GOOD WORD Schedule
"Genesis"
April, May, June 2022

#1	**April 02**	**The Creation**
#2	**April 09**	**The Fall**
#3	**April 16**	**Cain and His Legacy**
#4	**April 23**	**The Flood**
#5	**April 30**	**All Nations and Babel**
#6	**May 07**	**The Roots of Abraham**
#7	**May 14**	**The Covenant with Abraham**
#8	**May 21**	**The Promise**
#9	**May 28**	**Jacob, the Supplanter**
#10	**June 04**	**Jacob–Israel**
#11	**June 11**	**Joseph, Master of Dreams**
#12	**June 18**	**Joseph, Prince of Egypt**
#13	**June 25**	**Israel in Egypt**

Guests for this series of GOOD WORD broadcasts are Jody Washburn, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies: Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, and Alden Thompson, Emeritus Professor of the School of Theology, both faculty at Walla Walla University. Moderator and study guide author is Mathilde Frey, Professor of Biblical Studies: Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in the School of Theology at Walla Walla University.

For more information about GOOD WORD contact the School of Theology at Walla Walla University by phone (509-527-2194), email (GoodWord@wallawalla.edu) or regular mail (Walla Walla University, 204 S. College Ave., College Place WA 99324).

Past and present GOOD WORD and PROBE broadcasts are available from our website at www.wallawalla.edu/goodword. GOOD WORD is jointly sponsored by the School of Theology and KGTS at Walla Walla University.

GOOD WORD 2022.2	**The Creation**
Lesson #1 — April 02	**Genesis 1–2**
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: The Wonder of Creation

Leading Question: How would you describe a good world?

Genesis 1–2 contains the two primary biblical stories about creation of the universe where God brings order to the sky, the land, and the seas and fills the earth with living beings. These chapters stand in contrast to other ancient creation stories which centre around chaos, warring gods, and humans created to serve the gods. The two chapters address questions about the nature of God, the world, and humanity; about the reason for a seven-day week and Sabbath rest; about the intimate relationship between God and humanity; about ecology and the task of human beings to be stewards of God's created world.

Questions: What strikes you as significant about the way the Bible begins? What do you find most interesting about God's creation?

The first creation narrative is Genesis 1:1–2:3. It serves as the official gateway to the entire Bible and relates God's creative activities in seven paragraphs, that tell of God's seven days of creation. Over the course of six workdays, divinely spoken words resound in rhythmic and almost consistent fashion the making of a highly ordered universe. One of the often-overlooked wonders of the passage is its mathematical intricacy. The number seven is no random counting in the Hebrew Bible in general but is particular in its use in the Bible's first creation account. In the original text in the Hebrew language, the first verse consists of seven words; the second contains fourteen. The final section, Genesis 2:1-3, yields thirty-five words. And the total word count of the account in Hebrew is 469 or 7 x 67. In addition, there are a number of key phrases and key words: God "saw" and pronounced creation "good" seven times; "earth" or "land" (same word in Hebrew) appears twenty-one times; the word "God" is repeated thirty-five times. There are several more of these examples, but the most obvious and most important is that the seventh day marks the climax of the narrative, the only day declared "holy." In fact, we can argue that Genesis 1:1–2:3 is a numerologist's wonder- land.

Another amazing element in the Bible's first creation account is the theme of wholeness which seems to be God's foundational goal for the created world. This theme is related in the language of the text. For example, instead of saying "God created everything" the text says, "God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). This is a merism, a figure of speech, in which the combination of the two most contrasting elements refers to the whole including everything in between. For example, when we want to say that someone searched thoroughly, everywhere, we use the expression, "searched high and low." Throughout the Gen 1 creation account, similar contrasting elements appear. There are light and darkness, day and night, waters above and waters below, earth and sea, grass and trees, the greater light and the smaller light, fish and birds, animals and humans, male and female, God and humans, as well as the six occurrences of evening and morning.

In the first three days of creation, certain cosmic domains are established: first light, then the sky, the waters, and the land. In the second set of three days, each domain becomes populated with its own

members: lights, marine life, aviary life, and land animals, including human beings. In the course of creation, a remarkable symmetry unfolds as outlined in this diagram.

Unordered becomes ordered	Uninhabited becomes inhabited
Day 1: light	Day 4: lights
Day 2: air / water	Day 5: birds / fish
Day 3: land / vegetation	Day 6: animals / humans
Day 7: Sabbath	

The grand and glorious result is creation's "goodness." "Good" or "beautiful," repeated seven times in the divine speeches of Genesis 1, acknowledges creation's ordered integrity and intrinsic value. "Good" affirms creation's sustainability, its proclivity for fecundity. The world deemed "good" by God is creation set toward the furtherance of life: plants and fruit trees regenerate through their seeds; vegetation sustains all land animals, including humans and animals, who reproduce. Robust, resilient, evolving life is conclusive of God's creation.

The compelling notion of the human being as "image of God" (Gen 1:26–29) is one of the major contributions of the biblical creation account to our understanding of human nature and humanity's place in the world. It continues to serve as the theological basis of contemporary struggles for liberation and equality. As Martin Luther King Jr. notes, "Man is a child of god made in His image, and therefore must be respected as such" (King, 255).

Question: What would this world be like if every human being truly began to appreciate what it means that we humans are all vested with the image of God?

The first creation account concludes with the seventh day, holy and blessed by God who ceases from all his work (Gen 2:1–3). The seventh day, the climax of creation, sets the tone for the Sabbath theme in all of Scripture. In the holiness of the seventh day God discloses His divine presence within the created world. The Creator intends a relationship with the human being. The narrative shows how God's words are heard over the course of six days and His acts are seen in nature. However, it is when God's work is completed and His voice silent that His presence may be best perceived in the sacredness of the seventh day.

Question: Why is Sabbath-rest a key issue for God in His relationship with us and all created beings?

The second narrative (Gen 2:4–25), describes creation in an arid land by the LORD God (Yahweh Elohim) in much more anthropomorphic terms. The LORD God does not create by word in six days but by manual work without reference to time. Whereas the first account presented a cosmic panorama with everything set in its proper place, the second narrative shows the Creator at work as a potter, a gardener, a physician, and a builder. The LORD God forms the "earthling" (Hebrew *'adam;* related to *'adamah* meaning "earth") as the first act of creation (Gen 2:7), and intimately performs CPR on this earthling to bring it to life. Then, instead of creating by word of command, the LORD God "planted a garden" (Gen 2:8), "took" and "put" the earthling in it (Gen 2:15), "formed" from the same earth (*'adamah*) other living creatures (Gen 2:19), and then performed an elaborate surgical procedure by taking a "side" (Hebrew *tsela*; best read not as a single "rib" but as "side") and fashions the earthling's appropriate counterpart. It is only now that the earthling is described with the gendered terms "man" (Hebrew *ish*) and "woman" (*ishah*) in the creation account.

When read as an elaborate etiology for the institution of marriage, the second creation account presents this institution on the basis of relationship and wholeness between human counterparts and concludes with a compelling statement: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and be clings to his woman, and they are one flesh" (Gen 2:24). At the center of such intimacy and mutual companionship, there is neither fear nor shame, even before God (v. 25).

Question: The creation of humankind in Genesis 2 is humbling and beautiful. What does this creation account mean to you in your relationships?

The book of Exodus weaves both creation accounts into the lengthy narrative of the building of the tabernacle in Exodus 25–40. Here, Israel is called to make a home for God in the wilderness, because God desires to "dwell among them" (Exod 25:8). The pattern of God's speeches about the building of the tabernacle follows the pattern of the creation account in Genesis 1:1–2:3 and integrates numerous concepts from the creation account in Gen 2:4–25. Here too, the Sabbath holds an elevated place and shows that the Creator God of the first pages in the Bible is the Redeemer God of Israel. The LORD God, who created the universe, also liberates from slavery through majestic creational acts, and desires to live among human beings inspite of their destructive behaviors.

In his "Faith Lecture: Creation," Rabbi Jonathan Sacks remarked, "It is not difficult for an infinite Creator to make a home for mankind. What is difficult is for mankind to make a home for God."

GOOD WORD 2022.2	**The Fall**
Lesson #2 — April 09	**Genesis 3**
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: A Fractured World

Leading Question: Was it really a question of picking and eating the wrong kind of fruit?

Genesis 3 is an exceptionally rich story, full of irony and ambiguity about a world of loss and pain and death, but also a story with the promise for a restored world at its very core.

First, it is important to note that the identification of Genesis 3 as the "fall of humanity" and "fall into sin" cannot be interpreted with terminology and concepts specific to sin. The word "sin" is not mentioned anywhere, neither the word "fall." There are however other terms and negative descriptive images about life in the aftermath of eating from the forbidden tree. They are descriptions of the result of a different kind of nakedness from the one in experienced by the couple in the bliss of the garden. Nakedness in Genesis 3 seems closely related to the serpent and the consequences are fear, shame, and blame. These, according to Genesis 3, pervade and fracture all life.

Genesis 2 ended with a description of the couple's mutual and blissful relationship: "And the two of them were naked/exposed (Hebrew *'arom*), the man and his woman, and they were not ashamed before each other" (v. 25; my translation).

Genesis 3 introduces the serpent with these words: "But the serpent was more cunning/exposing (Hebrew *'arum*) than all the animals of the field" (v. 1). The play on the Hebrew root *'arom* and *'arum* could not have been lost on the Hebrew speaking audience. After the couple listened to the serpent, "their eyes were opened and they knew that they were naked" (Gen 3:7).

Question: What is different about being naked in Genesis 3 compared to the nakedness of the couple in Genesis 2?

Genesis 3 tells of three major characters whom God questions and addresses individually in Gen 3:9–19. These characters are the man, the woman, and the serpent. The structure of this section is a remarkable chiasm with the divine verdict, curse, and promise placed at the center:

A God questions the man; the man responds (3:9–12)
  B God questions the woman; the woman responds (3:13)
    X God speaks addresses the serpent (3:14–15)
  B' God addresses the woman (3:16)
A' God addresses the man (3:17–19)

Much debate has focused on the identity of the serpent. In Genesis 3, the serpent is no supernatural being; he is simply identified as an animal of the field created by God. Nevertheless, the serpent is best understood as a living metaphor, representing an agent in God's good creation who is not only able to facilitate options for human will and action but is ultimately identified as the culprit, the guilty one (Gen 3:14). Perhaps the Hebrew word for "serpent" (*nachash*) yields a clue for such a sinister character in its related verb form with the meaning, "to murmur an obscure incantation," "to give omens," "to be ominous."

In the history of interpretation on Genesis 3, the association of the serpent with the "devil" begins already in the intertestamental Book of Wisdom, "By the envy of the devil, death entered the world, and they who are allied with him experience it" (2:24). The accounts of Jesus' temptation (Matt 4:1–11; Mark 1:12-13; and Luke 4:1–13) tell of similar connotations. But it is in the Book of Revelation where one reads, "And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him" (Rev 12:9).

