

saint mary's press

# A Popular Guide

Through the

# Old Testament

Mary Reed Newland

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## **Mary Reed Newland**

**committed much of her life to the needy.**

**For this reason, her family wishes to dedicate this,  
her final project, in her honor to those who suffer  
for lack of shelter, nourishment, and human dignity.**

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# 1

## The Story of God's Boundless Love

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. . . .  
Make me to know your ways, O LORD;  
teach me your paths.  
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long.

(Psalm 25:1–5)

The Bible can be thought of as the expression, through human words and ways of communicating, of God's boundless love for us and God's longing for our happiness.

The Bible tells the Story of God's love for us, but it is not only a human account. It is the **word of God**, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Thus the Scriptures can nourish and transform the life of those who approach them with an open heart. In the Bible we can encounter not just words on a page but the living God.

### The Great Story

As you know, the Bible consists of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. *Testament* is another word for "covenant." Here, in the briefest outline of the Bible:

1. God created the world and humankind out of infinite love.
2. God offered hope and a promise of salvation when human beings rejected that love.

3. God chose a people and formed a covenant with them, a special relationship, and promised that through them the whole world would be saved.
4. God molded and fashioned this people, the Israelites, during the ups and downs of their history. God offered them liberation, challenged them to live justly and faithfully, took them back when they strayed, consoled them in sorrow, and saved them when they got into trouble. The people of Israel—eventually called the Jews—looked to a future day when God's Reign of justice and peace would fill the whole world.
5. God sent the divine Son, Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, as the human expression of God's love and the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. Jesus is the fullness of God's revelation.
6. By his life, death, and Resurrection, Jesus brought salvation to all the world.
7. The Holy Spirit was sent by Christ to nourish, sustain, and renew the followers of Christ, who carry on Christ's work and message until the end of time. In the end Christ will return in glory, and God's universal Reign of justice and peace will finally be complete.

This book considers the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures—the first part of the Bible—which tells the great Story through the time just before Jesus.

A note on terminology: For Christians the word *old* in Old Testament does not imply “outdated” or “no longer in effect,” and *new* in New Testament, or Christian Testament, does not imply that it replaces or substitutes for the Old Testament. Rather, Christians believe that the New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Both form a unity that is the inspired word of God. We cannot understand the New Testament without understanding the Old Testament. Both are the sacred Scriptures.

## The Inspired Word of God

To say that the Bible is inspired by God does not mean that God dictated the words to the writers, who simply recorded



what was “whispered” to them! Nor does it mean that everything in the Bible is factually correct or scientifically valid.

Instead, to say that the sacred Scriptures are inspired means God ensured that they contain *all the truth that is necessary for our salvation*. This is the truth of who God is, who we are and how we must act in relation to God and all creation, and where we are going—the destiny meant for us, union with God forever. This is *religious truth*, which is not the same as historical accuracy or scientific explanation.

In inspiring the Bible, God worked through human beings who wrote the sacred Scriptures. They, like us today, were subject to the cultural and intellectual limitations of their own era; they had many customs and ways of thinking that are not our own, and they wrote in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic.

Furthermore, these authors used various literary forms in ways that met the needs of their audiences. The Old Testament includes ancient myths and legends, royal court histories, letters, poems, songs, genealogies, sermons, liturgical instructions, laws, accounts of visions, and stories passed down orally for generations before being written down. The process of writing the Old Testament spanned about a thousand years.

God inspired not only the writers themselves but the whole people as they told and retold the stories of their own past; handed them down through the centuries; wrote, edited, and combined their written accounts over time; and finally sifted through all this literature to select the Scriptures that they believed were inspired by God and thus carried the authority of God. The listing of those books is called the *canon* of the Scriptures. Just as Jesus is both divine and human, the Bible itself shows the hands of both God and human beings.

## Why *Study* the Bible?

Some of the Bible can be quite puzzling to modern ears. We may not understand the circumstances in which the texts were written or the meaning originally intended by the authors. Some of it may seem contradictory.

Scripture scholars translate the ancient Hebrew and Greek into modern languages, but they also try to get at what the authors really meant. Scholars delve into the history, archaeology, literary forms, and culture surrounding the development of the texts to help us understand their intended meanings. Of course, even the best Scripture scholars disagree on their findings and theories, and many questions are still open to debate. By and large, though, Scripture scholarship has shed great light on modern understanding of the Bible.

The purpose of studying the Scriptures is not simply that we might know a lot of things about the Bible or even about its theological meaning. Knowledge is important and useful, but it is not enough. Rather, the deeper intent of Scripture study is that we might “fall in love” with the Bible, and with God, who is its source and inspiration.

## Why the Old Testament?

Christians cannot understand the New Testament and Jesus without understanding the Old Testament. But in itself—and not just because it points to the New Testament—the Old Testament has permanent value. It contains profound teachings, beautiful prayers, and some of the greatest literature ever created. Most important, in the Old Testament we encounter God, its inspiration.

This book provides you with a “guided tour” of the Old Testament. It walks you through all the books, considering the circumstances in which they were composed, describing their contents, and offering insights into their meaning from the perspectives of contemporary Scripture scholarship and Catholic Tradition.

The book directs you to read key passages from each book of the Old Testament. No book can substitute for reading the word of God. So you are invited to plunge into the Scripture passages themselves, which have the power to touch our life in a way that summaries of them do not.

Once you are equipped with a Bible, this book, and a willing spirit, you are ready to discover the meaning of the Old Testament, and to encounter God in the process.

## **A God Who Acts in History**

The God revealed in the Old Testament is not aloof or distant from human affairs; this God acts within human history. The Story of God's actions and the people's responses over many centuries is called **salvation history**. It will help to keep the big picture of that history in mind as we set out to discover the meaning of the Old Testament, because the history and the Scriptures of ancient Israel were intertwined.

About 3000 B.C.E. history as we know it began, with the development of early forms of writing. The biblical period—from the beginnings of Israel as a people through the time of Jesus and the earliest years of the church—was from about 1850 B.C.E. until about 100 C.E. It lasted almost two thousand years.

Note: The standard practice today is to use the abbreviations B.C.E. (before the common era) and C.E. (of the common era) in place of the traditional abbreviations B.C. and A.D.

## **The Founders and the Promise**

The history and the religion of the Israelites began with Abraham. Abraham was a wandering herdsman who lived in the region now called Iraq, around 1850 B.C.E. According to the Book of Genesis, God promised to make Abraham's descendants a blessing to the world and to give them the

land of Canaan, later known as Palestine. The Promise was that Abraham's descendants would reveal the one God to the world. Christians believe that this Promise reached its fulfillment in the coming of Christ.

Abraham's descendants and their families inherited the Promise. His son Isaac and grandson Jacob, like Abraham, would be called the patriarchs, or founders, of the Jewish faith. Their wives—Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel—would be called the matriarchs.

## **The Exodus of the Israelites and the Covenant**

At the close of the Book of Genesis, the descendants of Abraham are living in Egypt, having traveled there from Canaan in order to survive a famine. Yet as the Book of Exodus opens, we find them enslaved by the Egyptians. Practically nothing is known about the Israelites in Egypt from about 1700 to 1290 B.C.E.

About 1290 B.C.E. the understanding that one God was above all other gods came to Moses when God revealed God's name, Yahweh, meaning "I am the One who is always present." With God's power the Israelites, led by Moses, made a daring escape from Pharaoh's army through the sea—the Exodus—and were thus freed from slavery.

After a dramatic encounter between Moses and God on Mount Sinai, a Covenant between Yahweh and the Israelites was confirmed. The Israelites' part of the Covenant was to keep the Ten Commandments, which God had presented to Moses. God's part was to make the Israelites "the people of God" and to be with them as long as they kept the Covenant. Once again God promised that they would be given the land of Canaan. But before they entered Canaan, they wandered in the desert as they learned to trust God's care for them.

## **Taking Over the Promised Land**

After Moses' time the Israelites, led by Joshua, entered Canaan. Over the next centuries—from about 1250 to 1000

B.C.E.—they fought against the people who lived in that region. In these battles the Israelites were led by military leaders called judges. During this time the Israelites abandoned their nomadic ways for the more settled agricultural life that was native to the region.

## **The Nation and the Temple**

Around 1000 B.C.E. Israel became recognized as a nation, with David as its anointed king and Jerusalem as its capital city. God made a promise to David that his royal line would endure forever. Later Jews put their hope in a descendant of David to save them from oppression.

David's son Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem, and it became the principal place of worship for the nation. As both a political and a religious capital, Jerusalem became a great and holy city.

## **The Kings and the Prophets**

After Solomon's death in 922 B.C.E., the nation broke in two, with the kingdom of Israel in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the south. Heavy taxes and forced service in both kingdoms created hardships for the people. In addition, the kings often practiced idolatry, the worship of idols.

Prophets spoke out against both kingdoms' injustices to the people and infidelity to God. They questioned the behavior of the kings and called them and their people back to the Covenant. Yet the kingdoms continued to oppress the poor and worship pagan gods until eventually both kingdoms were crushed by powerful conquerors. The Assyrians obliterated the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C.E. and took its people into exile. In 587 B.C.E. the Babylonians destroyed Judah, including the city of Jerusalem, and took its people to Babylon as captives.

