THE PATRIARCHS

by Robert C. Walton

THE PATRIARCHS I

Genesis 12-13

The patriarchal narratives in Genesis 12-50 lay the groundwork for our understanding of the covenant God established with His people. Throughout the Scriptures, we see the gradual outworking of the promise God gave to Adam and Eve after the fall. The Old Testament leads up to the fulfillment of God's promise through a gradual narrowing process. We learn that the promise is to be fulfilled through the line of Seth, then through the descendants of Noah, then through the line of Shem, then through the family of Abraham, then through the line of promise going through Isaac and Jacob, then through the tribe of Judah, then through the royal line of David. When we reach the New Testament, the genealogies in the Gospels written by Matthew and Luke show that Jesus fits all of these requirements. Then, once Christ has come and fulfilled God's promise, we see the expansion of God's blessing to all nations, beginning with the twelve apostles, then the hundred and twenty in the Upper Room, then the thousands of Jews who were converted on the day of Pentecost, then to the Gentiles through the ministry of Peter in the house of Cornelius, then finally throughout the Roman Empire by means of the ministry of the Apostle Paul. The narratives before us in this course thus serve to focus God's intention in the fulfillment of His promise in the Garden of Eden after the Fall of man. As we will note frequently in our study of these chapters, God's fulfillment of His promise is done in a way that demonstrates His sovereignty in saving His people - He chooses to operate against every cultural standard in existence at the time, showing that salvation is of the Lord, not man.

In addition to the groundwork for covenant fulfillment and the means of covenant fulfillment, we will also examine the people through whom the covenant is fulfilled. Though each of the key figures in the patriarchal narratives is singled out as a person of faith in Hebrews 11, these are also sinful human beings. Through their sins, as well as through the examples of their faith, we can learn much of what it means to live a life of trust in God.

THE CALL OF ABRAM (11:27-12:9)

The family background of Abram is given at the end of Genesis 11. He was one of three sons of Terah, and had married his half-sister Sarai (Terah's daughter, though having a different mother than Abram - Genesis 20:12). Sarai was barren, and by the time they arrived in Canaan, Abram was 75 and his wife was about 65.

Much is made by many of the fact that, when Abram responded to God's call, he brought most of his family with him. We are told in 12:1 that God had told him to leave his country, his people, and his father's household. Abram did the first two; 11:31 seems to indicate that the idea of bringing the whole clan to Canaan was Terah's decision. After his father's death, Abram then moved on to Canaan, with his nephew Lot (his dead brother Haran's son) accompanying him of his own volition. We need not therefore conclude that Abram was disobedient to God's call when he traveled with his clan from Ur to Haran (the place, probably named after Terah's dead son). After all, God had not told Abram to beat people off with a stick if they wanted to join him in his journey.

What, then, is the significance of Abram's relocation? First of all, God called him to leave every source of security a man could possess in the ancient world. Wealth was tied to land and family, and to leave one's land and one's clan was to strike out into the void with no foundation upon which to live and provide for one's children. Furthermore, the gods of the polytheistic ancient Near East were tied to places, priesthoods, and rituals. One who left his place was also leaving his gods behind - another source of security, uncertain and unpredictable though it may have been. We know, of course, that Abram's clan was polytheistic. The later encounter between Jacob and Laban shows that the latter continued to worship household gods (Rachel steals them). We don't even know at this point whether Abram had any clear concept of monotheism (it probably dawned on him gradually as a result of his experience with Yahweh). At any rate, by leaving the gods of his country and clan, Abram was committing his fate to this God who had, without apparent provocation or prior knowledge, offered to become what Abram probably understood at the time as his "sponsoring deity." In his case, faith preceded knowledge of anything more than the most elementary variety.

What should be noted about the covenant that God made with Abram? First of all, it is an unconditional covenant - there are no "if" clauses. God simply offers to bless Abram and his descendants. The proffered blessings include making of him a great nation (Israel, though he also became the father of the Arabs) if he stepped out in faith and separated himself from his clan; making his name great (the evidence for this is found in the chapters that follow, and in the reverence that is accorded to Abraham by Christians, Jews, and Muslims today); blessing those who blessed him and cursing those who cursed him (how often in the Old Testament is a nation dealt with by God according to their treatment of the Israelites?); and blessing all peoples of the earth through him (the most clearly Messianic aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant). The promise of the land is alluded to in 12:1, but is not made explicit until later (13:14-17). The question of whether or not *every clause* of the covenant is unconditional is one that is disputed among theologians, but is also at the heart of the modern Arab-Israeli conflict, as many Jews today continue to view the land of Canaan as the land promised to them in perpetuity by Yahweh.

We should also take a moment to observe the geographical features of the narrative. First of all, if we were to look at the route followed by Abram in traveling from Ur to Canaan, it would seem to be more than a little circuitous. Instead of traveling straight westward, they traveled far north (over 500 miles) before heading southward. The reason for this is that Canaan and the Fertile Crescent are separated by a fierce and barren wilderness through which few have ever dared to travel on foot. Instead, trade caravans and armies followed the trade route, which moved northward through the Fertile Crescent and down the King's Highway along the coast of Canaan (this is why, for example, the armies of Egypt and Babylon met in battle on the Plains of Megiddo in northern Israel in the time of Josiah).

The narrative also seems to pay quite a bit of attention to trees (at Mamre and Moreh, for example). The fact of the matter is that the land of Canaan doesn't have very many trees. Those that did live long enough to grow large did so because they were planted in fertile soil, usually at an oasis. These rare trees thus became favorite meeting places, centers of trade, and often sites of

worship because of the shade they provided. Abram simply follows common practice when he pitches his tent and sets up altars under trees wherever he settles.

ABRAM AND SARAI IN EGYPT (12:10-20)

In a country that depends on a short rainy season to provide the water for agriculture during a long dry season, famines tended to strike often, whenever rainfall was less than anticipated. Egypt, beneficiary of the seasonal flooding of the Nile, could always be counted upon as a source of food in an emergency. Abram and Sarai went down to Egypt during one such famine. Abram's half-truth shows his tendency to rely on his own stratagems rather than trusting God to fulfill His covenant (this isn't the last time such a lapse in faith occurs). God protects them anyway, and in fact enriches Abram through the transaction by which Sarai was taken into Pharaoh's harem. It is probably worth noting in passing that, though Sarai is said to be a beautiful woman at the age of 70, we should not imagine that she had discovered the Fountain of Youth (the same word is used to describe the "sleek" cows in 41:2); she was a mature woman, but striking and dignified in her bearing.

Incidents such as this, which recur frequently in the patriarchal narratives, illustrate both the importance and the nature of the life of faith. The man of faith not only trusts God to fulfill His promises, but also understands that God does not need our clever ideas to help in doing so.

ABRAM AND LOT CHOOSE SEPARATE LANDS (13:1-18)

The Negev, where Abram, Sarai, Lot, and their servants now settled, is hot and dry, but can be fertile when the seasonal rains provide sufficient moisture. They lived the lives of nomads, dwelling in tents and keeping their flocks rather than living a settled agricultural existence. They appear to have roamed through the land from Bethel (north of Jerusalem, and the southern boundary of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in later years) south to Hebron. In a land where grass is sparse, two large flocks cannot graze in the same place, and the attempt by Abram and Lot to do so quickly led to conflict between their herdsmen. Abram generously offers Lot his choice of grazing land, though as the head of the clan he should rightly have had the first choice of the best land. Lot took the plain around the Jordan Valley, which at the time was much more fertile than the land farther west left to Abram (today, it looks like Abram got the better of the deal, since the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah allowed the Dead Sea to expand into the region where Lot was living; virtually nothing grows there now outside the few oases that still exist in the area). While many read moral significance into Lot's choice, he was merely doing what anyone would do - choosing the land he would prefer in response to his uncle's generous offer. He was not ignoring God's covenant promise, since the boundaries of the Promised Land had not yet been defined. Events that followed, however, clearly showed that the temptation of living near Sodom was too much for Lot to handle, while Abram was rewarded by God with a promise of all the land his eyes could see. The blessing of Abram and the suffering of Lot came after the division of the land, and may not necessarily be said to have been caused by it. In all likelihood, Lot would have fallen into temptation and Abraham been blessed by the Lord had their plots of land been reversed. Their successes and failures came from what was in their hearts and from the purposes of God for their lives, not simply because of

where they chose to live. Similarly, it is our hearts and the work of God in our lives, not our circumstances, that determine whether or not we will know blessing or failure.

THE PATRIARCHS II

Genesis 14-15

Last week's chapters covered the call of Abram, the entrance into the land, and the division of the land between Abram and Lot. In this week's lesson, we will see something of Abram's involvement with the greater political affairs of the region and God's ratification of the covenant promises that He had given to Abram prior to his arrival in Canaan.

THE MESOPOTAMIAN INVASION (14:1-16)

As a result of the events of chapter 13, Lot is now living in the plain of the Jordan Valley, while Abram is in the Negev, at the oak of Mamre in Hebron. Before long, Abram and Lot find themselves caught up in the political and military conflicts of the age. An alliance of Mesopotamian kings, following the same trade route taken by Abram in traveling from Ur to Canaan, invades the region (Shinar = Sumer; Ellasar = Assyria; Elam was near the Caspian Sea; the Goiim - "foreigners" - was probably a reference to the Hittites in eastern Turkey), making war on the local Canaanite rulers. The conquests listed in verses 5-7 follow the King's Highway, the principal north-south road through Canaan, and are in sequence from north to south from Ashteroth Karnaim near the Sea of Galilee to El Paran in the south, which was probably modern Eilat. They then returned northward up the Great Rift Valley and took on the coalition of Canaanite rulers. The battle took place in the Valley of Siddim, which is at (or more likely, under) the southern end of the Dead Sea. The Canaanite kings were routed, their goods seized as plunder, and many of their people, including Lot and his family, were carried away as captives. When Abram heard what had happened, he gathered the armed men in his household, numbering 318 (the number of servants at his command gives some idea of the wealth he had accumulated), and, along with several local sheiks who were his allies, headed northward with the intention of rescuing Lot from the hands of the invaders. Abram spearheaded a surprise attack in darkness, and the invaders fled. After chasing them as far north as Damascus, Abram recovered all the people and goods that had been seized in the battle in the Valley of Siddim.

The narrative raises a number of questions. The first concerns the use of anachronisms in Genesis. Not only do we find in this chapter that the Valley of Siddim is described as the Salt Sea in verse 3 (the expansion of the Dead Sea would not have occurred until after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah), but also that Abram's midnight attack is said to occur at Dan (the city was known as Laish until the Danite invasion and conquest described in Judges 18:29). This suggests not only that Moses used terminology that would have been familiar to his readers in the fifteenth century before Christ, but also that some minor editing of the manuscript was done later to increase its intelligibility to later generations (note that this does not in any sense open the door for the sort of wholesale redaction required by such liberal speculations as Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis).

A second question has to do with the battle itself. Is it really reasonable for us to expect that Abram, with a few of his buddies, could actually defeat an army composed of major Middle Eastern

powers? Several points should be made here. The first is that the term *king* was used rather loosely in those days, and was really the equivalent of the war lord of a city-state (the typical city-state in the second millennium BC rarely occupied more than ten acres of ground, thus its population would have been quite small) or the sheik of a nomadic tribe. Abram, as the head of what had become a fairly substantial household, could deal with such men as an equal. Secondly, the tenuous nature of supply lines meant that only relatively small armies could be put on the field of battle far from home (the Canaanite kings could thus muster troops that were a numerical match for the invaders, though obviously an inferior fighting force). Even as late as the eighteenth century AD, it was rare for armies to number more than a few thousand. [Note in connection with this problem that the Hebrew word traditionally translated *thousand* may also have the meaning of *clan*. Such a translation not only brings the numbers in the Pentateuch more into line with what we know of life in the second millennium BC, but also makes the biblical numbers more internally consistent.]

What shall we say concerning the application of this passage? Basically, we find another example of Abram's integrity and God's hand of protection over him. A man of faith need not fear to do battle against his foes.

PEACE ARRANGEMENTS (14:17-24)

When Abram returns with the recaptured booty and prisoners, he is met by the king of Sodom, who appears to have headed the Canaanite coalition, and a shadowy figure by the name of Melchizedek. They meet in the Valley of Shaveh, which was probably the Kidron Valley outside Jerusalem. Melchizedek is described as the king of Salem (probably Jerusalem, though a sixth-century map associates it with Shechem) and priest of the Most High God (*El Elyon*, a term used to describe the chief Canaanite god *El*, but identified with *Yahweh* by Abram in verse 22). Thus while there is no question whom Abram was worshiping, there is some doubt, at least from the context in Genesis, as to the identity of the god worshiped by Melchizedek (although the way in which he is used as a type of Christ in Hebrews 7 would certainly point to him as a worshiper of the true God). The fact that Abram shared a meal with Melchizedek indicates that they were at peace with one another, and the fact that he shared the plunder with him shows that Melchizedek was the most prominent ruler in the region. We don't have time to go into the treatment of Melchizedek in Hebrews at any length, but note in passing the ways in which he is said to be a type of Christ - his name and title mean *king of righteousness* and *king of peace*; his birth, death, and genealogy are not mentioned; he was both a priest and a king; and the fact that Abram paid tithes to him shows him to have been a priest superior to Abram's descendant, Aaron.

When the king of Sodom seeks to reward Abram for his victory by giving him the spoils of battle (this would have been only fair, after all), Abram refuses, showing the depth of his faith in God. How often would we refuse a just reward for our labors simply because we don't want to appear dependent on human resources for our sustenance? Abram does not force his convictions on either his servants or his allies, however, and accepts the offer on their behalf.

THE PROMISE OF A SEED (15:1-6)

Abram, having just refused a reward from the king of Sodom, then has his faith confirmed by the promise that God is his reward. Abram, however, is concerned about the lack of an heir to fulfill the promises given in Genesis 12 (the adoption of a household servant as the heir to family property was a measure of last resort, since it would entail the transfer of the family's goods outside the clan). God then gave him an object lesson, telling him to look at the stars as an indicator of the descendants that would come from his line. Thus reassured, Abram believed what God told him (an object lesson from which Paul draws great significance in Romans 4). We thus have another example of the extent to which Abram's relationship to God was built on faith.

