

# **Notes on Genesis 1**

## **“The Morning of the World” (Genesis 1-2)**

**Fretheim Explores Genesis,  
Luther Productions, St. Paul, 2000**

### **A Book of Beginnings**

Genesis tells the story of:

- the beginning of human beings, animals, sun, moon, stars
- the beginning of sin (in chapter 3)

It is also a new beginning for God. It begins a new story in the life of God.

### **The Nature of God’s Creative Process**

- Not all of God’s creating is out of nothing. God also creates new things out of previously created material.
- God creates through words.
- God also creates by making, separating, getting down in the dirt, designing.
- God’s creating is a process. During this process, God evaluates God’s own work, and decides it is good -- or not good, as when God sees it is not good for the man to be alone.

### **The Nature of the World**

- Creation is not haphazard, but a purposeful, willful, personal act of God
- Creation is not God.
- God evaluated all of creation to be good. Hence all of creation has value.
- God intended creation to be without sin and evil.
- Although creation is good, it is not “perfect.” Creation is not fully developed. There is room for chance.
- God asks “that which is not God” to participate in the world’s creation and continue its development
  - Human beings are told to “subdue” the earth and continue the development of the world. Humans beings are also asked to evaluate and name parts of creation
  - God lets the earth and the waters “bring forth”. . .
  - Creation is still on-going. God is involved and God’s creatures are involved.

### **The Nature of Human Beings**

- God is a social being. God is not in heaven alone. Human kind are the product of a dialog / conversation among a heavenly society. “Let *us* make human kind in our image”

- God made humankind in the image of God, therefore:
  - Human Beings are social beings, part of a larger community
  - Human Beings have responsibilities. Among them: domination over the earth, which involves care and nurture.

### **The Nature of Law**

- Law is a good gift of God that orders creation.
- A strict association of law with sin is specious, for law came before sin entered the world

### **The Nature of Knowledge**

- The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil represents the difference between divine knowledge and human knowledge
- God has a wisdom and knowledge that we do not. God knows what is in the best interest of human beings. In not eating of this tree, human beings acknowledge this difference between the Creator and their own status as created beings

### **Note on the “Two Versions” of Creation**

- The Priestly Account (1:1 to 2:4a) and Yahwist Account (2:4b –2:25) have been placed together as a canonical, theological reflection on creation. We should thus try to read them together.
  - Chapter 2 can be thought of as providing more details on the creation of human beings

### **The Nature of Male and Female**

- Both male and female are made in the image of God and both are equal. There is no subordination of female to male (Adam: “bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh”):
  - God designs woman from a man’s rib; God molds man from dirt
  - Adam names Eve, but Hagar also names God
  - Woman called helper; but “helper” is a lofty role, a word most often used for God
  - Woman created last (pinnacle of creation?)

### **Genesis and Modern Science**

- Writers of Genesis made use of the best scientific knowledge they had; we in turn must make use of the best scientific knowledge we have in our theological reflections on creation

## References

- Video series: **Fretheim Explores Genesis**. Luther Productions. St. Paul. 2000. (Available from: <http://www.lutherproductions.com/bibleseries.htm#bible2>)
- “The Book of Genesis. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections.” Terence E. Fretheim. In: **The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994.

**Notes on Genesis 2**  
**Fall Up, Fall Down, or Fall Apart?**  
**(Genesis 3:1-6:5)**  
**Fretheim Explores Genesis,**  
**Luther Productions, St. Paul, 2000**

**What Kind of Fall?**

- 1. a fall down
  - stumbling, falling on face
- 2. a fall up
  - becoming like God, knowing good and evil like God
- 3. a fall apart
  - The effects of sin: relationships begin to fall apart. There is alienation, estrangement, distance between God's creatures and within selves (alienation within self = shame)

**Sin is an Intrusion into God's World**

- God did not intend sin to be part of the world, although God did create a world where his creatures could resist his will
- God created the world with a "moral order:" sin has consequences

**Purpose of the Story of the Fall**

- 1. story of the past
- 2. a story of what it is like to be tempted, to fall into sin on a regular basis

**Who is the Serpent (or Snake)?**

- the serpent is never identified as the devil or as evil.
- God made the snake (God made every animal, and it was good). The snake is a creature of God.
- Consider the snake not as a personification of the devil, but a neutral figure, a *truth-teller* who facilitates the options open to human beings
- a problem with the interpretation of the snake as the devil: shifts responsibility for sin, "the devil made me do it."

**What Was the First Sin?**

- Disobedience?
- On a deeper level, it was a mistrust of God and of God's word leading to the secondary sin of disobedience.
  - a mistrust engendered by the snake's saying "God knows . . ." (God has not told human beings everything.)

## **The Complicity of the Man in the First Sin**

- Note that Adam was with Eve during her conversation with the snake, although he contributes nothing.

## **The Effects of Sin in the World**

- For the Snake:
  - continuing presentations of tempting possibility / tempting potential to humanity
  - there is no clear sign who might win
- For the Woman:
  - Pain in childhood will be increased. Your desire will be for your husband. The man shall rule over you
  - Is this *descriptive* or *prescriptive*? God is *describing* here the effect of sin, not God's intentions
- For the Man:
  - increasing agricultural difficulties

## **The Cain and Abel Story**

- shows the snowballing effect of sin
- note it begins at the core of human relationship: the family
  - we see increasing dysfunctionality in families as we read further in the Bible, showing the continuing and progressive effects of sin.

