



## Reading Genesis Today<sup>1</sup>

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For many people today the stories of Genesis are just part of their childhood heritage alongside Jack and the Beanstalk, Winnie the Pooh, and the Wind in the Willows. They are pretty and amusing tales for children, but hardly relevant to adults in the late twentieth century. Christian Bible readers tend to regard the Genesis stories as more than fairy tales, but when asked why, they quickly become defensive. Creation of the world in six days, Eve being made out of Adam's rib, or Methuselah living to the age of 969 years, hardly suggest to the modern reader that Genesis makes a serious claim to truth. In other words, skeptics tend to treat Genesis with supercilious disdain while Christians are embarrassed by it.

Both reactions are unjustified. When it was written Genesis was a truly revolutionary work that fundamentally challenged the beliefs of that era. But more than that, it sets out some of the Bible's central beliefs about the nature of God and his relationship to the world, beliefs that are taken for granted by subsequent parts of Holy Scripture. It is the first book of the Torah, a book of divine instruction that sets out through narrative to explain how men and women should relate to one another and to God. In this essay I look at three aspects of Genesis that can contribute to our understanding of it: First, I shall compare Genesis to other oriental texts of the first and second millennia B.C., showing both the uniqueness and the revolutionary character of Genesis. Second, I shall look at what the book says about the nature of God and God's expectations for human behavior, principles that are assumed and restated in many parts of the Old and New Testament.

<sup>1</sup>This material derives from a lecture given in Cheltenham on March 3, 1993.

Third, I shall glance at the ancestral stories, particularly those about Jacob and Joseph, and use methods of new criticism to suggest what these texts are saying.

### I. GENESIS: A UNIQUE AND REVOLUTIONARY BOOK

By the standards of the ancient Near East, Genesis is quite a young document.<sup>2</sup> There are a number of more ancient texts which parallel the opening chapters of Genesis in an interesting way. First to be discovered was the Babylonian story of the flood,<sup>3</sup> which forms part of the Gilgamesh epic. It tells how the flood hero Noah, called in the Babylonian text Ut-napishtim, was warned by his personal god Ea of the coming flood and told to build a boat. He duly obeyed, built a giant cube-shaped ark, and embarked with a great collection of friends, family, and animals. The rains and flood came, destroying the rest of the human race; but eventually the ark came to rest on a mountain top, Noah disembarked, offered a sacrifice, and was blessed by the gods.

Another text which parallels Genesis is the Sumerian king list.<sup>4</sup> This tells of up to ten kings who reigned before the flood, the coming of the flood, and the new dynasties of kings established after the flood. This sequence of events closely matches Genesis 5 to 11. Chapter 5 lists the ten antediluvians from Adam to Noah, who lived before the flood; chapters 6-9 recount the flood; and chapters 10-11 list those who lived after the flood. The names in Genesis barely resemble those in the king list, but a comparison of the chronology is interesting. According to one version of the king list, eight kings reigned for a total of 241,000 years before the flood. The second king in the list reigned for 36,000 years. So those who think Genesis must be exaggerating in allowing Adam to reach the grand old age of 930 years or Methuselah to attain 969 should think again. By the standards of antiquity they were toddlers! Indeed another Sumerian text suggests babies were kept in diapers till the age of a hundred!<sup>5</sup>

But the most interesting texts for the light they shed on Genesis 1-11 are the Atrahasis epic and the Sumerian flood story, for they both recount the history of the world from the creation of humankind to the flood. The Atrahasis epic<sup>6</sup> begins with the lesser gods laboring at irrigation and agriculture to supply the great gods

<sup>2</sup>The date of Genesis is disputed. Traditionalists maintain Mosaic authorship, i.e., about 1300 B.C. Standard critical theory dates the final composition of Genesis around 500B.C. In my commentary (*Genesis 1-15* [Waco: Word, 1987]) I suggest a mediating position, with the final editing of the book in the period of the united monarchy, i.e., about 950 B.C.

<sup>3</sup>For a modern translation see S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1989) 109-116. The standard text of the Epic of Gilgamesh tablet 11 dates from the seventh century B.C., but W. G. Lambert, whose opinion I follow (*Genesis 1-15*, 159), holds that this version of the flood story was probably drawn from the Atrahasis epic of about 1600 B.C.

<sup>4</sup>See T. Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1939).

