

Genesis

“I have chosen him”

Genesis 18:19

Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament, begins with a creation account. Surprisingly, however, this account ends at the end of the second chapter. As important as the creation account may be, it does not seem like what Genesis is primarily interested in. What then is its primary purpose? What kind of a work are we dealing with? What is its plot?¹ What does Genesis as a whole teach us? How does one section of Genesis lead logically into next? How does each part contribute to the argument of the whole? Why is Genesis placed at the beginning of the Old Testament, and how does it fit into the whole of Scripture? Of course, these are all related questions that help us discern the message of Genesis.

One cannot overemphasize the importance of the book Genesis for God’s people: It proclaims God’s creation, the origin, the Fall and the salvation of the humankind, etc. Due to this importance most of us are very familiar with the text of Genesis. Our familiarity with Genesis, unfortunately, does not guarantee interpretive integrity. In fact, it sometimes gets in the way of understanding Genesis afresh. What should we do then? How can we avoid imposing our own views on Genesis? How can we still hear the word of God as we read Genesis again? It is not an easy task, but we will try our best to listen to Genesis afresh by comparing Genesis accounts to their ancient Near Eastern (abbreviated as ANE hereafter) cultural background because Genesis is a text of its time. Thus the first interpretive step we will take is to find out what Genesis might have meant to its original audience, i.e., ancient Israelites.² This step will ensure that we understand Genesis correctly in its cultural context. Only then will we wrestle with what it means for us today. In other words, we will contemplate how we can best apply theological teachings of Genesis in our context. In so doing we will see Genesis holistically by paying close attention to its plot (i.e., how its story unfolds), place and purpose because the whole is far more than the mere sum of its parts as the whole provides another dimension to its parts.

Why do we read Genesis? We may say, “to understand our origins.” The English title Genesis comes from the Greek word that means “origins” since the book provides a

¹ Plot of a story begins with a beginning that sets the stage by introducing the characters and crisis. Then in the middle the crisis builds up to the climax. Finally, an ending introduces a resolution. Finding the plot of Genesis will reveal its purpose readily.

² In his well-known article on biblical theology in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (1962) late Harvard professor Krister Stendahl identified biblical interpreter’s task to be descriptive. This means we are to find out first “what it meant” to the original audience. Then we can move forward to see what it means for us today and how we can apply it to our lives.

description of the origins of the universe, the earth, human beings and all animate and inanimate beings. Yet the primary purpose of Genesis is NOT creation or origins. When compared to its ANE counterpart *Enuma Elish*, i.e., a Mesopotamian account of creation, it becomes apparent that Genesis primarily focuses on something else. In *Enuma Elish* a creation narrative does appear, but for the most part *Enuma Elish* describes how gods and goddesses came to be and how they waged a great battle amongst them. Creation of humankind was just an afterthought in *Enuma Elish*, and humankind has a very insignificant role in it. On the contrary, in Genesis forty-eight out of fifty chapters (Should I say 96% of the book?) are primarily concerned about what happens to humankind. Of course, our God is still the main character in Genesis, but Genesis deals with more anthropology than theology because about 96% of the book focuses on the salvation of humankind!³ ANE and Greco-Roman myths and legends frequently speculate on what happens in the world of divine, and according to their theology their divine beings show little interest in human affairs. The God of the Bible, however, is deeply interested in human affairs even to the point that God's attention in the case of Job was too much for him to bear.⁴

What is the purpose or function of Genesis?

In his book *World's Religions* Houston Smith points out the fact that one-third of our Western civilization bears the marks of its Jewish ancestry!⁵ Numerous empires thrived in ancient world, but in the end they all disappeared from history. Yet Judaism and Israel, a tiny nation, still thrive!⁶ What lifted Jews, Smith asks, from obscurity to permanent religious greatness? It was, he answers, their passion for meaning. That is what made the difference. One of the results of their passion for meaning is the Bible as Jews are known as the "people of the Book."

³ Jewish biblical scholars tend not to use the term "theology" in relation to biblical studies. By its definition, theology is "study of God," and rabbis argue biblical studies is not "study of God," which comes across almost as blasphemy to them. They argue that is what pagans participate in. Greco-Roman philosophers in particular tried to "figure out" God, but rabbis object humans do not "study God" or "figure out God." Of course, the Bible does reveal who God is, but more importantly, the rabbis argue, the Bible primarily teaches who we are, that is, a divine perspective on human beings. In that regard, study of the Bible is more of anthropology than theology.

⁴ Job 7:17. See also Psalm 8:4.

⁵ Houston Smith's popular textbook *The World's Religions* is translated into many different languages, and more than two million copies are sold all over the world. In my opinion the chapter on Judaism (pp. 271-316) is the best chapter in the book.

⁶ Even today Jews comprise of less than one percent of the world's population. Cf. Deuteronomy 7:7-8.