## **The Continuing Positive Effects of God's Work as Creator Despite Sin**

- God gives human beings the same responsibility outside Eden as they had in Eden
- Humans still play a part in the continuing creation of the world, with new technological and artistic achievements
- Genealogies show God continues to relate to the world and provide life,
- Human intimacy continues as positive aspect of our relationship to each other

1

## **The Long Life Spans of People in the Bible**

- In those days, an extraordinary long life was common in stories of ancient times -- sometimes tens of thousands of years
  - longest life span in bible: 969 years
- successive genealogies in Genesis show life spans gradually decreasing over time: the progressive effect of sin

## **Original Sin versus the Originating Sin**

- Original sin (Genesis 6:5):
  - wickedness of humankind great, every inclination of their hearts only evil continuing
  - Original sin is sin become pervasive, an inevitable part of everyone's life

- Originating Sin
  - the first sin of Adam and Eve
  - note even after that first sin, Adam and Eve are not presented as despicable people
  - this was the beginning of the process that led to Original Sin

## References

- Video series: **Fretheim Explores Genesis**. Luther Productions. St. Paul. 2000.  
(Available from: <http://www.lutherproductions.com/bibleseries.htm#bible2>)
- "The Book of Genesis. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Terence E. Fretheim. In: **The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994.

## **Notes on Genesis 3**

### **God Will Never Do That Again!**

#### **(Genesis 6:5-11:26)**

**Fretheim Explores Genesis,  
Luther Productions, St. Paul, 2000**

### **The Story of Noah's Ark**

#### **God also remembers the animals.**

- The number of animals taken onto the ark
  - Was there one pair or seven pairs? Some sections of the text suggest the latter.
  - Note that Noah sacrifices one of every type of animal when they get off the ark, so if there was only one pair of animals . . .
- God remembers the animals
  - God decides to save not only human beings, but animals wild and domestic
  - After the flood, God promises never to respond to sin in an annihilating action like a flood again. This is a promise *to all flesh* (human beings and animals)
- So what do we do with animals in “ark-like” situations?
  - Text suggests: we should bring them on the ark.

### **The Rainbow in the Sky**

- note the Rainbow in the sky is a sign *for God* to remember his covenant with creation

### **Human Sin and the Cosmic Order**

- Moral order effects cosmic order.
  - Human sin causes the ground to produce thistles and thorns
  - In particular, the text speaks of human violence and its effects on the cosmic order. “Human violence begets cosmic violence.” (Genesis 6:11-12).
- God as Mediator of the Effects of Sin
  - Moral order effects cosmic order, and so the flood actually grows out of human sin. God does not trigger the flood. The flood is an example of the effects of sin – the flowering, the consequence of sin on the cosmic order. God is involved as judge and mediator of the effects of sin.

### **Relationship of the Story Noah and the Ark to Other Ancient Flood Stories**

- There is a great similarity with some other ancient flood stories. The Gilgamesh Epic for example has hero taking animals on a boat in a great flood
- The bible story here reflects a common tradition of a great flood story, told in the light of Israel's understanding of God.
  - Israel's knowledge of these other flood stories should be expected:
    - Abraham originated in the Mesopotamia
    - Israel lay on the travel route between the two major ancient civilization: Egypt, and Mesopotamia.

## A Worldwide Flood?

- The bible story describes a “world-wide flood,” however the “world” of the ancients much smaller than the world we know of today
- Archeological examination of silt levels shows there was a major flood in the Mesopotamian valley about 3000 B.C.

## God’s Response to the Sin of Noah’s Time: insight into the mind and heart and nature of God

- God regrets, grieves for having made the world in the first place
- Text presents to us a God who has emotion, who feels deeply. The “outer judgment is not matched by an inner harshness.”
- A God who regrets and grieves cannot be the impassible God of Greeks, but is a God who truly has emotions, who truly suffers.
- A God who regrets cannot be a God who knew for sure what was going to happen.

## What Did the Flood Accomplish?

- 1. Cleanse the World?
  - A cleansing of the world with water?
  - But after the flood we have Genesis 8:21: “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.” The flood did not “cleanse” human sinfulness!
- 2. Undo the Old Creation and Begin Again?
  - Water destroys the world, returning it to a watery chaos reminiscent of the first chapter of Genesis
  - While it is a new beginning, it is not a *radical* new beginning. The world is pretty much the same after the flood as before
  - Does offer insight into God: God is willing to begin again
    - Personal significance in our individual lives: the lives of all of us have stories where God could just wash his hands of us. Instead, God is willing to begin again
- 3. Warn us of the Power of God’s Divine Judgment?
  - But God promises he will never do this again, come what may. So this is not a *typical* example of God’s Judgment – but rather a unique example.
  - God’s promise not to respond to sin in such an annihilating fashion is a *limitation* of God’s power.
  - This promise recalls the story of Jesus after a town rejects him and his disciples. (Luke 9:51-56). The disciples offers to call down fire from heaven on the town, but Jesus rebukes them.
- So what has changed after the flood? Creation is largely the same, and the human heart remains inclined to evil. Answer: God has changed.
  - God understands that “human beings are hopeless” (Brueggemann): they will always be inclined to sin and evil
  - God resolves to take on a new relationship with creation, and a new way of engaging evil.
  - “The God-world relation is not simply that of strong God and needy world. Now it is a tortured relation between a grieved God and a resistant world.” God chooses to suffer and endure a wicked world, continuing to open up his divine heart to the world.

# The Tower of Babel Story

## Interpretations

- 1. Story of human pride, trying to reach the heavens and become like God
- 2. God's response to the human temptation to isolate themselves from the larger world, refusing to "fill the earth"
  - God's giving of different languages has the effect of forcing humanity to scatter. It is less a judgment than an attempt to get human beings to fill the earth.
  - God creates diversity.
    - Implications for the Unity of the Church: God will act to promote diversity over any form of unity that seeks to preserve itself in isolation to the outside world

## References

- Video series: **Fretheim Explores Genesis**. Luther Productions. St. Paul. 2000 (Available from: <http://www.lutherproductions.com/bibleseries.htm#bible2>)
- "The Book of Genesis. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Terence E. Fretheim. In: **The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994.
- **Genesis. Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching**. Walter Brueggemann, John Know Press, Atlanta, 1982.