<sup>5</sup>These comparisons of course do not explain the numbers in Genesis or the king list. Recently D. W. Young, (*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 100 [1988] 331-361; 102 [1990] 321-336) has suggested that the numbers may have been generated artificially using formulae known to Babylonian mathematicians. For older discussions, see *Genesis 1-15*, 130-34.

<sup>6</sup>For a translation see S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 9-38.

with food. However, the lesser gods go on strike, and this prompts the great god Ea to suggest to the mother goddess Belet-ili to create human beings: she obligingly produces out of clay and the blood of a dead god seven human couples. Unfortunately the creation of humans began the population explosion, the multiplication of the human race spoiled the tranquillity of heaven, and the gods resolved to eliminate the problem. First they decreed a plague which would have destroyed humankind, had not someone offered a sacrifice to the plague god, who then relented. Then a drought was sent, but another opportune offering brought that to an end. Eventually the gods arranged a flood, but Atrahasis built an ark and survived. However, to ensure that the human race will not once again become too numerous, the gods decree that some women will be childless, others miscarry, and so on.

The Sumerian flood story as reconstructed by T. Jacobsen<sup>7</sup> shows even more points of contact with Genesis:

Lines 1-36	creation of man & animals; no irrigation canals, no clothes,	cf. Genesis 1
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	no fear of wild animals	cf. Genesis 2-3
37-50	plan of mother goddess Nintur to end human nomadism	cf. Gen 3:20; 4:1 cf. Gen 4:1-16
51-85	the failure of Nintur's plan; the establishment of kingship	
86-100	building of first cities, including Eridu; establishment of worship	cf. Gen 4:17-18 cf. Gen 4:26
101-134	antediluvian kings; human noise	cf. Genesis 5 cf. Gen 6:1-8
135-260	the flood	cf. Gen 6:9-9:29

These four texts all date from the first half of the second millennium B.C., i.e., before 1500 B.C.—a long time before Genesis was written. The parallels between Genesis and these texts are not so close that we can suppose the writer of Genesis borrowed from them or had even read them. The texts reflect the common ancient oriental view about the earliest days of human history. Similarly today few people have read Darwin's *Origin of Species* but most have a general knowledge of the theory of evolution. With the Atrahasis epic and the Sumerian flood story, Genesis shares a common understanding of the earliest phases of world history: the creation of humankind, followed by population growth, followed by the flood. Modern readers of Genesis tend to be very impressed by these parallels, but I suggest that ancient readers would hardly have noticed them: what would have struck

<sup>7</sup>T. Jacobsen, "The Eridu Genesis," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981) 513-529. For a discussion of some of the problems with this reconstruction, see *Genesis 1-15*, xl.

them were the vast differences between Genesis and other ancient near eastern accounts of world origins.

Try to imagine yourself as an ancient Babylonian or Syrian arriving in Jerusalem in about 1000 B.C. and reading the stories of Genesis for the first time. What would have struck you about Genesis' account of world history?

You might have noticed a few differences in the historical data, for example, in the size of the ark or the length of the flood. But the most obvious differences between Genesis and the earlier oriental texts would fall in the realm of theology and anthropology, that is, in what they say about God and the human. As an ancient Iraqi you would have been brought up to believe in a multitude of gods and goddesses, who often had sexual intercourse with each other and indeed from time to time with humans. In Genesis there is but one God, creator of all that exists. As an ancient Iraqi you had grown up to believe that the sun, moon, and stars were some of the most powerful gods around, but Genesis says they were simply created by God's "let there be" on the fourth day of creation.

The notion of God's sexual activity is also striking by its absence from Genesis. Ancient Babylonians and Canaanites believed in sacred marriages between gods and humans that took place in their temples. Girls were dedicated to the temples to serve as sacred prostitutes, and their acts of intercourse, allegedly with the gods, were supposed to ensure the fertility of the soil and

the womb. But Genesis holds that this practice of sacred prostitution was so repulsive to the Creator that he decreed the flood to blot out sinful humanity (Gen 6:1-8). Strictly speaking, the God of Genesis is beyond sexual distinction, but as befits one who has more power than any male in a patriarchal society, he is portrayed in almost exclusively masculine imagery. He is a god not a goddess, and there is only one of him.

The second point that would strike an ancient Babylonian reading Genesis for the first time is the power of the one creator God. He is both omniscient and omnipotent. He speaks and the world appears perfectly ordered, so that after six days of divine activity the whole is complete and declared to be very good. Creation as described in Babylonian and Canaanite mythology was often a drawn-out process involving battles with other deities and chaos monsters.

