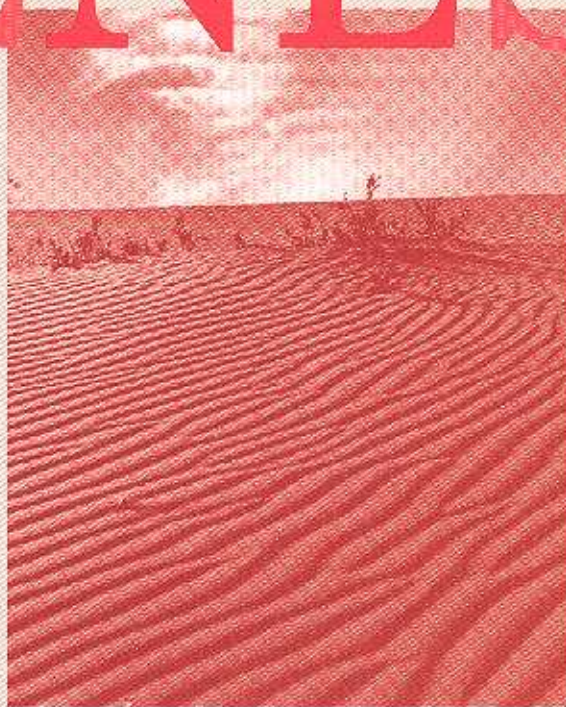


GENESIS



A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men
by John C. Purdy

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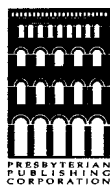
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Genesis

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Introduction

Men's

Bible

Study

The Reasons for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life ...
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture.*

These words from "A Brief Statement of Faith," adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God's Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's Word" (*Book of Order*, PC(USA), G 14.0516) to each of us.

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says; yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho.

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men's breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study groups in homes, and many more. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion it assumes a small group of men, no more than twelve, one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is a Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective:

1) We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2) We will stick to the Scripture in this study. The men in the group have gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas may be.

3) We will regard the leader(s) as "first among equals." Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning. The pastor will serve as a resource for leaders in this study but may or may not be a leader, as determined by each study group.

4) We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit, which spoke to the biblical writers, now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5) We will listen for "the question behind the question." Sometimes a man's gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6) We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other, even when we think the other person is wrong.

7) We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes and answering questions relating to the study and, from time to time, sharing your answers with others, even when you worry that they are not the "right" answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of the preceding seven rules.

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes to speak has a chance to do so, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. Or the leaders might alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of a worksheet. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passage. Others are intended to help the students think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis of this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. When a man has noted on his sheet his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword, often a story relating to the story that has just been discussed.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak, without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? And (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study God's word together in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study, the leader will find Scripture quotations. These quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout the study, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. Asterisks (*) are placed beside those sections of each lesson that may be omitted or summarized by the leader for the sake of time. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson as shown in the study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

The Book of Genesis

Introduction

Think of the Book of Genesis as a quilt. A quilt is a coverlet pieced together from remnants of cloth, sewed into a design, and often made into a finished product by the work of many hands. (Some of us remember when our grandmothers gathered in the church basement for a quilting bee.) Think of Genesis as a being very much like a quilt—pieced together by many faithful loving hands.

Biblical scholars tell us that the Book of Genesis was made in just such a fashion: This first book of the Bible is a collection of materials gathered from many sources, some of which served a different purpose at one time. Its structure reveals the careful work of many hands, yet the finished product displays a marvelous, coherent pattern.

Among quilters, it is the practice to give names to their patterns, such as Texas Star, Wagon Wheel, Cup and Saucer, and Spring Flowers. Think of the overall design of Genesis as having for its name The Holy One of Israel. It is the purpose of Genesis to present to its readers the main character, the chief actor in Israel's story—God. This is not the God of philosophy, not God as an idea, as the First Mover or the Ground of Being. This is the One to whom Israel owed total allegiance—known variously as Yahweh, God Almighty, The Lord of Hosts, and The Holy One.

The Holy One of Israel

"A Brief Statement of Faith," from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Confessions*, declares:

We trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel . . .

Then it goes on to affirm:

In sovereign love God created the world good . . . God acts with love and justice to redeem creation.

In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all the families of the earth.

Who is this "Holy One of Israel," who creates, acts, chooses, and blesses? The Book of Genesis testifies to the character and purpose of that One. This is what gives Genesis a discernible pattern; it is what binds together legends, sagas, histories, genealogies, folktales, and myths into a coherent whole, so that each of the stories you will be studying in this series is a testimony to Israel's God.

Other Stories, Other Studies

Viewing Genesis as a quilt whose various pieces are held together by a dominant pattern (or purpose) has this advantage: It helps us put aside—for consideration in another time and place—colorful, fascinating stories that are not testimonies to the Holy One of Israel. One of these is the history of the people of Israel. That story properly begins about 1200 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era). About that time, several tribes living in the land of Canaan came together in a league, bound together by the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God of their ancestors (cf. Joshua 24).

The forming of this league is probably the earliest historical knowledge we have of Israel—knowledge that can be corroborated by nonbiblical sources such as archaeology and related disciplines.

The Book of Genesis is not properly a part of that history. In many wonderful ways, Genesis tells us what happened before Israel came into being. But these accounts are not, strictly speaking, historical; they are not open to the kind of scientific observation and verification that historians insist upon.

Archaeologists can assure us that there were indeed Semitic peoples living in Mesopotamia in the second millennium B.C.E., and that some of these peoples migrated to Canaan. But there are no extra-biblical records identifying one of these groups as wanderers of Abram.

If the beginning of Israel in 1200 B.C.E. may be compared with the establishment of the United States of America in 1789, then the accounts in Genesis may be compared with Columbus' discovering of America, the pilgrims' first Thanksgiving, Daniel Boone's wonderful escape, Pocahontas' saving of John Smith, and the like. While there are legendary aspects to these stories, they are an important part of our national epic. They help us to know who we are and how we got here. In some ways they are as important to our national identity as the ratification of the Constitution. In a similar way, the stories in Genesis are an essential part of the national epic of Israel. They would have been told and retold from one generation to another, just as we tell our children about the pilgrim fathers and mothers—or comparable stories.

The Making of Genesis

Looking at Genesis in terms of its finished design also warns us of another fascinating study, which, like the

history of Israel, can wait for another time and place. That is the study of the origins of the various pieces of Genesis and of how they came to be stitched together. You can't read far into Genesis before you become very much aware that it is indeed a quilt of many pieces. The most obvious and well-known example is the presence of two Creation stories, one in Gen. 1:1—2:4a and a second one in Gen. 2:4b—3:24. Also the story of the Flood in Genesis 6—9 seems to be a composite of several different accounts.

Scholars have marvelous and intricate theories about where the various pieces of Genesis originated and how they were brought together. There is general agreement that the first Creation story, for example, was composed by priestly writers during or after the Babylonian captivity, which took place in the sixth century B.C.E., while the second Creation story is attributed to writers living in the kingdom of Judah several centuries earlier.

A contemporary scholar, Harold Bloom, advances the theory that one of these writers living in Judah was a woman. He has published *The Book of J*, which isolates the work of this particular author and presents it as a narrative in its own right.

Some of you are familiar with the story of how the first three Gospels were written: how Mark came first, how Matthew and Luke each had Mark's account to work with plus another common source named Q, and other, diverse materials. And you know how useful that story can be in reading and interpreting the first three Gospels. The same may be said of knowing how Genesis was put together. It has been enormously useful to biblical interpreters to hear how Genesis constructed. I heard one elegant theory that suggested the narratives of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph were each constructed to reflect a separate era in Israel's history. Abraham represents the Exodus from Egypt and the occupation of the promised land, Jacob represents the time of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and Joseph represents the Babylonian exile and the return.

