

# OpenTheo

## Genesis: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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## **Transcript**

When reading Genesis, chapter 1, many have argued that the passage is poetry. The implication being, to their minds, that it is not to be taken so seriously as an account of concrete reality. And in many ways, this is a modern prejudice.

The suggestion is that poetry and literature can't reveal deep truths about the world as it really is. And that the truest form of expression is that provided by bare scientific prose. But yet, by using a poetic form of expression, the scripture gives us a sense of a world that is alive with connections, analogies, interactions between levels of reality that we would not see merely within a scientific form of expression.

So the form of literature that we have here, which isn't exactly poetry, but a more elevated literary form, is not accidental. It is something that is appropriate to the world that God has created. And the form of this passage should invite us to reflect upon the reality of the world that God has created.

There is an original problem with the world in that it is formless and void. It's without shape and without structure and without order and it's also empty. And so those two

problems need to be addressed on the one hand by forming and on the other hand by filling.

The first addresses the formlessness, the second addresses the emptiness. And in the days that follow, there are three days of forming and three days of filling. And each corresponds to the other.

So we have the creation of the light on the first day. On the fourth day that corresponds to that, the lights fill the heavens. The sun, the moon and the stars are placed in the heavens.

On the second day, we have the formation of the firmament, heaven above and earth beneath. And on the fifth day, we have the birds that fly across the base of the firmament and the fish that fill the seas. On the third day, we have the creation of the earth as distinct from the seas.

And then on the sixth day, we have the earth bringing forth living creatures that will fill that realm. And so the first three days involve, among other things, the creation of great binaries. Of day and night, of heaven above and earth beneath and of the sea and the earth.

And there's a sort of liturgy that God follows in the course of his action. It's important to consider the aspect of time as we're going through this passage. It begins with God striking up a beat as it were.

Evening, morning, evening, morning. The division between day and night is not a division primarily between object of light in the heavens and darkness around it. It's a division in time between the state of the light and the state of the darkness between day and night.

And that temporal pattern provides the pattern for what follows. Day by day follows this day-night pattern. And the liturgy that God follows is he speaks.

The creation comes into being or he acts to bring it into being. Then God names his creation. God sees and he judges it.

And then there's evening and then there's morning that particular day. And so God is following a work week. Not every single day has all these elements contained.

But more generally, these are the typical patterns that are playing out. And note also the different modes of creation. God relates to his world in different ways.

He relates to the world as the transcendent creator who by the power of his word brings creation into existence from nothing. He also exists as the one who sustains things in their imminent order. He holds things together in structure and in their shape, in their form.

But he's also the one who gives life and breath to all things. And so in each of these modes of creation, they're each represented at some point and in different overlapping ways within Genesis chapter 1. On the later days of creation, we see God delegating the rule of his creation. So God has begun by acting himself to order the world.

And now increasingly he passes over the reins. God doesn't fill the seas. He gives the fish the power to reproduce themselves so that they will fill the seas.

He delegates the rule of the heavens to the sun and the moon and the stars. And he delegates the rule on the earth to human beings. Man is placed at the centre of the stage of creation.

But this creation does not merely exist for our sake as humanity. The image of God is the way in which we represent God in our dominion. This shouldn't be narrowly focused on individuals.

It should be perhaps read alongside the chapter that follows. It should be related to such things as the delegation of the rule of the day and the night to the sun, moon and stars. It's a dominion that represents the rule of heaven as it's symbolised on earth.

As you look through this chapter, here are a few questions to think about for the rest of the day. Why did God create the animals? God could have created a world without animals, just with food supplies for instance, or with other machines perhaps to help man work and labour. Why did God create the animals? What could be learnt from reflecting upon the poetic form of the description of God's creation of humankind in his image? That description is one that has a more elevated form of poetry than that around it.

When God says, let us make man in his image, another question to ask is, who might the us be? And in reflecting upon that, how might that help us to read the chapters that follow? Genesis 2 begins with the establishment of the Sabbath. It might seem a little strange that the story of creation has seven days, when the final day is a day of rest. No creation seems to be done on that day at all.

But when we look through the pattern of creation, what we see is that temporal patterns are a very important part of it. The first day is the establishment of a temporal pattern, the beat of evening and morning, as the light is separated from the darkness, the period of the day from the period of the night. On the fourth day, the middle day of creation, the sun, moon and stars are established for signs, for seasons, for days and for years.

And all of these things have a significance beyond the initial work of creation. What they do is they establish enduring patterns that will continue into the future. And in the seven day pattern, six days of work and one day of rest, God sets the pattern of the week for all the years that follow, for the entirety of human history.

God does the work week first and then we're supposed to follow his pattern. The day, the

year and the seasons, they've been entrusted to the sun, moon and the stars to maintain. But the Sabbath is implicitly given to man.

It's a cycle of labour and rest that belongs first to God, that characterises God's own activity, and is then entrusted to man to uphold. It's also a day that is holy and set apart, a principle from which other holy days develop, as we'll see as we get into the law. In this sense, it's a principle of blessedness as well.

It's a day that's been set apart as particularly blessed by God, as something that is a time of enjoyment of the good gifts of his creation, resting in our labours. Not just working non-stop, but enjoying the fruits of our labours. These are the generations, as we see in Genesis chapter 2 verse 4. It's a common refrain in the book of Genesis.

It's almost invariably used as a heading. So you'll see key figures have a series of generations and then it begins a cycle of the story. And Matthew alludes to this at the beginning of his gospel, the book of the generation of Jesus Christ.

The question of whether Genesis 2 verse 4 is a heading for what follows, or a summation of what preceded, is not one that scholars are entirely settled upon. It could in fact be both, and maybe it's best to allow it to be open enough to include both of those possibilities. I'm inclined to take it, in some ways, as a heading primarily.

That it expresses these are the generations of the heavens and the earth. The generations of the heavens and the earth are the creatures of the earth. Human beings and the animals that arise from the heavens and the earth.

And the creation of man being the first great example. As heaven, God's activity, and the earth, the dust taken from the earth and fashioned to a human frame. These things brought together are what forms humanity.

Many have argued that Genesis 2 gives us an alternative creation narrative. It could perhaps be seen better as the street view to the satellite view of chapter 1. And if we read through chapter 2 we'll see a very similar pattern play out. So first of all we see this initial situation where things are formless and void.

There's no one to till the ground. There's no real order upon the earth. There's this indiscriminate body of water, this surge or this mist that's covering the whole face of the earth.

As the deep covered the whole face of the earth in chapter 1. And then in the creation days a similar pattern follows out. So the first day was the creation of light. The creation of light to rule the day and the night.

And the first day of the new creation narrative is the creation of man. Who is supposed in some sense to be the light of the world. To maintain moral standards, to provide light in

that sense.

The second day is the division of the heaven from the earth. The waters above from the waters beneath with the establishment of the firmament. On the second day of the second account God establishes a firmament garden.

A realm in which he will walk in the midst of his people and provide a model for the way that the rest of the world should be. On the third day there is the creation of vegetation and the separation of land and sea. In the second account we have waters going out from the garden, vegetation growing up.

The lands being divided by these rivers that are going out. And then on the fourth day the lights are placed in the firmament, sun, moon and stars. And on the fourth day as it were the man is placed in the centre of the garden.

To rule and to divide. To divide between what should be eaten and what should not be eaten. The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which should not be eaten from.

The fifth and sixth days the animals and the fish are created. And the animals are formed and brought to the man to name. And in the climactic action of the sixth day in the first creation account humanity is formed.

Here the woman is formed. And so it's a very similar pattern playing out. And if we follow this pattern all the way through what we end up with is that the establishment of the rest of marriage is something that is paralleled with God's own rest on the Sabbath.

As we go through the scripture it would seem obvious that these things do go together. The final rest is described as a wedding feast. A bringing together of bride and bridegroom.

Now the creation of the man is the creation of an Adam from the Adamah. An earthling from the earth. There is a connection between the two.

The Adamah is feminine and the Adam is masculine. One is formed from the other to have a particular duty to uphold and to serve the earth that he was born from. Now the Garden of Eden is a miniature world model.

It's a training ground for labour in the wider world. God establishes a temporal pattern for man's labour in the six days of creation and the one day of rest. But he also establishes a spatial pattern.

This one particular realm that's bounded off from the rest of the creation. It's a realm that has been tamed and domesticated. The order has been established within it.

And this is the context within which man will learn how to act within the wider world. The

themes of the garden are also taken up in later sanctuaries. Waters flowing out into the world.

Seven days of creation represented in the establishment of the tabernacle. Many of the same words used. The serving and the guarding that the man is commissioned to do in the garden is the same task that is commissioned for the Levites.

And so it's a sanctuary realm. It's a realm where God is dwelling in the midst of his people. God walks in the midst of the garden.

There are cherubim later on to guard the entrance to the garden. Just as there are cherubim drawn or embroidered onto the certain of the curtains of the tabernacle. And then you see other things that would connect the two.

Fruit trees and other images of garden in the temple and elsewhere. So the man is learning the task within the garden. He's learning the priestly task here and then later on he'll have to be a king within the wider world.

God is teaching his son his trade. And then later he brings him a wife. Adam names the creatures as God named his creations on days one to three.

And the garden is just the beginning. The implicit message of Genesis chapter 2 is that man's labour will later on flow out into the entire wider creation. The gold in the land of Havila needs to be mined.

It needs to be brought into the garden to dress up the garden and make it glorious. As we'll see at the very end of Revelation where there's a garden city. It's also a world of particular things.

Of trees, animals, men and women. Particular lands and precious stones and rivers. Each with their own meaning.

Now we tend to think in terms of great big ideologies that are abstracted from reality. Concrete reality. But the story of Genesis is very much an on the ground story where specific particular things are charged with significance.

And when we read this it will make a bit more sense of why we have things like the sacrificial system in the book of Leviticus. It's working with the particular meanings of these variegated aspects of a diverse and beautiful creation. Where things are dancing with each other.

Where there are analogies between different levels of reality. And connections and homologies. Ways in which things are associated or governed by the same logic.

The woman is created because the man needs a helper. The man is particularly charged with heading up the mission. He's being given the task.



He's created for the task of tilling the ground. And he's commissioned with the task of upholding the order of the garden. The rule concerning the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

But the woman is not created as the man's sidekick or his understudy or his secretary. The statement that it's not good for the man to be alone isn't primarily about the man's subjective state of loneliness. That this is a lonely bachelor who needs some company.

No, it's about his insufficiency for the purpose for which God was establishing humanity. Mankind needs womankind. And without man and woman together, they will not be able to form and fill the world as God has designed.

The woman needs to be not merely a helper. The animals can be helpers. But a true counterpart to the man.

One that can stand alongside him as his equal but yet one who is truly different from him. The man breaks forth in poetry when he sees the woman. Just as he was called the Adam in a way that connected him with the earth, the Adamah.

Now he recognises himself as man, Ish, when faced with woman, Ishah. It's not primarily that we are individuals but we are sexuate persons. At the heart of humanity is a sort of magnetic polarity that is to be experienced as beautiful and good.

And the first time that was ever experienced, it elicited poetry. And within the story of Genesis, this provides the model of what is good about this relationship. And this difference as well in relationship.

Now later on in Ephesians 5, Paul says that this is a mystery but it's about Christ and the church. Now what he might be saying is not just that he's talking in that particular passage about Christ and the church. But that this statement in Genesis itself is anticipating something of the mission of Christ and the establishment of the church.

So even in this statement concerning the establishment of marriage, it's already looking towards what Christ is going to accomplish. Even before the fall if this is the case. And that is quite a startling and stunning statement and worth reflecting upon.

Notice then the Sabbath themes as marriage and Sabbath are both periods of rest that are brought together in these same sort of patterns. Some questions to think about. What is the significance of the deep sleep that God places Adam in? And also why the change from referring to God as God in chapter 1 to speaking of him as Lord God or Yahweh God in chapter 2? Chapter 3 of Genesis begins by introducing us to the character of the serpent.

The serpent we are told is shrewd. There's a pun here upon the word for naked that has just been used of the man and the woman. And some translators have tried to capture

this with plays such as *The Man and the Woman Were Nude* and *The Serpent Was Shrewd*.

Samuel Bray and John Hobbins in their recent translation described the serpent as smooth and shrewd. Suggesting nakedness with that word smooth. And the serpent seems to be associated with the beasts of the field in some way.

He has a cunning, an ability to navigate the world that humanity can learn from. Now if we think about the animals, one of the things that the animals do for us is teach us how to negotiate new environments. We follow their tracks.

We go to the watering holes that they lead us to. And the serpent is in many ways a creature that seems to be fitted to teach Adam and Eve concerning the wider world. And he questions the woman.

The woman in many ways is the weakest point of the situation in the garden. Why is that the case? Well she hasn't received the commandment concerning the tree directly from God. And so she's relying upon knowledge received second hand from Adam.

And if you pay attention to what the serpent says to her, he's playing off two pieces of information against each other. In chapter 1 verse 29, the man and the woman are told that all the fruit of the trees has been given to them. And then in chapter 2 verses 16 and 17, the man alone is told about this one restriction.

And so the serpent plays off that first piece of information that she has received first hand against the second piece of information which she has not. And when God challenges them later about the commandment, he challenges Adam in particular. If you read the text carefully, you should notice, if you read it in the original Hebrew or if you read it in the King James Bible, that it's a singular pronoun that's used.

It's Adam in particular that is challenged. Adam was the one commanded and it was a commandment delivered chiefly to him. Now the woman also enjoys privileged access to the heart of the man.

So if you want to get to the man, it's very good to go through the woman because she can break through his defences in a way that the serpent could not directly. Note the serpent's promise. You will be like God or like the gods, knowing good and evil.

I think it might be better to take this as a reference to the gods. And the serpent himself is presumably one of these. It maybe makes more sense of what's taking place.

The god is surrounded by the gods. Now the gods are not the pagan deities as we understand them within the ancient Near East. They're the angels.

They're the rulers of the world that God has established and created. They're created

beings. They're a court that fits within a monotheistic framework.

That's very different from the polytheism of the nations round about. But scripture talks about the gods on many occasions in the Old Testament. And here I think might be one of them.

The serpent's promise is that they will be like one of the ruling creatures, one of the angelic beings, one of these beings that rule within the world. If only they eat of this fruit. And later on it seems that they do in fact become like one of the gods, knowing good and evil.

And it would seem to me that it makes more sense to refer that to the gods rather than God himself. The serpent makes an insinuation that the woman never effectively challenges. Now note what he says.

He suggests that God has withhold all the trees of the garden. But he didn't do that. He didn't say that they couldn't eat of any of the trees.

There was just one tree that was forbidden to them. And the insinuation there is that God is not a good giver but that he is fundamentally withholding. And the woman never effectively diffuses that.

And that can so easily become our attitude. We can think of God as one who is holding back his good gifts from us, his children. But at the very heart of the story of creation is a story of God who is the good giver, who wants to give us good gifts.

And those things which he has withheld from us are withheld for a good reason. And that is the insinuation that the serpent brings at this initial point. There is also a confusion of what is good to our senses and what is morally good.

The woman sees the fruit and it seems good for food, desirable to make one wise, etc. It's a delight to the eyes. And yet that is not necessarily the same thing as being morally good.

Something that is good in a moral sense is not necessarily the same thing as something that seems visually appealing or appealing to our tastes or whatever it is. And that distinction between those two things is a very great part of what it means to gain moral perception. Infants often can't distinguish between what tastes good and what is actually good for their bodies.

And that sort of distinction is the distinction that the woman and the man seem to act and lack in this passage. It should maybe reflect a bit upon the meaning of nakedness. Nakedness can be associated with infancy.

And infancy has two key things associated with it. Moral innocence, not sinful, and so in

the same way as an adult is. And there's less of a sense of interiority, so there's less of a sense of shame associated.

And then there's less glory. Glory is something that is to do with our status, our honour, the way that we appear to others, the way that we have standing in the world and in the sight of others. Now infants don't have that yet.

And so they run around quite happily naked without having a strong sense of interiority or a sense of honour and glory that would give them any qualms about it. Whereas when we grow up, we can have a strong sense of, for instance, being underdressed. We go to a party and everyone else is dressed up for the event and we're actually underdressed.

We're maybe wearing jeans and some shirt that isn't particularly neat. And we feel that we stand out. And so that sense of being underdressed is a sense of a lack of glory.

And that nakedness that the man and the woman experience at this point suddenly hits them with a force is in part a sense of being underdressed and it's also a sense of exposure to judgement. It's exposure to the gaze of the other. Now the naked human being is in many ways the peeled human being, the human being that has been robbed of their outer covering.

Clothing is quite natural to us. Clothing is that which glorifies us. When we become mature, we tend to dress up for special events, to show status, to show our importance, whatever it is.

And these are not bad things. But then there's also that sense of shame when clothing is removed. And that sense of shame is a sense of a lack of glory, a lack of integrity, whatever it is, and an exposure to the judgement of others.

Now opened eyes, as Adam and Eve experience, are eyes of judgement. Eyes that can see things in their interior character. The infant doesn't wear clothes in part because they have no strong sense of interiority.

And when two people become one flesh, they should be able to be naked and unashamed with each other. But yet our shame can be seen even in our most intimate acts and relations. A shame that is founded upon in part our loss of integrity and our loss of innocence, moral innocence.

Even in these most intimate acts and relations we can set up psychological barriers, barriers of technique, or something else to prevent ourselves from being truly exposed and vulnerable to the gaze of the other person. We're shrinking away. We're trying to hide ourselves as Adam and the woman were.

Later in scripture we can see that key human beings gain the knowledge of good and evil and become like the gods in certain respects. These aren't necessarily bad things in

themselves and it seems that the knowledge of good and evil might have been given to Adam and Eve if only they waited. The problem is they're like kids joyriding in their parents' car, not waiting for the proper time when when they come of age they might be given the keys and taught how to drive themselves.

Adam, note, shifts blame to the woman but also to God. He says the woman whom you gave to be with me, she, etc. The man is suggesting not merely that God is a god who is withholding, as the serpent insinuated earlier, but that God gives bad gifts.

The woman is not a good gift. She is a gift that has led him astray, that has caused all this upset. And God is ultimately the one responsible.

Now there are three judgements associated with the three participants and there's a promise contained in the judgement to the serpent. The promise of the one that will crush the serpent's head, the seed of the woman. And here in embryo we see the story of scripture being presented.

We saw it to an extent in the previous chapter with the promise of a man leaving his father and mother and being joined to his wife and the two becoming one flesh. That anticipates what happens in Christ and the church. But here we see the seed of the woman is anticipating the great form of redemption in Christ.

How God will ultimately defeat and conquer the serpent. That he will destroy the works of the devil. That is the purpose for which Christ came.

Both the man and the woman are to be frustrated in their relationship with that from which they were taken. The woman's task focuses on the filling work of bringing life and forming the heart of human society. But she will find that her husband rules over her rather than acting to strengthen her.

Now her desire will be for her husband. I don't think that's a statement that she wants to take his place. I think it's more a fact that she wants him.

She wants him to act on her behalf. She wants him to be on her side and yet she finds that he frustrates her. He rules over her.

He does not use his strength to come to her aid and her support. Rather he frustrates her and subjugates her in different ways. And on his part the man's task focuses on the forming work of taming the earth.

And he will be frustrated by it. He will ultimately return to the dust. And he will become, as he returns to the dust, food for the serpent who eats the dust.

And all this frustration can be seen as purely curse. But there's a form of grace here as well. It keeps sin on a tighter leash.

By putting enmity between the woman and the serpent. By putting a frustrating relationship between the man and the woman. And by frustrating man's labours in the world.

Sin is prevented from rushing forward inexorably to destroy the entirety of creation. It's kept on a tighter leash than it would have been otherwise. And there's a blessing here.

To know that sinful human beings cannot exert the full force that they might like in shaping the world to their sinful desires. Likewise the entrance of sin and death serves constantly to cut back sin. Preventing it rising to its full unfettered development.

Death forces us to reckon with the end of our existence. Not just the temporal end, but also our end in the sense of our final purpose. It forces us to consider ourselves before judgement.

And so God casts the man and the woman out of the garden. He places them within the wider world and they must fend for themselves there in a new way. They must work no longer in the garden where they're provided for, where they have all this fruit to hand.

But in a difficult working situation where they no longer have the same access to God's presence. Some questions to think about. First of all, why is the woman named Eve? What is the significance of that name? Second, can you observe some literary parallels and connections between the judgement on the woman and the judgement on the man? And what might be learned from these? And finally, what significance can be seen in God's making the man and the woman garments of skins? In Genesis 4, Cain being born is new life in a world under the shadow of death following the fall.

Eve's statement, I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord, may suggest that she believes that this one might be the seed that crushes the serpent's head. One way or another, she sees in this a continuation of God's creative grace. God has not given up on the world.

And in the birth of a child, a new life, there's a sign that life is going to continue. That God is going to still work with his creation. And he's going to show grace to it.

There are two narratives dealing with creation. And now there's a second narrative dealing with the first advent of sin. So we have two creation narratives and two fall narratives.

Adam and Eve bring sin in the garden by rebelling against their divine father. And Cain sins in the land by murdering his brother. There's a sin against the father and it's followed by a sin against the brother, the nearest neighbour.

There's a vertical sin followed by a horizontal sin. A sin against the first tablet of the law followed by a sin against the second tablet of the law. Sin has also spread.

So it's like a drop of ink or a blot of ink that flows out and spreads from the garden now to the wider world. There's a sin involving a husband-wife pairing. And now it's followed by a sin involving a brother-brother pairing.

And the narratives should be read alongside each other. There are parallels that are immediately obvious to anyone without tin ears. For instance, between verse 3, 16 of chapter 3, and verse 7 of chapter 4. Both that speak of the desire of something for someone else and the fact that that person should rule over them.

Thomas Brodie has listed a number of the parallels. So first of all, we see in the setting that they, the man and his wife, and then in the second one, the man knew his wife. There's the serpent of the field and then there's the sin crouching into the field.

There's the fruit forbidden by God and then there's the fruit of Cain that is not regarded by God. There's the problem of relationship to God and then there's the problem of relationship through God to Abel. There's the drama seen on the face with the eyes opening, the delight of the eyes, the desire, all these sorts of things.

And in the case of Cain, the distress of his face. His face falls. This crime and punishment.

After eating, they know that they are naked. After killing, God asks where is Abel? They hear the voice. And in the case of Cain, God says the voice is crying to me.

The response of Adam, I hid when I heard the sound of God coming near. In the case of Cain, he must hide. He must be concealed lest he be killed.

There's an avoidance of responsibility. It was the woman. It was the serpent.

And in the case of Cain, a similar thing. Am I my brother's keeper? Because you have done this, cursed are you. Cursed is the ground because of you.

And in the same case of Cain, what have you done? Now you are cursed from the ground. And there's consequences that are very similar. God protects and clothes them.

And God puts a sign on Cain. God casts them out of Eden. And Cain goes out from God's presence.

There are cherubim placed in the east of Eden. And Cain dwells to the east of Eden. Cain is associated with the service of the ground.

And his name may be suggesting some sort of association with the forge. Abel, on the other hand, keeps sheep. And his name associates him with breath.

Perhaps we should see a bifurcation of Adam's own identity and vocation here. So on the one hand, Adam serves the ground. He tills the ground.

He acts within the world to bring fruit from the ground. But he also rules over and names the animals. So on the one hand, he's defined by the breath that he's given, the breath from heaven.

And on the other hand, he's defined by his bodily relationship with the world and the earth and the way he's going to serve that earth. And in the case of Cain and Abel, we see a sort of bifurcation of that. Cain expressing the earthward relationship of Adam and Abel relating to the heavenward relationship of Adam.

That Abel is the one who uses his breath. He uses his power of rule to keep the sheep. And Cain, his relationship with the ground and the earth.

And he operates on that level. Animal sacrifice has already begun at this point. And it seems to be a way that the offerer offers themselves to God.

And God's reception of the sacrifice is in part his acceptance of the worshipper that offers themselves in the symbol of the sacrifice. Now, why is Cain rejected? Some have suggested it's the fact that he does not bring an animal sacrifice and the blood of atonement that requires. Perhaps it's also that he doesn't bring the first fruits.

He's just bringing average produce. Whereas Abel offers not just fruit of his works, but a symbol of his person, a recognition of the necessity of death and also of the first fruits of his flock. The very best.

Perhaps Abel should have been the one that led. The younger brother as the priest and the elder brother as the powerful king who rules and gains power from the earth. Now, why is Cain angry? His sacrifice is rejected, but Abel's is accepted.

And think of the times when we've given a gift and our gift is thrown back to us. It's rejected. And in the rejection of the gift, we feel that we ourselves are not seen.

We're not accepted. And he feels that he's been cut out of the loop of relationship with God. And he feels threatened by that fact.

And so his anger is exercised against the one who was accepted. There's envy there, but also a resistance to God who has cut him out, it seems. God challenges him at this point.

And he challenges him before he has come to any action. Sin resides in the heart before it is expressed in the actions. And in Jesus' teaching, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, he draws attention to this.

That sin must be dealt with at its root. It must be dealt with at the very basic point of the heart. And the entrance of sin, the weak point, is found within us.

The temptation takes place first there. This is where the garden is. This is where our garden is.



As Adam and Eve found themselves in the garden, they were tempted at that point. The true garden in Cain is within his heart. Is he going to guard that garden? And this is where the beast crouching at the door finds access.

Like the serpent, who is the wildest of the beasts, he finds access to the garden. So there's a beast crouching at the door of Cain's heart, of his garden. And we must guard the gardens of our hearts, lest we give access to the beast of sin.

And once that beast has access, the actions so often follow. This is why Jesus' teaching on the Sermon on the Mount is so important. It's how to deal with that problem at the heart.

How to get below just regulating actions in a futile way that often proves unsuccessful. And dealing with the problem where it really resides. Now what does it mean that sin's desire is for Cain? Well, I think it means that it wants to gain his strength by capturing his heart.

Cain's strength is desired by sin. Sin wants Cain to act on its behalf. It wants to capture the citadel of Cain's heart so that Cain would be its willing agent.

And what we see in what follows is an unfolding of the city of man. As there is this first foundation of a city named after Cain's son. Cain is trying to form a civilization in part because he's been cut out of the cycle of gift.

He's been exiled and now he's trying to make a name for himself. Almost in rebellion against God or as an alternative to the city of God and fellowship with God, we have this alternative city being developed. There are characters that arise from Cain's line that provide other interesting lights on what's happened before.

So we have the children of Ada and Zilla, the wives of Lamech. Ada is the mother of Jabal, who's associated with those who live in tents and keep livestock. And of Jubal, players of the lyre and of the pipe.

Now, looking at those names, you should immediately recognize some sort of resonance with the name of Abel. Jabal, Abel. Jubal, Abel.

These are the same sorts of names and it seems that there's a sort of progression and building out and unpacking and unfolding some sort of refracting of the identity of Abel here. So we have two sets of brothers, those associated with Ada and those associated with Zilla. And in the case of Ada, you have Jabal and Jubal associated with tents and livestock as Abel was associated with keeping of sheep and with breath.

And so the player of the lyre and pipe, making music, is associated with Abel. It's an unpacking of his identity. On the other hand, we have the son of Zilla is Tubal-Cain.

Again, there's an association with Cain's name and Cain is associated with the earth. Tubal-Cain is the smith. And thinking about those connections, I think, can be helpful to see that contrast between these two characters and the way that they are unpacking the fundamental vocation of Adam.

It might be interesting to think about that. Some questions. Cain says, am I my brother's keeper? Think about the relationship between Adam's sin in relationship to Eve and Cain's sin in relationship to Abel.

There is a parallel to be observed there. Second question. Lamex speaks of himself being avenged 70 times 7. Now, this is not the only time in scripture we see this number.

Where else do we see the number and how might the comparison and the contrast prove significant? A few chapters ago, we saw the generations of the heavens and the earth. And now we begin the generations of Adam. Adam functions both as a name for an individual man, but also as the name for the race built in the case of Eve and descended in the case of everyone else from him.

He stands for the entirety of humanity. His name is given to humanity. He was created in God's image and likeness.

And now he has a son, Seth, in his image and likeness. Now, when we're reading a text like this, it's important to remember that we read the scriptures as people who swim in a society of literally trillions of texts of different kinds. Everything from text messages to things that we read on the Internet to books that we pull down from a shelf.

And we're accustomed to single readings of texts with low signal to noise ratios or pure surface signal that we can read quickly. We can get the message and we don't have to return to them. But the original readers of scripture would have devoted years to studying them closely in a society with a very limited body of knowledge that was highly integrated.

They were also quite used to the exceedingly dense signals of texts that might require a hundred readings or more to discover. And when we're reading something like this genealogy, it's important to remember that because there's a lot within this. And I'm going to throw out a few things to notice and see if you can put any pieces together.

I have not been able to put these pieces together yet, but there's something promising here. First of all, we've already seen a genealogy in the previous chapter. Adam, Cain, Enoch, Irad, Mithu, Jael, Mithu, Shael, Lamech, and then Jabal, Jubal, Tubal, Cain and Nama.

And I wonder whether the sons of Lamech are supposed to recall Cain and Abel. I've already mentioned this in the previous discussion. But there are a number of points of similarity with the genealogy that follows.

And a number of people have noticed this. So there's Adam, Seth, Enoch, Kinan. Is that a reminder of Cain? Mahalalel? Is that Mithu, Jael? Is that some connection there? Jared, Irad, Enoch.

There's another Enoch in the previous one. Methuselah and then Mithu, Shael. And then there's a Lamech in both.

And then it ends with Noah. And perhaps we're supposed to read these two lines in juxtaposition with each other as a sort of commentary on their respective and their contrasting character. That's one suggestion.

The similarities between the names have been noticed by many. The other thing that should be noted is that the age at which the patriarchs give birth is included, which isn't always the case in these sorts of things. Some have suggested that that's to give a complete chronology so that you can map from one to another.

And you can have a very clear idea of what happens when at which point. And you can count out the years and number the age of the earth for that reason as well. But there are interesting things about the numbers too.

Carol Hill has observed that there are preferred numbers. There are numbers that we see and then there are numbers that we don't see. She notes that for the 30 numbers listed for the patriarchs prior to the flood from Adam to Noah, all of the ages end in a 0, 5, 7, 2 or 9. And she observes that these can all be forms of adding 5 and 7 or adding 5 and 7 and 7 or something like that.

These are significant numbers that arise from key core significant numbers. And numbers that are an exact century are mentioned on three occasions within these. That's unusual.

It's not what we'd expect. It's not what we'd expect if this were just a random set of numbers. In the Septuagint, a number of these figures differ.

And some have argued that the Septuagint numbers should be preferred over the numbers that we have in our Bibles. But again, it's worth seeing that many of the properties of the numbers are shared both by the Septuagint and the version in our Bible. Even though they're different numbers, they have similar qualities and characters to them.

And that, again, is an interesting feature. Many of the numbers can be combined to form other numbers in the passage. It's another weird feature.

It's not what we'd expect. Others have observed the connections between the numbers and the synodical orbits of the chief planets as calculated by the Babylonians. So Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn.

Add all five of these and you get the year that the flood ended in the Septuagint numbering. And note also figures like Enoch. Enoch is 365 years old when he dies.

Now, that's a number we know. It's a number that should stand out to us like other numbers that we have within the text. And so pay attention to those sorts of details and you might notice some important things.

Richard Hess has argued that there is wordplay and significance to the names of the characters in the narrative. So we see the name of Adam connects him with the Earth. Ish and Isha are connected together.

Eve connected with life. We have Cain and Abel, their names, given some sort of significance. And in all of these cases, these occur within the narrative.

But within the genealogy, he suggests that there are roles and characteristics that are associated with the names. And really suggested some of these in the case of Cain's genealogy. And some like Noah are interpreted for us.

But when we consider these things, maybe there is some greater significance to be found in this particular set of names. Others have pointed out that there might be some analogy between Genesis 1 as the generations of the Earth. Day following day.

First day, second day, etc. all the way down. And Genesis 5 as the generations of Adam who came last in the previous generations.

Both end on the theme of rest. The first with the Sabbath and then the second with Noah that's going to give rest in their labours. So there's a similarity there.

There are ten words of creation in Genesis chapter 1. There are ten generations in Genesis chapter 5. What else can we see? Well, there's a contrast between the technologically advancing descendants of Cain that we've seen in the previous chapter. And the descendants of the righteous, of Seth, who do not seem to be associated with the same progress in technology. We'll see the same sort of thing in the contrast between the story of Babel and the development of the technology of firing bricks.

And the call of Abraham, who does not have the same technological advancement. At the end of both genealogies, or near the end, the one who fathers the final generation is a figure called Lamech. Lamech, whose wives are Ada and Zillah and has three sons and a daughter.

And then Lamech, who's the father of Noah. In the first one he's associated with 70 times 7. And in the second he's associated with 777. That's his age.

Some questions to ask about this passage. First of all, how does God creating humanity in the image of God relate to Adam fathering a child in his image and likeness? How can

one illuminate the other? And a second question. Why do we have years and ages in the genealogy of Seth, but not in that of Cain? Verse 1 of chapter 6 concerning the multiplication of man connects what has gone before with the event of the flood that follows.

However, while the genealogy of chapter 5 moves step by step towards the climax of the 10th generation, this introduction highlights the multiplication that has occurred through the generations, not just the progression. And while chapter 5 focused on the sons and the movement from father to son, verse 1 of chapter 6 shifts attention to the daughters. With the sons comes an emphasis upon the succession of rule and name.

With the daughters an emphasis upon the proliferation and the life of humanity. We should note also here that there is an echo of the four. The sons of God see that the daughters of man are good and they take them, much as Eve took the fruit in the garden.

Now the big question many people have here is who are the sons of God? And the oldest readings can often relate this to angelic beings or members of the divine council. So God exists enthroned above the heavens and there are created beings that surround him, the angels. And then of various classes, these divine beings, these are the gods of the nations, the rulers, who are created beings but nonetheless above humanity in various ways.

These beings are referred to as the sons of God elsewhere in scripture, in places like the book of Job, in places like Psalm 89 and in parts of Deuteronomy. It's also within ancient Near Eastern mythology that there is this council of the gods. Now that's been demythologised to a certain extent and placed within a monotheistic framework within scripture.

But there are significant commonalities here. Elsewhere in Genesis, angels also seem to appear in human bodily forms. They seem to be capable of regular human bodily actions such as eating.

And so some have suggested that these are angelic beings having physical relations with human women. There are a number of questions and problems with this but also some advantages to this thesis. First of all, why are human beings punished for what seems to be the sin of angels? That's one of the questions that has arisen for many critics of this position.

This reading also tends to relate it to wider ancient mythology of sexual relations between humanity and the gods and the superhuman heroes that arose from such unions. There's a broader theme that goes throughout the book of Genesis that this might fit into. It's a broader theme of attempts to gain forbidden status.