But it is in the flood story that the new theology of Genesis is most apparent. The Gilgamesh epic describes how the gods collectively decided to destroy the human race with a flood. However, one of the gods disagreed with the decision and tipped off his devotee to build an ark. Once the flood came, it was outside the gods' control: they were so frightened they cowered in the corner like dogs. Furthermore, when the flood was over, one of the top three gods (Enlil) turned up at the sacrifice which "Noah" was offering and was astonished to find a human survivor. The gods of Mesopotamia were neither in control of the flood nor did they know exactly what was happening. They were neither omniscient nor omnipotent. How different is the God of Genesis. The flood begins exactly when he determines. He knows all about Noah; indeed, he shut him in, and when he remembers Noah, the flood starts to subside. Finally it is the sovereign Creator

who tells Noah when to disembark. At every moment God knows what is happening and is in control of the flood. He is both omniscient and omnipotent.

Third, an ancient oriental reading Genesis for the first time would have been struck by the one God's supreme concern for humankind. According to the Atrahasis epic the creation of humanity was very much an afterthought. Originally the minor gods, the Igigi, were responsible for irrigating the ground and producing food for the great gods. However, when they went on strike, seven human couples were created to supply the great gods with their needs. In fact sending the flood was rather a mistake, for the gods became very hungry when they nearly annihilated the human race. The Gilgamesh epic tells how they crowded like flies round "Noah's" sacrifice when he left the ark.

Totally different is the attitude of the God of Genesis. The creation of human beings in two sexes in the image of God is the climax and goal of Genesis 1. So important is it that the angels are invited to watch in the words, "Let us make man in *our* image" (1:26). The whole narrative builds up to this point, with most attention being given to the creation of those things that matter most for human existence (sun, land, plants, etc.). It is striking that God specifically supplies humanity with food: "I have given you every plant for food." It is not the human who feeds the gods, as the Atrahasis epic says, but God who feeds the human. The divine concern with human welfare is reiterated in Genesis 2. There God creates the perfect human environment: rivers, trees, food, and companions. God is pictured as looking round to see if there is anything that people need and then stepping in to provide it. It is only after the creation of the human that God declares his work complete, and it is described as very good (1:31).

If our ancient Babylonian would have been surprised by God's concern with human welfare, he might have been taken aback by Genesis's stern moralism. The gods of the ancient orient had their principles, but like human beings they did not always live up to them. They lied and squabbled; one could not rely on them. Indeed the Babylonian flood was sent because of the number and noise of the human race, and their flood hero was saved simply because he was a devotee of a god who disagreed with the decision to destroy humanity. Much sterner is the God of Genesis. He expels Adam and Eve from Eden for eating ~ pretty fruit; he sentences Cain to perpetual nomadism for fratricide; he sends the flood because of the human addiction to sin. Noah escaped from death, not by luck, but because of his outstanding righteousness; he was blameless among his contemporaries (6:9).

Finally, though there is a similar sequence of events in Genesis 1-9 and the Sumerian flood story and the Atrahasis epic, the interpretation of this sequence is quite different. The Sumerian flood story

takes throughout...an affirmative and optimistic view of existence: it believes in progress. Things were not nearly as good to begin with as they have become since....

In the biblical account it is the other way around. Things began as perfect from God's hand and grew then steadily worse through man's sinfulness until God finally had to do away with all mankind except for the pious Noah who would beget a new and better stock.

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The moral judgement here introduced, and the ensuing pessimistic viewpoint could not be more different from the tenor of the Sumerian tale; only the assurance that such a flood will not recur is common to both.<sup>8</sup>

These then are the differences that would have sprung to the eyes of ancient readers of Genesis encountering the book for the first time. They would not have noticed the differences between Genesis and modern geology, for they would have known nothing about the billions of years that the earth took to emerge. But ancient Babylonians would have been struck by Genesis's monotheism as opposed to the polytheisms with which they had grown up. They would have been awed by the sovereign power of the one God, and amazed at his concern with human beings. Finally, they might have been dismayed by the moral strictness of this God, and the ability of humankind to destroy the good creation.

