march from Egypt to Mount Sinai in Exodus 13:17–18:27.

In the March (13:17–18:27). Now, despite the troubles that Israel experienced in the march to Sinai, it's important to note that Israel didn't leave Egypt unprepared. Exodus 13:18 explicitly tells us that the Israelites left Egypt "armed for battle." In light of this military theme, this entire section is characterized by conflicts with other nations and by the need for water and food for the Israelite army.

Israel's march in battle array divides into four main segments. The first segment deals with the vindication of Moses' authority at the sea in 13:17–15:21. In Exodus 14:31, after Israel had crossed the sea on dry land, we read this vindication of Moses:

The people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant (Exodus 14:31).

This verse forcefully presents the main points of this segment. The army of Israel "feared the Lord God and put their trust in him." *And* they also put their trust "in Moses his servant." Of course, the message was obvious to the original audience of Exodus. They too were to trust God and Moses in their day.

After this, Israel's army marched to the desert of Shur in 15:22-27. In the desert of Shur, the people challenged Moses' authority by grumbling against Moses because the water he had found was undrinkable. So, God exalted Moses as Israel's leader by providing him a piece of wood that cured the water.

In the third segment, the Israelites arrived in the desert of Sin in 16:1-36. In the desert of Sin, the Israelites challenged Moses' leadership again by grumbling against Moses and Aaron. But this time, in verse 7, Moses insisted that they were actually grumbling against *God*. And God vindicated Moses by granting Israel quail for food and by regularly giving them manna.

God confirms Moses' authority by providing for the people's needs in the wilderness. Even though they grumble against Moses and against the Lord, God graciously provides them with water from the rock, he provides them with manna from heaven, and all of that is not only out of fatherly care for them, but also to confirm that Moses is indeed the one that he had sent... We oftentimes don't, as Christians, think about believing in a man, putting our faith in a man, but here's a case where the people actually are called to put their faith, not only in the Lord, but in Moses as the Lord's instrument and agent in this case. We saw that on the backside of the Red Sea too, when God had his mighty victory over the armies of Egypt, passing through the sea. There on the far side of the sea, it says that the people rejoiced and they praised God, and they put their faith in God and in Moses.

— Prof. Thomas Egger

The fourth and final place to which Israel marched was Rephidim in Exodus 17:1–18:27. This relatively long segment divides into three episodes. First, in Exodus 17:1-7, the people tested God when they grumbled again about water. In response, God commanded Moses to take elders with him to Mount Sinai. There, God instructed Moses to strike a rock, and water came out. Despite this miracle, however, the Israelites quarreled even more with God. They defiantly wondered in verse 7, “Is the Lord among us or not?” The next two episodes put the matter to rest.

Now, to understand how these episodes answer the question, we need to remember something the Israelites knew well. In Genesis 12:3, God had promised Abraham that he would bless all who blessed Israel and curse all who cursed them. So, in line with this promise, in Exodus 17:8-16, when the Amalekites attacked Israel, God defeated them and cursed the Amalekites.

Then in the final episode of this segment, in 18:1-27, Jethro came to Moses in peace. Because Jethro blessed the Israelites, Jethro was blessed by God. These two events demonstrated beyond any doubt that God was among the Israelites just as he had promised Abraham. As the army of Israel followed Moses, they received the protection of God’s powerful presence.

So far, we’ve seen how the structure and content of Exodus first deals with Moses’ authority by focusing on Moses and Israel’s deliverance from Egypt to Mount Sinai. Now we should turn to the second half of the book in Exodus 19:1–40:38. These chapters demonstrate Moses’ authority by turning to Moses and Israel’s preparation for Canaan at Mount Sinai.

PREPARATION FOR CANAAN (EXODUS 19:1–40:38)

Most students of the Bible are familiar with what happened to Moses and the Israelites as they encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai — how God gave them his law and his tabernacle. But Exodus only tells us a few of the things that actually happened there. We know this because the book of Leviticus tells us several other things that occurred at the time. For this reason, we know that these chapters are highly selective. They were designed to accentuate certain perspectives on these events. And as we’ll see, they focus especially on how God displayed Moses’ authority over Israel at Mount Sinai.

Moses and Israel’s preparation for Canaan breaks down into two main sections. The first section appears in Exodus 19:1–24:11 and deals with Moses’ authority and Israel’s covenant. The second section, in 24:12–40:38, emphasizes Moses authority and Israel’s tabernacle. Let’s look at Israel’s covenant.

Israel’s Covenant (19:1–24:11)

Now, the record of Israel’s covenant answers a crucial question for the original audience of Exodus: Why should the second generation of the exodus submit to the covenant law that their forebears received from Moses at Mount Sinai? Why shouldn’t they follow a different path?

The chapters devoted to Israel's covenant answer this question in four steps. First, in Exodus 19:1 through the beginning of verse 8, we find the initiation of Israel's covenant with God.

Initiation of Covenant (19:1-8a). These verses give the basic terms of the Mosaic covenant: God had shown the Israelites benevolence; he required loyalty from them; they would be blessed if they obeyed him. Exodus 19:8 closes the episode with Israel's enthusiastic and unanimous response: "We will do everything the Lord has said." And of course, the point was clear; the second-generation audience of Exodus should imitate their forebears. They should recommit to God's covenant through Moses with equal enthusiasm.

Israel's Trust in Moses (19:8b-20:20). The second step of Moses' authority and Israel's covenant focuses on Israel's trust in Moses as the mediator of God's covenant. It begins in Exodus 19 in the second half of verse 8 and runs through 20:20. You'll remember that in Exodus 19:9, God made this promise to Moses:

I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you (Exodus 19:9).

Notice here that God said he would appear on Mount Sinai and speak with Moses so that "the people ... [would] *always* put their trust in [Moses]." Then the scenes that follow explain how God kept this promise.

The main body of this step consists of two parallel series of God's instruction, Moses' obedience, and God's theophany. The first series appears in 19:10-19 where God instructed Moses to prepare Israel to meet with God. Moses obeyed God's instruction, and the result was a dramatic theophany on Mount Sinai — the glorious, visible and audible manifestation of God's presence there.

Then, we read the second series in Exodus 19:20-25. God instructed Moses once again to prepare the people, and Moses obeyed. As a result, in 20:1-17, the narrative returns to the theophany on Mount Sinai where God spoke the Ten Commandments for all of Israel to hear.

In balance with God's promise in the opening segment of this section, Exodus 20:18-20 explains that God's promise to Moses was fulfilled. These verses depict how, after hearing God's voice from the mountain, the Israelites were so terrified that they asked for God to stop speaking to them directly. They begged Moses to speak to them on God's behalf. The implication of this request for the second-generation audience is clear enough. Their own forebears turned to Moses as the mediator of God's covenant law and they should too.

Moses' Covenant Law (20:21-23:33). The third step in this section on Moses' authority and Israel's covenant is found in Exodus 20:21-23:33. These chapters present the content of Moses' covenant law. This entire step vindicates Moses authority by noting that God himself commanded Moses to deliver the law to Israel.

This step is introduced in 20:21-26. Here, God instructed Moses to tell Israel his laws for worship — instructions on idols and altars. These verses largely elaborate on the first two of the Ten Commandments. Following this, God instructed Moses to tell Israel the content of the Book of the Covenant in 21:1–23:33.

To understand how the Book of the Covenant was to function in Israel, it's important to note that in Exodus 21:1, God described the Book of the Covenant in this way:

These are the laws you are to set before them (Exodus 21:1).

The Hebrew term here translated “the laws” is *הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים* (*hammishpatim*). This term has the connotations of “legal judgments,” or what we might call “case laws.” This designation for the Book of the Covenant gives us a clear orientation toward God’s twofold covenant law through Moses. Essentially, the Ten Commandments functioned as statutory laws, or general legal principles in Israel. And the Book of the Covenant presented legal precedents on a wide variety of topics that Israel’s judges were to follow. Many of these precedents resemble the kinds of laws in the *Code of Hammurabi* and other ancient Near Eastern law codes. These codes and the Book of the Covenant were designed for judges to apply in the courts of their nations.

The Book of the Covenant has many parallels to other legal codes that we have in the ancient Near East from the late third millennium down into the second millennium B.C. It differs in the sense that it’s in a covenant context. Hammurabi’s code is the most famous of these, the most extensive of these law codes... The way the laws are formulated in the “if-then” pattern — with the “then” usually giving the civil sanction for the situation — is very similar to how the laws are formulated in Exodus 21:1 through, I think, about 22:16, I think it is, in a kind of “if-then” structure, which has been called a casuistic form, a case law form. When we get into the actual details, the differences between ancient Israelite society and the society of ancient Babylon, let’s say, a city-state in Mesopotamia, is very different. A city-state in Babylonia, like Babylon, is a very stratified society, which has free persons, freeborn persons and commoners at another level, and then slaves. It also has a very differentiated economy with different economic roles in the society. There’s a powerful temple complex which plays into the whole economy. The palace, the royal palace is a major factor in the structure of the society. And it’s almost like a feudal society, like we think of in a medieval feudal society. The Israelite society is much more egalitarian, not in a modern individualistic sense, but it’s based on an agrarian economy and a tribal organization for land tenure. So, there isn’t the same distinction, there isn’t the same societal stratification that you find in Hammurabi’s Code, let’s say.

— Dr. Douglas Gropp

Ratification of Covenant (24:1-11). In the fourth and closing step of Moses' authority and Israel's covenant, Exodus 24:1-11 records the ratification of the covenant. This fourth step completes what began with the initiation of the covenant in Exodus 19:1 through the beginning of verse 8. Note in particular that Exodus 24:3 and 7 both echo 19:8 where Israel repeated in unison their commitment to do all that God commanded.

Beyond this, the last scene of this step describes how the leaders of Israel ascended Mount Sinai, saw God, and ate and drank in wondrous harmony with him. The wonder of this scene of peace and harmony with God was designed to dispel any hesitation the original audience of Exodus may have had. How could they experience peace and harmony with God? Only by acknowledging the abiding authority of God's covenant law through Moses in their own day.

Now that we've explored Moses and Israel's preparation for Canaan at Mount Sinai by looking at Israel's covenant in Exodus 19:1–24:11, we should turn to the last major focus of Exodus. An emphasis on Moses' authority and Israel's tabernacle appears in Exodus 24:12–40:38. These chapters support Moses' abiding authority by focusing on the crucial role he played in establishing God's tabernacle.

Israel's Tabernacle (24:12–40:38)

Most students of the Bible think of Israel's tabernacle as little more than a chapel for worship, but recent archeological discoveries strongly suggest that it was much more than this. It was the custom in ancient Egypt for Pharaohs to go out to battle with their armies. When they did, they lived in elaborate tent structures, mobile palaces as it were. These royal war tents consisted of covered inner and outer rooms that were surrounded by a courtyard. At these tents, armies would do homage to their king and would receive directions from the king. Along these same lines, Exodus presents God's tabernacle as more than a chapel for worship. It was his royal war tent. And as such, it was where the army of Israel did homage to its divine king and where Israel's divine king revealed his directives to the army of Israel.