**Notes on Genesis 4**  
**God's Unconditional Promises**  
**(Genesis 12-15)**  
**Fretheim Explores Genesis,**  
**Luther Productions, St. Paul, 2000**

**The Shift from Universal Perspective to a Single Family**

- ◆ We now shift from a universal perspective to a single family in a small town
- ◆ The first 11 chapters of Genesis focuses upon all of creation. The same is true for Revelations. The two books are “bookends” to the bible
  - Together, they reminds us that God's vision involves *all the world*

**God's Strategy to Save the World Through Election to Mission**

- ◆ Why did God choose a particular family (and their descendents, the Jews)?
  - Genesis 12:1-3: this promise to Abraham is a “fulcrum text” that connects the first 11 chapters with the remaining chapters
  - The text makes clear that the choice of Abraham's family is for *all the families of the earth*
  - The choice of a particular family is God's strategy to save the world: an “initially exclusive move for the sake of a maximally inclusive end” (“election is for mission”). God chose Abraham's family for a mission to all the world.
- ◆ Why did God choose this strategy? Why did God not just “command” salvation?
  - We can note that a “forced salvation” would not respect the nature of the personal relationship between God and each individual.

**God's Choosing Can Be a Cause of Conflict**

- ◆ Conflicts among members of the chosen people arise for many reasons. Among them is that God chooses some and not others:
  - Jacob and Esau
  - Joseph and his brothers
  - Abel and Cain

**God Does Not Choose in the Way of the World**

- ◆ Why did God choose those that God did for mission?
- ◆ We can note that God did not choose in the ways the world might choose. Note in the ancient world the oldest son inherited almost everything. Yet God did not follow the “way of the world:”
  - Abel and Cain. God chose Cain, the second son
  - Ishmael and Isaac. God chose Isaac, the second son
  - Esau and Jacob. God chose Jacob, the second son

### **God Surrounds Those Chosen for Mission with Promises**

- ◆ God gives promises to those chosen (those called to tasks, called to mission).
- ◆ Note the promises given to Abram are unconditional: Chapter 12:1-3, 7

### **God's Promises Generate Faith; Questions Will Persist**

- ◆ In Chapter 15 we get an interesting combination of promises and questions by Abraham: promises are not meant to cut off questions
- ◆ The promises generate faith in Abraham
  - Abraham believes in view of the promises.
  - God reckons Abraham righteous because of his faith
  - “What shape the future takes will depend on many things, but Abraham can be assured that, amid all that makes for trouble in his life and the world, it holds promise for goodness and well-being. And that makes a profound difference for all life.” (Fretheim in New Interpreter’s Bible)
- ◆ Faith does not however eliminate questions
  - Genesis 15:7-8: “‘I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.’ But he [Abraham] said, ‘O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?’”
  - “It is not unnatural to faith, or unbecoming to the believer, that questions persist in the midst of belief.” (Fretheim in New Interpreter’s Bible, p.448)

### **The Certainty of God's Promises**

- ◆ Note that God’s covenant with Abraham is unilateral.
  - In chapter 15, God alone goes through the cut animals (an ancient covenant making ritual)
  - God’s promise does not depend on what Abraham does
- ◆ Can we be certain of God’s promises, since God can change God’s mind?
  - Analogy: the steadfast commitment of partners in a good marriage amid a mixture of constancy and change
  - God is both constant and changing as God relates to people who are changing.

### **God's Promise to Abraham is Grounded in God's Promise to Noah**

- ◆ God’s promise with Noah was a promise to all flesh, all creatures. This universal promise to all the world grounds God’s more particular promise with Abraham.

## The Story of Abraham as a Call

- ◆ There is a voice in the night. Abraham goes. Abraham's apparent unquestioned obedience to his call contrasts the call of Moses, who was full of questions. But was Abraham's call really so strange?
  - Note before the call comes in chapter 12, *Abraham is already on the way to Israel.*
  - Genesis 11:31: "Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans *to go into the land of Canaan*, but when they came to Haran, they settled there" (NRSV)
- ◆ God's call to Abram then comes when Abram is "stalled out" in Haran (now in SE Turkey), soon after Abraham's father Terah has died (the death of a parent is often a traumatic, life-changing). Significance of this:
  - God's call to Abraham may not be so strange: Abraham had been on his way to Israel; God redirects Abraham back to his original goal.
  - "God has ways of taking into account who we are, where we are, the circumstances of life in which we are engaged, and directing us, pushing and pulling us towards certain objectives, in view of who we have become, in view of recent experience."

## Sarah and the Promise

- ◆ Initially, God's promise is to Abraham
- ◆ Sarah does not get a promise until Genesis 17:15.

## A Note On Reading the Text: The Reader Often Knows More Than the Characters

- ◆ The narrator of the story often tells us the readers more than Abraham knows.
  - For example, Genesis 12:1: "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. . .'" (NRSV)
  - Abraham must infer from the promises it is God speaking to him. The narrator however tells the reader explicitly it is God speaking.

## References

- ◆ Video series: **Fretheim Explores Genesis**. Luther Productions. St. Paul. 2000 (Available from: <http://www.lutherproductions.com/bibleseries.htm#bible2>)
- ◆ "The Book of Genesis. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Terence E. Fretheim. In: **The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994.