## II. GENESIS ON GOD AND HUMANS

These features of Genesis that would have struck an ancient reader so forcibly are of course ideas that are presupposed throughout scripture. One might even say that in the opening chapters of Genesis the assumptions of all the biblical writers are made explicit. The unity of God is reiterated time and again in the Bible. The first commandment is, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:3); Deut 6:4 affirms, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD"; and Isa 45:5, "besides me there is no God." There were indeed many polytheists in

ancient Israel, and the historical books of the Old Testament record the bitter struggles of the prophets and kings to promote monotheism, but the biblical writers simply take it for granted that there is only one true God (1 Cor 8:5-6).

Genesis's assertion of the supreme power of God is also taken for granted by the rest of the Bible. The plagues were sent to show the Egyptians that Yahweh is God (Exod 7:5). Fire fell from heaven at Elijah's behest to prove the same to the worshipers of Baal. The prophets declare that God controls all the nations and look forward to a day when all will acknowledge his perfect rule from Jerusalem (Amos 9:7; Isa 2:2-3). He is the "only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Tim 6:15).

Like Genesis, the rest of scripture insists on God's concern for human welfare. Many laws in the Pentateuch are explicitly commended by motive clauses which speak of their potential benefit for the observer. For example, the commandment "Honor your father and mother" is supported by the motive clause "that your days may be long in the land." A similar point is made by many of the proverbs. Perhaps Psalm 8:4-5 best sums up the Old Testament attitude:

What are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?  
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honor.

Jesus makes the same point when he says: "If God so clothes the grass of the field,

<sup>8</sup>T. Jacobsen, "The Eridu Genesis," 529.

will he not much more clothe you?" (Matt 6:30). The incarnation is the ultimate demonstration of how God values humankind: God chose to redeem the human by becoming human.

The concern for morality exhibited by Genesis continues throughout the Bible in the law, the wisdom books, and the prophets. That moral behavior matters is clearly stated or implied everywhere. The immediacy of God's concern for moral issues is expressed by the ascription of the very words of the law to God himself and by the way the prophets introduce their oracles: "Thus says the LORD." The dire punishments meted out to lawbreakers in both testaments witness to an ongoing divine hatred of wickedness.

Finally, Genesis's picture of human history being characterized by degeneration rather than progress is reaffirmed elsewhere in the Bible. The theme of the Pentateuch has been defined as "the partial fulfillment...of the promise to...the patriarchs...in a world where human initiatives always lead to disaster."<sup>9</sup> The books of Judges and Kings exhibit this degenerative decline over longer periods: according to Judges the faithful contemporaries of Joshua were succeeded by ever more corrupt descendants, whose behavior ultimately was no better than Sodom's. The book of Kings relates how the glorious city and temple of Solomon were eventually destroyed by the Babylonians. As far as individuals are concerned, the biographies of Saul, David, and Solomon show young men of great promise ending their days in shame.

Genesis does not just reflect on theology and ethics in general. The opening chapters give a clear analysis of biblical ideals through narrative. Gen 1:1-2:3 shows God working for six days

and resting on the seventh. This suggests a model for creatures created in the divine image to imitate. Righteous Noah worked on a weekly cycle, and Exod 20:8 begins, “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth.”

Before God rested on the sabbath, he told humans to “be fruitful and multiply.” Indeed he created humankind in two sexes for the purpose of filling the earth and subduing it. This is the most explicit comment on human sexuality in these opening chapters of Genesis, but the story of the creation of Eve in chapter 2 also has clear implications for relationships between the sexes. Through the medium of narrative God’s ideals for human behavior are set out, and it is against these ideals that the actual behavior of later characters in the biblical story is evaluated. In other words, these stories are not simply related to describe the past or to provide entertainment, but to show the ancient Israelites how they ought to live. It is this didactic purpose in Genesis that warrants the Jewish description of it as Torah or law.

So I next wish to focus on the ethical principles expressed in the opening chapters of Genesis, contrasting them with attitudes in other parts of the ancient orient and suggesting how these principles are reflected in other parts of the Bible.

The ancient world was worried by the population explosion. According to

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<sup>9</sup>D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978) 29.

the Atrahasis epic, the gods were prompted to send the flood because the human race had become too numerous, and after the flood the gods ordained that some women should suffer infertility, and some miscarry or otherwise lose their babies. Genesis opposes such an approach. Adam is told to be fruitful and multiply, and this command is repeated no less than three times to Noah after the flood. This positive attitude to children emerges time and again in other parts of the Bible. Abraham is promised children as numerous as the stars of heaven (Genesis 15:5). The pentateuchal law looks askance at attempts to curb fertility.<sup>10</sup> The psalms declare: “Blessed is the man who has his quiver full of them [children]” (127:5).