In his book *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* James Sanders asks similar questions. Why did tiny Israel survive when mighty empires in the ancient world did not?⁷ What was ancient Israel's dynamic identity source? It must have been, Sanders answers, something that has ability to give life by providing national self-identity. Sanders proposes that this dynamic source of the national identity must have been indestructible, commonly available, highly adaptable and portable. He identifies this source to be none other than the Torah. According to Sanders, the Torah provides answers to questions like, "Who are we?" and "What are we to do?" As the first book of the Torah, Genesis specifically forms a worldview and directs its readers' lives by answering these questions.

What significance is there in the place (location) of Genesis?

Genesis never stands alone. It exists only as the first chapter of the Pentateuch or Torah. As such, Genesis does not end with a period but ends with a comma, as is often said. When we read through the book of Genesis we see that it anticipates more story to come because it functions as a prehistory that leads to the story of exodus and the rebellion in the wilderness. Without Genesis we cannot fully understand the history of redemption of the ancient Israelites from beginning to end. But Genesis only deals with the beginning of the redemption as the entire Old Testament itself ends without a strong sense of closure on this topic of redemption but looks forward to the ultimate human redemption in Christ.

What is the plot of Genesis?

When read holistically what does Genesis teach? In other words, what is the main teaching of the book? What is the plot of Genesis? These are the questions we will come back to discuss more fully later in Lesson 3, but it would be interesting to find out how people in our classes answer these questions.

Genesis 1 and 2: Creation in Its ANE Background

Prepared by Kilnam Cha

Not many people know that the creation account in Genesis is neither the only nor the oldest creation account in the world. Let us think about the date of Genesis? When is the earliest possible date of the composition of Genesis? Two scholarly views for the date exist. If we take the early view of Exodus (i.e., 1446 BC), some time in the fifteenth century BC can be the possible date of Genesis. Even then, it is preceded by *Enuma Elish*, which goes back at least to the seventeenth century BC. This means the biblical creation account was written with full awareness of *Enuma Elish* as they both share

⁷ In his book *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) James A. Sanders discusses the function of the Old Testament canon. He proposes that the OT canon gave Israel a national identity by answering the two questions: Who are we, and what are we to do? For details, see the first chapter, "Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of Canon," pp. 9-39.

numerous similarities.⁸ Yet I would say that the differences between the two creation accounts make the biblical account more impressive.⁹ Thus this lesson will compare the two different creation accounts and highlight the differences that will help us to see how Genesis corrects the prevailing worldview of the time period.

In the ancient world, it is safe to say, everybody believed the creation of the world to be a work of God. The question to ask was which God? For example, *Enuma Elish* declares Babylon's supreme god Marduk created the world. The creation account in Genesis was written to counter *Enuma Elish* and other ancient ideas concerning who created the universe and everything in it. I would paraphrase what Genesis 1-2 conveyed to its original audience as: "You got it wrong. As powerful as nature may be, we are not to worship nature. Sun, moon, stars, sea, etc. are mere creations of Yahweh, the One and Only God of the universe! Created in His image we are His partners, not slaves, in this world!"

What is human? How do we understand us to be? Our theology (or our worldview) or as we talked about in the previous lesson "anthropology" (understanding of who we are) dictates our actions. It is utterly important that we understand ourselves correctly because our lives are guided by our understanding of our own identity. A case in point is the following definition of a human being: "The human body contains a sufficient amount of fat to make 7 cakes of soap, enough iron to make a medium-sized nail, a sufficient amount of phosphorus to equip 2,000 match-heads, enough sulphur to rid one's self of one's fleas." We must ask, "Is this definition correct?" Scientifically, this statement is not wrong, but we all know that humankind is more than a mere combination of these elements. Would you be surprised to know that this definition of human being was frequently quoted in pre-Nazi Germany? Given the popularity of this incomplete, materialistic definition of human being, then it is not completely surprising that the most inhumane treatment of other human beings, i.e., the Holocaust, took place in Nazi-Germany. What then does Genesis teach about who we are?

⁸ Most ancient people were illiterate, and chances were they never "read" *Enuma Elish* in their lifetime. This illiteracy, however, does not mean that they were not aware of *Enuma Elish*. You may ask your class to see how many people actually "read" Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Only a few people may have actually read it, but we all know what it is about, at least its basic elements. The same can be said about *Enuma Elish*. See below the text of *Enuma Elish* is provided for your comparison with Genesis 1-2. I used bold letters to highlight some texts that are relevant to our discussion.

⁹ Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (Free Press, 2007). Having received a Ph.D. and M.D. in medical genetics, Collins headed the Human Genome Project that completely mapped out the human DNA sequence. This phenomenal project shows all humans share the same 99.9% of DNA sequence. Then it is the mere 0.1% that makes the difference in who we are. Likewise, the differences between the biblical creation and the ANE creation accounts set the biblical account apart.