## The Babylonian Exile and the Jewish Dispersion

While the people were exiled in Babylon, other prophets encouraged them to repent of their sins and turn back to God. During this time the prophet known as Second Isaiah proclaimed that God was the one and only God. Monotheism, the belief in one God, was now the revelation of this people to the world, their blessing to the nations.

After fifty years in Babylon, the exiles were released from captivity by the conquering Persians and allowed to return home. Judah, no longer a politically independent kingdom, had become a district within the Persian Empire, and the returned exiles became known as Jews, from the word *Judah*. They rebuilt the Temple, and under Ezra and Nehemiah, they re-established the Law and restored Jerusalem. That city became the religious capital for the Jews who had resettled all over the world—that is, the Jews of the Dispersion.

During the exile the Jewish leaders had begun collecting and reflecting on their ancestral writings, forming the core of what would later become their Bible, known to Christians as the Old Testament.

## More Oppressors

The Persian Empire was conquered in 330 B.C.E. by the armies of Alexander the Great. This made the Greeks overlords of the Jews for nearly three hundred years, with the exception of a brief period of independence after a revolt led by the Maccabees family. The Greeks were followed by the Romans, who captured Jerusalem in 63 B.C.E. Although tolerant of other cultures and religions, the Roman Empire severely punished revolutionaries.

It was a dark time for the people of the Promise, who longed for release from oppression and for the day when all their hopes for a good and peaceful life would be fulfilled. Many Jews looked toward the coming of a messiah, one sent by God to save them; some expected this messiah

to be from the family line of David. It is at this point in the history of Israel that the Old Testament accounts end.

## **Jesus, the Savior**

Into a situation of defeat and darkness for the people of Israel, Jesus was born—one of the house, or family line, of David. Christians see Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, the fulfillment of all God's promises to Israel and the savior of the world. With his death and Resurrection, Jesus' followers recognized that he was the Son of God. The community of believers began to grow, first among Jews but later among Gentiles, or non-Jews. The story of Jesus and the growth of the early church is told in the New Testament.

## **Writing the Scriptures**

Many of the books of the Old Testament were derived from earlier oral versions going back to the time when Israel was a people but not yet a nation. The written versions began later, when a simple system of writing Hebrew became available around 1000 B.C.E.—the time of David's and Solomon's reigns.

In a limited form, writing has been used for over thirty thousand years. In picture writing, realistically drawn figures represent an object, an event, or an idea. Many ancient societies developed writing systems based on picture writing. Over time the written characters became simpler, but each one still represented a word or a phrase. Ancient writers had to learn hundreds, even thousands, of written characters in order to record even brief reports or letters.

We associate the written characters called hieroglyphics with the Egyptians, who carved them on their temples and tombs beginning around 3000 B.C.E. Actually, the term *hieroglyphic*, meaning "of holy carvings," can refer to any system of highly stylized pictures—such as those once used by the Cretans in the Mediterranean or the Mayans in Central America.

The Egyptians added a special feature to writing by using some of their pictures to represent sounds. Egyptian writing

## Judaism After the Biblical Period

Most of the Jews of the first century C.E. did not become Christian. Judaism went on, and it has carried the light of faith in the one God into our contemporary age.

The history of Judaism in the time after Jesus began with a crushing blow. A Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire led to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the second Temple in 70 C.E. The surviving Jews fled to Africa, Asia, and Europe. The Jewish Dispersion, the *Diaspora*, became a central fact of Jewish history.

That Jews were dispersed all over the Empire spurred the definition of an official set of scriptures to guide Jewish religious life. This would ensure the Jews' sense of identity as a

influenced the system that the Canaanites invented sometime before 1550 B.C.E. The Canaanites also used pictures, but eventually they adopted a set of simply written characters—all of which represented consonants. The written characters were linked to sounds, not words. Relatively few characters were needed; a couple of dozen could represent most of the sounds of speech. Now anyone who could learn a simple alphabet could write. Suddenly many more people could become professional writers, or scribes.

After the Israelites entered Canaan, they adopted both the language of the Canaanites and their alphabetic writing system. The ease of using an alphabet made it possible to preserve the ideas of common people, not just of royalty. In the Scriptures, then, the words of unpopular prophets stand alongside those of powerful kings.

The alphabet moved toward completion when the Greeks borrowed it from the Phoenicians, descendants of the Canaanites, around 800 B.C.E. Soon after, the Greeks took the final step of using some of the characters to represent vowel sounds. Hundreds of years later, the early Christian writers used the Greek alphabet and language to record the Gospels. A few of the books in the Catholic canon of the Old Testament were written in Greek, as well.



people set apart and bound by the Covenant with God; it would help them keep separate from the surrounding cultures that worshiped other gods and had immoral practices.

By the end of the first century C.E., this official set of the Hebrew Scriptures was defined. In 90 C.E. Jewish religious leaders met to agree on the *canon*—that is, the list of books recognized as divinely inspired and thus the primary source and guide for religious belief and practice. In translations this canon became known as the Bible, literally meaning “the book.” The Jewish Bible was organized into three main parts: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.

Catholic teaching is that Christians are forever linked with the Jewish people, who were the first to hear the word of God. God’s Covenant and special relationship with the Jews still stand, “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29). The words of Saint Paul about the Jews express this: “To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah” (9:4–5).

In spite of great suffering and persecution, often at the hands of Christians, Jews have remained faithful to God through the centuries since biblical times. Like Christians, Jews work toward and await in hope the coming of God’s Reign of peace and justice.

## What Are the Scriptures of the Old Testament?

### For the Jews: Letters from Home

The Old Testament, and the Bible as a whole, can be thought of as a “letter from God”—a message conveying God’s truth that enables us to encounter God, who inspired it.

The Scriptures, though, can also be considered from their human aspect. They were written by flesh-and-blood human beings for real audiences who needed to hear what these writers had to say in their own time and place. And

so for the Jews of the Dispersion, flung around the ancient world of the Mediterranean by war and persecution, their Hebrew Scriptures must have seemed like “letters from home.”

Imagine what a letter from home might mean to a group of refugees. The Hebrew Scriptures were like that for the Jews of the Dispersion. They told the Jews in their own language how best to live a faithful life in unfamiliar surroundings. Most important, the Scriptures told them that the God of their people would be with them always.

These “letters from home” took the form of many types of writing: stories, legends, histories, oracles, conversations, letters, novels, lists, biographies, laws, speeches, poems, proverbs, and prayers.

## The Catholic Canon of the Old Testament

Because Christianity's religious roots were in Judaism, Christians adopted the sacred writings of Judaism as their own. So the Bible of Judaism contains the same Scriptures as what Christians call the Old Testament, with the exception of a few more texts in the Catholic canon. These other texts—some of them originally written in Greek and others translated from Hebrew or Aramaic into Greek—often appear in Protestant Bibles under the category of apocryphal writings; they are not part of the Protestant or the Jewish canon.

The **Catholic canon** of the Old Testament consists of forty-six books, grouped in the following major sections:

- the Pentateuch
- the historical books
- the wisdom books
- the prophetic books

### The Pentateuch

The heart of Israel's story is told in the first five books of the Bible, called the Pentateuch, which means “five books.” The five books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Jews refer to these books as the *Torah*, a Hebrew word that means “instruction” but is sometimes translated as “the Law.” In the Jewish faith, these books are

the primary scriptural authority in matters of belief and practice.

The Pentateuch's opening stories about the Creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, and the Tower of Babel show us God as a loving Creator and reveal the effects of disobedience. Following these stories are the tales of the patriarchs and the matriarchs—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, and Joseph.

Next, we are told of Israel's slavery in Egypt, Israel's escape under the leadership of Moses, the Covenant at Mount Sinai, and the forty years in the wilderness, ending on the eve of Israel's entry into the Promised Land.

### **The Historical Books**

The historical books tell of Israel's conquest of the land of Canaan—including stories of Joshua, the judges, and Israel's first kings (Saul, David, and Solomon). These books also describe the breakup of the nation of Israel, the reigns of the later kings, and the prophets' attempts to warn those kings of coming disaster.

In spite of the prophets' warnings, the kings disobey, disaster comes, and exile follows. Fifty years later a remnant of the people returns to Jerusalem, rebuilds the Temple, and struggles again with foreign powers and the people's own weaknesses. Through it all Israel's prophets remind the people of their Covenant with God and of their call to be a blessing to all the nations of the world. In addition to Joshua and Judges, the historical books include Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, and 1 and 2 Maccabees.

### **The Wisdom Books**

The wisdom books are usually listed as Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, and Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus).

- The Book of Job explores the age-old question of why bad things happen to good people. Job demands a reason from God for the calamities that overcome him, and God answers in a speech of matchless splendor.