Question: Why is it not good for human beings to have the knowledge of good and evil?

With regard to the other two characters, the woman and the man, Christian interpretators have not contributed much to help clarify the story in Genesis 3. While reading the reference to the serpent figuratively and identifying the serpent as the devil or Satan, interpreters have not been consistent in reading the references to the woman and to the man in a similar way. The woman in Genesis 3 is most often recognized as the first woman created by God. God's words to her in Gen 3:16 are taken as God's curse for her life and for all women born on earth. The hermeneutical inconsistency of not applying a figurative interpretation similar to the serpent's has resulted in millenia-long misogynistic readings of the text. Here are just a few of such examples from prominent Church Fathers and Reformers:

> "In pain shall you bring forth children, woman, and you shall turn to your husband and he shall rule over you. And do you not know that you are Eve? God's sentence hangs still over all your sex and His punishment weighs down upon you. You are the devil's gateway; you are she who first violated the forbidden tree and broke the law of God. It was you who coaxed your way around him whom the devil had not the force to attack. With what ease you shattered that image of God: Man! Because of the death you merited, even the Son of God had to die… Woman, you are the gate to hell." (Tertullian, c. 160–226)
>
> "Woman does not possess the image of God in herself but only when taken together with the male who is her head, so that the whole substance is one image. But when she is assigned the role as helpmate, a function that pertains to her alone, then she is not the image of God. But as far as the man is concerned, he is by himself alone the image of God just as fully and completely as when he and the woman are joined together into one." (Saint Augustine, 354-430)

> "As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from a defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence." (Thomas Aquinas, 1225–1274)
>
> "The word and works of God is quite clear, that women were made either to be wives or prostitutes. Men have broad and large chests, and small narrow hips, and more understanding than women, who have but small and narrow breasts, and broad hips, to the end they should remain at home, sit still, keep house, and bear and bring up children." (Martin Luther, 1483-1546)
>
> "Do not any longer contend for mastery, for power, money, or praise. Be content to be a private, insignificant person, known and loved by God and me. . . . Of what importance is your character to mankind, if you was buried just now? Or if you had never lived, what loss would it be to the cause of God?" (John Wesley, 1703-1791, written in a letter to his wife on July 15, 1774)

Question: How would a consistent figurative interpretation for the woman (Gen 3:16) and the man (Gen 3:17–19) change the story of Genesis 3? How would it affect our way of thinking about women in church? What about men?

Note how the Bible uses "woman" as a figure for God's people in numerous texts in the Old Testament: Hosea 2; Jer 2:1–11; 6:2; Lam 1:1–7; Mic 4:8–10; 7:1–18; Isa 40:1, 2; 54:4–6; 62:11; 32:9–15; Zeph 3:14; Zec 9:9; Song of Songs; Ezek 16. God's people are referred to as:

- "bride"
- "daughter of Zion"
- "Jerusalem"
- "princess"
- "wife"
- "barren woman"

The prophet Isaiah contains a particularly poignant passage in Isa 54:1–6 (my emphasis):

"Shout for joy, **o barren one** …
Fear not, for you will not be put to shame;
And do not feel humiliated, for you will not be disgraced;
But you will forget the shame of your youth,
And the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.
For your husband [*ba'al*] is your Maker,
Whose name is the LORD of hosts;
And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel,
Who is called the God of all the earth.
For the LORD has called you,

Like a **wife** forsaken and grieved in spirit,
Even like a **wife** of *one's* youth when she is rejected."

Note how the New Testament uses "woman" as a figure for God's people in Eph 5:22–32; 2 John 1:1; Rev 12; 19:7–9; 21:1–9; 22:17 and speaks in the following images:

- "bride"
- "lady"
- "Jerusalem"

- "pregnant woman"

With regard to the "man" in Gen 3:17–19, the figurative interpretation in male imagery in the rest of the Old Testament is overwhelmingly present in expressions about Israel as God's son or firstborn son in passages as, Exod 4:22; 13:1–2, 12–15; 22:29; 34:19–20; Num 3:12–13, 40–50; 8:16–18; Deut 14:1; 33:17; Jer 3:19; 31:20; Hosea 11:1.

The New Testament uses imagery in a variety of ways in an inclusive manner with Paul being the most explicit in his famous words, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

- Corporal: The Church as Body (Rom 12:4–5; 1 Cor 10:17; 12:12, 27; Eph 4:12; 5:23, 30; Col 1:24)
- Architectural: The Church as Building/Temple (1 Cor 3:11, 16–17; 6:19; Eph 2:19–22; 1 Tim 3:14–15; 1 Pet 2:5–7; Heb 3:6)
- Agricultural: The Church as Plant/Field/Vineyard/Vine (1 Cor 3:5–6; John 15:1–2)
- Familial and Marital: The Church as Family and Bride (Matt 12:49–50; 2 Cor 6:18; 11:12; Eph 2:19; 5:31–32; Gal 6:10; Rev 19:7–8; 21:9)

We may conclude that the Bible uses female and male imagery to speak of and describe God's people or God's church throughout the ages. Both the woman and the man in Genesis 3 may be read as symbolizing and embodying the church of God within His plan of salvation, and the serpent as the ultimate enemy of the church. Nevertheless, the "pregnant woman" of Revelation 12 does give birth to the Christ-child, who alone is the head of the entire body of the church (Col 1:18).

Question: How does the man react to God's declaration, "Dust you are and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:19)?

GOOD WORD 2022.2	**Cain and His Legacy**
Lesson #3 — April 16	**Genesis 4**
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: A Violent World

Leading Question: Does God favor some over others?

Eve bears two sons, Cain and Abel. The brothers grow to become a shepherd and a farmer, taking up the creational commands to have dominion over the animals and to cultivate the earth (1:28). To cultivate the earth was reiterated by God in Gen 3:23, which was explicitly met by Cain in his line of work. The brothers bring offerings without any command to do so from the yield of their labors; and, Cain is the first to do this worshipful act.

Question: Was Cain's offering truly not good enough?

John Walton, Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College (Illinois) writes in in his blog titled, "Hebrew Corner" about Cain's sacrifice:

> In popular circles the tradition that Cain's offering was unacceptable because it was not a blood sacrifice is still very common, despite the fact that no major evangelical commentary on Genesis in the last several decades endorses it. The offerings that Cain and Abel bring are described in the text by the term *minhâ*. In Leviticus, the *minhâ* is discussed in ch. 2, where NIV translates it as "grain offering." Its purpose is simply to give a gift to honor deity, and is usually given in a context of celebration. It often accompanies an animal sacrifice, but usually is comprised of grain. Outside of ritual contexts, the term can be used in personal or political senses. In political contexts it refers to tribute paid from a vassal or subordinate state to the overlord (2 Kings 17:3-4). When individual persons are involved the term refers to a gift to give deference or honor (Gen 32:18; 43:11; 2 Kings 8:9). These usages are duplicated in cognates across the Semitic languages.
>
> Consequently, it is clear that the problem with Cain's sacrifice did not have anything to do with the absence of blood. Fruit and vegetable offerings would have been just as appropriate for a *minhâ* as animal offerings would have been. Additionally it should be noted that even Abel's offering is described in terms of "fat portions" with no reference to blood. Finally, blood is usually used in the sacrificial system to accomplish *kpr* (NIV: "atonement"—see next week's blog). Genesis 4 neither mentions a need for *kpr* nor the procurement of it for Abel. We must look elsewhere to identify the fault in Cain's offering.

Question: Where do we get the idea about Can's sacrifice as a faulty offering?

Read: Hebrews 11:4

When reading this verse about Cain and Abel's offerings in the New Testament, it is important to recognize that Hebrews refers to the story of Genesis 4 based on the Greek translation of the Bible in the Septuagint (LXX). It was this ancient version, not the Hebrew Bible, which was used by the

majority of Gentile Christians in the early church, and not the Hebrew Scriptures. The differences between the Hebrew text and the LXX are noticeable in the story of Genesis 4, and seem to be directly related to the question: what was wrong with Cain's sacrifice?

The Hebrew Bible does not distinguish between the offerings brought by Cain and Abel: both are described in Gen 4:3–5 as *minhâ*, a term explained well by John Walton in the section above. The Septuagint, however, clearly distinguished between the offerings of the brothers. Cain's offering of fruits of the earth is designated as *thysia*, a general word meaning "sacrifice," while Abel's animal sacrifice is called dōra, "gifts" (Gen 4:4). Scholars argue that this difference in translation influenced the rendering of Abel's offering as a "better" sacrifice in Hebrews 11:4. In addition to that, Hebrews makes a strong argument about faith as Abel's testimony and legacy.

Question: So, what did Cain do wrong?

There is a verse in Genesis 4 that does not make sense at all. It starts with Cain who resents the fact that Abel's offering is accepted while his is not. God senses his rising anger and warns him to control it, but Cain isn't listening. Then comes the fateful verse. Literally translated from the Hebrew it says,

"Cain said to his brother Abel,
and while they were in the field,
Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him"

This does not make sense and neither does the syntax of the sentence. "Cain said," but then we don't get to read what Cain said. Only the translations of the Hebrew text into Greek and other languages (Septuagint, Samaritan Pentateuch, Vulgate, and Syriac versions) add a phrase telling that Cain said, "Let's go into the field." This phrase appears in some of our English Bibles in Gen 4:8 (NIV, NET, RSV, NRSV, GNT).

> But the original Hebrew says what it does for a reason. It says, "Cain said to his brother Abel," and then lapses into silence before telling us that Cain attacked his brother. The fractured syntax conveys more powerfully than any well-formed sentence could, that conversation between the brothers broke down. They stopped speaking. Words failed. Cain was too angry to verbalise his feelings. The next phrase tells us the result. When words fail, violence begins. (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, 2011)

Question: "Where is Abel, your brother?" How does one live in a violent world?

Interestingly, Cain does not deny his murder. He does not say, "It was not me," or "It was not my fault." But he denied his moral responsibility. In response to God's question, "Where is Abel, your brother?" he asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9). In effect, he asked why he should be concerned with the welfare of anyone but himself. Why should he be responsible for another? Why should we not, do what we want if we have the freedom and power to do it?

Yes, God gave us freedom, but with freedom comes responsibility. As Christians we understand this principle. The responsible life is a life that responds to the world around us, to the people next to us, to the "other." It is notable that the Hebrew word for responsibility (*achrayut*) comes from the word *acher*, which means "other."

GOOD WORD 2022.2	**The Flood**
Lesson #4 — April 23	**Genesis 6**
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: A World Under Water

Leading Question: If God asked for your opinion before opening up the floodgates, what advice would you give? How might you have responded to "the wickedness of human beings on earth" (Genesis 6:5)?