As James Sanders points out, Genesis, in particular the first two chapters, discusses human identity. Genesis 1-2 corrects the prevalent, popular understanding of humanity of the time. According to the ANE creation narratives, humans occupy the bottom of the totem pole. Since ANE people worshipped nature gods and goddesses, nature (sun, moon, stars, sea, etc.) was at the top of the totem pole. The biblical creation account corrects this misunderstanding by telling that nature is also God's creation like humankind. With their misguided theology the ANE people worshipped nature because it seemed to possess mighty power.

Assyria, Babylon and Persia were great empires in the ancient world. Yet none of the great empires survived time. They disappeared from history. Many historians are puzzled about tiny, insignificant ancient Israel's survival. What gave her strength to survive? Sanders and numerous others credit the Torah for Israel's survival. The Torah gave Israel her national identity and gave the ancient Israelites strength to survive whereas the great empires could not. Again, it is utterly important to understand who we are correctly. As part of the Torah, Genesis provided Israel her national identity by correcting the prevalent misunderstanding of humanity at the time.

First of all, how does *Enuma Elish* portray divine beings and human beings? According to *Enuma Elish*, divine beings, I would say, are created in human image! Just like humans, both male and female divine beings exist. Being nature gods and goddesses they are unpredictable (Texans will understand this well). In Mesopotamia floods were unpredictable, capricious and destructive.¹⁰ They may be powerful, but like human beings divine beings are self-centered, and always struggling for more power as whoever is powerful rules the rest. Again, ANE divine beings are not so different from humans whose image they are created in. The God of the Bible, on the other hand, is NOT capricious but faithful and steadfast. Time after time, Genesis will show how faithful Yahweh is! Also Genesis reveals a God who is benevolent as it frequently describes God's blessings on human beings.¹¹ This benevolent character of Yahweh provides a stark contrast to ANE literature's portrayal of ANE divine beings who were impersonal and less than benevolent. God's blessing is most clearly linked with His command to "be fruitful and multiply" (1:22, 28; 9:1), which is central in the patriarchal stories. As we will see later in the Epic of Gilgamesh, such a divine blessing is far from ANE divine beings' dealings with human beings. Thus it is not surprising that psalmists and other biblical authors often declare, "There is none like Yahweh!"

Genesis declares that God created human beings in His image, which we all know very well. Yet it is unclear what this divine image precisely refers to. What is clear is this

¹⁰ In Egypt flood was predictable and largely beneficial as the fertile Nile Delta was basically a result of the regular annual flood over a long period of time.

¹¹ The Hebrew root word *BRK*, meaning to "bless" and "blessing" is used more frequently in Genesis than any other Old Testament books. This root word occurs 88 times in Genesis and 398 times in the entire Old Testament.

concept is indicative of the human beings' special relationship to Yahweh as the Hebrew word for image (*tselem*) is also used for the construction of royal images. In the ancient world, kings would set up their images to remind people of king's authority. In this sense that humans are created in God's image means human beings are God's representatives in the created world. Again this royal image of human beings is drastically different from *Enuma Elish*'s low perception of human beings.

What other new insights did this biblical creation account reveal to its ancient audience? What did it mean to the ancient audience? How was it different from what they already knew? In Mesopotamia, it was believed, kings alone were made in the divine image, and Pharaoh was even believed to be divine in Egypt. But what Genesis teaches is democratization of the concept of divine images, because it declares that everyone, not just kings or some special people, is created in divine image! Again that is how Genesis corrects the prevalent view that misguided people into believing that only some special people possess divine image and thereby justifying kings and powerful peoples' oppression and mistreatment of the common people. After all, that is what gods and goddesses do according to *Enuma Elish* – the most powerful being rules the rest. Furthermore, when compared to *Enuma Elish*, Genesis portrays the creation of humankind to be the pinnacle of creation. In *Enuma Elish* Marduk created humans to be expendable “slaves,” who would relieve the minor gods from their labor after the great battle between Marduk and Tiamat was ended. Following the advice of Ea, god of wisdom, that was how Marduk rewarded his minions. Genesis, on the other hand, declares that humankind is created to be God's partners – not slaves! – whom He delegates His authority to do His work in the world! What a difference!

Unlike ANE and Greco-Roman worldview, Genesis 1-2 reveals goodness of creation or physical world. This positive view on the physical world becomes apparent in the repetition of the assessment of God's creation that “it was good” (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 25, 31). This goodness of created world reveals goodness of Yahweh. He alone is the faithful, benevolent King.

What does Genesis 1-2 mean to us today? In other words, in light of what it meant to those ancient people, how can we apply what it teaches to our lives? What is the dominant metanarrative for today? In light of Genesis, how do we effectively correct the dominant yet misguided worldview of today? What is the implication for us in our modern context that “everybody” is created in His image, not just some special people like kings. How should we then treat others? These are some of the questions we need to wrestle with.