But the story of the composition of Genesis is not our concern in this study, just as we are not concerned with the history of Israel. We are concerned to know what these texts tell us about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That will be our focus in each of the seven sessions.

By keeping the focus on the character and purpose of God, we can do justice to the Book of Genesis in a seven-session study. Examination of the entire book is clearly impossible; Genesis has fifty chapters! Also, the final third of the book—chapters 37—50, the story of Joseph and Jacob's family—is a unity. It is like a novella. It is too long for a single study session; and there is no convenient way to look at bits and pieces of it. That is a part of Genesis that you may read on your own; it is a grand story.

In your group you will be discussing seven representative stories from the first 36 chapters of Genesis. Trust each one to answer in its own way the question, *Who is the Holy One of Israel?*

These seven stories are:

1. God Creates the World, Gen. 2:4b—3:24
2. Cain and Abel, Gen. 4:1—16
3. God Calls Abram and Sarai, Gen. 12:1—9
4. The Covenant with Abraham, Gen. 17:1—22
5. Jacob and Esau, Gen. 25:19—34
6. Jacob's Dream, Gen. 28:1—15
7. Jacob's Journey to Bethel, Gen. 35:1—15

These stories take us from the creation of the world to the beginning of Israel as a nation: They take us from Adam's naming of the animals to God's naming of Jacob as "Israel." The tribes who come together to form the league in 1200 B.C.E. bear the names of the sons of Jacob. "The Holy One of Israel" is the name by which God is to be known and worshiped—even to this day.

One

God Creates

The World

Genesis 2:4b—3:24

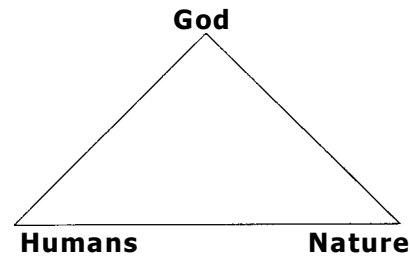
"It is not good that the man should be alone," said Yahweh. "I will make a partner to stand beside him." So Yahweh shaped out of the soil all the creatures of the field and birds of the air, bringing them to the man to see how he would call them. Whatever the man called became the living creature's name. Soon all wild animals had names the man gave them, all the birds of the air and creatures of the field; but the man did not find his partner among them. Now Yahweh put the man into a deep sleep; when he fell asleep, he took a rib, closed the flesh of his side again. Starting with the part taken out of the man, Yahweh shaped the rib into woman, returned her to the side of the man.

"This one is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh," said the man. "Woman I call her, out of man she was parted." So a man parts from his mother and father, clings to his wife: they were one flesh."¹

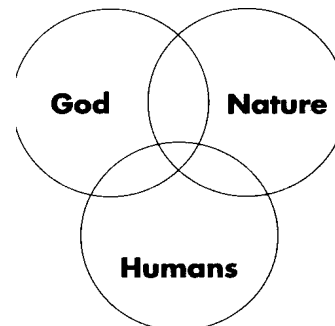
Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

(To the leader: A man who was a highly successful teacher himself wrote: "The teacher . . . is not primarily someone who knows instructing someone who does not know. He is rather someone who attempts to re-create the subject in the student's mind, and his strategy in doing this is first of all to get the student to recognize what he already potentially knows. . . . That is why it is the teacher, rather than the student, who asks most of the questions."²)

Read Gen. 2:4b—3:24. Working individually, try various ways of diagramming the relationships among God, humans, and the rest of creation. Before setting to work, consider these questions: (1) Are those relationships best represented by a triangle, in which God, Humans, and Nature are each separate entities?



(2) Or might we prefer three interlocking circles, in which God, Humans, and Nature each have some independence, but are not seen as existing apart from the others?



Share your ideas about how you might diagram this relationship with members of the group.

Are we better off with the story in Gen. 2:4b—3:24 than with any kind of scheme that can be represented by a diagram? Why or why not?

¹ David Rosenberg and Harold Bloom, *The Book of J* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), p. 62.

² Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1983), p. xv.

Spend a few minutes enjoying the plays on words in Gen. 2:4b-3:24. Adam means *man* in the generic sense, that is, human being. The ground out of which Adam is made is written in Hebrew as *Adamah*. When the human being sees the partner that was made from a rib, he calls her *Ishshah* (woman), because she is taken from *Ish* (man as male).

Is there anything that could or should be construed to allot to the male of the human species superiority or dominion over the female? What relationship is implied?

What is the nature of God that God sees the need of a partner for Adam and from Adam creates two separate genders, male and female?

Where is Mother Nature in all of this? Would it be proper to speak of God in this narrative as Father Nature?

Where does the notion of Mother Nature come from?

Is it possible, from this story in Genesis, to derive the notion of nature as obeying its own laws, irrespective of human beings?

What does the story tell us about the place of human beings in and with the rest of the created order?

In contemporary thinking, has Mother Nature been replaced by the environment?

Consider together the imagery of the human being receiving the gift of a garden to tend. Were not our forebears only too happy to leave their farms for the city?

Are there any implications in Gen. 2:4b—3:24 that humans are to turn all wilderness into a garden?

If we take this creation narrative as normative, what is the purpose of sexual intercourse? (Some members may be familiar with the use that Jesus makes of Gen. 2:21—24 when asked by the Pharisees about the possibility of divorce. Cf. Matt. 19:3—9.)

Be sure to leave some time at the end of the session to consider what Gen. 2:4b—3:24 tells us about the character and purpose of The Holy One of Israel. Working individually, complete three statements about God that this story prompts you to make:

God is

God wants

God made

Share your statements with the group.

(To the leader: Call attention to the Afterword. There are suggestions for daily Bible reading and meditation for those so inclined. Brief selections are designed for individual reflection after the study session is over—stories of men's experience, poems, hymns, quotations, etc.

Some leaders may choose to use selections from the Afterword within the group sessions—especially if the proposed learning activities do not strike fire.

Do not blame yourself or the group if you did not cover all of the suggested learning activities. They are provided only to get you seriously engaged with the biblical text. If one or more of them does so, that is all that matters.)

Afterword

.....
Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled him down;
And there the great God Almighty Who
lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till he shaped it in his own image;

Then into it he blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.³

"I stood on a hillside that had been used and cared for by three generations of Amish farmers. It was steep land the sort more often than not worn out under the old American agriculture and simply unusable in the new. The hillside had been cropped in alternating strips of corn and sod.... When I was there the cover crop was

³ James Weldon Johnson, "The Creation," in *God's Trombones* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1927, 1955), p. 20.

coming up to safeguard the ground over the winter. I looked for marks of erosion. There were none. It is possible, I think, to say that this is a Christian agriculture, formed upon the understanding that it is sinful for people to misuse or destroy what they did not make."⁴

"A good deal of human activity is wasted or perverted energy, making war, feeding a parasitic class, building monuments to paranoid conquerors and the like. The genuine work which is founded on the human need for food and shelter moves in the direction of transforming nature into a world with a human shape, meaning, and function."⁵

"Someone asked a rabbi, 'Why did God steal a rib to make a companion for Adam?' The rabbi answered, 'Would you call it theft if someone took one piece of silver during the night and returned the next morning and returned twelve pieces of silver?'"⁶

"We then are told that, from the very beginning, man has been created 'male and female' (Gen. 1:27). Scripture itself provides the interpretation of this fact: even though man is surrounded by the innumerable creatures of the created world, he realizes that *he is alone* (cf. Gen. 2:20). God intervenes in order to help him escape from solitude: *'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him'* (Gen. 2:18). The creation of woman is thus marked from the outset by *the principle of help*: a help which is not one-sided but *mutual*. Woman complements man, just as man complements woman. ..."⁷

—From a Papal letter, issued in July 1995, in which the Pope endorsed "real equality" between the sexes.