Genesis 6–9 presents a story that challenges our assumptions not only about the nature of God but also about the biblical text and how it relates to other ancient flood stories. For example, the biblical flood story has numerous rival myths from many cultures in the world, including ancient documents that report striking parallels to Genesis 6–9. Perhaps, the most famous document is the Babylonian "Epic of Gilgamesh," which tells the story of a man by the name of Utnapishtim. The gods decide to destroy the earth, there is a great flood, and because Utnapishtim is the favorite of the god Ea, he is saved. Here are some of the similarities that the Epic of Gilgamesh and the biblical flood story share:

- A divine commitment to destroy most of humanity
- The focus on a named flood survivor
- Building an ark or boat that is described in detail in the narrative
- Animals being put on board to preserve their species
- The flood itself
- Sending out birds to see if the flood waters have receded
- Post-diluvial sacrifices with regard to the new relationship between humanity and the divine

While the similarities have drawn much attention, there are important differences:

- The different number of gods involved, which reflects the polytheism of Mesopotamia; in contrast is the monotheism noted in the biblical account.
- The depiction of the storm. In Genesis, the storm is hardly mentioned, while the depiction in Gilgamesh is vivid and violent.
- The subplot of Ea, the god of wisdom, plotting to save Utanapishtim, his favorite in Gilgamesh, is completely missing from Genesis. Noah is not arbitrarily saved. He is a "righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God" (Gen 6:9).
- The warning to of the flood. In Genesis, God warns Noah explicitly of the coming destruction, but in Gilgamesh, Ea tells Utanapishtim to couch his prophecies in riddles.

Question: How does the fact that there are many flood stories from different cultures in the world affect your understanding of the biblical account?

The biblical story of the flood has traditionally been understood as a unified narrative about God's punishment of fallen human beings for their great inclination or propensity to sin. However, Genesis 6–9 presents details and perspectives that do not always flow easily. For example, in Gen 7:1–17 one could understand that the flood lasted for 40 days, but then in verse 24 we read that it was 150 days. Another detail is about the number of animals that were to be taken aboard the ark, according to Gen 6:19 it was one pair of each, but according to 7:2 it was one pair of the unclean and seven pairs of the clean animals. One more example is about the birds. Did Noah release a raven which "went to and fro until the waters were dried up" (Gen 8:7), or a dove which on the third occasion "did not return to him again" (Gen 8:8–12), or was it both? Despite the variations, the story in Gen 6–9 forms a unified whole, such that biblical scholars see in it a chiasm, that is a literary structure in which the first item matches the last, the second the second-last, and so on.

Question: How could God destroy his own created world? What kind of God is that?

Genesis 6 presents us with two reasons for the flood. The first is stated in vers 5: "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man [*ha-adam*; "humankind, humanity"] was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." God's response to this innate moral condition is, "The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart" (v. 6). The LORD's emotion translated as being "sorry" or "he regretted" comes from a deeper place than what the English translations are able to convey. The Hebrew word, *nacham*, used in this verse pictures God taking deep breaths, sighing, even panting as a woman panting and gasping in order to find relief during labor pains in childbirth. Such a deep emotional portrayal of God surely averts from the idea that God would send the flood purely as a punishment for humanity's sins. God is not just sending down the waters to destroy the earth, no, the LORD is present and gasping for air in the world of evil human beings. Furthermore, God is accompanied by another one who is gasping as well. His name, Noah, conveys that very meaning in the original Hebrew *Noach*. His father Lamech thought he would be the one to change the course of life on earth, and so "he called his name Noah [*noach*], saying, 'This one will give us rest [*nacham*; "provide us relief"] from our work and from the toil of our hands *arising* from the ground" (Gen 5:29). Humanity's evil heart provoked the LORD to "breathe deeply," "to gasp," and then pair up with Noah, who himself "gasped."

Question: How does the LORD's reaction to an evil world change your perception of God?

Note the parallel lines in Genesis 6:6 that are best read as follows:

"The LORD gasped, for He had made the earthling on earth,
And He was grieved to his core."

Question: Why was it necessary to destroy the entire planet along with humanity?

To describe the nature of the earth's corruption the Bible uses two words in Gen 6:11–12: the earth was "corrupt" or "ruined" (*shachat*) and filled with "violence" (*chamas*). The verb "to be ruined" is

used five times in Genesis 6. “To be ruined” refers not only to the moral corruption of human beings but to the destruction of the planet.

The world does not belong to us. Even our very lives are a gift from God. When we abuse the gift of life to harm others or the world that God has made, instead of investing in serving others, we squander his gift. In the flood story, we are told that God took back the gift of order in creation. The refrain of Gen 1 is that God made everything “good” (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). When God started making the world liveable, darkness was over the “deep,” and his Spirit hovered over the waters (Gen 1:2). Humanity, however, had managed to ruin God’s world. As a result, God acted in judgment, and the fountains of the “deep” erupted, inundating the earth with water (Gen 7:11). (The Hebrew term translated “deep” is significant here, since Genesis uses it only four times.) God was the one who had given the breath of life (Gen 2:7); now he took it back (Gen 6:17; 7:22).

Genesis firmly anchors the meaning of the flood in the context of God’s intervention to stop humanity’s headlong slide into evil. God doesn’t take pleasure in the flood. Rather, Genesis highlights how the wickedness unleashed by the Fall caused God sorrow and grief. His heart was broken.

Read through the prism of our current climate crisis, as floods and other weather-related crises threaten our very survival, one can read the lawless violence of humanity in our days as an affront to nature, our negligence of its consequences, and our inevitable decline as a civilization if we do not respond and act in remedial ways.

Later on, when Isaiah the prophet remembers Noah (Isaiah 54:9), he doesn’t think of the flood, but the covenant God made with Noah afterward. In that covenant, God promises that nothing like this will ever happen again. This points to the key meaning of the story: the flood is about God’s mercy and commitment to the goodness of what he has made. Simply put, the story of Noah’s flood is a story of God’s re-creation.

GOOD WORD 2022.2	**All Nations and Babel**
Lesson #5 — April 30	**Genesis 10–11**
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: A Scattered World

Leading Question: Why is a unified world threatening to human life?

Life after the flood begins with God's solemn oath:

> "I will never again curse the ground [*'adamah*] on account of the human [*'adam*],
> **for the intent [*yetser*; "form"] of the heart of the human [*'adam*] is evil from his youth**;
> and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done."
> (Gen 8:21; my translation).

Note the following:

> "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of the human [*'adamah*] was great on the earth, and that **every intent [*yetser*; "form"] of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually**.
> . . . The LORD said, 'I will blot out the human [*'adam*] whom I have created from the face of the land [*'adamah*] . . ."
> (Gen 6:5, 7; my translation)

1. The evilness of the human heart was already identified before the flood in Gen 6:5 and used as a reason to wipe out human life from the earth (v. 7).
2. After the flood, nothing changed about the problem of the human heart.
3. Nonetheless, in spite of, or **because** of the evilness of the human heart, God vows to keep His covenant for the sake of life which He created on earth.

There is a similar example in the story of the golden calf (Exodus 32–34), where the human condition is phrased as "obstinate" or "stiff-necked" (Exod 33:7; 34:9). This condition is first stated as a reason for God to give up on the people of Israel. But then, it is stated again in the same wording, as a powerful reason for God to continue His covenantal promises with Israel. Note:

1. God says, "I will not go up in your midst, **because you are an obstinate people**, and I might destroy you on the way" (Exod 33:7).

2. Then Moses appeals, "O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go along in our midst, **because the people are so obstinate**, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your own possession" (Exod 34:9).

Question: How does God's acknowledgment of the human condition impact or change our view of God in the stories of the Old Testament? How does it impact our life with God?

After the Flood, "the whole world branched out" from the three sons of Noah (Gen 9:19). In chapter 10, this statement turns into an intricate series of geneaologies. Seventy nations are identified by their names, their lands, with their own languages (Gen 10:1–5). This chapter about human diversity stands in parallel to the biodiversity of God's creation in Genesis 1, where a key-recurring word is, "after their kind" (used 10 times). God created plants, animals, birds, fish, according to their different kinds. The essence of Genesis 1 is ordered diversity, "and God saw, and it was good" (Gen 1:24).

After Genesis 10 with the list of seventy names, that are nations, languages, and lands, follows the opposite story—the tower of Babel (Gen 11). Here, "The entire earth had one language and a common speech" (Gen 11:1). Doesn't this sound so much more peaceful and idyllic? Also, different from the people before the flood, the builders of this world are bent on construction, not destruction. But then God intervened and confused their language and scattered them over the whole earth.

Question: Why would God stop a project where people want to live together in unity?

Archaeological evidence helps us answer this question. Mesopotamia, which included Babel/Babylon and Assyria was the home of the world's first empires. From the neo-Assyrians we know that they imposed their own language, Akkadian, on the peoples and nations they conquered. A cylinder inscription of Sargon II (722–705 BCE) states that he had conquered many nations "with strange tongues and divergent speech" and caused them all to "accept a single voice" (Dûr-Sharukkîn Cylinder). Also, Ashurbanipal II (669–631 BCE), who is known as one of the most brutal kings, boasted according to an inscription that he made "the totality of all people speak one speech" and made "the unruly and ruthless kings speak one speech from the rising of the sun to its setting."

The ancient kings who forced unity of language and culture upon defeated nations was the endeavor of ruthless imperialism. The structure that still testifies to such imperialist power demonstrations is the excavated base of the Etemenanki ziggurat, a 6-floor high staircase pyramid with a temple on top dedicated to the Babylonian deity Marduk. Its name is given in the Esagila tablet as "tower with its head in the heavens," which almost exactly describes the biblical story of the tower of Babel. When Genesis 11 is read in the context of such power impositions, it turns out that the diversity of languages is not a result of God's punishment but about a critique of imperialism, the coercion of a single culture and language on a plural world.

Sometimes, Christians view cultural diversity as part of the fallen world, as a curse. This view has often been justified with the story of the tower of Babel. However, as a closer reading of Genesis 11 suggests, God's confusion of "tongues" or languages at Babel was not a curse but rather God's intervention to prevent imperial execution of power over other people groups. In effect, it was God's intervention of grace.

The builders of the Tower of Babel held the false belief that through the unity that results from forced homogeneity, people could be at peace, could have access to heaven and could approach God. Babel was a project of ideological and religious uniformity, and God did not agree to it.

Question: So, is diversity a good thing? Does God want diversity?

"Biblical monotheism is not the idea that there is one God and therefore one gateway to His presence. To the contrary, it is the idea that the unity of God is to be found in the diversity of creation . . . Unity in heaven creates diversity on earth" (Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, 53–54).

When religious fundamentalism tries to impose faith on others by force, it builds a "Babel" tower!

Question: How does God react to our hubris?

The builders had constructed a stairway to heaven, "And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of man had built" (Gen 11:5). This is God laughing. On earth, humans thought they had reached the sky, but to God the building was so tiny and indiscernible, so microscopic, that He had to come down to see it. There is an old saying that what makes God laugh is seeing our plans for the future, seeing our delusions of grandeur. From the vantage point of heaven, the ultimate absurdity is when humans start thinking of themselves as more than human, as gods.