THE PROMISE OF A LAND (15:7-21)

God then addresses another aspect of the covenant with Abram - the matter of the Promised Land (Abram at this point owned no land at all, and by the time of his death, owned nothing more than the field in which the burial cave of his wife was located). Abram again seeks reassurance, and God gives it by means of a graphic covenant ratification ceremony. Abram was told to bring five creatures - a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove, and a pigeon (all animals that played prominent roles in the sacrificial system initiated in Leviticus). The animals were to be slaughtered, cut in half, and the parts laid out in two parallel lines. Abram obeyed, then kept the birds of prey away from the carcasses. At sunset, God put Abram into a deep sleep during which he saw a smoking censer and blazing torch (symbols of ceremonial purity in the culture of the time) passing between the pieces of animal bodies. In Abram's vision, God told him of the coming four-century captivity in Egypt, assured Abram that it would occur after his death, and defined the boundaries of the Promised Land (the river of Egypt was a wadi in the Sinai, not the Nile) - territory that Israel possessed only briefly during the reign of Solomon.

The significance of Abram's vision cannot be overemphasized. Such ceremonies as the one described here were common when two kings ratified a treaty between them. Normally, the two monarchs would walk together between the rows of sacrificed animals. The meaning of the ceremony was to call the gods to witness that what had happened to the animals would also happen to either of the parties who violated the terms of the covenant. It is thus of utmost significance that the censer and torch, symbols of the holiness of God, passed through the pieces *alone*. The burden for the fulfillment of the covenant between God and Abram would be borne on the shoulders of God alone. Abram need do nothing but trust the God Who would do all. Abram had no idea of the extent of the significance of God's act on that day, but those of us who know the benefits of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross are aware that God, indeed, did offer His life to ensure the fulfillment of the covenant He had made with Abram.

THE PATRIARCHS III

Genesis 16-17

Last week, we saw the glorious imagery of the covenant ratification ceremony, as God confirmed His promise to Abram concerning the promised seed and the Promised Land. Though Abram was a man whose faith was counted by God as righteousness, he was also a man like us, and thus his faith sometimes lapsed. The chapters before us this week recount one such lapse, as well as God's gracious faithfulness in again affirming His promise to the patriarch.

THE BIRTH OF ISHMAEL (16:1-16)

Abram and his family had now been in Canaan for ten years, and there was no sign of the promised seed. Sarai was barren, which was viewed in the ancient world as a sure sign of the gods' disfavor. How was Abram to square this obvious lack of fulfillment of God's promise with the astounding experience recorded in chapter 15? Perhaps God expected him to show some initiative.

Sarai's suggestion that Abram sleep with her maidservant was considered both legal and moral in the ancient world. Slave concubines lacked the standing of wives, but were considered an extension of the wife by law, so that any child born to such a woman would be considered legally to be the offspring of the wife. What was considered legal and moral by society was not necessarily wise, however. When Hagar conceived, jealousy between the fertile concubine and the barren wife was almost inevitable. Sarai tried to blame the problem on Abram despite the fact that the whole thing had been her idea, and he promptly dumped the matter back into her lap, telling her to dispose of her maid as she wished. Sarai began to abuse the pregnant Hagar, who fled into the Negev.

The Lord sent a messenger to Hagar at an oasis in the wilderness, instructing her to return to Sarai and telling her that she would have a great posterity. The description of the child doesn't sound too encouraging (Yasir Arafat, perhaps?), but portrays strength if not a peaceful disposition. The nomads who descended from Ishmael in fact bear many of the characteristics described in verses 11-12.

The statement in verse 13 is a bit troubling because of the significance of names in Scripture and in the ancient world in general. Names conveyed meaning, defining the personality of the person being named. A corollary of this fact was the understanding that the giving of a name involved the assertion of authority over the one being named (e.g., Nebuchadnezzar renames Daniel and his friends when he tries to turn them into Babylonian civil servants). What we find in verse 13, however, is the only instance in Scripture in which someone gives a name to God (in all other instances, God *reveals* His own names; no one has the right to define His character). How can we harmonize this with what we know about the significance of the naming process? Probably the simplest answer is that Hagar didn't know the identity of the person to whom she was speaking. As a polytheist, the fact that this messenger delivered a word from Yahweh would not have implied to Hagar that he was not a deity as well. Thus she does not use the name Yahweh in reference to him,

but speaks of the "God (*El*, a generic term) who sees me." She is thus not giving a name to God, but identifying a characteristic of the unknown god she had encountered.

The major lesson to be learned from this narrative involves the serious consequences of lapses of faith, even in God's most devoted servants. Just like David's sin with Bathsheba brought unending turmoil to his family and rebellion and warfare to the kingdom, so Abram's lack of faith has produced almost four millennia of conflict between the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael. This should underscore for us the need to be perpetually on guard, trusting Christ at all times rather than relying on our own devices to accomplish what we believe to be the will of God.

THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT (17:1-27)

The Genesis narrative now skips thirteen years. Abram is now 99, Sarai is 89, and there is still no sign of the fulfillment of God's promise. God again appears to him and reveals Himself to be God Almighty (*El Shaddai*). The translation and meaning of this particular name of God are somewhat uncertain, though it is usually connected to the word *shad*, which means *breast*. God thus pictures Himself as the Many-Breasted One, the Nourisher. He is sufficient for Abram's needs and is able to fulfill whatever He promises.

God again reassures Abram, and in the process changes his name. We have already noted the significance of this. God redefines Abram according to what He intended to accomplish through him. Abram (*exalted father*) becomes Abraham (*the father of many*). He is named according to his faith, and according to God's promise (cf. the promise of a new name given to overcomers in Revelation 2:17). God repeats the earlier promises of posterity and property inheritance. He also changes Sarai's name (another reference to a Babylonian deity) to Sarah (*princess*, reflecting the promise that kings shall descend from them).

At this time God also institutes what is to become the sign of the covenant between Himself and Abraham and his posterity. Circumcision was practiced elsewhere in the ancient world, but more often at puberty or even at marriage than at the time of birth, though the Hittites did practice the ritual on week-old babies. God thus took a rite that already existed and gave it a new significance - it became a constant reminder that the fulfillment of His promise of a seed that extended for countless generations was in God's hands alone. He withholds new life when He chooses, but also gives it to those to whom He promises it. Circumcision was thus neither the mark of shame it later became in the Roman world nor the matter of health that it has become in our modern age. Note also that the sign of the covenant applied to all who received the benefits of the covenant, whether lineal descendants of Abraham, servants born in the household, or slaves purchased with money.

Again, we find that Abraham's faith falters. In simple terms, he laughed in God's face. The expectation that Sarah would have a child at her advanced age was too much for him to fathom, and he asked God if the promise could not be transferred to the son who had already been born - Ishmael. God, however, demonstrates a bit of a sense of humor, and not only assures Abraham that Sarah will

have a child, but orders them to name the baby Isaac, which means *laughter*. Isaac will be the bearer of the covenant, but Ishmael will also be blessed.

Abraham's response was one of instant obedience. While those who live lives of faith may at times doubt, they take those doubts to God. The major difference between doubt that is sin and doubt that leads to the increase of faith is how a person handles it. When doubt leads a person to fall on his face before God, as Abraham did, the result is greater faith and greater obedience. When doubt turns a person away from God, seeking answers either in himself or in the godless world around him, however, that doubt is both sinful and destructive.

THE PATRIARCHS IV

Genesis 18-19

We arrive this week at the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is important to note that the context of the incident is the confirmation of God's promise concerning the birth of Isaac. While most of the attention in recent years has been devoted to the role played by homosexuality in the destruction of Sodom, the text itself focuses on other issues - the relationship between God and Abraham as a result of the covenant, an extended theodicy justifying God's act of judgment, and an explanation (one of many in the text of Genesis) for the origin of two of Israel's neighbors (and long-standing enemies).

THE NATURE OF COVENANT RELATIONSHIP (18:1-19)

As chapter 18 begins, we find the Lord again appearing to Abraham. The incident must have occurred shortly after the one described in chapter 17, since the birth of Isaac is still almost a year away (verse 14) and Sarah is not yet pregnant. The first nine verses of the chapter give us a picture of hospitality in the Ancient Near East. There is no indication in these verses that Abraham knew the identity of his guests, and the way he treated them was standard protocol in that era. Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent for two reasons - to keep cool in the heat of the day and to protect his goods from hostile intruders. Any passing strangers were to be welcomed and offered food and shelter; this was considered a good way to turn potential enemies into at least temporary friends and to keep them from plundering one's tent. The nature of the meal that is prepared demonstrates both Abraham's wealth and his generosity (3 seahs of flour is about 20 quarts - quite a bit of bread for three men - and the slaughter of the calf is remarkable because meat was not a regular part of the diet at the time, but was reserved for special occasions; curds - yogurt - and milk were typical side dishes in a nomadic society that depended on its flocks for food).

At some point during the conversation, Abraham discovers that his three visitors are the Lord (a theophany - a visible appearance of God to man) and two angels (cf. 19:1). The Lord then confirms his promise of a son born to Abraham and Sarah, and this time it is Sarah who laughs at the prospect, despite the fact that she later tries to deny her reaction. Isaac, then, is aptly named because of the responses of *both* of his parents (cf. 17:17).

In the last few verses of this section, God decides to share with Abraham His intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. The reasoning is worth noting. Part of the way in which God was to fulfill His promise through Abraham involved the raising up of a godly seed. In order for this to happen, it would be necessary for Abraham to direct his children in the way of the Lord, implying that Abraham would have to *know* the way of the Lord. It is on the basis of this rationale that God tells Abraham what He has determined to do. Similarly, God deals with His covenant people today on the basis of knowledge (I Corinthians 2:9-10). He has revealed to us His plans and purposes for the future - not in full detail, any more than He did to Abraham, but He has given us what we need to raise our children in the knowledge of the ways of God. Thus, when we come to passages of Scripture in which God reveals what He will do in the future, the purpose of those passages is not

to satisfy idle curiosity or stimulate eschatological speculations, but rather to give us tools with which to instruct those entrusted to our care so that they might understand the character of God and the ways of God with man. It is in this context that the extended theodicy that occupies most of today's passage should be read.

JUSTIFYING THE WAYS OF GOD TO MAN (18:20-19:29)

The basic purpose of the theodicy found in 18:20-19:29 is to show that Sodom and Gomorrah deserved the judgment that God rained down upon them. A corollary to this truth is that God was not being arbitrary or capricious in giving vent to His wrath. The end of chapter 18 serves to demonstrate the latter point. In an exchange that bears an uncanny resemblance to the type of haggling that goes on even today in the Jerusalem bazaar, Abraham seeks the mercy of God on behalf of his nephew Lot and his family. While the passage is often applied to encourage the value of persistent prayer and the appropriateness of "arguing with God" from a stance of humility, the real point of these verses is to show that God is merciful and truly cares about His chosen people. Contrary to the arbitrary, petulant despot that so many have claimed to see in the God of the Old Testament, we find here One who is willing to pass over the outrageous, heinous sin of many if it means protecting a small minority who belong to Him. In fact, there are many times in the Old Testament where God seems extraordinarily willing to withhold judgment at the tiniest sign of repentance (I Kings 21:29; Jonah 3:10). Even in the absence of such repentance, God is still merciful to Lot and his family in the midst of the destruction of the Cities of the Plain.

After the conversation between God and Abraham, the Lord leaves while the two angels go into Sodom. There they find Lot sitting in the city gate. The gate of the city was the place where rulers would pass judgment on cases before them, and also a place where business was transacted (Lot's presence in the gate was probably as a prominent businessman rather than as a judge - see verse 9). The Cities of the Plain, located near what is now the southern end of the Dead Sea, lived by commerce - trade in salt and other minerals, and by serving as a way-station on one of the major caravan routes between the Fertile Crescent and Egypt. Lot, as Abraham had done earlier, offers to the angels the hospitality that cultural protocol required (the unleavened bread was because of the shortness of the available time, since the guests arrived in the evening).

When night falls, the men of the city (the description of the mob in universal language shows that the sin of Sodom was not an isolated incident, but pervasive, thus justifying the judgment that God was about to bring on them) surround Lot's house and demand that the visitors be sent out for an intended homosexual gang rape. Modern apologists for homosexuality argue that the real issue here is hospitality, not homosexuality - that God judged the city of Sodom because the men of the city violated the canons of hospitality to strangers, not because of the sexual preferences associated with that breach of manners (cf. Ezekiel 16:49). Such an argument is disingenuous at best, and clearly misses the point. The sin that led to the judgment was not simply the sin that occurred that night, but a pervasive stench in the nostrils of God that had already marked the city for judgment before the angels arrived on the scene. Homosexuality was a capital offense in the ancient world - and not just in Israelite law. While the contrast between Lot's adherence to the standards of

hospitality (even to the extent of seeking to protect his guests by offering what was most precious to him in the whole world - his daughters) and the violation of those standards by the Sodomites helps to underscore the theodicy that the passage is building, it requires doing serious violence to both the text and common sense to argue that the homosexuality of the men of Sodom had nothing to do with their judgment at the hands of God.

The angels then protect Lot's family from the intruders and ask if there are any in the city who should be under their protection. While both of Lot's daughters were engaged to men in the city, the prospective sons-in-law refused to listen to the warning delivered by Lot and perished in the judgment that followed. Lot's family had to be dragged bodily from the city in the nick of time, and even then they struggled every step of the way. Lot argued for a nearer destination (though he did leave Zoar and flee to the mountains after he saw the destruction wrought by God), and his wife, unable to stand the thought of leaving her home, hung back as they fled and was overtaken by the hail of minerals, abundant to the region, that had been ignited by the earthquake (probably) that served as the instrument of God's judgment. Even today, large salt deposits, some of grotesquely human appearance that tour guides point out to gullible pilgrims, surround portions of the Dead Sea, though these are caused by moisture-laden winds that pass over the surface of the water and leave huge mineral formations when the moisture evaporates over dry land.

What applications should we draw from this passage, besides the fact that God disapproves of homosexuality, gang rape, and lack of hospitality? First of all, we should see the narrative as a demonstration of the mercy of God as well as His justice. Abraham's prayer was answered, though not in the way he framed his request. The cities were not spared, but Lot and his family were. God's mercy does not necessarily involve the avoidance of judgment, but always involves protection through that judgment for His people.

Secondly, we should note that God's compassion is great indeed. In II Peter 2:7, Lot is described as "righteous." Given this story, or for that matter the entire role of Lot in the Genesis narrative, would any of us be remotely tempted to describe Lot in this way? It is all too easy for us to judge one another harshly, focusing our attention on the faults of others while, of course, minimizing our own. This is not to suggest that we should take sin lightly or be willing to ignore its presence, in our lives or in the lives of others, but it should warn us against harsh judgments directed against others because of what we perceive as a weakness in their spirituality. If Peter, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said that Lot was righteous, dare we do any less? And dare we make harsh judgments about the spiritual standing of fellow believers today?