- The Book of Psalms is a collection of religious songs once attributed solely to David but now to a number of authors. Some psalms were written for liturgical occasions, others for private prayer.
- The Book of Proverbs is a collection of writings filled with practical advice about living an ordinary life in the spirit of godliness.
- The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes was a questioner who, in the end, saw that life was a mystery for which he had no answers. It is wise to live life as well as possible and to enjoy it, he decided.
- The Song of Songs is a collection of love songs in the form of dialog, the speakers being bride, bridegroom, and attendants.
- The Book of Wisdom was meant to strengthen the faith of Israel, and spoke for the first time in Israel's history about life after death.
- The Book of Sirach was written to show that true wisdom had been revealed by God to Israel.

## *The Dead Sea Scrolls*

Modern Scripture studies can be greatly affected by discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Possibly before the Roman invasion of Palestine in the first century C.E., a Jewish community called Qumran hid its library of scrolls in caves near the Dead Sea. There they remained until 1947, when shepherds discovered them.

Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the earliest manuscripts in Hebrew came from the ninth century C.E. The scrolls from Qumran date back almost a thousand years before that and serve as a check on the accuracy of later manuscripts. These scrolls confirm that Jewish scribes copied their manuscripts with great care and precision.

### The Prophetic Books

The early prophets—such as Samuel and Nathan, Elijah and Elisha—are known for their life stories rather than for their recorded words. Often called the nonwriting prophets, these figures appear in the historical books.

The writing prophets, each of whose teachings are a book of the Bible, can be thought of in three groups, named in reference to the exile in Babylon:

- The *pre-exilic* prophets are Hosea and Amos (who spoke to the northern kingdom of Israel) and Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah (all of whom spoke to the southern kingdom of Judah).
- The *exilic prophets* are Ezekiel (who went to Babylon with the deportees), Second Isaiah (the second part of the Book of Isaiah), and the unknown author of the Book of Lamentations.
- The *postexilic* prophets include Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Third Isaiah (the third part of the Book of Isaiah), Joel, Obadiah, and Baruch.

The prophetic books tell us about people who loved Israel and who warned it that to depart from fidelity to God would lead not only to moral blindness but to destruction as a nation—which is what happened. The Books of Jonah and Daniel are also listed with the prophetic writings.

This book covers all the books of the Old Testament (some only briefly). However, it does not treat the books in the same order that they appear in the Bible, which is by categories. This is so that the book can follow roughly the history of Israel. For example, historical and prophetic books are treated together in some chapters because they relate to the same biblical period.

## Begin . . . at the Beginning

With all this in mind, open the first book of the Old Testament—the Book of Genesis, which tells the story of the Creation and of the first people on earth. As you proceed keep in mind the words of the great modern Jewish thinker

Martin Buber. Referring to the Hebrew Scriptures, Buber addressed these words to Christian readers:

To you, the book is a forecourt;  
to us, it is the sanctuary.  
But in this place,  
we can dwell together,  
and together listen to the voice  
that speaks here.

*(The Writings of Martin Buber, p. 275)*

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What has been your experience with the Old Testament? Recall how you were taught to view it. What sort of influence has the Old Testament had on the growth of your spirituality?
2. Spend some time exploring your Bible. Find a passage in the Old Testament that you think is beautiful, powerful, or inspiring. Ponder why you chose it. What is the truth it offers you?
3. Who are the patriarchs and matriarchs in your family tree? What legacy have they left your family? What stories are told and retold in your family? Why is it important to preserve and pass on family stories?
4. Reflect on a time when you felt deep trust in God, or a time you faltered in your trust. In your own salvation history, how important has it been to remember these times?
5. What does Martin Buber's statement at the end of the chapter mean for you?

## 2

# Stories of God's Creation and Promises

Praise the LORD! . . .

Praise him, sun and moon;  
praise him, all you shining stars!  
Praise him, you highest heavens,  
and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,  
for he commanded and they were created.  
He established them forever and ever;  
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed. . . .

Mountains and all hills,  
fruit trees and all cedars!  
Wild animals and all cattle,  
creeping things and flying birds! . . .

Let them praise the name of the LORD,  
for his name alone is exalted;  
his glory is above earth and heaven.

(Psalm 148:1–13)

Much of the Old Testament, including the **Book of Genesis**, was written down and put into final form around the period of the Babylonian exile, in the sixth century B.C.E.

The exile is a time of crisis for the Israelite people. They have lost their homeland, Judah. Their holy city, Jerusalem, has been conquered, and their sacred Temple, the center of their life, has been destroyed. Here they are, a defeated people forced to live among their captors in Babylon. Babylonian

culture and religion, with their strange ways and their belief in many destructive, warring gods, feel like a horrendous assault on everything the exiles hold dear.

Disturbing questions gnaw at the exiles: Has God abandoned us? We thought we were the Chosen People of an all-powerful God. Or are the Babylonians right after all? Could the chaotic, competitive gods of the Babylonians really be superior to the one God we worship? Is that why we have been defeated, humiliated, and brought here to this strange, unfriendly land—because our God failed?

In the midst of their doubts and feelings of despair, the exiles desperately need to hear the liberating truth: Our God is in charge—of *everything in the world*, including the Babylonians! God is all good, and God creates only goodness. We can count on that. God can turn even our failures to good if we trust in God with all our heart. We are God's people, and God will never abandon us.

That message of hope and trust in God's goodness did reach the discouraged exiles and their offspring, who after about fifty years were released from Babylon to go back and build a new life in their home country, Judah. The Book of Genesis, put together in its final form during and after the exile, strengthened and lifted the hearts of the returning Israelites, by that time called the Jews. It helped remind them that from the beginning their God had been in charge, bringing forth goodness out of everything, even out of nothingness! Genesis helped them understand their origins—who they were and why they should have hope.

## Stories of the Origins

The first part of Genesis (which means “beginning”), made up of chapters 1 to 11, is a kind of prehistory of Israel. Various versions of the stories in it were first told by folksingers and storytellers early in Israel's history, as they wove together accounts of “where we came from.” The stories are filled with fragments of myths from the ancient Near East. But over the centuries and especially around the time of the exile, the stories were transformed by the scriptural writers.



The stories became powerful, God-inspired religious tales that expressed Israel's beliefs about God and the world's origins, in stark contrast to the beliefs of their Near East neighbors. In those eleven chapters of Genesis are the marvelous stories many of us recall from childhood:

- Creation (how the original goodness of Creation came from the one God)
- Adam and Eve and the Fall (how sin entered the world)
- Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood (how the evil of sin spread)
- the Tower of Babel (how humanity, in terrible condition, was unable to save itself from its own sinfulness)

By the end of Genesis, chapter 11, the stage is set for the great drama that follows—the story of God's relationship with a special people through whom the world would be saved. The rest of Genesis tells of how one man, Abraham, and his descendants down to Joseph became that Chosen People, the Israelites.

But let's begin at the very beginning: "In the beginning . . ."

## Creation: Original Goodness

Where did we come from? Why are we here at all? Are we meant to be happy or miserable? Ancient peoples turned these questions over in their minds, as human beings have continued to do right down to today.

Many people in the ancient Near East, including the Babylonians, had rather pessimistic answers to these questions. They were **polytheistic**, worshiping many gods, and believed that the world had come from those gods—self-serving, violent, and destructive deities that had made the earth for their own pleasure, and humankind for their slaves. This was a chaotic world where human beings were caught in the middle of the gods' wars, trying to please first one bad-tempered god, then another, to avoid their wrath.

The ancient Jews had quite a different answer to the question of why we are here at all. Contrast the Babylonians' frightening worldview with the Jewish view in the Book of Genesis of a wonderful world created by God: Out

of chaos, the one God brings forth goodness—order, beauty, and abundant forms of marvelous life. It is all meant to be wondered at, enjoyed, and cared for by human beings, the last of God's creatures, who are made partners with God in loving all Creation.

In this first story, the sun and the moon and the stars are not gods that rule humans (as the Babylonians believed them to be) but are *created by* God as good and then are set calmly in their proper place in “the dome” (Genesis 1:7) of the sky. God is in charge! The great sea monsters, perceived as evil demons by many ancient peoples, are shown to be what they are—good, innocent creatures that God loves. Then God creates the first human (“*adam* in Hebrew, also meaning “earth creature”). This first human was understood to mean all of humanity, which was godlike, made in God's own image—full of dignity and beauty.

You can sense God's delight in such handiwork: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

*Read Genesis 1:1–31; 2:1–4.*

The story of Creation underlies a basic attitude in the Judeo-Christian heritage: God is good, we are good, and life is good. God cares about us and all Creation, and wants us to be happy. We are to uphold the inherent dignity and worth of each human being because all are created in God's image. And God has entrusted us with this amazing world, to be caretakers, not destroyers, of Creation. God wants full life for every person and intends for us to preserve and watch over the environment.

### **The Sabbath: A Gift of Rest**

The Creation story tells of God “resting” on the seventh day after a flurry of creative work. This might seem a curious detail to include, but remember that the story was written down during the exile. In that time, keeping the **Sabbath** was a sacred custom the Jews had carried with them to the exile. It marked them as unique among their neighbors. In Babylon the Sabbath took on much importance as a constant reminder for the Jews that they were God's people, not the Babylonians' or their gods'. So the

Creation story writer included God's own resting on the seventh day to emphasize the importance of keeping the Sabbath holy as a day to rest, praise God, and be refreshed together—a gift from God not to be turned down.