So in the case of the Garden of Eden, the man and the woman sought to become like one of the gods. The temptation of the serpent, who presumably was one of the gods himself, offered them the possibility of gaining this status, this status of rule and authority in the world. Perhaps what we're seeing here is a development of the temptation and the ploy of the serpent in the garden to get humanity to crave this forbidden status and to align themselves with him and his fallen angels to try and achieve it.

So with sexual consort between human women and fallen angels, there is the hope that they will gain some higher status and power within the world. We can see a further example of this at the Tower of Babel, where humanity seeks to gain authority to build a tower that rises to heaven so that they will not be scattered and so that they will have some of the authority of the gods. Another interesting thing to bear in mind here is the fact that the angels in scripture seem to be exclusively male and seem to be particularly interested in women.

The angels as depicted in scripture are comparable to a military company or a band of priests. They are a band of sons and brothers. They're not a race like humanity.

Humanity is a bride and on account of women has a glory of its own that angels lack. Human women represent the potential of humanity to be elevated above the angels and for this reason might spark angelic jealousy and pride. It might be one of the reasons why the angels specifically target human women because women are the ones that represent the potential of humanity to be exalted above the angels, to be the bride.

In 1 Corinthians 11 verse 10, we are told that women have to dress in a particular modest manner on account of the angels and some such as Tertullian have related that to this particular reading of Genesis. There's also the fact that within apocryphal literature dating back maybe even to the 3rd and 4th centuries BC, such as the book of Enoch, there are already developed stories of these events relating them to angelic watchers. These figures taught humanity technology, warfare, cosmetics, astrology, witchcraft and other such arts and they determined to take human wives to bear children for themselves as part of their own rebellion and they become the giants of the Nephilim.

And this apocryphal literature seems to be referenced in the New Testament in places such as 2 Peter 2 verses 4-5, the book of Jude verse 6 and verses 14-15. And as I mentioned in the case of Tertullian and elsewhere, we see this sort of understanding of the text referenced very early in the history of the church. And it seems that this reading certainly has a strong pedigree, but yet it's been strongly challenged by many.

It's important to notice that behind this challenge to the angelic sons of God reading are often deeper concerns about the interpretation of scripture. In particular, when the reading of obscure texts is made to hinge upon details from, for instance, ancient Near

Eastern mythology and apocryphal literature, many people get understandably concerned. This suggests the existence of a sort of penumbral realm of partial revelation in myth and non-scriptural prophecy which extends beyond the explicit word of scripture.

And the more that we are made to depend upon this, the more biblical revelation can become eroded by myths, fables and speculation. Also, one not uncommonly encounters people who entertain such myths drifting away from focus upon the revealed things of God into speculative and fantastical fables. So one moment they're talking about Genesis 6, and the next they have a unified theory of ancient mythological heroes, modern UFO sightings and scripture that threatens to displace God's clear revealed word from its centrality.

However, on the other hand, the claim that scripture is hermetically sealed off from such realms of discourse is difficult to sustain at various points in the text, such as in the places I mentioned in 2 Peter and the book of Jude. These seem to reference apocryphal literature. And it might be worth bearing in mind that while it references such apocryphal literature, scripture shows a certain reservation about this mythological aspect.

While it comes into view at certain points, it is in shadow. It's not focused upon. And likewise for us, it should not become the focus of our attention, although it is worth paying attention to.

There seems to be a large amount of stuff in scripture that is just mysterious and not explained within the text itself, much less than some presume. Those who will take the more mythological perspective can often overestimate the amount that needs to be explained by sources outside of the text. But there is much more than certain biblicists might like to believe.

There are certain things that cannot easily be explained from within the text. So let's take note of some of the issues here. If we're going to solve a question like this or at least break it down to size, we need to recognise some of the problems and the issues that are at play.

So the first thing to notice is the existence of early myths elaborating on the significance of these events and possibly validating allusions to these in the New Testament. The other thing to notice is the use of the terminology of sons of God to refer to angels on various other occasions in scripture. It's not used in the same way to refer to the generation of the righteous, for instance.

The implication that the Nephilim were the result of the sexual union between the sons of God and daughters of man is a fairly natural reading of this passage. And why would a union between two sets of human beings produce giants and mighty men? That's another question to answer. The use of the word Adam or man in contrasting ways in verse 1 and 2 is also important.

If the reading that many have presented in a more conservative context that one is the generation of the righteous and the other generation of the wicked, you have man multiplying and then you have the reference to the daughters of man. But man used there in that particular reading is a particular group of man. It's not mankind in general.

And it's strange that you'd have that shift between those two senses of the term. On the surface of things, there seems to be a contrast between a group of persons associated with the gods and a group of women associated with humanity. Some opponents of the angelic sons of God reading have brought forward the claim that angels do not marry according to Jesus' teaching.

And this certainly seems to be true of the righteous angels. Angels do not have relations among themselves. They are a host, not a race.

However, angels can come in a bodily form and those bodies can seem to perform usual functions. And would it be possible for such an angel in such a body to have relations with human beings? It does not seem to be something that we can simply rule out as a possibility. Also, we have angelic or demonic possession of human bodies, which would present other possibilities.

Genesis also, I think this is one of the strongest arguments against the angelic sons of God reading. Genesis seems to have an anti-mythological impulse. And such a reading seems to open the door, at least by a crack, to all sorts of mythology.

And so a number of those arguing against the angelic sons of God reading point to this danger. And the impulse of Genesis is to attack these mythologies and place things within a monotheistic and non-mythological framework. A common Christian and Jewish reading then is that the sons of God are the covenant line of Seth and the daughters of men are women of the line of Cain.

The problem then is intermarriage between the line of the righteous and the line of the wicked. Now, this might be reading the concept of the covenant back into a situation where it does not appropriately belong. And I'm unpersuaded by this reading myself.

Other readings have tried to take on board the strength of the angelic sons of God reading and bring different things to bear upon the question. So, for instance, people like Meredith Klein have argued that the sons of God are dynastic rulers. And taking of the daughters of men, whichever they choose, is the reference to indiscriminate marriage and polygamy like Lamech and his wives.

The sons of God or the sons of the gods, it's language that can be used of kings. And we see that sort of language used in ancient Near Eastern mythology of sacral kingship. The king can be understood as the son of the gods or goddesses.

And the high priestesses would be seen as spouses of the deity and would themselves



be bound up with the royal dynastic cult. And so Genesis chapter 6 might be referring to this cultic myth rather than advocating an actual myth. Of course, behind the cultic myth was the actual worship of fallen angels and ritual sonship of them.

Chris Coe has made a strong argument for this particular reading, arguing that the ritual enacting of sexual congress with the gods is involved here. But it's a ritual inaction, not an actual physical sexual relation with the gods. The Nephilim are described as mighty men.

Later in chapter 10, verse 8, Nimrod is described in similar language. We're told that God's spirit will not strive, protect or remain with man forever. It's not entirely clear what that word should be translated as.

We've already encountered the spirit hovering over the creation in the beginning in chapter 1, verse 2. It might also be a reference to the breath that is breathed into man. That God is going to remove the breath from everything that breathes. And there's a spirit and flesh opposition here.

Flesh stands for humanity and its weakness and frailty and also for animal life. Flesh must be cut off. Man is evil completely, exclusively and continually.

Every part of man's life is infected and corrupted by sin. And what we're seeing in part here is the spreading out of sin. In the Garden of Eden, we saw that first blot of sin in the Garden Realm.

And then it spreads out to the land with the killing of Abel by Cain. And now it's spread out even further. And we're seeing a gradual progression also from the relationship between man and God.

The relationship between brother and brother with Cain and Abel. And now the relationship between husband and wife and also the angels coming into the picture, perhaps. This is a breakdown of the whole cosmic order.

And the whole creation is in this broader rebellion. And the logic of sin is being ever more completely worked out. In the naming of the child Noah in the previous chapter, there's an anticipation that he will bring an alteration in humanity's relationship with the earth.

Noah is named Noah because he will bring comfort. Yet there seems to be a wordplay connecting this with God's regret in this chapter. That God's regret is a play on the name for Noah.

God declares a universal intention. But immediately we read of an exception to it, Noah. While the rest of human flesh and flesh in general is going to be wiped out, Noah finds grace in God's eyes.

And grace here is important. This is not fundamentally grounded upon anything that Noah has done that Noah merits. But his receipt of grace from God.

Noah heads a new generation section here as well. This is a story that is spreading out from Noah's life and what he stands for. He's told to build an ark.

The ark has three stories, as does the world, the heavens, the earth, and the waters under the earth. Within the ark, he's supposed to have male and female of all creatures. The dimensions of the ark are interesting too.

It's worth reflecting upon the connections between them and the dimensions of the tabernacle in his courtyard. Or the dimensions of the temple. We should relate these things together.

Also, some of the key numbers of the flood narrative, such as the number 150. Or the number of Noah's age. The flood occurs in Noah's 600th year.

And after that, he lives for 300 years and 50 years. If you think about 350, those are the dimensions of the ark. And so Noah himself is an ark.

A human ark that bears humanity in himself. The instructions to build the ark have all sorts of curious details. Concerning the roof or skylight.

The division of the ark into rooms or nests. And the wood from which it should be made. There are other details that are omitted.

So one of the questions I would encourage you to think about are what are the significance of some of these details? How can comparing these details with the story of other constructions that human beings are called to make shed light upon both? Noah's ark, as we have seen in the previous chapter, has resemblances to the tabernacle. It is the place where God is present with his people. But it is also the place where he preserves his people.

And its dimensions are like a bringing together of the dimensions of the tabernacle courtyard. 100 cubits by 50 cubits. And the tabernacle itself.

30 cubits by 10 cubits. Divided into 20 cubits by 10. For the holy place and then the most holy place as 10 by 10.

The tabernacle is the only other construction described in this way in the Pentateuch. Rabbi David Foreman has noted the parallels between Noah's ark and the ark of the covenant. It is important to notice that these aren't the same word ark in Hebrew as they are in English.

But there are parallels nonetheless. In both cases someone is called to construct a wooden object and to overlay it inside and out with something. Pitch in the case of the

ark of Noah and gold in the case of the ark of the covenant.

We can also see maybe parallels with the ark in which the infant Moses is placed. Again it's daubed outside with pitch. And it is prepared in a way to preserve this young child from being drowned in the waters.

Noah has originally been told to take pairs of animals into the ark. But the instructions here are fleshed out further. Where he is instructed to bring seven pairs of the birds and seven of each clean animal.

There's an anticipation on the one hand of the birds flying out over the new creation as it's been released from the deep. And then the sacrifice of the clean animals in the future. We should notice that the story of the flood as Gordon Wenham and others have pointed out.

Is a series of bookends around bookends. It has an ABCDE DCBA structure. So it can think about the rising of the text and then the falling of the text like the waters themselves.

This is what scholars have called a chiasm or a polystrophy. It's a there and back again structure. So if you look at the days that are mentioned you see seven days of waiting for the flood.

In chapter 7 verse 4. Seven days further of waiting for the flood. Chapter 7 verse 10. 40 days of the flood itself.

150 days of water triumphing. In 7 verse 24. 150 days of water waning.

In 8 verse 3. And then 40 days of wait. 8 verse 6. 7 days of wait. 8 verse 10.

And 7 days of wait again. 8 verse 12. So you can see there's a up and then a down.

There's a going out and a coming back. Noah enters the ark at the age of 600. And again we should note the significance of particular numbers.

Particularly round numbers and multiples of 60. So this is 10 times 60. It's another round century as we see in the case of the story of Adam.

And we see that Noah begets his children around the age of 500. These round numbers are important. Methuselah is born in the 65th year of Enoch's life.

After which Enoch lives for 300 further years. Noah and Enoch both walk with God. They both have these round numbers as part of their ages.

The ark is the seed of a new world. It's a microcosm. And God shuts Noah in.

Maybe we could think of parallels with the events of the Exodus. There's a great

pilgrimage of a large number for deliverance from judgment. There's the shutting up of some within a realm of refuge.

Like the doors being closed around the houses of the Israelites while the Egyptians were judged. We can think about the judgment arriving upon those outside of the doors. Deliverance and judgment through waters as at the Red Sea.

Arrival at the mountain as in the case of both Sinai and Ararat. And then the establishment of a covenant. The covenant with Noah and the covenant with Moses and the Israelites.

40 days and 40 nights are both significant numbers associated with the rising up of Moses to God's presence. And also the rising up of the ark. There are instructions to build a construction.

And there's obedience to those instructions. So maybe there's something to be explored here about some parallel between these events. The event of the flood involves a decreation and a return to the chaotic state at the very beginning of the creation.

Darkness over the face of the deep. The deep covering the whole earth, blanketing the creation. And a return to the state of chaos.

And this one small place within the creation that preserves order. And that's the realm of the ark. That's the seed of a new creation that will later on be spread out upon the world.

You can think about the importance of boats more generally. Boats can represent a home, a structure of order in a realm of chaos. In a realm where everything else is outside is disordered and dangerous.

Noah and his family enter the ark in the 600th year of Noah's life. In the second month on the 17th day of the month. Now it's an interestingly precise figure.

Why not just say he entered in the 600th year and came out in his 600th and first year. But it's very specific as are a number of the other dates in the narrative. This it might be noted as 47 days into the year, which is 40 plus 7. Which both being numbers that we see at the beginning and the end of the event of the flood.

Already known to be significant for the author. The flood ends exactly one year and 11 days later. When we consider that the solar year is 11 days longer than the lunar year.

It might seem to be intentional here. The specificity of the dates does invite reflection. And maybe we should see some connection with feast days or something like that.

I would strongly recommend that people look further into this. See if there's anything that they dig up. The world is drowned.

But Noah and those in the ark are not just preserved through the waters. But they're lifted up by the waters. They are raised up.

One final question. Can you see any of the possible significance to the dates of the flood narrative? And to the numbers of the days devoted to specific events? In Genesis chapter 8 verse 1 we see the verse that is the turning point of the flood narrative. God remembers Noah.

Later on we'll see God remembering Abraham in the destruction of Sodom. We'll see God remembering Israel as he delivers them in the Exodus. Here the wind blowing over the earth might recall the spirit of God hovering over the waters in Genesis chapter 1 verse 2. It also maybe anticipates the strong east wind that blows over the Red Sea.

Opening a path for the Israelites to cross in the Exodus. The description of the receding sea is also similar to that used in reference to the Red Sea in Exodus chapter 14. The chronology of the flood is important as I've already noted.

The length of days recorded are noteworthy. There are a number of periods of a week mentioned. There are a couple of 40 day periods.

And 150 days is 5 months. You can think of this in a more schematized understanding of months where each month is allocated 30 days. We have different calendars for different things.

There are some calendars that have exactly 52 weeks in the year. So you have a 4-4-5 pattern. Four quarters of 13 weeks divided into two 4 week months and one 5 week month.

When we're dealing with the flood narrative I think it's important to recognize that we are dealing with something that seems highly schematized. There is a very close attention to the structure of the text. We've already seen this chiasmic structure, this there and back again structure.

We've also seen specific dates singled out. And those dates it seems to me are not just dates of occurrences but they're dates that are correlated with certain observances. The importance being that people read the story of the flood and recognize a meaning within it.

So there are events that occur on the first day of the 601st year of Noah's life. That day is a significant one not merely in terms of what occurred on it but in terms of observance. It's correlated with a particular part of the calendar.

It seems likely to me that some of the peculiar details of the text can be explained in part by the bringing together of a lunar calendar with 354 days in the year and a solar calendar with 365 days in the year. And within the text we're seeing both of these having

a play along with the schematized month of 30 days. Which is why you have the 150 day period being significant.

The 150 is also associated with the age of Noah himself at the beginning of the flood. Four times 150. The ark is also twice 150 in its length which suggests maybe more is going on there.

The ark comes to rest on the mountains of Ararat. Not necessarily Ararat itself but rest is a play on Noah's name. Noah is the one who was named in order that he would bring rest and relief and comfort to people after the cursing of the earth.

And now he brings the ark to rest. He sends out the raven and the raven is an unclean bird but that's followed by a dove which is a clean bird and may represent Noah himself. The dove finds no resting place and again this is a play on Noah's name.

The dove may be looking for a Noah as it were outside of the ark but finds none. Note that Noah follows a weekly pattern in sending out the dove. The dove comes back with an olive leaf perhaps representing Israel in the end.

And Noah reaches out his hand and takes the dove into the ark. The last time we've seen that sort of language is in reference to the fear that man will reach out his hand and take of the tree of life. Is there some connection to be seen in the fact that Noah is reaching out his hand and taking this bird with this part of the tree? Maybe there is something there.

It's worth looking into at least. The waters recede on the first day of the 601st year of Noah's life. And the tabernacle is erected on the first day of the first year of the exodus.

And I've already noted a number of the different details that connect these stories. Israel goes out with 600,000 people. Noah begins the story of the ark in his 600th year.

And so maybe there are further connections there. Noah removes the covering from the ark. And the same language again is used for the covering of the tabernacle.

Noah is in many ways a new Moses. He's the one that goes to the top of the mountain. He's the one who's lifted up in an ark.

Moses is placed in an ark in his infancy. He's the one who acts as a mediator for the people. And Noah acts as a mediator for humanity.

Noah constructs the ark. Moses constructs the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant. Which as we have seen have all sorts of parallels with the ark.

And so it seems to me that we can fruitfully read these stories alongside each other. And the best all illusions that we find within the story of Noah and the flood may be helpful here. There's a new creation situation.

Animals are sent out to be fruitful and multiply in the earth. There's a first reference to an altar. Noah sacrifices clean animals upon the altar.

Already we're having an anticipation of the sort of sacrifice that will be exercised later on. Maybe the animals are supposed to represent human beings. So you have domestic animals representing human beings in an appropriate way that wild animals and beasts of the field cannot.

It seems to serve as a propitiating sacrifice. And maybe there's something important here to be considered concerning the logic of sacrifice more generally. And God's statement where he almost repeats the assessment of humanity but yet declares his desire for mercy is an interesting one.

It may remind you of the way that God speaks concerning the children of Israel and the hardness of their heart. But yet expressing a certain mercy even in his judgment at that point. And so as I've noted Noah is a Moses-like figure and a mediator.

One question for reflection. As we're reading through the story of the flood there are a great many parallels with the story of the original creation. There's the wind of God upon the waters just as the spirit of God hovered over the waters in Genesis chapter 1. There's the deep that covers the whole face of the earth.

There's all the animals being gathered together and then being sent out to be fruitful and multiply. There's the emergence of the dry land from the waters and the separation of the two. And then there's this celebration of a sort of Sabbath-like event as God blesses and shows mercy towards his creation.

While the original creation narrative spanned the period of a week in the ark narrative we're covering a whole year. And there are patterns playing out here as well. Seasons and particular festal days and other things that even in the chaos of the ark that's surrounded by waters there are certain patterns that are emerging.

That this seed is maintaining and then later on God's promise that he will not judge the earth in the same manner again. But that the cycles of the year and the seasons will be maintained. So what I want you to think about are some of these parallels and how they can help us to read the greater significance of the story of the ark against the background of the story of creation.

And the story of creation against the background of the story of the flood. The story of the flood is a story of de-creation and re-creation. The original creation narrative is a story of a world formed out of water.

The earth is void and formless. Darkness is over the face of the deep. The spirit of God is hovering over the face of the waters.

And God separates the waters, the waters above from the waters beneath. He draws the land out of the waters and gradually forms a world out of the waters. In the story of the flood we see the world restored to its original chaotic and void and formless shape.

The world is being broken down. The fountains of the deep are opened up. The heavens are opened up and we see this division between the waters above and the waters beneath no longer existing.

The waters that were once separated have now been brought back together. In the story of chapter 8 and 9 of Genesis we see various allusions to this. We see allusions to the deep.

We see allusions to the wind on the surface of the waters. We see references to the land drying out. And all of these draw our attention back to Genesis chapter 1. And then the earth is populated.

First of all birds are sent out. Then we have the animals being sent out and man going out into the creation. And at the beginning of chapter 9 we see very similar statements to the ones that we find after the creation of man and the animals in chapter 1 of Genesis.

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. But there's a change here. Man is now told that the fear of you and the dread of you will be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens.

Upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. They've been delivered into humanity's hands. Now many have seen in this and I think there's reason to believe this is the case.

That at this point man is given the right to eat animals. And man did not eat animals beforehand. Man was vegetarian.

Man was existing within a garden setting originally. And then out in the world in a weaker state. But now man has the power to rule over the world.

And with that greater power of rule and authority over the animals comes the right to eat animals. As man is given the green plants at the very beginning so man is given animals to eat. But yet there is a taboo, a restriction.

And that is not to eat animals with their blood. In part this is an expression of the fact that the animals belong to God alone. That when man eats animals we're not eating animals as those who have a natural right to take whatever life we want.

But as those who have received this right from God to whom all things belong. Who gives life and breath to all things and then gives the right to take certain life into our



hands. There's a reckoning that will be required of us of the life that we take.

First of all we cannot take animal life and dispose of it however we will. The prohibition on eating blood expresses this. But there's also a judgement that comes upon those who take the life of man.

So we can take the life of other creatures but to take the life of man is to take the life of one who has been created in the image of God. And God will hold such a person responsible. The judgement that's carried out upon the person who takes the life of another man is one that expresses on the one hand the dignity of every human being made in the image of God.

But also the dignity of human beings as those who share the dominion of God. By man shall his blood be shed for God made man in his own image. In part that may be an expression of the fact that since God has made man in his own image man has the right to judge other men on account of their breaking of God's law.

To act on God's behalf and to take the life of other human beings in these acts of judgement. We can think about the way in which in principle every judgement that we have whether that's taking a particular fine from someone or whether it's putting someone in prison for a number of years or whether it's even the death penalty. All of these arise from this fundamental principle that life can be taken by other men as an expression of the authority that God has given to his representatives, to his vicegerents.

Man is called to go out into the creation to be fruitful and multiply, to increase greatly upon the earth and multiply upon it. And God establishes a covenant with humanity at this point with Noah and his descendants and with every living creature that is with them. And the covenant is that he will never again cut off flesh by the waters of the flood.

There will never be this de-creation event of the same type. This is accompanied by a sign which is the rainbow in the heavens and God promises on this account that he will not judge the earth in the same way again. That the judgement is finished, it's over.

And as we think about the parallels between the original creation and the de-creation and re-creation of the world in the flood, this is a further connection. That the covenant and the sign of the covenant as the rainbow correspond with the day of the Sabbath. It's God's rest, it's his blessing and it's his determination that the act is finished.

That he's no longer going to judge in this particular way. God hangs up his war bow in the clouds. The act is finished and now human life can continue according to its regular patterns.

There's an everlasting covenant that's established in this way. Following the original creation story, there is a second account of God's forming of the man from the earth.

Creation of a garden and all the events that occur within the garden, most particularly the fall.

And we see a recapitulation of that pattern here. Noah began to be a man of the soil. Now the word for soil there is the same word as the Adamah from which Adam was formed.

So Noah is playing out the Adam pattern here. He plants a vineyard just as God planted a garden in Eden. He drinks of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent.

He takes of the fruit of the tree, he eats it, he has a change in his state and he's found naked. And so it's the pattern of the fall playing out again. And at this point the son Ham, the father of Canaan, sees the nakedness of his father and tells the two brothers.

And then the brothers act in a righteous, honourable manner. They take in the garment from outside and they cover him up. Now there are many questions about what this involves.

What does it mean that he uncovers the nakedness of his father? In the book of Leviticus we see the sexual relation with the mother as being an act of uncovering the nakedness of the father. So some have suggested this is incest with the wife of Noah and that Canaan is the result of that illicit union. Others have suggested it's an act of homosexual rape of the father.

And both of those suggestions I think fail to reckon fully with the fact of the actions of Shem and Japheth. The way that they put the garment over their father. That the key concern seems to be covering over the nakedness of the father.

The point of Ham's action is to usurp his father's authority. Whatever is involved here, that seems to be what is at issue. Shem and Japheth restore their father's dignity and ensure that they do not seek to attack or undermine his authority.

Noah wakes, he realises what has been done to him and then he summons his sons and he judges them. He judges Ham's son in particular. Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers.

And here we should see a parallel with the judgement upon the serpent. Which suggests maybe that part of Ham's purpose was to subvert his father's authority by getting his brothers in. To tempt them to act against the father's authority.

Think back to the sin of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The serpent tries to undermine the authority of the father. He tries to declare the promise that Adam and Eve will become like gods, knowing good and evil.

That God is holding this back against them and that they should join with him in his

rebellion. And Ham's action seems to be quite similar. He usurps authority and he seeks to get his brothers to turn against the father too.

And as a judgement for his action, his son is reduced in status. And so his son becomes a servant of servant to his brothers. Which is similar to the way that the serpent is judged from among the beasts.

He's cursed above all the beasts. On the other hand, whereas we see judgements carried out upon the serpent, Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter 3. Here the two brothers, Shem and Japheth, resist the temptation. They clothe their father's nakedness and here they are blessed.

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth and let him dwell in the tents of Shem and let Canaan be his servant. And so they are given authority over the son of the figure who's associated with the serpent.

So the seed of the serpent figure in this narrative is going to serve the righteous seed. Those who stand up for the father and for his honour. After the flood Noah lives 350 years or 300 years and 50 years.

All the days of Noah are 950 years and he died. I've previously observed a parallel between the age of Noah after the flood and the dimensions of the ark. So the ark is 300 cubits by 50 cubits.

After the flood Noah lives 300 years and 50 years. So there's an ark type character to Noah himself. Noah is the ark of humanity.

He and his children within him are the ones that will be born through the flood. And it's because of his righteousness and the grace that he finds in the eyes of God that humanity is saved. And the complete years of his life are 950 years.

What we're seeing within this chapter then is a recapitulation first of all of the original creation. Then of the events of the garden and then of the judgment. The fall and the curse upon the serpent.

In this case there's a blessing upon the two people who resist the temptation. One question. Noah is a new head of humanity.

Adam was the original head of humanity. He's the one that was first created from whom all descended. But Noah is a new Adam.

He's one who's also a man of the soil. A man of the Adomar. He's one who also is within a vineyard.

And he plays out many of the similar patterns that we see in the story of Adam. He also in some sense rules over the animals. But there seem to be forms of progression too.

So the question that I want you to think about is the way or the ways in which Noah represents a movement beyond, a progression beyond or maturation beyond the figure of Adam. And what might be the significance to that development. Out of Eden flowed a river which divided into four rivers which watered the surrounding lands.

Out of Noah flowed three lines of descendants. Shem, Ham and Japheth. And these go into the wider world and eventually are divided up and settle all the different surrounding nations.

The attention given to these nations depends in part upon their proximity to Israel. And so the nations with which they had the greatest dealings are given most attention within this chapter. But this is the table of the nations.

There are 70 nations listed. That number 70 is an important one in scripture. Later on we'll see 70 descendants of Jacob going down into Egypt.

And on various other occasions in scripture this number occurs. Going through the lists of the names we can maybe notice particular patterns. The first thing to note is the significance of the number 7. Of the sons of Japheth there are 7. And then there are 7 grandsons as well.

Such a list needn't be exhaustive. Such a list can sometimes exclude certain characters and include others in part to reveal a numerological significance. The sons of Ham are of a particular significance to the author of Genesis.

These are nations with which Israel would have more to do. The Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians. All of these descend from these particular peoples.

The emphasis of this text is not so much on a genealogical succession as the spreading out, the multiplication, the division of different peoples within the world. The world is populated by different families of peoples. And as you look through this passage you'll see a certain refrain that occurs.

Spreading in their lands with their own language, by their clans, in their nations. In verse 5 you see a similar thing. In verse 20.

And in verse 31. And in verse 32. This is how the world is populated.

And it's a world populated by different families of people. Different families that have a particular character. As we saw already in the connection between Ham and his son Canaan, there is a connection between persons and their genealogy.

People are characterised in part by the persons or groups of persons that they have descended from. Nations have characters. And within Genesis chapter 10 you're reading about some of these different nations and the characters that they have.

The figure of Nimrod particularly stands out in this chapter. He's a mighty hunter before the Lord. He's a kingdom builder, an empire creator.

He gets Babel, Akkad, Assyria and Nineveh and all these other places as part of his vast reach of his imperial power. And as he's doing this, he's presumably the person who founds the Tower of Babel. He has this great intent to form this vast powerful kingdom that takes many people into itself.

Canaan is described in more detail as well. Not surprisingly, these are the people that Israel would have to deal with more closely. The Jebusites, the Amorites, the Gergashites, the Hivites, the Archites, the Sinites, the Arvidites, the Zemurites and the Hamathites.

And all of these different clans are peoples who will be within the land that Israel will have to remove. The territory of the Canaanites is described. And again, it has that refrain of the way that the sons of Ham have been divided out.

And that they've been dispersed according to their clans, languages, lands and nations. Shem is introduced to us as the father of all the children of Eber and as the elder brother of Japheth. Japheth presumably comes first because he is the elder brother of Ham.

And Shem comes last because Shem is the one with whom the rest of the story will really have to do. Shem is the one who is the father of all the children of Eber. Perhaps Eber's name is related to Hebrews.

Eber's sons are also singled out in certain ways. Peleg, we're told the meaning of his name, that the division that his name speaks of is related to the division of the earth during the days of his life. Peleg's brother's name is Joktan.

And Joktan's descendants are listed in detail here. The question of why they are given so much attention is a difficult one. And I'm not sure I have a good answer for it.

It's worth looking into, I'm sure. It's another line of the family that will produce on the other side Abraham and his descendants. And so maybe that's part of the purpose to reveal some of the significant people groups that arose from that particular line of the family.

Distant cousins and relations as it were. One question. As we're reading through this list of names, there are a number of points where we recognize certain names associated with particular people groups.

And at one specific point, we're told that the Philistines come from the people of Egypt. And that suggests an association between those two groups of people. How might this prove an important piece of information as we read further in Scripture? The story of the Tower of Babel is one of the most important stories in the Old Testament.

It's an origin story for the nations and provides a backdrop for the events that occur in the chapters that follow. These are the nations formed as an act of judgment. And later on, we'll see a nation that's formed through an act of blessing.

This occurs in the context of Nimrod's kingdom in the land of Shinar. And all the people of the world have the same language. They have the same words.

They're seeking to avoid being scattered abroad. And so they're gathering together and building this great empire. They invent a new technology, a new way of firing bricks.

And they burn these bricks thoroughly. And so they can build things on a far greater scale than they ever would have built before. It's worth thinking about the way that the action of building the city and the tower comes after the invention of the new technology.

Often when we invent something new, it gives us a new sense of our power. And the urge to build something is almost an imperative arising from the existence of the technology. Once we have the power to do it, we must do it.

And this dream, this hubristic vision of what man could make for themselves arises out of this new technology. How many times have we experienced that within our society? Where we develop a new technology or a new capacity and we seek to express our pride and our power and our ability to master the world for our wishes around that new technology and express through it. They build, on the one hand, a city and on the other hand, a tower.

These are two things, not just a tower. The city is to gather all people together. A one world society.

And the tower is to present this power structure, this ladder to heaven as it were. This ability to commune with the gods, to have the power of the gods, this religious centralisation as well. So the tower with its tops in the heavens relates the heavens to the earth.

They want to make a name for themselves. Think about the situation that man faces. Man is faced with the struggle of death.

Death has entered into the world and death wipes away all the things that we build like sand castles on the beach as the tide comes in. Nothing we build is left behind. And so what they want to build is something that will outlast them, something that will express their power, their name, their vigour as a society.

And it will be something that outlasts them. Even the power of death won't take this away. When God comes down and he sees the city and the tower which they have built, there is plural language used at this point.

Come let us go down. And they have confused their language so that they may not understand one another's speech. Here I think we should see in the background the divine council.

This is not just God but this is God surrounded by his angels, surrounded by the principalities and powers and the divine forces. And they are going to put humanity in their proper place. Again let's think about part of the importance of this as God curbing mankind's intent to express its sinful, wicked will in a way that is unchecked.

God is going to prevent that will from achieving its full intent. This is an act of grace among other things. God does not want human sinfulness to reach its full flourishing.

And so he prevents human hubris from achieving its purposes. God scatters them upon the face of the earth. In part this is fulfilling the intent that God had for humanity.

That they would fill the earth and subdue it. That it would not just be ruling in a particular centralised location and forming a one world government. But it would be a scattering abroad forming many different peoples and niches and societies.

And God divides them as a result. God confuses them by dividing their language so that they can't understand one another's speech. Now often people see this as an instantaneous action.

It's not necessarily the case. This may have occurred over many decades that the speeches of the different peoples started to become disparate and they become divided from each other. Not as an instantaneous event so much as a gradual divergence.

God disperses them across all the face of the earth. And the place of the city is called Babel because God confused the languages there. And the name of Babel and other features of this text involve all sorts of punning.

And we'll maybe return to this at certain points as there are allusions back to it in the later story. Not least as we get into the New Testament and we read something like the story of Pentecost. It calls back to this event in a number of different respects.

From there we read the story of the generations of Shem. We've already read some of the people groups that arose from Shem in the previous chapter in the Table of the Nations. But now there is this genealogical succession from Shem and ten generations.

We've already seen ten generations coming from Adam to Noah. And now we have another list of ten generations ending in Terah, Abram, Nahor and Haran. This list of people again gives the number of the years that the father had before he fathered the child.

And then how long he lived afterwards. And so it's similar to chapter five in that respect.

The ten generations invites comparison with the events of chapter five.

Not least in the fact that at the end we meet Terah with Abram, Nahor and Haran. Much as we met Noah with Shem, Ham and Japheth, a man with three sons. Haran, the son of Terah, dies when he is still in the land of Ur of the Chaldeans.

And Abram and Nahor take wives. Abram's wife is Sarai and Nahor's wife is Milcah, the daughter of Haran. We should note here that Nahor is performing leveret marriage.

By taking the daughter of Haran, his brother, he is seeking to raise up children for his dead brother. Seeking to maintain his name within the earth. Sarai, some have suggested, is the same person as Iscah.

The suggestion being that Abram is also performing leveret marriage for the sake of his dead brother. Thinking about the brother who has died and the importance of Lot, the son of Haran, to Abram. Maybe we could think the symmetry between this and the story of Ham and his son Canaan.

Whereas Shem and Japheth acted to maintain their father's honour. Their brother Ham and his son Canaan were judged on account of Ham's sin. In the case of Terah and his sons, we see a different situation.

Abram and Nahor act on behalf of the dead brother and Abram takes into his household Lot. The person who is playing in many ways a similar role to the character of Canaan. But yet there is a problem because Sarai is barren.