GOOD WORD 2022.2	**The Roots of Abraham**
Lesson #6 — May 07	**Genesis 12**
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: God and Abraham

Leading Question: What is Faith?

The journey of Abraham with God begins with two words, *Lech Lecha*, "God said to Abraham, 'Go forth [*Lech Lecha*] from your land, your birthplace and your father's house to a land I will show you'" (Gen 12:1). The Bible does not tell us about his childhood, his youth, his relationships with his family, how he married Sarah, or anything about his character. Why would God call Abraham to become the one whom we credit with monotheism and the father of faith of the three monotheistic religions in the world, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The story of God's people begins with a call to journey into the unknown. And then, God makes three foundational promises. (1) He promises a seed, "I will make you a great nation" – childless Abram will become a father of a great family, and indeed a multitude of nations. (2) He promises land, "the land that I will show you." (3) He promises blessing; this most significant point of God's promise has two aspects. First, divine protection: "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse." Second, blessings to *all* nations: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Question: What gives Abraham the strength and courage to go forth?

God made it clear that the first step is that Abraham had to be willing to leave—it's only later, with God's help, that he'll figure out the destination. The medieval commentator Rashi tells us that this leave-taking is for Abraham's "own good," that his growth depends on leaving the safe confines of everything he knows and takes for granted. It depends on taking a risk.

The call, *Lech Lecha*, is a multilayerd expression. First, "Go from" and leave behind everything that you know and love, your customs and your upbringing, and all that is familiar. This interpretation certainly resonates with me as I recognize myself as a 'world citizen' because I left my parent's home and worked and lived on several continents and in different countries. Such transitions have the potential to challenge long-held assumptions and make one be open for different views on life.

A second way of reading the Hebrew expression, *Lech Lecha*, is "Go to yourself." What if the call to "Go forth from your land, from the place that you were born, and from your father's house" does not necessitate a turning away from a place but a turning toward, a deep searching into our inner self. Amidst the external confusion and chaos around we also need to pay attention to the voice of the Spririt speaking to us in silence and meditation. How will this journey of the unknown be? What assumptions and ways of being do I need to let go, and what do I need to make new?

God's call to go, *Lech Lecha,* may even mean to be on a lonely journey, "Go by yourself." To be a child of Abraham is to have the courage to be different, to challenge the idols of the age, any age. It means recognizing that one's life is not dependent on the whims of a multitude of gods but meaningful in

relation to the Creator who celebrates his created works. In slavery, it means refusing to accept the status quo in the name of God, but instead challenging it in the name of God. When power is worshipped, it means striving to construct a society that cares for the powerless, the widow, orphan, stranger, refugee, and immigrant. When war is the test of manhood, it means striving for peace. When individualism is confused with freedom, it means knowing that we are not what we own but what we share; not what we buy but what we give; that there is something greater than ourselves and our own desire. The call that came to Abraham summons us to be and to make a contribution to the world.

Question: What is the Faith? How does it fit into the journey of Abraham's life?

Note how Genesis 12–22 structures the life story of Abraham:

A Abram's Call: Promise of Seed (11:31-12:3)
- B Sojourn in Canaan (12:4-9)
  - C1 Sojourn in Egypt; Denial of Sarai (12:10-20)
  - C2 Separation of Lot; Manifestation of the Lord (13:1-18)
    - D War on Sodom; Rescue of Lot by Abram (14:1-24)
      - E Covenant Made: Land (15:1-21)
        - F Sarai's Effort (16:1-16)
          - X Covenant Made: Abraham & Covenant Sign (17:1-14)
        - F' Sarah's Blessing (17:15-27)
      - E' Covenant Made: Seed (18:1-15)
    - D' Destruction of Sodom; Rescue of Lot by Angels (18:16-19:38)
  - C1' Sojourn in Gerar; Denial of Sarah (20:1-18)
  - C2' Manifestation of Seed; Separation of Ishmael (21:1-21)
- B' Sojourn in Gerar (21:22-34)

A' Abraham's Test: Blessing of Seed (22:1-19)

The parallelisms in this chiasm show that Abraham's life did not follow a perfect upward trajectory. Quite the opposite, he made the same mistakes all over and failed even when he became older.

Question: When is Faith's best moment? When does Abraham become the "father of faith"?

The story of Abraham's faith is startling. It is centered in a place and context when we would least expect it. It reads, "he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). It became *Sola fide*, the central doctrine of the Reformation, "by which the church stands or falls." Over the past five hundred years theologians have debated the doctrine of faith on the basis of Paul's expositions about Abraham in Romans 4. However, the roots of faith are in the story of Genesis 15, a story were salvation is not the ultimate concern, but life's journey built on trust in God's promises.

Questions: What is the result of Faith?

The man to whom God promised as many children as the stars of the sky has one child to continue the covenant. The man who received the promise of the land "from the river of Egypt to the great river,

the River Euphrates" [15:18] had acquired one field and a tomb. But that is enough. The journey has begun. Abraham knows that it is not for him to complete the task. And so, he can die content.

GOOD WORD 2022.2	**The Covenant with Abraham**
Lesson #7 — May 14	**Genesis 12–17**
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: A Relational World

Leading Question: How do you describe a good relationship?

The covenant found in Genesis 12–17 is known as the "Covenant Between the Parts." The covenant was for Abraham and his offspring. In Genesis 12–17, we are able to recognize three developments of the covenant: In Genesis 12, God promises Abram land, descendants, and blessings, but does not place any stipulations or conditions for the covenant to be fulfilled.

According to Genesis 15, God vows to fulfill His promises again without conditions. He shows Abram a vision of a fiery torch passing between the animal parts of a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove, and a pigion. This ancient ritual conveys the message that God is taking the responsibility solely upon himself to keep his promises to Abram.

There is more to the story of Genesis 15 that speaks of covenant and relationship, even before Abram gets to watch the fiery torch pass between the animal parts. For the first time, Abram is in a diaglogue with God, and he has some very pertinent questions to ask. After having waited in vain for ten years for the promised heir, Abram breaks his silence and replies to God in quite the emotional outburst: "O Sovereign LORD, what do you give me?" (Gen 15:2). Then, after God promises the land again, Abram erupts again, "O Sovereign LORD, how do I know?" (Gen 15:8). In between the questions, we read that Abram believed. Here is how Abram's story looks like,

A "O Sovereign LORD, what do you give me?" (v. 2)
X "He believed" (v. 6)
A' "O Sovereign LORD, how do I know?" (v. 8)

Here is Abram and God, deeply "entangled" with each other.

In my personal experience as a parent of two children, I value the moments when they did not shy away, or were silent, or hide from me, but when they asked bold and hard questions. It was in the times when we wrestle together that we were closest, and our relationship was strongest.

"Faith is born not in the answer but in the question, not in harmony but in dissonance" (Sacks, *Radical Then, Radical Now*, 54).

Question: How do you relate to God when he fails to answer you?

In Genesis 17, the covenant offered as God's promise is confirmed by performing circumcision as a ritual act for all males in Abram's household. Along with circumcision goes the change of Abram's name to Abraham, "father of a multitude" (Gen 17:5).

Question: Why was circumcision the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham?

Interpreters of the story about circumcision in Genesis 17 and of the law in Leviticus 12, argue that to understand the meaning of circumcision as a covenant sign, it is important to go beyond God's claim over Israel as a people group or a chosen nation, and learn from the prophet Hosea what it means for God to hold on to His people within the most intimate of relationships. Hosea lived in the eighth century BCE when the Northern Kingdom of Israel had slipped into lawlessness, idolatry, and chaos. Over the course of just fifteen years (747 and 732 BCE), there were no less than five kings who took the throne by betrayal, intrigue, and a series of bloody struggles for power. According to Hosea, "There is no faithfulness or kindness, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, desception, murder, stealing and adultery; they employ violence so that bloodshed follows bloodshed" (Hos 4:1–2; NASB).

Hosea knew that Israel's survival depended on its faithfulness to God in order to build a society where all people lived with dignity. What makes Hosea's description of covenant remarkable in such a devastating context of life are the first three chapters of the book. God tells the prophet to marry a prostitute and have children with her. The names of the children signify God's sense of the betrayal He suffered as well as His deep commitment to the people nonetheless. It is a powerful passage with an astonishing assertion: More than the people love God, God loves the people. Even though God feels betrayed, hurt, and angry, He will forgive. He will take His people on a second "honeymoon" so that they renew their marriage vows together:

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her;
Bring her into the wilderness and speak kindly to her . . .
I will betroth you to me forever;
Yes, I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice,
In lovingkindness and in compassion, I will betroth you to me in faithfulness,
Then you will know the Lord."
(Hos 2:14–22)

In the midst of Hosea's prophetic poetry about the renewal of "marriage" between God and His people, is a complex covenant metaphor:

"In that day, declares the Lord, you will call me **'my husband' [*ishi*]**;
You will no longer call me **'my master' [*baali*]**."

(Hos 2:16)

The last sentence in this verse is a pun on words. Baal, in Hebrew, meant a "husband" in a specific sense; a baal-husband meant a "master," "owner," "possessor," and "controller"—a husband who holds power over his wife. Baal was also the name of the god whose prophets got challenged by Elijah in the famous confrontation at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). Baal was the god of fertility, the weather, and rainstorms, who according to the Ugaritic myths of the Baal Cycle, defeated Mot, the god of sterility and death, in the springtime when he brought rain and "impregnated" the earth so it would become fertile soil. Baal worship was about a god in power over nature and the cycle of seasons.

Hosea contrasts a *baal*-relationship of power with an *ish*-relationship. God's *ish*-relationship with Israel recalls the first speech when the man becomes aware of the woman:

"This is now bone of my bones,
Flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called Woman [*ishah*],
Because she was taken from Man [*ish*]."
(Gen 2:23)

In Genesis 2, the male-female relationship is built on something that is the very opposite of power, dominance, ownership, and control. The relationship is one of perfect equality, mutual loyalty, and trust. This is what Hosea's **marriage-as-covenant** addresses; it is a pledge to honor and cherish the other in deep love and commitment.

Not only is this a radical way of reconceptualizing the relationship between man and woman: it is also the way we should think of the relationship between human beings and God. God reaches out to humanity not as power (like Baal, the storm, thunder, and rain god) but as love with deep and abiding passion that survives disappointments and betrayals. Even when Israel fails to behave lovingly toward God, says Hosea, God loves Israel and will never cease to do so.

"Now we understand," concludes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "why the sign of the covenant is circumcision. For faith to be more than the worship of power, it must affect the most intimate relationship between men and women. In a society founded on covenant, relationships must be built on something other and gentler than male dominance, masculine power, sexual desire, and the drive to own, control, and possess. Baal must become *ish*" ("The Sign of the Covenant").