Genesis 3-11: The Plot of Genesis

Prepared by Kilnam Cha

Lesson 3 will focus on the plot of Genesis. We may gain numerous insights from the book. But how do we know what is intended by the text and what is not? Also how do we know what is the primary concern of the text? One way to ensure its intended message and purpose is to read the text holistically. When read as a whole, like any other

narrative Genesis reveals its plot, i.e., the storyline. Each narrative consists of three parts: Introduction, body and conclusion. In Genesis the first two chapters are assigned to introduce God's creation that was GOOD. That this word "good" appears 6 times in the first chapter indicates the goodness of God's creation and God's complete satisfaction in all of his creation. This introduction of the goodness of the creation, however, anticipates a problem. In Genesis 3-11 this problem is clearly revealed as four different narratives all share the same problem and pattern: sin, punishment and grace. These chapters tell us that as sin grows stronger and more prevalent, the grace of God also abounds. Interestingly, Genesis 3-11 ends without a clear indication of God's grace – at least it appears to be so. What then is God's ultimate solution to the growing power of sin?¹² Genesis 12-50 provides the answer to that question, i.e., the election of Abraham. But before we discuss the solution, let's focus on the unfolding of the crisis found in Genesis 3-11.

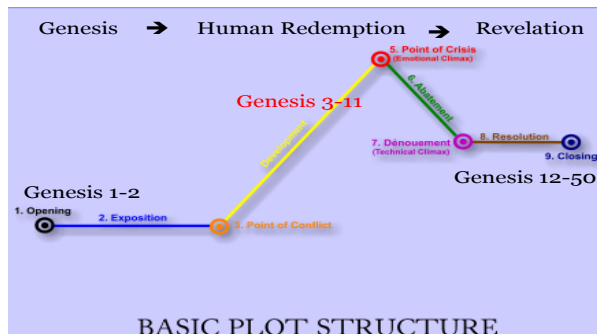
At first glance Genesis 3-11 seems to contain several interesting but unrelated stories.¹³

This section, however, is carefully structured with a single them: the growing power of SIN and ends with a question, "If sin is so powerful, what must be done?" Genesis 3-11 introduces a crisis brought to the ideal state of the created world portrayed in Genesis 1-2. As important as the topic of creation, it is not the primary theme of Genesis as is apparent in the fact that Genesis does not dwell on it. Instead, it quickly moves on to the topic of the perennial human need for redemption because foundational to a biblical worldview is a set of existential questions: "Who are we?" "What are we to do?" "What's wrong?" and "What is the solution?" Genesis answers these questions of human identity and thereby corrects the misguided worldview of the ancient Near Eastern world (and also the humanistic worldview of today) and shapes lives of its readers, both past and present

¹² The death of Christ is God's ultimate solution for the problem of human sin. Genesis, however, shows how God prepares a solution for this inescapable human problem of sin.

¹³ When compared to the term "history," the term "story" has some negative connotations. We typically equate "history" to be factual, objective, and significant for humankind. With all of its positive characteristics "story," on the other hand, may mean to some people that it is subjective, maybe fictional, and not as significant as history. Adding to these possibly negative connotations some critical biblical scholars argue that the Old Testament consists of both "story" and "history." In other words, the Old Testament is a mixture of story and history, and a serious problem is that it is difficult to determine, they argue, exactly where history ends and story begins, or *vice versa*, implying that the Old Testament is not a reliable source as a historical document. Nevertheless, I prefer to use the term "story" in discussing Genesis, not because I believe stories in Genesis are fictional, but because Genesis invites its readers to be part of this divine story by allowing this story to become the foundation of our thoughts and actions. Everybody has a story or a metanarrative that shapes his or her life. Then a fundamental question for everybody is, "What is your story?" Genesis is ancient Israelites' story as well as ours.

because these stories are more about the present than they are about the past. As such, Genesis identifies who we are and defines what we are to do.



The first story in Genesis 3-11 introduces changes to the ideal state of the creation described in Genesis 1-2. A crisis of the growing power of sin takes place! Adam and Eve sinned by eating of the forbidden fruit, and God punished them by casting them out of the Garden of Eden. Yet they experienced God’s grace because God provided them clothing to cover their naked bodies and they did not experience immediate death. The story of Cain and Abel shares the same pattern of sin (murder), punishment (ostracism) and grace (mark). The crisis is continued and even intensified. Yet it still remains at an individual level. This changes in the story of Noah as it shows that sin is no longer just an individual problem but that of the whole society as indicated by “The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” (6:5). Thus the divine punishment comes in the form of the great flood. Yet God’s grace is manifested in sparing of righteous Noah, his family and all kinds of animals.¹⁴ The power of sin intensifies even further and reaches its crescendo as people at Babel tried once more to become autonomous.¹⁵ God’s punishment for this bold, futile rebellion was to scatter them by confusing their language. As the common pattern of sin-judgment-grace indicates, one may anticipate God’s grace

¹⁴ Nowadays almost everybody knows God to be gracious. Thanks be to God and to the Bible that is the case. Even the mastermind behind the Holocaust, Adolf Eichmann, said God would forgive him because “That is his job.” Even his twisted, sick mind acknowledged Yahweh to be gracious. However, we need to be aware of the fact that in ANE world that was not the case because ANE gods and goddesses were nature gods who were unpredictable and often destructive, “grace” was not in their vocabulary. We need to convey this ancient understanding of divine beings to our audiences so that they become more fully aware of and appreciative of God’s grace and also so that they do not impose our modern understanding to the text. Also it must be noted that God’s salvific concern is not just for humans but inclusive of animals (Cf. Romans 8:21).