Instructions for Tabernacle (24:12–31:18). The record of Moses' authority and Israel's tabernacle divides into three main parts. First, Exodus 24:12–31:18 consists of God's instructions to Moses for the tabernacle. God's instructions for the tabernacle begin in Exodus 24:12-18 with God's call for Moses to receive the Ten Commandments on stone tablets. Then God's specific instructions for the tabernacle appear in 25:1–31:17. These instructions give detailed descriptions of the tabernacle's furnishings and architecture. God also dictated guidelines for the personnel and practices of the tabernacle with directives for priests, artisans, and skilled laborers. And he gave direct instructions regarding the weekly Sabbath. The number and length of these details reflect the importance of observing certain protocols at God's royal war tent. Then, after this main body of instructions, we find Moses' successful reception of the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments in Exodus 31:18. This marks the end of God's instructions for the tabernacle.

Now, on several occasions in this section, God explicitly pointed to the fact that his directives were not just for the Israelites at Mount Sinai. They were also for Exodus' second-generation audience. In places like Exodus 27:21; 28:43; 29:9 and 42; 30:21; and 31:16, God used several variations on the phrase, "a lasting ordinance for the generations to come." This indicated how various aspects of his instructions for the tabernacle were to be observed by future generations. Of course, the point of these notations for the original audience was clear. They were to observe God's instructions for the tabernacle in their own day as well.

There are a number of parallels particularly in the technology of the way the tabernacle is put together as it's described in the book of Exodus, how it can be put together with poles and stands and so on and then be dismantled and carried so that it becomes effectively mobile. There are parallels to that in Egypt in many different periods, but the most outstanding parallel is to the relief of Ramses II in his Battle of Kadesh in the Abu Simbel temple, which commemorates this battle of Kadesh, which he claims to have won but most scholars think he was, sort of, he was lucky to get out alive. But there's a relief on the wall of Abu Simbel which depicts his own tent, his own war tent, and it has the same exact dimensions as the tabernacle with a kind of a square inner room, which must have been his throne room, and then a longer hallway, which was twice as long as the inner room, and outside of that is a rectangular court, much like the rectangular court around the tabernacle. Also, we can see in the relief that his four divisions of his army are placed in the four sides of his camp, much like as is described in the book of Numbers. The tabernacle is surrounded first by the Levites and then by four sets of three tribes on all four directions.

— Dr. Douglas Gropp

Failure and Renewal (32:1-34:35). After God's instructions for the tabernacle, Moses recounted Israel's failure and renewal at the foot of Mount Sinai in Exodus 32:1–34:35. These chapters divide into three main steps. In 32:1-35, we read of the Israelites breaking their covenant with God by worshiping the golden calf at Mount Sinai. These chapters vindicate Moses' authority because Moses identified himself closely with Israel and interceded for them. At the risk of his own life, Moses mediated and won God's favor toward Israel. And God did not utterly destroy the nation.

Then, the second step of this section, in Exodus 33:1-23, turns to the threat of God's absence. Having agreed not to destroy the nation immediately, God commanded Moses to move forward. But God threatened to remove his presence because he might destroy Israel along the way. But once again, Moses identified himself with the nation, interceded successfully on Israel's behalf, and removed the threat of God's absence.

The third step of this section, in 34:1-35, involves God's covenant renewal with Israel. God confirmed that he would go with Israel toward Canaan by renewing his

covenant. And this chapter exalts Moses as Israel's leader by reporting his effective intercessions during the renewal of the covenant.

Completion of Tabernacle (35:1–40:38). Finally, the section on Moses' authority and Israel's tabernacle closes with the completion of the tabernacle in Exodus 35:1–40:38. These chapters begin with a reminder of the weekly Sabbath in 35:1-3. Then God gave Moses the commission to build and operate the tabernacle in 35:4–39:43. Exodus 40:1-33 depicts the actual building of the tabernacle. The details in these verses demonstrate how the building of the tabernacle, God's royal war tent, conformed perfectly to God's earlier instructions. And this section ends in 40:34-38 with God's blessing on Israel in response to the tabernacle's completion.

This final scene of God's blessing on Israel focuses once again on Moses' authority. It encouraged the original audience to submit to Moses by observing all the protocols of God's tabernacle, so that they too would receive God's blessing. Listen to Exodus 40:36-38, the last verses of the book:

In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out — until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels (Exodus 40:36-38).

Moses closed his book with this glorious summation of Israel's travels toward Canaan. He pointed out that God's presence remained because the first generation submitted to Moses' instructions for the tabernacle. The second-generation audience could see God's magnificent presence with their own eyes. And if they hoped to keep God's presence with them as they moved into the conquest of the Promised Land, they would have to submit to Moses' tabernacle instructions — the instructions for the royal war tent of their divine king.

Now that we've explored some initial considerations and the structure and content of Exodus, we should turn to our third main topic: the major themes of this book. What are some of the most important issues in Exodus that impacted the lives of the original audience? And how should these major themes be applied to followers of Christ today?

MAJOR THEMES

Throughout this lesson, we've pointed out how the book of Exodus was designed to highlight Moses' abiding authority over Israel. As important as this theme is, we always have to keep in mind that it's not the *only* theme in the book. While these Scriptures do build a case for Moses' authority, they do this by drawing attention to a number of other issues related to this prominent, unifying theme.

Exodus actually weaves so many different themes other than the authority of Moses together that we could summarize it in many, many different ways. But one of the most helpful strategies to summarize the main themes of the book is to explore how this book emphasizes the kingdom of God. Now, that's a theme that runs through the whole Bible, and it even reaches its culmination in the New Testament, so it's an important theme for us to look at in this book. Now, sometimes modern Christians miss this facet of Exodus, but we all know that Exodus deals with the time when God formed Israel into a *bona fide* nation at Mt. Sinai, and the time when he prepared them to become a kingdom in the Promised Land and later, then, throughout the whole world. And so, we can see this emphasis on the kingdom of God in the book, but one of the best ways to see it is to see how Exodus characterizes God. God is a primary character in the book of Exodus, and it has a lot to say about God, but it primarily emphasizes that God is Israel's king.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Exodus is the first book in Scripture to refer *explicitly* to God as king. In Exodus 15:1-18, after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea on dry ground, Moses and the Israelites sang a song to the Lord. The body of the song draws the experiences of the first and second generations of the exodus together. It focuses on God's past deliverance of Israel from Egypt, and also on Israel's future success in the conquest and settlement of Canaan. Interestingly, Moses' last words at the sea draw both the past deliverance from Egypt and the future conquest and settlement of Canaan together under the kingship of God. Listen to Exodus 15:18 where Moses drew his entire praise of God together with these words:

The Lord reigns for ever and ever (Exodus 15:18).

As this verse indicates, God's mighty acts for both generations of the exodus displayed his glory as the divine king of Israel, the one who "reigns for ever and ever."

In this light, it will be helpful to organize the major themes of Exodus by considering four ways Exodus emphasized God's kingship in the days of Moses. First, we'll explore God as Israel's royal covenant keeper in Exodus 1:1-4:31. Second, we'll see how Exodus gives special attention to God as Israel's victorious royal warrior in Exodus 5:1-18:27. Next, we'll look at the theme of God as the royal covenant lawgiver in Exodus 19:1-24:11. And finally, we'll consider the theme of God as Israel's present warrior in Exodus 24:12-40:38. Let's look at each of these themes, beginning with God as the royal covenant keeper.

COVENANT KEEPER (1:1–4:31)

Although the theme of God as Israel’s royal covenant keeper appears throughout the book of Exodus, it’s primarily emphasized in Exodus 1:1–4:31. These chapters rehearse events from before Moses’ birth to Moses’ rise to leadership over Israel. Listen for instance to Exodus 2:24 where we read:

God heard [the Israelites’] groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob (Exodus 2:24).

This verse is important because, apart from a brief note that God blessed the midwives who feared him, this is the first time Exodus mentions God. So, from the outset, Exodus portrayed God as the royal covenant keeper, the one who “remembered his covenant.”

Whenever the Scriptures mention God and his covenants, they implicitly focus on him as Israel’s divine king. During biblical times, God covenanted with people in ways that were similar to how great kings in the ancient Near East made treaties with other nations. Today, we often call these international treaties “suzerain-vassal treaties.” In these treaties, greater kings, or suzerains, established solemn arrangements with lesser kings, or vassals, and their nations. The Israelites understood that, as Israel’s faithful *covenant keeper*, God was also their divine king. And he fulfilled his covenant with Israel’s patriarchs by acting in the days of Moses. So, God’s covenant with Moses wasn’t contrary to his earlier covenants with Israel’s patriarchs. Rather, it was in fulfillment of them. Listen to this emphasis in Exodus 3:14-15 where God revealed his name to Moses.

I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I AM has sent me to you... The Lord, the God of your fathers — the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob — has sent me to you” (Exodus 3:14-15).

Notice here that God told Moses to identify him to the Israelites in Egypt with three different names: “I AM WHO I AM,” “I AM,” and “the Lord.”

To understand how these names relate to God as the royal covenant keeper, we need understand that all three names are variations of the same Hebrew verb *הָיָה* (*hayah*). This word is most often translated by some form of the verb “to be.” It’s easy to see that “I AM WHO I AM” — or “I will be who I will be,” as the Hebrew may be translated — and the shorter form, “I am,” or “I will be,” involve first-person forms of this verb. But the name translated “Lord” requires a bit more explanation.

The term “Lord,” translates the so-called divine tetragrammaton, the four-letter Hebrew name of God that is often transcribed “YHWH”. Recent archeological discoveries have indicated that this term should be pronounced “Yahweh.” Yahweh is most often translated “Lord.” But it’s actually a third-person form of the verb “*hayah*” and may be translated, “he is” or “he will be.” In fact, following certain conventions of the Hebrew language, it is likely to mean “he causes to be” or “he will cause to be.” Along these same

lines, “I AM WHO I AM” may be translated, “I *cause* to be what I *cause* to be.” And “I AM” may be translated, “I *cause* to be.”

Assuming this understanding is correct, in these verses the name Yahweh, and these associated names, directly pointed to the fact that God was *causing* his covenant promises *to be*. In other words, he was keeping his covenant promises to Israel’s patriarchs by bringing them to fulfillment.

It isn’t difficult to see why Moses emphasized that God was faithfully fulfilling his covenant promises. In Genesis 15:14, God had promised to deliver Israel from hardship in a foreign land. Moses’ audience needed to know that God was fulfilling this promise in their day. They needed to see that every blessing in their past, present and future was the result of their divine king keeping his covenant with their patriarchs.

In many respects, the same is true for followers of Christ. God keeps the covenants he made with Israel’s patriarchs in *our* past, present and future as well. Passages like Luke 1:68-73 teach us that the final fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham began in the inauguration of Christ’s kingdom, during his first advent. In addition, passages like Galatians 3:15-18 tell us that during the continuation of Christ’s kingdom we must continue to trust in God and his promises to Abraham. Also, verses like Romans 4:13 teach that, at the consummation of Christ’s kingdom, the glorious eternal reward we’ll receive in Christ will be in fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel’s patriarchs.