"But in the end, we don't own nature any more than we own the birds at the feeder. Or the owls in the forest. What ever fine points the lawyers for the timber industry can draw in a court, nature draws other laws. We can't save the owl and cut down the forests, any more than we can destroy our habitat and survive."⁸

⁴ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (Copyright 1977 by Wendell Berry. San Francisco: Avon Books, 1977), p. 213.

⁵ Frye, *The Great Code*, p. 72.

⁶ *Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis*, by Jacob Neusner (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1985), as quoted in *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible: Vol. 1-Genesis*, edited by Michael E. Williams (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 35.

⁷ "To the Women of the World: An Affirmation of 'Feminine Genius,'" *The New York Times*, Sunday, July 16, 1995, p. E7.

⁸ Ellen Goodman, "Earth Week case for Supreme Court," in *The New Mexican*, Thursday, April 20, 1995, p. A7.

"The major responsibility of the earth-creature (in Hebrew *ʾadam*), fashioned by God from the 'ground' (in Hebrew *ʾadamah*), was to care for and to enjoy the garden (Gen. 2:7-9, 15). As benefitting the garden-keeper, 'the man' (the term is not used clearly as a personal name until 3:17 though perhaps in 2:20 'for the man' might be rendered 'for Adam') is given the authority and power to name all the creatures God made from the 'ground' (in Hebrew *ʾadamah*). By naming the creatures, God's garden-keeper orders the creation. Great power rested in naming, and a name—especially God's name—was not to be used wrongly or lightly. By allowing the garden-keeper to name all other creatures the Lord God acknowledges humankind's authority and special role within the creation."⁹

Suggested Daily Readings

Genesis 1:1—11:9 is sometimes called the Primitive Cycle of stories in the Book of Genesis. It includes the Creation, the Temptation, Cain and Abel, the Great Flood, God's Covenant with Noah, and the Tower of Babel. The world is still good because it is God's creation; still, the world needs God's redeeming work because of human sin.

- Day 1:** Read Gen. 1:1—2:4a, the first of two Creation stories. Meditate on the marvelous order exhibited by the created world.
- Day 2:** Read Gen. 2:4b—3:24, the second Creation story, which tells of the temptation, fall, and expulsion from the garden. Meditate on the world as God intended it—and as it is in reality.
- Day 3:** Read Gen. 4:1-16, in which Cain murders his brother Abel. Meditate on the power of sin to set brother against brother.
- Day 4:** Read Gen. 5:1—6:4, which tells of the generations between Adam and Noah. Meditate on the power of humans to reproduce themselves, to form families, to create memories of ancestors.
- Day 5:** Read Gen. 6:5—8:22, the story of the Great Flood. Meditate on the divine sorrow and regret at what humans do to one another.
- Day 6:** Read Gen. 9:1-29, which tells of God's covenant with Noah. Meditate on the forgiving love of the Creator.
- Day 7:** Read Gen. 10:1—11:26, which tells the story of the Tower of Babel. Consider the ethnic rivalries that plague humankind even today.

⁹ W. Eugene March, "The Origin of Humankind," in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, August 16-23-30, 1993, p. 17.

two

Cain and Abel

Genesis 4:1—16

"...one day, Cain brought an offering to Yahweh, from fruit of the earth. Abel also brought an offering, from the choicest of his flock, from its fat parts, and Yahweh was moved by Abel and his holocaust. Yet by Cain and his holocaust he was unmoved. This disturbed Cain deeply, his face fell.

"What so disturbs you?" said Yahweh to Cain. "Why wear a face so fallen? Look up: if you conceive good it is moving; if not good, sin is an open door, a demon crouching there. It will rise to you, though you be above it."¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

As Northrop Frye has written in *The Great Code*, "The general principle of interpretation is traditionally given as In the Old Testament the New Testament is concealed; in the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed.' Everything that happens in the Old Testament is a 'type' or adumbration of something that happens in the New Testament."² It is always useful in discussing Old Testament texts to ask: How is this event a hint, a foreshadowing of the advent of the Messiah?

Read Gen. 4:1-16. (This is one of those narratives that lends itself to a dramatic reading in which one person reads aloud the narrative portions, another reads the words of God, and a third the words of Cain.) Compare and contrast this story with the Creation story in Gen. 2:4b-3:24, and discuss your answers as a group. Use the following questions to guide you:

What aspects of human life and activity have entered the picture that were not present in the garden?

What does the Cain and Abel story suggest about the future of the humans who got off to such a good beginning?

Look for clues to the meaning of the story in the original meanings of names: "Eve" is related to the Hebrew word for "living." "Cain" is similar to the Hebrew word for "produced." "The land of Nod" means "the land of wandering." Discuss such questions as these:

Do all humans have their origin in a single living person?

Is Cain meant to represent all who derive produce from the land, that is, all farmers? And is this suggestive of a natural antagonism between farmers and shepherds?

What does it mean to be a wanderer on earth? Is that the fate of all humans, that is, all descendants of Cain?

¹ David Rosenberg and Harold Bloom, *The Book of J* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), p. 12.

² Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1983), p. 79.

Think about plays, novels, movies, and operas that tell of violence growing out of envy or jealousy. (For example: Macbeth, who murders the king in order to take the throne; Hamlet's uncle, who kills his brother to gain a throne.) Genesis 4:7 speaks of a sin as "lurking at the door." Who is waiting to take advantage of human failings?

Compare the Cain and Abel story with the saying of Jesus in Matt. 5:21-24.

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; . . . So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Is it likely that Jesus had in mind the story of Cain and Abel?

Consider, as a group, what the story of Cain and Abel tells us about The Holy One of Israel.

How would you characterize the relationship of Cain to God before the murder of his brother? Intimate? Friendly?

How do you account for the offerings that the brothers made?

Why was Abel's sacrifice accepted and Cain's rejected?

Why was there no "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, life for a life"?

Where is the justice in this story?

To whom does the cursing of the ground apply—to Cain only? Or to all of humanity?

Is there relevance in the story to the "ethnic cleansing" that goes on today between peoples who have lived side-by-side for many years?

Afterword

A Divine Image

Cruelty has a Human Heart,
And Jealousy a Human Face;
Terror the Human Form Divine,
And Secrecy the Human Dress.
The Human Dress is forged Iron,
The Human Form a fiery Forge, The
Human Face a Furnace seal'd,
The Human Heart its hungry Gorge.³

"To the bad conscience God appears always the God of wrath. The boy who broke the vase by throwing the ball at it, says to his mother, 'Now Mummy, don't get mad.' Anger is not in the mother, anger is in the boy's projection to his mother of his own sense of justice. Anger is not in God; anger is in our disordered selves."⁴

"Gap in Wealth in U.S. Called Widest in West
WASHINGTON, April 12—New studies on the growing concentration of American wealth and income challenge a cherished part of the country's self-image: They show that rather than being an egalitarian society, the United States has become the most economically stratified of industrial nations."⁵

"My father was a wandering American . . . who ducked out when I was two and moved on, sometimes just ahead of child-support payments. And great-grandmother was a wandering Brit, crossing alone at age 13 to marry an older man, probably by arrangement, and bear 16 children for love and social security.