She has no child. The story is set up for what follows next. Terah, even before Abram is called, sets out from Ur of the Chaldees and goes to Haran.

When they arrive in Haran, they settle there and he dies in Haran. Haran is a different word from the name of the son Haran. But the similarity does invite some sort of connection between the two.

If we think about what happened in the earlier part of the chapter, there are people trying to make a name for themselves, trying to make some name that endures beyond their death. Maybe we could see some connection between the similar names of Haran and Haran. We've already seen in the story of Genesis the naming of cities after a particular person so that their names would not die out.

This is a way of making a name for themselves. But yet the story of Abraham is a story of a name being made. But yet it will be God that makes the name great.

Abram is also one who is concerned to maintain the name of his dead brother as an act of charity. He takes in his nephew as a result of it. In the same way Nahor takes the daughter of his dead brother in order to raise up descendants for his dead brother.



There seems then to be a different ethos that is seen at the end of this chapter as we saw at the beginning in the story of the Tower of Babel. One question. The story of Genesis contains a number of different accounts of human attempts to usurp God's place or to gain some sort of divine power through technology, through some other means.

How does the Tower of Babel present us with a paradigm for thinking about such projects within our own day and age? The call of Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 plays out against the backdrop of the events of Babel. At Babel a number of men sought to make their name great, to build a legacy for themselves, to build a tower that reached to the heavens. In Genesis chapter 12 God promises that the nations that have been scattered will be blessed through believing Abraham.

He is called and promised that God will make his name great. In contrast to the men of Babel who sought this achievement for themselves, God is going to do this for Abraham. There's a radical break that Abraham is called to make with his past.

He has to leave country, kindred and father's house behind him. He has to abandon the legacy that has been given to him. This is the first great test of Abraham.

Is he going to leave his past? And it's important to notice here that it is connected with the last great test of Abraham. The story of Genesis chapter 12 begins with the call. Now the Lord said to Abraham, go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you.

And I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. And there is a threefold intensification. Your country, your kindred, your father's house.

And in chapter 22 we see a similar call. After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, Abraham, and he said, here I am. He said, take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.

It's a similar sort of call. The first is calling him to give up his past. And the final call is a call to give up his future, it seems.

The son that he's invested all his hopes in. Chapter 12 and 13 are bookend structures. As we look through these chapters we'll see what scholars call a chiasm or there and back again structure.

And it helps to understand some of the ways in which details are repeated. If you look through the passage you'll see promises and appearances to God at the very beginning in verses 1 to 3 of chapter 12. And at the end in verses 14 and 17 to 17 of chapter 13.

At the very beginning he goes out with Lot in verses 4 to 5 of chapter 12. And then he

separates from Lot towards the end of the section in verses 5 to 13 of chapter 13. And then you have the description of the Canaanites being in the land in verse 6 of chapter 12 and in verse 7 of chapter 13.

It seems to be repetitive but yet it makes sense if you have this there and back again structure. The Canaanites and the Perizzites dwelling in the land. Then he goes to Bethel and to Ai and he pitches his tent with Bethel in the west and Ai in the east.

And he builds an altar there in verse 8 of chapter 12. And then in the second part of the story in verses 3 and 4 of chapter 13 he returns to the same place. Then we have him journeying to the south in verse 9 of chapter 12 and then journeying to the south in verse 1 of chapter 13.

He goes to Egypt in verse 10 of chapter 12 and then departs from Egypt in verse 20 of chapter 12. And then he goes into Egypt saying that Sarah is a beautiful woman. The Egyptians will see her say that it is his wife.

Take her and then he suggests that he say that she is his sister and that he will be blessed for her sake in verses 11 to 13. And it's exactly what we see in what immediately follows in verse 14 to 16. So this whole passage is a unified text and it's parallel through its different parts.

And as we see this working out it helps us to see that this is a significant movement that's taking place. Some of the things to notice here. First of all that he goes out with Lot.

At this moment in time Lot would seem to be Abram's natural heir. He is the one who is the son of his brother Haran who has died. Abram has taken him under his wing.

And Lot and Abram have a sort of son-father relationship at this point. And it might seem that Lot is the one who's going to fulfill the promises that God has for Abram. He arrives at Shechem.

Shechem will be an important point in the story of Abram. Abram has just been promised here that his family will be made great. Nothing yet said about the land just that his family and name will be made great.

And then he arrives at the point of Shechem and builds an altar there. But Shechem is a place where the family is divided on a number of occasions. It's the site where Dinah is seduced by Shechem.

And there's a breach in the family at that point as Simeon and Levi seek to avenge their sister and their father fails to take action. We see a similar thing in the story of Joseph. There's a breach in the family at Shechem as Joseph is sold into slavery by Judah and his brethren.

Another breach in the family. At Shechem Rehoboam and the people are divided. And the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom go their different ways.

And so all these breaches in the family of Abraham at Shechem present this site as having some significance. But yet it's at this very site that God promises that he will make Abraham's name great and that his family will be a great nation. The very site where the breaches are found in the nation at later points in history is the site that God has promised beforehand that the family will be made great.

So passing through this point is an important thing. Later he arrives at Bethel and Ai. Ai is a significant location too.

It's at Ai that they fail to enter in and take possession of the land. Achan sins by taking devoted items and the people lose the battle. But yet it is at Ai that God promises that he will receive the land.

His offspring will receive the land. He builds an altar there. And so at these two pivotal sites in later history of Israel we see Abraham building altars, walking through the footsteps that his descendants will later walk.

And that's exactly what we see in the story of his sojourn in Egypt. There's a famine. He goes down to Egypt as a result of a severe famine.

When he's in Egypt, Sarai is taken. There's a threat to the bride. There are plagues upon the Egyptians and Pharaoh.

Israel, or Abraham's house, prospers and they're blessed. He's dealt with well on account of Sarai. He's given sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys and camels.

And Pharaoh is afflicted until he releases Sarai and sends Abraham and Sarai their way. It's a story of the Exodus. In advance of what happens in the book of Exodus itself, God is playing out the pattern of the Exodus in the great ancestor of Israel.

Abraham walks in the steps that his descendants will later walk. He anticipates the path that they will walk. Now why does he deceive Pharaoh in this particular way? Why does he present himself to be the brother of Sarai rather than her husband? Well, if he presents himself as her brother, he's in a better position to protect himself and also in many ways her.

As her brother, he can stall for time. He will be courted by Pharaoh. Pharaoh will try and get on his good side and he's the one who would negotiate marriage arrangements.

Whereas if he's her husband, he's the obstacle to be removed. And it's important to remember that Abraham's concern here is not merely his own skin. Abraham, as we see

later on, has a large fighting force with him.

318 men. Which makes it likely that Abraham is surrounded by around 3 or more thousand people in his sheikdom. He's someone who's leading a vast company of people and if he is killed, all of them are put at risk.

And so the way that Sarai is presented is not merely for his own sake. It's presumably for the sake of the people around him as well. One question.

As we read this passage, we see Abraham anticipating the path and the experience that his descendants will have in history. And yet there are other elements of this story that anticipate Abraham's own life and other events further on in his story. And maybe in his immediate descendant, Isaac.

What are some of the ways in which this event may have repercussions? The experience in Egypt, that it may have repercussions years later. What are some of the consequences that this event might have as it plays out in the story of Abraham and Isaac? As we saw yesterday, chapters 12 and 13 of Genesis are tightly structured. There is a relationship between these two chapters as Abraham walks a path, goes down into Egypt and then returns from Egypt and retraces many of his steps.

When he returns to the land, he returns to the places where he has been before. And at this point, he took Lot with him earlier, but now there is a division. There are two characters that have a relationship with Abraham that's unclear.

Is Sarai Abraham's wife or is she his sister? How is she going to relate to the fulfillment of the promises? Likewise with Lot. Is Lot going to be put in the category of son or is he going to be put in the category of brother? Is God going to fulfill his promises to Abraham through Lot or is Lot someone with a different destiny? At the beginning of the narrative, it seems as if Lot is the person through whom God will fulfill his promises to Abraham. Abraham takes his dead brother's son with him and it seems as if he's the one that God might fulfill the promises with.

But Lot in this chapter takes a different course as they separate. Both Lot and Abraham have significant wealth, great flocks and they are competing with each other. And as a result, they have to separate going their different ways, leading to a greater separation as Lot heads towards Sodom.

There's division within the family and it means that Lot can no longer be straightforwardly categorized as a son. He's not the one through whom Abraham's name is going to be made great. He's not going to be the one through whom the nation is established.

Which throws open the question again, how is God going to fulfill his promise to Abraham? Now Lot and Abraham are often held alongside each other, juxtaposed with

each other. One character is seen to have a certain set of characteristics and the other, another. In the book of Genesis, there are several such juxtapositions of characters.

Cain and Abel, Esau, Jacob, Judah, Joseph, Sarai, Hagar, Abraham, Lot and Leo, Rachel. You can think of a number of others perhaps. But it's not a straightforward good-bad juxtaposition.

Often there are characters that are both flawed but are related to each other in ways that are significant in other respects. Highlighting different characteristics by that comparison. Later on as we read the story, Lot will be explicitly referred to as a brother.

It's a relationship that helps us to hold Lot and Abraham over against each other and see their destinies being played out against each other. We'll see this especially as we get to chapters 18 and 19. At the end of this passage, God promises the land to Abraham.

The Lord said to Abraham, after Lot had separated from him, Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. God has already promised that he will make Abraham and his family great. But what he does in this chapter is promise that he will give them a place.

A particular place where they will be made great. That they will inherit. That they will be settled in this particular land.

And as we read through the story here, it's important to notice that Abraham is involved in construction. In chapter 11, there was an attempt to make the name of the builders of Babel great. They wanted to build this great city and tower to build a legacy for themselves that would avoid death.

They built a tower and yet God undermined their project and it came to nothing. What does Abraham do as he goes from place to place? As God gives him promises, he builds altars. An altar is something that lasts for a long time.

But the purpose of the altar is not to make the name of the altar builder great, but the one to whose name the altar is erected. Abraham, wherever he goes, is establishing the worship of God. He's seeking to make God's name great.

There is a juxtaposition here with the builders of Babel. That they sought to make their name great. Abraham seeks to make God's name great.

He's going throughout the land and at these significant sites between Bethel and Ai, at Shechem, and other such sites, sites that anticipate the later story of Israel, the sites and the events that will define its identity, the scars upon the life and body of Israel, those events that help to determine its destiny. At each of these sites, in significant anticipation of what's to come, he is building altars, establishing the worship of God in

that location. Also notice how Abraham holds things with an open hand.

He allows Lot, the person on whom his hopes may have been placed for the continuing of his legacy, to depart from him, to go his own way. And he's left with merely Sarai and the rest of his household around him. He has no son of his own.

And so he's wandering throughout the land, living in tents. He does not have a settled location that belongs to him. He's depending upon the promises of God.

And this example of faith is one that we'll see throughout the story of Abraham. That he lives in the land that he will inherit as a stranger. And anticipating God's promises, he builds altars to make God's name great.

To seek God's glory, not his own. A question to think about. As Lot looks out over the land, it is described as similar to the garden of God and to the land of Egypt.

Why those particular comparisons? What might be some of the important connotations of such descriptions? Genesis chapter 14 is a story that very much belongs within the world of the ancient Near East. A world of wars between kings, of kings outside the land, dominating over small kingdoms within the land. The forces involved are significant here.

We have Chedda Leoma, the king of Elam. And Elam is the first son of Shem. Abraham is described as the Hebrew within this chapter.

He's associated with Eber, perhaps, the younger son of Shem. So the older son of Shem, when associated with Elam, is displaced by a younger son of Shem, a son of Eber. This sort of event suggests a relationship with the broader theme of the older son being displaced by the younger son throughout the book of Genesis.

Cain and Abel, Seth, Esau, Jacob, Ishmael, Isaac, Judah, Joseph, etc. And in all of these different occasions, we see a reversal of the natural birth order. And this might be another example of what's taking place.

Now the king of Elam, Chedda Leoma, is ruling over the people of Canaan with his allies, these other kings. And this would seem to be, in part, a fulfillment of the prophecy of Genesis chapter 9 concerning Canaan. Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be to his brethren.

And blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem, and may Canaan be his servant. This is a situation where kings from Japheth and a king of Shem are ruling over Canaan. They're dominating the land.

And here comes another descendant of Shem to liberate Canaan and to act on behalf of the land of Canaan. This is the curse that we see in the story of Noah. And now it begins to play out as these families spread out across the land.

There's a flowing out of families at this point. The families of the nations have divided up and they're playing out their different destinies. Lot and Abraham have divided.

Two nations going their own way. And later we'll see Moab and Ammon arising out of Lot. These are split destinations.

Another thing to notice in this chapter is the way that the story of the kings is interrupted at various points with glosses upon the particular place names or the locations or kingdoms. It suggests this is updated for a later audience. The story of the kings and the victory over them at this point is serving a purpose that is not merely anachronistic.

It's not really the reason why the names are updated. The names are updated in order to show Israel that their forefather Abraham has won the victory over the people within this land. He's playing out the destiny of his descendants beforehand.

When the land of people like the Amalekites is mentioned it is anachronistic. Amalek has not yet been born. But the point is that the land later associated with Amalek is conquered and it is liberated by Abraham.

And this is a sign of the possibility of Abraham's descendants doing the same thing. Genesis 14 then is a conquest narrative. It is a narrative of Abraham going throughout the whole land conquering a significant tract of territory.

He pursues Chedulema and his forces up to the north of Damascus. It's a significant territory that he's marked out by his victory. And as we've seen Abraham has been building altars throughout the land, then walking throughout the land.

And then having a certain area of the land being declared as his possession in the future mapped out as the territory that God will give to him. And here we see taking possession of the land and guarding the people within it. He's progressively developing a deeper relationship with the land and its people as we go through these chapters.

So we begin in chapter 12 of having an exodus experience in the land of Egypt. Going down into Egypt because of a famine, being protected there, being delivered with plagues. And then going into the land, wandering throughout the land, spying out the land as it were and now winning a victory within the land.

He's going through the history of his descendants in important ways. He's already been in significant places like Shechem and Ai where they failed to take possession of the land. And he's built altars in these places.

He's playing out the history of Israel in advance. And so as Israel looked back at stories like this they would see that their destiny has been foreshadowed. That there's nothing that they will face that Abraham has not faced before them.

The kings of the nations, Chedorlamor and his forces, drive the forces of the land, the Canaanites, down to the asphalt pits. But yet Abraham can defeat them. And if Abraham can do it, then they may be able to do it too with the forces that dominate the land in their day.

Lot's part in this story is important. He's the one, it would seem at this point, that Abraham's descendants would be named in. But yet in the previous chapter we saw that Lot went his own way.

In many respects he seems like a bad penny. He's gone his own way but maybe he can be won back. You can imagine Abraham having great hope here as he goes out to rescue Lot.

Maybe Lot will have learnt his lesson. Maybe Lot will come back to him. One of the questions within this chapter is how Lot and Abraham will relate by the end of it, this episode.

Are they going to relate to each other as brothers? Or is Lot going to return to the status of a son-like character? His brother's son who is adopted into his family and who will bear his destiny. These are important questions. And as the chapter moves on we'll see that there is a fateful decision that arises.

Abraham gathers together his forces. He has influence within the land and it suggests, as we read this chapter, that he has real weight to him. He's someone who's acting very much like a king at this point.

Not just a priest building altars but a judge figure, a figure with military might, someone with allies, someone who can muster military forces. He himself has forces of over 300 men, 318 men and that number is significant. Why that number in particular? Well, it's the gematria of the name of Eliezer who we meet in the following chapter.

It's the number of his house-born servant. These are people who are born within his house and they're representing Eliezer, his chief servant. Now, the fact that he can muster this many men suggests that he probably has about 2 or 3 thousand people in his sheikdom.

There's a significant number of people surrounding him and all of these are people who can fight for him, who he can call upon to his aid. They're not just regular mercenaries. These are people who belong to his own house.

So he's already acting as a sort of king on some scale. And Abram now is going to move to a grander scale of operation. He's acting with the peoples of the land, with allies around him and he's combating some early empires.

Chedorlamor and the Japhethite kings come against him and he's someone who can stand



for the land he's within and make a conquest within it. He does not take absolute possession of it. That's something that awaits later developments.

But he's able to drive out the opponents and he divides up his forces, attacks by night and pursues the opponents north of Damascus. After he wins the victory, he meets with the king of Sodom and Melchizedek, the king of Salem in the king's valley. Melchizedek, the king of Salem, brings out bread and wine.

He is described as the priest of God Most High and he brings out bread and wine. We're seeing here themes of priesthood and kingdom. Abraham, as he has already gone throughout the land, has built altars, sites of worship, etc.

And he's developed allies, Mamre, Hannah, Eshkol, other figures like that who have surrounded Abram and allied themselves with him. And he is met here by Melchizedek, the king of Salem. This meeting is an interesting one.

It occurs at a very significant point within the story that invites reflection. Abraham has been playing out the history of the future history of his nation. He's gone through the story of the Exodus.

He's gone through the story of spying out the land, the conquest of the land. And now he meets this mysterious figure from Salem. And he treats this figure in a remarkable way.

This figure blesses him, but he gives him a tithe of everything he possesses. And it would seem that this Melchizedek character is of more significance than he might originally appear to be. The fact that he appears at this juncture suggests that there's something more to him.

If he is playing out the destiny of Israel, what or who does Melchizedek represent? That site will later be the site of Jerusalem. And he's met by the king of righteousness, as Melchizedek's name suggests. So it's a very significant meeting.

At the site of Jerusalem, meeting with this mysterious character, it might seem to be an anticipation of a sort of Davidic kingdom. But a Davidic kingship that also has priestly authority. And so it's not surprising that the book of Hebrews and other parts of later scripture would reflect upon this event.

And see within this event something that maybe augurs something greater in the future. Some anticipation of what some figure might arise later on in Israel's history. And it's not surprising then that Christ is presented as the great Melchizedek.

The one who after his victory over the principalities of powers comes as the Davidic king from the New Jerusalem. To his people with gifts of bread and wine, setting a table for them in the presence of their enemies, defeated enemies, feeding them at his feast. We are the true sons of Abraham.

We're fed by the great Melchizedek. And so this pattern as it plays out anticipates later history and the destiny of the people of God. The king of Sodom says something quite fateful at this point.

He says, Abraham, you can keep the goods, but I want to keep the people for myself. And what does that mean? It means that the king of Sodom wants to keep Lot. He wants Lot and his family.

And so all the people are returned to the king of Sodom. Abraham might have hoped that he would have Lot restored to him, but that is not to happen. He's been liberated from captivity to King Chedulema, but he's now back within the land and has a part to play within the society of Sodom.

He's pitched his tent near Sodom in the past, but later on we'll see him enter within their gates, being one of their rulers. He's one of the people who has influence within that society now. And so this story is one that is a pivotal point, a point where the destiny of Lot and Abraham separates more decisively.

And whereas in the previous chapter it might have been just for a period of time, now it seems more definitive. One question. As we're reading the story of Abraham, it's important to keep in mind that there are a lot of moving pieces.

There's Abraham's relationship with the land, there's Abraham's relationship with the people of the land, there's Abraham's relationship with his wife Sarai, there's Abraham's relationship with the promises of God. At this point, it would be good to step back and reflect upon how all these different aspects of the story stand at this particular juncture. To take stock of how things stand before the significant events of the chapter that follows.

Chapter 14 of Genesis ends with a question concerning reward. And in chapter 15 it opens with a statement about reward. God declares that he will be Abraham's shield and exceedingly great reward.

In the previous chapter Abraham had said, So he refuses the rewards at that point, but then God appears to him and declares that he will be his reward. But Abraham has an immediate problem. The problem is that he does not have an heir.

Lot is no longer around. His only seeming heir is a house-born servant, Eliezer of Damascus. He has no natural heir.

And the Lord's response is to confirm that Eliezer will not be his heir, but one who comes from his own body. God had promised that he would make Abraham's name great and make him a great nation. And Abraham already has many people around him.

But there was no promise yet that the nation would descend biologically from Abraham

himself. We presume at the outset that it's going to be Lot, the son of his brother, his dead brother, who will be brought with him and become his heir. But yet Lot has gone off the scene and now there doesn't seem to be anyone.

Sarai is barren. So maybe it's just going to be the household around him that God will multiply the sheikdom of Abraham like the dust of the earth. But it does not seem yet that he has a promise of a biological heir, a son of his own.

And so there's development of the promises at this point. He's taken outside and he's told that he will have a descendant from his own body and brought to look up at the stars, to consider the stars, to account for the stars. It's an elevation of the previous promises.

He's already been told that his descendants will be numerous like the dust of the earth. But now they're going to be numerous as the dust of the earth but also be like the stars in heaven. They're numerous but the stars in heaven are not just a matter of number.

They're also forms of rule. In Genesis chapter 1 they rule over the heavens. They are the authorities and the powers.

They are associated in some places with the angels. And so Abraham's descendants will be numerous but they will also be like the ruling forces, the forces that measure out time. Israel will later be divided into 12 tribes which can be associated with the 12 signs of the zodiac.

Signs of rule, signs of authority, signs of power in the heavens. And so their symbolic significance is not just that they are numerous but that they are means of rule, that they are set above the nations, that they are collected around the tabernacle of God which is connected with the sun. Abraham believes in the Lord and he accounted it to him for righteousness.

It's an act of faith. Abraham has no direct evidence at this point. He's just taking God's word for it.

And he's someone who's given up so much. He's let Lot go. He's left his home country.

He's left all these things behind. And all he is relying upon is God's word that he will fulfil what he has promised. In what might be a separate subsequent event God says to Abraham, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to inherit it.

That's a familiar formation. Most typically seen in the context of Israel being brought out of Egypt to inherit the promised land. It's a formula that we see elsewhere.

But here Abraham asks the question, how do I know that I will inherit it? And the

significance of the word inherit is important. The word hasn't been used in quite the same way before. And he is wondering about his inheritance.

Will he have an heir to give his house to? Or will he just have to accept Eliezer of Damascus, a house-born servant, as his heir? God here talks about him inheriting the land. And there are many ways that you can receive something. You can receive something as a gift.

You can maybe be given something as a possession. Someone can sell something to you. But there is a more significant way of accepting something, receiving something.

It's to inherit. Abraham is promised that he will inherit the land. That God will give him the land as an inheritance.

It suggests a relationship that's stronger than one merely associated with gift. God is not just giving this land to Abraham. He is giving Abraham an inheritance that marks him out, not just as a recipient of a divine gift, but as an heir of God himself.

Abraham, as he enters into the land, is given a seal or a promise. A very peculiar act that he's called to perform. And there's a vision associated with it.

He brings a three-year-old heifer, female goat, ram, turtle dove and pigeon. He cuts them open down the middle and places one piece on each side. Why these particular animals? Why divide them in this particular way? Well, it's a weird passage.

But I think this is an anticipation of the later sacrificial system. There's something of this already in the story of Noah. But the five animals mentioned here are the five animals that are connected with the sacrifices of Israel.

There are five animals offered in Israel's sacrifices. And these are the animals. These sacrifices represent Israel itself, various members of the household of the nation.

And so what's being presented in these different halves is the house of Israel itself. It's different offices, the different parts of the larger social body. And why these particular animals? In not just the species, but the stipulated particular types.

A female cow, a heifer that has not born a calf, a three-year-old female goat. Why a female goat rather than a male goat? A three-year-old ram and a turtle dove and pigeon. Why those particular animals? And I think the connection with the sacrifice is important.

But later on when we see those sacrifices, it's a bull. It is a male ram. And that difference is maybe worth attending to.

In Leviticus 1 verse 17 it describes dividing up all these different animals into parts. And the parts are treated differently. Some are associated with the man who is offering and they are washed.

And the others are associated with God and they are taken up by the priests. And then the ones that are washed are added later. I think we see this in places like Leviticus 1, 5-6.

And the priests, heir and son, shall bring the blood and sprinkle the blood all around the altar that is by the door of the tabernacle of meeting. And he shall skin the burnt offering and cut it into its pieces. And then the animal cut into pieces is divided and then brought back together again.

And that burning up of the animal is a reunion. The priest shall bring it to the altar, ring off its head, burn it on the altar. Its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar and he shall remove its crop with its feathers and cast it beside the altar on the east side into the place for ashes.

Then he shall split it at its wings but shall not divide it completely. And the priest shall burn it on the altar on the wood that is on the fire. It is a burnt sacrifice and offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the Lord.

And this is suggesting a connection between the way that the sacrificial system treats the birds and the way that Abraham is called to treat the birds. They are prepared in particular ways. The birds are not divided in Genesis chapter 15 in the same way as we see in Leviticus chapter 1. And the sacrifice are stipulated in Leviticus and Numbers, generally male sacrifices.

But if a commoner of the people is offering a sacrifice it will have to be a female goat or some other female creature that's offered. We don't usually see a female heifer offered but we do see heifers being used for particular rituals such as the ritual of the red heifer or for unsolved murders. What does the heifer represent? I think that it's associated with the corresponding animal to the bull which is associated with the high priest.

The corresponding animal to the female goat is the male goat which is associated with the leader of the people. And here I think the female goat is associated with the general member of the people. There's a husband-bride type symbolism here.

And the priestly husband of the people and the whole congregation is the son of the herd. They're associated with the bull, the priestly animal. But the kings and rulers of the people are associated with the male goats.

Israel, however, does not yet have a priesthood, does not yet have a kingdom. And at this point they're associated more with a bridal identity that have yet to have husbands in those sorts of offices as priests and kings. And so at this point I think that is what those animals represent.

They're three years of age. I think this relates to animals in their prime but also with different generations perhaps that are mentioned in this chapter. There are three

generations and it's the number of generations Israel is going to go through before they come out or the number of centuries that there will be.

After the fourth century they will be brought out. In the fourth generation they will come out. I think these connections maybe help us to understand what those numbers mean.

This is speculation but this is my guess. The details of the prophecy are also related to Israel's state in Egypt without kings and without priests. There are nations waiting to be delivered and the vultures, the birds that come down picking them apart are connected with the nations.

Nations like Egypt. Abraham chases away the birds and God appears in this visionary event as Abraham is placed into a deep sleep. This deep sleep connects I believe with the story of Genesis chapter 2. It's a deep sleep that comes upon Adam as the bride Eve is taken from his side.

Israel is going to be taken out of the side of Abraham and he's going to be formed into a true people, a nation. It's a death-like sleep and he'll be raised up again at the other side. But there is a profound event taking place here.

The deep sleep is a period of darkness. It's the darkness of the womb, the darkness of night, the time when God is working, the darkness of the time when he has counted the stars and the vultures are trying to destroy the carcass at this point. But God is going to deal with the descendants of Abraham.

He will come to bring them back to the land. There will be the exodus and God will deliver them from the nation that's seeking to destroy them. What else can we see here? There's a smoking pot that passes through the pieces, a smoking oven or a burning torch.

God is passing through the pieces. In the book of Jeremiah we read of the people performing an oath where they step between the pieces of a sacrifice that is torn in two. As they walk between the sacrificial pieces they are declaring a self-maladictory oath.

This should happen to me if I do not keep my vow. And the pieces that are split represent Israel and maybe part of what's happening is that one half is associated with God, one half is associated with Israel. It's as we see in the sacrificial system that one half belongs to the priests, the household servants of the temple, of God's palace, and then the other half is associated with the offerer themselves.

They have to wash it and then present it. One half the sacrifice associated with God, the other half with Abraham and the people he represents. And God moves between the pieces bringing them together by fire like we see in the sacrificial system.

And as they're brought together by fire there's a sort of reunification, a new wholeness, a

promise that God makes an oath, he swears by himself that if he does not keep his promise that he will have the same thing that happens to the animals happen to him himself. Now that is a strong thing to declare. That could never be.

And yet that's how strong God's promise to keep his word to Abraham is. The animals do not seem to be burnt up into God's presence. But I think that's part of the logic of what's taking place here.

Israel is represented by these different parts that are then brought together by God's passing between them. And every time a sacrifice is performed it's replaying the story of this event to Abraham. God has promised that he will be with his people, that he will give them an inheritance, that he will bring them out of Egypt, that he will be with them, that they will be his people.

And God's passing between the animals is something that is performed in a sort of ritual every single time an ascension offering is brought by Israel. Every single time this ritual plays out in Leviticus it is hearkening back to this event in Genesis 15. It's not all that's taking place but I think this is really important background for the sacrificial system.

One question to think about. In Romans chapter 4 Paul refers to Genesis chapter 15 verse 6. Abraham believed God and he accounted it to him for righteousness. How can reflecting upon Genesis chapter 15 help us better to understand Paul's argument in the book of Romans? Reading passages such as Genesis chapter 16 there are great rewards for paying attention.

The first thing to notice here is that Hagar is introduced to us as an Egyptian maidservant. We've already had one Egyptian experience in the story of Abraham back in chapter 12. He was in Egypt and Sarai was taken and in the house of Pharaoh.

Pharaoh was plagued and then he was sent away with many gifts. With sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys and camels etc. Presumably Hagar was one of these female servants.

So we've had an Egyptian experience and now there is another. Presumably one of the Egyptian maidservants received during that sojourn in Egypt is the main player within this particular chapter. And her nationality is significant where she comes from.

She's first of all someone who has come from this particular earlier story. But also there is an anticipation of later period in Israel's history where they will be the servant in the house of the Egyptians. It is important to read this passage against the backdrop of the passage that immediately preceded it.

Perhaps some of you as we are reading through that passage noticed a pattern. Abraham brings together a number of animals and then he's placed into a deep sleep. We've seen that pattern before.

In Genesis chapter 2 God brings the animals to Adam to name. And after naming the animals he is placed into a deep sleep and the woman is taken from his side and brought to him. It's an unusual word that we see for deep sleep.

A word only found in Genesis chapter 2 and Genesis chapter 16 within this book. This deep sleep is followed by meeting the woman. And at the beginning of chapter 16 the woman comes on the scene.

There is however a problem. Sarai, Abraham's wife, is barren. She is not having any children.

And so a supposed solution is proposed. That Sarai give Hagar, her Egyptian maidservant, to Abraham and that Hagar would have children for the sake of Sarai. Now there is a pattern here that we should notice.

It continues the pattern that we saw in Genesis chapter 2 and Genesis chapter 15. The woman is brought to the man and now we see a fall pattern playing out. The woman brought to the man but now the woman takes, gives to the man.

The man listens to the voice of his wife which is an echo of the language of Genesis chapter 3. This is a warning sign time. We are seeing these words cropping up, these expressions recurring. It's a sign that something is very wrong.

There is nothing wrong of course with listening to your wife. But the language is charged language. It's language that reminds us of some time previously in the story where things went very badly awry.

And what happens after the man takes what is given to him by the wife and listen to her voice, eyes are opened. He goes into Hagar, she conceives. And when she saw that she had conceived, received the fruit perhaps, her mistress became despised in her eyes.

Her eyes are opened and she despises her mistress. And then Sarai blames Abram. Such a cycle of recrimination might remind us of what we see in Genesis chapter 3. There is a blame shifting between the man and his wife and then the man blaming God as well.

And then his wife, the woman, blaming the serpent. If we look at the text carefully it says that Sarai gave Hagar to be his wife. Now I'm not sure that that's what Sarai's intention was.

Sarai wanted Abram to raise children through Hagar for her. She wasn't expecting that Hagar would be an equal wife alongside her. She wanted to be built up through Hagar.

That language of being built up is significant language. It's the language that we see for the formation of Eve in Genesis chapter 2. Eve is built out of the side of the man. It's a building up and she wants to be built up through Hagar.



And Hagar is given to her husband but then she realises this was not what she wanted. After conceiving Hagar looks at her mistress in a different way. Seeing herself as an equal, a wife alongside her.

Not just a maidservant. A wife of Abram with a child of her own. And in some ways the text would seem to back her up.

There's a validation of her new status. And this shift is very reminiscent of the forbidden fruit story. She feels deceived.

Sarai feels deceived. She didn't know that this was going to happen. And her eyes are opened and she feels naked.

She feels judged. And she no longer has the same status as she once did. This child is now going to be raised not as hers but by this independent woman who was once her maidservant.

Hagar is going to stand independently of her. And so she blames Abram. And this movement to a judgment scene is seen as Abram gives Hagar over into the hands of Sarai.

Saying, you do what's pleasing in your sight. And the language of sight continues throughout this passage. The play on the theme of sight and seeing is important.

They see that the fruit is good. The eyes are open. They see that they are naked.

They're hiding from sight in Genesis chapter 3. And these sorts of themes recur in Genesis chapter 16. Sarai sees that she's not bearing children. The handmaid is given to Abram.

And she sees that she conceives. And then she looks at her mistress and despises her. And then Sarai's eyes are open to the situation that she is despised in Hagar's eyes.

She's then handed over to Sarai to do what is pleasing in her eyes. Then Hagar flees from the sight of her mistress. The angel then finds her by a spring or literally an eye of water in the wilderness.

By the eye on the road to shore. And he asks her what's going on with her. Again there are sight themes here.

And these are things that we see within the fall. Adam and Eve hid from the presence of God. And God judged them.

God came and said, where are you to Adam? Adam was hiding because he was naked. Who told you that you were naked? And here we have a similar thing. Hagar flees from the presence and sight of her mistress.

And as she flees the angel of the Lord comes. And the angel of the Lord asks essentially the same question as God asked to Adam. Where are you? Why are you here? From where are you going? Why have you hidden? Why have you fled? The angel of the Lord instructs her to return to her mistress and submit herself under her hand.

A very similar thing that we see in the judgment on the woman in verse 16 of chapter 3 at the end of the story of the fall. There the woman is told that her desire will be for her husband and her husband will rule over her. It's a breaking down of the reciprocity in that relationship.

It becomes fraught. It becomes a relationship of subjugation rather than a healthy one. And here Hagar is told to return to an oppressive relationship with her mistress.

It's not what we might expect. But the theme continues. She returns to her mistress.

It's connected with the theme of the judgment upon Eve. But there is a redemptive tone. As she returns to her mistress she is told that her descendants will be multiplied exceedingly.

So that they cannot be counted for the multitude. In Genesis chapter 3 Eve is told I will multiply your conceptions. And here there's something similar but not just the pain of conception.

But the number of children that are to be born in a way that is more emphasising blessing rather than judgment. There are a series of statements made by the angel of the Lord here. So the angel of the Lord said.

Then the angel of the Lord said. And then the angel of the Lord said. In verses 9, 10, 11.

These might be successive speeches. Each of them answered by silence on the part of Hagar until finally she speaks. Return to your mistress and submit yourself under her hands.

And then the response of silence. I will multiply your descendants exceedingly so that they shall not be counted for multitude. And then the response of silence.

And then finally behold you are with child and you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael because the Lord has heard your affliction. Note the shift from seeing to hearing.