We are in Christ. Christ is the heir of Abraham’s covenant. And God will not fail to keep his covenant with Abraham. These and similar applications to our world flow out of every passage in Exodus that reveals God as Israel’s covenant-keeping king.

The book of Exodus demonstrates that God is always faithful to his covenant, because even when the children of Israel rebelled against Moses and they did not honor what God had done with them in the past, God kept his promises to deliver them. God wouldn’t have given up because of their rebelliousness, but he had to achieve the goal that he had set to deliver them. And this goal that God has set for all of us to draw us closer to him. No matter how much distance we walk away from God, God tries and God keeps on drawing us closer to him. No matter how broken we are, he comes closer to us so that he can fix us and so that he can bring us back home. So, the book of Exodus, it’s a reflection of the life that God has called us. And he is there to deliver. In fact, the book of Exodus is the book of delivery. People have fallen and they need to be delivered, and we do that every day. And God does that. He specializes in drawing us closer to him even when we are running away from his grace.

— Rev. Dr. Cyprian K. Guchienda

In addition to the major theme of God as Israel’s royal covenant keeper, we should note the emphasis on God as Israel’s victorious royal warrior in Exodus 5:1–18:27.

VICTORIOUS WARRIOR (5:1–18:27)

Archeological discoveries in every major empire of Moses' day show how common it was for divine and human kingship to be linked to victory in war. So, even a slight allusion to God as Israel's victorious warrior was an indication that he was also Israel's victorious king.

We'll look at God as Israel's victorious royal warrior, first, when Moses was in Egypt. Then we'll examine this theme when Moses and the Israelites were in the march from Egypt to Sinai. Let's start with Moses in Egypt.

In Egypt

This theme appears throughout Exodus, but we can see it especially during Israel's deliverance in 5:1–13:16. God's miraculous judgments against Egypt not only vindicated Moses' authority; they also displayed God's victory as Israel's royal warrior.

In Exodus 12:12, God summed up the significance of his greatest judgment, the judgment of Passover, in this way:

I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn — both men and animals — and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord (Exodus 12:12).

Notice that in this verse God declared, "I am the Lord," or "I am [Yahweh]." Here again, God identified himself as the one who remembers his covenant by causing its fulfillment. As Israel's victorious royal warrior, he was going to "strike down every firstborn [of] both men and animals." In other words, he was going to destroy the Egyptians and their society because they had made themselves his enemies. And along with this human emphasis, God would "bring judgment on all the *gods* of Egypt." He would defeat the false gods, the evil spirits that the Egyptians worshiped.

We can see this duality in Yahweh's miraculous judgments against Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Most, if not all, of these judgments also brought victory over one or more of Egypt's false gods. For instance, when Aaron's staff became a snake and swallowed the snakes of Pharaoh's magicians, it wasn't just a victory over Pharaoh. It was a victory over the divine power symbolized by the cobra that decorated Pharaoh's crown. When God turned the Nile to blood, he demonstrated his power over Egyptian gods and goddesses that were associated with the Nile, like Hapi, Sepek, who took the form of a crocodile, Khnum, and Hatmehyt whose symbol was a fish. The plague of frogs displayed God's power over Hekhet, the Egyptian goddess depicted as a human with a frog's head. No Egyptian gods have been conclusively associated with the plague of gnats. But scholars have made a number of suggestions such as Geb, the god of earth. This plague also may have served to humiliate the Egyptian priests and magicians. The plague of flies may have been directed against the god Khepre, who is often represented as a flying beetle. The death of livestock displayed God's power over an assortment of gods depicted as bulls, such as Apis, Buchis, Mnevis, Ptah and Re, as well as Isis, queen

of the gods and Hathor goddess of beauty and love. Both of these goddesses were depicted as cows. The plague of boils was likely a display of God's power over Sekhmet and Imhotep, who were associated with disease and healing. The judgment of hail displayed God's power over Nut, the goddess of the sky and Shu who held up the sky. The locusts were in defiance of Senehem who protected from pests. The judgment of darkness showed Yahweh's power over the great sun god Re, or Amon-Re. Then the closing plague of death for the firstborn was an affront to Min and Isis, deities associated with procreation. As these associations indicate, God's miraculous judgments in Egypt not only demonstrated his victory over his physical enemies, but also over his spiritual enemies, the forces of Satan.

We've seen the theme of God as Israel's victorious royal warrior when Moses was in Egypt. But God's victory over human and spiritual enemies also appears when Moses and the Israelites were in the march to Sinai in Exodus 13:17–18:27.

In the March (13:17–18:27)

Of course, the fact that God led the army of Israel through hardships on the way to Mount Sinai reveals him as Israel's royal warrior. But perhaps the best way to illustrate this facet of Exodus is to turn again to Moses' song at the Red Sea. Listen to Exodus 15:3-4 where Moses sang:

The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name. Pharaoh's chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea (Exodus 15:3-4).

Here Moses explicitly identified Yahweh as "a warrior," and then repeated that "[Yahweh] is his name." This close association between God's name and God as a warrior formed the background of the familiar Old Testament expression "Lord of hosts" or "Yahweh of armies." As his name indicates, God, the royal warrior, causes the hosts or armies to be, and he defeats his enemies. In this case, he overcame "Pharaoh's chariots and his army" by hurling them "into the sea." Then, in Exodus 15:11, Moses also identified the spiritual side of God's victory when he said:

Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you — majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders? (Exodus 15:11).

God's victory not only showed his power over the human army of Egypt, but it also displayed his triumph over all of Egypt's false gods.

What's it mean that God is a victorious warrior? Well, in the ancient world it basically means that God is the Lord of creation and the true King, and that's exactly what we see in Exodus 15. In 15:11 it asks a great question in this praise: "Who is like the Lord?" And the answer is, no one. There's no one, and specifically, there's no other gods or goddesses that are like God. So this is, when we talk about God being

a victorious warrior, this is a powerful statement in a context where there were hundreds of other deities that were vying for the title of God. And basically, what the Bible does is really subtle. It asks the question, “Who is like the Lord?” And the answer is no one, with the point being: You may think there’s other gods, but at the end of the day, there’s only one being who’s worthy of the title God, and that’s the Lord. And then Exodus 15 ends with “The Lord will reign for ever and ever.” And that’s the kind of warrior that we want fighting for us.

— Dr. Brian D. Russell

The book of Exodus emphasized Yahweh’s victory over Pharaoh and his false gods to give the second-generation audience confidence. God was able to defeat *their* physical and spiritual enemies too. They learned about how God had fought for their forebears in the past. In this way, they also learned how he would give them triumph in the future as they entered the conquest of Canaan.

In much the same way, as Christians learn of God’s great victory in Exodus, we can reflect on what the New Testament teaches about Christ’s victory. In passages like Matthew 12:28 and 29, John 12:31, and Colossians 2:15, the New Testament teaches that Christ acted as our divine royal warrior when he inaugurated his kingdom. But while Jesus defeated Satan and the false gods of the world, he also mercifully offered forgiveness and reconciliation with God to all who would surrender to him.

And, in passages like 1 Corinthians 15:25, Hebrews 1:3 and 1 Peter 3:22, we learn that Jesus is our royal victorious warrior during the continuation of his kingdom. Throughout church history we are to imitate Christ’s strategy of defeating Satan and other evil spirits in the world. And we are to continue to offer forgiveness and reconciliation with God through faith in Christ.

Finally, in passages like 2 Thessalonians 1:6 and 7, Hebrews 10:27, and 2 Peter 3:7, we find that, at the consummation of his kingdom, Christ will return as the divine royal warrior once again. But at his return, Christ’s merciful offer of reconciliation will end. Those who have refused to come to Christ will suffer the same fate as Satan and his minions — the eternal judgment of God.

Having looked at the major themes of God as Israel’s royal covenant keeper and victorious royal warrior, we should turn to a third major theme in Exodus: God as Israel’s royal covenant lawgiver in Exodus 19:1–24:11.

COVENANT LAWGIVER (19:1–24:11)

As we saw earlier, these verses draw attention to Moses’ authority and Israel’s covenant law. In the ancient Near East, people believed that both human and divine kings revealed their wisdom through the laws they gave. So, it wouldn’t have surprised the original audience of Exodus that God was their royal covenant lawgiver. But, for us to recognize how Moses emphasized this theme, it will help to look at *why* God gave his law in the book of Exodus.

Every major Protestant tradition has spoken of three main uses of the law. The first is what's often been called "*usus pedagogicus*," the pedagogical use of the law. New Testament passages like Galatians 3:23-26, Romans 3:20, and Romans 5:20 and 21 teach that God uses the law to incite and expose sin. In this way, human beings are driven to Christ for salvation. Second, Protestants refer to what's sometimes been called "*usus civilis*," the civic or political use of the law. In this use, the law restrains sin in society by the threat of God's punishment. But, as true as these outlooks are to the teachings of Scripture in general, the book of Exodus emphasizes what's been called "the third use of the law." This is sometimes referred to as "*usus normativus*," the normative use, or "*usus didacticus*," the instructive use. In this case, God's law is the norm, or instruction, for those who are already under his grace. So, in the book of Exodus, God gave the law primarily to guide his people, Israel, toward his blessings.

This theme appears in many places in Exodus. But it's especially evident in 19:1–24:11, beginning with the initiation of God's covenant with Israel and continuing through the ratification of the covenant. Listen to Exodus 19:4 where God told the Israelites:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself (Exodus 19:4).

We see here that even before the Israelites received the law, they'd already experienced God's grace. In verses 5 and 6, God then turned to the requirement of Israel's obedience to the law and the benefits of loyalty. He said:

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6).

Having already received God's grace, Israel would be his "treasured possession," "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" if they obeyed his law. Clearly, God's law wasn't given so that Israel might *earn* their salvation. The law was his gift to his people after he'd already shown them mercy.

A similar pattern appears in Exodus 20:1-17. In 20:2, God initiated the Ten Commandments with a declaration of his benevolence toward Israel, saying:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery (Exodus 20:2).

Once again, we see that God's mercy preceded his law to Israel. It wasn't until after this declaration that God gave Israel the Ten Commandments. And, as a number of the Ten Commandments state explicitly, Israel would receive blessings for obedience to the law.

Maybe some people think of the law of God as constrictive and antithetical to grace, but when we look at the way that God gave the law in the Old Testament, we can see that it was a gracious thing for

God to give the law in the way that he did. What we see is that God gave the law to his people after he had redeemed them from bondage of slavery in Egypt. As he lead them out and powerfully intervened on their behalf, he then brings them into the wilderness and condescends to them and reveals his plan for how they are to live under the lordship and the kingship of God who is their great King. And so, the law is not something that God required his people to keep in order that he *then* might redeem them. Instead, the law was given *after* God redeemed them from Egypt and shows his people the way that they are to live under the lordship of God as great King, and how they are to live among one another as a redeemed people. And so, whenever you read about the law in the Old Testament, it's already being given in the context of God's gracious condescension to his people.