## **Notes on Genesis 5**

### **Intercession and Judgment**

#### **(Genesis 18:16 - 19:38)**

**Fretheim Explores Genesis,  
Luther Productions, St. Paul, 2000**

#### **Key Themes**

- ◆ Intercessory Prayer
- ◆ Theme of Divine Judgment

#### **Background**

- ◆ Biblical Notes:
  - Elsewhere in the Old Testament the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is referred to about 20 times, more than any other story in Genesis (whereas the story of the sacrifice of Isaac is not referred to anywhere else!)
  - In Chapter 13, Lot chooses the Jordan valley (a land as rich as the Garden of Eden) for his flocks and chooses to live in Sodom. When Lot and his family move there, the city was known as evil.
- ◆ Notes on Geology and Geography:
  - Sodom and Gomorrah probably located just south of the Dead Sea.
  - This area is a barren wilderness.
  - It lies within a geographic rift that extends from Turkey and Armenia into East Africa.
  - The lowest point along the rift is the Dead Sea, 1305 feet below sea level. Dead Sea has a 35% salt content.
  - Extensive sulfur (= brimstone) and bitumen deposits and petrochemical springs present
  - Earthquakes can occur
  - An earthquake with associated fires and explosions of petrochemical springs may what destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah

#### **God May Have New Truths to Speak to Us. Divine Revelation is On-going**

- ◆ In Genesis 18 we witness a dialog in the mind of God:
  - God is concerned something must be done to check the evil in Sodom and Gomorrah.
  - In Genesis 18:17: God considers whether his concerns should be shared with Abraham.
    - “God does not want to hide from Abraham what God is about in the world. God does not want to keep God’s people ignorant as to what God is doing” (Fretheim).
    - God is not interested in hiding from us

- ◆ 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of gospel of John: Jesus will send the Spirit to lead us into the truth.
  - We do not have all the truth about God in hand. God may have new truths to speak to us.
  - The more we know about God, the more God is a mystery

### **God is Slow to Anger**

- ◆ God hears the outcry from Sodom and Gomorrah
- ◆ Yet God moves to judgment slowly. He consults Abraham. “He is eager to avoid judgment whenever possible.” (Fretheim)
- ◆ Ezekiel 18:32: God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone.
- ◆ “God will go to great lengths to find a different future.” (Fretheim)

### **Intercessory Prayer**

- ◆ God has not made a final decision about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, and God consults with Abraham. God is interested in what Abraham thinks. Abraham’s input is important. He brings “new ingredients” into God’s thinking.
- ◆ “God has so entered into relationship with us that God is not the only one who has something important to say. What human beings think, what human beings say will contribute in a genuine way to the shape of the future. God has determined that people’s insights are important for the shaping of the future.” (Fretheim)
- ◆ When we pray, We give to God our insight, our energy and passion, our decisiveness. We bring new possibilities to God’s thinking.

### **Will Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What’s Right?**

- ◆ Abraham’s intercession before God is very blunt
- ◆ Abraham’s argument presumes a “moral order” that even God is bound by. And God accepts this presumption.

### **The Sin of Sodom**

- ◆ A common notion: the sin was homosexual behavior.
  - However the story’s focus is more on sexual *violence* and savage inhospitality (the threatened gang rape of the visitors in Lot’s house).
  - Jesus uses this text in reference to hospitality to strangers
- ◆ Furthermore:
  - Ezekiel Chapter 16:48-55: speaks of a wide range of sins of Sodom and Gomorrah: neglect of poor and needy, greed, luxury.
  - God uses language of outcry when speaking of the sins of Sodom: this is language used for those oppressed.
- ◆ The sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are thus wide-ranging and complex, sins we ourselves cannot say we are free from.

### **A God who Works for Good in the Midst of Great Evil**

- ◆ Lot's offers his own daughters to the mob to spare the young men
  - this is to be condemned, and raises the question to what degree the sinfulness of Sodom has changed Lot
- ◆ Lot's daughters later have incestuous relations with Lot, which appears to be an example of how sin begets sin, "What goes around comes around."
- ◆ A son results from this union: Moab, who is progenitor of Ruth, who is a progenitor of Jesus.
- ◆ "Even out of the worst of family situations, God can bring goodness, life, and blessing to the world." (Fretheim page 476 in the New Interpreter's Bible)

### **Moral Order Effects Cosmic Order: the Judgment of God Reflected in the Negative Consequences of Sin**

- ◆ The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was an ecological catastrophe.
- ◆ The text links human sin and negative effects on the environment: "Moral order effects cosmic order."
  - This does *not* mean that natural disasters are judgments of God. Natural disaster are part of the free workings of nature.
  - The text *does* imply that human sin can negatively effect the natural world and accumulate to such a degree that it may lead to a natural disaster.
- ◆ More generally, the fact that there are negative consequences of sin (the principles "We reap what we sow" and "What goes around comes around") is a means by which God mediates the effects of sin so that sin and evil do not go unchecked in the world. That there are negative consequences to sin is a reflection of divine judgment against sin and evil.

### **Why did Abraham stop at 10 people? Corporate Justice: The "Critical Mass" of Righteous People to "Leaven" a Sinful Community**

- ◆ Why should the righteous and the good seem to fare no better than the wicked?
- ◆ A number of righteous people in a community can effect how that community lives, grows, and moves into the future.
  - Their righteousness can outweigh the accumulative effects of sin and evil (Reverse of the "bad apple" theory). That is, a few righteous people can mediate or "leaven" the effects of sin and evil in a community to such a degree that the community can still move into the future that God intends.
  - For such a critical mass of the righteous, God will spare the wicked. (And it may appear the wicked fare as well as the righteous).
- ◆ However, there must be a "critical mass:" of such people. The reality is that at a certain point, the number of righteous will be unable to sufficiently reverse the effects of sin and evil. Abraham may have stopped at 10 righteous people in recognition of this.
- ◆ We don't know what the "critical mass" of righteous is for our communities.

- “We should pray and we should act as if we indeed make the difference in a given situation, so that what we have to say, and what we have to do, will help shape the future of the society of which we are apart . . . so we act as if we truly make a difference for the future. . . And God will take what we say and what we do into account in moving into the future” (Fretheim).

## References

- ◆ Video series: **Fretheim Explores Genesis**. Luther Productions. St. Paul. 2000. (Available from: <http://www.lutherproductions.com/bibleseries.htm#bible2>)
- ◆ "The Book of Genesis. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Terence E. Fretheim. In: **The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994.