Jews today celebrate the Sabbath from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. For Christians the Sabbath is Sunday, recalling the day of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### **Is It Science?**

The Creation account in Genesis has stirred up controversy among believers, both Christian and Jewish, especially in the last century. **Creationists** insist that the account in Genesis is factually true—that is, God created the world in just seven days, in the order given in the story. **Evolutionists** argue that the universe has evolved over millions of years, with humankind as a late part of that evolutionary process. Evolutionists claim that the Bible's Creation account was never intended by its biblical writer to be a factual explanation. Developed in the literary form of a myth, it was meant to convey religious truth, not scientific fact.

The Catholic understanding of the Creation account is that no contradiction exists between the biblical story and the theory of evolution. The Genesis story is about the religious meaning of the origins of the universe, not the scientific facts of those origins. The church affirms that much scientific evidence supports the evolution theory. In no way does that shake the religious truth of the Creation account—the truth that God is the source of all goodness, including our own existence as human beings made in God's image.

In the story of Creation, we can see the magnificence of God's truth. It is expressed through the inspired poetic genius of its writer, probably a member of the priestly class of Jews, who with few words put everything in place.

## **Adam and Eve**

Genesis moves on to another account of Creation, which focuses on the story of **Adam and Eve**. Do not be concerned if some of the details are inconsistent with the first account. The biblical writers had the job of weaving together a number of different strands from their oral tradition. Sometimes,

when inconsistencies arose, they didn't worry about them but let both accounts stand. No doubt they figured that each one contributed some valuable religious truth that they did not want to leave out. From our vantage point, we can see God's inspiration at work in the writers' decisions about what to include.

In the story, Adam and Eve are created to enjoy the delightful garden and to be intimate companions for each other. They are also privileged to be on walking and talking terms with their Creator. But soon the man and the woman are caught up in disobedience and guilt. They have eaten the forbidden fruit, and feeling naked, they try to cover themselves. When they hear God approaching, they hide. God calls Adam, and his excuse for hiding is his nakedness. Yet earlier Adam was naked and unashamed. God asks if he has eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and Adam, unwilling to take the blame, tries to shift it to Eve. Eve, just as unwilling, accuses the serpent of tricking her.

Thus sin has done its work and ruined Adam and Eve's relationships—with God, between themselves, and with Creation. Now God foretells the consequences of their sin: Man's work will not give him perfect pleasure but will be difficult and will weary him, and woman will be subject to her husband and will bear children in pain.

*Read Genesis 2:4–25; 3:1–24.*

This story of Creation tells of the **Fall**—that is, the first sin of humankind—termed by Christians **Original Sin**. The “knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:17)—so alluring to Eve and Adam—is a knowledge that is God's alone. Adam and Eve are not satisfied with being what they are, humans made in God's own image, seen as “very good” by God, and destined for happiness. They looked at themselves and decided that their humanity was not good enough. Their sin was the denial of the goodness of Creation. Adam and Eve decided that they had to snatch divine likeness from God, when they had it already. Thus they damaged their relationship with God.

The ancient Jewish storytellers wanted us to understand that human beings, not God, destroyed life in the garden. Created with freedom, humans can choose to believe God and live in the divine image or to rebel against

God and reject their full humanity. The misery that follows results from human choice. Thus God does not create injustice in the world; human beings do so by their bad choices.

## **Sin's Spread: Cain and Abel**

Like ripples in a pond, sin will spread out over the ages and touch everyone. Genesis describes sin's spread first with a story about hatred between brothers that ends in murder, then with a story about depravity in society, and finally with one about arrogance among the nations.

The story of **Cain and Abel** tells of two brothers, sons of Adam and Eve—the first a farmer, the second a shepherd—offering gifts to God in sacrifice. God blesses only Abel's sacrifice and encourages Cain to rise above his jealousy. Angry, Cain murders Abel. So the first sin has begun to affect the human family, in the form of another sin, murder. As if that were not enough, in response to God's inquiry about Abel's whereabouts, we hear Cain's insolent reply, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9). Those familiar words are echoed even today in the responses of people who want to deny that they have any responsibility toward others.

*Read Genesis 4:1–16.*

## **More Sin and a Promise: Noah and the Flood**

The account of the **Flood** almost begins with "Once upon a time," so accustomed are we to hearing it as a nursery tale. The story tells of how bad things can get once sin spreads its ugliness. There is such depravity on the earth that God regrets creating the human race.

Only one man, **Noah**, finds favor with God and is instructed to build an ark to protect himself, his family, and some animals from destruction. Noah does as God commands, the Flood comes, and the ark safely rides the waters until they recede. All other creatures are destroyed.

Leaving the ark, Noah offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving. The story of Noah ends with God's first **covenant**, or solemn promise—with Noah because he obeyed.

*Read Genesis, chapters 6; 7; 8; 9:1–17.*

### God's Word Saves Us

The story of Noah is probably related to other similar flood stories found in ancient literature. The tale's authors were not interested in figuring out historical causes of the flood, if indeed such a flood occurred, but in teaching the powerful truth that whoever hears and obeys God's word will be saved, and whoever does not will be lost.

"Saved from what?" is the question. We know that devout people are not necessarily saved from disaster. Even those who Jesus says will live forever are not saved from calamity in this life.

The answer is that hearing and keeping God's word saves us from forgetting how to love and serve. When we *do* forget how to love, something happens inside us, where it is unseen. We turn hard and cold, perhaps not instantly but gradually. Our warm, fleshy heart eventually turns to cold stone without our even being aware of it. *That* is the awful fate that God wants to save us from.

### The Rainbow: A Sign of a Promise

The end of the Flood is marked with a rainbow as a sign of God's love for every creature on the earth, and a promise that the world will never again be destroyed by a flood. This promise is the first instance of a covenant between God and human beings, in the Bible. The next time you see a rainbow, remember how dearly God loves the earth.

## An Arrogant World: The Tower of Babel

The last of the prehistory stories in Genesis is the tale of **Babel**. Once again humankind tries to carve out a destiny of its own making. Here the presumptuous ambition of Adam and Eve to be equal to God is projected on a grand scale when the nations try to build a tower with its summit in the heavens so they can "make a name for themselves." God comes down to see the tower, is appalled by the nations' arrogance, and stops them by confusing their language and dispersing the peoples.

*Read Genesis 11:1–9.*

The story of Babel shows how sin has spread to affect even the behavior of the nations, who seek glory in power, might, wealth, superiority, and dominance—without a thought for God. Today the nightly newscasts are filled with stories of such attempts, as well as stories of the pain, corruption, and devastation they beget.

Thus the first eleven chapters of Genesis tell about God's good purpose for the world, and then how things went. These prehistory chapters come to a close with the world desperately in need of God's salvation.

If the first part of Genesis explains why things went wrong in the world, the second part tells how God chose a people to start setting things right again. This latter part of Genesis tells stories about the founders of the Israelites, the people chosen as the instrument through whom God would save the world.

## Abraham

Like the stories about Creation, the stories of the founders were remembered and told for centuries before they were written down. Unlike the stories of Creation, the stories of the patriarchs and the matriarchs take place in historical times. Their setting is a period about four thousand years ago (2000 to 1700 B.C.E.).

The first of these stories is about **Abraham** and his wife, **Sarah**. Through Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants, God would establish a people, a "nation," through which God would save the world. It all begins with the story of people who are willing to follow God's call wherever it leads them. Abraham and Sarah appear in the Book of Genesis first with the names **Abram** and **Sarai**.

### The Call of Abram and God's Promise

Among the Semitic nomads wandering along the highlands of the Near East is a man named Abram. (The word *Semites* refers to a number of ancient peoples of the Near East, from whom the Israelites descended.) Abram travels from the city

of Ur to the city of Haran, and it is in Haran that he hears God's call. God bids Abram to take his family away from all that is familiar and go to a land "that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). And God promises that from Abram's offspring will come a great nation, a blessing for the world. This is the first mention of God's **Promise** to the people who would become Israel. Abram takes Sarai, his nephew **Lot**, and all his possessions, and goes, not knowing where God is leading him or what to expect. In faith he follows a God he does not yet know to the land called **Canaan**.

*Read Genesis 12:1–9.*

The story of Abram's call, written as though God is speaking directly to him, is about Abram's struggle to understand the mystery of the gods—until it comes to him that one God is above all other gods. Abram's call probably came the way that God's call comes to anyone: silently, subtly, during the search for answers that we call prayer.

Abram may not have understood God as the *only* God, but as the God he would worship above all others. Even though belief in the one God is the cornerstone of Judaism, it was not yet clear to the people of Abram's time. But from a later perspective, Jews recognized the God of Abram as *the* one and only God.

Abram, an old man whose wife is childless and beyond her childbearing years, lets God lead him—and becomes the father of the faith of the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims. Recall the story of Babel, where human beings close themselves off to God in the illusion that they are "on top," in control. Their arrogance brings on disaster. Abram, on the other hand, is humble before God. He is open to God's purpose for his life, and is willing to leave behind all that is familiar to follow God's call. He knows he is not in control; God is. Thus God is able to accomplish great things through Abram.