THE ORIGIN OF THE MOABITES AND AMMONITES (19:30-38)

The concluding section of today's passage is one of many in the book of Genesis that is intended largely to establish the context of the world in which God's covenant people were to live. Such narratives give the origins of place names and the origins of the various people groups among which the Israelites were to live and against which they would often do battle. This narrative, while making it even harder to have any sympathy for Lot or to understand the appellation given him by

Peter, does explain where two of Israel's close neighbors (and frequent adversaries) came from. We should note in passing that the imperative to preserve the line leads to pragmatic, albeit desperate, measures to accomplish the purpose, as it had earlier with Sarai and Hagar. Lot's daughters had lost their fiancés and saw little hope of likely replacements in the foreseeable future, perhaps even thinking that they were the only ones left on the entire earth. They therefore got their father drunk and conceived through him. The children are aptly named - Moab means *from father* and Ben-ammi means *son of my people*.

THE PATRIARCHS V

Genesis 20-21

In today's passage, we finally see the fulfillment of the promise of a seed - the heir to God's covenant arrives through what is by this time clearly the sovereign work of the One who initiated the covenant in the first place.

FEAR OVER FAITH (20:1-18)

Fifteen years after the incident in Egypt recorded in Genesis 13, Abraham again lies about his wife out of fear for his life at the hands of a pagan ruler. Liberal critics claim that the two stories are in reality two versions of the same narrative that were both included in the text by a careless redactor (some would also throw in the similar story involving Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis 26, noting that the name Abimelech also appears in that narrative, but the editor would have had to have been *really* stupid to have included the same story *three* times). Note, however, that Abraham now had a new reason to fear - his wife would soon carry the child of promise.

The background of the incident is difficult to pin down. The location of Gerar is unknown beyond the fact that the text places it in the western Negev, and *Abimelech* is probably a dynastic title rather than a name (it means *the king is my father*; thus it was used to designate the heir apparent to the throne, somewhat like the title Prince of Wales in England).

The fact that God appeared to a pagan ruler in a dream is unusual, but not unique in the annals of Scripture. Though God is not specifically cited as the source of the dreams given to Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar that were interpreted by Joseph and Daniel, respectively, they were clearly revelatory in nature, and thus it would be logical to conclude that God was the source of the visions. Note, too, that when Abraham is described as a prophet in verse 7, his designated role is that of intercessor; prophets thus were understood as being able to communicate with God on behalf of man as well as communicating to man the messages of God. Thus God again protects Abraham from the consequences of his own lack of faith, and Abraham again emerges richer than he had been before (a thousand shekels of silver would have weighed about 25 pounds and been worth more than a normal laborer could have earned in a lifetime).

As far as application is concerned, we should note that one symptom of lack of faith is an attempt to manipulate the consequences of our actions rather than stepping out in obedience. Abraham didn't trust God enough to leave the results of naked obedience in His hands. When I read the passage, it reminded me of a newspaper article I saw that spoke of Pat Robertson, then the head of the Christian Coalition, advising Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush not to speak out against the legalization of RU-486 because to do so might cost him enough votes to deny him the presidency. Such lack of integrity for the sake of political expediency is similar in kind to the actions of Abraham in this passage.

THE BIRTH OF ISAAC (21:1-7)

Shortly after Abraham and Sarah are reunited, she becomes pregnant and bears a son despite the fact that she is ninety years old and her husband has reached the century mark. The child is named Isaac (*laughter*) as a reminder of the response of both parents to God's announcement of the upcoming pregnancy, though the laughter to which Sarah refers is of a very different character. Abraham then circumcises Isaac according to God's command. The joy at the birth of the child of promise only sets the stage for the greatest test of Abraham's faith, which we will examine next week

HAGAR AND ISHMAEL EXPELLED (21:8-21)

In the ancient world, children nursed for far longer than is the case today. Isaac was probably three or even four years old when he was weaned, thus making the mocking Ishmael seventeen or eighteen at the time. Sarah, observing the mockery, insists that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away so that there will be no question concerning the inheritance rights of her son Isaac. Abraham, who clearly loved Ishmael, was reluctant to comply, but God assured him that Ishmael would be cared for and would become a great nation. Hagar is thus sent off to wander in the Negev for the second time. Water is scarce in the region, and the pouch of water supplied by Abraham eventually ran out. Hagar and Ishmael lay down, anticipating death. God sent an angel to speak to Hagar, and he led her to a well that gave them enough water to survive. Ishmael then began to develop the skills needed to survive in the wilderness and was able to provide food for himself and his mother, along with perhaps hiring himself out as a mercenary to local tribal groups. In any case, he eventually took a wife and became the leader of one of the nomadic tribes roaming the region of the Negev.

Paul makes use of this story in Galatians 4:21-31, presenting Hagar and Ishmael on the one hand and Sarah and Isaac on the other as symbols of Law and Grace. Like Hagar and Ishmael, the Law leads only to bondage. The Promise, however, leads to freedom, even as Isaac, the son of promise, was the heir to all that God had guaranteed to Abraham. It is worth noting that Paul never says that what he is presenting is the *meaning* of the Genesis narrative (this is what distinguishes Paul's approach from the allegorical hermeneutic so popular in the Middle Ages); instead, he is using it more like someone today would use a sermon illustration.

A TREATY FOR WATER RIGHTS (21:22-34)

Water was rare and precious in the Negev, and relationships among tribes often centered around access to the precious fluid. The covenant made between Abraham and Abimelech is typical of many at that time, and its place in the biblical narrative is to continue to set the scene for the entrance of Israel into the Promised Land by indicating how the town of Beersheba got its name (the name can mean either *the well of the oath* or *the well of seven*). The mention of the Philistines is probably anachronistic, since the Sea Peoples, of whom the Philistines were one, did not enter the land of Canaan until the latter half of the second millennium BC. Thus Moses again uses a description that would have been familiar to his readers.

THE PATRIARCHS VI

Genesis 22-23

There are two great events in the life of Abraham that demonstrate that he was a man of faith. The first is his departure from Ur at the command of God when he had no idea where he would be going, while the second is his willingness to sacrifice the son of promise for whom he had waited so long. The latter incident serves as the main focus of today's lesson.

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC (22:1-19)

The practice of child sacrifice was common in the ancient world. It was basically a fertility ritual - the idea was to offer back to the god or goddess of fertility part of what he or she had provided as a means of showing gratitude and assuring continued offspring. In fact, the sacrificial system eventually installed among the Israelites incorporated something similar through the offering of the firstfruits - the first portion of the harvest, along with the initial offspring of domesticated animals, were to be sacrificed to the Lord as a thank offering. The Israelite law also recognized that human fertility was the gift of God, but instead of demanding human sacrifice, which is clearly described as an abomination, the firstborn children were to be redeemed by the sacrifice of an animal.

The location of this incident is difficult to pinpoint. When God tells Abraham to go to the region of Moriah, we hear that the trip involves a journey of three days from Beersheba, but we are given no direction. Since most of the central spine of Palestine is mountainous, process of elimination provides no assistance. Jewish tradition, on the basis of the statement in II Chronicles 3:1 that Solomon built the Temple on Mount Moriah, locates the sacrifice of Isaac on what would eventually become the Temple Mount, though that is unlikely for two reasons. First of all, we know from Genesis 14, in the incident with Melchizedek, that Jerusalem was already inhabited, though the Temple Mount was probably still outside the city walls at this point. Secondly, the mountains around Jerusalem have wooded slopes, so that the carrying of wood for the sacrifice would not have been necessary. One need not travel too far from Jerusalem, however, to arrive at bleak rocky hills, so the best guess remains that the "region of Moriah" to which Abraham and Isaac traveled was fairly close to Jerusalem, though probably not the Temple Mount itself. It is interesting to note, though, that the rock in the center of the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount is believed by Muslims to be the rock on which Abraham offered his son (they teach that it was Ishmael rather than Isaac), as well as the rock from which Muhammad ascended into heaven (they claim his footprint may still be seen on the rock).

How, then, are we to understand Abraham's reaction to God's demand that he offer Isaac as a burnt offering? The reaction is remarkably calm, especially considering all the agonizing and maneuvering that had occurred in the years preceding Isaac's birth. Some scholars suggest that Abraham reacts calmly because he grew up in a culture where human sacrifice was common practice, so that God's demand simply did not surprise him. Both the immediate context and the reference to the incident in Hebrews 11:17-19, however, would point in another direction - that Abraham's

instant obedience, without complaint or challenge, was an act of extraordinary faith on his part. Both Genesis 22:5,8 and Hebrews 11:19 speak of Abraham's confidence that Isaac would return alive with him from the mountain - even if God had to raise him from the dead in order to accomplish it. We should note in passing that Søren Kierkegaard makes much of this passage in his book *Fear and Trembling*, in which he argues that the faith of Abraham was like a leap into the darkness. Abraham's faith was no empty existentialist leap into the void, however; it was grounded firmly in God's promises. He knew that Isaac would live to carry on the line of promise, though he did not know how God would accomplish such a thing.

In addition to the faith of Abraham, it is also worth commenting on the faith of Isaac. His complete submission to his father is remarkable. We don't know exactly how old Isaac was at the time, but he was certainly strong enough to carry the wood up the mountain for his father, so he could not have been a little boy. If Isaac was in his teens, of course, Abraham would have been well into his twelfth decade. Had Isaac chosen to do so, he could easily have run from his father, or even overpowered him, but he submitted in faith, even to the point of allowing himself to be bound and laid on the altar. If any man in history understood the concept of substitutionary atonement, it was Isaac.

Unlike the practice of human sacrifice, which we have already noted was common to the religions of that day, the concept of substitution was virtually unknown. The idea that an animal could die in place of a person appears nowhere in the surrounding cultures. Sacrifices instead were seen as offerings of thanksgiving for favors granted, or more often as outright bribes to ensure the future cooperation of the deity. By allowing Abraham to offer the ram in place of his son, God thus sets the stage, not only for the sacrifices of redemption for the firstborn that later appear in Israelite ritual, but for the sacrifice of His Son as a substitute for His people.

The narrative not only demonstrates the faith of Abraham and Isaac and provides a beautiful picture of the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross, it also illustrates the fact that God tests the faith of His servants in order to strengthen that faith. Abraham had earlier been tested through adversity, particularly through the long delay in the fulfillment of God's promise to him. Here God tests him in prosperity - the promise has been fulfilled, everything is going well, and suddenly God presents Abraham with this seemingly horrible demand. After all, it is in times of prosperity that we are most easily tempted to depend upon ourselves rather than God, and testing in such times reveals the true extent of our self-sufficiency.

THE FAMILY OF NAHOR (22:20-24)

This brief narrative is another one of several we have seen so far in the book of Genesis that is included in the text purely to establish some key element that will enter the story at a later date. In this case, we learn the origin of the Arameans, Israel's persistent foe in the early years of the Divided Monarchy period, and we also see the relationship between Isaac and Rebekah, his future wife (she was his second cousin, daughter of his cousin Bethuel, who was the son of Abraham's

brother Nahor; because Isaac was born when his parents were so old, he would have been in the same age bracket as the grandchildren of Abraham's brother).

THE DEATH OF SARAH (23:1-20)

The events surrounding the death of Sarah provide another slice of life from the world of the Ancient Near East. Land ownership was rare among nomads, but when possession of real estate had been established, it was closely guarded and passed down from one generation to the next. Thus the willingness of the Hittites to sell the land in question to Abraham is a measure of the respect they had for him as a neighbor. The haggling that surrounds the purchase is typical of the era. We should note in passing that Abraham refused to take the land as a gift or at a discounted price for a good reason, and not simply as a mark of his integrity in wanting to pay full value for favor granted. Had he taken the land as a gift or at a reduced price, his possession of the land could have been subject to legal challenge after the death of Ephron, whose sons could have claimed that their father unjustly impoverished them through his benevolence to a stranger and demanded that their inheritance be restored. When Abraham paid full price for the land, however, such a challenge was no longer possible. The purchase price was substantial, amounting to about ten pounds of silver, which was more than the average workman could expect to earn in his lifetime.

As far as application is concerned, the purchase of the cave of Machpelah represents the only concrete fulfillment of God's promise to give Abraham the land into which He called him that he ever experienced. It is reminiscent of the description that Paul uses in Ephesians 1:14 when he talks about the Holy Spirit being the "deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession." God gives us a small part of the promised inheritance as a reminder of the fullness that is to follow.

THE PATRIARCHS VII

Genesis 24-26

The chapters before us today make up the bulk of the Isaac narrative in the book of Genesis. While earlier Isaac stories focus on Abraham, later ones focus on Jacob.

ISAAC GETS A WIFE (24:1-67)

By the beginning of this narrative, Abraham had reached the age of 140 and was beginning to slow down a little bit. God had blessed him greatly, and he was wealthy and at peace with his neighbors. He knew, however, that the covenant God had made with him necessitated the avoidance of assimilation by the multi-ethnic Canaanite population among whom he lived. He thus enlisted the aid of his most trusted servant to find a wife for Isaac, who was now forty years old, from among the members of his own clan who were still living in northern Mesopotamia. Note that though the motive for this decision was related to the nature of God's covenant with Abraham, it was not religious in character, since there is no evidence that Abraham's extended family worshiped Abraham's God; in fact, evidence from the later story of Jacob and Rachel points in the opposite direction.

The oath with which the narrative begins is typical of solemn promises exacted at the time in that it called upon God to witness the vow. The symbolic action that accompanied the oath normally related to the subject matter concerning which the oath was being taken - in this case, the continuation of Abraham's line.

When Abraham's servant arrives at his destination, it is the time for drawing water (this was heavy work, and was commonly done in early morning and at twilight, when temperatures would be cooler). Women commonly came to the well in groups for safety reasons. The servant requests direction from Abraham's God in the form of what was known as an *oracle* - a yes-no question that could be answered by the outcome of a binary event. Such oracles were normally ascertained by priests (e.g., the Urim and Thummim worn by Israel's high priest), but could be read by common people as well. It is worth noting that the nature of the servant's oracle request was both unusual and connected with the object of his search. It would have been expected for a woman drawing water from a well to offer a drink to a stranger. Drawing water for camels, however, went far beyond the call of duty (a thirsty camel can drink twenty-five gallons of water, while the pitchers used at the time held about three gallons; the servant had ten camels with him). Thus it would have taken a clear act of God to provide a positive answer to the oracle. Unlike the oracle requested by Gideon in Judges 6, however, the servant's request also was directly related to the purpose of his visit, in that it said something very definite about the character of the girl who responded to it. Note, too, that Gideon's request was improper because God had already told him what to do, while Abraham's servant was in genuine need of guidance in a situation where he could not possibly have had prior knowledge of God's will.