And Estella's father was a wandering Mexican who walked through the unparted waters of the Rio Grande . . . And Bao's mother and father and sister and brothers were wandering Vietnamese, adrift in a boat. And John's granddaddy got out of Georgia two steps ahead of the law with a stolen mule, broken-down wagon and a bad reputation with women. . .

And God's people say just that before we set our gift on the altar. God deals with slobs whose pedigree is traced along a line of shame and cowardice, being wanderers on the lam and on the run.

So before, before our obligation comes God's grace. And, of course, our brother Jesus had no place to lay his head, such a wanderer he was. And while we were and are yet wanderers, he lived and lives with us and for us, and died. While our ancestors were still nobodies—everbody's ancestors include nobodies—God stretched out a mighty arm and led them to promise."⁶

³ William Blake, "A Divine Image" from *Songs of Experience* (New York: Dover, 1984).

⁴ Fulton J. Sheen, *The Quotable Fulton Sheen* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 7.

⁵ Keith Bradsher, *The New York Times*, April 17, 1995.

⁶ William R. Leety, "So Who Was Your Ancestor?" in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, February 27, 1995, p. 9.

"Directly following the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, we have the story of the farmer Cain and the shepherd Abel. Disputes between a farmer and a shepherd are found centuries earlier in Sumerian literature, but there the farmer scores off the shepherd, as is natural for a country dependent on irrigation and a rotation of crops. But the Biblical writers tended to idealize the pastoral stage of Israelite life, in contrast to the agricultural stage, where contamination by the neighboring cults of Canaan was so frequent and pervasive. Hence Abel's pastoral offering to God of the sacrifice of a lamb, "not without blood" (Heb. 9:7), was accepted, and Cain's bloodless offering of firstfruits was not. Abel's sacrifice was the type of the primary festival of the Jewish Passover, and the murdered shepherd Abel was also, for Christianity, a type of Christ, whose passion coincided with the Passover, a human victim identified with the Passover Lamb, just as Abel, by his death, is identified with his sacrifice."⁷

Suggested Daily Readings

Genesis 11:27—17:27 constitutes the first half of the cycle of stories about Abraham, the first of the patriarchs of Israel. He first appears to us as Abram; his name is changed by God to the more familiar Abraham. His wife's name is changed from Sarai to Sarah.

Day 1: Read Gen. 11:27—12:9, in which God calls Abram to go from Haran to the land of Canaan. Meditate on God's call as a summons to move out, to move on.

Day 2: Read Gen. 12:10—13:1, in which Abram and Sarai are aliens in Egypt. Christians are sometimes called "aliens" and "strangers" in this world. Meditate on the experience of being an alien.

Day 3: Read Gen. 13:2—18, in which Abram divides the land with his nephew. Meditate on the far-reaching consequences of decisions.

Day 4: Read Gen. 14:1—24, in which Abram rescues Lot and his family from enemy forces. Meditate on family loyalty and its demands.

Day 5: Read Gen. 15:1—15, which is the second account of God's covenant with Abram. (The first is 12:1—9; the third is 17:27.) Meditate on the promises of God as anchors for faith.

Day 6: Read Gen. 16:1—15, in which Abram fathers a child by Sarai's slave-girl. Meditate on the strange ways God deals with humanity!

Day 7: Read Gen. 17:1—17, in which God changes Abram's name and gives circumcision as the sign of the covenant. Meditate on God's promise that the covenant will be everlasting.

⁷ Frye, *The Great Code*, p. 143.

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God Calls Abram and Sarai

Genesis 12:1—9

We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father,
In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image,
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator,
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem
creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant
people to bless all families of the earth.
—A Brief Statement of Faith, PC(U.S.A.)

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Gen. 12:1-9. This is one of the most significant of all Bible passages: Three of the world's great religious families—Christians, Jews, and Moslems—claim Abraham as their ancestor. So it is important to get the story straight! Take time to clarify these details, and share your answers as a group:

Who was Abram (later named Abraham)? How much do we know about him and with whom is he identified?

Where did he live?

What did God say to him?

When does the commandment to Abram come?

What did God promise Abram?

List the verbs in Gen. 12:1—9 that describe the activity of God:

Share your answers with the group. What do these activities tell us about God?

There is a couplet that says: "How odd of God / to choose the Jews."

Do you find anything strange or odd about this story in Gen. 12:1—9?

Isn't it strange that God would pick a 75-year-old man?

Why didn't God promise Abram a land where no one lived?

Why is Abram always on the move?

Isn't there something undemocratic, almost elitist, about the notion of a chosen people?

(To the leader: You are almost halfway through the study. You may want to leave a few minutes at the end of this session to take stock. On a piece of newsprint, list questions that the group has about the biblical texts you have discussed. Don't try to answer the questions in this session; they are more for your benefit than for the questioners! But consider the questions and the concerns that prompted them as you prepare the next several lessons.)

Afterword

In Joseph Heller's comic novel *God Knows*, King David is reflecting on his ancestors; "God does have this self-serving habit of putting all blame for His own mistakes

upon other people, doesn't he? He picks someone arbitrarily, unbidden, right out of the blue, so to speak, and levies upon him tasks of monumental difficulty for which we don't always measure up in every particular, and then charges us for *His* error in selecting imperfectly. He tends to forget that we are no more infallible than He is. He did that with Moses. He did it with me. He was gravely disappointed in Saul. But He sure guessed right with Abraham, didn't He, our first patriarch.

"Now Abraham was a prize, and I am proud to be his descendant ..."⁸

"In today's America you and I live in an environment that labels age unfairly. If a teenage boy forgets something important, it is because he is still learning. If a woman in her forties is forgetful, it is because she has so many things on her mind. But if an older person cannot remember something, no matter how trivial, obviously it is because of age. In today's world there are many double standards, and this is clearly one of them."⁹

"David, forty-eight, is an American-born engineer who moved to Jerusalem fifteen years ago. He grew up on Long Island, went to school in Baltimore, and then worked there. He is a thoughtful, deeply religious man. After a trip to Israel to visit relatives and see the country, David decided to move here to participate in the miracle of Israel. Although he still retains his U.S. citizenship, he is certain that God is responsible for Israel's rebirth as a nation out of the horrors of the Holocaust and for the preservation of this small country despite the surrounding hostile powers. For David, Israel's right to exist is God-given; the deed to the land is in the Bible. He is enthusiastic about reinstituting nationally the biblical names, like Shechem for Nablus, Samaria and Judea for the West Bank. The appropriate boundaries are those of the kingdom of David and Solomon. Israel is God's special nation, and David is certain that it will prevail."¹⁰

Promised Land

There is an old saw that possession is nine points of the law. The tenth may have some bearing. What promises get swept under Oriental rugs and North American pine needles. We all end up by subdividing our acres with heretics as well as other more or less legitimate heirs. We share but not alike.¹¹

8 Joseph Heller, *God Knows* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1984), pp. 55-56.

9 Frank Hutchison, *Aging Comes of Age: Older People Finding Themselves* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), p. 25.

10 W. Eugene March, *Israel and the Politics of Land: A Theological Case Study* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 9-10.