## Count the Stars if You Can

Years pass, and Abram and his family travel to other lands and arrive back in Canaan. But still there are no children. Having waited faithfully and grown older, Abram begins to



doubt that he will have a son. He has no child; Sarai is barren, apparently unable to bear children.

God tells Abram to look up at the stars and count them if he can. God promises that Abram's descendants will outnumber the stars. And Abram believes, despite the apparent impossibility of it all. By *descendants* God refers to all who believe or will believe because Abram believes.

*Read Genesis 15:1–6.*

## An Alternative Plan: Hagar

Sarai continues to be childless, and she finally proposes that Abram take her Egyptian maid, **Hagar**, as a concubine and beget a child by her, which would legally belong to Sarai. This idea works, but not without a lot of bad feeling between the two women. At one point the pregnant Hagar runs away to flee the harshness of her mistress. In the wilderness a messenger of God appears to her. At his command she returns to submit to Sarai, fortified by the promise that her unborn son, **Ishmael**, will grow to manhood wild and free.

*Read Genesis 16:1–16.*

The customs in early biblical times of taking concubines and of practicing **polygamy** need some explanation: If a wife was barren, a female servant might become a surrogate childbearer, a concubine to the husband. Or the husband might take a second wife in order to give the family children. Both of these practices helped to assure the survival of the tribe.

## The Sign of the Covenant

God establishes with Abram a covenant, a solemn pledge on both sides. This repeats the covenant made previously with Abram—the Promise that he will bring forth a multitude of descendants, and that all the land of Canaan eventually will be his people's. The sign of the covenant between God and the people is a ritual for all males, **circumcision**, which identifies Abram's people as God's people. To reflect this new status and identity, Abram's name is changed to Abraham and Sarai's to Sarah.

*Read Genesis 17:1–22.*

## Visited by Strangers

Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day when he is approached by three strangers—who, we later learn, represent God. In a display of graciousness, Abraham offers them refreshment, water for bathing, and a place to rest.

According to the custom of the time, Sarah, as a woman, is not present in this scene, but she is listening behind the flap of the tent. When she hears one of the visitors say that in a year she will bear a son, she laughs out loud. The visitor answers her laugh with, “Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?” (Genesis 18:14). The story, rich in color and detail, repeats God’s promise to Abraham that one day he will be a father of nations.

These verses (Genesis 17:17; 18:12) contain a bit of wordplay: **Isaac**, the name that God gives to their son-to-be, means “laugh” in Hebrew.

*Read Genesis 18:1–15.*

The story of the visit to Abraham highlights a solemn obligation of biblical times: the giving of **hospitality**. For a traveler in the wilderness, hospitality was a matter of survival, and to be refused hospitality was sometimes a death sentence.

Abraham and Sarah offer hospitality out of kindness, without any inkling that these mysterious guests represent God and have something marvelous to tell them. The Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament hints at this story, which would have been quite familiar to readers of the letter, with these words: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (13:2).

## Pleading with God

As the story continues, God reveals to Abraham a plan to destroy the wicked cities of **Sodom and Gomorrah** if the complaints against their inhabitants are found to be true. Abraham pleads for the safety of his nephew Lot, who lives in Sodom. As Abraham again and again presses God not to

destroy the just people along with the wicked in this infamous city—even if they number only a few—God graciously agrees.

In Sodom the wicked inhabitants propose the rape of some young men (or angels) to whom Lot has given shelter. Rape is evil at any time, but doubly heinous considering the life-giving hospitality required by guests. Lot offers his own daughters in order to protect his guests—to no avail. So the cities will be destroyed, except for Lot and his family, the only just people remaining in those wicked places. The angels rescue Lot and his family. In the well-known ending to the story, Lot's wife, curious about the fate of the cities, looks back to check out the destruction and turns into a pillar of salt—a famous but unimportant biblical detail.

*Read Genesis 18:16–33; 19:1–29.*

## **Enter Isaac, Exit Ishmael**

Isaac is born, and now Sarah's laughter is of a joyful kind. Hagar is expelled because Sarah fears that Ishmael might threaten Isaac's inheritance. Again, we must admire Hagar's behavior. Alone in the wilderness with no water left and thinking that her boy will die, she walks some distance away from him because she cannot bear to watch his suffering. Then, aided by an angel of the Lord, Hagar finds a spring and saves her son. Ishmael goes on, with God's blessing, to live in the wilderness and eventually to take a wife. The story is a tribute to Hagar's perseverance and faith.

*Read Genesis 21:1–21.*

### **A God Who Chooses Imperfect People**

Curiously, Hagar emerges from the Genesis story more noble than the ancestral heroes Abraham and Sarah. Hagar is portrayed sympathetically, even though Sarah's son, not Hagar's, is the one God intends to be the ancestor of the Chosen People.

The Jews did not try to whitewash their heroes, only to show that God had chosen a people far from perfect. Yet in spite of their faults, God was able to make them a light to the world. And that says something encouraging to all of us imperfect people.

What of Hagar? The story makes it clear that God holds her and her offspring in the most tender care. Being chosen does not necessarily mean being more worthy, as the Israelites will be reminded over and over in their checkered history with their God.

Tradition has made Ishmael a **bedouin**—that is, a nomadic Arab—and the **father of the Arab peoples**. Islam claims Abraham as their father in faith through the line of Ishmael. So Abraham is considered the ancestor of all three great **monotheistic** religions in the world today: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

## Abraham's Sacrifice

The next story is often called **Abraham's test**. In it, God bids Abraham to take Isaac, the son he loves with all his heart, to a place on a mountain and sacrifice him as a holocaust—that is, a burnt offering. In anguish Abraham climbs the mountain with the boy. In answer to Isaac's question about what they will sacrifice, Abraham can only say, filled with faith, that God will provide a victim. At the last moment, an angel of God stops Abraham from killing his son, and instead a ram is provided for the sacrifice.

*Read Genesis 22:1–19.*

### What Kind of God?

The biblical writer displayed only admiration for Abraham's obedience. Clearly the writer had no problem with this story, but how can we come to terms with a God who would ask such a thing, even if not intending to carry it out—to say nothing of a father who would acquiesce?

Abraham came from a culture that occasionally reverted to human sacrifice in times of national crisis, as a desperate attempt to secure divine help. We do not know for certain if this was the case with Abraham, but people have often thought that they knew what God wanted and have been mistaken. Only when the angel stayed his hand did Abraham know what his God expected of him. Many people have interpreted the story of Abraham's test as confirming that God forbids human sacrifice, something that seems obvious to us today.

## Isaac and Rebekah: Best Biblical Romance

Abraham returns home, and at Sarah's death buys a field in which to bury her, the first piece of ground that his people possess in a land that will one day be theirs.

Isaac grows up, and Abraham, facing his own death, instructs his steward to find a bride for Isaac from among their tribe back in Haran. Now we have a novella—a little masterpiece of storytelling. Rich detail, exotic marriage customs, and the loveliness and generosity of **Rebekah** are woven together in the most beautiful of all the biblical romances. We glimpse Rebekah's adventurous spirit when she agrees to leave Haran immediately, over the protests of her kin. The story ends with the bride glimpsing Isaac as she approaches her new home and Isaac taking her to his tent, where he marries her. In Rebekah he finds comfort after the death of his mother.

Abraham marries again and has many children by another woman. When he dies—at the age of one hundred and seventy-five—Isaac and Ishmael bury him next to Sarah in the family's field.

*Read Genesis 24:1–67.*

## World Happenings Between 2000 and 1700 B.C.E.

### Africa

The Egyptian pharaohs no longer build pyramids as their tombs. Instead they are buried in tombs deeply tunneled into the walls of the hills on the western side of the Nile River.

### America

The Eskimo culture begins on the Bering Strait. Pottery is made in Mexican villages.

### China

The potter's wheel is introduced. Pigs, dogs, oxen, goats, and sheep are domesticated.

Abraham's unbelievable age at his death is an exaggeration common in biblical stories. It is a way of saying that Abraham was wise and blessed.

And so the story unfolds. Through many ins and outs, heroic moments, laughter, sinfulness, and sadness, God is at work. First through Abraham and Sarah, then through Isaac and Rebekah, God is keeping the Promise to fashion a people who will be God's own and a blessing for all the nations. After the disaster of the Fall and the rampant spread of sin and depravity over the earth, it looks as though God is beginning to put the world back together again.

But the drama is just getting started. . . .

## Jacob: A Man Named Israel

Once again, in the stories about Isaac and Rebekah's son Jacob, the biblical writer shows God at work building a people—making sure that the divine purposes are accomplished.

From the time of her pregnancy, Rebekah knows that the younger of the twins she will bear is destined to be the

### Europe

Early cultures begin using bronze to make tools and weapons. The Stonehenge circle in England is used for religious and astronomical ceremonies. Culture on the island of Crete is at its height; the bull-god is worshiped at the city of Knossos.