— Dr. Brandon D. Crowe

God also exhibited this pattern during the ratification of the covenant. In Exodus 24:1 and 2, he graciously invited the leaders of Israel to come up to him on Mount Sinai. In verses 3-8, the people pledged obedience to the law. And in verses 9-11, the leaders of Israel celebrated the blessing of peace with God, and actually saw God.

For the original audience, this emphasis on the gracious and beneficial character of God's law in the past alerted them to their need to follow God's law in their own time. The law was their gift from God in their current circumstances and in the future as well.

Along these same lines, as followers of Christ, every time we see God's commands to Israel in the book of Exodus, we are to view them as God's gracious and beneficial gift to us in Christ.

Now, we know that in the inauguration of his kingdom, Jesus and his apostles and prophets gave the church new revelations to help us apply Moses' law to our age. But passages like Matthew 5:17, Romans 8:4 and Hebrews 8:10 make it clear that Jesus and his followers didn't discount the authority of Moses' law. And the same is true during the continuation of the kingdom. Today, we must not attempt to obey God's law as if Christ has not come. But we must apply it today in the light of God's further revelation in Christ. And, as we know, when Christ returns at the consummation of his kingdom, his people will be fully sanctified. Then we will obey the perfect law of God, written on our hearts, in the new creation.

We've looked at the major themes in the book of Exodus by exploring God as Israel's royal covenant keeper, as the victorious royal warrior, and as the royal covenant lawgiver. Finally, let's look at the theme of God as Israel's present warrior in Exodus 24:12–40:38.

PRESENT WARRIOR (24:12–40:38)

The book of Exodus offers a very interesting take on the kingship of the Lord over Israel. Often when people study the Old Testament,

they think of Israel's first king as Saul, and he is the first earthly king, so to speak. But when you read Exodus 19:5 and 6, it talks about Israel being a "kingdom of priests." Well, you can't have a kingdom without a king, and so, really, the perspective of Exodus 19:5-6 is that the first king of Israel is actually God himself. And even though God is not incarnate in Christ in the Old Testament, he nevertheless makes himself visible as king and his kingship in Christ visible through these images of the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. The tabernacle becomes a symbol of Emmanuel, "God with us." And so, God's kingship is visible in these figures and symbols that he gives to Israel by which he shows his own rule and kingship through Christ over Israel.

— Dr. Don Collett

We see the theme of God's kingly presence most clearly in Exodus 24:12–40:38. This fourth major division of Exodus focuses on Moses' authority and Israel's tabernacle. These chapters rehearse how God gave Moses instructions for the tabernacle, how Israel failed at the foot of Mount Sinai, and how Moses led Israel in the tabernacle's construction. Each of these events emphasized God's presence with his people. In Exodus 33:14, God assured Moses:

My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest (Exodus 33:14).

The expression "My Presence" in this verse translates the Hebrew noun פָּנִים (*panim*), a term that is usually translated "face." In a number of passages in Exodus and elsewhere, God's "face" signifies his special, intense, attentive, and often visible presence with his people.

Although God is omnipresent, he devotes himself to his people in special ways throughout the Bible. In this portion of Exodus, God's presence resided near and in the tabernacle. As we mentioned earlier in this lesson, the tabernacle was much more than a chapel or a place where Israel held worship services. Israel worshiped God at the tabernacle because it was God's royal war tent. Much like ancient human kings lived in royal war tents when they led their armies into battle, God took up residence in his tabernacle to lead Israel's army toward the conquest of Canaan.

Now, in Exodus 32:1–34:35, the presence of God with his people was seriously threatened. In this episode, we learn of Israel's failure and renewal at Mount Sinai. When God first saw that the Israelites were worshipping the golden calf at Sinai, he threatened to destroy the entire nation except for Moses. But through Moses' intercession, God relented and only punished those who had sinned. Still, God threatened to remove his presence from his people as they moved forward. But the thought of marching forward without the presence of the divine king was unthinkable. Listen to Exodus 33:15-16 where Moses said to God:

**If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.
How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your**

people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth? (Exodus 33:15-16).

Notice here that Moses asked God not to send Israel ahead “if [his] Presence [did] not go with [them].” He sought reassurance that all was right between them. And he asked God not to take away what distinguished them “from all the people on the face of the earth,” namely, God’s presence with them. In Exodus 33:17, God responded in this way:

I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name (Exodus 33:17).

It’s no wonder then that Exodus 40:38, the last verse of the book, highlights God’s presence with Israel at the tabernacle:

So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels (Exodus 40:38).

God is present with his people. He’s present with Moses in the bush. He’s present with his people with this pillar of fire and this cloud, guiding them at night with the fire and the cloud during the day. And then as we move into the latter chapters of the book, the parts of the book that often get ignored, God gives them a tent, a tabernacle. And within this tabernacle tent he gives them the Ark of the Covenant, where God’s presence is symbolically there. And the thing I love about this is we see that God is a God who wants to be with his people, which, for me, foreshadows nicely what we encounter in John 1, when it says:

The Word became flesh and tabernacled with his people (John 1:14, literal).

God in the Old Testament wants to be with his people, and ultimately God sent his Son Jesus to be with his people in the New Testament.

— Dr. David T. Lamb

The New Testament applies this major theme of God’s special kingly presence to followers of Christ in all three stages of Christ’s kingdom. Passages like Matthew 18:20 and John 2:19-21 explain that in the inauguration of his kingdom, Christ himself was the supernatural royal presence of God with his people. In fact, John 1:14 draws an explicit connection between the tabernacle of Israel and Jesus’ first advent. Listen to this verse:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

The expression “made his dwelling among us” derives from the Greek term σκηνόω (*skénoó*). The Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, used this same term for the Hebrew verb שָׁכַן (*shākan*) that appears in Exodus for God’s presence in his tabernacle. So, this verse indicates that Christ’s incarnation was God with his people leading them to victory.

In addition, passages like Acts 2:17 and Romans 5:5 teach that when Jesus ascended into heaven, he poured out his Spirit on followers of Christ. So, throughout the continuation of Christ’s kingdom, the Holy Spirit indwells his church. As God filled the tabernacle with his presence, the Spirit fills his people with his special, intense presence that guarantees us of God’s guidance and victory day by day.

And of course, New Testament passages like Revelation 21:3 also teach that Christ’s incarnation and the presence of the Spirit now are but preludes to the wonder of God’s royal presence in the new creation. When Christ returns in the consummation of his kingdom, he will make all things new. And the entire creation will be filled with the visible glory of our present warrior king.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson entitled “An Overview of Exodus,” we’ve introduced some initial considerations to keep in mind, including its author, occasion, original meaning, and modern application. We’ve also explored Exodus’ structure and content by dividing the book into two main divisions. And we’ve looked at a few of the major themes including how several dimensions of God’s kingship are highlighted throughout the book.

The book of Exodus had tremendous significance for its original Israelite audience as they were encamped with Moses on the border of the Promised Land. As the Israelites contemplated the challenges of living for God in their day, Exodus called on them to reaffirm their commitment to Moses as the God-ordained leader of their nation. The book reminded them of Moses’ role in their deliverance from Egypt to Mount Sinai. And it reminded them of how God had prepared them for the Promised Land.

In much the same way, as followers of Christ today, the book of Exodus calls on us to affirm our loyalty to Moses’ authority, but in the light of what God has accomplished in Christ. As much as God did through Moses as the leader of Israel, the book of Exodus shows us how much more God has done through Christ. In Christ, God has forever delivered us from slavery to sin and the dominion of Satan. And in Christ, God has given us the presence of Christ’s Spirit and instructions to guide us. And in this light, the book of Exodus gives us countless opportunities to learn more and more about how we are to follow Christ as he leads us to our eternal inheritance promised in the new heaven and the new earth.

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The Pentateuch

LESSON
ELEVEN

An Overview of Exodus Faculty Forum



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The Pentateuch

Lesson Eleven: An Overview of Exodus

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Steve Blakemore
Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.
Dr. Don Collett
Dr. Dorian G. Coover-Cox
Prof. Thomas Egger
Rev. Dr. Cyprian K. Guchienda

Dr. James M. Hamilton
Dr. Gordon H. Johnston
Dr. Riad Kassis
Dr. David T. Lamb
Dr. Erika Moore
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Rev. Dr. Paul R. Raabe
Dr. Scott Redd
Dr. Brian D. Russell
Dr. Timothy E. Saleska
Dr. Michael D. Williams

Question 1:

When was the book of Exodus written?

Prof. Thomas Egger

We don't know precisely when the book of Exodus was written, but if it was written by Moses, as it most likely was in its bulk, then it was written during Moses's lifetime. It obviously wasn't written before all of the events that delivered the Israelites out of Egypt, so it was written sometime in the wilderness between the exodus from Egypt and the death of Moses at the end of the book of Deuteronomy.

Dr. Erika Moore

When was the book of Exodus written? Well, that's hard to say. We don't know for sure. Moses had his hand in writing the Pentateuch. I talk about the "essential Mosaic authorship" of the Pentateuch. When did he write it? Well, again, it seems that Moses would have left something to the Israelites, on the plains of Moab, before he died and went to be with the Lord. So, it seems that along the journey we see that he was commanded to write by the Lord, so it makes sense that during the 40-year wilderness wanderings, Moses is writing things down and then bequeathing that to the Israelites.

Question 2:

What is the literary purpose of the book of Exodus?

Prof. Thomas Egger

The literary purpose of the book of Exodus, when you turn to the book of Exodus and begin to read, becomes clear from the very beginning. The book begins by saying, "These are the names of the sons of Israel that went down to Egypt." And, in fact, in Hebrew, the book of Exodus is oftentimes called "*Shemot*," — "Names" — and it is all about the identity of the people of God, Israel, and even more importantly about the identity and the character of their God, Yahweh, Jehovah, the Lord who comes and visits them in Egypt in fulfillment of his promises, leads them out with a mighty hand and then shows them his great compassion and provision and righteousness in

the wilderness, making a covenant with them and leading them as his own people. So, it really, at its heart, answers the question, who is God? And it answers the question, who is Israel? Who are the people of God?