He shall be a wild man. His hand shall be against every man. And every man's hand against him.

And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren. And at this point she responds. And her response draws upon the theme of sight again.

You are the God who sees. And she comments upon the fact that God has seen her. This is the first time that we see God named by a human character or given a title.

And it's significant that this is the character of Hagar. Not Sarai or Abram. Not some other significant character in the narrative that we might expect to name God.

Someone like Noah or maybe Seth or some other character like that. It's Hagar, the Egyptian bond servant. And so we see the playing out of a story of the fall.

And Sarai and Abram are on the wrong side of this in many ways. They're playing out the pattern of Adam and Eve. And Hagar plays out something of the pattern of Eve but in a more redemptive sense.

Another thing to notice here is that Hagar is associated with Egypt. As I mentioned at the beginning, this is an important detail to notice. There is a servant in the house of Abram and Sarai, the chosen people of God.

And they're mistreating this Egyptian maid servant. She's described as being afflicted. God hears her affliction.

Her name might even suggest the stranger. God has said in the previous chapter, your descendants will be strangers in a land not their own. And they will serve them and they will afflict them 400 years.

And in the very next chapter we see an Egyptian who is afflicted as a stranger within the house of Abram himself. And here I think we're having an anticipation of the Exodus. An Exodus twisted and perverted.

The afflicting party is Sarai, the wife of Abram. It's not Pharaoh. Rather it's the people of God.

The descendants of Abram are going to have to be servants in the house of Pharaoh. And now we see this ancestor, their great ancestor, as the one who's afflicting an Egyptian. There will have to be a reversal of this.

Israel is going to have to enter into the experience of Hagar and redeem that experience. The story is going to have to be reversed. And Abram had an account of all of this beforehand in his vision.

Told that his descendants would be in the position of Hagar. That they would be servants and afflicted in a house not their own. And in his own household we are seeing these things playing out.

It's a fall pattern. It's an Exodus pattern. As God meets the person fleeing from affliction in the wilderness and shows grace to them.

And so within this story we have a preview of some of the greater themes that will be developed. Towards the end of the book of Genesis and then into the book of Exodus. A question to meditate upon.

The story of Genesis at this point seems to be the story of Abram and Sarai. And yet in chapter 16 the story seems to focus, place its spotlight upon not Abram and Sarai. But this seemingly unimportant Egyptian maid servant.

She becomes the central figure in the story. She becomes the character who's blessed. Who God appears to and shows grace to.

She even gives God a title. Declares God's name to be the God who sees. What can we learn about God's character? That the figure of Hagar receives the sort of attention that he receives in this chapter.

What does it say about God's purpose in the formation of his people? And how does the way that God tells this story help us to understand its broader purpose and destination? The events of Genesis chapter 17 occur in the 99th year of Abram's life. 13 years after the events of the previous chapter. It's worth paying attention to the spans of time that are covered here.

There are 11 years after Abram is first called until the events of chapter 16. But then there's 13 years between chapters 16 and 17. And then between chapters 17 and chapter 21 a period of only one year is covered.

At the age of 99, Abram is about to enter into his century. He's about to reach the double jubilee of 2 times 50 years. Ishmael is in a similar significant point in his life.

He's 13, about to reach 14. A double week of years. We'll see 14 years occurring on a few occasions later on in the story of Genesis.

And so it might be worth paying attention. The giving of the covenant of circumcision prepares Abram for what's about to take place in the coming chapters. For the birth of Isaac.

Circumcision is a very significant event. It changes a number of things. Abram has been in a relationship with God.

He's been given promises. But this event solidifies a number of these things. Serving as a sign or a symbol that actually manifests something of the reality of the covenant.

It brings the covenant to light in different ways. The covenant is in part a cutting of a covenant. Israel has been cut off from other nations.

And circumcision establishes a new body of people. Before this point, Abram was very much associated with the line of terror. With his brothers and with others.

But now after circumcision, you have a new body of people defined by a ritual. That differentiates them from their forebears. It differentiates them from others who might be associated with the broader line of terror.

Such as Lot. And it gives them a distinct identity. Many questions could be asked about what circumcision means.

But here are a few suggestions. It occurs on the 8th day. The 8th day was the first day that animals were fit to be sacrificed.

Circumcision, I think, is associated in part with sacrifice. It's the giving of the child to God. You can see this theme playing out throughout the story of Genesis.

The giving over of the son to God. Handing over the son. Holding the son with an open hand so that God might actually take or require the son from the hand of the person who offers.

Circumcision is also associated with rendering an organ functional. If you look through the Old Testament and even into the New, you'll see circumcision or the lack of circumcision associated with bodily organs and their functionality or lack of functionality. You can talk about the uncircumcised heart.

Isaiah talks about uncircumcised lips. Elsewhere we read of uncircumcised ears. In each of these cases, uncircumcision is the inability of a wild or untamed organ to perform its proper function.

And so there's a cutting off to render something functional. The word wild here, I think, is important. If we read the book of Leviticus chapter 19 verses 23 to 25, we read... When you come into the land and have planted all kinds of trees for food, then you shall count their fruit as uncircumcised.

Three years it shall be as uncircumcised for you. It shall not be eaten. But in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy.

A praise to the Lord. And in the fifth year you may eat its fruit that it may yield to you its increase. I am the Lord your God.

So you have trees planted for fruit and food. And not to eat of those trees for the first three years. The juvenile trees which have just been planted, they're dedicated, they're uncircumcised.

No one can eat of them until the fourth year. And the fruit is dedicated to the Lord for that period of time. It's the first fruits.

And what does this tell you about circumcision? It connects the symbolism of the fruit and the tree with the organ of generation. The male organ of generation. And it's seen in

some way as something that's bringing forth fruit or sowing seed that's prepared for bearing.

Now, when we look at the example of the fruit tree, the cutting off or the pruning that would occur before that point, pruning the tree before it becomes fruitful, prepares it for that great fruitfulness, allowing it to be more fruitful and fertile later on. Part of the promise that is given by treating it as uncircumcised in this earlier stage and preparing it in the fifth year, it will be more fruitful. Now, Israel is in a similar position.

There's a close correlation between Israel and the symbolism of the land, of animals and other things like that. And Ishmael is described like a wild donkey. He's a wild, undomesticated person.

He's someone who dwells as a stranger. He's someone who acts as an outsider, someone who's not a domestic figure. And as we look in scripture, I think we'll see parallels between trees and plants and persons.

And Israel is supposed to be a tended vine. It's not just going to be a wild vine. And if it's going to be a tended vine, it needs to be circumcised.

It needs to be prepared to bear fruit. And that is provided by pruning, as it were, the male organ of generation. Circumcision is in some sense a domestication of the fruitfulness of the vine of Israel so that it will be fruitful.

It's significant that circumcision is something that tames the natural wildness of fertility, and particularly of the male sowing of seed. If you look at the passages that surround this, you'll see a vision of a society where male sexuality was often running amok. You can think of the story of Shechem and Dinah, as we see in chapter 34 of Genesis.

Or Abram and his relationship with Hagar. Or the story of Sodom in a few chapters' time. These are stories that show untended sexuality, sexuality that functions in a wild way, that has not been pruned in any form.

And the creativity of the person which is unpruned can be wild and dangerous. But yet God wants to prune the fertility, the agency of the man in this way. It's a restriction of fertility.

It's a tending of it. It's a bringing of it into subjection to God as its gardener. Now the difference between the wild and the cultivated, with circumcision representing the pruned man, I think is important.

If we look through scripture, you'll see that the male genitalia, the phallus, is associated with the flesh. It's associated with a lot of the other things that the flesh is associated with too. The flesh can be seen as a natural power of the spirited man.

It's associated with the body in its untamed natural form. And it can be associated with the sinful nature as an untamed natural impulse. This can be concentrated upon the phallus or the penis.

And we see this elsewhere in scripture and within culture more generally. It's not an accidental association. It's a site of male creative power, of spiritedness, the power to form civilizations, to make a name for yourself, to make a generation, to be a powerful fruitful vine.

And in all societies, the danger of the untended, untamed, undomesticated phallus, that sort of phallic power that is just left to run wild, untended, do whatever it wants, there's something wrong there. And so God tames humankind. God tames Abraham and his descendants by leaving a sign in this particular part of their body.

That part of their body will represent God's claim upon them. That no longer are they to act in whatever way they want according to that male energy, but they're supposed to act as those who have been sacrificed to God. There may even be a sort of symbolic castration involved here.

The organ being cut off in part to represent the offering of the entire virility of the man to God. Prior to the cutting off of the foreskin, Abraham is as good as dead in some sense. He could bear a child of the flesh beforehand, but after the foreskin has been cut off, after he's been circumcised, he's a tamed person, a pruned person.

And as a pruned person, he's no longer bearing wild fruit. He's one who's going to be bearing the child of promise, the child who's the true seed given by God himself. Circumcision might also be related to themes of priesthood.

The person who is circumcised is set apart for a sort of priestly vocation. And this is something that I think you see in the priestly initiation rites, where the priest has blood put on his thumb, his big toe, and also upon his ear. The four corners of the body, if you include the phallus, is associated with hearing, with walking, with stepping and moving around in the world.

And it's also associated with generation, bearing children. And these sacrificial dimensions that are associated with the priestly initiation rites, I think, highlight something of what circumcision means. That these children are set apart for God's service, set apart as God's people.

What else can we see? It happens in a particular context. There's a transition about to occur as God comes to judge the land. God is going to come and he's going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities of the plain.

And the cutting off the flesh is a preparatory act for that. Abram has to cut off part of his flesh so that the entirety of his flesh won't be cut off in judgment. In circumcision then,

there's a symbolic part removed, dedicating the whole body to the Lord.

A pruning of the body so that the body can be dedicated its entirety to God and not be destroyed. So the cutting off of flesh that we see at this point is dealing with wild, untamed sexuality and virility. It's taming it, subjecting it to God's authority.

And there we see such a sharp contrast between the way that the behaviour of the nations round about is characterised and the way that Abram and his descendants would have to be. When people come close to a God who will judge the flesh, their flesh has to be prepared. So in the story of Moses, as he is about to enter the land of Egypt, as God is about to come near and judge, he has to have his son circumcised.

It's a crisis moment. God is about to kill him if he does not circumcise his son. Elsewhere we see it in the case of the Passover.

If someone is not circumcised, they cannot participate in the Passover. And if they do not participate in the Passover, they will be cut off. As God comes near, you need to be prepared.

You need to batten down the hatches. And part of that is connected with the cutting off of the flesh. Circumcision is applied to all the members of Abraham's house.

This isn't just for his natural descendants. This is something that creates a new body of people defined by a shared right. And elsewhere in scripture we'll see that other people could come in and become part of the nation of Israel, the descendants of Abraham.

This, I think, is a sign that it's not just a biological people. It's a people defined by a particular practice, a particular covenant reality. There is an association with Abraham.

There is a biological dimension. But there's more than that. The story is not just a story of the cutting off of the male foreskin.

It's a story also about the opening of the womb. There's a parallel between the promise given to Abraham and the promise given to Sarai. Both of them have their names changed.

Abraham's name is changed to Abraham, as one to be the father of many nations. And that change is important. It's not just going to be Ishmael that he's the father of.

It probably refers to the nations descended from Jacob at this point. Abraham hopes that Ishmael would live before God, that God would fulfil his promise through Ishmael. But yet it's going to be through Sarah that he receives the son Isaac.

And Isaac is going to be the one who fulfils the promise. But there is a mirroring of Ishmael and Isaac. And we'll see this more as we go through the story.



We're told that Ishmael will beget twelve princes and he'll be made into a great nation. It's the same sort of promise that we see for Abraham and Sarah. They will have, ultimately, twelve tribes arising from them and will become a great nation.

So Ishmael and Isaac are similar characters. And the similarities invite us to compare and to contrast. Isaac's name is called Laughter.

Abraham laughs when he hears the news. It's a laugh of joy. Later on in chapter 18, Sarah also laughs.

As you look through the story of Isaac, you'll see that theme of laughter occurring on a number of further occasions. Ishmael laughs at Isaac and is seen as a threatening of his status. And Sarah casts out the bondswoman and her son.

At a later point in the story, we see Isaac isa-king, or laughing, with Rebecca and Abimelech finding them out. So there's a preparation going on here. Abraham and his family are being pruned in preparation for a judgment of the land.

There's going to be a burning up of the false trees of the land, the wild trees. And God is going to sow a cultivated, tamed and pruned nation in their place. It's a pivotal event for understanding the story of Abraham.

There's a movement here into an even greater stage of the covenant. We've looked already at the way that the covenant promises ramp up stage by stage. God promises that he will make Abraham's name great, that he will be a blessing, that he will bless many nations, etc.

Then he promises that he will make his descendants numerous as the dust of the earth, give them a place in the land. Then, even further, that they will be like the stars in the heavens, not just the dust of the earth. And now we have a cutting off of Israel from the other nations, a marking of the body with the covenant.

They are now a vine tended by the Lord, a vine that will be fruitful, a vine that will receive the promise of seed that God has given. And they're prepared for that time of judgment when God will come upon the land. And there will be this initial judgment as the cities of the plain in that great act of judgment that occurs in the chapters that follow will be removed from the scene.

A question to consider. In Colossians chapter 2, Paul talks about baptism and circumcision in close correlation. He talks about the circumcision of Christ.

Now, I believe the circumcision of Christ refers to the cross. Christ's flesh is cut off at the cross. It's the cutting off of flesh in a more decisive manner.

And baptism relates to that. Can you think of some of the ways in which circumcision

might help us to understand what takes place through the work of Christ, how Christ fulfills circumcision? And then how our practice of baptism might work out that meaning, that transition into the meaning that Christ brings. Genesis chapter 18 is a hugely important passage in the context of the story of Abraham.

Abraham has just received the covenant of circumcision. His name has been changed. Sarah has had her name changed.

She's been told that her womb will be opened and that they will have a son and that this son will be the heir, not Ishmael. Chapter 18 is set by the oak of Mamre or the terebinth tree. It's an important site.

Abraham has already built an altar at this site and now he's sitting by his tent door. The tent door is an important location. It's a boundary.

It's a liminal realm, a place that you must cross over from one realm to another. And as such, it's associated with birth. It's also associated with death.

Important things happen at doorways. And we'll see this in chapters that follow. We'll see it in places like the book of Exodus, where there is a threat at the doorway, where there must be marks made on the doorway.

We see it at other places where there are the threats of death or the promises of birth associated with doorways. Jephthah's daughter comes out of the door of his house first. And there are other points in scripture where we see those sorts of associations.

The child opens the doors of the womb, as we see in Exodus chapter 13. At significant points elsewhere in scripture, birth and death are associated with the door or with crossings of things such as rivers. These are borders that define identities.

And this happens at the heat of the day. It's the middle of the day. And there is a situation where Abraham is resting or sitting in the tent door, looking out, and some visitors arrive.

And there's an emphasis again upon sight here. He lifts up his eyes. He looks and behold, there are three references to sight in succession.

There are three men before him. He runs from the tent door to meet them, bows himself towards the ground, begs them to stay and receive his hospitality. And the theme of hospitality within this chapter and the chapter that follows is very important.

In the book of Hebrews, we're told about Abraham and others entertaining angels unawares. This is the first time that we see something like that. And the sort of hospitality that he provides here is juxtaposed with what we see in the chapter that follows.

Sodom is a place that is devoid of true hospitality. It's a place where we see the exact opposite. Hostility and violence and the assault upon the people who come to visit Lot and upon Lot himself and his daughters.

In these cases, there is a very stark contrast to what we see in the case of Abraham. And whereas one story leads to the wife being made fruitful, the other story ends with the wife being turned into something as barren as a pillar of salt. In the book of Ezekiel, we're told that the sin of Sodom was one of lack of hospitality and the treatment of the visitors is the committing of abomination.

It's not just about their sexual sin. It includes that. But there's a more general society of violent inhospitality and hostility.

And this is contrasted very sharply with Abraham, who's shown to be a person of great and excessive hospitality. He takes great measures of flour that are used to make cakes. He brings a great calf and he brings all these other things to make a bountiful feast.

He's showing the utmost hospitality, extreme hospitality. Although we see hospitality being shown later on in the story of Sodom and Lot, it's hospitality of a very different type and hospitality that goes awry. The question of who the three visitors are is one that has sparked great speculation.

It's not entirely clear that Abraham knows when he first encounters them. At first he may think that they are merely human figures who are walking and needing some sort of sustenance. The idea of entertaining angels unawares is important.

But we do later see that they are angels and two of those angels proceed to go to Sodom. We're told that they are angels at that point, but we're also informed that one of these characters is the Lord himself. And presumably the angel of the Lord or, I believe, Christ in a pre-incarnate manifestation.

These angelic figures that accompany him will go on to inspect. But there is an identity that becomes clearer of the third character. It's the Lord himself who continues to stay and talk with Abraham and addresses Sarah by name and tells of the birth to come.

There's a shift after the preparation and the eating of the meal. They say to him, where is Sarah, your wife? And he said, here in the tent. And that statement, I will certainly return to you according to the time of life.

And behold, Sarah, your wife shall have a son. That shift from they to he is interesting. There's a suggestion here that one of the visitors is not just an angel, but is the angel of the Lord, the Lord himself.

The angel of God who has come to declare the promise. And this is something that helps us to understand what happens later with the conversation between Abraham and the

Lord. As the visitors go on, Abraham stays and talks with the Lord who remains there.

Sarah laughs when she hears that she will have a child. It's not necessarily to be taken as an example of unbelief. Even if there is an element of disbelief there, it's maybe more characterized by astonishment and surprise than anything else.

And perhaps what's being said is that she should own that response, that she should recognize that it's an appropriate response in some ways. The child is supposed to be called after that laughter. There's something surprising and delightful and astonishing about what's taking place.

Her laughter becomes the name of her child, the defining characteristic that marks his story and what follows. His life, his very existence is a cause of laughter, not just of the laughter of unbelief, but the laughter of astonishment and joy and surprise. The promise is that according to the time of life she will have a son.

It's a significant expression that we see elsewhere. For instance, in the Annunciation story of 2 Kings chapter 4 where the Shunammite woman is told that she will have a son. And that story is very similar to the story of Isaac for a reason.

Told within a year she will have a son, the child in that story dies and there are a great many parallels with the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. We'll get to that later on I think when we discuss chapter 22 of Genesis. After the announcement of the birth of the child and the laughter that will be associated with that, the men rise and look towards Sodom and move there.

Abraham goes with them to send them on the way but God has an internal dialogue as it were at this point. The Lord said, as if speaking to himself, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing? Since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him. For I have known him in order that he might command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has spoken to him.

Now this suggests the reason, or at least some of the reasons for God's calling of Abraham and the particular way in which Abraham will receive the promise that God has designed for him. The means by which God will fulfil his promise to Abraham is through Abraham's ministering and keeping the way of the Lord and ministering to his children afterwards. His raising of a faithful family.

That's how God will fulfil his promise to make Abraham a blessing. Abraham is going to be an influence. He's going to raise a faithful family and through that God will pass what he has promised concerning Abraham.

And all the nations will be blessed through this. The fact that God is going to bless the

nations of the world in Abraham is also something that gives an understanding of why God talks to him concerning the fate of Sodom. If Abraham is going to be a blessing to all the nations of the world, then Abraham can intercede for Sodom.

He can be a blessing by speaking on behalf of a city that's about to be destroyed. Another thing to notice here is that God is conferring with Abraham concerning what he's planning to do. Elsewhere in scripture we're told that God does not do the things that he does without conferring with his prophets.

Abraham is described as a seer but also as a prophet. He's one who is privy to the divine counsel, who enters into God's presence, hears God's designs and purposes and is able to deliberate with God concerning those things. The deliberation with Abraham here is a sign that Abraham is part and a participant in the fulfilment of God's purposes and God's plan.

He's not just someone at the receiving end of God's purposes but someone who is part of deliberations concerning what God is about to do. This is a very powerful image of what is involved in the church's prayer as we, as the children of Abraham, commune with God and seek that his will would be enacted in the world in particular ways. We interact with him and we deliberate in some ways on these issues.

He's supposed to keep the way of the Lord. Where else have we seen an expression similar to this? In reference to the cherubim who keep the way to the tree of life. Perhaps there's some connection there.

God says that the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grievous. I will go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to me. If not, I will know.

It's the expression of intent to go down and inspect the city which the two angels do which is similar to what we find in chapter 11 concerning the Tower of Babel. Let us go down and confuse their language. Elsewhere in scripture we'll see two visitors being sent to a nation or city.

The angel of the Lord meets with Moses in the wilderness and then Moses and Aaron go to Egypt to test that place to see what will happen. Will they show hospitality? Will they respond? Will they let God's people go? We see in the story of Rahab a similar thing. Two visitors sent to a city.

What will be the response? Two visitors sent to the villages and cities of Israel as Christ sends out his disciples two by two. And this is a similar test to the one that Christ describes. Will his disciples be received? If they are received they will bring a blessing.

If they are not received then they shake the dust off their feet. And it will be a better outcome for Sodom and Gomorrah on the Day of Judgment than for that city. This

passage describes what many people see as Abraham bargaining with the Lord.

But it is a rather strange form of bargaining. When you bargain you usually set a figure and the person says no. And then you raise the figure and then the person says no.

And then maybe you present a counter figure and you gradually converge on something and you both compromise. And you will have all these expressions like I couldn't sell it for that much. I'll be rubbing myself.

And then others you're twisting my arm and I'll maybe be able to give you this but it's my lowest price I can go. And eventually someone gives in and you feel like you've won a coup. But that is not what happens here.

It's not haggling with one party going up and the other party going down. It's a very atypical bargaining event. Abraham is steadily going lower.

He presents God with a particular number of people and then God says yes. And then a lower number and God says yes. And then a lower number still to which God also says yes.

Lower all the way down to ten people. And he stops at that point. Now why does he stop at ten? It's an interesting thing.

First of all it's notable that God is not seeking to destroy. God is not a God who relishes the act of destruction. He's not in the business of bringing death and destruction upon places.

He wants to see them thrive. And he will save it for just ten people. Why ten people? Because those ten people will be an influence.

It's a sign of hope. As long as there is a seed of faithful people there and that seed has not died, that city may not be destroyed. Something can happen.

Why ten again? Maybe because Lot has ten people within his household. When you count his daughters and his sons and his daughter's husbands or at least fiancées, you have eight people represented and then Lot and his wife. Ten people.

Maybe he's thinking, oh, I know Lot's family is good enough. Ten people. They have ten people.

That will be enough. God will save the place. And so it seems as if there's an end to the negotiation.

But it also sets up the story for the next chapter. Will it be possible to bring ten people together? Does Lot have influence within the city? Can he even influence his own family? Is there in fact ten? Is Lot's family enough? And these are all key questions that drive us

into the next chapter. One concluding question for reflection, largely because I don't have a clue what the answer is, but it seems significant to me.

The ingredients for the meal that Abraham presents to the angels is given to us in detail. Three measures of meal, some butter, some milk and the calf. Now, I can't remember what I ate this day last week.

But yet we are told here about the specific ingredients of a meal that's presented to these three figures. What is the significance of the ingredients? If you find them out, if you can think of anything, please share them with the rest of us because it would be very illuminating to know. It seems that the ingredients of the meal in the chapter that follows are important and we'll get to that tomorrow.

So, what might be the significance of these details? Genesis chapter 19 is a challenging and a troubling story. It begins with two angels arriving in Sodom. The two angels are two of the three characters that meet Abraham in chapter 18.

The third of the figures that meets Abraham there is the Lord who goes his way at the end of the chapter after Abraham has interceded for Sodom. The beginning of chapter 19 has a great number of similarities with the beginning of 18. You have the visitors arriving.

You have Lot in the gate of the city as Abraham was in the tent door. Significant time of the day. It's the evening, the earlier time it was in the heat of the day.

And there is a greeting and an invitation to have a meal and an insistence that they come in and enjoy hospitality. In both of these cases, we're seeing then a pattern playing out which invites us to hold these two stories alongside each other, to juxtapose, to compare and contrast, to see the different elements and what we might learn by holding them alongside each other. They're both stories of hospitality in some way.

Hospitality and, in the second case, in chapter 19, failed hospitality. Lot makes a meal of unleavened bread. The details of this meal are significant.

The details are connected later on with the Passover meal or the celebration of the Passover and the feast of unleavened bread. Israel is brought out of Egypt and unleavened bread is an important part of that story. You have two visitors coming to the city, to the civilization to inspect it, Moses and Aaron, and there's judgment.

And then there's a destruction of the city or destruction of the nation, in the case of Egypt. They are led out, brought to the mountain, and a new covenant is formed in the story of the Exodus. Here, there is an Exodus pattern, but it does not actually arrive at a good solution.

At the very end, we find Lot in a cave, not on the mountain, as he should have been.

Reading the story of Lot against the backdrop of the Exodus helps us to pick out certain details that we might otherwise miss. For instance, why is there such an emphasis upon the threat at the doorway? In the story of the Exodus, the people have to be gathered within the house to celebrate the Passover feast.

They have to put blood on the lintels and doorposts, and there is judgment upon those outside. Here, we see the same thing. People must be brought inside the house for safety.

If they are left outside, they will be destroyed, they will be judged. And so, these are Exodus themes pervading this chapter. Another thing to do is to read it against the backdrop of the previous chapter, where there is, again, an emphasis upon doorways.

Abraham is seated in the tent door. Sarah hears the news or the statement of the Lord in the tent door. And there, the tent door is associated with birth and blessing.

It's associated with bringing forth a new son. In the story of Lot in Sodom, it's a different thing. The doorway is associated with death.

It's the doorway that represents that boundary between the realm of destruction and the realm of temporary safety. It's the doorway through which he seems to be willing to cast his daughters. And so, he's prepared, almost, to lose his children for the sake of his life.

Whereas, in the case of Abraham, in the doorway, there is a promise of new birth. The story of Lot moves towards a position where his wife becomes a pillar of salt, barren as a pillar of salt. In the story of Abraham, Sarah is made fruitful.

Holding these stories alongside each other, then, will help us to understand them. This is something that we see on many occasions in Scripture. Scripture has certain patterns that play out.

And the patterns help us to recognise both significant similarities and significant differences. So, it's not just playing out the same pattern again and again and again without variation. There are all these significant variations.

And as we read the story of Lot against the backdrop of the previous story with Abraham, and against the backdrop of the Exodus pattern, we will see a number of details that will help us to understand what's going on. The men of Sodom are wicked. They are characterised by a rapacious and cruel character.

They seek to rape the visitors that come to the city. Now, the purpose of this is not primarily to satisfy their sexual desires, but as an expression of their power and dominance over these people who have come into the city. This is a society that's turned in hostility towards anyone that needs help.



These are people who are opposed to the outside, the foreigner, to the stranger. And Lot, although he has dwelt among them for a while and has begun to sit in the gate, he's someone who seems to have exercised some authority in the city, he ends up falling foul of them too. He's taken in these people, these visitors, shown them hospitality, and now he is threatened on that account.

If Lot is going to save this city, he has to be secure within this city. If they cast him out, then they will be destroyed. And also, on the other hand, if Lot casts out people within his house, the city won't be saved either.

Against the events of chapter 18, we can see that there is a concern here. Can ten people be found? Can Lot's house be sufficient to save this city? Will the city retain Lot's house within it, or will they destroy Lot's house or cast them out? And can Lot hold his household together? And in both cases, we see that the answer is no. There is a crisis moment where there is not hospitality shown to the righteous within the city, and the righteous are failing.

They're falling into the patterns of the city round about them, and they're giving way, and the ground is slipping, and there must be an escape at that point. And so, the angels, with a great urgency, call Lot to gather his family together and to flee from the city. But yet Lot is not believed.

When he speaks to his sons-in-law, they ridicule him. Now, the sons-in-law may suggest that the daughters were not in the house. Later on, it says that the daughters have been found.

Now, that may be a suggestion that there was a ploy, that he did not actually have his daughters with him, and he wasn't going to cast them out. It was just a means to gain a few moments of time. That's an interesting theory.

There may be some truth to it. I'm not entirely convinced, one way or another. They're told to escape, and as he escapes, he pleads that he might go into the small city of Zoar, and the city is named according to this.

The other thing that's interesting about this is Lot is interceding for a city. Abraham interceded for a city. Sodom, the previous chapter.

And so, again, we're seeing parallels between the two stories. But something goes wrong. Lot can't stay in Zoar.

He comes to Zoar, the sun rises on the earth, and the city of Sodom and the city of Gomorrah are destroyed with sulfur and fire from heaven. But Lot ends up moving on from Zoar. He can't stay there.

And he ends up living in the hills with his two daughters, as he's afraid. And he lives in a

cave, isolated from everyone else, cut off from society. This is a great apocalypse that has occurred.

And he doesn't go to be with Abraham again. That's one thing he could have done. Maybe he thinks that Abraham is dead.

One way or another, he goes off to live in this cave with his daughters, by themselves. And in that context, we see the other tragic twist of this tale. The daughters that, seemingly, he was prepared to throw out to the crowd to have their way with them, now they have their way with him when he's unaware of what's happening.

So there is a plot between the two daughters. The firstborn seems to be the instigator, saying to the younger, Our father is old. There is not a man on earth to come into us after the manna of all the earth.

Note, again, the parallels with the case of Abraham. Abraham is old, and Sarah is old. They're not going to bear children.

And it's a similar situation here. And so it's an attempt, last-ditch attempt, to maintain the family line, to make sure that not everything dies out with Lot. And so the daughters lie with Lot.

They make their father drink wine and uncover their father's nakedness, in some sense. We can see the parallels between this and the story of Ham. And there, I think, it's important to notice that the children that arise from this are associated with the Canaanites in various ways.

The ways that the daughters act is characterised by Canaanite practices, by the same sort of relationship to sexuality that we see within Sodom. Now, why was Lot and his wife and his family told not to look back? In part, because they had grown so close to the society of Sodom, they'd become so entangled and enmeshed within it, that if they looked back, they would be too closely associated with it, and they would fall under its judgement. The story of Lot's wife is a warning for this reason, that Lot's wife, looking back, had too close of an association with the city.

Only by making that radical, extreme break, and not looking back for a moment, would they be able to be saved from its destruction. We can think about the way that we can so often be drawn back into the ways of the world. And like Lot, sometimes we may be led by the hand, instructed never to look back in any way at all, and to flee from our lives, like Christian, for instance, from the city of destruction.

This story, then, is one that is used in many occasions in the Old Testament as an example of a great judgement, a signal judgement. Something that anticipates final judgement, and the danger of being found unprepared or too entangled in the things of the world when the day of judgement arises. The plan between the two daughters is

something that maybe has similarities with the story of Tamar, and the way that she takes the initiative in raising up seed for Judah.

We see a similar thing in the background of the story of Ruth, the Moabites, who plays a similar sort of pattern in the relationship to Boaz. Plays it out, but doesn't actually enact it in the same way, but recalls the events surrounding Lot and her foremother, who slept with her father. There are ways in which we see this history being recalled and redeemed in that story of Ruth as an ancestor of Boaz is Judah, and an ancestress of Ruth is the mother of Moab.

These two people brought together are redeeming the legacy of their forefathers and foremothers. Two questions. First, looking at the story that ends this chapter with the two daughters of Lot, we can see similarities, but also differences, between the two daughters.

What are some of the ways in which we can see differences between the older and the younger daughter, and the way that they speak about their relationship with their father? The second question. The story of Abraham and the story of Lot are entangled until this point in Genesis. There are many ways in which they are playing off each other as characters.

We can see that Lot is the nephew of Abraham early on. He's the one who seems to be bearing the legacy of him. He's the one that's most well situated to making his name great.

And then at other points, he's described as if he's the brother of Abraham. At this point, we see the last appearance of Lot within the story. And there is, once again, a key relationship with Abraham that's being explored, a juxtaposition between the two, reflect upon some of the ways in which the contrast and the similarity between Lot and Abraham helps us to understand the key details and character of both persons' lives.

Chapter 20 of Genesis is one of those chapters where we might be forgiven for thinking that we're reading another chapter in Genesis entirely. There are three stories within the book of Genesis that have a very similar form, where one of the patriarchs goes to a foreign land to sojourn there for a while and his wife is taken. Or there's a threat that the wife might be taken.

And then the true identity of the wife is revealed and then they're sent away with many gifts. This is a story that we've already read in chapter 12. There's a similar story in chapter 26.

Such stories are what Robert Alter has described as typescenes. A typescene could be described as a fundamental template of a story that can be modified in different ways. So within the Old Testament we can think of accounts of women meeting men at wells.

And we also have an example of that in the New Testament, of course. We might also think of the annunciation of the birth of a saviour. There are a number of examples of that in the Old Testament, but also in the New.

These are fundamental patterns of stories that can be told many different times with variations. Now when we see a typescene it's important not just to pay attention to the similarities and the fundamental sameness of these stories. That would be a mistake.

The stories are never exactly the same. The variations are no less significant than the similarities. What a typescene does is place stories alongside each other so that as we reflect upon their similarities and differences we might come to a deeper understanding of their meaning.

So when we arrive at Genesis chapter 20 we've already heard this story in one sort of form before. These events are told as historical events. The point is not that these things are just made up tales.

But rather they're told with significant repetition and with correspondences that cause us to reflect upon their meanings over against each other. This story has differences from the previous story that we saw in chapter 12, but also similarities. On this occasion Abraham does not go down to Egypt.

He goes to the land of the Philistines. The Philistines, if we've looked at chapter 10 and paid attention to it, they're one of the people groups that descend from Israel. And that people group from Ham, this is a people group that's associated with the Egyptians.

It's important because as we go through the text here we'll see that they are playing a role that's similar to the Egyptians in certain respects. As we go through the story of the book of Samuel we'll again see the character of the Philistines connected to the Egyptians. So judgments upon the Philistines and sojourning with the Philistines, these are events that are interactions with an Egypt-related people.

Another thing to bear in mind here is that the Philistines were not one of the people groups whose land was to be given to Abraham. They were a people group that oppressed the land at various points, but they were adjacent to the land. They were not actually going to lose their land to Abraham and his seed.

Why does Abraham go outside the land at this point? Probably because of the destruction upon Sodom and Gomorrah, which may have rendered the land fairly barren at this point. If we look at the story of Genesis 12 or the story here in chapter 20 or the chapter 26 story concerning Isaac, each one of the stories follows something of the pattern of an Exodus narrative. There is a threat to the land, they move into a foreign land with all of their possessions.

There is a threat to the bride and the seed. There's a judgment upon the wicked. There is

an accusation against the righteous.

There's the humiliation of foreign gods. And then there's deliverance by God, going with great gifts and being established in a new land. Now this is the basic Exodus motif, and we can see it more elaborated in certain contexts, but more constrained and limited in others.