### India

Chickens and elephants are domesticated. Sacrifice is offered in the worship of a mother-goddess.

### The Near East

Around 2000 B.C.E. the destruction of Ur, the Near East's major city, results in the decline of the dominant culture.

principal heir to Isaac's goods and, most important, heir to his leadership of the tribe. By rights, the elder, the firstborn of the twins, should succeed his father. But Rebekah is convinced that God's purpose is otherwise, and she devotes herself to maneuvering the younger twin into the position of heir. This move will entail some deception, which Rebekah seems quite ready to engage in.

The twins are born—first **Esau**, the shaggy redhead, and then **Jacob**, following close behind, grasping Esau's heel as if trying to get ahead of him! Clued in by his mother as a child about his destiny, the young man Jacob manages to trick Esau into swearing over his birthright to him.

In time, father Isaac, old and failing in his eyesight, wants to give his dear elder son, Esau, his blessing to seal Esau's right to head the clan. Rebekah, ever alert on Jacob's behalf, stages an elaborate deception of her husband so that Jacob, not Esau, will get Isaac's blessing. Jacob puts goatskin on his neck and wrists so as to feel like hairy Esau to his near-blind father. Sure enough, the little drama works, and Jacob gets the prized blessing. Aghast, Isaac realizes he has been deceived, but he cannot take back his blessing once given. The furious Esau vows to kill Jacob one day.

For all her presumption, Rebekah sincerely believes that the will of God in this affair is in her hands. She strives to obey it at great personal risk.

*Read Genesis 27:1–41.*

## **Jacob Journeys to Haran**

To escape Esau's fury, Jacob suddenly must flee to Haran, where Abraham first heard his call from God so many years before. The young man can also find a suitable wife there, not a Canaanite that his mother would frown upon. Jacob—young, feisty, and self-satisfied—sets off with Isaac's blessing. Camping the first night, he dreams of angels ascending and descending from heaven. He hears the voice of God repeat the Promise made to Abraham, and names the place **Bethel**, meaning “the house or abode of God.”

In the final scene of this episode, Jacob seems to choose the terms of the relationship with God (Genesis

28:20–21), but God, not people, initiates covenants. Jacob sounds like a brash young man, who feels that it is his right to bargain with God.

*Read Genesis 27:42–46; 28:1–5, 10–22.*

## Life in Haran

Arriving in Haran, Jacob stays at the home of his uncle **Laban**. He is so good at helping with the flocks that Laban would like to keep him there, and marry off both of his daughters to Jacob as well. Jacob is in love with the younger daughter, **Rachel**. But Laban tricks him into marrying the older sister, **Leah**, after seven years, and then has him wait seven more years before giving him Rachel in marriage.

The years pass, and Jacob is older and wiser, although no less conniving. He has two wives, two concubines, and many children, and is totally fed up with Laban. In a kind of midlife crisis, he remembers the land of Canaan and God's Promise and wants to return home. So he and his substantial household of wives, slaves, and flocks set off for Canaan.

Midway to Canaan, Jacob remembers Esau. Fearful of his brother's anger, Jacob sends herdsmen ahead with large flocks of animals to be given as gifts to placate him. In his fright Jacob reminds God of the promise of protection, which he now desperately needs.

Reaching the border of Canaan, Jacob shepherds his family and flocks across a river and, staying alone on the other side, has a strange encounter, the meaning of which continues to puzzle scriptural commentators.

The mysterious being who meets Jacob in this story has been called by translators a stranger, a man, an angel—some even suggest a demon. This “someone” wrestles with Jacob until the break of day, when Jacob, refusing to let go, asks for a blessing. In reply the stranger asks his name, and when he says that it is Jacob, he is told that from now on he will be known as **Israel**, meaning “one who has contended with divine and human beings.” Left alone as the sun rises, Jacob marvels that he has seen God face-to-face and has not died.

*Read Genesis 32:23–32.*



The interpretations of this episode are so numerous that we are almost free to interpret it for ourselves. Was it a night of prayer? Was it a struggle with conscience? Was it a dream? Jacob—separated for fourteen years from his ancestral home and faced with Esau’s possible rage—could well have been terrified and torn between going on and turning back. In the context of biblical history, this is a curtain-raising story. Jacob is returning to the destiny long ago promised, to the land of Canaan, and to his place among the people chosen to be a blessing to the nations. He has been named Israel by God, and his descendants, God’s chosen ones, will be known as the Israelites.

## Family Worship of God

Jacob continues on to meet and make peace with Esau. He then goes to Bethel and builds an altar on the spot where he heard God’s promise on his outward journey. He orders his family to rid themselves of the trappings of their pagan religion—not only the household gods but also their ornaments, earrings, even clothing—in a purification rite that initiates the family into the worship of the God of Israel. Again God transfers to Jacob the blessing given to Abraham and Isaac, the Promise of the land of Canaan and a royal line that is to be a blessing to the nations.

In a short passage, we are told of the death of Rachel at the birth of her second son, **Benjamin**. Jacob returns home and finds Isaac still alive. At his death Jacob and Esau bury their father in the field where Abraham and Sarah lie.

*Read Genesis 35:1–29.*

## Joseph: Treachery, Triumph, and Forgiveness

The stories about Joseph are also about his father, Jacob, because God is not finished with Jacob yet. These famous tales also drive home the message that keeping God’s word brings rewards far beyond anything imaginable—and that God can bring good out of even the most wicked of deeds and desperate of circumstances.

## Sold into Slavery

**Joseph**, Rachel's first son, is seventeen years old and Jacob's favorite, but not his brothers'. Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher dislike Joseph because after he tended flocks with them, he told his father tales about their behavior. The others resent him for being their father's favorite, the son of Jacob's beloved Rachel. Jacob has had a long, flowing tunic made for Joseph—the garb of tent dwellers, not shepherds, and unlike the short, coarse garments that his brothers wear. Worse, Joseph's dreams contain portents that one day he will lord it over his family. When he rashly recounts these dreams, even Jacob rebukes him. The scene is set for his undoing.

One day the brothers are tending the flocks some distance away from home, and Jacob sends Joseph to see if things are well with them. As the brothers watch him approach wearing his long, flowing coat—hardly the clothing for a hike in the country—they plot to kill him and throw his body down a well. But **Reuben** has no heart for such a deed and suggests that instead they put Joseph into a dry well, for Reuben plans to return later to rescue him. The brothers do this and then sit down to eat—the writer's comment on their callousness.

Seeing traders on the way to Egypt, **Judah** suggests that they sell Joseph instead and avoid having his blood on their hands. The deed is done, and the brothers hide it by showing Joseph's coat, which they have dipped in goat's blood, to Jacob. Seeing the bloody coat, Jacob believes that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal, tears his own garments, and mourns the loss of Joseph for many days.

Here are all the elements of a family saga. Consider the parts of this melodrama:

- Jacob's favoritism
- Joseph's talebearing and boastfulness
- the brothers' envy and betrayal
- the brothers' deception of their father, Jacob (they seem to have inherited some of his traits)

The wonder is that, sinful and guilty as they are, God will lead these men to self-knowledge and remorse, some even to heroism and holiness.

*Read Genesis 37:1–35.*

## Joseph's Fate in Egypt

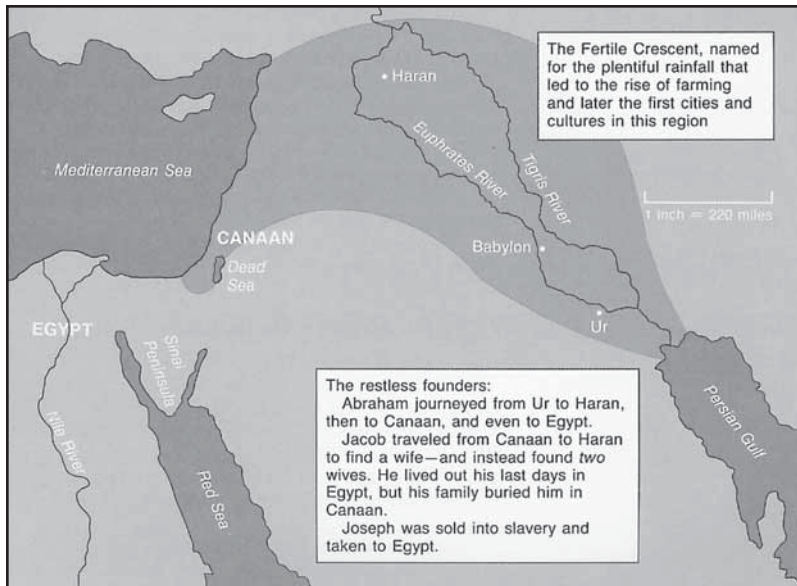
Once in Egypt Joseph does quite well for himself. Though a slave, he is given considerable responsibility under the pharaoh's chief steward. But Joseph lands in prison, falsely accused of rape by the steward's lustful wife, who has tried unsuccessfully to seduce the handsome young man.

Even in prison, though, Joseph is singled out as special. The knack for interpreting dreams that got him in such trouble with his brothers comes in handy when Joseph is asked to explain the pharaoh's dreams to him. He does so well at it that he gains the pharaoh's favor.