Dr. Dorian G. Coover-Cox

If you want to understand the literary purpose of the book of Exodus, a good way to start would be to think about its structure as a whole. What does it contain? What do you think about the book of Exodus? Well, I suppose most people think, Oh, that's the book that's about how God brought the Israelites out of Egypt. It's about the exodus, right? Yeah, it is, but it contains stories about their travel after they were brought out of Egypt, time in the wilderness where, hmm, why is that there? And then it has all these laws and then instructions about how to build the tabernacle. Well, why wouldn't you have all the instructions for the tabernacle in the book of Leviticus? Wouldn't that make sense? Leviticus has all the instructions about offering sacrifices, and so on. So the tabernacle instructions would go there quite nicely, and, well, all the laws about how to live, those could be in there too, right, in Leviticus, instructions about how to live. And what the Israelites did in the wilderness after they got out of Egypt, well, that would go nicely in the book of Numbers, wouldn't it? But it's all in the book of Exodus. Why? Because the book of Exodus is not strictly primarily about how God got the Israelites out of Egypt. Repeatedly in the book you have statements that the Lord makes, things like, "I'm going to do thus and such so that the Israelites would know." Actually, he says, "so that *you* would know" when he's talking to Moses, or to the Israelites — "so that you'll know that I am the Lord." And he'll say things like, "I'm going to do this so that Pharaoh, or so that the Egyptians, or so that the nations will know that I am the Lord." So, throughout the book you have this refrain coming up. And finally, the last time that this shows up, something is going to be done that will show people who the Lord is, but then it will be what the Israelites do that show, and that will be... So, all of these parts of the book — getting out of Egypt, surviving in the desert, becoming a nation with laws, and a place to worship the Lord — all those parts are tied together with this refrain, this motif you could call it, this theme of action leading to knowledge of who the Lord is. But is it really so very important to know who the Lord is? Why does this matter? Well, it matters enormously, and it becomes foundational to understanding God in the rest of the Bible, so that allusions to the book of Exodus show up throughout the Bible; themes, ideas, concepts are prevalent from Exodus all the way to the end of the book of Revelation. You can find echoes of what happened in the book of Exodus because it's terribly important to know who the Lord is, not because he *needs* to be known, but because it's good for us to know who he is, in order to understand who we are. And that's what was going on in Exodus.

Dr. Erika Moore

I think the literary purpose of the book of Exodus entails three things. First of all, redemption. The first part of the book shows us that God redeemed his people from Israel, and the exodus then becomes the paradigmatic salvation event in the rest of the Old Testament. It's referred to over and over again. And then, in the Prophets, we see they use it to show how, because Israel itself becomes "Canaanized" in the land, they

then, themselves, need to be expelled from the land, during the exile, but a second exodus will happen when God brings the people back into the land, a chastened people. So, one of the purposes is redemption. Another is law. What we have is the first nineteen chapters show us Israel coming out of Egypt, and then Exodus 19:1, we're told three months after leaving Egypt they end up on Mount Sinai. And what happens there is we have a redeemed people that is then given the law, not to become saved, they're already saved; they're already redeemed. And what happens at Mount Sinai is that the Lord tells his people, "This is how my redeemed people reflect who I am." So we get to see the heart of God, another purpose of the book. And then finally, worship. It's very interesting. In Exodus 25–40, why all these chapters devoted to the tabernacle? Except for the golden calf incident in chapters 32–34, you have 25–31 where the Lord tells Moses, build this tabernacle, and he gives all these details. And then you have chapters 35–40 where we're told the Israelites built this tabernacle. Why? Because it shows us the importance of worship.

Question 3:

What are some practical ways we can apply the stories in Exodus to our lives today?

Dr. David T. Lamb

The book of Exodus has so much to offer us. I mean, practical ways, things we can apply. A couple of lessons that come to mind right away for me: When Moses goes back and tells Pharaoh to let his people go, Pharaoh's not too excited about this idea. He likes his slaves. They're getting a lot of work done, they're building a lot of construction projects, and he basically says, "Okay, you guys are making bricks; you've got to make bricks now without straw." It gets worse before it gets better. And this continues for a while. I think one of the things we experience, God calls us in our ministries to something, something dramatic — to a new church, a new ministry, a new context — and we expect, well, if God called me here, we expect God to work it out and things to be smooth sailing. Well, that was not the case for Moses in the book of Exodus. Things got worse before they got better, and I think that there's profound lessons we can learn as we have to wait on God and to persist. Moses had a lot of opportunities when the people were complaining to just give up. In fact, in Exodus 32, God told Moses, "Look, they've built a golden calf; let's just start over with you." And if I were Moses I would have thought, "That sounds like a good idea. All these people do is complain." But Moses persisted, and he said, no. He advocated for his people to God — an amazing story in Exodus 32. And so, I think, as leaders we've got to realize it's not always smooth sailing. Things get worse before they get better. People are going to complain. And what helps me is to know ahead of time that those things should be expected. They happened to Jesus. They happened to Moses. We shouldn't be surprised when these things happen in our ministries.

Dr. Brian D. Russell

Well, the book of Exodus is a story about liberation. It's the liberation of God's people from Egypt. But one of the key things we want to remember, the book teaches us about a liberation *from* Egypt, but just as importantly, and a lot of the book, is about a liberation *for*. Because the book of Exodus, at its core, is about becoming the people that God created all humans to be, but in particular, the people of Israel who are going to be God's missional people for the sake of the whole world. And so, early on, some practical takeaways is we see that God, the God of the Scriptures, the God who'd created, the God that called Abraham, and now the God who releases Israel, demonstrates that he's powerfully present with his people, and he's come to deliver them. And not only come to deliver them, but deliver an oppressed people from the superpower at the time, to demonstrate that there's no one like God. So, Exodus reminds us in the most difficult and challenging times that the God of Scripture is for us, even when the "us" is the "little guy" — or the oppressed, or the hurting — against the powerful. This is a God who isn't necessarily against powerful people, but God can reverse any kind of *status quo* and bring about deliverance and liberation apart from any human means. So that's good news for us.

Now, as we move through the book some other practical takeaways is a lot of times we talk about being saved, and we can talk about what we're saved *from*, but that's not the whole Christian life. We've got to talk about what we're saved *for*... God delivers us for a purpose, and Exodus talks about that. God has delivered Israel to be his missional people, to ultimately usher in the Messiah. In Exodus 19, you'll see a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. That gives their vocation, but what's it mean to be holy? Well, Exodus helps us with that. We have the Ten Commandments, which, in their essence, are going to call us to love God and love neighbor, not as our means of gaining access to God but as our response. Ultimately, our deliverance that God gives to us, that he gives to his people Israel, is grace. It's about grace. And then what's the response to grace? Our response to grace is to love God, love people, live as his hands, his feet, his mouthpieces in the world, be his kingdom of priests, which exist again to extend his mission, to extend his name, to live for God in the world today.

Now, another practical takeaway is right at the end of the book of Exodus we have this long section on the tabernacle, which is difficult to read because it's very detailed, but right in the middle of the tabernacle, splitting up the narrative, we have the story of the golden calf, which stands in that context to serve as a warning to God's people, because what's the greatest threat to God's mission? It's when God's people forget who God is and practice idolatry. And that's going to be a lesson throughout the whole Old Testament. The Old Testament is nothing if not completely honest about the difficulties of living as God's people in the nations surrounded by other gods. And right here in the heart of Exodus, right after God himself spoke the Ten Commandments verbally to God's people, Moses goes back up Mount Sinai to receive more of the Torah, or God's law, and while he's gone, God's people forget, they make a golden calf, and they severely jeopardize the mission, and in fact, breach the covenant days after they had agreed to it. And that stands as a warning for us. God

delivers us from oppression, from sin, from all the things that really suffocate and squeeze our humanity, and he calls us to this great purpose, but we have to respond faithfully. And one of the chief threats to that is going to be the temptation of idolatry.

And, I could say, the last big takeaway from Exodus is, again, that the purpose of Exodus isn't again just liberation. It isn't even just our response to God's grace. The ultimate purpose of Exodus — and this is an important takeaway for us — last chapter, God's glory comes and abides with his people. And at the end of the day, that's the picture. It's almost like God's people become a sacrament to the rest of the nations. The tabernacle is in their midst, right in the middle of them. When you read the book of Numbers, Israel encamps right around the tabernacle. So here it is, right in the center of the community. The world surrounds Israel on all sides, and here's God's people with God's real presence in their midst, and they function essentially as God's priests to the rest of the nations. And so that's our ultimate takeaway. It's about mission. And then God rises up from the tabernacle, leads his people to the Promised Land as a good witness for us, where the gospel comes to us on its way to someone else, and Exodus reminds us of that.

Rev. Dr. Cyprian K. Guchienda

The stories of Exodus are very, very practical for us every, every day because we read in Exodus where God comes through for people. He blesses them, you know, he rescues them from bondage, and they start complaining. They come back and say, "Oh, you're not treating us right." They start rebelling against one who rescues them. God parts the waters and they cross the water and they start complaining again. So, it's a reflection of who we are as human beings. We don't remember the miracles of yesterday and relive them today. But we are called to know that even in the midst of problems or challenges that come on our way, like the children of Israel found themselves in Exodus, God is right there. God has not left us. He is with us in challenges and in good times. He is always thus. And he wants to accomplish good things for us, but he wants to refine us, and he wants us to walk out of it with a testimony that we saw God during those times of challenges.

Question 4:

What is the literary structure of the book of Exodus?

Dr. Brian D. Russell

The book of Exodus breaks up nicely into, really, three pieces. You have the most well-known section, which would be Exodus 1–15, which describes the deliverance from Egypt, God's deliverance of God's people from the land of Egypt. And when most people think about Exodus, they think about that piece. But one of the interesting things is when you read Exodus, you just kind of blow through that, that first fifteen chapters where you see God calling Moses through a burning bush, his people are oppressed in Egypt, and then in rapid succession you have the series of plagues where God shows a supremacy over the gods of Egypt and demonstrates who

the Lord really is to Pharaoh, who says in chapter 5, “Who is the Lord that I should listen to him?” Well, the first fifteen chapters of Exodus show Pharaoh and the whole world who God is, and we see Israel delivered from Egypt in spectacular fashion that climaxes with the crossing of the Red Sea. The second part, which is a little smaller, essentially describes Israel’s journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai, and it’s 15:22 all the way through chapter 18, where Israel’s in the wilderness. And there we see just a couple of things. We see God’s grace because God cares for his people. He gives them food. He gives them water. He protects them against their enemies. And at the same time, we get the first introduction to God’s people grumbling a little bit about their circumstances after they’re delivered. That theme gets picked up heavily in the book of Numbers, but we get it, we’re introduced to it in the book of Exodus.

The third section of the book of Exodus is chapters 19–40, and what needs to strike you as the reader of that is that this 19–40 is more than half the book. And if we think about it in the popular imagination, we usually think about the actual deliverance from Exodus. That’s just chapters 1–15. You have that little piece in the wilderness, but then the bulk of the book deals with what does it mean to be God’s newly redeemed, delivered people? What does that look like? And chapters 19–40 deal with that by introducing us to the Sinai covenant. God delivers Israel from Egypt, brings them to Sinai and offers them this special vocation to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. And the key piece is their response to that is to agree to be faithful, listen to God’s voice, and keep his covenant. Now, what’s covenant? Well, these next chapters detail that. We see the covenant is God’s offer of relationship to Israel, and that comes with some formal details. We have the Ten Commandments as a general expression of what it means to “keep covenant,” and then chapters 21–23, then, fill that out as, that’s called the “book of the covenant,” and they have specific laws. In chapter 24 Moses and some of the elders go up Mount Sinai and they formalize that covenant. So 19–24 give us specifics on what the covenant looks like, and then we see a greater purpose of covenant, which is ultimately going to be relationship. God wants Israel to be able to take his real presence with them wherever they go and, in a sense, take Mount Sinai with them wherever they go. In the ancient world, gods and goddesses were thought to live up on mountains. They had holy mountains, and Sinai was God’s mountain, but unlike other gods, God goes with his people, and he isn’t going to be bound to some geographic location. But the issue is, how do human beings abide with a holy God? Or maybe a better way to say that, how does a holy God abide with humans? And so, God gives them the gift of the tabernacle, which is told in two pieces, chapters 25–31, which are the specific instructions on how to build a tabernacle. And then, chapters 35–40 is Moses and God’s people implementing exactly and precisely those instructions and constructing the tabernacle. And that ends then in 40:34–38 with God’s real presence, his glory coming to abide with his people, and that’s the climax. Now, there’s one other piece in Exodus, and that’s the golden calf story, 32–34. That stands there in contrast to Israel’s obedience in building the tabernacle and serves as a warning about the danger of idolatry and disobedience to the mission that God has for his people.