¹⁵ Babel means “confusion,” and this word shares the same consonants (*bbl*) with Babylon (meaning “gate of the god”), the icon of being “autonomous” of God with its imperialistic ways of life. Rather than being the ultimate human achievement Babel/Babylon becomes a symbol of human’s failure to live independent of God. Their achievement was so insignificant God had to “come down” to see what these rebellious people built!

at the end of the story of Babel. Surprisingly, what comes next is a genealogy (11:10-26) to speed up to the point, i.e., the account of Abraham, whose election was a divine means of resolution. In Genesis 3-11 sin completely reversed the creative work of God in Genesis 1-2.¹⁶ Yet the rest of Genesis (12-50) shows how God prepare a resolution to restore the creation through the election of Abraham.

The Plot of Genesis	
Genesis 1-2	Introduces God's creation which was GOOD!
Genesis 3-11	Presents a problem: SIN
Genesis 12-50	Presents a solution:???

What does the story of the Tower of Babel say about the nature of sin? After the Flood people said to each other, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we *make a name for ourselves* and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (11:4). What does “make a name of ourselves” mean? In ancient world name represented the very essence of being. What is wrong with that idea? Before we make a quick conclusion to define what the phrase means, it is interesting to notice what God said to Abraham when He called him. God said to Abraham, “I will make your name great” (12:2). At Babel, people tried to make a name for themselves whatever that may have been, but one of the reasons for God’s election of Abraham was to make Abraham’s name great! That is an irony. God is aware of human desire to be “somebody,” but when that is carried autonomously that is sin. But God guides his followers to be “somebody” if they remain faithful. That is what the rest of Genesis 12-50 focus on to show how God elects a common person Abraham and transforms him to be the “Father of faith” and thereby begins to solve the perennial human problem of sin.

Structure of Genesis 3-11

Narrative	Sin	Punishment	Grace
Garden Genesis 3	Eating the Fruit	Expulsion	Clothes/no death
Cain & Abel Genesis 4	Murder	Ostracism	Mark
Noah Genesis 6-10	Pervasive evil	Flood	Noah/Ark
Babel Genesis 11	Storming heaven	Dispersion	???

¹⁶ Compare the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 10. Genesis 5 traces 10 generations of the faithful line of Adam from Seth to Noah. These individuals’ lifespan was much longer than that of the generations after the Flood. An important implication is that as sin grew stronger, its effect also grew stronger and resulted in the shortened lifespan of humankind.

Lesson 5: Genesis 12-25

Abraham's Faith Journey

Genesis 1-2 introduces the ideal world God created with its characteristic word “good” repeated 6 times in this short section. Then a crisis begins in Genesis 3 that reaches its climax in Genesis 11: Sin enters the perfect world alienating humans from God, and it spreads like a wildfire growing bigger and more serious as more stories are introduced. At first it was Adam and Eve’s eating of the fruit, but in the story of Cain and Abel sin manifests itself in a more serious form of fratricide. Then sin no longer stays at an individual level but escalates to be a societal problem as the inclinations of humans were always evil at the time of Noah. At the Tower of Babel sin appears to be even bolder as people tried to be autonomous by building a city that would reach the heavens. The plot of Genesis comes quickly to the resolution part in Genesis 12 by means of a genealogy which speeds up the story to get to the point of God’s election of Abraham (Genesis 11:10-32). God chooses Abraham to be a source of blessing for humankind (Genesis 12:1-3). In other words, God’s election of Abraham is presented as the divine means to solve the human dilemma of sin set out in Genesis 3-11: “I have chosen him so that he may direct his descendants and his household after him to the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just” (Genesis 18:19). Like Noah before him Abraham is a second Adam figure with whom God starts anew the vision for humanity set out in Genesis 1-2.

Genesis 12-25 describes Abraham’s faith journey. Referred to as “God’s friend” (2 Chron. 20:7; James 2:23), Abraham forever holds a great reputation as the “father of faith.” After reading the entire book of Genesis, however, one may wonder why God chose Abraham. Amar, my former student who is affiliated with Ba’hai faith (derivative of Islam), once questioned me saying, “Why did God choose Abraham, not Enoch?” After reading and discussing Genesis, Amar could not understand why God did not choose Enoch, who “walked with God” to be the “father of faith” (Genesis 5:21-24).¹⁷ That Enoch walked with God is repeated twice, emphasizing his obedience. Abraham’s faith journey, however, includes shameful acts of unfaith that threaten the fulfillment of God’s promises. For Amar Abraham was a less than ideal candidate to be the “father of faith.” Yet that is precisely the point Genesis is trying to make. Genesis shows how God chose a common person Abraham, not the perfect Enoch, and how He transforms Abraham to be the “father of faith,” a channel of blessing to others. God asks, “Is anything too hard for the Lord” (Genesis 18:14). The answer is an emphatic, “No!” Since God transformed a less than ideal candidate Abraham to be a great man of faith, the message is, He can transform anybody.¹⁸

¹⁷ The Quran quite often describes Allah as merciful, but Islam is a works oriented religion with no room for divine grace.