By the age of thirty, Joseph has been made governor of Egypt, second only to the pharaoh in power. He has married a beautiful Egyptian woman, and they have two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

Then severe famine strikes the whole Near East, including Egypt. But years earlier Joseph had predicted the famine through the pharaoh's dreams, and fortunately he has been storing up grain supplies for just such a disaster.

## The Founders' Journeys



People from all over the Near East go to Egypt to buy grain from the Egyptian surplus.

*Read Genesis, chapters 39, 40, 41.*

## The Brothers on Joseph's Turf

Back in Canaan, Jacob sends ten of his sons to Egypt to buy grain for the family's survival. And who is in charge of grain sales? Joseph.

Joseph's brothers, however, do not recognize him, and so Joseph takes the opportunity to toy with them a bit. He pretends to think they are spies and puts them in prison, refusing to sell them grain. Then he decides to let them go with the grain on condition they will return with their younger brother, Benjamin. As Jacob's dearest child after Joseph, Benjamin has not been allowed to come along on the trip. And they must leave one of the brothers, Simeon, as a pledge until they return!

Back home, the brothers plead with Jacob to let them take Benjamin back to Egypt so they can rescue the brother they left behind. Reuben even offers his own sons as a pledge for Benjamin's safety. But Jacob is adamant: they may not take his beloved Benjamin!

*Read Genesis 42:1–38.*

## Jacob's Sacrifice

Eventually Jacob's clan needs grain again, but without Benjamin the brothers cannot go back to Egypt for it. After bemoaning the terrible price he must pay, Jacob finally consents to part with Benjamin because his people must live. The sacrifice will take him to his grave, he cries, but he will do it.

*Read Genesis 43:1–14.*

Up until this point, we have not seen a lot to admire in Jacob's character. Consider his lifelong deceit, craft, and greed. Not until the moment when he agrees to sacrifice Benjamin (as Abraham was willing to do with his own son generations before) does Jacob become one of the great saints of the Scriptures.

## Return, Reunion, Reconciliation

Back the brothers go to Egypt, and on arriving they are invited to Joseph's house for a banquet—still unaware that he is the brother they sold into slavery. When Joseph sees Benjamin, he leaves the room to weep. Later, when Joseph sits down to eat, he sends tidbits from his own plate to share with Benjamin as a gesture of royal favor.

When the brothers prepare at last to leave with their grain, the steward hides Joseph's own goblet in Benjamin's sack as a plant. Once they are on their way, Joseph sends servants after them. The cup is found, and Joseph orders Benjamin to stay behind as a slave. Now Judah steps forward and, in a beautiful speech, pleads with Joseph to consider the aged father who will die if Benjamin fails to return. Judah pledges his own life in Benjamin's place, and Joseph, close to tears, sends everyone but the brothers from the room.

Weeping so loudly that the others hear him in the hall, Joseph finally reveals his identity, forbidding his brothers to blame themselves for their past misdeeds. Everything was allowed to happen, he says, so that when they were in danger of starving, someone would be there to feed them. Joseph's story is a tale of reconciliation and redemption.

*Read Genesis 43:15–34; 44:1–34; 45:1–28.*

Not only does Jacob get a bigger heart in this story, so do Joseph and his brothers. Joseph, who in his youth was boastful and proud, has the heart to forgive his brothers their wicked deed of selling him into slavery. The brothers have grown, becoming ready to make sacrifices for the well-being of those they love. The whole family has developed from bitterness and hate to tender appreciation of one another.

## Happy Ending

So all ends happily. The brothers return home, fetch Jacob and his family, journey back to Egypt, and settle there. Jacob is rewarded for his sacrifice of Benjamin by seeing all his sons reunited. In his old age, Jacob adopts Joseph's two

sons, Manasseh and Ephraim—which is why they are listed as two of the twelve tribes of Israel. When Jacob dies, Joseph takes his body back to Canaan for burial. Joseph also lives to old age, and makes his brothers swear that whenever their people return to the land of God's Promise, his bones will be taken there to be buried in the field where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob lie.

The stories of the patriarchs are all tales with happy endings—astonishingly so. Joseph's last request reveals, however, that the saga of ancient Israel is not over.

## Nourished Spirits

Imagine how the Genesis stories must have bolstered the spirits of the exiled Israelites in Babylon. They could see in these stories the pattern of God's work: *God worked with simple, flawed human beings to bring about God's Promise, that the people of Israel would become a "light to the nations," the people through whom God will save the world. Our all-powerful God makes good happen, in spite of our sin and weakness.* This hopeful message reached the exiles, who needed to recognize God's loving hand at work in the midst of their tragic failure.

By the end of the Book of Genesis, the descendants of Jacob Israel are living in Egypt. The stage is set for telling the story of the greatest event in the unfolding of God's plan among the Israelites—the Exodus.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What difference do a people's beliefs about their origins make to their attitudes about life? What does the Old Testament story of Creation tell you about your own worth and dignity?
2. "[God] rested on the seventh day" (Genesis 2:2). Create a chart of your typical week, noting how much time is given to work, social activities, family, friends, sleep,

and other things you're involved with. How would you evaluate your need for a *sabbath*?

3. "Am I my brother's keeper?" What does it mean to be responsible for another person? Who have been your "keepers" during your life?
4. Considering your experience, how have you encountered one act of sin leading to another and another.
5. "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Sarah laughs when she hears she will have a child in her old age. But with God nothing is impossible, nothing is too wonderful! Reflect on wonderful events from your life. What were the circumstances?
6. Usually we associate hospitality with physical needs being met, like the desert travelers welcomed by Abraham and Sarah. But more than offering food, drink, or rest, hospitality is about offering friendship and a safe presence. Think about the simple ways that you can show warmth, safety, and care—hospitality—to the people who make up the fabric of your life.
7. In the Israelites' understanding, things would work out the way God wanted them to—no matter what or who tried to get in the way. God could bring good out of situations that were weird, puzzling, unfair, or evil. Reflect on this idea, recalling examples from your own life.
8. Joseph forgives his brothers for selling him into slavery and abandoning him. Who needs your forgiveness? Are there any obstacles to forgiving? What might happen if forgiveness is withheld?

### 3

## The Exodus and the Covenant of Sinai

As a deer longs for flowing streams,  
so my soul longs for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold  
the face of God?

Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.

(Psalm 42:1–6)

The **Book of Exodus** is at the heart of the Old Testament. It proclaims the great truth that God freed the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob from oppression and slavery in Egypt, then formed them into a chosen nation, Israel, and created an everlasting bond with them through the Covenant of Sinai.

The Exodus stories, like those of Genesis and the other books of the Torah, were collected and edited into the Book of Exodus around the time of the exile in Babylon (seven hundred or so years after the Exodus took place). These accounts were close to the hearts of the exilic and postexilic Jews for many reasons:

- At the beginning of the story of the Exodus, the Israelites were living as slaves in a foreign land, Egypt. The Jews of the exile had a similar experience, living in Babylon as captive subjects of a mighty empire.



- The people of the Exodus struggled in a frightening and hostile wilderness. Similarly, the exiled Jews made a long, painful journey to Babylon, and back again to Judah some fifty years later.
- Most important for the Jews was God's revelation to their ancestors in the wilderness. Through Moses the people of Israel discovered the identity of their God, and through the Covenant, they found their own identity as God's people. Similarly, in Babylon, after repenting of their sins, the exiles rediscovered their true identity as God's beloved.

## The Exodus: Freed from Slavery

The Book of Exodus begins about four hundred and fifty years after the death of Joseph. The reigning pharaoh of Egypt, unlike the Semitic pharaohs of Joseph's time, hates and fears the people of Israel and orders them enslaved. Then comes the royal command: All Israelite males must be slain at birth.

### Young Moses

The story of **Moses** begins when his mother, to save her infant son from being slain by Pharaoh's orders, puts him in a basket and floats it on the Nile River, where he is discovered by Pharaoh's daughter. A little girl darts out of the reeds with the information that a Hebrew woman nearby could nurse the baby. The princess hires the woman to care for the child among the Hebrews until he is old enough to be returned to the royal household. Because the little girl and the nursing woman are Moses' sister, **Miriam**, and his mother, he grows up knowing that he is really an Israelite—although he is raised by Pharaoh's daughter as an Egyptian prince.

Reaching manhood, Moses sees an Egyptian slave driver beating a Hebrew one day. He is outraged at the injustice done to one of his own kinsfolk, so he attacks the slave driver, kills him, and buries his body in the sand. When he

finds out the next day that the murder is known to others, Moses fears Pharaoh's anger and flees Egypt eastward to the land of the nomadic Midians. There he meets a priest, marries one of his daughters, and becomes a shepherd.

*Read Exodus 1:6–22; 2:1–15.*

## The Burning Bush: In the Presence of the Holy

Life goes on miserably for the Israelite slaves; one cruel pharaoh replaces another. Though the Israelites have forgotten about the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they cry out in agony, and God is mindful of their suffering.