Rebekah passes the test with flying colors. The servant then gives her jewelry, symbolically indicating the purpose of his visit (such gifts were part of the bride price given by the family of the groom; the bulk of the price was given to the family, as is seen later in the passage). The servant seeks and receives hospitality from the family after being assured that he has indeed found the relatives of his master. The servant then tells his story to the family, and the negotiations for the marriage proceed smoothly (undoubtedly aided by the display of wealth the servant had brought with him). Note that Rebekah herself is never consulted, but is only brought into the discussion when the servant wants to leave immediately rather than waiting around for ten days so the family can be sure of the wisdom of their decision. She is willing to undertake the considerable risk of leaving with a complete stranger, so they set off. When they arrive back in the Negev, Isaac and Rebekah marry.

In seeking application for this story, we can certainly note that God takes all necessary steps to fulfill His covenant. God left no doubt of His will in the mind of the servant, and will lead us clearly in the decisions we need to make in order to be obedient to Him. This should not, however, encourage us to make up synthetic tests or seek personal oracles in order to ascertain God's will.

THE DEATH AND DESCENDANTS OF ABRAHAM (25:1-18)

This section of the narrative continues to establish the context in which Israel was to live once it entered the Promised Land. The most significant name among the sons of Abraham by Keturah is Midian - the Midianites were a nomadic people who lived near the southern borders of Israel, and were often numbered among their enemies. Midianites sold Joseph into slavery, and Moses married the daughter of a Midianite priest. The mention of Sheba is also worth noting. This tribe settled in southern Arabia (near the present-day country of Yemen), and their queen visited Solomon at the height of his power. The passage notes that Abraham provided well for all his sons, but did so in such a way that the position of Isaac as heir was securely established. Abraham then died at the age of 175 and was buried with Sarah in the cave at Machpelah. The passage also enumerates the descendants of Ishmael, none of whom plays a significant role in the biblical narrative. They, too, were nomads, living east of the Jordan valley (probably engaged in the spice trade that flourished in the region), and perpetually at war with their neighbors (some things never change).

THE BIRTH OF JACOB AND ESAU (25:19-26)

The phrase with which this narrative begins ("This is the book of the generations of . . .") occurs frequently in Genesis, and is thought by some to mark off the use of written sources in the compilation of the book by Moses. Whether or not this is true, the following narrative repeats the familiar theme of a barren wife and the miraculous provision of offspring by God in answer to prayer in order to fulfill the promise of the covenant. Finally, after twenty years of marriage, Rebekah becomes pregnant with twins, and God tells her that the two will father separate nations and that the older will serve the younger (this is another common theme in Genesis, and shows God's sovereign choice in the outworking of His covenant promises), contrary to all Ancient Near Eastern tradition. Both Jacob and Esau were named according to the circumstances of their birth - Esau was red and

hairy, while Jacob was grasping his brother's heel (he seems to have spent most of his life trying to pull himself up by someone else's bootstraps). Esau grew up to be a hunter, while Jacob became a shepherd (shepherds lived in tents while they pastured the flocks), and each was favored by a different parent.

The obvious application here, besides the clear evidence of God's sovereign purposes at work, is the long-term damage done by parental favoritism. Undoubtedly, Jacob and Esau were constantly at one another's throats, not just because of normal sibling rivalry and their personality differences, but because of the favoritism shown by their parents. Nothing more surely guarantees animosity among children than to have their parents favor one over the others (see the story of Joseph for further confirmation of this truth).

ESAU SELLS HIS BIRTHRIGHT (25:27-34)

This brief account clearly demonstrates the personalities and values of both men. Jacob was a conniver, while Esau was a materialist. Jacob valued the right things, but tried to get them by means of his own cleverness. Esau valued only the present moment, and thus despised his birthright. The birthright was the right of primogeniture - a father would divide his property into segments numbering one more than the number of his sons, then give a double portion to the oldest. It was that extra portion that Esau sold for a bowl of soup, not his entire inheritance. Of course, that birthright also related to the covenant promise of God, for which Esau evidently cared nothing (it is for this reason that Hebrews 12:16 refers to him as godless).

ISAAC AND HIS NEIGHBORS (26:1-35)

Again there is famine in the land, and God confirms His promise to Isaac and warns him not to leave and go down into Egypt. He instead settles in Gerar, as his father had done at least sixty years earlier. The wife-as-sister tactic appears again, this time with even less justification, since Rebekah was his second cousin, not his sister in any sense of the word. Note that the Abimelech in this narrative is not the same one mentioned in Genesis 20; the name was a dynastic title (*the king is my father*). When the deception is revealed, Abimelech rebukes Isaac, but ensures him of his protection. Isaac then settles in the area and increases his wealth, both through shepherding and through agriculture (nomads could carry this on to a limited extent as long as they visited their crops on a regular basis).

The jealousy of the inhabitants of the land (the reference to Philistines here is probably an anachronism, meaning "the inhabitants of the land we now know as Philistia") caused them to fill in the wells dug by Abraham - a very serious matter indeed in a land where water was scarce. The gracious way in which Isaac handled a potentially explosive conflict shows the meaning of "turning the other cheek" long before Jesus spoke the words. Finally, a treaty is arranged, and Isaac is able to live at peace with his neighbors. The reference to Beersheba is an interesting one, since Abraham had named the place long before, and some critics have problems with what they consider another double narrative. Remember, however, that the old well had been filled in, and Isaac was digging

a new well and cutting a new treaty with the men of Gerar. Furthermore, we know that place names in the ancient world tended to be notoriously flexible. Not only were places called by different names at different times, but the same name was applied to different locations, especially among the nomads. We have no real way of knowing whether the Beersheba of Genesis 21 was the same as that of Genesis 26, or whether either was the same as the town that marked the southern boundary of the nation of Israel. The archaeological dig referred to today as Beersheba dates only back to the twelfth century BC. Of course, it's also true that Genesis says nothing about a town at the location, since Abraham and Isaac were nomads - diggers of wells, but not builders of cities.

THE PATRIARCHS VIII

Genesis 27-28

We now arrive at the part of Genesis where Jacob becomes the focus of the narrative. The passages examined last week indicated the contrasting characters of the twin brothers, and we already saw how Jacob obtained Esau's birthright by taking advantage of the latter's preoccupation with material needs and comforts.

JACOB STEALS ESAU'S BLESSING (27:1-29)

We have already noted that names had great significance in the ancient world because they were considered to define the person's character and sometimes prophesy the person's destiny. Paternal blessings had much the same function. In an era before Israel had established a distinct priesthood, the father served not only as "king" of the clan, but also as prophet and priest (cf. Job 1). A father's blessing thus carried the weight of prophecy (we will see paternal blessings several more times in the Genesis narrative).

In this situation, Isaac knew that he was near death and wished to put his house in order by giving the traditional paternal blessings to his sons. Esau, as the firstborn, would receive the first blessing, so Isaac summoned him and told him to prepare a festive meal consisting of his father's favorite foods. Rebekah overheard the conversation, however, and was determined to obtain the blessing for Jacob, her favorite (note again the attempt to help God carry out his own promise - cf. 25:23). Jacob, no stranger to conniving himself, was reluctant to attempt such a blatant deception of his father, fearing the consequences should the deceit be discovered by the old man. Rebekah offered to take any resulting curse upon herself (though, as the narrative later indicates, such things were non-transferable). Between the tasty food, Esau's clothing, and the goatskin coverings on the hands and neck, Isaac, who must have been losing his hearing as well as his eyesight, was deceived, and gave the blessing to Jacob despite a few misgivings. The blessing is fairly typical of those recorded elsewhere from the era, and consists of material prosperity and rule over the clan, along with a sort of "boomerang effect" on blessings and curses.

ESAU DISCOVERS WHAT JACOB HAS DONE (27:30-40)

When Esau returns from the hunt and presents his freshly-prepared feast to his father, he finds that Jacob has preceded him and received the blessing that was supposed to have been his. Isaac acknowledges that such words, once spoken, cannot be recalled (how like words that we speak!). Esau begs his father for a blessing, but all Isaac can do is describe Esau's destiny in terms of the blessing he has already bestowed upon Jacob, while giving him the hope that Jacob's domination of his descendants will not be permanent. Note that while Esau's loss of his birthright was clearly blameworthy, he desired his father's blessing and is never blamed for having lost it. Instead, Jacob is the one who must bear the consequences of his deceit.

JACOB FLEES TO PADDAN ARAM (27:41-28:9)

The immediate consequence for Jacob was that he incurred the hatred of his brother. In order to keep Jacob from being murdered by Esau after Isaac's death, Rebekah convinces him to flee Beersheba and go to Paddan Aram on the pretext of finding a wife. Isaac accepts this reasoning because he, like Rebekah, is annoyed by Esau's Canaanite wives and sends Jacob on his way with his blessing. Esau, who apparently was either oblivious to his parents' dislike for his wives or didn't care what they thought, tries to make amends by marrying an Ishmaelite woman, figuring that at least she was a relative of the clan. As we will see later in the narrative, Jacob pays a heavy price for his deceit in that he never sees his mother again.

JACOB'S DREAM (28:10-22)

Jacob left Beersheba and traveled northward along the road through the hill country, which joined the Great Trunk Road traveled by caravans near Bethshan. During his journey, he stopped to rest near the town of Luz. Using a stone for a pillow, he fell asleep and had a dream in which he saw angels ascending and descending a staircase. What was being pictured here was a portal between two worlds - a staircase connecting earth and heaven. God stood at the top of the staircase and renewed His covenant promises to Jacob, assuring him that his descendants would receive the land promised to Abraham, would be a blessing to all nations, and that He would be with him for the rest of his days. Jacob, convinced that the place where he lay was the location of a gateway to heaven, set up the pillow-stone as an altar and named the place Bethel, which means "house of God." The place continued to be used for cultic activity and served as a shrine in the days of Samuel, as well as being the location of one of the golden calves set up by Jeroboam after the division of the kingdom. Jacob also took a vow at Bethel, promising to serve the Lord as his God (he had previously referred to "your God" when speaking to Isaac in 27:20) and give to Him a tithe of all with which the Lord blessed him (he probably had sacrifices in mind, assuming that his blessings would come in the form of flocks and herds).

A few background notes here might be helpful. First of all, the idea of a staircase connecting heaven and earth - a portal between two worlds - was a common one in the ancient world. Shrines depicting such stairways, called *ziggurats* (step pyramids with a temple to the god at the summit), were built throughout Mesopotamia. The Tower of Babel is the best-known example of such a structure.

Secondly, the idea of setting a stone upright to commemorate some special event or visitation of deity was also commonplace. Archaeologists have discovered many such "standing stones" in Canaanite temples, often surrounded by bowls or vials used to pour out libations to the deity, as Jacob did here.

Thirdly, tithes were most often taxes, either collected by the king or by a place of worship. The tithes of which Jacob speaks were voluntary, however, and probably represented sacrifices he intended to offer to God when the promises he had been given were fulfilled.

One further application should be noted in connection with this passage, and that is the use to which it is put in the New Testament. In John 1:51, Jesus, speaking to Nathanael, tells him that he will "see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Jesus thus compares Himself with the staircase in Jacob's vision - He is the portal between earth and heaven, the only mediator between God and man. It is certainly good for us to be reminded that, even as Nathanael was promised greater things than he saw in his first encounter with Jesus, so those of us who belong to Christ have experienced, and will continue to experience, things far greater than the famous vision of Jacob's Ladder. The glory of the presence of God within in the person of the Holy Spirit is something Jacob never knew.

THE PATRIARCHS IX

Genesis 29-31

The three chapters before us this week summarize the events that took place during Jacob's twenty-year sojourn in the household of Laban in Paddan Aram. Jacob's trickery is very much evident in these chapters, as is the shrewdness of his uncle Laban. We also see, however, how God's intention to bless His chosen ones moves forward despite their sin and lack of faith.

JACOB ARRIVES AT PADDAN ARAM (29:1-14)

After his vision of the staircase reaching to heaven, Jacob continues his journey and arrives at Paddan Aram in northern Mesopotamia. He reaches a well that is covered by a stone, around which several shepherds and their flocks have gathered. The practice of covering a well with a stone had multiple purposes - concealing a water source from those unauthorized to use it, protecting the water from poisoning or pollution, and preventing an animal or a traveler from falling into the well accidentally. Water rights often caused severe contention, as we have already seen, and this well was no exception to the rule. Apparently the local clans were so mistrustful of one another that they had agreed that no one could uncap the well unless all authorized flocks were present.

When Jacob arrives at the well, he asks after the family of Laban, and is told that Laban is well and that his daughter Rachel is in fact approaching the well with her father's flocks (though shepherdesses are common among bedouins today, they were not commonplace in the ancient world; the fact that Rachel was caring for the flocks probably indicates that Laban had no sons of appropriate age at this time). Jacob greets her with the kiss typical of the greeting of the day (this is not to be understood in romantic terms), and after introducing himself, is invited home to the tents of Laban. We should note that, as in the narrative of Abraham's servant's search for a bride for Isaac, God's providential care for His chosen ones is at work from the very beginning of the incident.

JACOB MARRIES LEAH AND RACHEL (29:15-30)

Within a short period of time, Jacob has fallen in love with Rachel. She is clearly the beauty of the family, though Leah's eyes apparently were remarkable (the word means *delicate*, like those of a doe). Normally, a man wishing to contract a marriage would provide a bride-price, but, given the circumstances under which Jacob had left home, he brought with him no such inducement. He therefore agrees to pay the bride-price in labor. Since a typical bride-price was thirty or forty shekels (three or four years' wages), Jacob overpaid for his bride, but he was hardly in a position to do any hard bargaining. Thus Laban establishes his character as a money-hungry and unscrupulous man from the very beginning of the story.