Dr. Dorian G. Coover-Cox

One way to understand the structure of Exodus is to think about chapter 18 and its function in the book as a whole. In chapter 18, Jethro comes to visit Moses after the Israelites have come out of Egypt, and in the process Moses describes to him how the Lord has brought the Israelites out of Egypt and how God has preserved them in the wilderness. So, it basically gives a chance to remember, review, so to speak, Moses' thinking through what has happened, and as a result of hearing all of this, Jethro says, "Oh, now I see exactly what you're talking about..." — paraphrasing a bit — "The Lord is greater than all the gods," and they worship the Lord, which is precisely what the Lord said would happen on the mountain after he had brought the Israelites out of Egypt. So things are kind of tied together there, but then Jethro notices Moses judging the Israelites and dealing with a multitude of problems, and he recognizes, this can't work going forward; you need some help, the need for having leaders, judges. And so, looking forward to the future of Israel and how they will proceed as a nation prepares for the rest of the book — the giving of the Law, the covenant, and building a tabernacle. So, these future events are, in a sense, prepared for. Another thing that happens in chapter 18 is that we tie together some of the issues having to do with the identity of Moses. Early in the book when Moses went out to see his kinfolk, he killed an Egyptian, and later that became known. Actually, it was probably known right away, but he came out again and was accused of this, and one of his fellow Israelites said to him, "Who made you a prince or a judge over us? Are you going to kill me like you killed the Egyptian?" And Moses was terrified, figured it was time to get out of Egypt for him, and left the country. He didn't look much like a leader for his people at that point. But by the time we get to chapter 18, Moses is so much the prince and the judge over Israel that he's the one God puts in charge of appointing new princes and judges. Aha, okay. So the identity of Moses is being clarified here. And then, in the remainder of the book, who the people of Israel are will become much clearer.

Question 5:

How does Moses employ chiasm in his storytelling in the book of Exodus?

Dr. Gordon H. Johnston

So, in the Pentateuch, whether the Jacob story in the book of Genesis, or in the book of Exodus, we find symmetrical structure: A-B-C-D-C-B-A. We could talk about that as a chiasm. I, myself, I prefer to talk about it just as a symmetrical narrative plot... So, you have a prologue. The prologue introduces characters and the setting. The epilogue talks about the character, how the characters change now and where he's at. So, that's your A and your A'. B, you've got the problem. The problem is introduced; B', the problem is solved. You have rising action, you've got falling action, and then you've got a turning point. So that prologue, problem, rising action, turning point, falling action, resolution, and epilogue: A-B-C-D-C-B-A. This is how we tell stories. This is universal. If I were to come home during the day and tell my wife something

happened, I would have a beginning. I would say, “I was here” — character, setting — “This problem arose, I prayed. God intervened. This is how it happened. The problem was solved, and here I am, happy to be home to tell you all about it.” So, we tend to just tell stories symmetrically.

Prof. Thomas Egger

One very common literary device in the Old Testament is chiasm, where the elements of a story are unfolded, and then you come to, kind of, a middle turning point, and then the events follow or speech follows, picking up those same elements in reverse order. It can be as simple as A-B-B-A or A-B-C-B-A. Or sometimes commentators will propose that there are actually very complex and extravagant structures to different narratives or different speeches in the Old Testament. In the book of Exodus, I think that it's actually more helpful to think about the chiasmic structure as being on a macro-level. There may well be individual readings within the book, individual scenes or episodes that are chiasmic in structure ... but I find it remarkable the way that the book as a whole introduces so many themes near its beginning that then find they are inverse towards the end of the book. And so, you have things like the house of Jacob going down into Egypt at the beginning of the book: “These are the names of the sons of Israel who went down to Egypt, each with his house.” And there they live then, through the narrative, in Egypt; “the house of slaves” it's called at Mount Sinai when they're brought out. “I'm the Lord your God who brought you up from the land of Egypt, out from the house of slaves,” and then the book ends with this reference to the people who have been called “the sons of Israel,” or the “congregation of the sons of Israel” all through the book. It refers to them in the very closing scene of the book as “the house of Israel.” It talks about, “the glory of Yahweh was on the tabernacle day and night in the sight of the house of Israel.” So, you have this movement from the *households* that go down, their time in the *house* of slaves, and then they become the *house* of Israel. There are a number of other dimensions of chiasm from beginning to end in the book of Exodus. You have the people laboring to build in Egypt. They are Pharaoh's slaves, and they are building the building projects of Pharaoh. At the end of the book you have this beautiful picture of obedient Israel, having rebelled against God with the golden calf and having been forgiven, now tasked with this beautiful labor of building the house of God, the tabernacle where God will dwell in their midst. That work is referred to in the beginning part of Exodus as “*abodah qasah*” — “hard labor.” In the end of the book of Exodus, all of the regulations about the worship and the priesthood and the tabernacle are referred to as “the *abodah* of the people,” their work, but also it's a word that can mean their worship. So, their labor, used at the beginning of the book, is paired with all of the dimensions of their worship at the end of the book. In that bitter labor at the beginning of the book, they are already groaning because of their oppression. But then, after Moses and Aaron speak to Pharaoh, Pharaoh takes away the straw that was provided to them, and they do not have enough. This is the complaint of the Israelite foremen who come to Pharaoh and say, “We do not have enough. We do not have the sufficiency to do the work which you're demanding of us.” At the end of the book when they go to build the tabernacle, they have a free will offering from the people of gold and silver and other precious things for the building,

and they receive so much that they have more than enough, and they have to cut things off, so they're oversupplied by the end of the book. There are all of these ways, then, that the beginning of the book and the end of the book pair up, but it's a beautiful picture at the end where all of the oppressive elements are transformed by the redemption of God to the life of his blessed people.

Question 6:

How is the book of the covenant similar to and different from other legal codes of the ancient Near East, like the Code of Hammurabi?

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

There are a number of ancient Near Eastern collections of laws, say from Egypt, from Babylon, those kinds of places, that do have significance as we try to interpret the book of the covenant in the book of Exodus. But by far the most important of those is the Code of Hammurabi. This is a well-known collection. It's dated around, usually around 1772 or so BC, and this collection of laws coming from the great Babylonian King Hammurabi is magnificent in the ways that it gives us insights into the book of the covenant that Moses gave to Israel under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Now, there are just as many differences as there are similarities between these two collections, the book of the covenant and the Code of Hammurabi. So, we mustn't act as if somehow Moses got these from Hammurabi or something like that, because while Hammurabi does predate Moses by centuries, the reality is that there are differences as well... First, that when you read the Code of Hammurabi, apart from the preface, the prologue and the epilogue of the code, it seems very disorganized. I mean, it seems like he jumps from one thing to another, to another, to another, this policy to that policy, this policy to that policy. And this is helpful because, when interpreters of the Bible look at the book of the covenant, they usually want to push very hard to find some kind of rationale for the order of all the laws that are in the book of the covenant. But in reality, when you look at the book of the covenant in Exodus and compare it to Hammurabi's law code, you can see that it's just about as *ad hoc* as the book of Hammurabi is as well. Moses goes through this, then he goes through this, this, this, this. There are only very loose associations, so there's no tight outline that can be justified for the book of the covenant in the book of Exodus. There's a second thing, however, and that is a contrast, a great contrast. When you contrast the punishments that are given in the book of Hammurabi, you find that violations for different classes of people, violations *against* different classes of people had different levels of payment or punishment given to them. Moses' book of the covenant is much more egalitarian; it's much more having to do with your offending God, and no matter what kind of person you're offending or hurting, this is the requirement; this is what's necessary: eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, do what is just, not treat the upper class better than you treat the lower class. But even beyond that, there's a third thing that I think that we'd have to say about this, and that is we learn from the book of Hammurabi's laws the function of this collection. The function was for Hammurabi to provide for local judges in various cities around his nation a

standard, a set of precedents for judgments that they were to render out there in their various locations. You see, it was impossible for everyone to come to Hammurabi, everyone to come to him and get judgments directly from him, so his central court established these policies. But also, it was impossible for Hammurabi to write down every possible scenario that a local judge might face... And so, the Code of Hammurabi was written, not to give direction for every single kind of case, but rather to give precedents for judges to apply with wisdom, and that, of course, is exactly what the book of the covenant was. As Moses was setting up the legal system of Israel, he provided them, the judges in local communities, with precedents, not with every single possible situation that might come up. It was the job of the judge to interpolate, to use wisdom that they gained from experience to figure out how, “I have this law. I have this law. Now how do I deal with this particular situation that sort of falls between those?” And that helps us a great deal. So, there’s a great deal of benefit to comparing the Code of Hammurabi with the code that we find in the book of the covenant.

Dr. Gordon H. Johnston

We often refer to the end of Exodus 20 or even Exodus 21–23 as the book of the covenant. It’s different than the Decalogue, which is “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” The book of the covenant consists of what we call “case law”: if this happens, you do this; when this happens, you do that. These case laws that we have in the end of Exodus 20, or going to Exodus 21–23, are very similar in form and content to other ancient Near Eastern legal collections, for example, the Law of Hammurabi, Eshnuna, Ur-Nammu, Lipit-Eshtar. They’re similar in the form in the sense that they both have this contextualized formula, but they’re also similar in the content. For example, one of the most famous examples is the so-called law of the goring ox. In Eshnuna, which dated to about, let’s see, 1800-1850 BC, and then Hammurabi, 1792 BC, they both feature laws dealing with goring ox. This was a problem in the ancient Near East. People had ox, and ox would gore. The book of the covenant deals with law of the goring ox. And it’s not just that we have the same topic, we have some of almost the same formulations. One, if an ox owned by one man gores the ox of another man and that ox kills this ox, you divide the meat of the dead ox and you sell the live ox, and the owners split it. On the other hand, if an ox is known to gore, and the authorities have forewarned the owner, and he didn’t blunt its horns or pen him in, and then he gores a man, then there’s a penalty. The book of the covenant deals with the very same situation. There are differences because in Exodus the goring ox is told... the owner of the goring ox is put to death. On the other hand, in Hammurabi there is the financial penalty. So, the book of the covenant reflects a higher value on human life. And yet you’ve got some of the very same topics, which shouldn’t surprise us because in the ancient Near Eastern world they had a very traditional culture, a lot of the same issues came up, and just common sense would tell you that if one ox gores another ox, what are you gonna do? Well, divide the meat of the dead ox; sell the live ox; split it. That would be fair. But they’re dealing with the same type of situation, same type of mentality.