11 Thomas Carlisle's "Promised Land," in *Celebration!* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), p. 59.

In Palestine in 1921 a rabbi stepped between warring groups of Jews and Arabs with this appeal to the Arabs:

"Our dear cousins! Our common father, Abraham, the father of Isaac and of Ishmael, when he saw that his nephew Lot was causing him trouble claiming there was not enough room for both his flocks and Abraham's flocks to live together, said to him, 'Let there be no quarrel between me and you, and between your shepherds and my shepherds, for we are people like brothers! We also say to you, this land can sustain all of us and provide for us in plenty. Let us then, stop fighting each other, for we too, are people like brothers.'"¹²

Suggested Daily Readings

Genesis 18:1—20:18 contains more stories in the Abraham Cycle.

- Day 1:** Read Gen. 18:1—15, in which God again promises that Sarah shall bear a son to Abraham. Consider how important in Scripture is the promise of a son.
- Day 2:** Read Gen. 18:16-21, in which God decides not to hide from Abraham what God intends to do to Sodom and Gomorrah. Meditate on the wonder of God's sharing the divine intention with humans.
- Day 3:** Read Gen. 18:22-33, in which Abraham intercedes with God for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. God truly listens to prayers.
- Day 4:** Read Gen. 19:1-11, in which the men of Sodom would attack Lot's guests. Consider the depth of human depravity. Who in this world is truly safe in his or her own house?
- Day 5:** Read Gen. 19:12-29, in which Lot and his family flee the destruction that God rains down on Sodom and Gomorrah. Meditate on Lot and his family as types of those who are saved.
- Day 6:** Read Gen. 19:30-35, in which Lot's daughters have his children. Consider the need of humans to continue their own kind.
- Day 7:** Genesis 20:1—18, in which again Abraham and Sarah live as aliens—this time in Gerar. Consider the dangers in which the chosen people lived—and still live.

¹² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987).

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The Covenant WITH ABRAHAM

Genesis 17:1–22

"There is one theme that recurs frequently in the early books of the Bible: the passing over of the firstborn son, who normally has the legal right of primogeniture, in favor of a younger one. The firstborn son of Adam, Cain, is sent into exile, and the line of descent goes through Seth. Ham, the rejected son of Noah, is not said to be his eldest son, but the same pattern recurs. Abraham is told to reject his son Ishmael because a younger son (Isaac) is to be born to him. Isaac's eldest son Esau loses his birthright to Jacob through some rather dubious maneuvers on Jacob's part, some of them backed by his mother. . . . the deliberate choice of a younger son represents a divine intervention in human affairs, a vertical descent into the continuity that breaks its pattern, but gives human life a new dimension by doing so. A closely related theme is that of the birth of a son to a mother so late in her life that the birth is a miracle, or at least an act of special grace."¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

When confronted with a complex, puzzling narrative, it is always helpful to press the question: What is this story about? The novel *Moby Dick* has as one of its central characters a great white whale, but the novel is not about hunting whales! Genesis 17:1–22 describes the origin of circumcision, but it is not about circumcision!

Read Gen. 17:1–22. What is this story really about? Here are some possibilities to consider together:

- a change of names
- the origin of male circumcision
- the gift of the land of Canaan to the Chosen People
- the miraculous birth of a child to a ninety-year-old mother
- God's appearance to a human being
- the everlasting covenant of God with Abraham and his descendants

Take up, as separate discussion items, these aspects of Gen. 17:1–22:

- The significance of the new names given to Abram and Sarai

- The promise of land to one particular clan
- The circumcision of males
- The passing over of Ishmael in favor of Isaac
- The nature of a covenant

Covenants Today

Ask members to list various "covenants" into which they have entered at one time or another. Use the following checklist as a pump primer:

- Marriage
- Employment
- Enrollment in a college or university
- Legal partnership
- Real estate contract

Discuss how the notion of "covenant" has entered into the fabric of Western culture.

Do you know the original meaning of your name?

Were you named for an ancestor? a friend of your parents? a famous American?

Early Debates on Circumcision

The matter of circumcision was debated among leaders of the early Jesus Movement. If you have time, look at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. Discover what was decided about circumcision as a ritual for Christians.

The suggestion was made in an earlier session that the New Testament is concealed in the Old; and Old Testament is revealed in the New. Make a list of persons, events, concepts, and institutions associated with the New Testament that are prefigured in Gen. 17:1–22. For example: the divine gift of a son.

¹ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1983), pp. 180–181, 182.

By your blessing, O God,
may these rings be to N. And N.
Symbols of unending love and faithfulness,
reminding them of the covenant they have made this day,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.⁶

Afterword

In the seminal decision *LoneWolf vs. Hitchcock*, the United States Supreme Court affirmed in 1903 that Congress has always possessed plenary power over Indian affairs. "It has never been doubted . . . that the power to abrogate [Indian treaties] existed in Congress. . . ," the majority opinion read.²

"I knew my man [the famous sculptor Henry Moore], and I asked him, 'Now that you're eighty, you must know the secret of life. What is the secret of life?' With anyone else the answer would have begun with an ironic laugh, but Henry Moore answered me straight: 'The secret of life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for your whole life. And the most important thing is—it must be something you cannot possibly do!'"³

A Name

A name is required. To whom are we indebted and who to us? A name. A name. But what does a name mean? Derivation uncertain, always uncertain. Someone fathered the last name and mothered the middle and christened the first. I am proud of the name I was given—given to give to a son or a book or a star and at last to a cross or a stone. A name. A name is required. No number describes me as well. I can fill out a name, give it muscles and heart, temper, humor, specifics. I can give it a face, unique mind-prints as whorled as my singular fingers. It compasses me and I it. I shall know when they call me. A name is required.⁴

Through baptism we enter the covenant God has established.

Within this covenant God gives us new life,
guards us from evil,
and nurtures us in love.

In embracing that covenant, we choose whom
we will serve,
by turning from evil
and turning to Jesus Christ.⁵

Suggested Daily Readings

Day 1: Read Gen. 21:1-7, in which a son is born to Sarah and Abraham, just as God promised. Meditate on the divine intervention through the gift of a child.

Day 2: Read Gen. 21:8-21, 25:12-18, in which we learn the destiny of Ishmael, through whom Muslims trace their ancestry to Abraham. Consider the promise to Abraham that he shall be the ancestor of a multitude.

Day 3: Read Gen. 21:22-33, in which Abraham makes a covenant with Abimelech. Consider the various covenants you have made.

Day 4: Read Gen. 22:1-19, in which Abraham is tested to the uttermost. Meditate on the cost of sacrificing one's own child.

Day 5: Read Gen. 23:1-20, in which Sarah dies and Abraham buys a burial cave and field from the Hittites. Reflect on the places where your ancestors are buried.

Day 6: Read Gen. 24:1-67, in which a wife is secured for Isaac. Consider the active providence of God in this marriage.

Day 7: Read Gen. 25:1-11, in which Abraham dies and is buried along with Sarah. How would you like as your epitaph, "He died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people"?

² Edward Lazarus, *Black Hills White Justice* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), p. 169.

³ Donald Hall, *Life Work* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), pp. 53-54.

⁴ Thomas J. Carlisle, *Invisible Harvest* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans

⁵ From the Sacrament of Baptism, *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

⁶ From the Christian Marriage Rite 1, *Book of Common Worship, PC(USA)*.

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Jacob AND ESAU

Genesis 25:19—34

Now Isaac appeals to Yahweh on behalf of his wife; she is childless. Yahweh responds, Rebecca becomes pregnant.

The children are struggling inside her; "Is this what I prayed for?" she said, questioning Yahweh.

"Two nations," Yahweh said to her, "are inside you—two people already at odds in your belly. One country grows stronger on the strength of the other; youth grows senior over age."