**Notes on Genesis 6**  
**Children of Abraham: Christians, Jews, Muslims**  
**(Genesis 16, 17 and 21)**  
**Fretheim Explores Genesis,**  
**Luther Productions, St. Paul, 2000**

**The Children of Abraham**

- ◆ Christians, Jews, and Muslims are all children of Abraham
- ◆ Muslims call themselves children of Abraham through Ishmael, just as Christians and Jews call themselves children of Abraham through Isaac.
- ◆ 14% of Muslims are of Arab descent -- thus the majority of Muslims are *spiritual* heirs of Abraham through Ishmael -- just as Christians are *spiritual* (rather than biological) heirs of Abraham through Isaac.

**Relevance of These Texts to How We Should Relate to Muslims and Others Outside the Community of Faith**

- ◆ The chosen family of God is called to be a blessing to all the families of the earth
- ◆ So how should we relate to the “outsiders” -- those outside our community of faith -- who are in our midst? How can we be a blessing to them? How should we evangelize “outsiders”?
  - In particular: there is an increasing Muslim population in the U.S.A. How should we relate to them?
- ◆ These text from Genesis can help us

**Why are the Stories of Hagar and Ishmael neglected?**

- ◆ These texts are often neglected, skipped over in Sunday School and bible studies. Why? Could it be because:
  - Hagar and Ishmael are outsiders?
  - Hagar is a woman?
  - Hagar is a slave?
  - Hagar is black?
  - Muslims trace their ancestry to Hagar and Ishmael?

**Sarah**

- ◆ Sarah is not included in the call of Abraham in Chapter 12.
  - When God promised Abraham a son, God does not say Sarah will be the mother. Sarah was not part of the promise.
- ◆ Sarah interprets the fact she has not been able to have Abraham’s child as meaning God does not want her to carry Abraham’s child.

- So in Chapter 16, Sarah takes a self-sacrificing initiative and offers Abraham her slave girl Hagar to have a son
  - ❖ an accepted practice of the culture
- She not only shares Abraham sexually, but allows Hagar to become Abraham's wife.
- ◆ Only in Chapter 17:15 does God tell Sarah she will be mother of the son of promise. Ishmael is already a teenager by this time!
  - When God does tell Sarah she will become the mother of the son of promise, Abraham and Sarah are so elderly that they both laugh at the idea.
- ◆ There are conflicts between Sarah and Hagar because of Ishmael that leads twice to Hagar's banishment:
  - Chapter 16
  - Chapter 21

## **Hagar**

- ◆ a slave
- ◆ black
- ◆ an outsider
- ◆ Egyptian
- ◆ at Sarah's beck and call
- ◆ She is not asked whether she would be willing to be Sarah's surrogate to carry Abraham's child -- Sarah just orders her to do it

## **The First Banishment of Hagar (Chapter 16)**

- ◆ Hagar is pregnant with Abraham's son and looks with contempt on Sarah. This creates conflict. Abraham tells Sarah to do what she wants about the situation, and Sarah banishes Hagar.
- ◆ Hagar journeys towards her home in Egypt, alone, pregnant.
- ◆ The language here is that Abraham and Sarah "oppress" her; Sarah deals "harshly" with her
  - This language parallels the description in Exodus of how the Egyptians treat the Hebrews
- ◆ An "Angel of the Lord" -- God in human form -- appears to Hagar, calling her by her name (Abraham and Sarah never call Hagar by her name).
- ◆ God speaks promises to Hagar:
  - Genesis 16:10: "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude."
  - God tells Hagar she will have a son Ishmael = "God hears"
  - Note God is making promises here to an "outsider." to a person banished from the promised family, the community of faith
- ◆ Hagar gives God a new name, based upon her own experience of God: El-roi ("The God who sees me").
  - She, the outsider, is only person in the Bible who gives a new name to God

## **The Second Banishment of Hagar (Chapter 21)**

- ◆ Conflict arises between Sarah and Hagar at the Celebration of the Weaning of Isaac
  - This was a time of rejoicing because the child has survived the very difficult first three years of life.
- ◆ Sarah worries about Isaac's inheritance (the oldest gets double inheritance) and demands Abraham choose between his sons.
- ◆ God sides with Sarah, and tells Abraham not to be distressed and to do what Sarah asks. He assures Abraham that although Isaac was the child of the covenant promise, he will also make a great nation of Ishmael, because Ishmael is also his son.
- ◆ "God chooses to work through complex situations and imperfect human beings on behalf of the divine purposes. God works with individuals on the scene; God does not perfect people before deciding to work through them. God may see Sarah's strategy, however inadequate, as the best possible way into the future for this particular moment in the life of this family." (Fretheim, in the New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 1, page 489.)
- ◆ There is a poignant scene between Abraham and Hagar in Chapter 21:14.
- ◆ Hagar again journeys towards home in Egypt, wandering in the wilderness of Beer-sheba
- ◆ On the way, Ishmael is in danger of dying from lack of water.
  - Hagar prays; God shows Hagar a well of water, and God again renews the promise to Hagar about her son, ". . . for I will make a great nation of him." (Genesis 21:18)

## **Women Who Can Find Their Stories in Hagar**

- ◆ Quote from Phyllis Trimble, *Texts of Terror*, p. 28: "Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the
  - faithful maid exploited,
  - the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class,
  - the surrogate mother,
  - the resident alien without legal recourse,
  - the other woman,
  - the runaway youth,
  - the religious fleeing from affliction,
  - the pregnant young woman alone,
  - the expelled wife,
  - the divorced mother with child,
  - the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water,
  - the homeless woman,
  - the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structures,
  - the welfare mother, and

- the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others.”

### **Muslims and God’s Promises to Hagar and Ishmael**

- ◆ God is not exclusively committed to Abraham and Sarah. God makes promises to Hagar and Ishmael, who are outside the community of faith.
  - God states the promises to Hagar and Ishmael five times in Chapters 16, 17 and 21.
- ◆ Can it be that the growth of the Muslim community is due to the fact that God is keeping the promises made to Hagar and Ishmael?