We've already seen an Exodus motif played out in the previous chapter concerning Sodom, and certain details within that story highlight a connection between the story and the story of the Exodus. Things like two people coming to test the place, outrage coming up to the Lord, threat at the doorway, meal of unleavened bread, fleeing the city, etc. etc.

And in this chapter we have a different sort of Exodus paradigm playing out, a story with resemblances with other stories that we see in Genesis. This event also occurs at a very significant juncture in time. If we think about what we've read in the previous chapters, God has promised to Abraham and Sarah that they will have a son within a year.

The taking of Sarah at this particular point is a threat to the promise. It's a threat to the possibility of Isaac's birth in the first place. So it seems to be a very clear assault by the serpent upon the seed of the woman.

There's a threat to the bride, as there was in chapter 12, but also, crucially, here to the seed. In the chapter 12 account, we see that God intervened with plagues and other things upon Pharaoh. But here there is a more specific threat, and there's not just generic plagues.

God appears in a dream to Abimelech, warning him that he will die because of what he has done. These are themes of Genesis chapter 3, the judgment of the fool. He has taken something that is not his, and he will die as a result.

He claims innocence, that he does not know that Sarah was the wife of Abraham. For all he knew, Sarah was Abraham's sister. Now, Abraham has used this ruse before.

He has already claimed that Sarah was his sister when he went down to Egypt. Hasn't he learned his lesson? And there are ways in which this is clearly not a positive event, the way that this plays out. It's not good for Sarah to be taken.

And there's an expression here of the limitation of Abraham's power. God has to intervene on this occasion, just as he did in chapter 12, to deliver Abraham from his plight and his predicament. But yet, is Abraham sinning? As we saw in the previous case, this is a consistent ploy that he is using.

This is something that he does in every single place that he goes to. When Abimelech inquires concerning what has happened to Abraham, Abraham says that he did not

believe that the fear of God was in that place, and so he did not want to be killed on account of his wife. Now, we can often see this as Abraham just wanting to save his own skin.

But it's important to bear in mind that Abraham is the head of a sheikdom. He has at least two or three thousand people along with him. If he's killed, they're in great danger.

And so, there is a problem for him. If he pretends to be the brother of Sarah, then he can be courted. He's someone that has leverage.

He's someone that the king of the place will want to make peace with, and will want to treat well, so that there can be some alliance made, so that the men of Abraham can be his men, and be allied to him. However, if Sarah is Abraham's wife, Abraham is an obstacle, and Abraham should be removed from the situation. So that ploy is one that has a certain reasoning to it, and it's not merely out of selfish interest.

Abraham saving his life is something that will save the lives of the people around him as well. It's something that he does consistently for this reason. God intervenes, but who is at fault here? Primarily Abimelech.

Abimelech is acting in a tyrannical manner. He does not know that he is taking another man's wife, but he is taking Sarah without any negotiation with Abraham, without consulting with him. And so Abraham is powerless to act.

Abraham can't intervene to play for time, or do whatever he needs to protect Sarah. He's put in a very vulnerable position. So God acts to intervene and establish Sarah back with Abraham at this point.

What he's doing at this point is protecting the seed and the bride. Behind all of these points, we need to see the work of serpent-like figures. The brood of the great dragon.

And in these repeated events, what we're seeing is an assault upon the woman and her seed, as we see in Revelation chapter 12. In these different chapters then, we're seeing this played out. In chapter 3 verse 15, we're told that the woman and her seed will crush the serpent's head, and the enmity is placed between the woman and the serpent for this reason.

And so these stories are playing out a great archetype, an archetypal story behind the lesser stories, a motif playing out, and the subtle variations help us to understand these stories at the juncture at which they occur. The judgment that occurs upon Abimelech and his house is also important. The judgment of wombs being closed up.

Now this may have to do with Abimelech's impotence, because it's a fairly brief period of time. How would they know that the wombs were closed and that they were not fertile? It could be that the women are miscarrying. Maybe they're just not able to come to

delivery properly.

Something is happening anyway that is alerting them to the fact that they are under judgment. And within that size of people group, it might take maybe a month or two to realize that something serious is amiss, and as a result that there is some sort of divine judgment. And this judgment concerning the seed is a sign that there is something going on with the birth of Isaac here.

Isaac is being prevented from being born, and so as long as Isaac is prevented from being born, the wombs of the people of Abimelech are closed up. There's a poetic justice here within that situation. Why does Abimelech take Sarah? Is it because Sarah is particularly beautiful? Well this is some decades after the original events of chapter 12, when Sarah was taken by Pharaoh.

Maybe her appearance is not the reason here. Maybe it's more the fact that she is associated with someone who has great power, and if she is taken, she will be someone who creates a strategic alliance. Having the sister of the ruler of this great sheikdom as your consort would put you in a position of significant power.

In a position maybe to take over that whole sheikdom. When God appears to Abimelech, he tells him to restore Sarah to Abraham, but also to get Abraham to pray for him. Abraham is a prophet.

This is the first time we see this word used in the Bible. Abraham has already been described as a seer, but here he is a prophet. A prophet is someone, in many cases, who participates in the divine council, as we saw in chapter 18.

Someone who, when God is deliberating concerning his purposes, is present and a participant. Abraham is part of this discussion, and he has influence upon the way that God's purposes play out in the world. So Abimelech is called to ask Abraham to intercede for him.

It also presents Abraham as a figure who is engaged in blessing the nations. There is a blessing upon the nation here. As Abraham prays, the wombs of this nation will be opened up.

There is association here also between the blessing of Sarah and the blessings of the Gentiles. These two things go together with the movement of Abraham into a greater degree of prophethood. At the beginning of Abraham's story, we saw him engaging in more priestly activity, building altars, leading people in the land in worship, calling upon the name of the Lord in the various places that he establishes altars.

Then we see him engaging in kingly activities, warring against the kings within the land. Now we have him going a step further. He is more like a prophet.

He is not just dealing with people in the land here. He is involved with the life of the surrounding nations, not just creating an initial foothold of sanctuaries and altars, but now speaking to people who are kings in the nations round about, acting as a prophet within those contexts. The movement then in the story of Abraham, a maturation.

This is, among other things, an anticipation of what will happen later on in the story of Israel. What other things can we see as we compare and contrast this with chapter 12? Recognize significant similarities and significant differences. One of the differences here is that Abimelech asks for Abraham to stay.

See, my land is before you, dwell wherever it pleases you. While Pharaoh wanted Abraham to leave his land as quickly as possible, Abimelech wants to be blessed by Abraham within his land. There is an extension here again of what we see in the promise to Abraham.

Abraham will be fruitful, multiply, and all these sorts of things, and nations will be blessed through him. Abimelech is noticing that as Abraham is present with him, he will be healed and blessed. Abraham is a man of God, a man that God is with, and a man that God is blessing.

And so people who bless Abraham will be blessed with believing Abraham. So there's an important progression here. One question to reflect upon.

Chapter 20 involves themes of deliverance. The deliverance of Sarah, also the deliverance of opened wombs, and the deliverance of the child. The story of the Exodus has very similar themes, connected with birth.

The birth of the firstborn. Can you see some of the ways in which the story of the birth of Isaac might shed light upon the story of the Exodus? How is the birth of Isaac an Exodus event? And how is the Exodus a birth event? Genesis chapter 21 begins with the birth of Isaac. Isaac is named after the laughter that greeted the announcement of his birth to Abraham and to Sarah.

In those cases, the laughter was laughter of surprise and astonishment or even disbelief. Later on, the laughter takes on different character. The laughter of joy is foregrounded here in this chapter.

This is something that will characterize Isaac. And as we go through this story, we'll see a way in which it plays out. Abraham is about 100 at this point.

We've already seen significant events and persons being associated with round centuries on various occasions in Genesis. Adam lives 800 years after the birth of Seth. Jared lives 800 years after the birth of Enoch.

Enoch lived 300 years after the birth of Methuselah. Noah fathered Shem, Ham and



Japheth when he was 500 years old. And a flood occurred when he was 600 years old.

So the fact that Abraham has Isaac, his son, at the age of 100 is probably not an accidental detail. We've already read about Sarai, Hagar and Ishmael in the previous chapter. In chapter 16, Sarai hoped to be built up by her Egyptian maid servant Hagar.

And Hagar was taken as wife by Abraham and it established a rivalry between the two of them. Seeing that she had been taken as wife by Abraham and that she had borne a son to him, Hagar despised her mistress. And the very purpose of Sarai's plan seemed to be foiled by this.

She had hoped to be built up by Hagar and to have a child born to her. But now Hagar was playing the role of a wife. It seems that she had established a rivalry rather than actually being built up by Hagar.

Hagar was now an opponent. At the end of that chapter, after Hagar fled from Sarai's presence, Hagar was told to return to Sarai and submit herself to her. Now that might seem to resolve the tension between the two women.

But there's a problem now. The problem is that Ishmael is probably around 15 or 16 and he is very close to his father. And it seems that he is the heir apparent of Abraham's house.

How is Isaac going to fit into the picture? So on the weaning day of Isaac, Sarah sees Ishmael laughing or mocking Isaac. He's Isaacing Isaac. That laughter that Isaac was named after is now being used as a sort of mockery of him.

Not the astonishment and joy at his birth, but something that threatens his status. It highlights the fact that Ishmael is increasingly closely attached to Abraham. And this attachment directly threatens Isaac's status.

While Hagar might have submitted herself to Sarah as her mistress after the events of chapter 16, Ishmael is now the more direct problem. It isn't clear that Ishmael is going to step aside for his much younger half-brother. And Sarah is angry.

She wants to cast out the bondswoman and she tells Abraham to do so. Abraham's response, unsurprisingly, is displeasure. He is deeply attached to Ishmael, as we've already seen in chapter 17, where he expressed his desire that Ishmael would be counted as his seed.

But God tells him that he should follow his wife's advice. And this response shouldn't necessarily be seen as one without some degree of ambivalence. It shouldn't necessarily be seen as a statement that this is a very positive course of action.

If we see something similar in the story of 1 Samuel 8, we can see that Samuel is told by

the people that they want a king. And God says to Samuel that he should go along with them, even though it's not a good decision in certain respects. God's statement that Abraham should go ahead with the counsel of Sarah isn't necessarily a statement that this is a good thing in every respect.

The casting out of Ishmael is an event that is far, far more significant within the story of Genesis than most people appreciate. Genesis is a subtle book that conveys many of its meanings through careful literary parallels and juxtapositions. When you look at this passage, one of the things that you should notice first is how closely parallel it is with what happens in the next chapter, with the binding of Isaac.

In the next chapter, Abraham is tested concerning Isaac. And there's a very close parallel between these stories. In both cases, Abraham arises early in the morning.

In the first story, the son of Abraham, Ishmael, is taken by his mother to another land from Beersheba. And in the second, the son of Abraham, Isaac, is taken by his father into another land from Beersheba. The boy in both stories comes to the point of death.

And God's angel intervenes in both cases. Hagar opens her eyes and sees the well of water. Abraham lifts up his eyes and sees the ram.

God promises to be with the boy in both cases. And then they go on to marry a foreign woman. The woman from Egypt in the case of Ishmael, and Rebekah from the house of Bethuel in chapter 24 in the case of Isaac.

So these are important parallels and they should encourage us to read these two stories alongside each other. I believe that there's probably some connection with the ritual of the Day of Atonement. Where you have two goats.

One that is taken up to the temple site and offered as a sacrifice. And the other goat that is sent out to an unoccupied territory by the hand of someone. It seems likely to me that we are not just supposed to read these two accounts as juxtaposed with each other.

But perhaps to see them as connected within a deeper ritual that is playing out. That is taking place in the intertwined identities and destinies of the two sons of Abraham. There are significant differences though.

And these differences again invite you to think about the similarities and the divergences between these stories. Some of the details may be interesting. For instance, placing things on the shoulder.

Whether that's the wood for the sacrifice or whether it's the water and the bread in the earlier story. There are juxtapositions elsewhere. God responds to Hagar saying, Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is.

And then God's response to Abraham. Do not lay your hand on the lad, nor do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God. There are differences.

But in both cases there's an emphasis upon fearing. We might ask why Abraham sends out Hagar and Ishmael with so little. Is he expecting that they'll be completely expelled and never have any relationship with him again? I don't think so.

I think that he's maybe expecting that they will come back and be supported more in a peripheral position. But something seems to go wrong at this point. And I believe that this can maybe shed light upon stories later on in the story of Genesis.

What is different about what happens with Hagar to what happens with Abraham? Hagar is deeply concerned about the near death of her child and she takes a distance from him. She does not want to see the child die so she removes herself from the child and leaves the child in a bush. Literally casts him down there and she goes away to the distance of a bow shot.

There's a distance that she creates between herself and her son because she does not want to see the son die. She does not want to see this tragic event. That distance is not created in the story of Abraham.

Abraham throughout the story is very present with and faithful to both God and to his son. In all of the cases we see him expressing his presence in terms of here I am. He says here I am to God, he says here I am to his son and he says here I am to the angel.

In each case presence is maintained whereas in the story of Hagar it isn't. The child is placed under one of the shrubs and she goes at a distance and says let me not see the death of the boy. Now the fact that the child is placed under the shrub might make us think about the ram as the replacement or substitute for Isaac that is caught in the thicket.

Maybe there's a parallel between those two things. The fate of Isaac and the fate of Ishmael being entangled in some way again. God hears the voice of the child.

Not primarily the voice of Hagar. Hagar sits opposite him at a bow shot's distance and lifts up her voice and weeps in despair. But it seems that God hears the voice of the child rather than her voice.

The angel of the Lord calls to Hagar out of heaven and said to her what ails you Hagar? And then says fear not for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. God hears the voice of Ishmael and calls Hagar to be present to him once again. She has to fill the skin with the water from the well that her eyes are opened up to.

And then God is with the lad and he dwells in the wilderness. He becomes an archer. Now maybe that might connect with the detail of being at a bow shot a distance from his

mother.

He becomes an archer. Something that bridges that distance of a bow shot. I'm not sure what to make of that but it is a curious detail of the text.

He's given a drink and then God is with the lad and he grows up and he dwells in the wilderness of Paran. This might remind us of the story of the birth and growth of John the Baptist. He grows in a similar way in the wilderness.

The child grew and became strong in spirit and was in the deserts until the day of his manifestation to Israel. Is there some connection between these characters? It's worth thinking about and I'll leave that as a question for you to ponder. Both of them are in some way a character who prepares the way for someone else who is the true seed.

One must decrease so that the other might increase. Their destinies however are intertwined. The twinning of characters in this way is something that we see elsewhere in scripture.

So I wonder whether we're supposed to reflect upon the way in which Ishmael and Isaac are bound up together. Another story from the book of Kings suggests some interesting things going on here that maybe we should come back to and look in more detail. In 1 Kings chapter 19 when he's persecuted Elijah is pursued by Jezebel, goes into the wilderness.

He leaves his lad or his servant behind at Beersheba and goes into the wilderness and sits under a broom tree and asks for death. Then the angel of the Lord visits him and gives him water and food and he's prepared to go into the wilderness for 40 days. Now we can see many details there that remind us of the story of Ishmael.

The lad who's left behind sitting under the broom tree. The broom tree is associated with Ishmael and his land elsewhere in scripture. There's waiting for death, being visited by the angel, provided with food and drink, lifting up the eyes.

And all these things remind us of the story of Ishmael. Is there some connection between Elijah and Ishmael? Both of them are people of the wilderness as we see in the case of John the Baptist. John the Baptist is another character of the wilderness.

The place of Jezebel is also interesting. Jezebel takes on the role of Sarah, the one who casts out, who persecutes this son. Elijah is a good character and his connections with Ishmael are suggestive of something deeper that might be going on.

As we read through the story we'll see further of these connections. Perhaps the most interesting are found in the story of chapter 37 as Joseph is sold into slavery. In that story Joseph is cast into a pit.

He is sent out first of all and he's sent to find his brothers in the wilderness. And he ends up wandering around and encountered there and told to go somewhere else. They see him afar off.

He's cast into the pit just as Ishmael was cast down at the tree. And it describes the pit or the cistern. There's no water in the cistern.

It's empty. Much as the water skin is empty. At this point they still have bread left but there's no water.

And they go and eat bread together at a distance so that they will not see him die when he's in the pit. And then they sell him to, surprise surprise, the Ishmaelites. He ends up going down into Egypt and he ends up being in a house of a master who treats him well but whose wife mistreats him.

The wife of Potiphar declares that her husband has brought in this Hebrew servant to mock us, to laugh at us. We've heard that language before. And she calls him to be cast out much as Sarah called for Abraham to cast out Ishmael.

So these connections suggest that the story of Hagar is playing a much more significant role in both the story of Genesis and the larger story of Scripture than we might otherwise realise. There's a child being expelled and cast out of the family in ways very similar to the story of Ishmael in Joseph's narrative. He ends up being with the Ishmaelites.

And it's not just incidental that this connection is formed. They are both part of the removed family, the distanced or estranged family of Abraham. A family that belongs in the wilderness but prepares the way.

They're not written out of the story but they have an unusual role to play. Now after this particular series of events we see interactions between Abimelech and Abraham. They create a covenant and this is a sign once more of Abraham dealing with wider nations round about.

He's acting as a king and a prophet and someone who is expanding in his influence within the region. God has developed his relationship with Abraham. Promises, covenant rights and other things like this.

And they've raised the scale of the promises that he's made to him. And we're also seeing now I think an intensification of God's relationship with the nations through Abraham. Abraham is the one who will be a means of blessing to the nations.

And so the way that Abimelech is blessed by his association with Abraham is important here. There is rivalry that occurs and that rivalry is connected with other themes that we've seen in the previous chapter. There is an association with sheep, ewes particularly

and women and wells.

All of these symbols are attached together within the stories of Genesis and in the story of Exodus too. Rachel for instance is associated with a ewe lamb in her name. And also with a well that is the place where she's first met.

Abraham plants a tree, a tamarisk tree in Beersheba. And he calls on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God. He sojourns in the land of the Philistines many days.

The planting of a tree is important. In the story of Abraham we'll often see trees and altars associated with each other. The oak of Mamre, the tamarisk tree, other things like that.

There is a tree and there's an altar. And it's worth thinking about why those two things come together. What do they represent? And that is a question to meditate upon that I'll leave you with.

Along with the question of the deeper purpose of the story of Hagar and Ishmael within Genesis and Scripture more generally. Why is it that God gives so much attention to this particular character? What might we learn from the hidden narrative that is playing out here? The story of Genesis chapter 22, the binding of Isaac, is perhaps one of the most poignant yet pregnant stories of the Old Testament. It's an event that is profoundly troubling that has inspired some of the deepest ethical reflection, a lot of outrage and scandal from various people.

How can God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son? How can Abraham be praised for seemingly going through to the extent that he does with God's command? And these are questions that we might ponder as we go through this chapter. The chapter begins with the statement. After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, Abraham.

And he said, here I am. He said, take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you. In chapter 12 when Abraham is first called, we read, Now the Lord said to Abraham, go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

The similarity should be immediately noticeable. God sends Abraham forth from the land of Caldees to a land that he will show him. And he sends Abraham forth to a mountain that he will show him.

In the first case he's called to sacrifice his past, his connection with his father's house, his land, his kindred. And in the second case he's asked to surrender his future, the son that all his hopes and legacy depends upon. God is testing Abraham in both of these cases.

According to traditional Jewish numbering, the first account is the first test of ten that Abraham receives. And the final account is the final of the ten tests that Abraham receives. These are events that define Abraham's life, both the sacrifice of his past and the sacrifice of his future.

We've already noted in chapter 21 that there are a great many similarities between the sending out of Ishmael and the seeming sacrifice of Isaac. One lad parallels the other. Their identities are entwined.

There are parallels with the Exodus narrative and connections with the Exodus narrative in both occasions. And together they might relate to the ritual of the Day of Atonement. When we're reading these stories then, we're dealing with something that has to do with the deep structure of scripture.

And there are echoes and resonances throughout the Old Testament that connect to these events. And as we read the story of the cross, we're reading a story that has all sorts of resonances with the events that we see in this chapter. In the story of Abraham and Isaac, the one sacrificing his son.

The story hinges in many ways upon the key expression, the key term that plays throughout the story. Hineni, the here I am answer that is given on a number of occasions. God calls to Abraham and Abraham's response is here I am.

Then we see Isaac speaking to Abraham, his father, and his father answers here I am. And then the angel of the Lord calls from heaven and says Abraham, Abraham, and Abraham says here I am. The economy of the brush strokes in the narrative of this account add considerably to its power.

We read the conversation between Abraham and Isaac for instance. Isaac speaks to his father, my father, and he said here I am my son. He said behold the fire and the wood but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? Abraham said God will provide for himself a lamb for a burnt offering my son.

So they went both of them together. And that silence that follows is one of the most powerful and poignant aspects of the story. The son seems to know what's going on.

He seems to have a sense that something's amiss. There is one thing that they need that they do not have. All the other things that will enable them to burn up and prepare the sacrifice are there except the sacrifice itself.

And he realises presumably that his father knows something that he does not. His father is bearing a deep burden that he is not yet privy to. And the response of Abraham is again to make known his presence to his son.

Very interesting contrast with the story of Hagar. Hagar sees her son about to die and

distances herself from him going off at a bow shot so that she will not have to see him die. But Abraham's response to his son is to say here I am.

Just as he says to God later on there's no departure from his son or emotional distancing. He's present with his son even as he's bringing him to the point of sacrifice. A very powerful part of the story.

The emotional power of the narrative is also underlined with the threefold repetition at the original command. Take now your son, the first description. Your only son Isaac, the second description.

Whom you love, third description. And each one of these is an accumulation of the weight of the action that Abraham is being called to do. It would seem that this is the one thing that he could never sacrifice.

In the earlier part of the story in Genesis chapter 12 there is a threefold repetition of him having to leave behind his father's house, his kindred, his land. But this is a far more weighty threefold intensified statement. We should consider what has happened in the story to this point.

In the first few chapters of Abraham's narrative it would seem that Lot was the heir apparent. He was the son of Abraham's brother, the one who had died and he would be the one that would continue Abraham's name. But yet Lot leaves him, divides from him in chapter 13.

In chapter 14 even though he's rescued by Abraham he goes off his own way. In chapter 19 he ends up living in a cave in the mountains and there's no hope for Lot at that point really. We see then Ishmael has gone.

In chapter 16 Ishmael comes on the scene, the child of Hagar. And in chapter 21 he has to be cast out. Eliezer is not going to be the one who inherits.

He's just a man from the house, a home-born slave as we see in chapter 15. Isaac, his only son, that is the one however that God calls for him to sacrifice. And the request is devastating for this reason.

His whole narrative to this point has been one lost hope after another leading to this great promised son. All his expectations and hopes and everything else is resting upon this child. Think about what else he represents.

He is the promised child given to Sarah. How could Abraham ever relate to his wife again after this? How could he relate to the Lord if the Lord required from him this son that he has given? Abraham has negotiated or interacted with God on earlier occasions such as in chapter 18. In chapter 18 God talks to Abraham concerning what he's about to do.



And Abraham at that point intercedes and deliberates with God. But here in this chapter there seems to be a more absolute command. He has to obey this.

He has to go through with it. God doesn't seem to be setting things up for a negotiation and a discussion. And for Abraham to go through with this there needs to be an absolute sense of loyalty to God.

But not just loyalty to God. This text sets up the emotional weight of what's taking place. God is not unmindful of the weight that he's putting upon Abraham.

And the subtlety and the attention with which the emotional dimensions of the event are described suggests that it's important. It's important that Abraham is able to say, Here I am to his son and truly mean it. That he's not forsaken his son.

He's not just closing himself off to his son. But yet to do that he has to have an absolute confidence in God's promise, in God's commitment, in God's goodness. And at many times we may find ourselves in the darkness of a decision, in wrestling through some issues, just not knowing how can God be good and yet lay this burden upon us.

Or how can God be true and yet this thing or this statement also be true. And that wrestling with God in the darkness is something where we find Abraham really providing a pattern for us to follow. Within the New Testament in the book of Hebrews we are told that Abraham was confident that God would even raise Isaac up from the dead.

He had received Isaac as it were from the dead. And now he hopes that whatever he does with his son, that God will fulfil his promise whatever it takes. God had promised that in Isaac your seed will be called.

And so he could account that God was able to raise him up even from the dead because he had received Isaac as it were from the dead in the first place. Now that's one suggestion of how to read the text. He expects that God is telling him to go through with the action.

And as he goes through with it, God will be faithful to his promise even to that uttermost position. God was symbolised in that flaming torch and furnace that went through the pieces. And the promise was there that God would be cut off, that God would be cut up into pieces in the same way if he did not keep his covenant.

And so he has to fulfil what he has promised to Abraham. And even if that requires the raising of Isaac from the dead, God will do it. And so Abraham's confidence is one that occurs even in the midst of deep blindness.

He does not know where God is leading. He cannot see the way he will go. He cannot see a route through this.

But he's confident in God's provision. And he answers to his son, My son, God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering. There may be a sort of double entendre here that what may be provided for the burnt offering is the son himself.

My son, God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering. That it's the son that's going to be provided. And he's not just addressing the son but rather it is the son who will be the provision that God gives.

As we read this story alongside other stories in scripture, I think we can see further things taking place. The story of the Shunammite woman, for instance, in 2 Kings chapter 4, involves a woman being given a child in her old age according to the messenger of God that visits her. And there are so many linguistic and other parallels with the story of the promise of the birth of Isaac.

But then the child dies. And the woman saddles her donkey, goes out early in the morning, sees the mountain of Farof, lays the wood, the staff, upon the child. And then later on there is the prophet and the child being joined together as the prophet lies down on the child in a way that creates some connection between the two.

And the woman receives her child back. She was given the child by promise. And when the child is lost, she insists that God give the child back.

And that is something that I think will help us to read this chapter. To understand that there is a reason, a justice by which Abraham and Sarah could appeal for their child back. Could appeal for Isaac to be restored to them, even if he were killed.

At this point in the story, it's likely that Isaac is in his 30s. He's going along with it. He's not just someone who is being forced to do this.

He's not going to be tied to that altar without his own will being involved. He submits. He is a son who follows with his father, who does not rebel against his father's call.

And this is one of the powerful aspects of the story and helps us to understand what we see in the New Testament. The relationship between the father and the son in the death of Christ. Christ is the one who willingly accepts the will of his father.

He struggles with it, the cup that's given to him, yet declares, yet not my will, but yours be done. And that submission to the will of his father, the loyalty, the trusting that God will raise him up. That God is faithful, even at the point of deepest darkness and death, when God seems to come as an enemy.

That is the confidence that we see in the story of Abraham and Isaac. And the confidence that we see in the story of Jesus Christ. Abraham's confidence that God will provide is something that leads to the naming of the place later on.

When God does in fact provide. A ram caught in the thicket by its horns. He goes and takes the ram, offers it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

And here I think that God's intervention should not be read as a statement that human sacrifice is wrong. That's how many people read it, but that's not actually what follows. God says, now I know that you fear me.

He doesn't say, you should never have done this. I would never have required this of you. Rather this is a movement into a deeper relationship between Abraham and God.

Abraham has related to God as a friend. He has related to God in hospitality, for instance. By his faithfulness in building up the name of others, in elevating the name of God, in establishing sites of worship in the land.

But now there is something here that goes further. He enters into a greater fearing of God, an awe and a reverence of God. Seen in his submission to God's will, even in the deepest darkness.

Even when he does not know where it will lead him. And this is part of what I think is emerging through Abraham's test. This is the result that we will see at the end.

And God sees at this point. God provides. Maybe remembering Hagar at this point and the way that she speaks of God in chapter 16 would be helpful.

This mount is a significant place. Why this particular mount? I believe because it's the Temple Mount. It's the mount upon which all sacrifices will occur.

Later on in 2nd Chronicles 3 verse 1, Solomon builds the house of the Lord at Jerusalem on Mount Moriah. Where the Lord had appeared to his father David at the place that David had prepared on the threshing floor of Ornon the Jebusite. So this is a place where many things had occurred.

It's the place where Abraham sacrificed Isaac. It's the place where the angel of God stayed his hand of judgment in his judgment after the census of David. It's a significant site then.

And it is the foundation of the sacrificial system more generally. Part of its deeper meaning. What is ultimately being sacrificed at this site? Not just animals.

What's being sacrificed is the Son. The future. The identity.

The people of Israel are sacrificing themselves. And the sacrificing of the firstborn Son, the only Son, the only begotten Son, is something that is connected with the event of the Exodus as well. As there is the setting apart of the firstborn through that.

So all these deep themes of Israel's worship, of its temple, are found present in this

event. This is the event that provides the source of these later systems. And every one of these later sacrifices draws our attention back to that sacrifice at the past.

It also draws our attention forward to the sacrifice of the future. If it is the father Abraham sacrificing his only begotten Son that the whole sacrificial system looks back to, it is the sacrifice of Christ as the Son of the Father that is everything that it looks forward to. Caught between these two great covenantal events, the sacrificial system takes its significance and meaning.

Many people read this story as if it were just sacrifice narrowly averted. But something more is taking place here. There is a substitution of Baraam, but there is a genuine sacrifice occurring here.

The blessing that comes afterwards is a blessing that amplifies the previous blessings. It's a statement that because Abraham has obeyed God's voice, he has heard and obeyed and submitted to the word of the Lord. He has feared the Lord.

That God has claimed him on a deeper level. In this sacrifice of his son, Abraham is giving himself to God in a new way. It's a child that is being given again to God after he has been given in the first place.

And maybe an example of this can be seen in the story of Samuel. The child that is received by grace as the womb is opened, and then the child that is given to God. And Isaac is given to God here.

Abraham is dedicating, as it were, in this sacrifice, all of his offspring to God. God claims Abraham's son for his own. In the story of the Exodus, we're told that Israel is my firstborn son.

That statement that God makes concerning Israel, I think, is founded in part upon what takes place here. Israel is God's firstborn son as Abraham gave up his son to God. God's name, God's claim is placed upon this child above Abraham's own.

There's a way in which this child now bears the name of God in a way that he did not before. It's a new sense of that child's identity. He's ascended to God.

And God takes Israel as his inheritance. They are his people. They belong to him.

They have been dedicated to him. Not merely by claiming them for himself, but by Abraham's willing giving up of his son. This then is an absolutely foundational event for all that follows.

And ultimately, all sacrifice is human sacrifice. We offer up ourselves in worship. We offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, singular, all together, bringing ourselves together in the body of Christ.

And that is what Paul talks about in Romans chapter 12. It's founded upon the offering of Christ. And then it looks back to the offering of Isaac.

These stories are all bound together in a deep logic of sacrifice that we should never forget. That sacrifice is always ultimately human sacrifice. We belong to God.

We offer ourselves up to God. Whether in symbols or whether in other ways, in baptism for instance, our bodies are sacrificed to God. They're washed as the sacrifices were washed.

Our members and our limbs and organs, like sacrifices cut up, they belong to God now. We are set apart as the temple of the Holy Spirit. As we descend from Mount Moriah with Abraham and his son, we should come away from it with a profound realisation of what the fear of the Lord means.

Of what the logic of sacrifice points towards. And ultimately of what occurs in Christ. Something to meditate upon.

This chapter ends with Abraham receiving the news of children being born to Nahor, his brother, by Milca. Milca was the daughter of the dead brother Haran. And also some children by the concubine.

And four children by the concubine, eight children by his wife. We can see this pattern elsewhere in Genesis where the wife has twice as many children as the concubine. Altogether this makes twelve children of Nahor.

What are we to make of this? Abraham will one day have twelve tribes descending from him. Ishmael will be the father of twelve princes. What are we to make of the fact that Nahor receives twelve offspring a generation before Abraham's line does? In Genesis chapter 23 Sarah dies.

She dies at the age of 127. Is there any significance to this number? Some have pointed out that it's the seventh centred hexagonal number. And she gives birth to Isaac at the age of 91 which is the sixth centred hexagonal number.

Maybe there's something to this. I don't think that's the first place I would look though. There are possible connections with the story of Esther that are worth noting.

If you look at the story of Esther the story is introduced to us with a reference to 127 provinces in chapter 1 verse 1. In chapter 8 verse 9 we read of the king's scribes and they're sending messages to 127 provinces. And in chapter 9 verse 30 you have 120 provinces again mentioned. Now why could there be some sort of connection here? Why repeat this number three times within the story of Esther? If you look at the story of Sarah and if you look at the story of Esther there are all sorts of parallels.

So maybe it's a detail that tips us off to the connection. What would the connection be? Could it be that the book of Esther is merely giving redundant details? Perhaps. I think there's something more going on here though.

If you look at the character of Sarah and Esther both of them are taken by a king on account of their beauty. Taken into the royal harem. Both have to hide their identities in the king's palace.

In both cases there's a threat to the seed. A threat to Isaac and a threat also to Israel as a whole. Esther presents us with a Sarah-like character who plays a far more active role in delivering her people.

Sarah's role might often be seen as very passive as she just goes along with Abraham. Much as Esther goes along with Mordecai to some extent. But Esther is a far more active character and I think maybe gives us a perspective upon Sarah that we might not find elsewhere.

As in various other cases that we've seen, recognising the connections between the stories in places like Genesis and stories elsewhere in Scripture will help us to read certain characters to understand the roles that they are playing. How they are more significant perhaps than we might otherwise have presumed. If the story of the Shunammite woman in 2nd Kings chapter 4 allows us to imagine a more active role for Sarah in the binding of Isaac story.

The story of Esther in the book of Esther helps us to imagine a more active role for Sarah in the court of Pharaoh or Bimelech. Sarah dies in the land of Canaan in Kiriath Arba and Abraham goes to mourn for her. It suggests perhaps that Abraham is operating elsewhere at the time.

Maybe he's out with his flocks in some other part of the land and then comes back to Sarah when she dies. Abraham's concern then at this point is to bury his dead within the land. He has not yet received the land.

He's still living outside of it and he wants to have some sort of foothold in the land. Some sort of down payment. A sense that he will have a place within the land that will be a guarantee of his future inheritance.

When people are buried there, there's also a resurrection theme that can come into play. Later on in the story of Jacob, Jacob will be very concerned that he is buried within the land of Canaan. As he's buried within the land, there is a recognition that they truly belong there and that one day God will act and that this will be their homeland.

And so burying the people within the land is an act of faith in that future possession. Likewise in the story of Joseph, his body is taken up out of Egypt with the Exodus. So much attention is given to burials in the story of Genesis because the connection

between the people and the land is such an important part of the story.

Abraham is a foreigner and a sojourner among the people of Canaan. He's a resident alien. He's not just a stranger from outside but someone who is dwelling within the land or has connections with the land.