The book of Deuteronomy adds further meaning to the covenant sign of circumcision when it speaks of circumcision of the heart as a dramatic change of course, "Circumcise your hearts and stiffen your neck no longer" (Deut 10:16; cf. 30:6). Here, circumcision is a figure for repentance and the transformation of the heart. The prophet Jeremiah calls the people of Judah to repent and change their lives in view of the looming destruction by the Babylonians (Jer 4:4). The circumstances in Jeremiah's days are so serious that the Lord is directly addressing those who are physically circumsiced with these words, "Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised" (Jer 9:25). According to Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, a relationship with God built on the physical act of circumcision is not enough. There is the need for a spiritual relationship founded on a profound inner transformation. This inner transformation is the work of God with the goal to "love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live" (Jer 30:6).

GOOD WORD 2022.2	**The Promise**
Lesson #8 — May 21	**Genesis 22**
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Abraham's Test

Leading Question: What is Abraham's test?

At the opening of Genesis 12, God called on Abraham to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house, and promised him, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you" (Gen 12:2).

Another promise followed, "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted" (Gen 13:16).

Then a third promise, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them . . . so shall your offspring be" (Gen 15:5).

And the fourth promise, "No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you" (Gen 17:5–6).

Four ascending promises: a great nation, as many as the dust of the earth, as the stars of the sky; not one nation but many nations. Abraham heard these promises and had faith in them.

The next times God spoke, He had painful news for Abraham. He should let go of his son by Hagar, of Ishmael, for he would not be his heir. God would bless him and make him a great nation, "But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year" (Gen 17:21).

It is against this background of four promises of countless children, and a further promise that Abraham's covenant would be continued by Isaac, that we must read the chilling words that open the trial in Genesis 22: "Take your son, your only son, the son that you love—Isaac—and offer him up."

Commentators throughout the ages have characterized this story as an example of the heights of faith. Abraham loved God so much he was willing to give up the child he waited so long to bear.

Question: Why does an omniscient God, who knows Abraham very well, require such a test?

Many Christians have been taught that faith devoid of reason is a good and godly thing. Abraham believed God and raised the knife to kill his son just because God asked him to do it. The American theologian and philosopher Francis Schaeffer explains how this interpretation found its way unto our Christian pulpits, "Kierkegaard said this was an act of faith with nothing rational to base it upon or to which to relate it. Out of this came the modern concept of a 'leap of faith' and the total separation of rationality and faith."[1] Preachers have often used Genesis 22 to extol Abraham as the ultimate exemplar of blind faith. The audience is then assured that God stopped the knife for Abraham and that God will ensure that no harm comes to the obedient Christian. Some have taken this argument as a

[1] Frances A. Schaeffer, "The God Who is There" in *The Frances A. Schaeffer Trilogy: Three Essential Books in One Volume* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 15.

reason to perform radically immoral and evil actions in the name of God (see, this recent news about a man who claimed God was telling him to kill: https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ellievhall/florida-shooting-marine-family).

Question: How should we think of the story of Isaac's sacrifice?

For a more consistent reading of Genesis 22 consider the following:

1. It is important to note that the Old Testament rejects and condems sacrificing children. Micah asks rhetorically, "Shall I give my firstborn for my sin, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (Micah 6:7) and replies, "He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8).
2. The kings who offered their sons as a ritual sacrifice to please or appease a deity such as Molech are recorded as the most cruel and evil, Mesha, the king of Moab (2 Kings 3:27), Ahaz of Judah (2 Kings 16:1–3), and Manasseh, king of of Judah (2 Kings 21:6-8). In Judges, we read of Jephthah who offered his daughter as a burnt offering because of a vow so God would give him victory over the Ammonites (Judg 11).
3. Abraham was chosen "so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just" (Gen 18:19). How could Abraham serve as a model father if he was willing to kill his child?
4. Contrary to Abraham's strong interjection against the killing of the people in Sodom and Gomorrah pointing out the immorality of such an act (Genesis 18:16–33), when it comes to Isaac, Abraham fails to interject, to ask questions, and point out the contradictions and the immorality of sacrificing children to a deity.
5. Sarah is not mentioned in Genesis 22. Her absence adds to the tragic nature of nearly sacrificing Isaac; and, right after Abraham came down from the mountain, we read about her death (Gen 23:1–2). What follows in Genesis 23 is one of the great paradoxes of Abraham's story. The disconnect between God's promises and the reality of Abraham's life is perplexing. Seven times, God had promised Abraham that he would inherit the land. Yet when Sarah died, Abraham owned not even an inch of land. He engages in an elaborate negotiation with the local people to buy a cave for a high price in which to bury his wife (Gen 23:1–20).

After considering these observations, could we say that the trial in Genesis 22 was *not* to see whether Abraham had the courage to sacrifice his son? As the Bible shows, evil kings like Mesha, Ahaz, and Manasseh had that courage and it was abhorrent and rejected by Israel's God. The trial was *not* to see whether Abraham had the strength to give up something he loved. He had shown this time and time again. At the very beginning of his story, he gave up his land, his birthplace and his father's house, everything that was familiar to him, everything that spoke of home. In Genesis 21 we learn that he gave up his firstborn son Ishmael whom he also loved. Was there even the slightest doubt that he would give up Isaac, who was God's miraculous gift to parents who were too old to have a child?

"The trial was to see whether Abraham could live with what seemed to be a clear contradiction between God's word now, and God's word on five previous occasions, promising him children and a covenant that would be continued by Isaac" (Sacks, "The Binding of Isaac").

The principle upon which the birth and the sacrifice of Isaac rests, is that a child is not the property of the father, the parents. Abraham is to renounce ownership of his son, hand over the child—not to the god of death—but to the God of life. In the New Testament, this principle seems to be applied when the writer of Hebrews says, “By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, ‘It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.’ He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back” (Hebrews 11:17–19).

GOOD WORD 2022.2	**Jacob, the Supplanter**
Lesson #9 — May 28	**Genesis 25–30**
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: The Struggles of Life

Leading Question: What are you willing to struggle for in your life?

Who is Jacob? The first time we hear a description of him he is called "a content man" (NIV) and "a peaceful man" (NASB). The Hebrew phrase, *ish tam*, tells of a simple, quiet, plain, and straightforward man. But that is exactly what he turns out not to be in the lengthy section of Genesis 25–36.

Jacob was born holding on to Esau's heel. He bought Esau's birthright. He stole Esau's blessing. When his blind father asked him who he was, he replied, "I am Esau, your firstborn" (Gen 27:19). Jacob was the child who wanted to be Esau, the firstborn, the strong and muscular man, his father's favorite. His struggle to be someone other will be long and arduous.

The result is tension between the twin brothers to such a degree that when Esau discovered that his father's blessing was stolen from him, he vowed to kill his brother once the father had died. Jacob remains the brazen trickster in Laban's house as well. At the same time, the book of Genesis depicts him as the one whom God had chosen, and from whom the people of Israel will derive.

As the story of Jacob and Esau unfolds in the book of Genesis it weaves Jacob's deceptive acts, his fears, and his struggles, all through the theme of God's covenant promises for Israel. At times it seems that even God compromises His character and engages in deceptive acts for the sake of fulfilling His promised covenant blessings.

Question: What should we make of the fact that Jacob the deceiver is God's chosen one?

Consider, the following scene after Jacob left his father with the blessing that was supposed for Esau. Esau returned from hunting and brought Isaac the food he had requested. We then read this:

> "Isaac trembled violently and said, 'Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me?
> I ate it just before you came, and I blessed him – and indeed he will be blessed!'
> When Esau heard his father's words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry
> and said to his father, 'Bless me – me too, my father!'
> But he said, 'Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing.'
> Esau said, 'Isn't he rightly named Jacob?
> This is the second time he has taken advantage of me:
> he took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!'
> Then he asked, 'Haven't you reserved any blessing for me?'"
> (Gen 27:33-36)

It is impossible to read this passage and not to feel sympathy for Isaac and Esau rather than Rebecca and Jacob. Phrases like "he trembled violently" and "burst out with a loud and bitter cry" cannot but

affect us deeply. Here is an old man who has been deceived by his younger son, and a young man, Esau, who feels cheated out of what was rightfully his. The emotions triggered by this scene will long stay with us as we continue reading the story of Jacob, who has now also become a fugitive.

As we journey with Jacob to the north to Laben's home in Haran, we hear about one of the great dreams of the Bible. Jacob, afraid and alone, finds himself in an in-between space, between the home he is escaping from and the destination he has not yet reached, between the danger of his brother Esau from whom he tries to escape, and the unknown risks he will encounter and suffer from in the home of Laban. In this space in between—scholars call it the liminal space—Jacob is alone at night, isolated and vulnerable. Here, "he had a dream in which he saw a ladder resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Gen 28:12). When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven" (Gen 28:17).

What Jacob realised that morning when he woke from his vision is that God is in *this* place—not somewhere else.

Question: What are some in-between spaces or liminal moments that help you reckognize that God is here, in *this* place?

When Jacob arrived at Laban's house and fell in love at first sight with Rachel, he worked seven years for her hand in marriage. On the night of the wedding, however, Laban substituted his elder daughter Leah. The deceiver had been outwitted. Jacob became the deceived. The irony in Laban's answer to the question, "Why have you deceived me" must have stung hard, "It is not done in our place to give the younger before the older" (Gen 29:25–26). No question, that this reminds of the birthright he had stolen from his elder brother. He then agreed to work another seven years for Rachel. The second wedding took place a mere week after the first.

In a sermon I preached at WWU church on the first Sabbath of this year, I have expounded on the story of Jacob's family life, his wives and children. I offer an excerpt here for reflection:

When Jacob married Rachel, we read: "And [Jacob] went in also to Rachel, and he loved also Rachel."

Freezing the story here, we are led to believe that the two sisters were equal in Jacob's eyes. That is what the repeated word "also" (Hebrew *gam*) signifies. The deception has – so we must suppose at this point – a happy ending. Jacob has married both sisters. He loves them both. It is possible, we are told here, to love two women equally.

But then, the next word sends our expectations crashing to the ground: ". . . more than Leah" (Gen 29:30).

The effect of this ending is like a sudden discord; it is shocking. Jacob does not love the two sisters equally. He may love them both, but his passion is for Rachel.

The next verse contains an even sharper discord: “God saw that Leah was hated [Hebrew *senuah*].” This is a phrase that **CAN NOT** be understood literally. The previous verse has just said that Leah was not hated but loved. The ancient commentators wrestled with this difficulty. They read the word “hated” as “[relatively] unloved.”

Yet, though the word is semantically impossible in that sentence, it makes psychological sense. Leah, less loved, *felt rejected*, hated, even.

The words “God saw” tell how God identified with her sense of humiliation. Laban’s deception had tragic consequences. Leah surely weeps for the husband whose love is for someone else.
Only now, in retrospect, we understand the significance of the first mention of Leah:

“Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah,
and the name of the younger was Rachel.
The eyes of Leah were weak [Hebrew *rakot*],
but Rachel was lovely in form, and beautiful.”
(Gen 29:16-17).