### **God is at Work Among Those Outside the Community of Faith: Implications for Mission**

- ◆ God continues to be with Ishmael after he has left the family Abraham.
  - Note parallel texts: “God was with Ishmael” (Genesis 21:20). “God was with Abraham” (Genesis 21:22)
  - God is with both those in the Community of Faith and those outside the community of faith.
- ◆ In mission, we do not bring God to others: God is already there! “God is present and active among them in ways beyond our imagination.”
  - What we can do in mission is “name” the experiences of God that those outside the community of faith have already had.

### **References**

- ◆ Video series: **Fretheim Explores Genesis**. Luther Productions. St. Paul. 2000. (Available from: <http://www.lutherproductions.com/bibleseries.htm>)
- ◆ "The Book of Genesis. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Terence E. Fretheim. In: **The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994.

**Notes on Genesis 7:  
Wrestling in Faith: The Story of Jacob  
(Genesis 25 to 36)  
Fretheim Explores Genesis,  
Luther Productions, St. Paul, 2000**

**Key Theme: Wrestling in Faith**

- ◆ Jacob and Esau wrestling in the womb
- ◆ Rachel and Leah “wrestle” over who would be more loved by Jacob
- ◆ The wrestling match between Jacob and God
  - Jacob: gets his name changed to “Israel” -- one who wrestles with God
  - Jacob becomes a people. The nation of Israel saw itself mirrored in the person of Jacob: a nation who wrestles with God

**God Chooses to Work in and Through Flawed Human Beings**

- ◆ The story is remarkably free of pretence. We see Jacob with his strengths as well as his flaws -- no attempt here to spin an idyllic story of the genesis of the nation of Israel
- ◆ A remarkable fact: Jacob is flawed, yet nonetheless God chooses him for God’s purposes. “God is not a moralist.”
  - God does not chose Jacob because Jacob has a better character. Jacob’s treatment of Esau cannot be justified. God’s reason for choosing is beyond us.
    - ❖ We can note that when God chooses, God often overturns customary ways of doing things.
  - God does not express concern about the flaws of the people in this story.
  - God chooses to work in and through flawed people

**God’s Choices Can Create Conflict**

- ◆ God’s choosing generates part of the conflict that we see in these stories. The conflict that arises is not merely the result of the flaws and foibles of human beings, but also from problems that arise from God’s choosing.
- ◆ As a result, God gets involved in our lives in ways we cannot ignore. God “gets in our face” at times

**The Structure of the Story of Jacob: Four Pillars**

- ◆ Four Pillars = Four Appearances of God in the story:
  - 1. Chapter 25: God appears to Rebekah and tells her the meaning of the struggle of the twins (Esau and Jacob) in her womb

- 2. Chapter 28: Jacob's Dream at Bethel as he leaves the promised land to flee Esau's anger
- 3. Chapter 32: Jacob wrestles with God
- 4. Chapter 35: God appears to Jacob at Bethel and confirms promises made to Jacob
- ◆ The birth of Jacob's twelve children occurs right in the middle of these "Four Pillars."
  - Chapter 29:31 to 30:23
  - Dinah - the 12<sup>th</sup> child
  - The 12 children are born to four women:
    - ❖ Jacob's two wives: Leah and Rachel
    - ❖ the two slave girls of Leah and Rachel
  - Leah and Rachel name all the children

### **The First Pillar: God's Appearance to Rebekah (Chapter 25)**

- ◆ Why would God tell Rebekah about the future struggle of Esau and Jacob, that the oldest would serve the younger?
  - God's oracle is a statement of the future's direction, not a statement of certainty. By telling Rebekah, God enlists Rebekah on God's side with respect to God's choice of Jacob
  - Rebekah does not act passively, presuming that God's will shall be done. Rather, Rebekah tries to shape her children's lives for the future that God desires
- ◆ Note that God chooses the woman, not the man Isaac, as the one in and through which God will work, apparently because God knows Rebekah is more likely to work with energy to bring about the future God desires.

### **The Second Pillar: Jacob's Dream at Bethel (Chapter 28)**

- ◆ Hymn "We are climbing Jacob's Ladder:" a misinterpretation: angels are going up and down the ladder, not Jacob.
  - The ladder was actually probably a ramp or staircase to a ziggurat (temple tower).
  - Typically priests go up and down the ramp, acting as God's intermediaries. But here God comes down the ladder and stands with Jacob in his dream.
- ◆ God's words to Jacob are filled with promises: Chapter 28:13-15. There are two kinds of promises made to Jacob:
  - land and many descendants, blessing to others (picking up on the promises to Abraham and Isaac)
  - personal promises to Jacob (I am with you, will keep you, will not leave you)

### **The Third Pillar: Jacob Wrestles with God (Chapter 32:22-32)**

- ◆ Setting: Jacob is coming back into the promised land to meet Esau. The night before, God meets Jacob at the border into the promised land

- God probably initiates the wrestling match
- At first it is unclear to the reader who the man is who is wrestling with Jacob. It becomes apparent only through the course of the night that the man wrestling with Jacob is God who has assumed human form
- ◆ Was this an actual wrestling match? Or just a spiritual struggle?
  - This is not a dream: it seems to be a real physical struggle. Jacob's hip gets dislocated, and he will limp away
  - "God encounters people in ways that best connect with who they are." Jacob is a wrestler; so that is how God meets Jacob
  - Just as Jacob wrestled with all his strength, we are not called to be passive or self-effacing in our struggles with God. Israel knew to bring all its capacities and talents to its wrestlings with God. This is what it means to be *in relationship* with God.
- ◆ Wasn't God just playing with Jacob? Couldn't God have won the match in an instant if God wanted to? Did God just let Jacob "prevail"?
  - We are not seeing God in all God's glory here. God has stooped to encounter Jacob at his own level.
  - God even commends Jacob for "holding his own" with God
  - It seems that "God commits to a genuine encounter with Jacob." He engages Jacob "with the kind of power that does not overpower." "God chooses to have a power that is in some sense comparable to the power Jacob that brings to this moment." Thus "The will of God can be resisted."
  - Implication: our encounters with God are *genuine engagements*. God truly "mixes it up" with us. God may even have a new appreciation for us after our engagement.
- ◆ Note also that God's encounter with Jacob is at a vulnerable moment in Jacob's life: the night before he will face Esau again
  - "God puts Jacob through a struggle the night before in order to better prepare him for the encounter [with Esau] the next day."