Things rapidly get worse, of course. When the seven years are over, Jacob demands his bride, but Laban tricks him by giving him Leah instead of Rachel (in case anyone wonders how Jacob could possibly not have noticed, it was common practice for the bride to be veiled during the ceremony and celebration that followed, and the nature of the celebration, during which people

typically imbibed large quantities of alcohol, would have rendered Jacob unlikely to notice with whom he was sleeping). Laban justifies the deception by citing the local custom of marrying off the older daughter before the younger. This was indeed common practice - the idea was to avoid having the family stuck with the responsibility of caring for an unmarriageable spinster - but this in no way excuses Laban's deception. Laban then tells Jacob to finish his bridal week with Leah (a period of time like a honeymoon during which the man devoted himself entirely to his new wife, with the hopeful result being an early pregnancy), and then work an additional seven years for Rachel. Jacob, unwilling to give up the woman he truly loves, agrees. Laban does make one concession, allowing Jacob to marry Rachel immediately before working off the remaining seven years. Each wife comes with a maidservant - a common wedding present given to departing daughters to make sure they could handle the housework for which they would now be accountable. God thus sets the stage, through Laban's trickery, for providing the offspring who would become the forefathers of the nation of Israel.

THE BIRTHS OF JACOB'S CHILDREN (29:31-30:24)

This lengthy section of the text details the births of Jacob's first twelve children - four to Leah (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah), two to Rachel's maid Bilhah (Dan and Naphtali), two to Leah's maid Zilpah (Gad and Asher), two sons and a daughter to Leah (Issachar, Zebulon, and Dinah), and finally a son to Rachel (Joseph). Here we see again the practice of wives giving their maids to their husbands as concubines and claiming legal rights over the resulting children, along with names being given that are connected with some aspect of the birth of the child. Note that mandrakes (verses 14-16) were edible roots shaped vaguely like the human form and thought in the ancient world to have aphrodisiac properties. Common in the Mediterranean basin, they were very rare, and thus prized, in Mesopotamia.

The family relationships pictured in this part of the narrative are not good ones. Leah and Rachel are jealous of one another, Rachel because of Leah's fertility and Leah because Rachel is loved by Jacob. The favoritism Jacob shows toward Rachel - an almost inevitable result of polygamy - sets the stage for the later favoritism shown toward Joseph and the sibling hatreds that result from such attitudes. God continues to be at work, however, again using barrenness as a means of marking out His own miraculous work in producing the child who is to play a central role in the narrative (the concept of a son of promise is in a sense no longer relevant because *all* of the sons of Jacob are within the bounds of the covenant).

JACOB'S WEALTH INCREASES (30:25-43)

At this point, the narrative returns to the relationship between Jacob and his uncle Laban, and we find that the tricks and counter-tricks that had characterized their interactions from the very beginning continue apace. Jacob wants to take his now quite large family and return home, but Laban encourages him to stay, having realized that God is blessing his household because of Jacob's presence (this is not the only time where God speaks through pagan forms of divination - remember the magi?). The fact that Laban wants the blessing that comes from Jacob's presence among the

members of his clan does not deter him from trying to swindle every last shekel from his nephew, however. No sooner does Jacob state his desired wages (a modest request, since only a small minority of the animals in a flock would typically have the stated characteristics) than Laban removes any animals with these characteristics far from Jacob to prevent their traits from being passed on to similarly-marked offspring. Jacob then combines a shrewd understanding of animal husbandry (mating strong animals and keeping the weak ones separate) with the grossest of superstitions (the notion that animals who mated in front of striped objects would produce striped offspring) to try to turn the tables on his uncle. He succeeds in multiplying his flocks at the expense of his uncle, but we know that his success came from God making him wealthy rather than the efficacy of his methods.

JACOB'S FLIGHT FROM LABAN (31:1-21)

Laban's sons begin to get angry with Jacob because he has enriched himself at the expense of their inheritance. Jacob, instructed by the voice of God and fearing further treachery, decides that the time has come for him to return to Canaan. He summons Leah and Rachel and informs them of his decision, in the process enumerating examples of their father's tricks and God's countermeasures. Leah and Rachel have no ties to their father, since he has set aside no dowry for their protection, and figure that the wealth gained by Jacob should have been theirs anyway. The family then gathers their goods and leaves for Canaan without saying anything to Laban. In the process, Rachel steals the family gods (*teraphim*), which were small images thought to bring luck to the clan, and also served as symbols of inheritance, as they were passed down from one head of the clan to the next. Again, we see lack of trust in God as the family tries to use deceit to ensure their own safety and their own "luck."

JACOB AND LABAN CONCLUDE A TREATY (31:22-55)

When Laban finds out three days later that Jacob has fled with his daughters and much of his wealth, he pursues him, catching up to him a week later. We need have no doubt that Laban intended harm to Jacob, but God appeared to him in a dream and warned him not to do anything rash. Whatever Laban's initial concerns may have been, he speaks to Jacob of his desire to say farewell to his daughters and kiss his grandchildren goodbye. The major problem that concerns him is the theft of the teraphim. Jacob, who knew nothing of what Rachel had done, denies having the gods and offers to let Laban search his goods, even to the point of decreeing the death of the thief. Laban begins the search, while Rachel conceals the idols in her camel's saddle and sits on it. She then dissuades Laban from searching the saddle by claiming to be having her period; he quickly leaves the tent, not because of the fear of ceremonial uncleanness (as would have been the case in later Israelite society), but because of the superstitious belief that demons inhabited menstrual blood.

Jacob then rebukes Laban, both for his mistrust and for his repeated mistreatment while Jacob had been in his employ. Laban, recognizing that he has lost, proposes a treaty. The covenant that results is essentially a boundary agreement, in which each party agrees to respect the other's territory and refrain from crossing the border with hostile intent. Again, standing stones are set up to mark

both the boundary and the treaty itself, and the gods of the participants are called to witness the covenant. The deal is sealed by a festive meal, and the two parties part in peace. [Note that verse 49, which is sometimes erroneously referred to as the "Mizpah Benediction," is anything but that. Instead, it is a statement of mutual mistrust, calling upon the gods of the two men to enforce proper behavior while the parties to the covenant are out of sight of one another. It is therefore quite inappropriate for use at the end of a worship service, though many churches use it for that purpose.]

We thus find Jacob, twenty years after stealing his brother's blessing, ready to return home. But he is far from the fearful wanderer he was twenty years before. He is now a wealthy man with a large family of his own. God has prospered him in spite of his trickery and lack of faith, yet the consequences of his sin still remain. As we will see next week, the fear of his brother with which he had been living ever since he left home follows him still. Sin may not prevent God from accomplishing His purposes, but it certainly affects the sinner, often in ways that take years to overcome.

THE PATRIARCHS X

Genesis 32-33

Jacob had fled his home in fear of his brother Esau's wrath following the incident of the stolen blessing. Now, twenty years later, Jacob, having become a rich man with a large family, fearfully returns home, hoping to make peace with his brother but fearing the worst, despite the fact that God had told him to return and guaranteed his safety. Today's chapters narrate the meeting between the two estranged brothers.

JACOB'S PRECAUTIONS (32:1-21)

Jacob receives an angelic visitation and a theophany on his return to the Land of Promise, as he had on his way out. He names the place of the angelic visitation Mahanaim (*two camps*). He then prepares for his inevitable encounter with Esau. As one might expect of a shrewd man like Jacob, his preparations are both careful and clever.

First, he sends messengers to his brother with instructions to tell Esau of the wealth he has accumulated. The probable reason for this is to assure Esau that Jacob has no intention of laying claim to the family fortune that he had gained in such an underhanded manner. The messengers deliver the missive and return to inform Jacob that Esau is coming to meet him, accompanied by an army of four hundred men. Needless to say, Jacob does not find the news encouraging, since his grandfather Abraham had defeated a coalition of four kings with a smaller contingent.

Jacob next divides his family and possessions into two groups and puts considerable distance between them, hoping that if Esau attacks one of the groups, the other will still be able to escape unscathed. Jacob's spiritual growth is revealed by the fact that he actually prays to God in the face of this crisis - something that he had never tended to do in the past. He then designs a strategy that he hopes will blunt Esau's rage. He has his servants remove a large group of livestock of various kinds from among his flocks and sends them on ahead of his family as gifts for Esau. These gifts had multiple purposes - not only were they intended to mollify the wrath of Esau, but would also have served to slow down the advance of his army, ensure that their approach would be a noisy one so that Jacob and his company would not face a surprise attack, and guarantee that, if indeed a battle ensued, Jacob would have a number of his loyal servants in Esau's camp to blunt the ferocity of the attack.

In terms of application, we should simply note that this story is one more example of a patriarch seeking God's help and then taking matters into his own hands. We do the same, of course, insisting on hedging our bets rather than stepping out in faith. In this case, as we will see, Jacob's self-reliance does not bear bitter fruit, but actually succeeds in helping to smooth the meeting between the brothers.

THE STRUGGLE AT PENIEL (32:22-32)

Jacob's family has by this time reached the Jabbok River, which enters the Jordan on the east side about twenty miles north of the Dead Sea. He sends his family and all his possessions across the Jabbok, remaining on the other side alone. There he is met by a man who wrestles with him all night. We soon find that the man is a theophany and that Jacob is determined to receive the blessing of God.

As with Moses in Exodus 4:24-26, God attacked someone who was doing his bidding because He needed to deal with a fatal flaw in that person's life. With Moses, the issue was holiness - he had failed to circumcise his son. With Jacob, it was self-sufficiency. Jacob the schemer needed to come face to face with his own helplessness. Now he encountered a situation that he could neither think nor talk his way out of. Here was a battle he couldn't win, and after God dislocated his hip, all he could do was hang on for dear life. His encounter with God awoke in him a longing for God, and he refused to let go until God blessed him. At daybreak, God mercifully ended the match, for no one can look on the face of God and live.

Jacob left his encounter with God a changed man. His physical weakness was a reminder of his own sin. His awareness of his sin had been the necessary prerequisite to the longing for God that resulted. Jacob also left with a new name that signified an altered character. He was no longer "he who grasps the heel," but was now a Prince with God. Though he continued to reap the consequences of his self-sufficient scheming, particularly through his children, he did become the instrument through whom God fulfilled His promise. [Note that the dietary custom mentioned in verse 32 is referred to nowhere else in Scripture.]

JACOB AND ESAU MEET AGAIN (33:1-20)

When Esau and troop of men appear on the horizon, Jacob divides his family into smaller groups, placing the maidservants and their children in the front followed by Leah and her children, with Rachel and Joseph bringing up the rear; this must have sent a clear message about who was expendable to wives and children alike! Jacob then stepped forward to meet his brother, prostrating himself seven times in a sign of abject humility. Much to Jacob's surprise and delight, however, Esau embraced him with joy. After Jacob had introduced his family, Esau asked about the numerous shipments of livestock he had encountered along the route, and Jacob explained that they were intended to curry his favor. Esau tried to refuse the gifts, but Jacob insisted. Esau then offered to accompany Jacob on his southward journey into the land of Seir (Edom, southeast of the Dead Sea), but Jacob declined, using as an excuse the slower traveling pace of his party because of the presence of the children and livestock. Esau offered to leave some of his men to escort Jacob's family on their journey, but Jacob again declined. Then instead of heading south, Jacob traveled westward to Succoth, where he built shelters for his livestock (the name of the place is the same word that is later used to describe the Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths), then continued on and settled at Shechem, about 35 miles north of Jerusalem. There he bought a piece of land and built an altar to the Lord.

The obvious lesson here is that what we most fear, and spend so much energy attempting to avoid, may never come to pass at all. Instead of deploying all our strength seeking to avoid anticipated calamities, we should trust the Lord from the outset, knowing that He has promised to protect His children. This is especially true when we are dealing with matters specifically promised by God in His Word. Jacob, having received God's promise of safety in his return to the land, had no reason to fear Esau. Similarly, we who have the promise of the completion of our salvation need fear nothing that we might imagine could separate us from the love of God.

THE PATRIARCHS XI

Genesis 34-36

The chapters before us this week conclude the portion of the Genesis narrative that focuses on Jacob and his generation. Next week, the focus shifts to Joseph and the other sons of Jacob.

THE RAPE OF DINAH (34:1-31)

It is because of the incident related in this chapter that the birth of Dinah was mentioned when the text was listing the children of Jacob born in Paddan Aram (he probably had other daughters as well, but they are not mentioned because they play no significant role in the narrative). As we saw last week, Jacob and his family settled near Shechem rather than following Esau down to the region of Seir. Apparently Dinah had made friends among the women of the land, and when she went to visit them, she was raped by Shechem, the son of the local chieftain. The practice of obtaining a marriage contract by means of rape was common enough that it is addressed in the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 22:16-17); that it was widespread, even beyond the borders of Canaan, may be seen in the precipitating action of the *Iliad*, where the kidnaping and rape of Helen by Paris bring down the wrath of the Greeks against the inhabitants of Troy.

After the rape, Shechem asks his father Hamor to arrange for him to marry Dinah, and Hamor visits Jacob to open negotiations. The implications of the marriage go far beyond the union of two individuals; what is being proposed is the union of two tribes by intermarriage. Shechem, both because he is madly in love with Dinah and because the violation of the girl has put him at a distinct disadvantage in the negotiations that follow, offers to pay whatever Jacob and his sons require as a bride price.

What happens next demonstrates that the proverbial apple never falls far from the tree. The scheming nature that characterized Jacob for so long now appears in his sons. They agree to Shechem's proposal, but add one further condition - that all the males of Hamor's clan must be circumcised. This demand was not made because of any concern for God's covenant; in fact, the tribal intermarriage proposed by Hamor would have completely destroyed the identity of God's covenant people. Instead, their plan was to incapacitate the men of Hamor's clan in order to attack and destroy them (note, again, the similarity with the *Iliad*, where Menelaus and the men of Greece seek vengeance against Paris by destroying his city and all its inhabitants). Circumcision, then, served as a sort of Trojan horse.

Shechem returned to his town and met with the men in the city gate, which was the normal place for meetings on matters of importance. Then men of the town agreed to the proposal because they saw it as a way of assimilating the clan of Jacob into their own and gaining control of his considerable possessions in the process. All the men were then circumcised - a painful procedure for adults that renders them virtually immobile for several days. Three days later, Simeon and Levi attacked the town and killed all the men in it, after which the remaining sons of Jacob looted the town, seizing flocks, herds, women and children for their own. Jacob was incensed with what his

sons had done, largely because it opened them up to retaliation from the neighboring Canaanite tribes, but the boys seemed unmoved by his rebuke, asserting that the Shechemites deserved what they got because of their abuse of Dinah.