If Genesis 1 makes the point that the purpose of sexual differentiation is procreation, Genesis 2 elaborates it. Adam, we are told, was lonely, so God created out of his rib the perfect companion for him; then comes the first wedding. When God, the divine parent, introduces bride and groom, Adam exclaims, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”; and the narrator comments, “Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh” (2:24). These remarks are quoted by Jesus and Paul as defining norms for relations between the sexes. It seems to me likely that the Old Testament also regards this story as normative. It has several implications.

First, note that God created Eve, not another Adam, to be Adam’s companion. This suggests that heterosexual companionship is the creator’s plan, not homosexual. The ancient oriental world, like the classical and the modern world, tended to regard homosexual acts between consenting adults as quite proper,<sup>11</sup> though of course homosexual rape was outlawed. But Old Testament law proscribes male homosexual intercourse and bans customs suggestive of homosexuality (e.g., Lev 18:22; Deut 22:5).

Second, note that God created only one Eve rather than several Eves. This suggests that monogamy was the divine ideal. The fact that patriarchs and kings often had more than one wife shows that polygamy was tolerated in Israel; but the brutal picture in Genesis 4 of Lamech, the

first bigamist, and the sad story of Jacob's unhappy marriage to two sisters show what the writer thought of such arrangements. Neither the husband nor the wives were content in the bigamous relationship.

Third, Genesis suggests that marriage creates a bond between man and woman akin to blood relationship. Eve is created out of Adam's rib, so that when he meets her for the first time he hails her as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (2:23). This kinship formula is typically used of blood relatives like brothers, sisters, cousins, or children. But here and in every marriage, says the narrator, spouses become as it were each other's relatives. This implies that marriage should be as durable as kinship, and that husband and wife should look after each other as the closest of relatives. Indeed the narrator makes the point that the husband has

<sup>10</sup>Lev 22:24; Deut 25:5-12; cf. Gen 38:9-10.

<sup>11</sup>G. J. Wenham, "The Old Testament Attitude to Homosexuality," *Expository Times* 102 (1991) 359-363.

a particular duty to look after his wife. In a world where women were often treated as property, this is a very striking statement. Usually it was held that a man's primary duty was to care for his parents, but Genesis says that "a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife" (2:24). This leaving was not physical, for in biblical society the wife moved to live with her husband and his family, not vice versa. Genesis is talking about an emotional leaving: a husband must put his wife's welfare above even his parents' interests, which were still regarded as most important (Exod 20:12). This revolutionary view of women was unfortunately not always practiced in Israel, but it stands at the beginning of the Bible as a statement of the Creator's ideals.

### III. GENESIS ON GRACIOUS LIVING

The opening chapters of Genesis constitute only a fraction of the book and something needs to be said about the last forty chapters, the story of the patriarchs. The very bulk of this material shows its importance to the writer: he was clearly much more interested in the lives of Abraham and Joseph than in Adam and Noah. Essentially, Genesis is interested in tracing the origins of the people of Israel and its twelve tribes. Thus the book's real focus is the life story of Jacob, later renamed Israel, and his twelve sons, the forefathers of the twelve tribes. Central to this story is the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham of land, descendants, and blessing.<sup>12</sup> No interpretation of Genesis that does not make central the fulfillment of the promises does justice to the author. But within the overall framework of Genesis the individual stories often have the character of Torah—law or teaching that shows subsequent generations how to live. Thus the marvelous tale of how Abraham's servant was sent to a distant land to find a wife for Isaac shows how God answers the devout prayers of his people. It is also, I suspect, a hint to the younger generation that even arranged marriages may be made in heaven!

But however happy the early years of Isaac and Rebekah's marriage, it later turned sour, with one parent favoring Esau and the other Jacob. The subsequent rivalry between the brothers reached such a pitch that Jacob had to flee for his life, as he feared Esau would murder him. He eventually arrived at his uncle Laban's house and was tricked into marrying two of his daughters, when he wanted to marry only Rachel. Into this unhappy and stormy relationship twelve sons were born, the ancestors of the twelve tribes. The tensions between the wives, Rachel and Leah,



and between Jacob and his wives dominate this part of Genesis. But these animosities affected the children too. It seems likely that Jacob's indifference to the rape of his daughter Dinah was because she was Leah's child, not Rachel's. Parental favoritism producing fraternal hate is even more evident in the story of Joseph. The long-sleeved coat given him by his father excited his brothers' envy, and envy was turned to deadly hatred by Joseph's own cocky interpretations of his

<sup>12</sup>For a discussion see D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*.

dreams. Consequently Joseph had to suffer exile, slavery, and imprisonment in Egypt for a dozen years because of his brothers.