The word about the weak eyes can mean many things: beautiful, weak, or sensitive. But the word is more significant than that in this story. It means, ‘Leah was easily moved to tears.’ She was emotionally vulnerable, sensitive. She knew she was Jacob’s lesser love, and it caused her pain.

The subtlety with which all this is conveyed is remarkable. The narrator has sketched Leah in a few skillful strokes, each of which we will only hear if we are listening carefully.

So traumatic is Leah’s situation, that, “The LORD saw that Leah was hated, and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren” (Gen 29:31).

Over the next verses, the Bible makes us hear Leah’s pain in the names she gives her children.
Her first, she calls Reuben, saying: “It is because the Lord has seen (*ra’ah*) my troubles. Surely, my husband will love me now.”

The second, she calls Shimon, “Because the Lord heard (*shama*) that I am unloved.”

The third, she calls Levi, “Now at last my husband will become attached (*lavah*) to me” (Gen 29:32-34). There is sustained anguish in these words. But Jacob does not hear!!!

The tragedy then takes turn after turn with the two slave women, Bilhah and Zilpah, handed over to Jacob and used to birth “on the knees” of their owners (the haunting trauma narrative of Margret Atwood’s, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, captures the biblical scene).

The last part of the story belongs to Rachel only. Jacob has failed to hear the distress of the one he “loved more.”

“When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children,

she became jealous of her sister.
She said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I will die.'
Jacob became angry with her and said,
'Am I in the place of God?
It is He who has kept you from having children.'"
(Gen 30:1)

Now, God will have to listen. And he does without being asked:

"Then God remembered Rachel,
and God gave heed to her and opened her womb."
(Gen 30:22)

The name she gives to her firstborn son, Joseph, "God has taken away my disgrace" (Gen 30:23), reflects on the great emotional and psychological anguish associated with the shame a barren woman would endure in a world that valued fertility more than a woman's life.

Then, with sad irony, Rachel dies, but not from an absence of children; she dies giving birth to her second child!! She died close to the place where God had come down to Jacob on a ladder.

"Then they journeyed from Bethel;
and when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath,
Rachel began to give birth and she suffered severe labor.
When she was in severe labor the midwife said to her,
'Do not fear, for now you have another son.'
It came about as her soul was departing (for she died),
that she named him Ben-oni;
but his father called him Benjamin.
So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).
Jacob set up a pillar over her grave;
that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day."
(Gen 35:16–20).

Have you noticed the tears and the wombs? The wombs—the barren wombs and the pregnant wombs—not only of the two main mothers but also of the other two, the ones who had no say in this messy net of Jacob's family?

Have you wept at the side of the dusty road, between Bethel and Bethlehem, with the one whose open bleeding womb is laid into the ground?

The year is 586 BCE. When the captives of Judah were gathered in the rugged lands and wadis of ancient Palestine, kept in prison camps until they were forced to march in chains into captivity (Jeremiah 40:1–5), a woman's voice could be heard mourning inconsolably.

Thus says the LORD, a voice on height!
Lamentation can be heard, weeping most bitter.
Rachel is weeping for her sons, refusing to be consoled for her sons,
"Oh, not one is here!"

Directed to no one in particular, and hence to all who may hear, the voice of Rachel travels across the land and through the ages to permeate existence with a suffering that not even death can relieve.

To Rachel the LORD responds:

"Keep your voice from weeping
and your eyes from tears.
For there is a reward for your work,
The Lord declares.
They shall return from the land of the enemy.
and there is a hope for your future,
The Lord declares.

God makes a pledge, "they shall return." Her children are considered and named. Ephraim is the center of attention in the poem. The LORD introduces him: "Truly, I have heard Ephraim rocking in grief."

Yahweh, the LORD's voice resounds with words that portray Him as mother Rachel. Just as Rachel cared and mourned the loss of her child, so Yahweh, the LORD, from the divine womb, mourns the same child:

"Is Ephraim my dear son? My darling child?
For the more I speak of him,
the more I remember him.
Therefore, my womb trembles for him;
I will truly show motherly compassion upon him.
Declares the LORD."

Jeremiah has placed Rachel's inconsolable weeping over her children and Ephraim's cry for help into a special section in his book. It is Jeremiah's "Book of Consolation" with the new covenant based on the LORD's divine womb filled with motherly compassion. It's goal is for a soft and receptive heart in return. The generations that experienced the disaster of the exile, the displaced—they come back. Rachel's children are alive, her broken family becomes restored. A more poignant announcement can hardly be imagined by Rachel, the grieving mother.

Hundreds of years passed, and again, the mothers of Bethlehem wept, and their grief rose up in mourning and lamentation.

One couple fled for their lives. Joseph and Mary, warned in a dream, were sent away for safety with the baby Jesus. The holy family left Bethlehem to become refugees in the land of slavery of their

ancestors. Matthew, the gospel writer, could not think of any other voice more appropriate, of no other tears more fitting, than Rachel's. And so, he raises her voice from the grave for a second time:

"Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled:

A VOICE WAS HEARD IN RAMAH,
WEEPING AND GREAT MOURNING,
RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN;
AND SHE REFUSED TO BE COMFORTED,
BECAUSE THEY WERE NO MORE."

(Matt 2:16–18)

Herod had ordered the execution of the young male children in the vicinity of Bethlehem, so as to avoid the loss of his throne to a newborn baby. And so it is that mother Rachel finds herself alongside mother Mary at the Christ-child's bed.

It is often said that the infancy accounts provide the gospel in a nutshell. Mary and Rachel thus form a perfect pair.

The tears of mother Rachel foreshadow the tears of Mary, walking the Via Dolorosa, standing by the cross, embracing her son's body before burial.

Rachel's son whome she called Benoni, prefigures Mary's child, the man of sorrows. Renamed, "Son of my Right Hand," Benjamin also prefigures the victorious offspring of Mary. The one who overcomes the grave.

In other ways, they are a perfect contrast.

Rachel dies giving life, while Mary lives giving birth to one destined for death.

So it is that Matthew needed to record this somber note about a mother's tears still flowing heavily even at the new dawn, at the birth of the One who is greeted with joyfulness and worship, with presents of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

For on the edge of a new dawn, tears of sorrow for all the children who were not saved from Herod's sword mix with tears of joy for those who come from all over the lands of the earth, those . . .

"who were ill,
those suffering with various diseases and pains,
…
And when He saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain
And sat down and said,
…
'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.'"

(Matt 4:24–5:4)

So it is that the mothers weeping for their Bethlehem children would one day join the mothers weeping along the streets of Jerusalem for the One who made his way up to the cross.

For, how could Rachel wipe her tears as long as the world's wounds and wombs are still bleeding? As long as there is even one child, one human being, who suffers?

Rachel's cry refuses to spiritualize, to explain away, to ignore or deny the depth and truth of suffering in this world. She rejects soothing words and superficial sentiments of 'can't we all just get along'.

According to the American Academy of Ophthalmology, we create 15 to 30 gallons of tears each year. Some in this church community may have been high-volume producers over the past year. And even though, as science tells us, we create less tears as we age, by the time we are 80, we could have easily filled up 40 average-sized bathtubs.

Rachel is still weeping for her children.

GOOD WORD 2022.2	**Jacob-Israel**
Lesson #10 — June 04	**Genesis 32–36**
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: A Changed Life

Leading Question: What if victory looks more like being defeated? What if strength feels more like being weak?

After his wrestling match with the unnamed man at Jabbok, Jacob was told: "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (Gen 32:29, NASB). This change of name takes place not once but twice. After the encounter with Esau, and the episode of Dina and Shechem, God told Jacob to go to Bethel. Then we read: "After Jacob returned from Paddan Aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him. God said to him, 'Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel.' So He named him Israel" (Gen 35:9–10).

"Jacob" is the name he acquired because he was born holding on to his brother Esau's heel. It signaled his his posture during the key events of his early life. He bought his brother's birthright. He wore his brother's clothes. At his mother's request, he took his brother's blessing. When asked by his father, "Who are you, my son?" He replied, "I am Esau, your firstborn."

Jacob was the man who wanted be Esau. Why so? Because Esau had one thing he did not have: his father's love. "Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob."

All that changed in the great wrestling match between Jacob and the unknown stranger. After they fight, he tells Jacob that his name would now be Israel, "for you have wrestled with God and with man and have prevailed." This is in sharp contrast with the name "Jacob," one who "holds on to his brother's heel."

After wrestling with the divine being and coming out as the victor blessed by God, Genesis 32 tells how Jacob frantically prepared to meet his brother Esau. The last time we saw the brothers together, twenty-two years earlier, Esau had vowed to kill Jacob. We know about Esau's character, that he is violent, and tempered. Yet when he appears and greets Jacob, all the fears turn out to be unfounded. Esau runs to meet Jacob, throws his arms around his neck, kisses him, and weeps. He shows no anger, resentment, or threat for revenge.

In watching the brothers meet we should also note that Jacob bowed down to the ground seven times (Gen 33:3) prostrating himself before Esau. Each member of the family does the same (Gen 33:6–7). Another part to pay attention to is Jacob's choice of words. Five times he calls Esau "my lord" and twice he calls himself "your servant." This is truly a choreography of self-abasement.

Question: Why did Jacob act fearfully even after he had overcome?

Question: Jacob had just won the victory over his adversary in the wrestling match at night, was blessed, and received a new name. Should he not have confidence that henceforth he would have the ability to survive any conflict?

In light of three powerful statements about Jacob, (a) his victory and new name, (b) the prophecy given to Rebekah when the twins were still in her womb, "the elder will serve the younger," and (c) Isaac's blessing, "Rule over your brothers and may your mother's son bow down to you," it should have been Esau who bowed down to Jacob. However, when the encounter takes place, Jacob the victor appears weak.

Question: When is weakness powerful?

He had even sent gifts and when Esau refused them, Jacob replied in the following extraordinary words:

"No, please, if I have found favour in your eyes, accept this gift from my hand, for to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably. Please accept the present [*birkhati*, literally "my blessing"] that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have everything" (Gen 33:10–11).

Jacob's words to Esau, "to see your face is like seeing the face of God," echo his words after the wrestling match, "He called the place Peniel, saying, 'It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared'" (Gen 32:30). Altogether, chapters 32 and 33 (the preparations for the meeting, the night-time struggle, and the meeting itself) echo time and again with variants on the word "face" (Hebrew *panim*). This is missed in translation, because the Hebrew word *panim* has many forms that are not evident in English. To take one example, Gen 32:21 reads in English:

"You shall say, 'Your servant Jacob is coming behind us,' for he thought, 'I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me.'"

This verse alone contains the Hebrew word *panim* for "face" four times. Literally, it should be read, "for he thought, 'I will wipe [the anger from] **his face** with the gift that goes ahead of **my face**; afterward, when I see **his face** perhaps he will lift up **my face**'" (my emphasis).

Rabbi Sacks asks the question, "What is going on here?" and then helps us understand that "the clue lies in Jacobs use of the word "blessing." This takes us back to Gen 27, where we read that "Jacob, dressed in Esau's clothes, takes his brother's blessing" which was:

"May God give you of the dew of heaven and the richness of the earth.
An abundance of corn and new wine.
May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you.
Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.
May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed."