¹⁸ That Abraham was a less than perfect person and that Genesis does not cover it up add trustworthiness to Genesis. Anthropologists testify to people groups’ tendency to idealize their founding fathers to be much larger than real life. A case in point is that of George Washington. In my elementary school ethics class in Korea we learned about the

ABRAHAM'S FAITH JOURNEY

ACTS OF FAITH	ACTS OF UNFAITH
Abraham left his homeland (12:1-9)	Abraham lied about his wife (12:10-20)
Abraham let Lot choose first (13:1-18)	Abraham and Sarah took matters into their own hands (16:1-16)
Abraham believed God's promise (15:6)	
Abraham tried to sacrifice Isaac (22:1-19)	Abraham lied about his wife (20:1-18)

Abraham's faith journey consists of spiritual ups and downs that reflect reality of faith journey. When Abram was called, God said to him, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household. Go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing" (Genesis 12:1-2). God promised Abraham to make him a source of blessing! **Yet we must not underestimate how hard it must have been for Abraham to trust God.** Abraham was from Chaldean Ur, a heartland of Mesopotamia where divine beings were considered to be less than trustworthy. We take for granted that the God of the Bible is trustworthy, but in Genesis God's trustworthiness has to be proven to human beings first. Furthermore, there is no indication in the text that Abraham had had any relationship with God prior to God's calling. God was a total stranger to Abraham when He called him! On top of all these, Abraham is asked to give up all the symbols of security for this unknown God. For Abraham to respond to God's call and to trust Him was to take a great risk as will be shown later. Thus Abraham's response to God's call was a great act of faith.

Trust in God and dependence upon God's promise is hard to achieve and even harder to hold on to. Abraham's act of unfaith begins soon after leaving his homeland. A famine forced Abraham and Sarah to take on a temporary exile in Egypt where he lied about his wife to save his life, a clear case of act of unfaith (12:10-20). Sarah was beautiful! In a dispute with his nephew Lot Abraham exhibited an act of faith by allowing Lot to choose first (14:1-16). Abraham somehow trusted in God's promise enough that no matter what Lot does God would still fulfill His promise of land. God's covenant with Abraham was renewed multiple times in Abraham's lifetime (15:18; 17:1-22; 22:15-19). In Genesis 15 God intervened to remind Abraham of the original promises made in Genesis 12. Abraham objected that he had no evidence those promises would ever become reality (15:2). God assured him that his descendants would be numerous like stars in the sky, and Abraham somehow believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (15:6), an act of faith. Then God made a covenant with Abraham to ensure? (sic?) him (15:9-21). Barren Sarai took initiative to secure a son through the legally accepted custom of concubinage (16:1-16). The birth of Ismael is clearly another act of unfaith on Abraham and Sarah's part because Abraham and Sarah took matters into their

story of Washington's childhood honesty. When I came to America I took American History class at a community college in San Diego. During the first session the professor shocked me by declaring that the story of Washington's childhood honesty was not historical! Ancient Israelites were not afraid to disclose their founding father Abraham's shameful acts of unfaith.

own hands. Abraham's act of faith reaches its climax when Abraham tried to sacrifice his own son Isaac (22:1-19). Abraham knew exactly what he was supposed to do, i.e., killing Isaac, but Abraham trusted in God that no matter what he does to Isaac, God would bring Isaac back to life. Abraham's trust in God becomes apparent in his speech to his servants: "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you" (22:5).

As shown above, Abraham's faith journey consists of both acts of faith and unfaith. Abraham was not always faithful, and Abraham and Sarah's acts of unfaith "threatened" the fulfillment of God's promises. In Genesis 12-25 there is a constant tension between the promises of God and threats to their fulfillment. God affirms his promises multiple times. In all only God remained constantly faithful throughout the journey. As such, what Genesis does hard is to emphasize God's faithfulness because God works his plan of human redemption in spite of Abraham's acts of unfaith. In the end Abraham became a paragon of faith, but that became a reality only through God's unchanging faithfulness. Genesis 12-25 presents God's election of Abraham as the divine way of dealing with the dilemma of human sin set out in Genesis 3-11. God elects a common person Abraham and transforms him to be the father of faith, although God's election of Abraham is just a beginning of the resolution. The plot continues in the rest of Genesis.