The way Genesis sets the favoritism of Isaac in one generation alongside the favoritism of Jacob in the next, and its portrayal of the bitter consequences for parents and children alike is surely deliberate. But just as deliberate is the book's portrayal of forgiveness and reconciliation in both these stories.

Twenty years elapse between Jacob's leaving home and his reconciliation with Esau. Their meeting is dramatically described in Genesis 33. Both are changed men. Jacob has just struggled with the angel at Peniel and had his name changed to Israel. Humility takes the place of arrogance as he bows down seven times before his brother. Penitence prompts him to offer back the blessing out of which he had cheated Esau. For his part Esau too is transformed. Last heard of, Esau had been waiting for his father's death so that he could kill Jacob. This time "Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him" (Gen 33:4). At first Esau refused Jacob's gifts. Instead he invited him to come and live with him in Seir. Such warmth after so many years of hatred makes this scene one of the most beautiful in scripture.

Yet even more moving is the scene in the Joseph story that leads to Joseph's disclosing his identity to his brothers. Once again we are shown that both sides have changed. At this stage of the story Joseph has been released from prison and appointed director of Egyptian famine relief. His brothers have come to Egypt to buy grain and naturally fail to recognize Joseph, but he has identified them. He puts them into a situation that replicates as closely as possible the situation when they sold him to Egypt, indifferent to the heartbreak that this caused their father Jacob. Now Joseph threatens to keep Benjamin, Jacob's darling youngest son, and let the brothers return home. But Judah, the very brother responsible for Joseph's sale, pleads for Benjamin's release in a "speech of singular pathos and beauty."<sup>13</sup> In this great speech (Gen 44:18-34), Judah, one of Jacob's least loved sons, identifies with Jacob's predicament and begs that he may stay behind instead of Benjamin, because he cannot bear to see his father's heart broken.

This is what Robert Alter says about Judah's plea:

This remarkable speech is a point-for-point undoing, morally and psychologically, of the brothers' earlier violation of fraternal and filial bonds. A basic biblical perception about both human relations and relations between God and man is that love is unpredictable, arbitrary, at times perhaps seemingly unjust, and Judah now comes to an acceptance of that fact with all its consequences. His father, he states clearly to Joseph, has singled out Benjamin for a special love, as he singled out

Rachel's other son before. It is a painful reality of favoritism with which Judah, in contrast to the earlier jealousy over Joseph, is here reconciled, out of filial duty and more, out of filial love. His entire speech is motivated by the deepest empathy for his father, by a real understanding of what it means for the old man's very life to be bound up with that of the lad. He can even bring himself to quote sympathetically (verse 27) Jacob's typically extravagant state

<sup>13</sup>S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 14th ed. (London: Methuen, 1943) 359.

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ment that his wife bore him two sons—as though Leah were not also his wife and the other ten were not also his sons. Twenty-two years earlier, Judah engineered the selling of Joseph into slavery; now he is prepared to offer himself as a slave so that the other son of Rachel can be set free. Twenty-two years earlier, he stood with his brothers and silently watched when the bloodied tunic they had brought to Jacob sent their father into a fit of anguish; now he is willing to do anything in order not to have to see his father suffer that way again.<sup>14</sup>

Judah's great speech is both a confession of the brothers' past and a declaration of their new attitude. It prompts Joseph to identify himself ("I am Joseph your brother") and to declare that he does not hold their sin against them, indeed, that God has used it for great good: "God sent me before you to preserve life"; "you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen 45:5; 50:20).

The book of Genesis is, above all, about grace. It is a story of God's love for sinful humanity, a love that triumphs despite and indeed through human sin. Despite its grim analysis of humanity's plight without God, Genesis is a fundamentally optimistic book, for the God who created human beings in his own image will not give up until his promises to humanity are fulfilled. Reading Genesis is demanding, but most rewarding, for the more I read it, the more hope it gives me that the tragedies of the twentieth century can, through God's mercy, work out for good.

<sup>14</sup>R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 174-175.

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