(Gen 27:28)

This is the blessing Jacob took away from his brother, dressed in Esau's clothes, taking Esau's place.

However, there was a second blessing by Isaac to Jacob later. Esau had married two Hittite women. This was "a source of grief to Isaac and Rebecca" and so, Rebecca takes this as an opportunity to send Jacob away to her brother Laban, where he would be safe from Esau. Before Jacob leaves, Isaac blesses him in these words:

"May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful
and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples.
May He give you and your descendants the blessing of Abraham,
so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien,
the land God gave to Abraham."
(Gen 28:3–4)

What Isaac is doing in the second blessing is handing on to Jacob the legacy of Abraham, saying, it will be you who will continue the covenant into the future. This blessing was given by Isaac to Jacob knowing that he was Jacob. There was no need for Jacob to disguise himself and deceive his father and his brother. Isaac had reserved the right blessing for each of his sons. The blessing Jacob took away from his brother by deception was never meant for him. And so, after twenty-two years, when Jacob met Esau, he was giving back the blessing he had taken all those years before. The herds and flocks he sent to Esau represented wealth ("the dew of the heavens and the richness of the earth"). The sevenfold bowing and calling himself "your servant" and Esau "my lord" represented power ("Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down before you"). Jacob gave back what he had stolen. In effect, he says to his brother, "please take not just my gift but also my blessing."

The last observation is about the change of name, from Jacob to Israel. "Jacob" meant, in the past he held on to and struggled to be Esau. The name "Israel" also means struggle, but in a different way. From now on, he would need to hold on to God.

GOOD WORD 2022.2	**Joseph, Master of Dreams**
Lesson #11 — June 11	**Genesis 37–41**
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Living the Dream

Leading Question: How do you turn dreams into realities?

The "master of dreams" (Gen 37:19) is the mocking label put on the young man named Joseph by his older brothers.

Question: How does a label of disdain become a title of honor?

From chapter 37 on the book of Genesis is devoted to the story of Joseph except for one puzzling interlude, which is the story about Judah and Tamar in chapter 38. The focus of the long narrative is about the question, 'Who will lead the family of Jacob into the future?' Will it be the firstborn of all the sons, Reuben, son of Leah, or will it be Joseph, the firstborn of Rachel? As the narratives in Genesis show, the leader will be the surprising rise of Judah who emerges as the leader of Israel's tribes in the context of the Joseph cycle.

The importance of the Joseph story lies in the fact that it initiates a chain of events that leads to the descent of Jacob's family to Egypt; it is the prelude to the drama of oppression and Israel's redemption from Egyptian slavery that constitutes the overriding motif of biblical theology. Joseph's experience is the culmination of a series of episodes set in motion by causes that seem mostly insignificant or petty, and mundane. A father's favoritism, sibling jealousies, dreams of a young boy—all these are elements of a family situation that culminates in explosive tragedy.

The animosity in Joseph's story starts right at the beginning when we read, that "Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilphah. And Joseph brought bad reports for them to their father" (Gen 37:2). The second cause of enmity follows right there saying that "Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him an ornamented tunic" (v. 3). Jacob's undisguised partiality intensified the hostility. The third and most grave source of discord was Joseph's dreams. The problem with dreams must be understood against the cultural background of the times. A dream was recognized as a means of divine communication. This would be reason enough for the brothers to take Joseph seriously, had it not been for their perception about his egotistical aspirations and grandstanding.

Joseph's brothers plot his destruction, first intending to kill him, until Reuben suggest they should just leave him in a pit. Then Judah said to his brothers,

"What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood?
Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves.
After all, he is our brother, our own flesh."

"His brothers agreed. When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit.
They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites,
who brought Joseph to Egypt."
(Genesis 37:18-28)

What callousness! At the very moment he calls Joseph "our own flesh and blood" Judah is proposing selling him as a slave. At this point, Judah becomes "Judas." He is the last person from whom we would expect anything good. Nevertheless, at the end of the entire Joseph story, Judah emerges as a changed man. In the final episode, when Joseph demands that the brothers return home to their father Jacob without Benjamin (Gen 44:18–34), Judah becomes the group's spokesman. He showed unexpected compassion in telling of the family's heart-wrenching experience of starvation, of his father's undying love for Benjamin, and of his own promise to his father that he would bring Benjamin back home. Then, Judah offered to substitute *himself* in place of Benjamin!

Question: How did such a radical transformation of Judah come about? What does real change and transformation look like?

To understand how Judah becomes a changed person we need to know about the story that does not seem to fit into the entire Joseph narative. It is the interlude of Genesis 38, that tells of Judah, who more than anyone else in the entire book of Genesis, becomes a changed man. For the man we meet after that episode is not who he once was when he sold Joseph into slavery. While Joseph served in the house of Potiphar and suffered in an Egyptian dungeon, Judah's life took dramatic turns after he moved away from his brothers and married a Canaanite woman with whom he had three children. His eldest son, named Er, married Tamar. She too, must have been a Canaanite. Her husband Er died young, leaving Tamar a childless widow. Judah then instructs his second son, Onan, to marry her, "to do his duty as the husband's brother and raise up offspring for his brother" (Gen 38:8). Realising that a child from the marriage would be considered as belonging to his dead brother rather than his, Onan is careful not to make Tamar pregnant. Onan too dies young. And now the right thing would be for Judah's third son, Shelah, to marry Tamar; but Judah is reluctant to let this happen, "for he was afraid that Shelah too might die like his brothers" (Gen 38:11).

The underlying law in the story is the levirate marriage law, stated in Deut 25:6, where a member of the dead husband's family is to marry his childless widow. Based upon the law, Tamar decides on a bold course of action. Hearing that Judah was about to pass by on his way to the sheep-shearing, she removes her widow's clothes, puts on a veil, and sits at the crossroads. Judah sees her, does not recognize his daughter-in-law, and takes her for a prostitute. They negotiate a price, and Tamar insists on his seal and its cord and his staff as a pledge of security. Judah agrees, and they sleep together. The next day he sends a friend with the payment, but the friend cannot find her, and people tell him that there is no prostitute in the area. Judah shrugs off the episode, saying "Let her keep the pledge, or we will be a laughingstock" (Gen 38:23).

Three months later, people notice that Tamar is pregnant. Judah orders, "Bring her out so that she may be burnt." Only now we realize the subtlety of Tamar's strategy. She sent word to her father-in-law, "The father of my child is the man to whom these things belong . . . See if you recognise whose they

are, this seal, the pattern of the cord, and the staff." When Judah identifies them, he says, "She is more righteous than I am, because I did not give her to my son Shelah" (Gen 38:25–26).

This one brief verse holds in it an acknowledgement of the harm Judah had done to Tamar and his expression of regret; it testifies to his transformation.

Question: What are some ways of breaking a life cycle of dysfunction?

Joseph, who was sold into slavery and brought down into Egypt, finds himself, through a combination of luck and talent, eventually well-positioned as Pharoah's vizier. When his brothers came to Egypt for grain, and did not recognize him, Joseph develops an elaborate ruse to determine whether they were still the same people who willingly sold him into slavery. In the end, Joseph has his youngest brother Benjamin framed for theft, and declares that Benjamin must remain enslaved in the Egyptian court. It is Judah who speaks up! He tells of the terrible grief that Jacob suffered after hearing that Joseph was dead and worries aloud that Jacob might not survive another blow if his youngest son would also be taken away.

> "Therefore," Judah pleads, "please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers."
> (Gen 44:33)

Here, Judah had the opportunity to commit the same harm that he had previously committed on Joseph. However, he made a different choice because he was a different person. Judah could not undo the past, but after his encounter with Tamar, he is able to break the cycle so that a different future would be possible for his family.

Question: How did Joseph's dreams become realities?

The interpretation and misinterpretation of Joseph's dreams becomes the key to finding out who will be the leader of the family who will become a people and nation. Joseph's brothers misinterpreted the dreams assuming that Joseph would autocratically rule over his family. This misinterpretation had led to tragedy because it impelled Joseph's brothers to depose him so that he ended up in Egypt. When Joseph met his brothers in Egypt, this became the moment for Joseph to recognize his own responsibility based on the dreams he had, namely that he was called to care for his family and not rule over them. As his brothers bowed to him in their inquiry for food, he understood that the dream about the brothers' sheaves bowing to his sheaf was not about his power over them, but about his responsibility to feed them as an Egyptian official in charge of food.

After Jacob's death the brothers reverted back to their original interpretation of his dreams. They expected that Joseph would revenge himself for what they had done to him. Genesis 50:17 and 19 tells how Joseph cried and comforted them saying that it was God's will to transform their evil intent to good and thus give him the power to sustain and care for the entire family. In this sense, Joseph does become the "master of dreams" and a true leader in generosity and responsibility.

GOOD WORD 2022.2	**Joseph, Prince of Egypt**
Lesson #12 — June 18	**Genesis 42–45**
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: The Risks of Power

Leading Question: What does a powerful position do to the person who holds that power?

Genesis tells of one of the most sudden and radical transformations in the Bible. Joseph, in a single day, moves from zero to hero, from forgotten, languishing prisoner to viceroy of Egypt, the most powerful man in the land, in control of the nation's economy.

Joseph has been asked to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. But he does far more than that. First, he interprets the dreams. Second, he projects the Egyptian economy for the next 14 years. He also diagnoses the problem. The people will starve during the seven years of famine. Next, with a stroke of sheer genius, he solves the problem. Store a fifth of the produce during the years of plenty, and it will be enough to stave off starvation during the lean years. "The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. So, Pharaoh asked them, 'Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?'" (Gen 41:37-38).

At the age of 30, Joseph is the most powerful man in the region, and his administrative competence is total. He travels around the country, arranges for collection of the grain, and ensures that it is stored safely. We also read that Joseph, "removed the population town by town, from one end of Egypt's border to the other" (Gen 47:21). This was a policy of enforced resettlement that would eventually be used against Joseph's descendents by the Assyrian kings.

The question is: was Joseph right to do this? Seemingly, he did it of his own accord. He was not asked to do so by Pharaoh.

When the years of plenty were over, Joseph's position became even more powerful. Everyone turned to him for food. Pharaoh himself commanded the people, "Go to Joseph and do what he tells you." The result, however, of all these policies is that unprecedented wealth and power were now concentrated in Pharaoh's hand—power that would eventually be used against the Israelites.

During the time of the famine, the Egyptians come to Joseph and say, "Buy us and our land in exchange for food, and we with our land will be slaves to Pharaoh . . . Thus Joseph acquired all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh, for every Egyptian sold their field . . . and the land became Pharaoh's" (Gen 47:19–20).

Twice we encounter the people saying, "we will be slaves to Pharaoh" (Gen 47:19, 25), which will be one of the key phrases in the Exodus account of the Israelites when they are Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt (Exod 5–12).