What role does this story play in the overall narrative of Genesis? Several points may be noted. First of all, the story shows that God is determined to preserve the distinctness of His covenant people, even through the evil deeds done by some of them. One might conceivably have justified the death of Shechem himself for the rape of Dinah, but the destruction of the entire town seems to be a case of overkill, if one could excuse the bad pun. Yet God uses the event to further His own purposes. This is one of many occasions in the book of Genesis where God means for good what man means for evil.

Secondly, this incident, along with the brief description in 35:22 (see below) and the unsavory story of Judah and Tamar in chapter 38, serves to justify the granting of the right of primogeniture to Joseph at the end of the book. The four oldest sons of Leah have disqualified themselves by their actions to gain the right of the oldest son, and thus that right of inheritance falls to Joseph over the sons of the concubines and the younger sons of Leah.

JACOB AT BETHEL (35:1-15)

Jacob realizes that he is no longer welcome in the region of Shechem, and God tells him to move southward and settle near Bethel. The first thing Jacob does is to purify his household by burying any foreign gods his sons and servants still have with them. The existence of these foreign gods shows the limited extent to which the patriarchs and their families had grasped the concept of monotheism at this point. Jacob was here swearing allegiance to Yahweh exclusively, but he did not yet seem to grasp the fact that the other gods represented by the household idols he buried did not even exist. When they arrive at Bethel, Jacob builds an altar (another one of the standing stones we saw earlier, and which are so common among the artifacts of the region). The death of Rachel's nurse provides another opportunity to explain the origin of a place name (Allon Bacuth - "oak of weeping"), and God then appears to Jacob, confirms the covenant, and refers to Himself again by the name El Shaddai - this time again clearly connected with the multiplication of offspring, as it had been in Genesis 17.

THE DEATH OF RACHEL (35:16-26)

Jacob and his family then continue southward. Near Bethlehem, Rachel, who is in the last stages of her second pregnancy, encounters difficulties and dies while giving birth to Benjamin. Jacob buries her there and sets up a pillar marking her grave. The tomb was a site of pilgrimage throughout much of the Old Testament era. Today, two competing locations claim to be the place of Rachel's tomb, one in Bethlehem and one just outside of the city of Jerusalem.

Verse 22 then mentions the fact that Reuben slept with Jacob's concubine Bilhah. The act of sleeping with one's father's concubine involved an assertion of clan leadership (cf. Absalom

sleeping with the women of David's harem after forcing the old king to flee from Jerusalem in II Samuel 16:21-22). This insult to his father's authority ultimately cost him his right of inheritance as the firstborn.

THE DEATH OF ISAAC (35:27-29)

Jacob finally returns home to Hebron to see his father (his mother had died years before), and is there to comfort the old man in his death. He was buried, presumably in the cave of Machpelah purchased by Abraham, by his two sons - one of the few deeds performed by the brothers in harmony. Jacob and Esau don't remain in the same territory, however, as 36:6-8 indicates, because both had become too wealthy for the land to support them and their clans. Jacob remains in Canaan, while Esau returns to the land of Seir.

THE LINE OF ESAU (36:1-43)

Chapter 36 of Genesis gives the genealogies of the peoples who descended from Esau. The main function of this chapter was to give the Israelites who were about to enter the Promised Land some understanding of the origins of the peoples they would encounter, as we have seen previously. While most of these tribal names have no meaning to us today, a few items might be singled out for special attention.

Verse 12 mentions that Amalek was a grandson of Esau through his son's concubine. The Amalekites were a nomadic people who fought numerous times among Israel's enemies. Their vicious attack on the Israelites as they traveled through the wilderness on the way to Canaan leads God to order their destruction, and Saul's failure to carry out the order causes God to deprive Saul of the crown.

Verse 24 mentions the discovery of hot springs in the desert by Anah. This is included largely to distinguish this Anah from his uncle, mentioned in verse 20. Without last names, such information commonly distinguished people with identical monikers.

Verse 28 mentions Uz, and at least implies a connection with the book of Job. The story seems to have taken place during the patriarchal era, and Job is said to have lived in the land of Uz. This need not mean that he was an Edomite, since many of the inhabitants of the land were nomads, but certainly explains why his story doesn't intersect those of the patriarchs on whom the book of Genesis focuses its attention. Notice, too, the appearance of the name Eliphaz in verses 10-11. A few other names from this list also appear again in the Old Testament as place names or tribal identifiers.

One more important connection with the Edomites that appears much later in Scripture, of course, is that of the Herod family. Herod the Great was an Edomite (they were known as Idumaeans then) whose family had been forcibly converted to Judaism during the reign of the Hasmoneans.

Herod used his Jewish connections to gain the throne for himself during the era of Roman rule, and the members of his family appear all over the political landscape of the New Testament era.

THE PATRIARCHS XII

Genesis 37-39

Today's passage begins the last major segment of the patriarchal narrative by introducing the character of Joseph. He now becomes the central figure for the remainder of the book, though Jacob continues to be on the fringes of the narrative and his other sons play significant roles in what follows.

JOSEPH'S DREAMS (37:1-11)

By the time this part of the story begins, Joseph is seventeen years old. He is his father's favorite because he "had been born to him in his old age." Note that such a description would also apply to Benjamin, but Joseph probably held the position as favorite because he was the oldest son of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel. Jacob shows his favoritism by making Joseph a "richly-ornamented robe" (the term is a *hapax legomenon* the meaning of which is uncertain; Egyptian paintings of the era picture well-dressed Canaanites wearing long fringed robes with decorative sashes wrapped from the waist to the hem of the garment). While it was not likely to have been a "technicolor dreamcoat," it would have been a symbol of favor, and perhaps of authority as well.

Jacob's partiality results in enmity between Joseph and his brothers - a problem that Joseph apparently did little to remedy through his own attitude (another of many examples of the disastrous consequences of parental favoritism that we find in the patriarchal narratives). The extent to which the bad report mentioned in verse 2 was justified cannot be determined from the text, though the later accounts of Joseph's probity make it likely that his brothers deserved censure for their management of their father's flocks. The dreams, however, are another matter. Dreams were considered omens in the ancient world, so it is not surprising that Joseph ascribed meaning to his dreams. He showed considerable lack of wisdom in sharing them with his brothers, however - such an act did little more than fan the flames of jealousy (though Jacob himself took the dreams under advisement despite his rebuke of his son). As we know, of course, it was all part of God's plan, since their anger was a necessary step in the ultimate salvation of the Chosen People from the famine that was soon to come upon the land.

JOSEPH SOLD INTO SLAVERY (37:12-36)

Jacob and his family were now living in Hebron, but flocks needed to go where grazing could be found, so Jacob sent his sons northward to the more fertile region around Shechem. Jacob evidently didn't trust his sons, so he sent Joseph to check up on them. When Joseph arrived at Shechem, he found that his brothers had moved about fifteen miles further north to the area around Dothan. He followed them there, but his brothers saw him from a distance and plotted against him. Their original intention was to kill him, but Reuben talked them into throwing him into a dry cistern (carved out of the soft limestone for the purpose of storing water) instead, intending later to rescue him and send him back to Jacob. After throwing him into the pit, they sat down to eat. While they were eating, a caravan approached (the fact that they are described as Ishmaelites in verse 25 and

Midianites in verse 28 is not a problem; both were nomadic groups descended from Abraham, one through Hagar and the other through Keturah, who lived in the region east of the Jordan and made their living through the spice trade; apparently the names were used interchangeably), and the brothers decided to make a profit out of the deal. They sold Joseph into slavery for the standard price of twenty shekels (about two years' wages). Reuben was distraught when he discovered what they had done, but apparently agreed to the ensuing deception of Jacob. Jacob, convinced that Joseph was dead, went into deep mourning and refused to be comforted by his hypocritical offspring. Joseph, meanwhile, was sold as a slave to Potiphar, the captain of the royal guard in Egypt.

JUDAH AND TAMAR (38:1-30)

The insertion of the story of Judah and Tamar at this point in the narrative serves a number of functions. As we have already seen, it helps to justify the eventual choice of Joseph as the principal heir by detailing the disqualifying behavior of the brothers who would normally have been in a position to receive the right of primogeniture. Secondly, it serves to mark the passage of time in the Joseph narrative - though the story of Judah occupies far more time than the years Joseph spent in the house of Potiphar, its insertion at this point does let the reader know that time is passing. Thirdly, the story found in chapter 38 underscores once again the danger of mixing with the native Canaanite population - a warning that the Israelites who were about to enter the Promised Land under Joshua failed to heed.

As for the story itself, it is another one of those unsavory accounts found in the patriarchal narratives. Judah strikes out on his own and settles in the Shephelah west of Hebron - the land eventually occupied by the Philistines. He marries a Canaanite woman and bears three sons, but these sons are godless men. The first, Er, is struck down by God for some nameless sin. The second, Onan, is killed because of his refusal to fulfill the law of levirate marriage with Er's widow Tamar (this is not an anachronism - such laws apparently were common in the societies of the ancient Near East before they were incorporated into Israelite law; note also that this passage cannot legitimately be used as an argument against birth control, for which it has often been cited, since that was hardly the point of the story).

By this time, Judah is convinced that Tamar is bad luck. He tells her to go back to her father's house and live as a widow (this was not common practice; typically a widow would live in the house of her husband's family, and they would provide for her) until his third son Shelah was old enough to marry her, but his main intent was to get rid of her. Many years later, Judah's wife died and, after his period of mourning was fulfilled (usually thirty days) he went to Timnah on business. Tamar, hearing that he was coming to Timnah, decided to deceive him in order to force him to fulfill his promise of marrying her to his youngest son, who by now had reached adulthood. She disguised herself as a cult prostitute and sat by the side of the road near a pagan shrine. Judah solicited her services and impregnated her. Since he had no money to pay her, he gave her his seal (a cylinder that would be rolled in clay, many of which have been discovered in Canaan) and his staff (which probably would have had individualizing carvings on it). When he sent the agreed-upon payments and sought the return of his pledge, however, the prostitute could not be found. Judah then

gave his possessions up for lost and continued his journey. Three months later, however, he was told that his daughter-in-law Tamar had become pregnant. He was furious that she would commit adultery (double standards are nothing new), and ordered her to be burned to death - somewhat unusual, since the common means of carrying out capital punishment was by stoning. Tamar then produced the seal and staff to identify the one who had impregnated her. Judah admitted his culpability in not fulfilling his promise to give her to his youngest son, and she bore twins from her encounter with her father-in-law. The grace of God is again visible here in that the younger, Perez, became an ancestor of the Messiah (Matthew 1:3); here again the younger son takes precedence over the older son. God is able to bring good out of the most despicable sins of mankind.

JOSEPH IN THE HOUSE OF POTIPHAR (39:1-23)

The story now returns to Joseph, who has been sold into slavery and is serving in the household of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. Joseph served Potiphar faithfully and well, and God blessed his efforts, so that Potiphar eventually placed Joseph in charge of his entire household and estate, which began to prosper abundantly.

But Joseph, who was a good-looking young man, attracted the attention of Potiphar's wife, whose roving eye led her to try to seduce the young steward. Joseph repelled her advances despite the fact that she attempted to talk him into her bed repeatedly. In doing so, Joseph cited not only his responsibility to his master, but also his responsibility to God (the contrast with Judah is clear here). Finally, one day Joseph was doing his work in his master's house at a time when none of the other servants was present. Potiphar's wife laid hold of him, but Joseph fled, leaving behind only his cloak. Potiphar's wife, humiliated by being rejected by a mere servant, then accused Joseph of trying to rape her, using the cloak as evidence (this is the second time that a cloak gets Joseph in trouble). Potiphar was furious and had Joseph thrown into prison (the fact that Joseph was imprisoned in a jail reserved for political prisoners rather than being executed on the spot or cast into a common dungeon perhaps indicates something of the amount of confidence Potiphar placed in his wife's account of what had happened).

Even in the prison, however, the Lord was with Joseph, and he soon gained a place of trust. Joseph's responses to the undeserved setbacks he experienced in his life indicate the truth of what Peter expresses in I Peter 2:18-20. God's people are sometimes called to suffer unjustly, but God has His purposes for their suffering, and they have Christ as their example as they go through something that, however severe it may be, cannot approach what He has suffered on their behalf.

THE PATRIARCHS XIII

Genesis 40-41

This week's passage tells the story of Joseph's rise from rags to riches, from the dungeon to the palace. The narrative tells us much about both Joseph's character and God's providence in his life.

JOSEPH IN PRISON (40:1-23)

We saw last week that Joseph was confined in a political prison rather than a common dungeon. His place of confinement was under the authority of Potiphar, the captain of the guard and his former master. Potiphar continues to show his confidence in Joseph by giving him a place of responsibility in the prison and entrusting important royal prisoners to his care and supervision.

After Joseph had been in prison for some time (we don't know how long, but the elapsed time between Joseph being sold into slavery and his appointment to a place of honor in Pharaoh's government was thirteen years; he may have been in the prison for as long as a decade) when he is given charge of two new prisoners - Pharaoh's chief baker and cupbearer. These were officers who enjoyed a high degree of trust, since assassination attempts were frequent in the ancient world and poisoning was often a method of choice. The baker, who prepared the king's food, and the cupbearer, who served and tasted it, thus enjoyed great trust. The cause of their imprisonment is unknown, but it may well have been in connection with an assassination attempt in which their complicity was suspected.

While in prison, both men had dreams on the same night. We have already seen that dreams were believed to be messages from the gods. In pagan societies, however, the gods were not believed to communicate the meaning of the dreams they sent; after all, if they had wanted to be clear, they would have sent a message couched in something other than obscure symbolism. Dreams were thus referred to professional interpreters - priests, sorcerers, magi, etc. Joseph's prisoners are downcast because they have no access to a skilled interpreter, and thus have no way of learning the meaning of their dreams. Joseph, however, assures them that the true God, unlike the gods of the Egyptians, interprets the dreams He sends, and encourages them to tell him about their dreams.

The cupbearer's dream is interpreted by Joseph to mean that he will be restored to his office in three days. The baker, encouraged by the positive interpretation, then tells his dream, but Joseph responds by telling him that he will be executed three days hence. Three days later, Pharaoh celebrated his birthday, and in honor of the event may have announced his findings regarding the plot against his life. The innocent cupbearer was restored, as Joseph had said, while the baker, guilty of being involved in the plot, was executed (the form of execution was not hanging as we think of the term, but beheading followed by the desecration of the corpse by means of public impalement). The cupbearer, however, quickly forgot about the young prisoner who had interpreted his dream, and Joseph was left to languish in the prison for another two years.