He asks for property, for a burial place among them that he might bury his dead. Now what he's looking for is not just a site to bury his dead. He's looking for a property, a holding within the land.

And there's a difference between just being given a certain area of land that he can use and having a holding, something that is truly his. And there are many people who would be quite happy to say to Abraham, you can bury her in our plot. But he wants something more than that.

He wants something that is truly his. Not just the allowance of someone else's property and the extension of hospitality. He wants a possession.

It's like being in someone else's house and they say you're very welcome to stay. You can use this room whenever you want and make yourself at home. But making yourself at home is a very different thing from actually having a home.

And so if you were to say to the person who invited you in that way, I want to buy that room. I want it to be my own in the full sense. I don't just want to be a guest.

That would be the sort of thing that Abraham is doing at this point. He's not going to just accept a gift or hospitality. He wants to have a stake in this land.

A particular territory that will be a down payment of his future inheritance. And so the negotiation and haggling that occurs after this is important. The people say you're a mighty prince or a prince of God.

He's maybe a spiritual leader among them too. A priest-like leader who has established altars within the land. And they will treat him with honour and respect.

In fact it might seem as if Abraham is being given the opportunity to become one of the Hittites himself. He can bury his dead in Hittite land, have a plot among them and perhaps be one of the Hittite princes. They will give him choices to their possessions.

They're not going to be withholding anything from him. But he would have to consider himself as one of them rather than having a possession of his own distinct from theirs. And Abraham's not going to accept that.

That's not what he's looking for. So he talks about the cave of Machphala. He wants this particular double cave.

A two layered cave for his possession. He wants the end of the field. The field of Ephron, the son of Zohar.

He doesn't ask for the whole field. He wants the cave alone. And Ephron talks with him saying that he will give him the field and the cave that is in it.

And on three separate occasions says bury your dead and gives him that grant. But that's again not what Abraham wants. He does not just want hospitality.

He does not want a gift. He wants a possession. When we think about a gift for instance.

If someone gives you something you can be beholden to them. You have a responsibility to them. You have to show gratitude in certain ways.

Whereas if you buy something generally. When you purchase something the relationship between you and the person you purchase it from is dissolved immediately upon the purchase. You've fulfilled your obligation to them.

If they give you something you are beholden to them. And if you purchase something you are not beholden to them in the same way. And Abraham is very concerned that he possesses this in the right way.

Ephron offers him not just the cave but the field as well. He quite possibly knows that Abraham is not going to be satisfied with this. But wants to get Abraham to give him more money by offering the field and the cave.

Whereas Abraham just wants the cave. Abraham returns. Abraham responds by bowing down and speaking to Ephron saying.

If you will give it I will give you money for the field. Take it from me and I will bury my dead there. And he answers again but does not really directly answer Abraham.

He answers him in an implicit way. My Lord listen to me the land is worth 400 shekels of silver. What is that between you and me? So bury your dead.

What he is given is the price that he believes the land is worth. Or at least the price that he wants from Abraham. He knows that Abraham wants to pay for the land.

That he wants it as a possession. And the amount that he asks is a huge amount. He is hoping that as Abraham is an exceedingly rich man.

He will be able to pay something that is about 50 years of a regular wage earners labour. This is a lot of money to ask for a possession. Particularly when you compare it to the amount that is paid for places in other parts of scripture.

The potters field that is bought with the money for which Jesus is betrayed is 30 shekels



of silver. This is 400. And it is a huge amount.

It gives you also a sense of just how rich Abraham is at this point. In these negotiations Abraham is willing to pay this amount of money to have a possession in the land. Even if it is just a field and a cave.

It is a place that he can call his own. A first peg placed down into the land. It is a sign of his confidence in God's fulfilment of his promise.

This is his land. The land that is promised to him. By burying his dead there he is expressing confidence that God will raise his people up from the death like slumber of Egypt.

And that he will be brought into the possession of this land. God had placed Abraham himself into slumber. Telling him that he will bring his people up and into the possession of the land.

And now by burying his dead within the land he is praying or anticipating that same thing. Burying the dead within the land is a sign of resurrection faith. That one day God will return them from the death like slumber of Egypt.

Joseph's statement concerning his body at the end of the book of Genesis anticipates the same thing. Hoping that they will bring his body up as they leave Egypt. That is the way that the story of Genesis ends.

This site then is a memorial that all will be theirs on a future occasion. It is not just a gift. It is not just hospitality from the Hittites.

There is not just a sense of honour given to a resident alien who is respected among them. This is a sign of possession. That they own this property.

It is truly their own. And one day that they will own all of the land. Abraham as he spoke to the king of Sodom refused to accept any of the spoil from his hands.

He did not want to say that the king of Sodom had made him rich. Likewise he does not want to say that he has beholden to the Hittites. That he is their guest.

That he has received the land from their hands. That he has beholden to them in some respect. To return in some manner something to them.

No, he buys it from them so that he can say that only God has made him rich. That this possession will come from God alone who is the owner of heaven and earth. A question to meditate upon.

Genesis chapter 23 speaks of Abraham buying a field and a cave as sites for burial. In the story of the gospels we have two burial places referred to. A field that is bought as a

burial place.

And a tomb or cave in which Jesus' body is buried. What insights might be gained from holding these two stories. These two fields, these two caves alongside each other.

And reflecting upon the similarities and the contrasts. Genesis chapter 24 is a fascinating narrative. In part because it is the longest single narrative in the story of Genesis.

And also because it lies at the very heart of the book. It begins with Abraham giving a mission to his faithful servant. The oldest servant in his house.

Presumably Eleazar of Damascus. The home born servant that was going to inherit everything that Abraham possessed. The angel of the Lord is going to go ahead of him.

As the angel of the Lord goes ahead of Israel in the Exodus. The servant sets a particular test. A test by which he will know in God's providence who the person to be the wife of Isaac would be.

There is a meeting at a well. Once again in the book of Genesis we see a number of connections between wells and women. The well is a sort of life and fertility.

It is connected with the giving of water. And Rebecca within this story is a giver of water. She is the one who gives life to the camels.

Life to Eleazar. And in that sense she is set apart as someone who is suitable as a bride for Isaac. However she needs to be not only the wife of Isaac but also the new matriarch of the people after the death of Sarah.

At the end of the passage we see her brought into the tent of Sarah. She is filling the spot that Sarah has left behind. So the choice of Rebecca is hugely important.

This chapter has lengthy telling and retelling of details. First of all it describes the visit of the servant. The conversation between him and Rebecca.

And then how he recounts again some of the things to her. And then later on to Laban and her family. The Bible can be extremely brief when it wants to be.

So we should wonder why it isn't here. Why does it repeat all these things? And why, more importantly, are there variations and discrepancies in the retelling later on? If we take the way that the events are originally described by the narrator and then by Eleazar to Rebecca and contrast and compare those with the way that things are described to Laban and her family a number of variations and discrepancies emerge. For instance, when speaking to the family he mentions going to Abraham's father's house and family to look for a wife.

But that isn't mentioned the first time in his original instructions. He prays for kindness in

the first occasion and focuses upon a prayer for success in the second. He gives the jewellery first and then asks who she is in the first account as it's narrated.

And then the second time as he recounts it to the family that is flipped. He talks about who she is first and then gives the jewellery. The second account also emphasises that everything has been left to Isaac by his father who is very rich.

It doesn't mention God's kindness to Abraham in the same way. It focuses upon the success that God has given him but not so much upon the kindness. Laban doesn't serve Abraham's servant in the same way that Rebecca does and this might be a helpful clue.

He doesn't seem to be as characterised by kindness as Rebecca is. So that contrast I think helps us to see that there are two characters here from the same family. One who is characterised by incredible hospitality and kindness and another who isn't.

It seems in the text if we read it very quickly and without paying close attention that Laban invites the servant in and then provides everything for his camels etc. But look more closely and it seems to be the man that has to do that for himself. He's not treated in the same way as he is by Rebecca.

It's important to notice the significance of Laban as the brother within the marriage negotiations. This is something we've commented upon previously as Sarah declared Abraham to be her brother. The brother had an important role to play in negotiating marriage plans.

And also Rebecca seems to have had veto power. Rebecca would have become both the sister and the bride of Isaac. Adopted into the family of Abraham but then someone who becomes the wife as well.

There is the provision of some degree of financial security. She's given costly jewellery and there is a gift of various items to her family as well to provide further security with the males of her family given wealth that they can use to act in her favour and for her aid. Later on we'll see Laban acting in a way that does not respect these sorts of customs.

Consuming the money that has been given to him for his daughters. That money should have been preserved for their well-being but he uses it himself. Laban wants to delay and we'll see later on in the story of Jacob that that delay is a fateful thing.

It's not something that you want to get trapped in. Laban will end up chewing up years of Jacob's time. And so it's important that Eliezer does not allow that to happen to him.

He wants to head straight back and Rebecca is happy to go. Rebecca is a new Abram. She leaves her father and mother, her people, her land and her kin and is prepared to go where God will lead her.

She follows this servant and she follows him on the basis not of the tale of great wealth that is focused upon when speaking with Laban but on the basis of God's kindness and his goodness to Abraham which is more emphasised in the first account. She is a new Abram in other respects. She's an Abraham in the way that she acts in the test of hospitality.

In chapters 18 and 19 we compared and contrasted two stories of hospitality, the story of Abraham and then the story of Lot. One a successful story of hospitality and the other a failed one. And one leading to fruitfulness, the other leading to barrenness.

And that story of Abraham's extreme hospitality is mirrored here in the extreme hospitality of Rebecca who will become his daughter-in-law. She is a new Abram leaving father and mother and being joined to her husband. Another thing to notice is that she is the granddaughter of Milcah who is the daughter of Haran who is the dead brother of Abraham.

And that dead brother of Abraham has children raised up for him by his brother Nahor. Rebecca is herself then a sort of life from the dead. What she does as well is in being the child of or the descendant of Haran raised up by Nahor, she is going to, in marrying Isaac, bring the three threads of Terah's house together in the receipt of the promise.

This is the first formation of a new union and it's a formation of a union that brings all the children of Terah together in the first act of union with those outside of that immediate group. Abraham has been given the promise but this is the first time that there's really been a marriage bringing in of a new party. And here we see that the first recipient of this is other parts of Terah's line.

And that I think is important. One question to reflect upon. A passage that has great many similarities to this is found in 1st Samuel chapter 9. When Saul comes and he sees the women at the well and eventually he is told that he will be the king of the people, that he is the one that has been searched for, the one who will fulfil God's purpose in establishing the kingdom.

What can be learned in comparing and contrasting these passages? How can the character of Rebekah shed light perhaps upon the character of Saul? In Genesis chapter 25 we read of the death of Abraham. After the death of Sarah his wife, Abraham had taken a concubine, Keturah, and through Keturah had a number of children. Children who among them included Midian, the ancestor of the Midianites.

The Midianites are important characters elsewhere in scripture. Moses takes refuge with the Midianites when he leaves Egypt and spends his time with Jethro, the priest of the Midianites. In the book of Judges we meet Jael who is a Kenite which is presumably a Midianite group.

At other points we see the Ishmaelites and the descendants of Keturah associated with each other. For instance in chapter 37 of Genesis where the Midianites and the Ishmaelites are both involved in taking Joseph down to Egypt. Isaac is the sole heir, the one who bears the destiny of the covenant though.

And while these groups may come into the orbit of the narrative of scripture, they are not the central stage characters that Isaac and his seed will be. Abraham dies at the age of 175 and why do we pay attention to the numbers in scripture? Well, because sometimes they have interesting details. 175 is 7 times 5 squared.

Now, that's not especially interesting, but it becomes interesting when you consider that Isaac's death is at 180 which is 5 times 6 squared. Jacob dies at 147 which is 3 times 7 squared. And then Joseph dies at 110 which is 5 squared plus 6 squared plus 7 squared.

So these numbers connect characters together and so we should pay attention to them. Ishmael and Isaac seem to be joined together in the burial of their father. Isaac ends up settling at Beelahairoi which was associated with Ishmael and Hagar in chapter 16.

Ishmael here is associated with princes much as Esau is associated with chiefs and kings in chapter 36. There are 12 children of Nahor in chapter 22 and now the descendants of Ishmael include 12 princes. In these stories we're seeing that other parts of the godly line or other associated families are reaching this 12 before Israel.

They're reaching also the state of kingdom and rule. Whether it is Abraham's brother or his son who is not of the promised seed, we see people arriving at this state of maturity before the true seed. We might then wonder why it is taking so long for the 12 tribes of Israel to come.

The story of Rebekah is another story of a barren woman. We've already had the story of Sarah whose womb was opened but now there is another barren woman within the promised line. It seems as if the promised line is struggling to bring forth children and also struggling to reach those landmarks that lie ahead of them.

The landmarks of 12 tribes, the landmarks of kingdom, all these sorts of things. Everyone else seems to be going out ahead of them and beating them to that mark. They seem to be far more fertile, they seem to be far more successful in these respects.

But yet the focus here is upon God who gives the seed. It may only be one child of Abraham but from that child a great nation will be raised up. The womb is opened through Isaac's intercession.

He seems to be playing something of a role of a prophet, prophetically interceding for someone in need. Much as we see the story of Abraham earlier on as he intercedes for Abimelech's house and then intercedes for Pharaoh and intercedes for Sodom. The character of the twins is also something that has been debated.

Are they identical twins? Now this might seem a strange thing to say as they appear very different when they're born. Yet some have suggested that since Jacob comes out holding his brother's heel they might actually be in the same amniotic sack. Why do they come out looking different? Some have suggested again that there's a twin to twin transfusion syndrome here.

So one comes out pale and sallow and the other comes out far more red. There's a significant pairing here again. As we go through the story of Genesis we'll often see diptychs.

Two frames held alongside each other. Whether that's Cain and Abel or later Cain and Seth. Or we see characters such as Lamech and Lamech.

Or the characters of Abraham and Lot. Or Ishmael and Isaac. Here we have a further two characters that are set alongside each other.

Esau and Jacob. Going through this chapter we'll see that this has already been set up from birth. These two characters are at odds with each other.

In tension with each other. Wrestling within the womb. And the events of the womb cast a deep shadow over everything that follows.

Two key issues hang over Jacob's life in all that follows. One having to do with his name and the other having to do with the blessing. And both of these begin in this story.

The story of the name is set off by the fact that Jacob is given a rather unflattering name at the beginning. The name itself may have been given to him by his father alone. Not by his mother.

As in the case of Esau both parents are involved in naming the child. But in the case of Jacob it is not necessarily the case. The two characters appear very different.

One is very red and hairy and the other is smooth. And a man who seems to be cunning and shrewd. He's like the serpent who takes the heel.

He's the one who takes and usurps. And later on we'll see these things playing out in his story. Esau is a skilful hunter.

He's a man of the field. But Jacob is a man who dwells in tents. A man who will end up being associated with keeping sheep.

Think again. These are parallels perhaps with the man of the field. Cain.

And the man of tents. Abel. Isaac however loves Esau because of his game.

But Rebecca loves Jacob so there's a tension here between the two parents. And the

story of the stew incident is a very important one that plays out in different ways in what follows. Esau says to Jacob that he wants some of the stew that he's cooking.

The red red stuff literally. And that red red stuff, does he think it's blood? Some have suggested it is in his understanding blood. And so it would be forbidden food.

He wants some of the forbidden food. And Jacob quite willingly plays the part of the serpent. The one who deceives him to take the forbidden food and to lose his birthright as a result.

As Adam lost the birthright in the Garden of Eden so Esau loses his birthright as a result of this. He's immediately afterwards called Edom. Edom as a name reminds us of Adam.

The names are very similar. And that connection with Edom and the colour red is also important. He wants the red stew.

Therefore he's called red. In the story of Laban, Laban's name is associated with white. And he's deceived with white strips taken from the white tree to reveal white beneath.

And so the colours are an important part of this story too. Esau despises his birthright. He takes the food and then immediately goes his way.

He's not at the point of death. He suggests he is but he is not actually at the point of death. In fact what he does is despise the covenant.

And as we go through the story of Esau we'll see how often he does not take the covenant seriously. So it's a good thing that it passes into the hands of Jacob. And Jacob's shrewdness at this point should not necessarily be condemned as an action of wicked deception.

He may be trying to save the covenant and the destiny of Abraham's promise from the hands of Esau who would despise it. One final question to reflect upon. In the story of Esau and Jacob, Esau is described as hairy.

He's associated with goats. And these are all plays upon the name of Seir which is the land where he finally ends up. We also see plays upon the colour red.

And there are other things that are worth noting about the character and the way he's described for us. He's described as ruddy. There is one other character in scripture who's called ruddy.

What character is that? And what could a comparison between Esau and this character teach us about both of them? Genesis chapter 26 immediately distinguishes itself from the previous story of a famine in chapter 12. That famine occurs to Abraham and leads him to go into Egypt shortly after he first arrives in the land of Canaan. This is a story that resembles that story and perhaps for that reason it's distinguished from it

immediately.

However, the distinction also has the effect of bringing to mind the earlier famine story and making us think about what similarities they may have. This is actually the third wife as sister story in Genesis. We have already read such stories in Genesis chapter 12 and in Genesis chapter 20.

There are other stories that have similar features. The stories where the ancestress of some nation is threatened. We can think of the story of Hagar in the wilderness running out of food and drink.

We can think of the story of Tamar later on, the story of Dinah, the story of Lot's daughters. All of these are threats to the ancestress stories. And the wife as sister stories are a sub-genre of these.

Many have wondered whether the compiler of Genesis just did not know what to do with three different yet similar accounts. And yet when we look closely at these stories they are very different in certain respects. In the case of the first story, it's Abraham and Sarai going into the land of Egypt.

Sarai being taken by Pharaoh and then Sarai and Abraham being sent out when Sarai's true identity comes to light. In chapter 20 there's a different story. Sarai and Abraham go into the land of the Philistines this time and it's just before the conception of Isaac.

She's taken by Abimelech but God appears to Abimelech in a dream and warns him that he is a dead man as he's taken someone else's wife. In this story there aren't plagues upon the nation and Abraham isn't sent away with Sarah. Rather they're told to stay in the land and to settle there.

So Genesis chapter 26 is the third account of this kind. Again it's in the land of the Philistines. There's an Abimelech again.

Probably not the same Abimelech as we met in chapter 20. The earlier Abimelech had made a treaty with Abraham but now we see inhospitality and envy. And in this case Rebecca is not taken.

Rather she is almost taken or there's the threat that she might be taken. But she's seen with Isaac laughing. And that statement that Isaac is laughing with Rebecca is again a play upon his name.

He's Isaicing with Rebecca. In this case the children have also been born. Whereas in the first account, the story of Sarai in the land of Egypt, the child is still not born for quite some time.

In the second account it's just before the conception of Isaac and the wombs of



Abimelech's house are opened. Now Esau and Jacob have been born so there's no longer a theme of a threat to the child. There's a threat to Rebecca but there's no threat to the children in this case here.

One thing that we should notice about this story is the similarity with the story of Abraham. The fact that Isaac is replaying many of the events that remind us of Abraham. The very beginning of the story is a reminder of the blessing of Abraham.

And the fact that Isaac is receiving this blessing. He's called to sojourn in the land. God will be with him and bless him and give him the land.

And it's going to be to fulfil the oath that he swore to Abraham his father. He will multiply his offspring of the stars of heavens, give the offspring all these lands. Now that's a statement that's just reiterating the promise that was given to Abraham and now passed on to Isaac.

And he's told that all his offspring will be blessed because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws. Now that five-fold list seems a little out of place within its original context. We might expect such terms in Psalm 119 for instance where there is explicit reflection upon the law or the Torah.

Whereas here it seems anachronistic. How is Abraham being presented? As if he were the paradigmatic law keeper. That's strange because the law has not been given.

But yet, maybe that's the point. Maybe the true keeping of the law looks like Abraham. And as we reflect upon the story of Abraham we'll have an idea what it looks like to be a keeper of the law.

Abraham leaves his father's house. He believes God's promise. He cuts off the flesh in circumcision.

He is prepared to offer up his son Isaac in fear of the Lord. In all of these ways we're seeing the deeper logic of the sacrificial system of the law etc. These are all ultimately about obedience to God.

About offering oneself up to God and all that one possesses. Leaving things behind and cleaving to God. Believing his promise.

Cutting off the flesh in all of its different forms. And offering yourself and your hope to God. When we see Paul using the example of Abraham in the New Testament, I believe he's using this sort of principle.

That Abraham is the hermeneutical principle, the principle of interpretation by which we can understand what the law was always supposed to look like. Now the shadow of Abraham lies over this passage in other ways. Not only is Isaac being blessed on account

of his father Abraham.

Not only is Isaac replaying some scenes that remind us of the story of Abraham. He's having to consolidate the work of Abraham. The wells of Abraham have been closed up by the Philistines.

And Isaac has to dig or open them again. There are other ways in which we can see the pattern of Abraham over this passage. There's been a covenant set up with Abimelech, a previous Abimelech presumably, in chapter 21.

And a new covenant has to be set up that follows exactly the same sort of pattern. And again it leads to finding water at Beersheba. As Isaac re-establishes the old boundary marks of his father, consolidates his father's work.

He ends up finding water at Beersheba. Which reminds us of the covenant site that had been formed by Abraham just a few chapters earlier. So the story of Abraham is hanging over the story of Isaac.

Sometimes we find that our work is not so much breaking new ground but consolidating the work of people who have gone before us. That was certainly the case for Isaac within this story. There are some further things to be noticed here.

At the beginning of this story Isaac is told to sojourn in this land. And then he goes and he settles in Gerar. And while in Gerar he plants crops and he's blessed and they multiply.

But there's a question there. Is settling what he was asked to do? He was not told by God to settle, he was told to sojourn. Earlier on in the story of Genesis chapter 11 and 12, Abraham's father Terah left the land of Uruqqaqaldi and settled in Haran.

And Abraham was told to leave and to sojourn. Now what Isaac does here is rather than sojourning he settles. He's left a semi-nomadic pastoral lifestyle and now he's planting crops as an agriculturalist.

He's having a lot of success but he seems to be changing his pattern of behaviour. You can maybe think about the contrast between Lot and Abraham. Where in chapter 18 Abraham is seated at his tent door whereas Lot is in the gate of Sodom.

Here it seems that Isaac has settled in a city. He's living in a place where the king of the city can look out his window and see Isaac having relations or acting in a very familiar way with his wife. That suggests that he's gone some way from the nomadic lifestyle of his father.

Likewise you don't plant crops on that sort of scale if you're moving around from place to place. The manner of his life has changed. Now one of the things that you do when

you're settling in a particular place is you build wells and those wells are part of your claim upon the place.

And he's re-establishing some of the wells of Abraham his father but he's finding that he's quarrelling about these wells all the time with the Philistines. The Philistines keep claiming these wells and these wells are named on account of the quarrels with the Philistines. And then eventually he moves on, he digs a well and there's no conflict.

And this well is a sign of the blessing of God but it's also an important movement in his story that he has to uproot. He has to move on. He has to take on the lifestyle of a sojourner again.

He won't just settle in the land and become part of the citizenry of Gerar or one of the ruling peoples within that land. He has great power, he's living near the king, he has a great sheikdom around him. But he must move on, he must take on the life of a wanderer that God has committed to Abraham his father.

Even after digging the well of Rehoboth he moves on. And moving on he comes to Beersheba and the Lord appears to him and reiterates the promise that he gave to Abraham his father. And he'll be blessed and multiplied on account of his father's sake.

So he builds an altar there, calls upon the name of the Lord and pitches his tent and his servants dig a well. Now we can maybe think about the relationship between the altar, the tent and the well. These are three things that in connection with each other may alert us to some associations, maybe even with the tabernacle, the altar and the lever.

I'm not sure, it's worth thinking about and I'll leave that as a question for you to think about. It might also be worth thinking about possible connections between wells and women. As we've looked through the book of Genesis to this point we've seen the patriarchs meeting their wives at wells on many occasions.

Wells are associated with the fertility of the land. Wells are the springs or the sources of water that give life to the land around them. And the conflict over wells, the conflict over women and then the naming of wells and the naming of children may be associated in ways that reward attention and reflection.

I'm not sure what to make of it but I think there's something there. Two concluding questions to think about. First, consider the significance of the actions of Esau at the end of this chapter against the background of what we've seen in the story of Genesis to this point.

And the second question, Abimelech accuses Isaac of wrongdoing in not telling him that Rebekah was his wife. What hints might be given to us in the passage that Isaac was justified in his original assessment of the land? Genesis chapter 27 is doubtless one of the most important passages in the Old Testament. It's a parting of the ways.

The legacy of Abraham and Isaac is now going to pass through Jacob rather than Esau. The destiny of the promises given to Abraham hang upon the outcome of the events of this chapter. Will it be through Edom that things are fulfilled or will it be through the descendants of Jacob? Discerning the meaning of the events of this chapter is not entirely easy.

Many people have different theories about who are the good characters, who are the bad characters. Do we side with Jacob or should we side with Esau as the wronged brother and Isaac as the deceived father? It's not entirely clear. When we're trying to answer such questions, it's extremely important that we pay attention to the wider narrative that surrounds it.

There are certain clues to the meaning of this narrative that can be found later on and also beforehand. Another thing we need to bear in mind is that characters are not necessarily good or bad. We've very often been taught to read these passages determining whether someone is good and faithful or unfaithful and wicked.

We are looking for a black or white reading of the text and its characters. But yet often the characters are in full colour and it's not entirely clear where they stand. They represent different traits or sometimes they're good and sometimes they're acting in ways that are flawed or lacking discernment.

Sometimes they're lacking faith, acting in a wicked way. But these are three-dimensional people and it's dangerous to read them in a simplistic black or white fashion. Another thing to notice is that certain characters have particular traits associated with them.

And those traits can play in different ways in different contexts. Sometimes those traits will play out in a very positive way and sometimes in a not so positive way. For instance, the character of David plays out both positive and negative aspects of Jacob's traits.

He has that association and that association has a certain ambivalence to it. There are ways in which it can be a positive thing but there's also ways in which it can be a negative thing. One further thing to notice before we look at the passage more directly is that the story of Genesis is a single story.

Particularly the story of Abraham and his descendants. We can very easily read the story as if it were just one event after another. Detached stories that are strung together and we're just supposed to look in each one for messages about faith or unbelief.

But as we read through it carefully we'll notice that specific events cast shadows over what happens later. We can think about the story of Hagar. The story of Hagar is still playing out in the story of Jacob and Joseph, his son.

Hagar's story does not end in chapter 21 but continues all the way through to chapter 37 and 39 as her story is played out in different ways in the story of Joseph. It's important

then to pay attention to the consequences of events. The way that they play out in the later narrative if we are to discern something of their meaning.

With this particular story there are various events that happen later in Jacob's life that either resemble or are consequences of what happens here. A few examples. First there is the confusion of the older and the younger in the case of Leah and Rachel.

That confusion hangs over the rest of the story that follows with the rivalry between the two sides of Jacob's family. But that mixing up of the firstborn and the younger is the same sort of thing as we're seeing with Esau and Jacob in this passage. A further example is found in Genesis chapter 37 when Jacob himself is deceived concerning the death of his son Joseph.

And what is used to deceive him is a goat and a coat. Just as Esau's coat and a goat are used to disguise Jacob to Isaac his father, so the brothers, his sons, use a goat and its blood upon a coat to deceive their father. So there's a similar theme playing out there.

You can also think at the very end of Jacob's life he mixes up the two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, blessing the older second and the younger first. So in some ways there's a reiteration of the order of the blessing. We'll also see further connections in chapter 32 and 33, wrestling with the angel and the things that happen after that.

So all of these events help to comment and to reflect upon the meaning of the events here. We ought not read this passage by itself but must connect it with this broader scope of the narrative and what's taking place. Let's notice some further connections.

We can think about the importance of two goats and those two goats may connect with something that we've already seen. In the stories of Ishmael and Isaac in chapters 21 and 22, Ishmael is sent out into the wilderness by the hand of Hagar and Isaac is sent up to the mountain to be offered on the Temple Mount. And this may be playing out the pattern of the Day of Atonement.

We may see a similar pattern here. Why are there two goats? We know a ritual in which there are two goats. We can see a similar thing later on in the story of Joseph and Judah where there are goats in both cases.

There's one goat offered to the father, that's the goat associated with the blood of Joseph. And then there's another goat that's sent into the wilderness by the hand of Hira the Adolamite. So again we're seeing interesting connections.

It might be helpful to begin by taking stock of the characters as they stand prior to the events of this chapter. First of all we see Isaac who has been offered up by his father Abraham. He favours the oldest of the two twins, Esau, on account of his hunting prowess.

Rebecca on the other hand has received a prophecy concerning the twins saying that the older would serve the younger and she favours Jacob. Esau has taken two Canaanite wives which has been a cause of grief to his parents and he's despised his birthright. On the other hand Jacob, the younger twin, has received an unflattering name, doesn't really seem to have much going for him and has earlier on tricked Esau out of his birthright.

And at this point we see Isaac about to die or thinking he's about to die. He's old, his eyes are dim, he's lacking perception both physically and spiritually. He favours his older son in many ways because of his older son's aptitude.

But yet when we think about the older son he's associated with the field, he's associated with hunting. We've already seen characters who are associated with hunting. We can think particularly of Nimrod.

We can think back further. Who's associated with the field? It's the character of Cain. And the character associated with tents is the character associated with keeping livestock, with keeping sheep and that's Abel.

This opposition between the two brothers is similar to a Cain-Abel opposition. And Cain, that character, is supported by the father whereas the Abel character is supported by the mother. Why might this be the case? If you think about it, Isaac wants someone to bring forward his legacy and in many ways Esau seems the most apt to do so.

He's not a faithful son in certain respects. He's taken these Canaanite wives. But yet on the other hand he seems to be someone who has energy and vigor and virility to him.

He's someone who has the sort of force of personality and will to take forward the covenant. Whereas Jacob seems very weak. Throughout this chapter Jacob does hardly anything.

He's pushed into everything by his mother. His mother takes the initiative for him in sorting out the plan. She tells him what to do.

She prepares the goats for him and she dresses him. And she prepares all the other food. And then she pushes him into the situation.

In this way we see that Rebecca is really the one that's taking the initiative. Again she's the one who's overhearing this conversation in the first place. The conversation between Isaac and Esau.

And she's trying to act recognising the significance of what's taking place. Isaac is about to put everything into Esau's hand. Esau is the one that seems the most strong and virile and vigorous.

The sort of person that you want to take these things forward. But yet he's not faithful. And she thinks there is this other son.

This son who should be blessed. This son that shouldn't be ignored. And as we read through the passage we'll see that the blessing that is actually given is one that excludes the other son in many ways.

It leaves nothing for the other son. And it seems as if Isaac is going to give everything and exclude Jacob from the blessing at all. And so she wants to take the initiative.

She wants to get Jacob to push himself forward and make a case for himself. To go before his father to bring some food and to make a case for himself. To present himself as a son worth blessing.

Now is she expecting that Jacob will deceive his father at this point? I don't think so. What's presented at this point is not a plan of deception in the initial stage. What's presented is the possibility that he can go before his father and present a case for himself.

Bring food before his father and present himself as a son that is also worth blessing. Yet Jacob has qualms. He knows that unlike his brother he's not a hairy man.

He's not a man of action. He's not a doer. He's not a hunter.

He's not a man of the field. And his father will recognise this. He will see through his presentation.

He will see that he's not the man his brother is. Why should he get a blessing? Indeed bringing himself to mind at that point might lead his father to curse him rather than bless him. And so his mother tries to make things even easier for him.

She says if you are cursed let that curse be on me rather than upon you. And then she goes even further to give Jacob even more confidence. She dresses him in Esau's clothes.

See you can be a man like Esau. Put on his garments. As you wear his garments you can be like him.

And then she goes further still and puts skins of goats upon his hands and the smooth part of his neck. See he's a hairy man. Just put these things on and you'll be a hairy man too.

Don't worry about it. You can go before your father. And so he goes into his father and presents himself.

My father. And the father's response is here I am. Who are you my son? The father

recognises that there's something wrong.

That this isn't quite what he expected. It doesn't actually sound like Esau. And Jacob then makes the faithful statement.

I am Esau your firstborn. He's not going to present himself as Jacob. He's going to hide behind Esau and this disguise that he's put on.

And he brings in the food not as Jacob but as Esau. Rather than making a case for himself as his mother had suggested he ends up to avoid judgement by his father pretending to be his brother. Now going back it's important to remember that when this plan was first suggested there was no mention of disguise.

There was no mention of pretending to be Esau. There was just the matter of making a case for himself and bringing food to his father so that he might be blessed. And as we've gone through this we've seen that it's Jacob's qualms that lead him to be dressed up.

And those are primarily for his own confidence. To present him as someone in his own eyes someone who could be like his brother Esau. And then he goes in before his father and then he pretends to be his brother and deceives him.

He's brought near by his father and then he's felt. But it seems as if his father is still not completely convinced. He's still saying are you really my son Esau after he's blessed him.

He does not recognise him. His hands are hairy like his brother Esau's hands but his voice is Jacob's. There we see the two traits that the brothers are associated with.

Esau is a man of his hands, a man of action, a man of skill. Whereas Jacob is a man of the voice, a man who's a skilled deceiver earlier on. Someone who's able to use his voice to achieve things.

But now we have the voice of Jacob and the hands of Esau. And the father isn't able to discern them. There's a confusion between the two.

And in that confusion he blesses Jacob. The interesting thing here is that it's not the case that Jacob says oh it's Esau and then blesses him. Rather he's just not recognising him.

And even after he's blessed he's asking are you really my son Esau. In some respects it seems as if whatever Isaac wants to ascertain about the identity of this person has been ascertained even without knowing that person's identity. He knows it is his son, one of his sons.

And he knows that the character has the hands of Esau and the food of Esau. And so whoever this character is, even though he might sound like Jacob, he's a fitting recipient



of the blessing. And so he smells his son and blesses him.

And the blessing that he gives him at this point is an important one as we'll see later on in the story. It's worth remembering details such as let people serve you and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you.

That detail becomes important later on. After he has finished blessing Jacob and Jacob has left his presence, Esau comes in. He's prepared food too.

He's brought it to his father. And his father is shocked. Again the question, who are you? I am your son, your firstborn, Esau.

Isaac is clearly shocked at this point. He trembles very violently and asks the identity of the person who came in and gave him the food earlier. And yet he does not judge Jacob here.

He does not condemn what Jacob has done. He says he came in deceitfully. But he doesn't follow up that blessing with a curse.

Rather he declares that the blessing will stand. Even though Jacob had acted out of deceit, he still had the qualities. The qualities that led him to be blessed.