## References

- ◆ Video series: **Fretheim Explores Genesis**. Luther Productions. St. Paul. 2000. (Available from: <http://www.lutherproductions.com/bibleseries.htm>)
- ◆ "The Book of Genesis. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Terence E. Fretheim. In: **The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994.

**Notes on Genesis 8:  
Women with Stories: Dinah and Tamar  
(Genesis 34, 38)  
Fretheim Explores Genesis,  
Luther Productions, St. Paul, 2000**

## **Women in Genesis**

- ◆ Women play a crucial role in many places in Genesis
- ◆ This emphasis rises from two basic concerns:
  - Both male and female made in the image of God. Both are equal
    - ❖ Patriarchal structures rose after sin entered into the world
  - The importance of family life in the Genesis narratives.
- ◆ Woman we have studied so far:
  - Eve (not the temptress as often thought)
  - Sarah and Hagar (wives of Abraham)
  - Rebekah (wife of Isaac)
  - Leah and Rachel (wives of Jacob)

## **Dinah (Chapter 34)**

### **Background**

- ◆ The only daughter of Jacob; her mother was Leah
- ◆ There is only a bare notice of her birth.
- ◆ Her story is picked up again in chapter 34, where Dinah is raped by Shechem, son of Hamor, member of the ruling family in a neighboring Canaanite town
  - The rape is condemned, a vicious act, an outrage on Israel.
  - However, Shechem, the rapist, falls in love with Dinah.
- ◆ The Law of Deuteronomy 22 and Exodus 22 also requires that the rapists must marry the woman he rapes (still a law in some African and Indian cultures today)
  - Law in ancient Israel required that he must live with her and support her for the rest of her life; he cannot divorce her
  - Rationale of law:
    - ❖ Upholds the woman's honor.
    - ❖ Grants her economic and social status.
    - ❖ Gives her a family, community to live with.
    - ❖ The alternative: "spoiled goods," life of the outcast, poverty

### **Dinah's Silence**

- ◆ Dinah is only talked about.
- ◆ She goes to live with Shechem, then her brother takes her away.
- ◆ She is only "done to."
- ◆ She has no voice in the story.

- Why is Dinah silent? Deliberate?
- What lies behind her silence?
- Raises for us the question of society's treatment and attitude towards women who have been raped. How do we today try to uphold the honor, the economic and social status of such women?

### **The response of Dinah's brothers to the rape: the hijacking of religious symbols for the purposes of violence**

- ◆ Arrangements are made between Jacob and Hamar for the marriage of Dinah and Shechem
- ◆ However, Dinah's brothers do not want the integration of the families. They devise a ruse using religious symbols and practices:
- ◆ They ask that all members of Shechem's family be circumcised
- ◆ Then, while the male members of Shechem's family "are all still in pain," the brothers come and:
  - Kill all the men
  - Rape and carry away all the women
  - Take away the children and property
  - Take Dinah back.
- ◆ Jacob curses the instigators Simeon and Levi for their violence

### **God's Apparent Absence**

- ◆ God is never mentioned in Genesis 34.
- ◆ God seems absent from the story. There seems to be no protection from violence and evil for the individuals in the story

## **Tamar (Chapter 38)**

### **Background: The Story of Tamar**

- ◆ Judah is one of the sons of Jacob.
  - Judah's line is the line that will eventually lead to David and Jesus.
- ◆ Judah's son Er married Tamar, who was not a Jew -- she was probably a Canaanite woman.
  - Er dies without an heir.
  - We are told he was evil and God put him to death. It is rare that God puts any individual to death in the Old Testament.
  - By law, Er's brother is obligated to marry in order to carry on the name of her dead husband, so that his name will be remembered down through the generations.
- ◆ Onan, Er's brother marries Judah.
  - uses *coitus interruptus* to keep Tamar from getting pregnant (he would then receive the inheritance given to the oldest from Judah).
  - He dies (God puts him to death; we don't know the means. Again, it is rare for God to put an individual to death).

- ◆ The third son of Judah, Shelah, is too young at the time, but Judah promises him to Tamar.
  - But Judah later reneges on his promise and responsibility.
- ◆ So Tamar takes it upon herself to provide an heir for her dead husband Er:
  - Judah's wife dies.
  - Tamar dresses as a prostitute (she takes off her widow's garments, which she will put on again afterwards).
  - Judah uses her, but Tamar obtains his staff and ring before sex.
- ◆ Tamar then becomes pregnant with twins.
  - Judah says she should be put to death, for she has played the whore
  - Tamar brings out Judah's staff and ring
  - Judah in verse 26 recognizes he has done wrong, and he declares Tamar more righteous than he.
- ◆ Tamar has twins
  - The second born Perez carries on the line of promise.

### **Faithfulness to a Relationship May Require Going Beyond Law**

- ◆ Tamar's act of prostitution would normally be considered an offensive act and condemned. Yet Judah calls it a "righteous" action.
- ◆ It may be necessary to disobey one law in order to obey another.
- ◆ Tamar takes responsibility to provide a heir. She assumes an activity that normally would be condemned in order to do justice to the familial relationship.
- ◆ "Relationships are more important than rules; faithfulness may mean going beyond the law." (Ref. 2)
- ◆ "Virtues may emerge from within a relationship would never make some kind of abstract list."

### **Jesus and Prostitutes**

- ◆ Jesus may have been thinking of the story of Tamar when he says (Matthew 21:31): "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." (NRSV)
- ◆ How should the church respond to the men and women engaged in prostitution?