Her time for giving birth grown ripe, look: twins are in her belly. The first comes out ruddy hairy all over as a coat, so they named him Esau, ruffian.

Then his brother comes out, his hand latching onto Esau's heels like a figure J. They named him Jacob, heel-clutcher; Isaac was sixty when she gave birth to them.

When the youths were grown, look: Esau is a man with knowledge of the hunt, the outdoors; Jacob is quiet, keeping to the tents. Isaac loved Esau, whose game tasted sumptuous in his mouth. But Rebecca loved Jacob.

One day Jacob was cooking a stew of beans; Esau came back from the field exhausted. "Please, pour me some mouthfuls from that reddish stuff," Esau asked Jacob. "I can barely speak." That's why he was called "Red," Edom.

"Sell me your birthright," said Jacob, "right now."

"Look, I'm fit to die," Esau said. "So what use is this blessing to me now?"

"Vow it this very day," said Jacob. He swore to Jacob, selling his birthright to him.

So Jacob gave Esau bread, a stew of beans; he ate, got up and left—a blessing slighted by Esau.¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

This text presents a special challenge because it is crammed full of details: names, places, characters, events—even nations! It may well be true, as one interpreter has said, that "God is in the details." After you have each read the text silently, try a dramatic reading aloud, in which one member is the narrator and others take the parts of Rebekah, God, Jacob, and Esau. Then compare and contrast the scriptural text with the

translation from the Hebrew provided by David Rosenberg in *The Book of J*, as it appears in the previous reading.

Underlying Factors

Read Gen. 25:19—34. Then try to discover what this story is about. One way to do that is to identify the various factors or elements in the narrative and then assign each of these a relative importance, using percentages. Use the following list of suggestions. For example: If you think that sibling rivalry is at the heart of everything, on the following list you might assign fifty percent to "dynamics of family life."

- _____ % Divine Initiative
- _____ % Human Initiative
- _____ % Geography
- _____ % Social Custom
- _____ Inherited (genetic) Traits
- _____ Dynamics of Family Life
- _____ % Pure Chance
- _____ % Physical Need

In assigning importance to various elements in the story, ask yourself: How might the story be different if this particular element were missing? For instance: What if there were no social customs regulating inheritance?

After identifying the various elements in the narrative, discuss them, guided by these questions:

Where before in Genesis have you heard about a barren woman being granted a child? What significance do you attach to these "miracles"?

¹ David Rosenberg and Harold Bloom, *The Book of J* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), pp. 96-98.

Why does God answer Isaac's prayer with twin sons?

Why do the twins display such different interests?

What is the nature of Rebekah's prayer?

What usually happens in families when each of the parents has a favorite?

Why is the birthright assumed to belong to Esau?

Where do your own sympathies lie—with Jacob? Esau? Isaac? Rebekah?

What is the significance of the names given to the twins?

Use Gen. 25:19—34 as a case study in human relations. Do twins—especially boys—always create special problems? Do you blame Jacob for wanting to be number one? Might things have turned out for the better if the parents had been more evenhanded in their treatment of the sons? Was Esau treated unfairly by his brother? Does this story remind you of any families you know?

Where is Edom?

Discuss the role of God in the story. From what you have heard about God in the four previous sessions, does this story surprise you? Why? Why not?

Why should Esau's oath be binding, when it was given under duress?

Recalling the dictum that the New Testament is concealed in the Old, and the Old is revealed in the New, look in Gen. 25:19—34 for types of persons and relationships that one finds in the New Testament.

Where, for instance, do you find in the New Testament a beloved story about an older and younger brother?

Afterword

"According to the rabbis Jacob was not the only tricky brother. Esau is described by them as a trapper as well as a hunter. He would trap people with leading questions. 'So you are not a thief. Who did you say helped you steal that?' Or, 'When did you stop abusing your animals.' So any answer would ensnare the answerer."³

"If twins are important to science because they allow us to ask how much of our nature arises from our genes and how much from our circumstances, the answers have equally profound implications for social policy. The hallmark of liberalism is that changes in the social environment produce corresponding changes in human development. But if people's destinies are written in their genes, why waste money on social programs? . . . Even matters that would seem to be entirely a reflection of one's personal experience, such as political orientation or depth of religious commitment, have been shown by various twin studies to be largely under genetic influence."⁴

The Twins

Good and bad are in my heart,
But I cannot tell you-
- For they never are apart-
Which is better of the two.

I am this! I am the other! And
the devil is my brother!
But my father He is God!
And my mother is the Sod!
I am safe enough, you see,
Owing to my pedigree.

So I shelter love and hate
Like twin brothers in a nest;
Lest I find when it's too late,
That the other was the best.⁵

"Prayer is a grace, an offer of God.

We shall not begin, as the Reformers did, with a description of what we do when we pray. Obviously we do something, we act; to understand this action, however, we must begin with the end, that is, we must first consider the answer to prayer. We may be surprised at this, for, from a logical standpoint, we should ask first, "What is prayer?" And only afterward, "Do we receive an answer when we pray?" Now for the Reformers the basic and vital point is this certitude: God does answer prayer. . . . Calvin says it explicitly: We obtain what we request. Prayer is grounded upon this assurance. . . ."

³ From *Genesis Rabbah* 63.10, in *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible: Vol. 1 - Genesis*, edited by Michael E. Williams (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 130.

⁴ Lawrence Wright, "Double Mystery," in *The New Yorker*, August 7, 1995, pp. 46-47.

⁵ James Stephens, *Collected Poems of James Stephens* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1954).

If Jacob represents Israel and Esau represents Edom, where do we hear in the New Testament about one group supplanting another?

How does the notion of "birthright" appear in the New Testament?

What do you recall of Jesus' comments and attitude regarding his own family?

(To the leader: If you have established the practice of closing each session with prayer, it may seem appropriate to pray for the families of humankind.) This prayer appears in the Book of Common Worship:

*O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son. Look with compassion on the whole human family, take away the arrogance and hatred that infects our hearts, break down the walls that separate us, unite us in bonds of love, and, through our struggle and confusion, work to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*²

² *Book of Common Worship*, p. 797.

"God is not deaf, but listens; more than that, he acts. God does not act in the same way whether we pray or not. Prayer exerts influence upon God's action, even upon his existence. This is what the word 'answer' means."⁶

Selected Daily Readings

Genesis 25:19—36:43 constitutes the Jacob Cycle of stories. It features the birth of Jacob and his twin brother Esau, Jacob's securing the birthright and blessing, God's covenant with Jacob, his prospering in Haran, the birth of his twelve children, his return to the promised land, his reconciliation with Esau, and his further adventures in the promised land. Very little is told about Isaac, son of Abraham and father of Jacob—compared to the lengthy cycles of stories about Abraham, Jacob, and Jacob's sons.

Day 1: Read Gen. 25:19—34, which tells of the birth of twins to Isaac and Rebekah—and how their paths diverged. Consider the mysteries of family relationships—no two families seem to be alike!

Day 2: Read Gen. 26:1-34, a collection of stories about Isaac. Consider how each of us serves as a link between two generations—the one that went before us, and the one that comes after us.

Day 3: Read Gen. 27:1—45, in which Jacob contrives to supplant Esau as the one to receive his father's blessing. Meditate on the large role that envy plays in family life.

Day 4: Read Gen. 27:46—28:22, in which Jacob has his famous dream of the stairway reaching to heaven. Meditate on the mystery of God's choices!

Day 5: Read Gen. 29:1—31:55, which tells how Jacob prospered in Haran. Look back on your own life, at your loves, labors, failures, and success.