> We tend to assume that the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt was a consequence of, and punishment for, the brothers selling Joseph as a slave. But Joseph himself turned the Egyptians

> into a nation of slaves. What is more, he created the highly centralised power that would eventually be used against his people.[1]

Rabbi Sacks adds other interpreters who argue similarly about Joseph's policies that would result in the people's enslavement.

> Aaron Wildavsky in his book about Joseph, *Assimilation versus Separation*, says that Joseph "left the system into which he was elevated less humane than it was by making Pharaoh more powerful than he had been."[2] Leon Kass, in *The Beginning of Wisdom*, says about Joseph's decision to make the people pay for food in the years of famine (food that they themselves had handed over during the years of plenty): "Joseph is saving life by making Pharaoh rich and, soon, all-powerful. While we may applaud Joseph's forethought, we are rightly made uneasy by this man who profits from exercising his god-like power over life and death."[3]

Question: What are the pros and cons of concentrated economic power?

Question: Did Joseph understand what his methods and policies would do to the population of the country?

"Joseph's sagacity is technical and managerial, not moral and political. He is long on forethought and planning but short on understanding the souls of men."[4]

Nine years after taking the highest position of power after pharaoh, Joseph is forced to confront his past when his brothers return and his long-repressed dreams surface to his memory:

> "And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down to him with *their* faces to the ground . . .
> But Joseph had recognized his brothers, although they did not recognize him.
> Joseph remembered the dreams which he had about them . . ."
> (Gen 42:6–9)

Joseph's recognition of his brothers is not just physical. He also recognizes them, because of their bowing to him. The enactment of his dreams comes about in reality. This 'down and up' movement of their bodies prostrating themselves and then rising jolts the memory of his early dreams. It is a flashback of the hostile moments with his brothers. Is this still so as he accuses them of being spies in Egypt and finding out about the "undefended ["naked" in Hebr.] parts of our land" (Gen 6:9)?

The memory of his dreams, forces Joseph to face his past. The continuation of the story underlines the disparity between the self-confident Joseph, now turned elevated statesman, who knows exactly what should be done in order to steer Egypt to safety, and his shattered inner world, in which nothing appears secure or whole.

---

[1] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Joseph and the Risks of Power" (https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/mikketz/joseph-and-the-risks-of-power/; retrieved 26 April 2022).
[2] Aaron Wildavsky, *Assimilation versus Separation*, Transaction, 2002, 143.
[3] Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, Free Press, 2003, 571.
[4] Ibid., 633–34.

Considering his traumatic past, Joseph may well be feeling endangered by his brothers' reappearance in his well-settled life in Egypt. Will they drag him back to the dark and painful experiences of his youth? Will the brothers, by their mere appearance, erase all he has accomplished in his good years in Egypt?

Question: Is there a correlation between power and fear? What is the result when people who seek power are motivated by acquiring control over others?

Rabbi Sacks has summed up the story of Joseph with great insight:

> What this entire passage represents is the first intrusion of politics into the life of the family of the covenant. From the beginning of Exodus to the end of Deuteronomy, politics will dominate the narrative. But this is our first introduction to it: Joseph's appointment to a key position in the Egyptian court. And what it is telling us is the sheer ambiguity of power. On the one hand, you cannot create or sustain a society without it. On the other hand, it almost cries out to be abused. Power is dangerous, even when used with the best of intentions by the best of people. Joseph acted to strengthen the hand of a Pharaoh who had been generous to him, and would be likewise to the rest of his family. He could not have foreseen what that same power might make possible in the hands of a "new Pharaoh who knew not Joseph."
>
> Tradition [that is, Jewish tradition] called Joseph *ha-tzaddik*, the righteous . . . Even a tzaddik with the best of intentions, when he or she enters politics and assumes airs of authority, can make mistakes.
>
> I believe the great challenge of politics is to keep policies humane and that politicians remain humble, so that power, always so dangerous, is not used for harm. That is an ongoing challenge, and tests even the best.[5]

[5] Sacks, "Joseph and the Risks of Power."

GOOD WORD 2022.2	Israel in Egypt
Lesson #13 — June 25	Genesis 46–50
	—prepared by Mathilde Frey, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Family Reconciliation

Leading Question: Is it possible to redeem negative events of the past?

With this lesson, the study of the Book of Genesis concludes. It carries the title Genesis, the Book of the Beginnings. However, to truly understand the storyline of this book one must pay attention to its ending.

Genesis ends with three significant scenes. First, Jacob blesses his grandsons, Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Second, Jacob blesses his twelve sons. In these the blessings spoken over his three eldest sons, Ruben, Simeon and Levi, reflect a significant amount of tension in the family. And third, after the death of Jacob, the brothers ask Joseph to forgive them, which he does.

The three scenes imply that at the end of Genesis, the book's message is about the family. Family comes before the land, the nation, and before the pursuit of wealth and power. What matters in the end, is that family tensions and disagreements must find resolution before the page can be turned to the story of Exodus where the family of Jacob grows into a people and a nation. In the book of Exodus, the position of the Israelites in Egypt becomes very vulnerable, and all the power Joseph had centralized into the hands of Pharaoh would eventually be used against them. And so, Rabbi Sacks concludes, "How could they live together as a people, if they couldn't even live together as a family?" Therefore, "Genesis is not about power. It is about families. Because that is, where life together begins."[6] And, as the story shows, there is nothing easy about making and sustaining family life. Genesis does not praise the virtues of the family; rather, it is an honest account about the problems that exist even within the best of families, it is a display of the real messiness of family life. The challenge of Genesis then, is to find ways to handle family conflicts, to forgive wrongs of the past, and how to care for family members.

Question: In what way does Joseph's reconciliation with his family inspire us to find resolution in our family conflicts?

There seem to be two unexpected ways of how the end of the Book of Genesis teaches family reconciliation. First, Joseph does something unusual when he reveals himself to his brothers. Fully aware that they will be shocked when they learn who he is, he **reinterprets the past**:

> "I am your brother Yosef, the one you sold into Egypt!
> And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves
> for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.
> For two years now there has been famine in the land,

[6] Sacks, "Family, Faith, and Freedom."

and for the next five years there will be no ploughing and reaping.
But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth
and to save your lives by a great deliverance.
So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.
He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt."
(Gen 45:4–8)

From a story of kidnapping and injustice his lifestory has turned to one of divine providence and redemption. "It wasn't you," he tells his brothers, "it was God. You didn't realise that you were part of a larger plan. Although it began badly, it has ended well. So do not feel guilty. And do not be afraid that I want revenge. I do not. I realise that we were all being directed by a force greater than ourselves, greater than we can fully understand."

Question: Can you think of any events in your life that seemed bad at the time but in hindsight were meaningful?

Often, we do not understand what is happening to us now until we can look back in retrospect and see how it all turned out. This means that we are not held captive by the past. Things can happen to us, that can completely alter the way our life unfolds, and we recognize the difference only when we look back and remember. That is when we will be able to reinterpret the past.

The second insight into the reconciliation of Joseph's family at the end of Genesis, comes, when we take a closer look at the events of reuinion. We learn about an amazing sequence of seven events that display his emotional life: Joseph weeps! **There are seven scenes of tears**:

1. When the brothers appear before Joseph in Egypt for the first time, they said to one another,

"Surely we are being punished because of our brother.
We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life,
but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come on us" . . .
They did not realize that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter.
He turned away from them and **began to weep**, but then came back and spoke to them again.
(Gen 42:21–24; my emphasis)

2. On the second occasion, when the brothers brought Benjamin with them to Egypt:

As he lifted his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, he said,
"Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me?"
And he said, "May God be gracious to you, my son."
Joseph hurried *out* for he was deeply stirred over his brother,
and he sought *a place* to **weep**; and he entered his chamber and **wept** there.
Then he washed his face and came out;
and he controlled himself and said, "Serve the meal."
(Gen. 43:29-31; my emphasis)

3. After Judah's impassioned speech, Joseph discloses his identity and weeps loudly:

> Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him,
> and he cried, "Have everyone go out from me."
> So there was no man with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.
> He **wept so loudly** that the Egyptians heard *it,* and the household of Pharaoh heard *of it.*
> (Gen 45:1–2; my emphasis)

4. Immediately after he discloses his identity to his brothers:

> Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and **wept**,
> and Benjamin embraced him, **weeping**.
> And he kissed all his brothers and **wept** over them.
> (Gen 45:14–15; my emphasis)

5. When he meets his father after their long separation, Joseph wept for a long time:

> Joseph had his chariot made ready and went to Goshen to meet his father Israel.
> As soon as Joseph appeared before him,
> he threw his arms around his father and **wept** for a long time.
> (Gen 46:29; my emphasis)

6. On the death of his father:

> Joseph threw himself on his father and **wept over him** and kissed him.
> (Gen 50:1; my emphasis)

7. After his father's death, when the brothers approached him worried that he had not forgiven their wrongdoing, Joseph wept:

> When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said,
> "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"
> So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died:
> 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins
> and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.'
> Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father."
> When their message came to him, **Joseph wept**.
> (Gen 50:15–17; my emphasis)

There is no parallel to the seven acts of Joseph's weeping in the Bible. Every instance of weeping has its own significance. Each reflects the drama of his internal life. The descriptions of his tearful outbreaks span the full spectrum of emotion, from painful memory to the joy of being reunited with the brothers, especially with Benjamin and then with his father Jacob. There are tears when he discloses his identity to his brothers, and he weeps at Jacob's deathbed. But the most intriguing are the tears he sheds last

when he hears that his brothers still fear that he will take revenge on them after their father is no longer alive.

> At this moment, Yosef discovers the limits of raw power. He discovers the extent to which the human connection, the personal connection, the family connection, hold far more value and importance than does power – both for the person himself and for all those around him . . .
>
> He weeps over the weakness inherent in power, over the terrible price that he has paid for it. His dreams have indeed been realized, on some level, but the tragedy remains just as real. The torn shreds of the family have not been made completely whole.
>
> When will the shreds be made whole? Only a few hundred years later, with someone who appears on the stage of Jewish history as an infant crying in a basket among the bulrushes. It is he who seeks the bones of Yosef and, in the midst of the exodus, takes the trouble to bring them up for burial in Israel. It is only when they leave Egypt, only when they leave the territory where Yosef had been lord and ruler, and only through renewed weeping, that Yosef succeeds – that history succeeds – in sewing the pieces back together.[7]

Questions: What is more important to you: protecting your inner self and keeping emotional restraint or letting go of barriers? What are some moments when you allow your inner person to be seen? What does that do for you?

There are three times when the New Testament tells of Jesus' tears (John 11:35; Luke 19:41; Hebrews 5:7-9) showing that the Lord truly "sympathizes with our weaknesses" (Hebrews 4:15).

[7] Harav Aharon Lichtenstein, "Yosef's Tears" (https://www.etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/great-thinkers/harav-aharon-lichtenstein/alei-etzion16-yosef%E2%80%99s-tears; retreived 29 April 2022).