In this section of the story, we can see clearly that God is working Joseph into a position where he will have direct access to the sovereign of the land. What is clear to us was not at all clear to Joseph, of course, and there we see the value of his example. His patience in the face of repeated reverses and disappointments shows the extent of his faith in God. He continued to serve faithfully wherever God put him, even though the places in which he found himself seemed to get progressively less appealing.

JOSEPH INTERPRETS THE DREAMS OF PHARAOH (41:1-40)

Two years later, Pharaoh himself has a pair of parallel dreams. We have already seen that dreams were usually interpreted by professional seers, but such a procedure was very unusual in connection with a dream by the reigning Pharaoh. Since the Pharaoh was considered of divine descent, he normally presented his dreams to his court as being perfectly intelligible to him. Thus for him to seek outside interpreters would have been an admission of weakness. In this case, however, he is sufficiently concerned about the import of his dreams to seek outside help. His magi are unable to decipher the dreams (normally interpreters would do this through dream books - records of dreams and their fulfillments that would provide a sort of dictionary of dream symbolism). One might wonder why they simply didn't make something up in order to satisfy their ruler, but it is necessary to keep in mind that failed interpretations did not tend to be good for a seer's health.

At this point, the cupbearer remembers the young man who had interpreted his dream in the prison two years earlier. Joseph is summoned and prepares himself to appear before Pharaoh by clothing and grooming himself in the Egyptian fashion. When Pharaoh explains the nature of the problem, Joseph immediately disavows any personal insight, but affirms that God will give the meaning of the dreams. Pharaoh then relates his two dreams, and Joseph interprets them as both referring to the same thing - seven years of bounty to be followed by seven years of famine. As would be expected of a magician in such circumstances, he also makes application of the meaning of the dreams by advising Pharaoh to prepare for the years of famine by storing grain during the years of prosperity. Pharaoh, seeing that God is with Joseph, appoints him to supervise the process of preparing for the famine that was to come.

This is one of several incidents in Scripture where God reveals Himself in the context of the belief system of the person to whom He intends to speak. Pharaoh and his officials expected that the gods would communicate with them through dreams, so when God speaks to them, He speaks in a language that they can understand (at least with Joseph's help, they can). This is precisely what He did, of course, when He sent the star to inform the magi of the birth of the Messiah. God's mercy extends to His creatures in that He speaks to us in our language. Scripture itself is an example of this.

JOSEPH IS MADE GRAND VIZIER OF EGYPT (41:41-57)

The exact title of the office given to Joseph is uncertain, though *Grand Vizier* and *Overseer of the Royal Estates* are two titles found in the literature of Egypt that could correspond to the

responsibilities given to the young Hebrew. Perhaps the closest description of a royal office found in the tomb paintings is *Overseer of the Granaries of Upper and Lower Egypt*. The investiture ceremonies described in verse 42 are similar to those pictured in tomb paintings of Egyptian officials from the period. When Joseph is described as "second in command" to Pharaoh, this indicates that he was accorded the honor of riding in the chariot immediately behind that of the monarch. This doesn't necessarily mean that Joseph exercised authority over all the other courtiers, but that he "reported directly to the President" - on the matter of food storage, no one could tell Joseph what to do except Pharaoh himself. After all, a corporation can have many vice presidents, but only one C.E.O. Joseph was thus more like the Secretary of Agriculture than the Prime Minister of Egypt.

Joseph is also given an Egyptian wife, Asenath, allying him with one of the most powerful priestly families in the land (the temple of On was located at Heliopolis, one of the great temple cities in ancient Egypt). By her, Joseph has two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, whose names indicate that God has enabled him to forget his years of suffering and become fruitful in the land to which he was transported by divine providence.

The success of the Egyptian government in managing the seasonal flooding of the Nile made Egypt the breadbasket of the Near East, so what happens in this passage is not at all unusual in the period of our story. Joseph taxes grain during the years of plenty, stores the surplus, then sells it during the years of famine. This not only spares the Egyptian people the suffering that famine would entail, but also draws to Egypt those in neighboring regions who are experiencing the same deprivation. Among those seekers of food, of course, will be the sons of Jacob.

THE PATRIARCHS XIV

Genesis 42-43

Now that Joseph is in a position of power in Egypt, the stage is set for the reunion with his brothers. When the famine predicted by Pharaoh's dreams arrives, Joseph is in a position to preserve the lives of God's covenant people.

THE FIRST JOURNEY TO EGYPT (42:1-38)

When the famine reaches Canaan, Jacob receives word that grain is available in Egypt, so he sends his sons to purchase the food needed for the clan's survival. All of Joseph's brothers make the trip with the exception of Benjamin, the youngest. When the brothers arrive in Egypt, they are brought before Joseph, who is responsible for food distribution. They bow before the great Egyptian official, unaware that he is the young man they had sold into slavery twenty years earlier. He recognizes them immediately, however, and remembers the dreams he had as a child.

At this point, Joseph decides to test his brothers to see if their characters have improved any after two decades. He treats them harshly, accusing them of being spies sent to scout out the land on behalf of a foreign power. The accusation was not totally unreasonable. The use of spies was common at the time, as it is now; when the Israelites prepared to enter Canaan, they sent spies to do reconnaissance work, and later sent agents into Jericho prior to attacking it. Often, these spies would be merchants rather than citizens of the country seeking the information, especially if the country doing the spying already was engaged in hostilities against the country being visited by the spies.

Their replies to Joseph's interrogation indicate that they genuinely believed him to be dead. He demands that they produce Benjamin, both out of a desire to see his younger sibling and because he wants to know if the hatreds and jealousies that had led to his being sold into slavery had now been transferred to Rachel's youngest offspring, now undoubtedly the favorite of his father. He originally intended to keep all but one confined to prison until Benjamin was brought before him, but decided that it would be enough to keep a single hostage, thus allowing them to take the grain back to Canaan that was needed for the survival of their families.

At this point, Reuben rebukes his brothers for their treatment of Joseph so many years before (he, if you recall, was the one who had wanted to spare Joseph). They don't realize that Joseph can understand their speech, but he is touched by their changed attitudes and signs of repentance, and weeps before binding Simeon and sending the rest away. He sees to it that their money is returned to them in the grain sacks they carry away; the fact that they are fearful when they discover it shows something of their newfound honesty.

When they return to Canaan, they tell Jacob all that happened, and he initially refuses to part with Benjamin, insisting that he cannot stand the loss of another son. Though his continuing favoritism for the sons of Rachel remains apparent, the brothers show genuine pity for their father,

to the extent that Reuben offers his two sons in exchange for Benjamin should anything happen to him during the journey.

The path upon which God's work is being carried out is becoming more apparent at this point in the narrative, but we are given little insight into the remarkable change in the character of Jacob's sons. What has happened to them to make them honorable men? Why are they no longer jealous and selfish? Could it be guilt over what they had done to Joseph? Could it be simply a matter of maturity? There is little in the responses of Jacob himself to indicate that his example since his meeting with God at Peniel would have been enough to change his sons. He seems, instead, to be the same old faithless Jacob, willing to turn first to his own devices rather than trusting God.

In that regard, we should note several things for our own edification from this portion of the story. First of all, God most often changes people slowly. We very easily become impatient with ourselves and others, expecting immediate reformation and freedom from the temptations that have plagued us for so long. But if we take the biblical narratives seriously, we must realize that Jacob is more characteristic of most Christians than is Saul of Tarsus. For most of us, change is slow and gradual, with many hesitations and frequent steps backward. We should not take such discouraging signs, either in our own lives or in the lives of others, as evidence that God is not at work. Sanctification is often slow, but it is always sure.

THE SECOND JOURNEY TO EGYPT (43:1-34)

Only when the food brought from Egypt runs out does Jacob finally agree to allow his sons to take Benjamin down to Egypt. Judah is the one this time who offers to guarantee Benjamin's safety, and Jacob reluctantly sends his youngest son away, fatalistically moaning that, if he is to be bereaved once again, there is nothing he can do about it. He sends the brothers away, loaded down with presents of produce of the land and rare spices, along with twice the amount of silver, so that they would be able to give back the money that had mysteriously appeared in their sacks as well as purchasing more grain [coinage would not be invented for more than a thousand years yet; at this time, raw precious metals were a common medium of exchange, along with the barter of trade goods].

When they arrived in Egypt, they again went to see Joseph. When he saw Benjamin, he ordered them taken to his house, planning to have dinner with them. The brothers were terrified, thinking that he was now planning to do away with all of them, but Joseph's steward assured them that he had no evil intentions (perhaps, too, their knowledge of their own evil characters led them to expect the worst of others). When they asked about the mysterious case of the reappearing silver, the steward lied and said that their payment for the initial grain sale had been received, and that their God must have put the silver in their sacks. Simeon was then liberated.

When Joseph arrived, they presented their gifts and he inquired about their father. When he saw Benjamin, he was so moved that he had to leave the room to hide his tears. They then enjoyed a sumptuous meal together, though Joseph maintained his secrecy by eating separately from his

brothers (several different factors are at work here; Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews because they considered shepherds unclean - thus the separate land in Goshen when Jacob's family settles in Egypt, and Joseph would have eaten apart from the other Egyptians present because of his elevated rank). He couldn't resist toying with them, however, by seating them in order of their ages - something he would have had no way of knowing had he been nothing more than a high Egyptian official. He also saw to it that Benjamin was given the largest and choicest portions of the feast.

Joseph clearly does not hold a grudge here, though from a human standpoint he would have had every reason to do so. This is another example of the excellence of his character. But, as we will see next week, he needs to find out more about his brothers, so he plans one more test for them.

THE PATRIARCHS XV

Genesis 44-45

Ever since Joseph's initial encounter with his brothers in Egypt, he had been testing them to determine whether or not their characters had improved since they had sold him into slavery many years before. He had maneuvered them in such a way as to get them to bring Benjamin with them to Egypt, and he was now ready to initiate the final test to determine whether the brothers would betray and abandon Benjamin as they had done to him twenty-two years earlier.

THE CUP IN THE SACK (44:1-13)

Joseph's strategy involved planting a valuable silver cup in Benjamin's sack, then accusing him of theft to see how the brothers would respond. The cup involved was used for divination purposes - the technique, known as *lecanomancy*, sought to foretell the future or gain information by observing the configuration taken by oil poured on top of water in the cup. Such cups were only used by the rich and powerful, thus Joseph would have possessed one as part of the paraphernalia associated with his exalted status. It is impossible to ascertain from the text whether or not he actually used it, though his clear-headed attitude toward divination by means of dreams would suggest that he would not.

Joseph's brothers left to return to Canaan the following morning, but shortly after their departure, Joseph sent his steward to intercept them, intent on capturing the man responsible for the theft of the valuable cup (no mention is made of the silver, which was again returned to the brothers in the tops of their grain sacks; perhaps by this time they were accustomed to having their silver miraculously reappear). Joseph's brothers protest their innocence, pointing out that they had returned the silver found in their sacks on the previous trip. They are so sure of themselves that they offer to give up the culprit for execution and bind the rest to perpetual slavery should the cup be found among their goods. The steward rejects such a severe remedy, but insists that, should the cup be discovered among the property of any one of them, that one should be taken into slavery. The cup was found in Benjamin's sack, right where the steward had planted it. Rather than leaving Benjamin to his fate, however, all the brothers load up their donkeys and return to the house of Joseph.

JUDAH AND THE OTHERS STAND BY BENJAMIN (44:14-34)

One thing that stands out in the narrative that follows is the leadership and nobility of purpose displayed by Judah. The man we see here is a far cry from the godless brute of chapter 38. There can be little question that the events of this chapter help to justify the royal descent that is given to the tribe of Judah in the blessings parceled out by Jacob prior to his death.

When the brothers arrive at the house of Joseph, they continue to affirm their innocence, but in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, they continue to stand by Benjamin, refusing to place the blame on him in order to save themselves. Instead, they offer to stay with him and share the slavery that is to be his punishment. Joseph again insists that only the guilty man should suffer,

but Judah pulls him aside and explains the circumstances behind their visit - the (supposed) loss of Joseph himself, Jacob's love for Benjamin (now described without rancor) and his reluctance to allow him to come to Egypt, and his inevitable death in sorrow should they return without their youngest brother. Judah then offers himself as a slave in place of Benjamin.

It is worth noting at this point that the change of character among Joseph's brothers is demonstrated by their unity of purpose and action and the way they join together in support of one who is threatened. Rather than turning on the weak, as they had done so readily before, they now close ranks in support of Benjamin, even though they could easily have assumed his guilt and left him to suffer what he deserved. One consequence of the maturity of God's people thus is the evidence of their willingness to stand together in the face of trouble rather than taking an "every man for himself" attitude and fleeing out of a desire for personal safety.

JOSEPH REVEALS HIS IDENTITY (45:1-15)

Judah's generosity is too much for Joseph to endure. He orders the room cleared and reveals his identity to his brothers. The first reaction of the brothers is fear. They are terrified that Joseph might have revenge on his mind - a somewhat understandable concern on their part. Joseph, however, embraces them and reassures them that he harbors no bitterness because he recognizes that what they intended for evil was intended by God for good, to preserve the family through the famine that the Middle East was then experiencing. He then instructs the brothers to return to Jacob and to bring him and the entire clan to Egypt, where they would be permitted to settle in the land of Goshen (in the Nile delta area of Lower Egypt, which would have provided rich grasslands for the clan's flocks while keeping them at a safe distance from the Egyptian settlements, since the Egyptians considered shepherds to be unclean).

Note that the title "father to Pharaoh" used in verse 8 is typically that of a trusted advisor (cf. Judges 17:10; II Kings 6:21). As we saw before when Joseph was described as second in command in Egypt, this was not a unique title - numerous officials in the land would have been able to claim the same distinction. Joseph was thus in a position of great authority, but he was not alone in holding such an elevated place.

Joseph's comments to his brothers in this section underscore the basic message of the Joseph story - the providence of God in human affairs, particularly with regard to His care for His people and the fulfillment of His covenant promises. The promise made to Abraham will indeed come to pass, and cannot be stopped by something as paltry as a seven-year famine. Note that Joseph's explanation also would have resonated with the wilderness generation who made up the original recipients of the book. They would thus have been able to understand that their long years of suffering in Egypt had not been evidence that God had abandoned them, but instead had been part of His plan to accomplish what He had promised to their forefathers hundreds of years before.