Sometimes some people are troubled by the idea that the biblical case laws, the book of the covenant, Exodus 21–23, or in the case laws in Deuteronomy 12–26, sometimes some Christians are troubled that these case laws look so similar to ancient Near Eastern law codes. Shouldn't the Bible be a lot different than what the pagans had? ... Some non-conservatives sometimes suggest that the similarities between the Mosaic case laws in the ancient Near East suggest that this is not a matter of a product of divine revelation but that the biblical law has been plagiarized or borrowed from ancient Near Eastern material, and therefore, Yahweh didn't give it to Moses, or this is not from the time of Moses. I think that over-simplifies the issues. In the ancient Near East you had a very common similar culture all throughout the ancient Near East. Listen, the ancient Near East was not that much bigger than Texas, and if you've got a similar culture for a couple thousand years, there were a lot of traditional practices that arose, there was a tradition, there was a common legal tradition that was informed by human conscience, and I take human conscience as being informed by common grace, the general revelation, God working on the human heart. There's a common sense of justice all throughout the world when we talk about God working on the heart. And so, I'm not troubled by the fact that we've got similar situations and similar solutions to the problems. If you will, Yahweh, God, wrote his law on the heart of Hammurabi and Eshnuna, these ancient Near Eastern kings, and they were getting it right. And then he wrote his law on stone at Sinai, so I take this as all from the same God.

Question 7:

What significance did Old Testament festivals, Sabbaths, prayers, sacrifices, and other ceremonies have in the lives of Old Testament believers?

Dr. Steve Blakemore

In the lives of Old Testament believers, the various festivals, the Sabbath observances, sacrificial offerings that were made, they played a very important role. First of all, they were to remind Israel that its life as the people of God was a gift to them. For instance, the Passover was meant to remind them that they were once slaves in Egypt, and God and God alone has set them free. But not just to remind them that they were set free, because they were set free from Egypt to be taken to Sinai where God would establish his covenant with them. So the festival life of Israel was meant to be a reminder to them that God and God alone has called them to be his people, to remember the mighty works of God to save them. The Sabbaths were meant to remind them of two things, that the world is Yahweh's and that they didn't create themselves, and they didn't free themselves from slavery. In Exodus, Moses says, "Keep the Sabbath, for on the Sabbath day God rests." In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses says, "Keep the Sabbath because, not only did God rest on the Sabbath day, but remember that you were once slaves in Egypt." So, all of these festivals were meant to remind them of what God has done to redeem them and to remind them that they are, alone, the people of God because of God's gracious

goodness toward them, and out of those practices have their lives shaped, their self-understanding shaped, so that they would begin and continue to respond faithfully to God in lives of obedience, trust, love and service.

Dr. Riad Kassis

There were many special occasions in the Old Testament, in Old Testament times, like festivals, the Sabbath and other occasions. And I think there were two aspects of these special occasions. There was the religious aspect. These were occasions where people celebrated God's goodness, God's grace. But there was also another social aspect. I think in these special occasions people came together to strengthen their relationships, to enjoy their life as a community, something which is very much needed in our own days, in addition to that religious aspect. Sabbath was a day for worship, but it was also a day of rest. It was a day to enjoy God's creation and to enjoy fellowship with other fellow men and women.

Question 8:

How does the book of Exodus demonstrate that God is always faithful to his covenant?

Dr. Timothy E. Saleska

God demonstrates that he's faithful to his covenant not only by continually giving us his promises, but also, as we read the narrative in a marvelous way, you can see how he begins to fulfill the promises he's made in the actual events and in his working with God's people, with his people Israel. I want to call your attention to the last part, first of all, of the book of Genesis... So remember, on his deathbed Joseph recalls the covenant that God had made with his forefathers, which included the promise to bring them out into the land that he had promised them. When we get to the book of Exodus, right at the beginning of the book, in the first chapter, notice what Moses writes in verse 7:

But the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied, and grew exceedingly mighty, and the land was filled with them (Exodus 1:7, NKJV).

So, notice how Moses there echoes the promise that God had made to the patriarchs back in the book of Genesis, that they would become a great nation, as many as the sand that's on the seashore, stars in the sky, promised them the land, as Joseph remembered on his deathbed. So, here in Exodus we see that God had already worked to begin fulfilling that promise to his people, except that they were in the wrong place. But already then, at the beginning of the book, if Moses wants you to remember the promise, remember the covenant that God made, we are already kind of alerted to the fact that now Yahweh was going to act on behalf of his people. As we read in the first part of Exodus then, the people, because they were so numerous,

became slaves of the Egyptians, and their work was arduous and hard, and they cried to Yahweh. And when we get to the end of chapter 2, Moses writes this:

So God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob, and God looked upon the children of Israel, and God acknowledged them (Exodus 2:24-25, NKJV).

And so, here we see God starting to move on behalf of his people on the basis of the promise that he had made to them. And of course, in the rest of the first part of that book then, we see how God began to move by choosing Moses, his servant, and Aaron, his brother, to lead his people out, and he did it with mighty acts, working through Moses as the leader of his people. And it was always in view of the promises that he had made to bring them out of Egypt to the land that he had promised them.

Prof. Thomas Egger

One of the major themes in the book of Exodus is God's faithfulness to his promises, his faithfulness to the covenant that he's made with the people. The book of Genesis ends with a setup for the book of Exodus with Joseph saying to his brothers that God will visit them in Egypt and will bring them up. And this confidence among the people that God would fulfill this promise, this promise to bring them back to the land of Canaan, the land that he had promised to their forefathers, and that he would plant them there, and they would be his people, and he would be their God. That has to happen as we go through the book of Exodus. That has to happen because God has promised it, and the God who has promised it is faithful. But, there are so many things that get in the way of that all through the book of Exodus. The people are enslaved by a ruthless king, one of the most powerful figures in the world of his day, the pharaoh of Egypt. And it seems impossible that God's people will emerge from that situation and go to the land that God has promised to their forefathers. Yet, in miraculous, mighty ways, God reaches in, and he shows his faithfulness. He brings about that deliverance so that he can fulfill the promise that he made to their fathers. Having taken them out of Egypt, led them even through the sea, they encounter the Amalekites in the wilderness; they have to do battle there. The Lord shows his strength, he brings them through. But their biggest foe in the wilderness will become themselves, and this is, perhaps, the greatest demonstration of the Lord's faithfulness. This Hebrew word, the "*chesed*" of the Lord, his lovingkindness, his persistent, merciful faithfulness to his people, that even when they show themselves to be in every way just like Pharaoh, just as deserving of God's judgment as Pharaoh. "Stiff-necked," God calls them, and he uses the same word root there that was used for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, one of the words used for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Just as Pharaoh was hard of heart, the people are hard of neck. They are rebellious; they are sinful. But God's mercy finds a way, and through the atoning blood, through the mediation of Moses, through expressing his great mercy and compassion and forgiveness, he finds a way to go with the people and to lead them, and continue to lead them towards that Land of Promise.

Dr. Erika Moore

One of the things that the book of Exodus demonstrates for us is God's faithfulness to his covenant. So, the book starts out with the Israelites in bondage in Egypt, and yet the Lord hears the cry of his people. So he raises up Moses as a deliverer, and he frees the people from slavery ... and the time period is the three months between leaving Egypt and entering, or landing on Mount Sinai. We know that because Exodus 15 is the poetic account of the crossing of the Red Sea. And then we get to chapters 16, 17 and 18. In 19, we're told it's three months out of Egypt, and they're at Mount Sinai. So, even right at the get-go, God frees them from slavery, and what happens? Well, what the people do is they start grumbling and complaining. And what does the Lord do? He hears their grumbling and complaining, and what does he do? He gives them manna and quail. Then, he also gives them water. And then what we have in Exodus 20, he brings them to Mount Sinai, chapter 19, and even though they have been complaining and grumbling, what does he do? He says, "I've carried you on eagles' wings, I've brought you here; you are my people," and he continues to be in covenant relationship with them in the giving of the law. And then, in chapter 25, he says to Moses — this is an amazing passage — he tells Moses:

[Tell the Israelites to] make a sanctuary for me and I will dwell among them (Exodus 25:8).

The Emmanuel principle — God wants to be with his people. So, all these chapters then are giving, describing all the details of the tabernacle, and then we have the golden calf incident that's sandwiched around proper worship. And yet, after the golden calf incident, there's this conversation between Moses and Yahweh, and Yahweh continues to be with his people so that at the end of the book we see his great covenant faithfulness. The tabernacle is built, and we're told that the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. So, God has come to be with his people, he remains faithful to the covenant despite Israel's unfaithfulness.

Question 9:**What does the word Yahweh mean?****Dr. Scott Redd**

The question of the meaning of the word Yahweh has been a topic, obviously, of a lot of dialogue and discussion over the course of biblical interpretation. It's clearly and closely connected with the inauguration, the initiation of God's relationship with Moses and the people of Israel through the Mosaic covenant in both Exodus 3 and Exodus 6, and it's clearly tied to this new arrangement that God has made with his people. It marks a new kind of relationship that he's entering into with his people that even Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had not experienced or been able to understand in a unique way. So, the term, or the title "Yahweh" is usually covenantal. It's usually used in focusing on God's covenant relationship with his people and the way in which he goes about both caring for them and drawing their worship to him... But the word

is closely connected with the Mosaic covenant, not meaning that it wasn't used in previous years or in previous arrangements, but not used in that way. In other words, it marks a change that's taking place when God enters into his relationship with Moses. Now, there are a variety of theories as to why we should vocalize it "Yahweh" and not something else, or why we should pronounce it as the word "Yahweh." One prevailing one that I find to be pretty convincing is the idea that Yahweh Sabaoth, which is often translated "Lord of Hosts" or "Lord of heavenly armies" is actually the fuller version of the name Yahweh, and that if we read Yahweh as being a verb form referring to something like, God's causing something to be, or in this case, causing the heavenly armies, the heavenly hosts to be, then it shows that God's role, or Yahweh's role, is one of creation, but not *merely* creation. It's creation as a warrior king. He's creating the heavenly hosts to go about bringing his will in the cosmos.

Dr. Don Collett

The word "Yahweh" is derived from four Hebrew consonants, and we call that the "tetragrammaton" — "*tetra*" referring to "four," four consonants. We don't really know how those four consonants were vocalized, which is to say what vowels were attached to those consonants so that we could name them. Part of the reason we don't know is because the Jewish tradition had a practice of not pronouncing what, the word we now call Yahweh. However, what they would say in its place was "*Adonai*," or in the Septuagint, "*Kurios*," both of which mean "Lord." Since the word Yahweh occurs most often in covenantal context where God's redemptive purposes are in view, and since the tradition, both Jewish and the Greek translation of the Old Testament have rendered it with words that mean Lord, I would say Yahweh means "the covenant Lord of Israel."