Esau lifts up his voice and weeps and proceeds to plan to take his brother's life. Rebecca, hearing this plan, sends Jacob away to her brother Laban. Hoping that a few months away from home perhaps might lead to his brother's anger dying down.

And she says that she does not want to be bereft or miscarried of them both in one day. Again an important expression and we might get back to that in the future. And then the chapter ends with a statement of Rebecca's anguish at the wives of her son Esau, the Hittite women.

The Hittite women were mentioned at the very end of the previous chapter. And so their occurrence here again highlights the fact that Esau's unfaithfulness is the foreground of reality. He has despised his birthright.

He has married unfaithfully. And now he has lost his blessing. It's not necessarily a good thing that Jacob has taken his blessing in this way and deceived his father.

And Jacob will receive many negative consequences for what he has done here. But yet it was the appropriate thing to happen as regards Esau. Esau should have lost the blessing and he did.

One question to reflect upon. Within this chapter we can see themes not just of the stories that I've mentioned but also of the story of the binding of Isaac. The sacrifice of Isaac in chapter 22.

Can you see some of those and how might they help us to read the meaning of what's taking place? Genesis chapter 28 occurs in the wake of the events of the previous chapter. Jacob, with the aid of his mother Rebekah, has deceived his father Isaac and received the blessing over his brother Esau. Now he is summoned by his father again.

He's blessed again. And then he's directed to go to Paddan Aram to take a daughter of Laban as his wife. Jacob continues to be associated primarily with his mother and his mother's side of the family.

His mother had the prophecy concerning him and his brother that the older would serve the younger. His mother is also the one who directed him in his actions up to the point when he deceived his father. His mother now and his father instruct him to take a wife from his maternal cousins.

And this instruction is mirrored on the other side with Esau who takes a wife from his paternal cousins, the daughters of Ishmael. By this Ishmael seems to want to improve relationships between him and his parents. Perhaps this is some sign of repentance on Esau's front, a sign of concern to win back his parents' favour.

Jacob now retraces the path of Abraham back to Haran. He ascends back to the land of the ancestors for refuge from his brother who's trying to kill him and also for a wife. Now we've already seen that Esau is associated with the colour red as Edom.

He's the one who wants the red red stew and he's a skilful man of the hand. But now Jacob is walking to the land of Mr White, Laban, the man associated with the colour white. And Laban's his uncle.

He's a shrewd, crafty serpent type figure. And as he wrestles with these characters he will grow in his own abilities and character. So he's overcome Mr Red and now he has to go to Mr White and then he will have to meet Mr Red again in a new way.

He is gaining wisdom and skill through experience here. Now Jacob alights upon a particular place and he stays there that night because the sun has set. The setting of the sun is not an incidental detail in the story.

Later on we'll see the sun rising at a key point in the narrative. And it's important to pay attention to these scenic details because the Bible does not usually give us a lot of scenic details. It's not usually trying to build a picture within our minds of a very rich backdrop for its events.

Rather it gives us very sparse details about how people appear, what time of the day things occurred at, all these sorts of details. And then sometimes it will give us lots and lots and lots of details. And there seems to be a reason for this.

These details are not accidental. They're there to be reflected upon. When a few

chapters later we see the sun rising we should be clued into the fact that there is a full cycle that has occurred here.

That Jacob has spent a few chapters, as it were, symbolically in the dark. And now his journey is complete. The sun has risen.

It's been evening and it's been morning. And now a new day in his life is starting. So what happens at this point is the beginning of a there and back again story.

Jacob is leaving his home. He'll be returning to his home a few chapters later. And during that time away he is undergoing a deep experience that will transform him.

And that transforming experience will equip him to face the struggles that await him in the future. As we move forward in this story we'll see a number of the ways in which the later part of the story mirrors the earlier part of the story. And fleshes out this there and back again pattern.

I won't get into that now but I do want us to pay attention to some of the details of this particular story. Jacob takes up the stones of the place and he lays down to sleep. While he sleeps he dreams and sees a ladder with angels ascending and descending and God at the top.

Now what might this remind us of? Earlier on, before the story of Abraham, in chapter 11, we read of the builders of Babel coming to a plain in the land of Shinar, settling there, gathering bricks and setting out to build a city and a tower whose top was in the heavens. Jacob gathers stones as the Babel builders gathered bricks. Later he'll take a single stone that has been used as a pillow and then he'll set it up as a pillar.

He marvels at what he sees when he sees this vision of the angels ascending and descending and calls the name of the place Bethel, meaning house of God. And then goes on to describe it as the house of God and the gate of heaven. Now the Akkadian name for Babel means gate of God and so calling this particular place house of God and gate of heaven might remind us of Babel, the gate of God.

So what are we to make of all these parallels and juxtapositions between the story of Babel and the story of Bethel? Well it seems to me something of Jacob's mission and the mission of the descendants of Jacob is being fleshed out here. The Babel builders had sought to avoid being spread out over the earth, to gather together in this particular place to make a name great for themselves. God is declaring to Jacob that his descendants would be spread out to the four corners of the earth but then also be gathered into that particular place and that as they were gathered in that God would make his name great.

This is something that contrasts with the story of Babel but also shows that God is going to fulfil what the Babel builders sought to fulfil but he's going to fulfil it in a different way

and for his glory not for the building up of the names of proud men. The name of the city is changed from Luz to Bethel. Luz is associated with the almond tree but also with crookedness.

Later we'll see the almond tree mentioned as one of the trees with which Jacob outwitted Laban. Bethel was an important site of worship in the early history of Israel and the Temple Mount has already been marked out in chapter 22 and now Bethel is marked out as well. There will be a tower formed between heaven and earth but it will be formed not by human technological genius and engineering but it will be formed by worship, by establishing this unhewn stone of worship, this pillar that goes up towards God's heavens.

Jacob as we'll see in the chapters that follow is a man associated with stones. There are a number of significant stones within Jacob's life and these stones contrast with the bricks of Babel but also with the brick that is associated with Laban's own name. Later on in the instructions given to Israel they are told not to use bricks to build their altars but to use unhewn stones.

And there seems to be something of this contrast that continues into the later life and worship of the nation. So Israel is going to be established as the true Tower of Babel, the true point where heaven and earth meet in worship as God's angels descend to earth and interact with human beings and as human beings are raised up to God's presence in worship this communication between heaven and earth is established by God himself. In the New Testament we can see this goes further.

Christ says to Nathaniel, Hereafter you'll see the heavens opened and angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Christ is the true Tower of Babel, the true connection between heaven and earth. He is the one who sends down his spirit upon the church that by the spirit our prayers and our petitions and our lives might ascend to God's presence.

That is the true connection between heaven and earth. But here we have the great anticipation of what's about to happen. That God is going to fulfil the intent of Babel but in a different way, in a way that is founded upon his work.

And it's going to be through the descendants of Jacob. Some questions to reflect upon. There are similarities between this story and the story of God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush.

Can you see any of them? And what help might they give us to interpret what's going on here? A second question. The name of Luz is changed to Bethel. On Jacob's return to the land another change of name occurs.

How might these two events shed light upon each other? In Genesis chapter 29 Jacob

leaves Bethel and heads towards the land of the people of the east, Haran and the house of his uncle Laban. Once again we have surprising scenic details. There's a well with a stone over it and three flocks of sheep lying beside it.

Jacob asks the shepherds whether they know Laban and is told that they do and that his daughter Rachel is coming with the sheep. They cannot remove the stone until the flocks are gathered. And Rachel is bringing the fourth flock.

On Rachel's arrival Jacob removes the stone and waters the flock of Laban. Jacob greets Rachel with a kiss and weeps aloud telling her that he was her father's kinsman and the son of Rebekah. And when Laban hears this, as Rachel runs to tell her family, he runs to meet Jacob, embraces him and kisses him.

Now there's a lot of scenic detail in this passage and as usual when the Bible gives us lots of seemingly superfluous scenic details they probably aren't merely there for the purpose of painting a florid picture in our minds. It's worth bearing in mind how random, occasional and often weird the scenic details scripture gives us are. So for instance we are told all of the ingredients of the meal that Abraham gave to the angels but we are told virtually nothing about the physical appearance of the majority of biblical characters including Jesus himself.

There are scenic and other details that are used very sparingly and usually when they're present they're there for us to pay attention to. There's a principle of drama called Chekhov's gun. The principle goes as follows.

Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired it shouldn't be hanging there.

So it is with scripture. Scripture does not give us irrelevant story elements. Biblical narrative often involves scenic or incidental details but those details help you to recognise connections.

So for instance why are we told that John the Baptist dresses in a particular way with camel skin and a leather belt around his waist? Well because it helps us to recognise his resemblance to Elijah. Why are we told here that there are three flocks of sheep with a further fourth flock of sheep led by Rachel on the way? Well one thing it helps us to do is to recognise the symmetry between the beginning of Jacob's journey to Padan and Moran and then his return. When he divides his family into four groups with Rachel last.

In that return journey he has an encounter with God's angels at Mahanaim which he calls God's camp. This reminds us of the story of Bethel in chapter 28 with Jacob's statement this is the gate of heaven, this is the house of God. Now what other things do we see? There's a physical feet at the site of the water and there's a meeting with Esau that

recalls the meeting with Rachel and Laban.

Running out to meet him, embracing, kissing and then also lifting up their voices and weeping. It's the same patterns that we see in the story of meeting with Rachel and Laban. And so these scenic details help us to recognise something more of the shape of this story.

And in the shape of the story some of the deeper themes and things that are playing out. This is a there and back again story and once you've realised that you'll recognise some further connections and it will help you to see part of the meaning of what's taking place. Jacob in this chapter already seems quite transformed from the weak character of chapter 27 who could not take the initiative but had to be pushed into things by his mother.

Now he's lifting up his legs and running on his way. He can remove a great stone single-handed and once again note Jacob's association with stones. This is something that we've seen in the previous chapter and will continue through in his story.

Beyond the change in Jacob's ability and character maybe we should notice a further connection between a matriarch and a well as Rachel is here encountered at a well. We've seen the story of Hagar in the well. We've seen the story of Rebecca in the well.

Later on we'll see in Exodus the story of Moses meeting with his wife at a well. And these stories are familiar patterns being played out in different forms. Now I've mentioned before that the differences between the accounts are as important as their similarities.

The meaningful differences become more apparent as the similarities become more familiar to us. So as we've read a number of these stories we begin to see the ways in which each particular story stands out. And in this story one of the ways it stands out from the others is that the well is blocked and needs to be opened.

It can only be opened when Rachel has arrived with her flock. Now note the fact that it is the opening of Rachel's womb that marks the turning of the tide in the next chapter. As Rachel comes with her flock of children there will be a change in the movement of the story.

The fruit of Rachel's womb will bring blessing for all but it will only occur through struggle. After the other flocks have arrived it will be Rachel's flock that will come last. Rachel is described as a shepherdess, a fitting companion for one who is associated with sheep.

Her name also means ewe or female sheep. And in this story we'll see parallels between flocks of sheep and flocks as the family. Jacob acts like Rebecca did for his grandfather Abraham's servant.

So he goes and he waters the flocks of Rachel just as Rebecca watered the flocks or the camels of Eliezer. Rachel then acts like Rebecca running and telling her family about this person who's arrived. And Laban's extravagant greeting at this point is perhaps in hope of treasures from the grandson of Abraham.

He was in the previous story and remains a mercenary man. But yet a month passes and there's no great caravan of wealth coming behind Jacob. Jacob's by himself with no great treasures to his possession.

And then we see Jacob's status reduced by Laban. He's no longer being treated as a kinsman but more as a hired servant. He has to work for his keep.

He has to be paid wages. He's no longer treated as Laban's bone and his flesh but as one who's working within his house for money. Now he's not reduced to servitude and slavery but his situation is definitely lowered at this point.

He wants to serve for Rachel, Laban's youngest daughter. And Rachel is described as beautiful but Leah's eyes are delicate. It can be translated weak or perhaps delicate.

I prefer to go with delicate which may also suggest that they were beautiful in their own way. He serves Laban for a week of years, for seven years which is later described as a week. It feels like a few days to him.

Now remember in the previous chapter that Rebecca had told Jacob to stay for a few days in Laban's house and that she'd summon him back when the time came. Now it feels to him like this whole seven year period is just a few days. He loves Rachel so much.

At this point he's presumably working for a bride price and the purpose of a bride price is to give security to the wife. So this money would be given to Laban which Laban would hold in trust for Rachel so that if anything happened, if Jacob abandoned her or if Jacob died, Rachel would have that money as her security. But yet Laban switches Rachel with her elder sister Leah.

We can think back to chapter 27. This is the same sort of thing that happened. Rebecca had switched her two sons and now Rebecca's brother Laban switches his two daughters.

He says, it is not so done in our country to give the younger before the firstborn. You can imagine that stung that Jacob knew that Laban was referring in part to the way that he had treated his brother Esau. There is a feast, there is the switching of the two children, there's the use of darkness as a means of hiding recognition.

So in the first story it's the blindness of Isaac that's the darkness. Here it's just the darkness after the feast. We should presume that Jacob has drunk well.

It's a feast of wine that they celebrate and the drinking is something that is important to pay attention to here because we'll see references to it in the chapter that follows. Jacob then says words to Laban that are very similar to the words of Esau to his father. He then goes on to serve another seven years for Leah.

Altogether this makes 14 years, two separate weeks of years, distinct sets, one week and then followed by another week. We should notice that there is another example of this later on in Genesis. It will occur again in the story of Joseph and the famine in Egypt.

So keep this detail in the back of your mind for now because it will become relevant again then. Jacob now has two rival wives in his house, one loved and the other unloved. And they're sisters but they're at odds with each other now.

And the repercussions of this will become central for the rest of the book of Genesis. It's a rivalry between two wives which spills over into the rivalry between two sides of a family. Later on the law will say that you should not do this.

You shall not take a wife as a rival wife for her sister in Leviticus 18 verse 18. This is speaking very clearly to a situation like that of Jacob and Rachel and Leah. It's not an appropriate situation and we can see from the fallout of it that it is a negative choice.

There were many ways in which this led to harmful consequences for all parties involved. Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah are now born and named. We should observe the way that Leah is dealing with God through the story of her childbearing.

She's in a tragic situation. She's presumably in this situation more as a result of her father's engineering and plans and plots than of her own. But God sees and remembers her.

Even though her father has wronged her, her sister is her rival, her husband doesn't love her, God sees her. As in the story of Hagar, God remembers the outcast and has concern for the outcast. In Genesis the names of the characters are often important for the narrative.

I've already noted the way that various facets of the laughter to which Isaac's name refers is explored throughout the story. And the names of Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah are important, the meanings that are given to them. And we'll maybe see or comment upon these at some later points within the story of Genesis.

A question to think about in conclusion. It's important to remember that when we're reading the story of Genesis, we're not just reading a story or set of stories of mere individuals. The story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the descendants of Jacob is a story of God dealing with the tangled mess of a family over many generations.

All these stories are intertwined in unexpected and surprising ways. The story of Hagar is



still playing out in the story of Joseph. The story of Rachel has repercussions all the way down.

And the decision of Isaac to bless Esau over Jacob, that was eventually foiled by the deception of Jacob, has consequences that play out in the decisions and the events of this chapter as Jacob has the same sort of deception played on him. So when we're reading this story, we need to recognise that there is something that connects them all. They are part of a greater story.

And that this is a story in which the actions of one family member a few generations back can have repercussions for someone a few generations down the line. We are not detached individuals and Abraham's descendants are not detached individuals. There are consequences that play out over generations.

Now this is how God deals with us too. God deals with larger bodies of people, not just individuals in splendid detachment from each other. So for this question, I want you to think about the way in which if you were telling your story, the story of other people around you, how you could retell it not as a story of an individual life, but as the story of God dealing with families and bodies of people connected with each other.

Think about your story that way and it may help you to read the story of Genesis in a richer and fuller manner. Genesis chapter 30 may be one of the more confusing chapters in the book, with two of the most surprising and difficult episodes within the entirety of Genesis. It continues the story where we left it off in chapter 29.

Jacob has been deceived by his uncle Laban into marrying Leah rather than Rachel. He then takes Rachel who ends up as a rival wife to her sister. However, Leah has four sons while Rachel is childless.

Rachel was tricked out of her marriage by her father, whereas Leah was tricked into it. And so at this point, Rachel envies her sister and vents her anger at Jacob. Rachel's painful childlessness exacerbates the rivalry that she has with her sister and even sparks antagonism with Jacob, her husband.

And as a result of Laban's trickery, what could have been a fairy tale union is now a miserable situation for every person involved. Like Sarai did with Hagar, Rachel tries to salvage the situation of her childlessness by giving her handmaid Bilhah to Jacob, her husband. And she names the two sons that she receives through Bilhah after her rivalry with her sister Leah.

God has judged me, Dan. With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed, Naphtali. And like Jacob wrestling with Esau, his brother, so Rachel is wrestling with Leah.

Jacob and Esau were in conflict with each other from the womb and Rachel and Leah

have been in conflict since being placed into this marriage situation. These stories of giving birth should not be passed over without attention. The great works of God in history so often begin with women struggling in birth.

They begin at places and with persons that we would not look to with expectation of some great deliverer arising. It begins with things such as the story of Jochebed and the Hebrew midwives in the book of Exodus and their resistance to the murderous decree of Pharaoh. It can begin with the story of Hannah and her wrestling prayer in the temple.

Or it can begin with Elizabeth and Mary, two figures that would not be expected to give birth. Now, as God's works begin in these places, so in the chapter that we're reading here, we can see the same sort of pattern. The turning point occurs as the women wrestle with God in prayer.

God hears and remembers them. And out of that hearing and remembering comes a change of direction. We've already noted this in the story of Leah, but it happens here in the story of Rachel as well.

When she notices that she has stopped giving birth to children, Leah gives her handmaid, Zilpah, to her husband, Jacob. And Leah, through Zilpah, has Gad and Asher. And at this point, we meet one of the stranger stories within the book, which is the story of Reuben and the Mandrakes.

So Reuben goes out into the field at around the time of the harvest, and he brings in some mandrakes for his mother. We don't know exactly what the mandrakes were. There are speculations.

Some see them as a plant for fertility. Others see them as some sort of aphrodisiac. We don't know what they are.

So what are we to make of them? I think the clue, and it was Rabbi David Foreman who put me onto this, is found in who picks them and for whom. Reuben picks them for his mother, Leah. And the significance of this is that Reuben is the oldest son of Leah.

He's only a few years old at this point. And he goes into the field and he picks some flowers to show his love for his mother. And he gives those flowers to his mother as a gift.

When Rachel asks for the mandrakes then, she's not just asking for the plants or whatever they are. She's asking for Leah's son's mandrakes. It's important whose they are and from whom they have come.

Reuben has given these to his mother as a sign of his love. And it is precisely this gift that Rachel requests. Now think about Rachel to this point.

Rachel has been wrestling with her sister, envious of her sister, a rival to her sister. She's named her first two sons after this rivalry that God has judged in her case and come out in her favour in the case of Dan. And then Naphtali naming her son after that wrestling that she has with her sister.

That she has prevailed finally against her rival. And now she's asking for some of the gift that Reuben has given to his mother. What's significant about this? Well, what Rachel is doing, I believe, is trying to create peace.

She's changing the tenor of the relationship that she has with her sister. No longer is it going to be one of rivalry, but she wants to share in the love that her sister has for her son Reuben. And no longer see herself as an opponent, but as one who's going to share and rejoice with her.

However, when Leah's response comes, it's an angry response. It's a response that speaks of how aggrieved she feels by Rachel's actions. Rachel could have just left the situation alone.

She could have allowed Leah to take her husband and mourn the fact. And yet that's not what she did. She entered the marriage as a rival to her sister and ended up in a situation where her sister could not be happy.

And had to live as the unloved wife, no matter how many children she had. And so Leah naturally feels fairly aggrieved by this situation. What is the arrangement that they come to? And why is that significant? Well, Rachel says that Leah can have Jacob that night.

That is a significant thing to do because that's what originally was stolen from her. She had her marriage bed stolen from her by Leah. And now she is giving that marriage bed to her sister.

No longer as a rival, but as a sister. And in exchange, she is going to share in her sister's love for her child. What she's doing is trying to create peace in a situation where there has been a breach.

And as we go through scripture, we'll see events that call back to this memory. I think there's a very powerful reference back to this in chapter 31 of Jeremiah, which I might get to in a moment. Out of that union that night, Leah gives birth to another son called Issachar.

And Issachar she sees as her reward or her wages. Later on in the Bible in Jeremiah chapter 31, God says to Rachel that there is a reward for what she has done. That seems to me that that's a reference back to this event that Issachar is named after reward or wages.

And in the same way, there is an Issachar for what Rachel has done. And what did she

do? She healed the breach with her sister. She formed peace.

She pursued reconciliation where there was that tension within the family. And as we look in the rest of the book, that tension continues in the next generation. But in her generation, Rachel sought to heal it.

At this point, God remembers Rachel, listens to her and opens her womb. She bears a son whom she calls Joseph. And the birth of Joseph is seen to be a transition point.

At this point, there is a sign that God has blessed. God has finally opened the womb of Rachel. And now there is a promise of actually moving on, of returning maybe to the land that Jacob has left.

However, when Jacob asked to leave, Laban asked him to stay on as he has been blessed through the work of Laban. Again, it is important to notice the way that Laban is treating his nephew here. He's not treating him in a proper way.

If you're a good uncle, you'll be sending him away with many gifts and blessings, but he doesn't do that. Rather, he treats Jacob as someone who is just owed any outstanding wages, of which there are none. But yet, when we look at the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 15, we're told that if you have a Hebrew man or Hebrew woman working for you as a servant, they should serve for six years and in the seventh year they should go free.

And they should not be let free empty-handed. They should be furnished liberally from the flock, from the threshing floor, from the wine press. And as God has blessed them, they should actually give on to the person that has served them.

And yet, this is completely different from the way that Laban treats Jacob. He is not a good uncle or even a good master. Laban does not treat Jacob as a family member, but more as a dishonored servant.

And so Jacob's response to Laban's request for him to stay is a shrewd one. He knows that Laban won't willingly give him anything of real value. So Jacob asks for something that Laban won't value so highly.

It's also something that is easily tested. So Laban would easily be able to tell if Jacob hasn't kept the terms of the agreement, because it's the colours of the animals themselves. Likewise for Jacob.

Laban tries to ensure that Jacob won't have as much of the flock to choose from. So he puts most of the irregular coloured animals with his sons, leaving Jacob with only a small flock to select from. But this in many ways makes things easier for Jacob to carry out his later activities without supervision.

And again, we should note the play upon words here. There are white strips taken from

the white tree. The poplar tree is one of the trees that's mentioned, and that's a tree that plays upon Laban's name, revealing the white beneath.

And he's changing the colour of the white flocks of Laban. And so Laban, his name connects with the colour white. And Jacob is changing the colour of the white flocks of Laban, using the white tree, white strips and the white that's revealed beneath it.

God is ultimately the one who makes Jacob's unusual plan work, as we see in the following chapter. But there are things to be noticed here. First of all, again, the plays upon words.

We've already observed some of the plays upon words in the story of Esau. Esau is associated with the land of Seir, but he's also associated with hair and with goats, both of which are very similar terms to the word for Seir. Likewise, he's called Edom, just after he's eaten some of the red, red stew.

And again, Edom connects with red and also connects with Adam. And so there are lots of plays upon words going on here. Laban has a name that again connects with the colour white, connects with Lebanon, perhaps connects with poplar tree.

It connects with bricks, whereas Jacob is connected with stones. And as we go through, we'll see other plays upon words. Once again, it's important to pay attention to the unusual details that are given to us.

So why mention that he uses fresh sticks of poplar, almond and plain trees? Why those particular trees? Why not just say some sticks? The fact that specific trees mentioned suggests that those trees are mentioned for a reason. And I think we'll see as we look a bit more closely. First of all, the poplar tree plays upon the name of Laban.

The almond tree is named Luz. We've already seen a Luz in chapter 28. Luz, which is the former name of Bethel.

And then it's connected with crookedness as well. And then there's the final tree, which is the plain tree, which is a word that's very similar to that for cunning. The use of those particular trees suggests that maybe there's something more going on here, that these symbolize something, that they stand for something.

Now, there may be some parallels between the story of the wives and the story of the flocks. Laban, Mr White, refused to give Jacob his beautiful ewe, Rachel. Remember, Rachel means ewe.

But he gave the feeble-eyed or delicate-eyed Leah instead, the less favoured sister. Jacob places the rods at the place where the flocks drink, and he was deceived after a drinking feast. He symbolically repeats Laban's switch, but uses it to become strong.

He knows that Laban's not going to give him the well-favoured sheep and livestock. Rather, he's going to give him the weak. He's going to give him the miscoloured.

He's going to give him the less favoured. And so he accepts those, and he uses those to become strong. He is symbolically replaying what Laban has done to him in a way that will lead him to prosper.

The result is that Jacob increases, much as Abraham did in Egypt in chapter 12. And there are parallels between this story and the story of Abraham leaving Egypt in chapter 12. There will be another extra story in the two chapters that follow.

A question to reflect upon. The curse or judgement of Genesis chapter 3 verse 16 is that women will have pain in childbearing. And this plays out in the story of the matriarchs of Israel, who often have difficulty conceiving.

Think of Sarai, Rebekah and Rachel all as examples of this. And in addition to struggle with barrenness, the many other pains and difficulties and dangers that attend childbearing. Rachel is perhaps the greatest example of this.

The person who dies ultimately in childbirth. And her story is a very painful one. Yet the flipside of that pain that recalls Genesis chapter 3 verse 16 is the promise that comes attached to it.

That this is the seed of the woman that is going to come forth. We can think of Genesis 3 verse 15 here. That the woman's seed will crush the serpent's head.

And it's precisely those children of promise that require the most suffering to bring forth. What insight might this give us into the story of Rachel and its importance? And the story of her son Joseph? In Genesis chapter 31, Jacob finally leaves the house of Laban. In the previous chapter, Jacob's family grew and although Laban continued to mistreat him, he outwitted Laban at his own game.

God also heard the prayers of Leah and Rachel and gave them children. Now Jacob recognises that both Laban and his sons are not favourably inclined towards him. Jacob has been dispossessing them, even as they have been trying to cheat him.

Whatever Laban did to try to undermine Jacob, God caused Jacob to prosper against it. While the exact mechanism of Jacob's plan with the rods is much debated, whatever it was, it shows not just Jacob's cunning but also God's providence. It is God who ensures that Laban will not defeat Jacob.

But that at each stage Jacob will be blessed, even as Laban seeks to oppress him. In chapters 29 to 31, God's providence is also very much active in the hidden realms of conception and birth. This isn't a grand story of miracles and wonders and pyrotechnics that we might find in the story of the plagues, for instance.

Rather, it's a story of God's providence in ensuring that Jacob's wives would be fruitful and that his flocks would be fruitful and that they would bear the right sort of offspring. The changing attitude of Laban to Jacob is similar to the changing attitude of the Egyptians to Israel before the Exodus. And there are a great many Exodus themes in this chapter, themes that we'll examine in a moment.

Laban had further mistreated Jacob and his daughters by consuming the bride price that Jacob had paid for his daughters. This was supposed to be their security, something that he would hold in trust for them if they ever needed it. If Jacob mistreated them or if Jacob died and they needed some security, that money was theirs.

But he consumed it for himself. Jacob's flight occurs at the time of sheep shearing. Now, this is a significant time, as we'll see as we go further in the story of Scripture, where there are various reminders of the events of this chapter.

For instance, in the story of 1 Samuel, chapter 25, David has a run in with Nabal at the time of sheep shearing. He protects Nabal's flocks, but yet Nabal treats him in an ungrateful and unfair manner. David then sets out to avenge himself against Nabal, going with 400 men to attack him, and then he's pacified by Abigail sending ahead a wave of gifts.

And that's what we see in chapter 32 and 33 of Genesis, as Jacob sends gifts ahead of himself to Esau. But Nabal should remind us of the character of Laban. And sure enough, if you turn around the word Laban, in both Hebrew and English, you get the word Nabal.

And there are connections between these characters in Scripture that help us to understand who different figures are. It helps us to understand that David is a new Jacob, but that David can also be pulled at certain points towards the character of Esau. Now, Jacob takes his property, crosses the river with the company of his family, livestock and possessions, and goes to the mountains.

It's an Exodus pattern. And just as the Exodus involved the humiliation of false gods, so Rachel humiliates the gods of Laban by stealing them. Again, just as in the Exodus, the departing group is pursued by their former master and overtaken ultimately.

Perhaps we're supposed to see further connections. Maybe the ten changes of wages mentioned earlier on in the chapter and then repeated later on, each of which were thwarted by God, is some parallel to the ten plagues. I think that's less certain to me, but it's a possibility.

Laban blames Jacob. As we often see in the accusations of the people of God in Genesis, it shouldn't be taken at face value. Laban, for all his claims, would not have sent Jacob away kindly.

God has to intervene to prevent Laban from acting in violence or coercion or some other

way against Jacob. Jacob had to steal away because he genuinely feared that Laban would take Rachel and Leah from him. And again, maybe we can note some parallels between the story of Sarah and Pharaoh or Sarah and Abimelech and the story of Rebecca and Abimelech in chapter 26.

Jacob declares a death sentence upon the person who stole Laban's teraphim, his household gods, not knowing that it was Rachel. Rachel took the teraphim, placed them in her camel's saddlebags and sat upon the camel's saddlebags, claiming that as she was menstruating at the time, she wouldn't get up for her father. Once again, this is one of those stories that has an aftermath to it.

It plays out in various other stories in Genesis. There is the story of Rachel's death. In chapter 37, there is the story of camels coming from Mount Gilead to take her oldest son away.

And then finally, there is the story of the pursuit of Benjamin, where again, some means of divination has been stolen and there is a pursuit to obtain it. There is a death sentence declared upon the person whose possession it is found. There is a searching of property from the oldest to the youngest, finding it in the possession of the youngest, who is the youngest son of Rachel.

And then the story proceeds from that. As I've noted on various occasions, as we see these sorts of connections, we will be helped greatly to read and understand what's taking place within the stories. What were the Terraphae? Well, they are household gods and some have suggested they were used for divination.

They also may have been used to demonstrate property ownership and other things like that. So they would have a number of different purposes. The fact that they were taken here seems to have some connection with divination, but there might also be some statement about the true possession of Laban's wealth, that by taking the household gods, there's something like taking title deeds to a property.

There are themes of deception here as well, which are very important. In Genesis chapter 3, the woman was deceived and outwitted by the serpent. But in Scripture, there's poetic justice in the way that women routinely deceive and outwit tyrants.

So maybe think about the Hebrew midwives deceiving Pharaoh, or Rahab deceiving the men of Jericho, or Jael deceiving Sisera, or Michael deceiving Saul, or Esther deceiving Haman. These stories are a reversal of the original deception. It's a way by which God is going to set things right.

But there are other subtle overtones that we might hear though. As in the story of Jacob deceiving his father Isaac, there was an appropriateness to him having the blessing. But yet, that action and its consequences hung over the rest of his life and had bitter



consequences down the line.

Here also, the actions of Rachel have a shadow that is cast over her life that follows. And we'll see some of that as we go through the story. The woman has taken something that was not her own, and a death sentence hangs over her as a result.

Much as in the story of Eve in Genesis. And when Jacob mentions the animals torn by wild beasts, we might have a further sense of premonition. The time will come, not too long hence, when his own son, his son by Rachel, will be presented to him as if it were an animal torn by wild beasts.

And so, even if Laban gets what's coming to him, the actions of Rachel have consequences. Consequences that are very painful in what follows. A question to consider.

Can you think about ways in which the characters of Saul, David and Michael in the book of 1 Samuel are like Laban, Jacob and Rachel in the book of Genesis? In Genesis chapter 32, Jacob has just moved on from his encounter with Laban after he fled from Laban's house and was pursued by him. And at this point he meets angels of God and declares the place where he is to be God's camp. Note the call back to Bethel, another place named after such an encounter.

In that case it's the house of God, the gate of heaven. Here it's declared to be God's camp. And if Jacob's sojourn in Paddan Aram is a there and back again story, the presence of such a symmetry that we're seeing at this point is a sign that we're entering the return leg.

Jacob initiates contact with Esau, sending messengers ahead of him. And there's a directness that has not been characteristic of Jacob to this point. The ways in which he has tended to deal with people have tended to involve subterfuge or deception or some other sort of indirect approach.

Here, however, he approaches Esau directly. Unfortunately, however, his messengers return with the news that Esau is coming with 400 men with him. Jacob, fearing the consequences of an attack from Esau, divides his people into two camps to limit his potential losses if Esau attacks.

And note the connection between the name of Mahanaim, two camps, the place that he named after the fact that it was God's camp, and the fact that Jacob himself divides his company into two camps only a few verses later. It seems that these are connected in some way and it might be worth you thinking about why that might be. I'm not entirely sure.

Jacob wrestles with God in prayer at this point. He appeals to God's covenant promises to him and his fathers, calling for God to act to preserve him from the wrath of Esau. And

staying there that night, he uses wisdom in sending out an immense gift of livestock to Esau.

This is a princely gift. And the numbers that he's sending are really large. They're suitable for breeding as well.

Note the far greater number of female animals than male. He is probably surrendering a significant proportion of the animals that he gained in Paddan Aram. These gifts are sent on ahead, wave after wave, to pacify Esau.

And in some respects, Jacob might be in a position akin to that of Abraham, his grandfather, when he was called to sacrifice Isaac. To actually enter back into the land, Jacob has to give up an awful amount of his wealth. He then sends his wives, two female servants, and all his children, sending them ahead over the Jabbok before him.

And he is like Abraham, prepared to be dispossessed of everything. He's left alone. And in the darkness and the isolation, a man comes to him as an adversary and wrestles with him until the daybreak.

This conflict occurs at the Jabbok. The Jabbok mixes up the letters of Jacob's name, which is about to be changed later on in that chapter. It's also similar to the word for wrestling.

And so there is a lot of wordplay here, as there is throughout the Jacob story. The man wrestling with Jacob touches the inside of his thigh next to the hip. This is an extremely intimate spot.

It's where Eliezer touched when he swore his oath to Abraham. And we might see it perhaps as being connected with circumcision and the promise of seed. This is an event of wrestling between this unknown assailant and Jacob that is fraught with all these themes that have been playing throughout the book to this point.

The sun rises as he crosses over, as he finally defeats the opponent. And the sun rising maybe draws our mind back to the sun setting at Bethel. He leaves the land of his father's.

He goes to Bethel. And as the sun descends, he sleeps. And now the sun is rising and there's a new stage of his life beginning.

We might also think about the significance of water as a threshold. In the story of Israel, Israel is surrounded by a number of bodies of water that they cross at significant moments in their history. And these water crossings are not just boundaries between the land and other things outside.