One day while tending sheep in Midian, Moses sees a strange sight—a bush aflame but not consumed. Drawing near, he hears God telling him to remove his sandals, for he is standing on holy ground. Moses is awed by the mysterious presence, then alarmed to hear the command that he return to Egypt and order **Pharaoh** to let the Israelites go. Moses protests that he is unsuited for such a task, but God insists. Again Moses protests: he does not know God's name. Who will he tell the people that their God is? God reveals the sacred name to be **Yahweh**—interpreted within the scriptural text as “I am who am” or “I am who I am.” Once again Moses excuses himself: the people will not believe him. God gives him two miraculous signs by which to convince the people—or at least himself. Still Moses argues: he is slow of speech and tongue, suggesting a speech impediment. Finally, God becomes angry and says that Moses' brother, **Aaron**, will accompany him and do the talking—but Moses is to go.

*Read Exodus 3:1–22; 4:1–17.*

Scholars suggest that the worship of the God named Yahweh was, in fact, unknown before the time of Moses. Although the early Israelites began to worship Yahweh within their own group, they did not necessarily see their people's God as the one and only God or as the God of all the nations. This belief came later. The concerns of Moses' people probably did not extend much beyond their own families and tribes.

For Jews the name Yahweh stresses the unutterable mystery of God, and out of reverence they have preferred not to pronounce it. Instead they substitute titles such as Adonai, meaning “the Lord.” Many Christian versions of the Bible have adopted the word *Lord* in their translations, meaning “divine sovereignty.” This book will follow the same practice.

## “Let My People Go!”

In Egypt Moses and Aaron give God’s message to the Israelites, who exult because the Lord has seen their affliction. Yet Pharaoh, when told of God’s command to “let my people go” (Exodus 5:1), is unmoved: Why should he heed a God of slaves? Isn’t he, Pharaoh, a god also—son of the great god Ra? Besides, freeing his workforce would upset the system. Accusing Moses of luring the Israelites from their work, Pharaoh doubles their burden. The people cry out that Moses’ promise of the Lord’s protection has not freed them but only increased their sufferings. They want no more to do with the Lord. Now God promises to take action.

Notice that the Israelites have to be convinced of God’s presence by miracles. They have been in Egypt for over four hundred years, and they no longer know their God. Yet God knows them.

*Read Exodus 4:27–31; 5:1–23; 6:1.*

## Pharaoh: Plagued by Plagues

Moses and Aaron return to Pharaoh and repeat their demand, Pharaoh ignores them, and then the ten plagues begin. Water turns to blood, frogs overrun the land, and gnats and flies torment the Egyptians. Sickness afflicts their cattle, boils plague the people, hail destroys the crops, and locusts eat what is left. Darkness covers the land, and Moses proclaims the final plague—death for the firstborn of Egypt. Pharaoh will beg them to leave, Moses says—but still Pharaoh is adamant.

*Read Exodus 6:28–30; 7:1–25; 8:1–11; 11:1–10.*

Were the plagues miracles or natural phenomena? As natural disasters they were not unknown to Egypt. But the point is that God freed Israel from Egypt—whether through miracles or natural occurrences.

Pharaoh's performance reads like that of a character in a TV soap opera. Note the following passages in Exodus:

- Pharaoh's arrogance in 7:22–23
- his bargaining and going back on his word in 8:4–15
- his wavering in 8:21–28
- his pretended repentance in 9:27–28
- his craftiness in 9:33–35
- his ransom plan in 10:8–11
- his hypocrisy in 10:16

Did God harden Pharaoh's heart, or was he naturally stubborn? The Scriptures say both things, ten times each, and both may be true. The human heart is hardened by flinging itself against the will of the loving God, and proud, powerful rulers do not give in easily, especially to slaves. The God of the lowly Israelites was in Pharaoh's way.

## Preparation for the Passover

God gives Moses instructions in preparation for the journey out of Egypt. Every family is to slay and roast a yearling lamb or kid, eat it with unleavened bread—a yeast dough would take too long to rise—and be ready to leave. Then they are to smear the top and posts of their doorway with the blood of the lamb so that the angel of God will *pass over* their home when striking down the firstborn of Egypt. The Israelites are to celebrate this meal every year as a perpetual reminder of the **Pesach**, or **Passover**.

At subsequent Passovers the Israelites rid their households of all leaven—that is, fermented dough kept from one baking to another, a form of yeast—and all leavened bread. Starting afresh with new dough symbolized a new life of freedom. Jewish families today do this during the Passover season and serve only unleavened bread, called matzo. From this custom came the Catholic use of unleavened bread in Communion.

*Read Exodus 12:1–14.*

The memorial meal of the Israelites became the Passover **seder**, or ritual meal, of the Jewish people. Although we do not know for sure, the **Last Supper**, Jesus' meal with his disciples the night before he died, was likely a seder. We do know that Jesus used the language, food, and ritual of the Passover to help his disciples understand the meaning of his own death in the context of their history. The Jewish seder celebrates freedom from slavery in Egypt and the longing for freedom everywhere in the world. The Last Supper has become the Christian Eucharist, which celebrates freedom from the power of sin and death through Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection.

### **"Go, and Good Riddance!"**

At midnight a loud cry rises up over Egypt as the firstborn of every household is discovered dead. As Moses has foretold, Pharaoh summons him and cries out that Moses and his people must go, that it will be a blessing to be rid of them.

At last the people of Israel leave—a ragtag crowd of slaves, foreigners, men, women, and children, unarmed and on foot, leading their milking animals, and carrying all their belongings—including the bones of their ancestor Joseph, who wanted to be buried in the **Promised Land**, the land of Canaan first promised to Abraham.

*Read Exodus 12:29–39.*

Again, the point of the story is *that* God freed the Israelites, not *how* God freed them. The slaying of the Egyptians' firstborn is not described.

### **The Great Escape: Crossing the Sea of Reeds**

God, in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, leads the Israelites. Hardly have they left when Pharaoh, in a rage, starts after them. The Israelites see his chariots in pursuit, are terrified, and cry out to Moses accusingly: "Were there not enough graves in Egypt? Is that why you brought us out to the desert to die?" (adapted from Exodus 14:11). Moses bids them to wait to see what the Lord will

do. The cloud moves to the rear of their camp and hides them from the Egyptians. Then the wind blows all night, parting the Sea of Reeds, and in the morning the Israelites cross safely—just ahead of the Egyptians. The water returns, and Pharaoh’s troops drown. Moses and his sister, Miriam, together with their people, sing a *canticle* praising God for the victory. Scholars believe that the oldest parts of the Old Testament might be found in two verses of Moses and Miriam’s canticle (15:1,21).

*Read Exodus 13:17–22; 14:1–31; 15:1–21.*

## **Murmuring and Grumbling in the Wilderness**

The people of Israel have hardly finished celebrating their new freedom when they begin to complain about the hardships of the journey. When the water is bitter, the Lord sweetens it. When they lack food, the Lord sends manna and quail. When again they need water, Moses strikes a rock and water gushes out.

*Read Exodus 15:22–27; 16:1–36; 17:1–6.*

Scholars are not sure what the food was that the Israelites called manna. One possibility is the sweet sap that forms on one variety of desert tree. Whatever it was, the Israelites depended on it as their “daily bread” throughout the forty years of their wandering in the wilderness.

## **An Exodus Perspective for the Exiles**

The Israelites were freed from slavery and oppression by the power of God and then led into the wilderness, where they had to learn over and over to keep trusting in God’s care for them. Reflecting on that reality centuries later, the Jewish exiles in Babylon understood what that meant for them in their oppressed situation: “The Lord will save us. The Lord will free us. And when we are tempted to give up in despair, the Lord will go on looking after us, giving us everything we need to keep going. *Trust the Lord.*”

## The Covenant of Sinai: An Offering from God

When the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai, Moses goes up the mountain. There God bids him to tell the people that the Lord has brought them safely to this place and that if they will keep the Covenant, they will be the Lord's holy nation, dearer than all other peoples. Moses returns to the people and repeats this message, and the people say they will do everything the Lord asks of them.

On the third day, as the people prepare themselves for God's coming, a great storm breaks out on the mountain. Lightning flashes, thunder peals, and dense clouds cover the peaks. Moses leaves the people behind to go up the holy mountain and receive God's message. Then the Lord gives Moses the Ten Commandments.

*Read Exodus 19:1–11, 16–19.*

Some scholars speculate that the writer may have embellished this account of divine visitation with details from Israel's later liturgical celebrations. The trumpet blasts and clouds of smoke that were included to symbolize the Lord's arrival could have been part of the celebration of the great event in the centuries that followed it.

## The Ten Commandments

The **Ten Commandments**, or the **Decalogue**, had a long history of development beginning in the time of Moses (1250 B.C.E.). Many other laws were added to them over the years and are included in Exodus—as well as in the Books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These later laws will be treated in the next chapter. Here we will look at the Ten Commandments in their historical context.

*Read Exodus 20:1–26.*

### No Other Gods

The first commandment did not say that no other gods existed, but it did declare that there was only one God of the Israelites and that they should worship no other.