### **God Can Work Through "Outsiders"**

- ◆ Tamar is an outsider who is faithful to the chosen family, the family of promise
- ◆ Another example of how God can work through the outsider

### **References**

- ◆ 1. Video series: **Fretheim Explores Genesis**. Luther Productions. St. Paul. 2000. (Available from: <http://www.lutherproductions.com/bibleseries.htm>)
- ◆ 2. "The Book of Genesis. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Terence E. Fretheim. In: **The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994.

**Notes on Genesis 9:  
A Family Reconciled  
(The “Story of Joseph” in Genesis 37-50)  
Fretheim Explores Genesis,  
Luther Productions, St. Paul, 2000**

## **God Behind the Scenes in the Reconciliation of the Brothers**

- ◆ The story of Joseph involves conflicts among the sons of Jacob. Eventually, the story leads to reconciliation among them.
- ◆ The story is less episodic than previous stories in Genesis, almost a small novel. There is more character development.
- ◆ God appears only once (to Jacob in chapter 46). God is at work, but behind the scenes.
- ◆ Later in the Bible we hear of the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” – but interestingly, not the “God of Abraham, ... , Joseph.” Perhaps this is because God never appears to Joseph

## **The Passing On of the Faith, the Promise of the Covenant**

- ◆ Jacob passes on the promise to Joseph (rather than God)
- ◆ Joseph passes on the promise to all the brothers (Genesis 50:24)

## **Which Brother Will God Choose to Carry on the Line of Promise?**

- ◆ In previous stories, God chose: Jacob rather than Esau, Isaac rather than Ishmael
- ◆ Here no one of the brothers is lifted up by God as the heir to the promise. All the sons will become leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel.
- ◆ In other words, we are seeing the transition: “Israel as Jacob becomes Israel as a people.”
- ◆ Ultimately, the line of promise continues with Judah, the fourth born of the family

## **The Egyptians in the Story of Joseph**

- ◆ Story of Joseph leads into the Book of Exodus.

- ◆ One purpose: explains how the Hebrew got in Egypt in the first place.
- ◆ Note in the Story of Joseph, the Egyptians are presented as a kindly people, and the Pharaoh viewed in a positive light.

## **“God does not perfect people before God decides to work in and through them.”**

- ◆ The story of Joseph is a story of a family fraught with tensions among the brothers.
- ◆ The chosen family is thus like many families, and so connects with families down through the ages.
- ◆ “God does not perfect people before God decides to work in and through them.”
- ◆ Echoing Paul in 1 Corinthians, “God chooses to work through the weak in the world, and those who are not so wise, those who don’t consider themselves so perfect, . . . in order to claim the world.” -- even though it may besmirch God’s own reputation.

## **The Relationship Between Family and Nation**

- ◆ Joseph is a member of a family, and a leader of a government.
- ◆ The text discusses the “symbiotic relationship between government and family” embodied in Joseph.
- ◆ Effect of government on citizens should be like the effect of a good family system.
- ◆ Wide leadership in both families and in governments may be necessary to bring the good order necessary for life and well-being.
- ◆ Joseph is lifted up in this story for his wise actions in a way Abraham and Jacob were not. Joseph is concerned not only about his own family, but is also concerned about the broader world, and his actions reflect both these concerns.

## **God Behind the Scenes in the Work of Joseph**

- ◆ God is behind the scenes, “working in and through the wise leadership of Joseph,” “weaving threads of goodness.”
- ◆ God’s presences here is not overpowering, filling the stories with miracles, oracles.

## **A Blessing for All the Families of the Earth**

- ◆ The promise to Abraham was that his descendants will be a blessing to all the families of the world

- ◆ Here we see the chosen people as a blessing not merely *spiritually* for the families of the earth – but a blessing for their *physical needs*

## **The Story of Creation and the Story of Joseph: Bookends for Genesis**

- ◆ The focus in the story of Joseph once again expands to embrace the entire world.
- ◆ The wise leadership of Joseph makes the world more like what God intended in the beginning, spreading goodness throughout God's creation.
- ◆ Creation themes are also central: family order, global social and economic crises, the preservation of life and well-being of God's world

## **Joseph's Role in the Genuine Reconciliation of the Brothers (Chapter 50)**

- ◆ Jacob dies in chapter 50. The brothers must renegotiate their relationship.
- ◆ Joseph has the power to exact revenge. Instead, he assures his brothers he does not stand above them, : “Am I in the Place of God?”
  - He may not explicitly offer them forgiveness, for that might appear to place himself on a moral high-ground. His primary goal may instead be to demonstrate his basic moral equality with them.

## **God Can Work Good in the Midst of Evil**

- ◆ Genesis 50:20: Joseph tells his brothers: “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.”:
- ◆ And earlier in Genesis 45:8: Joseph tells his brothers: “So it was not you who sent me here [Egypt], but God . . .”
- ◆ Two temptations in interpreting this text:
  - Deism God removed from the life of the world, not involved at all
  - God micro-manages. God has God's finger in every pie and has control over everything. God is the only effective actor.
- ◆ Neither interpretation works in Genesis. The sins of Joseph's brothers are real and liable, not the actions of puppets.
- ◆ “God can take up even people's sinful and evil actions, and piece these actions into a larger “quilt” of God's purposes for God's people. So God can work good in the midst of evil, God can work life in the midst of death to bring about God's good purposes. God good purposes will not be finally stymied...”
- ◆ “God does not have a detailed plan about relationships among human beings. . . What people do and say counts.”

- ◆ Human actions and words are important to God. God takes up human actions and words, and works with them to work goodness in God's creation.

## References

- ◆ 1. Video series: **Fretheim Explores Genesis**. Luther Productions. St. Paul. 2000. (Available from: <http://www.lutherproductions.com/bibleseries.htm>)
- ◆ 2. "The Book of Genesis. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Terence E. Fretheim. In: **The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994.