Genesis 26-36: Jacob's Faith Journey

In Lesson 7 we will discuss Jacob's faith journey. Like that of Abraham, Jacob's faith journey highlights God's grace and His transforming power. Typically known as the Jacob cycle, Genesis 26-36 consists of 4 stages of Jacob's faith journey: A need for transformation, a preparation for transformation, the transformation, and the results of the transformation respectively.¹⁹ The line of God's promises continues: "There above it the Lord stood and he said, 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth ... All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you'" (28:13-15). Unfortunately, threats to the fulfillment of God's promises also continue in the familiar form of acts of unfaith. Jacob's conflict with Esau threatens the fulfillment God's plan because Esau who is angered by Jacob's deception contemplates on killing Jacob through whom God plans to fulfill his promise (27:41). The Massacre of the Hivites also threatens the fulfillment of God's plan by endangering the safety of Jacob's extended family (34:1-31). Yet God continues to be faithful to His promises and God transforms Jacob to fulfill His plan of building a world characterized by righteousness and justice.

¹⁹ Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). I am quoting him from my memory, so I don't have exact page numbers.

The first stage of Jacob's faith journey reveals Jacob's need for transformation (Genesis 25:19-28:9). Supposedly, he grew up in a believer's household. His grand father Abraham made a covenant with God, which was renewed numerous times in Genesis 12-25. His father Isaac also became God's covenant partner. We can reasonably assume that Jacob must have heard from his parents about this God Yahweh who is not like any other gods of the time. Yet there was no indication in the text of Genesis that Jacob knew God from the beginning. In fact, according to the text, Jacob's first encounter with God takes place when he was running away from his angry brother Esau.

The second stage (Genesis 28:10-32:21) prepares for Jacob's transformation. That Jacob was not yet a believer is made evident by the conversation between God and Jacob. When God appeared to Jacob for the first time, God said, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac" (28:13). Jacob responded by saying, "*If* God will be with me and watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, *then the Lord will be my God*" (Genesis 28:20-21). Apparently, both God and Jacob knew Yahweh was not yet God of Jacob. The covenant had to be renewed, and Jacob had to own his faith.

The third stage (Genesis 32:22-32) recounts Jacob's transformation. Just as he had been, Jacob was still shrewd when he was finally ready to return home as indicated by his dealing with his father-in-law Laban. As Jacob prepared to meet his older brother Esau, he sent gifts ahead of him to appease Esau, and Jacob was at the end of the caravan. If Esau were still angry with him, Jacob's position at the end of the caravan would ensure his escape from Esau's wrath. The night before, however, something miraculous happened when Jacob wrestled with God. The text does not clarify exactly how Jacob was finally transformed, but the results of the transformation become apparent in the last stage.

The last stage (Genesis 33:1-36:40) shows the results of Jacob's transformation. First of all, Jacob was no longer afraid of his brother, and he went on ahead of his family to meet Esau (Genesis 33:3). His action was equivalent of Esther saying, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16). Jacob finally had faith in God and was no longer afraid of death. After he reconciled with God, he reconciled with Esau. Of special noteworthy moment in the last stage of Jacob's faith journey is his erection of an altar and naming it "*El Elohe Israel*" (Genesis 33:20). *El Elohe Israel* is a Hebrew transliteration that means "God is God of Israel." In this last stage of his life, Jacob finally acknowledged Yahweh as *his* God. He finally owned his faith and the covenant with God. God's covenant with Abraham could be inherited, but like Jacob each individual/generation had to own his own faith/covenant. Only after the transformation, just like his grandfather Abraham did, Jacob continued to build an altar for God wherever he went (Genesis 35:10). He also told his household and to all who were with him, "Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes. Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone" (35:2-3). This kind of transformation is exactly what God had in mind when he elected Abraham (Genesis 18:19).

What then is the point or the function of the Jacob cycle? It is twofold. First, it again highlights God's faithfulness – There is none like Yahweh! God transforms a conman Jacob to be the founding father of Israel. Just as God transformed deceptive Jacob, he can transform anybody. Time after time, Genesis begs a question: "Is anything too hard for the Lord? (18:14). The answer is repeatedly: Of course not! Second, The Jacob cycle shows how Abraham's descendants can participate in God's plan of salvation and inherit God's everlasting unconditional covenant with Abraham. Yes, God made a covenant with Abraham, a less than perfect person to be the paragon of faith, whose primary responsibility was to "direct his children and his household to the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just." In other words, Abraham was to teach his children about God, but this teaching does not necessarily guarantee that any of his children or household would automatically become a follower of God. Jacob's faith journey shows each individual who may have grown up in a believing family has to own their faith sometime in their lifetime.²⁰ God is always there for us, but each of us has to make a decision to accept God as "my God" as Jacob finally did. The text of Jacob's faith journey illustrates this process so well.