Day 6: Genesis 32, in which Jacob wrestles all night at the river. What do you wrestle with in the lonely hours of the night?

Day 7: Genesis 33, in which Jacob is reconciled with Esau. Consider how remarkable it is when genuine peace is made between parties.

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Jacob's DREAM

Genesis 28:10—17

"One may outline the Jacob story broadly as a journey: flight from Canaan to Haran and back to Canaan. To this we should add the journey through the land of promise in 33:18-35:27, after the return. This itinerary gives to the story a strong sense of movement, presenting a person and a family on the go, never staying in one spot too long. The journeys both within and without the promised land mirror the life of later Israel, especially the experiences of exodus and exile. The most basic movement in the Jacob story is linear, climaxing in the settlement of Jacob and his family in the land of promise."¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

To the leader: The Jacob stories present a unique challenge to church discussion groups. Unlike Abraham, Jacob does not lend himself easily as an exemplar of faith. Discussions of his character can lead to endless debate. Leaders need to be relentless in pressing the question that is meant to dominate this series: What does this story tell us about God?

Read Gen. 28:10-17. Compare the promises made by God to Jacob with the promises made to Abraham in Gen. 12:1-3 and 17:1-8.

What words or phrases are repeated in all three passages?

When you have finished, share your answers with the group and briefly discuss the following question: Is this a new covenant that God makes with Jacob, or the renewal of the covenant made with Abraham?

Read Gen. 28:1-10 to learn why Jacob is on his way to Haran.

Where has Haran appeared before in the patriarchal narratives?

Why does geography continue to play such an important role in the story?

Could the story of Jacob have happened anywhere else? Why or why not?

Share with the group your knowledge of God's other appearances to human beings in dreams or visions.

What might be signified by the angels who are going up and down the ladder (staircase) in the dream?

In each of the previous five stories in this series, God was present to humans in some fashion: a voice, an unseen presence, and others. Recall these "appearances"—if that is what they were.

How is God's appearance to Jacob similar to these other appearances? How is it different?

Jacob's dream has passed into story, song, and legend in ways that God's appearances to Abraham have not. Children are told the story of "Jacob's Ladder," congregations sing, "We are climbing Jacob's Ladder."

How do you account for this? What has been so compelling about the biblical account—the dream? the ladder? the angels? God's promises?

Jacob's "Holy Place"

Fear, awe, and dread are present in the Jacob story. Discuss that as a group.

What is there to suggest that Jacob thought he had happened upon a "holy place"?

If this were indeed a "holy place," what are we to make of Jacob's camping there for the night?

Does the notion of "accident" or "chance" make any sense in this context?

Share your experiences of "special places"—the grave of an ancestor, a patriotic statue or building, a war memorial, a shrine, a cathedral. Do you share Jacob's feelings when you think of your present church buildings? your sanctuary?

With this story of God's covenant with Jacob, God now becomes the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (see Matt. 22:32, Luke 20:37, Acts 3:13). What is the significance of this for us as Christians? Do we worship "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?" How is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in any way this same God?

Afterword

Blaise Pascal, French philosopher and mathematician of the sixteenth century, had a sudden revelation of God one night. In the morning he found he had written down these words: "Fire! Not the God of the philosophers, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Now Jacob comes out of Beersheba, journeys toward Haran. Encountering the spot, he stays over there: it is already sunset. So it was: Yahweh stood beside him.

"I am Yahweh, your grandfather Abram's God, Isaac's God," he said. "The ground you camp upon belongs to you: I bestow it on your seed. Like grains of dust on the ground your seed will be; you will burst out toward the sea and toward the east, northward and toward the Negev. All families of earth will see themselves blessed in you, in your descendants.

"Now look: I am beside you, to watch wherever you go, to see you return to this soil. I will not abandon you before I have made these words deed—on your behalf."

In the morning Jacob said: "It must be Yahweh stands by this spot, only I didn't know it."²

² David Rosenberg and Harold Bloom, *The Book of J* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), p. 106.

THE NIGHT IS DARK:
Jacob's Prayer to Rebekah

The night is dark
and I am far
from hope and near
to fear and death.
O my mother,
teach me to sleep
as the sheep do
home in the fold.
Soften this stone
for my pillow.
Send me a dream
and assure me
that I will find
your father's house.

Feed Esau well,
O my mother.
Tranquilize him
lest he bellow
and follow me
and, red-handed,
to avenge my guile.
Let me forget
my clever sin
and sleep a while.

My climb was steep,
O my mother.
These rocky steps
would tear a lamb
to pieces. Give
me peace tonight.
Reach out. Extend
the ladder of
your love. And more,
build me a bridge to
father's God.³

"While Jacob put one stone under his head for a pillow
he placed the rest so that they formed a wall around him,
since he was afraid of wild beasts."⁴

"The messengers going up the steps were singing the
praises of Jacob, while those who were coming down were
leaping and dancing and saying terrible things about him,
said some rabbis. Some said that these were just two
places from which to view the sleeping Jacob, one close
by and the other far away. Others said that in God's realm
those who praise Israel (Jacob's new name, given later) are
'lifted up,' while those who speak against Israel are
'brought low.' On earth, unfortunately, just the opposite is
true."⁵

"Samuel. Samuel."

The call came to him sleeping. He was awake suddenly,
erect and tensed in bed, eyes wide. The window faced him
pale in the dresser mirror with the blob of yardlight in one
corner... .

"Samuel. Samuel."

He couldn't doubt that. Someone had called his name.
He shivered abruptly, violently; he felt something had
driven down into him to his very grounds. Called by his
name in the night. After a moment he realized his hands
were up, clenched into fists as for defense

"Samuel. Samuel... "

"Yeah?"

"I am the God of your fathers, the Lord your God. Go
and proclaim peace in Vietnam."

Even for a southern Manitoba Mennonite Sam Reimer
was known as careful; not always completely slow or
stubborn, but careful... .

"Cou—could you say that again, hey?"

"Of course." The voice continued at dictation speed, "I
am the God of your fathers, the Lord your God. Go and
proclaim peace in Vietnam."

"That's what I thou—" he jerked erect, staring.

His head sang; every sense he had seemed tilted
forward, vibrating."⁶

³ The Night is Dark: Jacob's Prayer to Rebekah, Genesis 28, Thomas J. Carlisle,
Eve and After: Old Testament Women in Portrait (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B.
Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 25-26.

⁴ Genesis Rabbah 68:11, in *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible: Vol. 1-
Genesis*, edited by Michael E. Williams, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 143.

⁵ Genesis Rabbah 68:12, in *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible: Vol. 1-
Genesis*, p. 143.

⁶ Rudy Wiebe, *The Blue Mountains of China* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B.
Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 157-58.

Suggested Daily Readings

These stories constitute the rest of the Jacob Cycle. They tell us what happened after Jacob returned from Haran to Canaan and was reconciled with Esau.