JACOB'S FAMILY INVITED TO SETTLE IN EGYPT (45:16-28)

When Pharaoh hears the news that Joseph's family has arrived in Egypt, he displays great generosity for the kin of his trusted advisor, to whom he owes much indeed. He not only ratifies Joseph's promise of the land of Goshen, but also provides carts for the journey (a kindness to the elderly, women, and children, and something nomads would be unlikely to have). Joseph then gives them a generous ration of food and clothing, with a special portion set aside for Benjamin (favoritism again?). Joseph's final warning to his brothers before their departure indicates that he still has some doubts about the completeness of their transformation of character. When they arrive in Canaan, Jacob at first doesn't believe their news, but when he sees the carts and the donkeys loaded with provisions, he is convinced, and prepares for his momentous journey to meet his long-lost son.

THE PATRIARCHS XVI

Genesis 46-47

The chapters before us today record the journey of the clan of Jacob, eventually to become the nation of Israel, into Egypt in response to Joseph's invitation. Again, for the wilderness generation for whom this book was written, this section demonstrates that their experience in Egypt was not to be taken as evidence of God's abandonment, but as part of His overall plan, and even as an aspect of His good providence.

THE JOURNEY TO EGYPT (46:1-27)

Jacob now gathers his family together and sets out for Egypt. On the way, he stops to worship at Beersheba, where his father Isaac had lived for many years. At Beersheba, God appears to him in a vision and reassures him about the coming journey, telling him that his clan will become a great nation in Egypt, and that God will one day bring them back to the land of promise. The entire clan travels together, using the carts provided by Pharaoh and taking with them their possessions, flocks, and herds, though Pharaoh had told them it would not be necessary to do so (note that this was considered a good move diplomatically; a group of people who brought their wealth with them were not seen as aggressive or desirous of seizing the wealth of their host country).

The text then enumerates the members of the clan who traveled into Egypt with Jacob, including his eleven sons besides Joseph (plus one daughter), fifty-one grandsons (and one granddaughter), and four great grandsons. With the addition of Jacob himself, Joseph, and his two sons, the total given for the clan is seventy people. Note that this includes only the men and the unmarried adult women (married adult descendants of Jacob would have been part of the clans of their husbands, and thus would not have made the trip to Egypt); wives of Jacob's sons and grandsons are not included in the tally, nor are female children - it is unreasonable to assume that all of these families had nothing but boys! Israel thus goes into Egypt numbering about a hundred and fifty people. By the time they leave Egypt four centuries later, they number about 20,000.

[The frequently-cited number of two million is a physical impossibility, not only in terms of the rate of propagation it would require, but also because of the logistics of the wilderness wanderings. For example, two million people, marching ten abreast, would make a line so long that the front of the line would have reached Mount Sinai before the end of the line had crossed the Red Sea; the one-night crossing spoken of in Exodus thus would not have been possible with two million people. The root of the problem lies in the translation of the Hebrew word used in the numbering of the people throughout the Old Testament. The word that is frequently translated *thousand* can also mean *troop* or *clan*. Thus, for example, Numbers 1:21 does not mean that there were 46,500 Reubenites, but that there were 46 troops of Reubenites totaling 500 fighting men. If a troop consisted of an average of nine or ten men of fighting age - a reasonable number given the reproductive rates implied by the biblical data - the 600,000 fighting men Israel took out of Egypt in Numbers 1:46 would become about six hundred troops, or about 5,500 fighting men. For further information on this issue, see the highly credible explanation found in Colin Humphreys, *The Number of People in the Exodus from*

Egypt: Decoding Mathematically the Very Large Numbers in Numbers I and XXVI, in *Vetus Testamentum* XLVIII, 2. Unlike many who have questioned the numbers of the Exodus, Humphreys bases his conclusions on an assumption of the accuracy of the biblical text.]

SETTLEMENT IN GOSHEN (46:28-47:12)

Joseph settles his family in the land of Goshen in the rich soil of the Nile delta. This land provided good grazing for the flocks and herds of the former nomads, while also keeping them out of the way of the Egyptians, who tended to view foreigners as a threat, and despised shepherds on general principles. As we have already noted, the way in which Joseph instructed his family to present themselves to Pharaoh was calculated to minimize any thought that the newcomers would be a threat to the Egyptians. Pharaoh readily agrees to let them settle in Goshen, and also offers to hire the most skillful among them to tend his personal flocks. Note that the mention of the district of Rameses in 47:11, though it may be an anachronistic reference to the great thirteenth-century pharaoh Rameses II, who is thought, particularly in liberal circles, to be the pharaoh of the Exodus, is more likely an indication that the name Rameses was in common use in Egypt before it was associated with the pharaohs (see also the fact that one of the treasure cities built by the Israelites during their bondage in the days of Moses was called Rameses). The late date for the Exodus favored by liberals simply does not mesh with the biblical chronological indicators.

JOSEPH MANAGES THE FOOD SUPPLY IN TIME OF FAMINE (47:13-31)

The final section of today's passage shows how Joseph approached the administrative problems associated with the severity of the famine in its later years. After the Egyptians have used all their money to buy grain stored by Joseph during the years of plentiful harvests, they turn to barter, trading their livestock for the grain needed to survive. Then when the livestock is gone, they sell their land to Pharaoh, becoming tenant farmers of their monarch. Thereafter, they rented the land they farmed at a cost of twenty percent of the produce grown on the land - still not a bad rate when compared with the taxation the typical American faces today. The priests, however, enjoyed a privileged position - one that vested in them a great deal of economic power, and thus political potency (one might compare their situation with that in Europe in the Middle Ages, where the Catholic Church controlled a great deal of land, which contributed greatly to the notorious feuds that occurred between emperors and kings and the popes).

It might also be helpful to compare the situation Joseph established in Egypt to that set up by God after Israel entered the Promised Land. There, the land did not belong to the king, but to God; He determined how it would be distributed, and a tenth of the produce was to be placed in the Temple treasury (ironically, God was a much more merciful landlord than Pharaoh). The priestly family, in contrast to the situation in Egypt, had no political power; they owned no land, but lived on the tithes contributed by the land-owning tribes. The entire Israelite system was thus established in a way that demonstrated the sovereignty of God over His people and their accountability to Him for all they possessed. The priests, as well, were servants of God rather than masters of the people.

At the end of today's passage, we find that Jacob died at the age of 147 after having lived in Egypt for seventeen years. As his death approached, he asked Joseph to bury him in the land of Canaan in the ancestral burial place of the family of Abraham in Hebron. This request was an example of Jacob's faith - in seeking to be buried in the land promised to Abraham and his descendants, he demonstrated his confidence that God would fulfill His promise to bring the family out of Egypt and back to the Promised Land. Thus Jacob dies trusting God; his life ends much better than most of it would have led us to suspect. May that be true of all of us. Next week, we will conclude our study by looking at the blessings bestowed on their offspring by Jacob and Joseph in chapters 48-50.

THE PATRIARCHS XVII

Genesis 48-50

The last three chapters of the book of Genesis contain the final patriarchal blessings of Jacob on his sons and grandsons and the deaths of Jacob and Joseph. These patriarchal blessings relate directly to the distribution of the land following the conquest under Joshua, and thus would have immediate relevance for the Israelites who were about to enter the Promised Land following the death of Moses, the author of the book.

JACOB BLESSES THE SONS OF JOSEPH (48:1-22)

We have already seen that a number of instances in the patriarchal narratives have set the stage for Joseph to receive the right of primogeniture - the double portion of his father's inheritance - and in this passage we see that being carried out. Joseph receives a double portion through the adoption of his two sons by Jacob (verses 5,12). This means that Ephraim and Manasseh receive an inheritance equal to that of Jacob's sons; indeed, when the Israelites leave Egypt, Ephraim and Manasseh are counted among the twelve tribes (note that there is no tribe of Joseph since each of his sons becomes the progenitor of a tribe in Israel, while the tribe of Levi serves a priestly function, and thus inherits no land). The land taken from the Amorites referred to in verse 22 is the land purchased in 33:19 and then conquered in the destruction of Shechem; this land ultimately fell within the tribal boundaries of Ephraim.

When Jacob blesses Joseph's sons, he crosses his hands so that his right hand is on the head of Ephraim, the younger. Joseph objects to this inversion of the proper order of blessing, but Jacob persists. Note that the choice of the younger over the elder has been a persistent theme throughout the patriarchal narratives. God chooses Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph over his ten older brothers, and now Ephraim over Manasseh. These incidents serve to underscore the fact that what is occurring here is the purpose of God, not merely human tradition. God inverts the expected order consistently throughout Scripture to carry out His purposes and make it clear that what is accomplished is done through His power rather than as a result of human instrumentality. In the context of the church, we see the same kinds of choices on God's part - choices that run counter to human expectations (cf. I Corinthians 1:26-29) and leave no doubt that all that happens is a consequence of God's grace. We should also note that this incident is the one mentioned in connection with Jacob in Hebrews 11:21; despite his many failings, he dies with a demonstration of faith in God and His promises.

JACOB BLESSES HIS SONS (49:1-28)

We have already noted that patriarchal blessings carried with them the weight of prophecy in the ancient world. Thus the blessings that Jacob bestows upon his sons speak directly to the destinies of the tribes that descend from them, and would have considerable relevance for the Israelites who were on the verge of entering the land of Canaan after forty years in the wilderness.

This is a poetic passage, and contains many words of uncertain origin and meaning. The overall theme of the chapter is the fulfillment of the blessing of God promised to Abraham.

The blessings on Reuben, Simeon, and Levi in verses 3-7 serve to eliminate them from the right of the firstborn (cf. I Chronicles 5:1-2). In Reuben's case, this was because he had slept with his father's concubine (35:22); in the cases of Simeon and Levi, it was because of their deplorable acts of violence against the Shechemites (34:25). In the distribution of land in Canaan, Reuben received a poor piece of land east of the Dead Sea, while Simeon got only scattered cities within the tribal territory of Judah and Levi, as the priestly tribe, received no land at all.

This passage in which Jacob blesses his sons is like an ellipse, having two foci. The first focal point of the benediction is the blessing given to Judah in verses 8-12. Judah is blessed with military prowess (8-9) and agricultural prosperity (11-12), but the centerpiece of the blessing is the vesting of the monarchy in the tribe of Judah in verse 10. The phrase translated "until tribute comes to him" or "until he comes to whom it belongs" (literally *until Shiloh comes*) is a difficult one, and has been a source of considerable dispute over the years (the Jewish rabbis of the Middle Ages, through the practice of *gematria*, in which numerical values were assigned to the letters of the Jewish alphabet in order to draw symbolic meaning from the text, noticed that the numbers of this Hebrew word, *shiloh*, equaled the numerical total in the word *messiah*, and thus identified the two; this is a classic example of someone arriving at a correct interpretation on the basis of horrible exegetical techniques). We should also note that the king from the tribe of Judah will rule over the *peoples*, not merely the people. This, again, is a fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, and points clearly toward the universal reign of the Messiah.

The next six blessings are brief, and many involve wordplay on the names of the recipients and references to their tribal inheritances. Zebulon, curiously enough, was a landlocked tribe in Canaan, but the promise of expansion to the sea bodes well for future prosperity of the nation. Issachar finds a good resting place, Dan and Gad experience victory over their enemies, and Asher and Naphtali know prosperity. All of these blessings are tied into the promise of the king from the tribe of Judah through whom God will accomplish these things.

The second focus of the blessing narrative is the benediction given to Joseph in verses 22-26. The blessing is similar in content to those that have gone before, but the language, particularly that of verse 24, becomes the source of much borrowing in later Israelite poetry (see, for instance, the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 and the poem of Asaph in Psalm 80). The dual focus of the blessings of Jacob foreshadows the conflict between Judah and Ephraim that will in many ways dominate the national history of Israel. Beginning in the period of the Judges, continuing through the United Monarchy, and flaring out into full-blown warfare in the Divided Monarchy period, these two powerful tribes maintain a rivalry that is never really resolved. In the end, the refusal of Ephraim to submit to the Davidic monarchy leads to the scattering and eventual disappearance of the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom.

The section ends with the blessing of Benjamin. The picture of a predator devouring its prey is similar to the blessing given to Judah, and may foreshadow the eventual alignment of Benjamin with Judah in the time of the division of the monarchy.

THE DEATH OF BURIAL OF JACOB (49:29-50:14)

Jacob repeats his instructions to his sons to bury him in the cave of Machpelah, where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah had been buried before him. Jacob then dies, and his sons carry out his instructions. As a visiting dignitary of some importance, Jacob is accorded burial ceremonies worthy of an Egyptian aristocrat. The embalming process took forty days, followed by the thirty days of mourning practiced by the Israelites (cf. Deuteronomy 34:8). The embalming technique of the Egyptians involved removing the entrails and soaking the corpse in embalming fluid for over a month. The Egyptians believed that the preservation of the body was necessary for a successful passage to the afterlife. For Jacob, and later for Joseph, it would have had a more practical purpose of preserving the body for the trip to Canaan for burial. Jacob's adult family members and representatives of the Egyptian court accompany the body up to the Negev, where Jacob is given a full state funeral. The event was so unusual, and so memorable for the local Canaanites, that they changed the name of the place where the mourning ceremony occurred to commemorate the incident (this is the final example in the book of Genesis of a story telling how a particular place received its name).

THE LAST YEARS OF JOSEPH (50:15-26)

At this point, Joseph's brothers began to worry that he had been kind to them purely for the sake of their father and was now prepared to take revenge for the wrongs they had done him in his youth. They therefore concocted a message, allegedly preserving Jacob's desire that Joseph forgive his brothers. Joseph, however, needed no such prompting, and reassured his brothers that what had happened had been part of God's plan for preserving their lives and that he bore no grudge against them.

We are then told that Joseph lived to the age of 110 and died after giving instructions to his family that he was not to be buried in Egypt, but was to be taken back to Canaan when God brought the Israelites out, as He had promised to do (seen as an indicator of his faith in Hebrews 11:22). Joseph was then embalmed and placed in a coffin to await the time of the Exodus (Exodus 13:19). The book thus ends with a reminder of the faithfulness of God to His covenants with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Israelites who read these words prior to entering Canaan would thus be able to see that what they were experiencing was part of a larger picture.

We, of course, are also part of that larger picture. We have seen the coming of the Lion of the Tribe of Judah and are witnessing His conquest of the nations. The promises therefore have relevance to us as well. In addition, we have the advantage of seeing fulfillments that could never have been imagined by those to whom the promises were given. May God grant us faith to trust Him for the continued working out of His faithfulness among His people today.