Dr. Michael D. Williams

Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa* took the name Yahweh as a statement of being. God is saying to Moses and through Moses to the Israelites, "I am the God who exists over against the gods who do not exist." The problem with that is, one, it comes from a kind of "philosophy of being" approach to reading the text. But it's also kind of a trivialization, if I can put it that way. It doesn't fit the context at all. It's as if Moses has walked up the mountain, he's going to see this great light. He comes onto this bush; it's on fire, but it's not being consumed, and then it speaks. And Moses says, "Who shall I tell them sent me?" and God says, "I exist." And I can just imagine Moses going, "Uhh, yeah, I got that, but what's your name? Who are you, really?" ... But the context here is that God is giving his name to his people. He wants them to call upon him. I remember Willem Van Gemeren saying God's name, Yahweh, is like on his business card, on the front of it, it says "Elohim, Creator of all things." And then he writes Yahweh and his personal phone number on the back and he gives it to his people — "You can get me. You can make contact with me 24/7. I'm always available to you." And what's interesting is the covenant name; it appears throughout the Old Testament in the context of God entering into covenant relationship... So what does Yahweh mean? Yahweh means I am the one who's always faithful. I'm the one who keeps promise. I'm the one who's here for you. I'm your God.

Question 10:**How does the book of Exodus present God as a warrior-king who fights on behalf of his people?****Dr. Scott Redd**

One of the most significant depictions of the Lord in the Old Testament is God's role as king, and as a king, he would have multiple duties just like any other ancient Near Eastern king, multiple duties and functions that give light to his office as king. One of those functions would have been a warrior function. You see, in the ancient Near East, the king was considered the leader of the hosts, the leader of the armies of his nation, and as such, he was also the greatest warrior. So God, or the Lord, being a warrior throughout the Old Testament depicts God as a king who is a warrior-king. He goes out and defends, he fights for, he delivers, and he protects his own people... So when we look at the story of Exodus, God going down and sending plagues against Pharaoh and his house, and indeed the whole nation of Egypt, is not just God showing random or arbitrary power in Egypt, but rather, he's addressing through each individual plague what were perceived to be the strengths and the domains of the Egyptian gods. So Yahweh is, in fact, even in Exodus, a delivering warrior. He comes in and he delivers his people from the Egyptian household, from the Egyptian pantheon of gods, and delivers them unto himself. Likewise, in the conquest of the Promised Land, God's people are shown to be going into war, and yet the victory is never for them. The victory is always for the Lord... God's role as a warrior-king is a cause for consolation and comfort, but also a cause for confidence. As we go out into the world around us, God's people can be sure that their God is a warrior and that he goes out and fights for them, and he protects them, and he defends them, and the victory will be his.

Rev. Dr. Paul R. Raabe

Just as Exodus 15 speaks of Yahweh as king, so it also speaks of Yahweh as a warrior. And so again, the context is Israel was in bondage in Egypt and they were under the thumb, under the total control of Pharaoh. And so, they were in bondage to Pharaoh, they were slaves to him. And Yahweh, the God of Israel, intervened and dealt with Pharaoh with his ten plagues, kind of pummeled him ten times and delivered Israel from bondage, and in that sense you might say that Yahweh, the God of Israel, went to war against Pharaoh, the kind of the "god king," the "incarnate" king of Egypt. And so, Yahweh went to war against Pharaoh and defeated him and thereby delivered his people from bondage. So there had to be a battle in order for there to be freedom for God's people. And so Exodus 15, Moses sings to Yahweh:

For he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. [Yahweh] is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him...

And then Moses says:

[Yahweh] is a man of war; [Yahweh] is his name (Exodus 15:1-3, ESV).

And so,

Your right hand, O [Yahweh], glorious in power, your right hand, O [Yahweh], shatters the enemy. In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries (Exodus 15:6-7, ESV).

So, it picks up on that that Yahweh, like a warrior, defeated the enemy and freed his people.

Rev. Dr. Cyprian K. Guchienda

The book of Exodus demonstrates very, very clearly that God is a victorious warrior because the children of Israel were untrained militarily, and they had to face opposition, opposition from within themselves and from outside. And most of the time that they wanted to give up, God would come through and fight a battle for them, fight a battle within themselves — their rebelliousness... their not remembering that God called them out of a nation that had oppressed them — and God leading them into a place they did not know, creating a path that they did not know. They did not have a compass that would give them directions. But God knew; he foreknew where he was taking them, and he knew the path that they would take. So, God provided and God fought for them.

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

In the book of Exodus, God appears as a mighty warrior-king, a typical ancient Near Eastern style. Of course, many have pointed out that through the plagues God defeats various deities of Egypt, but I think this really culminates at the Red Sea and the song of victory in chapter 15 where God is called an "*ish milhamah*," a "man of war," an idiom that means "a warrior." So, he's specifically called this. And of course, at the Red Sea he defeats the chariots of Egypt. This powerful warrior-king, if you go with the early dating of the exodus, it would be Amenhotep II; if you go with the later dating of the exodus it would be Ramses II. Either way, you have a mighty pharaoh with his chariot force, and the Lord annihilates this force, ironically, using the sea, because often in the ancient Near East, the sea is a symbol of chaos and opposition to the warrior-king. But Yahweh is such a powerful warrior, he can use the sea as his instrument to defeat the mighty Egyptian force.

Question 11:

In what ways do the Ten Commandments reveal the grace of God?

Rev. Dr. Cyprian K. Guchienda

The Ten Commandments reveal the grace of God in that God has divided the Ten Commandments in two parts. The four first commandments it's about our relationship with him. He wants us to know. He's so graceful, he does not let us guess, so he puts it before us so that we can know and know him and establish a relationship with him. The second part of it is six that relate with us and other human beings, and God wants us to have a great relationship as human beings because he created us as a family, and he wants us to love one another. He wants us to forgive. He wants us not to take from one another. He wants us to help one another. So, all these two draw us closer to God, when we look up to him vertically and horizontally when we relate to one another in a right way.

Dr. Brian D. Russell

The Ten Commandments are a powerful witness to God's grace. A lot of times when we think about the Old Testament and the laws, we think about them just being about obedience, about earning God's favor, but when we look carefully at the Ten Commandments, we can actually see that, in a sense, they're showing us God's grace by God graciously showing us how to respond to his grace. And that's really the key piece. The Ten Commandments start with this statement by God. This is a place where God identifies who he is. We saw that earlier in the book of Exodus where to Moses he said, "I am who I am." Well, in Exodus 20:2, that kind of cryptic, "I am who I am" gets a little clearer. It says, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." So, that is a dramatic statement about God's grace. Before God gives any laws to his people, God reminds them of his grace: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." And what that does is it sets up the rest of the Ten Commandments, not as laws to become God's people, but gives God's people an *ethos*, or a way of life, that allows them to respond to God's grace. In fact, in the synagogue, Jewish persons actually take that statement as the first commandment — "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt" — as a way of reminding themselves about grace. But then as you move through the rest of the Ten Commandments, how do we respond to God's grace? How do we live as people that have been delivered? Well, the Ten Commandments basically have two sections that are connected by the Sabbath commandment. In the first commands we have essentially, how do you love God? And you love God by having no other gods before the Lord, by not making graven images or images of God, and by not taking the Lord's name in vain. So, we love God by not practicing idolatry, essentially. So that's the one piece. We have this vertical relationship with God, and we see God wants us to respond to his grace by being fully in allegiance to him. Then the second half of the Ten Commandments, starting with "Honor your father and mother," is we have a series of laws that give us standards for interacting with other people, because the God of the Scriptures is not just a personal spirituality; there's a communal piece to this. It's not enough to simply love God.

That's the critical piece, but then that has to then be expressed in the way that we live and love other people, and that's the second part of the Ten Commandments. Then right in the middle we see this other piece of God's grace. It reminds us to keep the Sabbath: "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy," or "by keeping it holy." And right there we see in a microcosm the ethic that God wants. God's created us ultimately, not for work but for rest, to abide in God's presence, and on Sabbath, God combines, really, that vertical relationship of loving him with how we treat other people by carving into the fabric of creation this one day in which we do nothing; we remember God's grace. And so it's the one day that our main action is inaction, and that includes extending inaction to everyone. As you read the Ten Commandments, the longest one is the Sabbath command, and there's a list of pieces there. So, I can't keep a Sabbath and then make my kids do all the work for me, or I can't keep a Sabbath and send my donkey out to work for me. Everything closes down that day as we remember and practice the love for God and the love for our neighbors. And so, we see God's grace in action throughout those commands.

Question 12:

How would the description of the tabernacle in the book of Exodus have comforted its readers that God's kingly presence is with his people?

Dr. James M. Hamilton

God's presence in the tabernacle and the temple is significant because the tabernacle and the temple are the universe in miniature. They are microcosms of what the world is, and so God's presence there really represents his presence in the world. The world is the temple that he made in which he would commune with his people. And then, when Adam rebelled, God chose this one line of people that eventually becomes the nation of Israel, and he takes up residence among them, and where he dwells among them is in this miniature replica of what the universe was, and his presence there is unique because that's where Israel goes to be in the presence of God, to the tabernacle, and later the temple, and it's also something of a foretaste of what God is going to do in the whole world. When God fills the tabernacle at its consecration, when it's completed at the end of Exodus, and later when he fills the temple when it's completed in 1 Kings 8, we're really getting a preview of what's going to happen in the universe when the glory of God is fully known.

Dr. Brian D. Russell

The book of Exodus describes the Lord as the true King. And that's an absolutely critical piece for us as God's people, because that question, "Who is the King?" affects so many things. When we get to the New Testament, we're going to be talking about the kingdom of God and what does it look like to live for God's kingdom over against the kingdoms of the earth or whatever empire we may find ourselves in at any kind of given moment, because God's kingdom is the one that's going to ultimately last forever... But this is a different kind of king, and this is what's the key piece. In the ancient world, most spirituality, most religious beliefs essentially propped up the

powerful and kept down the people at the bottom. The Lord's a different kind of king because God reverses all that in the book of Exodus. He brings down the powerful and lifts up his people who had been oppressed. And so that would have been a powerful reminder that God is truly for everyone, not just the people that are already connected politically and with wealth. And so God, as a king, comforts his people because he's a different kind of king who comes and actually serves God's people. And then, unlike kings who live far away, who you may only encounter through their face on a coin, or in the modern world, their picture on TV or in the newspapers, Israel's God, the Lord, the true King, invites God's people to come and be with him on his holy mountain, Sinai, and then even more profoundly makes a means, the tabernacle, where God can literally come down and abide in the midst of his people forever. Now, when we get to the New Testament, the tabernacle was used to foreshadow Jesus, the Word's going to become flesh and make its dwelling among us, "tabernacle" among us. And so Jesus is going to put a human face on this God that they've met in Egypt. But all the way back in the book of Exodus, we have this kingly presence of a king who wants to abide with his people. That king's ultimately going to be Jesus, and the New Testament is going to tell us about him.

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