Genesis 37-50: Joseph Narrative

In Lesson 8 we will bring the Genesis series to a close by highlighting how God's salvific work continues in Genesis 37-50 typically designated as the Joseph narrative. As we have seen God is determined to fulfill the covenant promises in spite of the character flaws of the patriarchs. In this section it is more than the patriarch Jacob himself but some of his family members share the character flaws. In other words, God works his salvific plan out through a broken family. When compared to Genesis 12-36, in Genesis 37-50 things are not quite the same. In Genesis 12-36 direct theophanies are normal as God frequently talked to the patriarchs. In Genesis 37-50 God does not talk directly to Joseph. Instead, Joseph interprets dreams. For Abraham there was a demand for radical trust when he left his country and his father's house as a response to God's call (Genesis 12:1-3).²¹ For Abraham there was also an appeal for faith: "Walk before me and be blameless" (17:1). Yet in the Joseph narrative neither a demand for radical trust nor an appeal for

²⁰ The material we have been using thus far is what I use for my Message of the Old Testament course at ACU. I used the same material at Cascade College where I taught prior to coming to ACU. My students are typically sophomores, and I use Jacob's faith journey to challenge them to own their faith sometime in their lifetime. I require a vocational essay for all my courses in which my students have to share with me their walk with Christ, their reason for choosing ACU and their vocational goal after graduation. I often see a process of owning their faith taking place earlier in their life, and some are going through the process during college years. For some people, of course, that process may take longer than Jacob's case.

²¹ As discussed in the earlier lessons God's call of Abraham demanded a radical trust on Abraham's part because Abraham had to leave all forms of security behind when he responded to God's call.

faith is present. What are some implications of these changes in Genesis 37-50? Why doesn't God always work in the same way? These are the questions Genesis 37-50 deals with as it provides a transition to Exodus.

What is the function of Genesis 37-50 in the drama of redemptive history of ancient Israel? Typically, scholars title this section as "Joseph narrative" or "Joseph cycle." In spite of the length of this section or the title that bears his name, Joseph is only a peripheral character in the drama of redemptive history of ancient Israel. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the patriarchs of Israel, but Joseph is not. It is easy for readers to focus on Joseph since many chapters describe his interesting life and draw some ethical lessons from his life. But what we need to focus here primarily is the role of this section in the overall narrative of Genesis.²² How does God continue to work out his redemptive plan in the Joseph narrative? Given the differences between Genesis 12-36 and Genesis 37-50, God is not actively, or at least visibly, involved in the lives of Jacob's family. Yet God's redemptive plan becomes a reality through "unsavory experiences," such as the sale of Joseph as a slave by his older brothers and Tamar's incest with Judah.²³ In all these, humans are not aware of the fact that their acts become instruments of the divine redemptive plan. In other words, God's providential care is at the foundational level in the Joseph narrative. Just as Joseph later realized, God works good from evil perpetrated by humans. Had Joseph remained in Potiphar's house, he would not have become Pharaoh's vizier. Indeed, "in all things God works for good" may be the best description of Genesis 37-50.

God's covenant promises to Abraham continue to be effective in Genesis 37-50 even though they are not affirmed to Joseph as in the cases of Isaac and Jacob. Threats to the fulfillment of God's covenant promises also continue. First, Judah's dealing with Tamar threatens the fulfillment of God's promise. In the Joseph narrative the other threat comes in the form of a famine, and God uses the broken family relationships as a providential means to save Israel so that the promised seed can be preserved. The Joseph narrative also sets the stage for God's salvific work that will be unfolded in Exodus, and both the Joseph narrative and the opening chapters of Exodus highlight the same theme – potential threats to God's promise. As such, even with all its importance Genesis does not end with a period but with a comma and functions as a prologue to Exodus.²⁴

²² James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 179. Kugel points out that ancient interpreters focused on drawing ethical lessons from Joseph's steadfast refusal to give in to the sexual solicitation by Potiphar's wife. Unfortunately, they neglected the role of this section in the overall narrative of Genesis.

²³ Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2005), 122.

²⁴ Exodus continues the story that began in Genesis as Exodus shares numerous connections with Genesis. Exodus 1:1 repeats Genesis 46:8. In Exodus the Israelites "multiplied," and it is reminiscent of Genesis 1:28 and 12:2 where God commanded "Be fruitful and multiply in number." Also the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt as predicted

Genesis 38 seems like a misplaced story. Obviously, this chapter interrupts the flow of the Joseph narrative. Even if one skips Genesis 38 the continuity of the Joseph narrative is not seriously affected at all, and some commentators simply choose to ignore this chapter. The fact that scholars discuss Genesis 37-50 as the Joseph narrative may mislead readers to think Joseph's story to be the main issue here. The main issue here as well as in the entire book of Genesis, however, is God's resolution to the human problem of sin. God elected Abraham so that he may direct his descendants to the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just. God's covenant promises show that God intends to transform humankind through the promised seed, and Judah's dealing with Tamar threatens the fulfillment of God's covenant promise. In fact, the promised seed is preserved only through Judah's sinful sexual encounter with Tamar. That is how this section functions in Genesis to demonstrate God's providential, redemptive care of a chosen people – through all kinds of circumstances (good and ill) and despite their faults and unsavory actions. In all, God remains faithful to his covenant promises.

in Genesis 15:13-16. In Exodus Pharaoh's plan of infanticide was an external threat to God's promise of descendants.