- Day 1:** Read Gen. 34, the account of the rape of Dinah. Consider modern conflicts arising out of tribal rivalries.
- Day 2:** Read Gen. 35:1-4, in which Jacob's household renounces foreign gods. What rites or rituals of purification do we engage in?
- Day 3:** Read Gen. 35:5-8, in which Jacob builds an altar at Bethel, where Jacob had his dream. Consider the memorials we build to honor important events and persons.
- Day 4:** Read Gen. 35:9-15, in which Jacob gets a new name and the covenant is renewed. Reflect on your baptism, in which you were named as "a child of the covenant."
- Day 5:** Read Gen. 35:16-21, in which Rachel dies in giving birth to Benjamin. Consider childbearing as a "work" that women do.
- Day 6:** Read Gen. 35:22-29, which lists the twelve sons of Jacob and tells of the death of Isaac. Consider how little we know of Isaac, compared with Abraham and Jacob; consider how most of us will go to our grave with few words printed about us.
- Day 7:** Genesis 36, which tells what happened to the descendants of Esau (the kingdom of Edom). What do you know of your own genealogy? What do "blood lines" matter?

seven

Jacob's Journey To Bethel

Genesis 35:1—15

"People interested in the religious significance of the land refer to Palestine as the Holy Land. Christians, especially, use Holy Land to refer to the places where Jesus was born, raised, ministered, and was crucified and raised from the dead... .

"Jews also sometimes use the term Holy Land as a reference to Israel. Their term is broader and emphasizes places less significant for Christians like Hebron, Shechem, Jericho, Bethel, Beersheba. When Jews say Holy Land, they think of the whole of the land through which Abraham and Sarah traveled. Sometimes the term Holy Land is used in place of Israel, which can be understood as a political reference... .

"The Bible itself, however, practically never uses the term Holy Land. Only in one text, Zechariah 2:12, is the term explicitly employed when referring to Judah as God's special inheritance in "the holy land."

Things are considered holy when they are in close contact with God. God's name is holy, and God's Spirit is holy."¹

What's In A Name?

Read Gen. 35:1-15. Try rewriting the story, substituting for all the proper names their *literal* meaning. These meanings are given in the footnotes in most Bibles. For example: Jacob means "he takes by the heel" or "he supplants," according to a footnote to Gen. 25:26, where the name first appears. Look at the footnotes for the following verses to discover the literal meaning of other names: Abraham, 17:5; Isaac, 17:19; Esau, 25:25; Bethel, 28:19; Israel, 32:28. Such a rewrite of Gen. 35:1—15 might begin as follows:

God said to The Supplanter, "Arise, go up to the place of The House of God, and settle there...."

(To the leader: If this seems too involved and lengthy an activity, assign one name to each member for investigation and make the rewriting of the story a group activity.)

After sharing several rewrites of the text, discuss the significance of the new name given to Jacob. What are we to make of this activity of God—giving persons new names?

Discuss the role that sacred places and objects play in Gen. 35:1-15. Begin by making a list of these:

Gen. 31:1

Gen. 31:5

Gen. 31:14

What does the term "a holy place" signify to you? What about holy objects? even the "holy terror" mentioned in Gen. 35:5?

Compare and contrast the promises made by God to Jacob in Gen. 35:1—5 with the promises made at Bethel in Gen. 28:10—17. What significant addition is made in Gen. 35:1—15?

¹ W. Eugene March, *Israel and the Politics of Land: A Theological Case Study* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 58

Discuss the life of faith as a journey—a pilgrimage, a tour of discovery, an attempt to get back home, a search for holy places, a seeking of immediate experiences of God. If you are someone who has "come back" to the church after months or years of absence, consider sharing your experience with the group.

Consider together how the following elements in the Jacob story in Gen. 35:1—15 are taken up, one way or another, in the New Testament:

- pilgrimage
- house of God
- offering
- altar
- purification
- king
- nation
- Israel
- offspring

(To the leader: It is important that you allow at least fifteen minutes at the end of the session for evaluation. This is not a process of deciding who passed and who failed. It is a process of achieving some kind of closure with the study. Most adults engage in voluntary learning activities with specific goals in mind. It helps each learner to have an opportunity to state or restate those goals and to see how much was actually accomplished.)

As a final exercise, evaluate together the series being completed:

What expectations did members bring to this study?

How were these met, exceeded, or not fulfilled?

What questions were raised in the study that need further explanation?

Who is the most memorable character in Gen. 1—35? Why?

Which of the seven stories is the most memorable?

When Christians study the Old Testament, should reference be made in every session to Jesus Christ? Did this happen? If not, why not?

Afterword

"Four years ago, it looked like we'd have to leave this place we love so much. We were broke. My last book hadn't sold. The galleries weren't interested in Nancy's paintings. It's hard to find work in this territory. What to do? We were standing in the arroyo—a dry wash that briefly turns into a river after the rains—wondering how we could possibly come up with the money to survive here. Then we remembered a neighbor couple telling us they'd been in the same predicament several years before—broke, longing to stay in our village. They remembered what a wise woman had told them: If you don't know how to make a living, pay closer attention to where you are right now. Then start from where you're standing. My friends happened to be standing in front of a grove of willows. They began making the willow twig screens that you will see in many of the fine homes of New Mexico. Their business is thriving. I looked around me. What I saw were rocks. At my feet lay an oval rock about the size of my head. I picked it up and lugged it home. Finding an image in the rock's veins and ridges, I got out my acrylic paints and set to work. Alvaro and Barbara, my Happiness Gorilla friends, had moved to Truchas, a village up in the mountains, and had just

finished building their art gallery. They chanced to drop by that day, saw the rock, took it up to their gallery and sold it. Since then, my paintings on rocks have not only sold well, but searching for them and carrying them home has increased my happiness and kept me in excellent shape."²

"There is one obvious feature of the Bible that is of great importance in considering its revolutionary aspect: its strong emphasis on metaphors of the ear as compared with those of the eye. Much is said about the word of God But any suggestion that God has been seen is hedged about with expurgation and other forms of editorial anxiety

"The revolutionary context of this is clear enough. The word listened to and acted upon is the starting point of a course of action: the visible object brings one to a respectful halt in front of it... .

"The second commandment prohibits the making of 'graven images' to represent either the true or any false God, and in Judaic and Islamic traditions particularly this has restricted, even eliminated, many aspects of representational art. . . . it is easy to lose sight of the genuine feeling that underlies the hatred of idolatry. We have tried to show that the root of this hatred is a revolutionary impatience with a passive attitude toward nature and the gods assumed to be dominating it." ³

Suggested Daily Readings

Chapters 35 and 36 mark the end of the Jacob Cycle of stories. Chapters 37—50 contain the story of Jacob's family. We hear how Joseph, Jacob's favorite son, was sold into slavery in Egypt, how he prospered there, so that when there was a famine in Canaan, he was able to provide food and shelter for his family. This is how the Israelites got into Egypt, from which they were rescued in the Exodus, which became the defining event in the life of the Chosen People. A pastor preached a series of seven sermons on the story of Joseph; the texts and themes suggest a profitable reading scheme:

Day 1: Read Gen. 37:1-4, "Playing Favorites."

Day 2: Read Gen. 37:12—36, "Sibling Rivalry."

Day 3: Read Gen. 39, "Harassment."

Day 4: Read Gen. 40—41, "Dream Spinner."

Day 5: Read Gen. 42, "The Reckoning."

Day 6: Read Gen. 43—44, "The Final Test."

Day 7: Read Gen. 45:1—15; 50:15-20, "Working God's Purpose Out."

² Pierre Delattre, *Episodes* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1993), pp. 179-80.

³ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1983), p. 115-18.

What People Are Saying About the Men's Bible Study Series

"I found the study materials and questions among the most refreshing of any Bible study materials I have ever seen within the Presbyterian Church for men.

Thanks so much for doing them... "

*Bill Richard
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"(The) men had been so used to listening to lecture type Sunday School lessons (that) I was afraid that drawing them into a discussion would be like pulling teeth.

The surprise came on that first Sunday morning when all ten men in the class chimed in with their thoughts."

*Gene Wylie
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Presbyterian Men*

The Writer

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