They're existential boundaries for the nation. So they serve foreign gods on the other side of the river, the river Euphrates. Jacob has crossed that river just in the previous

chapter.

Then there are slaves in Egypt, delivered from slavery in Egypt as they cross the Red Sea. Then there is the event of going into the land through the Jordan. There's the Jabok, a tributary of the Jordan, the site at which Jacob wrestles with God and is given a new name.

So all of these events, these water crossings, help define Israel's identity. Whether it's their name itself, whether it's their deliverance from slavery, their entrance into the land, their movement away from the realm of serving foreign gods. In all of these respects, then, water crossings can be existential passages or changes.

The wrestling leads to a new name and a blessing. Now, what might this remind us of what's taking place here? One of the first things it should remind us of are the two children struggling in the womb of Rebecca. That's the very first thing that we read about in the story of Jacob.

He's wrestling with his brother, so much so that when he comes out of the womb, he's grappling with his brother, holding on to his brother's heel. And as we read through the story of Jacob, we'll see two other things. That name and blessing are crucial themes throughout the story.

When he's first born, he is given a name. And the name seems to be given by his father, particularly. Not necessarily by his mother.

It's not a flattering name. And later on, it's referred to by his brother, Esau, after he has been robbed of his blessing. Esau says that he has supplanted him these two times.

Now, name is an important theme then. Jacob does not have a flattering name, originally. And he's given a new name here.

Another theme is blessing. Jacob deceived his father and outwitted his brother to receive the blessing. And that was a crucial thing for him, to get that blessing.

And now, he is given a different blessing. And he will not let go until he is given that blessing. That tenacity is something that we've seen in Jacob to this point.

But here, I think there's something very important about it. We're returning to the two core themes of Jacob's story to this point. We're replaying the story of the birth and the story of the events in the tent of his father, Isaac.

And now, these themes are being resolved. Think about the way that Jacob sends on the gift ahead of himself to his lord, Esau. That reminds us of the blessing that is given to Jacob by his father, Isaac.

It seems as if Jacob is beginning to play out the blessing to Esau, to give back what he

has taken, in some respect. Jacob has also been a wrestler throughout his life. He's wrestled against Esau.

He's wrestled against Isaac. He's wrestled against Laban. And God recognizes this as he wrestles with him.

He says that he has wrestled with God and with men and has prevailed. He's wrestled with those figures like Esau and Isaac and Laban and grown through that conflict. And now, he's meeting with God himself and wrestling with God himself.

What's going on there? Well, one of the things I think we're seeing is that he has been wrestling with God and man and has prevailed. Who was wrestling with Jacob when Laban was mistreating him? When Isaac was blessing his brother ahead of him? When Esau was trying to kill him? Who was wrestling with him? In some sense, ultimately, God himself. Wrestling with him as a heavenly father might wrestle with his son so that his son might grow in strength.

And at that point, Jacob can realize that all these stories in his life, all these events in his life, that he might chalk down to his misfortune and all the opposition that he's facing. Ultimately, this is God wrestling with him. God wrestling with him so that through that testing and trying, he might become strong.

He might become a true wrestler with and wrestler for God, which is the name that he's given. Then, as God is wrestling with him, he's able to see his experience in a new way, to see that God's providence has been working throughout. Now, a question to reflect upon as we conclude.

Many people identify this point as Jacob's conversion, or perhaps slightly earlier on, as he prays to God as he hears that Esau is approaching. Now, I don't think that's the case. However, there is a transition in Jacob's life at this point.

He becomes a new sort of person, a more mature sort of person. He's given what he's finally longed for, a new name and a blessing. These things that have been key themes and driving factors of the story to this point are resolved here.

Now, what I think we're seeing is a transition in his life. There are many points when, in our own lives, we have key transition experiences that are not necessarily conversions in the way that they are commonly understood. A movement from not believing in God to believing in God.

Rather, it's a movement into a new level of faith. A new level of faith that resolves tensions that have been playing in our lives to that point. Tensions that may have defined our lives are finally moving past them.

As we'll see in the next chapter, Jacob is no longer wrestling with Esau in the same way.

He performs the blessing to Esau. He allows Esau to go out ahead of him.

This is another sort of birth scene. Two well-matched opponents wrestling with each other, waiting to see who's going to go out first. It's a wrestling for a name and a blessing for the firstborn status, in some sense.

And when Jacob is blessed by God, he is able to give the blessing back to Esau that he stole from him, in some sense at least. And so I want to encourage you to think about some time or times in your own life when such a transition has occurred. Not necessarily a movement from not believing to believing, but a movement from one level of understanding and faith and experience and way of thinking about your life to a completely different one.

A movement into a new level of maturity. In Genesis chapter 33, Jacob has just been blessed by the angel after wrestling with him and has been given a new name. Maybe at this point it would be worth just commenting upon the importance of the angel.

Later on when he blesses Ephraim and Manasseh, Jacob references the angel who has redeemed him from evil. The angel is a figure who seems to play an important role within the story of Jacob, as in the story of Abraham and Isaac. The angel appears to Abraham by the Oaks of Mamre.

The angel is the one who interrupts, just as he's about to sacrifice Isaac. And the angel here seems to be a divine figure, a figure who's associated with Yahweh himself. And so it's not surprising that people have reflected upon the presence of the angel within the book of Genesis and elsewhere and seen within it a reference to the second person of the Trinity.

As we look back upon these events in the light of the New Testament, there are places in the New Testament that suggest that sort of association. Jacob now lifts up his eyes and sees Esau coming with 400 men. The expression, lifted up his eyes and looked and behold, is used on a number of occasions in Genesis.

And in each occasion it seems to be a particularly charged one. This is a significant sight that he's seeing. Seeing Esau's company approaching him, he divides his people into four flocks, as it were, with Rachel's flock last, much as there were four flocks when Jacob first met Rachel, with Rachel's flock being the last to arrive at the closed well.

There is, however, an implicit favouritism here. The children of the maidservants are placed in the most dangerous position, Leah and her children next, and then finally in the safest position, Rachel and Joseph. It's very clear that Jacob favours Joseph over his other children, much as he favours Rachel over Leah and the handmaids.

And the favouritism that is on display here is something that has negative effects throughout the rest of the book of Genesis, not least in the chapter that follows. Jacob,

however, goes before them all. He bows to the ground seven times to his brother.

But Esau's response is surprising. Esau runs to meet him, embraces him, falls on his neck and kisses him. The word for embracing used here is not dissimilar for the word used for wrestling.

The brothers clutch each other, but it is a brotherly embrace, not a wrestling move as they might have had in the past. Esau falls on the part of the neck which Jacob had once covered up with goat skin to imitate him, and kisses it, much as their father had kissed Jacob in his blessing. And previous to this, there have been two cases of people lifting up their voices and weeping, separated from each other.

After he loses the blessing, Esau lifts up his voice and weeps, and then when Jacob meets Rachel, he lifts up his voice and weeps. The two brothers, both lifting up their voice and weeping, but separated from each other. But now the two brothers weep together, like twins who have just been reborn.

And Jacob insists that Esau accept the princely gift that he has sent on ahead of him, all the flocks and the livestock. And being willing to surrender such an extensive amount of his property is a sign of Jacob's trust in God as the true source of his provision. He's able to live as a wanderer and as someone who holds his possessions lightly because he knows that God is the one who will provide for him.

And Jacob also repeatedly refers to Esau as his lord and himself as Esau's servant. And here it is very important to note that Jacob is performing to Esau the blessing that he took from him. If you look back in Genesis chapter 27, this is the blessing that is given to Jacob.

See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed. May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine. Let people serve you and nations bow down to you.

Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you. And so what we're seeing here is Jacob performing to Esau the blessing that he once took from him.

It's a very significant and powerful action. And he's able to do this, to give back the blessing as he has been blessed and named by God himself. And he explicitly calls it a blessing, that he wants Esau to accept the blessing that he's given.

Earlier on in chapter 30, Rachel overcame the rivalry between herself and Leah, giving to Leah what her father originally stole from her with Leah, the marriage bed of Jacob. And now Jacob does something similar, healing a past wrong. Note that in verse 10, Jacob declares that he has seen Esau's face, which is like seeing the face of God.

Now Jacob has just seen God face to face and named Peniel after that encounter. What is going on here? What is the allusion back to the previous chapter doing here? First of all, we need to recognize that the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, etc. is an entire story.

It's not just lots of episodic events, as you might see in an older TV show. This is a consistent story and themes recur and things that happen are connected to things that have happened before. So this story is connected to the previous chapter and it's connected to all these other events that have gone before.

The stealing of the blessing. It's going back also to the events of the womb. These events need to be brought to mind if we're going to understand what's happening here between the two brothers.

So why the reference to seeing the face of Esau like the face of God? He has wrestled with God and be spared. And now he sees his brother and he's spared again. And there's a recognition, I believe, of God's favor in the favor of Esau.

It connects the story with that which precedes it, but also connects the recognition that arose from that story. You have wrestled with God and with man and have prevailed. And Jacob is now meeting his brother and he's seeing in the peace with which his brother meets him, the peace and the favor of God himself.

And so as he sees the peaceful face of his brother, his enemy throughout the story to this point, he recognizes that ultimately this is about God's favor. It's not just Esau. This is God's favor that he's experiencing.

And he's able to look at these events in a new light after he has had that encounter at Peniel. Once he has seen the face of God, he is able to look at human faces and see that in those human faces, God is at work relating to him through these people. Esau offers to journey with Jacob, but Jacob turns down the offer.

However, he's no longer competing to go out first as he was in the womb. Esau says, let me go on ahead. And Jacob doesn't stop him.

He can go on ahead. He's not going to grab the heel anymore. He suggests that he will visit Seir in time.

And the impression is given that Esau has by this point taken some sort of kingly position in the land of Seir for himself, rising to some measure of power. He also turns down Esau's offer of a bodyguard to be left with his company. And after having done all of this, Jacob comes to Succoth and builds a house and some booths for his cattle.

Once again, this may seem to be a strange, incidental detail. Why mention the building of a house at a place called Succoth? Well, if we read the story of the Exodus, it is a

place called Succoth that is the first place that Israel goes to after leaving Egypt. It's the place where they leave behind the houses in which they've celebrated Passover and dwell in booths.

It seems as if what's happening here for Jacob has a certain symmetry or similarity with what's happening with Israel later on. Jacob has undergone his own Exodus experience. He's been reduced in status.

He's been mistreated. He's been abused by someone who used to be favorable towards him. And then, God is with him.

God brings him out. He's pursued. There's a showdown.

And then there's also this struggle at the crossing of the water. And now that he's come out, he's going through other Exodus patterns. And here I think Israel is supposed to look back at characters like Jacob, as they do with Abraham, and see in these characters their own experience to recognize that what they're experiencing later on in history has resemblance with what their forefathers experienced.

They are walking in the footsteps of their ancestors. After this, he goes on to Shechem and buys the second tract of land that Israel owns within Canaan. No longer is it just the cave and field of Machpelah.

He also owns this place near Shechem. Shechem is another significant site in the story of Abraham. It's the first place that he goes to in the land, near the Oak of Moreh, and there he builds an altar.

And Jacob follows the same pattern. He arrives at this place. He pitches his tent.

He buys the land, and then he erects an altar and names it, for God, the God of Israel. This is a site that is, again, putting down roots in the land, anticipating the fulfillment of the promise that God first made at that place of Shechem to Abraham, that his descendants would own that land. And so, in that place, Jacob buys a tract of land.

A question to consider. In the story of this chapter, we see a transformation in the relationship between Esau and Jacob. A transformation that is made possible in large measure because of a prior transformation in the way that Jacob sees God's action and presence in his circumstances.

The changed way that he relates to God after wrestling with him enables him to change the way that he relates to other people. I would encourage you to reflect closely upon the difference that is made, and how exactly that difference is made. How does this encounter enable him to change the way that he views everything that has happened to him prior to that point, and the way that he relates to people going forward? One further detail of the story to reflect upon.



Jacob buys a parcel of land near Shechem. This is not the only time that we hear about this parcel of land. It's mentioned again at the end of the book of Joshua, where a significant event happens there.

What is that event, and why do you think it happens at that site? In Genesis chapter 34, Jacob has settled near Shechem, and has bought a parcel of land from Hamor, the father of Shechem. The story of the actions of Jacob's sons in Shechem that follow in this chapter are troubling on various fronts. Jacob seems to have put down some roots.

He's bought a parcel of land, and now his daughter Dinah goes out to meet with the women of the land. We might have a sense of unease at this point. We've had a number of previous stories of women being threatened as they go out and relate to the people of the land.

We might think of the story of Abimelech just a few chapters earlier in chapter 26, where he says that one of the people might easily have lain with your wife. Now, if it's that easy for someone to lie with an unwilling woman, as presumably Rebecca would have been, it seems that these were not safe places for women to be wandering around. So we might have a reasonable concern for Dinah's safety.

The chapter itself also sticks out in the wider context, so it's worth asking how it relates to the larger narrative as more than just a detached episode. As usual, to understand such a text, it's helpful to consider parallel texts, literary structures, broader themes, narrative movements, and other features that help us to place it more clearly. One of the things that can help us here is considering the way that the story is transitioning from the story of Jacob to the story of Jacob's sons.

And this story is focused upon the sons of Jacob and their sister Dinah. The way Dinah is introduced to us, though, is important. She's described as the daughter of Leah.

Not the daughter of Jacob, but the daughter of Leah. And later on we'll see this play off the fact that she is Jacob's daughter, she's also the daughter of Leah, and Simeon and Levi are described as her brothers. Now, why is this important? Leah is the unloved wife.

And the favouritism that Jacob has for Rachel over Leah is something that's playing out in the next generation already. His seeming lack of action or concern for the rape of his daughter Dinah is seen by his sons, quite legitimately, as a failure to take concern for their side of the family. Ironically, they are in certain ways playing out something that Jacob himself experienced.

Jacob was the unfavoured son himself, and now we see Jacob failing to break that cycle of favouritism. He has his own favoured side of the family, and he's failing to act on behalf of the unfavoured children. There are a number of stories of women in the book of Genesis being taken from their families by people of the land without consent.

Sarai is taken by Pharaoh, and later by Abimelech. Rebekah is almost taken by Abimelech, as we've discussed. Dinah can be placed within this larger pattern.

Shechem lies with her, but he also abducts her. It's not entirely clear whether this is a case of rape or seduction. The ways that we would characterise rape are not necessarily the ways that it would be characterised in Scripture.

So we have to be very careful of anachronistically reading our categories into the text. We have laws in Scripture that deal with these different sorts of situations in Deuteronomy 22, 28-29, and in Exodus 22, 16. We also have other stories like that of Tamar and Amnon in 2 Samuel 13, which speak of similar situations.

In the story of Amnon and Tamar, there is a case of rape, and Tamar sees the failure to actually regularise this relationship in some sort of marital arrangement as a compounding of the original sin or wrong that Amnon did to her. The fact that a victim of rape would actually want her rapist to marry her and see the failure of the rapist to marry her as a compounding of the wrong done to her is something that can be very difficult for us to understand. And so we do need to get inside the mindset of the culture to understand where exactly they were coming at this from.

Now while we know that the wronged woman had the right to veto any such arrangement, as did her father, and there was a duty to pay a price on the part of the rapist whether or not any relationship resulted, holding the rapist responsible to actually take the wronged woman as his wife was one of the possible resolutions of the situation that could be proposed. When thinking about such passages in scripture we need to be aware of a number of things. First of all we need to be aware of reading back our principles into the text in a way that fails to reckon with the world of the text itself and how that world operated, what the limitations that existed within that world were, and how the laws actually spoke to reality on the ground.

But on the other hand we need to resist the temptation to lightly cover over the difficulties of the text, not actually to do serious business with them. So these are questions that we need to wrestle with. We shouldn't just shrug them off.

We need to consider them carefully. In my experience the more that you deal with these questions carefully, the more satisfying and illuminating any possible resolution will be. Returning to the story in Genesis chapter 34, Jacob hears about the action of Shechem, but he holds his peace.

His son's here and they are incensed. Shechem has done an outrageous thing in Israel. This is an expression that we find elsewhere in the story of Amnon and Tamar in 2 Samuel chapter 13.

It's a strange thing to encounter here, to talk about an outrageous thing in Israel. It

almost seems anachronistic. Israel just has 12 children at this point that we know of.

Benjamin has not yet been born. And so to speak about this as an outrageous thing in Israel is to speak using the corporate name of the people when even Jacob is generally just called Jacob at this point. He's not yet called Israel on a regular basis.

This expression is found in a number of places in scripture, generally used of some sexual offence. And in just about every occasion where it's used, the person of whom it is spoken ends up losing their life because of their actions. Hamor and Shechem strike up negotiations.

Hamor desires a more political alliance between the clan of Jacob and the Shechemites, whereas Shechem's concern is to get Dinah. Jacob's sons propose that the Shechemites get circumcised, which will enable them to intermarry and form a collective people group. Hamor and Shechem then pitch that arrangement to their people as a political alliance, with no mention of Dinah's part in the story.

They give the suggestion that this will actually be a means by which they can take over the possessions of Israel. And Jacob's failure to stand up for his daughter Dinah leads to a breach in the family at this point. You should note the similarity with David again, who is displeased with Amnon for his actions towards Tamar in 2 Samuel chapter 13, but fails to take any action.

And the result of that is that Absalom takes vengeance for his sister. And there is again a breach within the family that results from that. Dinah, as I've already noted, seems to have been abducted, taken into Shechem's house.

And this puts Jacob and his sons in a weaker bargaining position. Hamor and Shechem hold the key card and it's very difficult perhaps for Jacob and his sons to stand against them. Which seems to be one of the reasons why Jacob's sons use deceit at this point.

They use a plot using the covenant sign of circumcision as a means of strategic warfare. So they get the Shechemites to circumcise themselves and when they're still in pain and disabled as a result of the circumcision, they attack and they seek to destroy the Shechemites and their city. They deliver Dinah and bring her back.

And at this point Jacob rebukes them for putting him and his people in a precarious position. And they challenge their father, though not as strongly as they might have done, for his failure to stand up for their sister. Note that they do not give the stronger accusation that they might have done if they said, should he treat your daughter like a prostitute, rather it's our sister.

At this point we may be seeing something of the divide in the family. That it's Simeon and Levi that will actually stand up for Dinah, not Dinah's father. Dinah's defining parent is Leah rather than Jacob and Jacob just does not seem to be acting on her behalf as he

ought to do.

This then is a passage in which we're seeing some of the cracks within the family of Jacob and the tensions that exist between the father, between the unloved sons and the favoured son, as we'll see later on in the story of Joseph. Levi and Simeon, the two brothers, are later judged for their actions in Genesis chapter 49. And Jacob talks about them hamstringing an ox.

What do they mean by hamstringing? Well, it seems to be a reference to what they do to Jacob. That he is the ox that is hamstrung by their action. The word for hamstrung and also the word for bringing trouble upon Jacob seem to be a play on words.

And here there is an association between their actions and the status of the ox, Jacob, within the land. Some other scholars have proposed that this story lies behind the restriction on yoking an ox with an ass. Hamor means ass and Jacob is associated with the ox and so they should not be unequally yoked.

That symbolic commandment then is a commandment against intermarriage. Looking at this passage we may see some other things as well. Some patterns that we saw in the story of Jacob being played out in the next generation.

We have someone who wants to marry a woman and will do anything to marry her. And then the marriage agreement not being able to be fulfilled for some reason. The use of deceit to get the desired end.

And the way in which this plays out reminds us of Jacob himself in certain respects. Jacob's sons are using the same sort of tactics that Jacob himself employed as the unfavoured son. And then also in other respects they seem to be playing parts that are similar to Laban.

As a final question to reflect upon, how might some of the associations, comparisons and similarities between the story of Jacob and the actions of his sons in this chapter help us to understand what's going on here and how it fits into the larger narrative. In chapter 35 of Genesis, following the blood bath at Shechem, Jacob is sent to Bethel to the place where God first appeared to him. Note that he is also retracing the original journey of Abraham who went from Haran to Shechem to Bethel.

He is returning to points where he left earlier as the story is going back to its origin. It's as I have said before a there and back again story and here he is on the return journey to arrive at the place where he began. Before he leaves Shechem, the people rededicate themselves to the Lord.

They put away foreign gods, purify themselves and change their garments. And the gods and the rings in their ears are buried beneath the terebinth tree in Shechem. Which clearly was a significant site of covenant remembrance as it also appears in the final

chapter of the book of Joshua.

In that story they forsake their foreign gods and place a large stone beneath the terebinth tree which is now next to the sanctuary of God. As we look through the story of Genesis we'll see that trees are natural pillars of remembrance, they're landmarks. It's one of the reasons why we so often see them mentioned in the Pentateuch.

On several occasions they're associated with altars. They also provide the blessing of shade like a cloud on a pillar, a tree with its canopy is something that has a natural symbolism to it. We continue that symbolism in the way that we design churches where you'll have the big trunk that is the pillar that holds up the roof and then the vaulting of the roof as the tree canopy that shades you.

And then the light coming through stained glass windows is like the light passing through the canopy of trees onto people beneath. So there are all sorts of symbolic associations that we see. And also with particular trees, the specific type of tree can represent a particular period of Israel's history.

The cypress, the oak, the terebinth associated with the oak or we might think about the acacia or the gopher wood that's used for the building of the ark. The vine or the fig tree. All of these have particular associations.

Even beyond particular types of trees we have specific trees like the oaks at Moreh or we have the oak or terebinth here at Shechem. And so these associations are very important in Scripture. Scripture is a book about specific things and it pays a lot of attention to specific places, the events that occur there, the ways that one set of events can be connected to another set of events and particular types of things in the world.

Not just trees as such but specific types of trees and their associations. So it's important that we pay attention to these things. God promised Jacob that he would bring him back to the land in Genesis chapter 28 at the site of Bethel.

And now he returns to the place of that promise. But not now a solitary individual escaping from his brother but surrounded by a large family, many people and extensive possessions returning home. God has made him rich in the land of Haran, Paddan Aram and now he's going to be returning to his family.

God places a terror on the cities so that they don't attack Jacob. It's a similar sort of thing that we see in the story of the exodus and the conquest of the land. That God goes before his people and he protects them.

After the events of Shechem it's not surprising that Jacob would need some protection. He certainly feels very vulnerable at the end. And here God prepares for that.

He gives protection as he walks on the way. When he arrives at Bethel he builds an altar

naming it for the God of Bethel. The God he first encountered on his way out to the land of Paddan Aram.

And the place still seems to be called Uz. And it's called Bethel in part in anticipation of its fully becoming that later. And it's at Bethel that Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, dies and is buried.

And she is probably the last remaining connection that Jacob has to his mother. Deborah seems to have accompanied Rebecca in chapter 24 as she goes down and meets with Isaac. But presumably after Rebecca's death, Rebecca seems to have died in this interim period, she goes back to the house of Laban in order to look after the favoured son of Rebecca.

And also to help him raise his children. There are other possibilities for how this might have worked out. But I would suspect that's the most likely situation.

But with the death of Deborah that one last remaining connection to his mother has gone. And so it's a tragic event for Jacob. It has a very deep personal significance to him.

Jacob has always been deeply connected with his mother and his mother's side of the family in his going to Paddan Aram to be with his uncle Laban. But now that tie has been cut and he has to move on. There's also a fulfilled transition here to Rachel and Leah as the new matriarchs.

It's no longer Rebecca as the key matriarch of the covenant people. Now it's Rachel and Leah. And that transition to the new generation is completed later on in this chapter with the death of Isaac.

God appears to Jacob again at Bethel and declares that he will be fruitful and multiply, will receive the land and the kings will come from his body. You might think that this is in certain ways playing out the pattern of the call to humanity to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth, to subdue it and to exercise dominion over its creatures. He will be fruitful and multiply.

He will receive the land that his people will fill. And then kings will come from his body which will both subdue the land and will give dominion over the land. And so this is the creation calling that's being fulfilled in this small context of the land of Israel.

God reiterates the changing of Jacob's name. And once again as in the case of Bethel, it seems that the name change anticipates things that are yet to fully take place. He still has to be made into a political entity.

Israel refers primarily to Jacob as he becomes a political entity. And that has yet to be fully realised. He sets up a pillar here and pours a drink offering and oil upon it.

It's in the place that God goes up from him. I would suggest that this is connected with the story of Jacob's ladder earlier on. That there is this ascending and descending at a particular point.

Elsewhere we see God going his way when he leaves talking with Abraham at the end of chapter 18 for instance. But here God doesn't go his way, rather he goes up. Which suggests that this site has a particular importance as a connection between heaven and earth.

As they travel on from Bethel, Rachel goes into labour but she dies before reaching Ephrath. She gives birth to a child who she calls Benoni whose name is then changed by his father to Benjamin. Think about Jacob's own name which was not a favourable name.

He was born under inauspicious conditions and his name that was given to him was later changed by God. And he changes the name of this second born son of his wife Rachel. She's buried there and a pillar is set up over her.

Once again Jacob is very strongly associated with stones. He's someone who sets up pillars, who gathers stones and who also removes stones as in the story of the well. After the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel, Jacob is referred in the next few verses as Israel.

Now his name has been changed before but we've not generally seen him referred to as Israel. And I wonder whether the connection with Benjamin who is the one who represents the tribe that will give rise to the first kings, whether that is seen as a transition into this more political identity. That Israel can now call himself Israel now that this son from which the first kings will arise has been born.

There have been ominous themes throughout the story of Rachel that maybe foreshadow this in different ways and different aspects of the event. First of all we can think about the way she's replaced by Leah. Her statement, give me sons or I die.

There's a certain foreshadowing there. The death sentence that's cast over her by Jacob when he's pursued by Laban. And then in a more positive way there's foreshadowing when she says in naming Joseph that the Lord would add to her another son.

And that's fulfilled in the words of the midwife to her who says do not fear you have another son. As we read further on in the story I think we'll see further ways in which Rachel's story foreshadows later events. Benjamin's story will be tragic like Rachel's in many respects.

They will almost be wiped out as a tribe at the end of the book of Judges. After this Reuben lies with Bilhah, his father's concubine, the handmaid of Rachel. Why do this? It seems that Reuben is the firstborn but the firstborn of the unfavoured mother.

Rachel has just had another son who has been favoured as the son of the father's right hand. And perhaps what Reuben is attempting to do here is an attempted coup. He humiliates his father but also presents himself as the man of the house.

The one who controls and protects the people within it. All the people of the household and the clan, the sheikdom. He's the one in charge.

Absalom does something very similar to his father's concubines in the book of 2 Samuel. It's again part of a coup, an attempt to gain power and assert his supremacy. Here I think Reuben might be spurred to his action by his recognition that his father prefers the sons of Rachel over him and his side of the family.

Once again we're seeing the tensions that arise within the family as a result of Jacob's favouring of Rachel over Leah. We've seen this already in the previous chapter in the story of Dinah and her two brothers. And now we're seeing it again in a far more ugly form.

What we're also seeing is that Reuben is disqualifying himself from the firstborn status by his action. If Simeon and Levi came under judgement because of what they did in chapter 34, here Reuben comes under judgement. Which means that the first three sons of Jacob have disqualified themselves in different ways.

At the end of this, Jacob's story finally comes full circle. This is why the list of his descendants is given at this point. It's the fulfilment of his journey and now things can move on to his sons.

Now that his journey has been completed, his twelve children have been born and he's returning to the house of his father. He finally comes to his father and Isaac finally dies. Before he departed for Paddan Aram, he was expecting his father's death was imminent.

But his father was still alive and so he returns and now his father dies. And at this point the brothers Jacob and Esau join together to bury their father. So they're reunited and their father finally dies.

Which calls our attention back to the events of chapter 27, now resolved. Esau has forgiven Jacob so he's no longer threatening to take his life as he once did when his intention was to take Jacob's life after the death of their father. Now they've come to peace.

Isaac dies at the age of 180. We've commented upon the significance of these numbers before. Abraham dies at 175, 7 times 5 squared.

Isaac dies at 180, which is 5 times 6 squared. Jacob will die at 147, 3 times 7 squared. And then Joseph will die at 5 squared plus 6 squared plus 7 squared.



So we're seeing a connection between these characters, an ongoing development. The numeric connection between the characters should alert us to the fact this is a continuing story. Generation after generation are building upon each other.

Just as we've seen that Jacob retreads the path of his father Abraham. And also he's retreading the path that he once walked himself. These are united stories, a single story developing generation after generation building on what has gone before.

A question to consider. The death of Rachel is an event that casts a shadow over the rest of scripture. How might a reading of Micah chapters 4 and 5, Jeremiah 31 and Matthew 2 make more sense against the background of this passage? In Genesis chapter 36 we have a chapter filled with what might perhaps be surprising material.

Yet we've already seen the pattern of a father dying, followed by the genealogy of his firstborn son, who was not the favoured son. And then followed by a longer textual treatment of the other son. So we see it in the case of Abraham dying and then Ishmael's genealogy is given, followed by the story of Jacob.

Here we have a similar pattern. Esau is connected with Edom here, as he was earlier on in chapter 25. That name, Red, was given to him in the context of his selling of the birthright for the red stew.

As we get through this chapter we'll see that Esau seems to get to everything first. He gets to kings and chiefs before Israel does, although his kings seem to be different from the kings that we see in the land of Israel. The genealogy here is a bit complicated by the fact that it isn't just one list of names.

Rather the lineage seems to be functioning in different spheres and there's also the descendants of the Horites that are listed. So we have a list of sons, followed by a list of chiefs. Then we have a list of sons of Seir the Horite, followed by a list of chiefs of the Horites.

Then we have the list of kings who reigned in the land of Edom. And then we have the name of the chiefs of Esau. So it's sons, chiefs, sons, chiefs, kings, chiefs.

So there's a literary pattern here. And also we can notice that this goes on quite some way into the future. Baal-Hanan is king at the same time as David.

And Hedar, or Hedar as he's called within 1 Kings, is a king who becomes a trouble to Israel at the time of Solomon. This suggests that this part of the text was inserted in at the time of Solomon, or maybe later. There are a few books of scripture where there is a long period of time that seems to intervene between the first writing of some of the texts that are involved in them to the final compilation of the finished book.

We can see that in something like the book of Psalms or Proverbs quite obviously. But

also in other parts of scripture that the bulk of the book was written and then later things were added at key points. As I will highlight in a moment though, these insertions are, I believe, important.

And they help us better to understand the meaning of the text. They are not to be seen as uninspired, certainly not. Rather they connect the meaning of the text and the import, the direction it's pointing to events many, many years down the line from that which is originally referred to.

There are parallels to be observed between Esau and his brother. We can think about the way in which Esau prospers in the land. And the way that that's described is similar to the way that Jacob's prospering is described within the land of Laban.

In chapter 31 verse 18, Jacob prospers in the land of Laban and then moves back into the promised land. Whereas for Esau it's a movement in the other direction. He prospers in the land and then moves out to the land of Edom.

Esau leaving the land is also a parting of ways that is similar to the parting of ways between Abraham and Lot. In chapter 13 verse 6, the land now belongs to Jacob. Throughout the story of Genesis we have a number of other characters whose identities play off against those of the promised people.

We can think about Lot and Abraham. There's a sort of diptych between the two of them, two frames that parallel the characters and contrast them. The characters of Ishmael and Isaac are also paralleled in such a way.

Cain and Abel earlier on within the story. And here Esau and Jacob play off against each other. And the nations that arise from them will have a similar sort of relationship.

When you think about brothers, brothers can play off against each other's identities and have rivalries. And we see some sort of rivalry or tension between characters such as Abraham and Lot in the nations that descend from them, Moab and Ammon and then Israel. But we also see it in the story of Esau and Jacob and Edom and Israel.

But that relationship is closer. They're not just brothers. They are twins.

And twins, their identity are entangled or connected far more closely than in the case of mere brothers. So Israel's story and Edom's story are connected in sometimes surreal ways. There are close parallels.

And the more that we look at these two characters, the more we'll see that Israel is supposed to see itself in Edom, to internalise certain aspects of Edom, but also to remain distinct from and separate from Edom. That rivalry that the ancestors have, Esau and Jacob, is going to be expressed in various ways in their descendants with this other kingdom that's very close and at certain points becomes part of the kingdom of Israel

itself. In the story of David, where David takes over the land of Edom and he in himself takes on characters of Esau.

Note that David is the only other character in scripture apart from Esau who's described as ruddy. And then at other points he seems to be like Esau. He's the one who comes with 400 men to attack Nabal.

Now Nabal is Laban backwards but Abigail sends a wave of gifts ahead and pacifies him. So there are relationships between David and Esau and then between the two nations of Edom and Israel. I'll get into that bit more in a moment.

Esau seems to have conquered the land of Seir and intermarried with the Horites. There's a merging of peoples here. Notice the presence of Anna and Zibion, the fathers of his two Canaanite wives.

Timnah becomes a concubine of Eliphaz, Esau's son, which suggests a reduction in status, that the Horites have been subdued by this greater people. Now once again we need to remember that Esau and Jacob, Isaac, Abraham, they're not just small groups of people. They are large sheikdoms.

They're surrounded with many men and women and they're supporting great people groups that are wandering around with them. Esau comes with 400 fighting men to meet Jacob. Even back in chapter 14, Abraham had 318 fighting men and was able to drive away kings.

Now this suggests that these were powerful sheikdoms and that both Esau and Jacob were able to command significant influence within their regions. The reference to chiefs and kings underlines this fact, that these are political entities, that Esau is Edom, the nation, the political entity, and Jacob is Israel, once again a political entity. Edom is based below Israel, towards the south east, and their patterns of stories are often very similar.

However Esau seems to reach some of the landmarks before Israel. They have kings before Israel. Their kings don't seem to be dynastic rulers, rather they're maybe chiefs set above the rest of the people.

They come from different cities. They are not descended from each other. But there are similarities.

So for instance there is Saul of Rehoboth, or Shaul as it's written within the text here, but it's the same word as Saul. And this Edomite king was king at the same time as Israel chose Saul. When Israel says let us have a king like those of the nations, they end up with a king called Saul.

A king that has the same name as the king of their twin nation, Edom, down south. It

might be interesting to consider why we're reading about kings at this particular point in the story. In the previous chapter Benjamin has been born, immediately after Jacob is promised that kings will come from his loins.

Now that promise is one that is fulfilled with the first king, a Benjamite, Saul. And there seem to be a number of connections between Benjamin, Saul, and Edom, or Esau. Who was the first king of the Edomites? Bela, son of Beel.

Who was the first son of Benjamin? Bela. There seems to be a connection there. We read about someone looking after his father's donkeys and finding a spring.

In the story of 1 Samuel, it's while looking for his father's donkeys and coming to a well that Saul is led to become the king. To be selected as the one who will take the rule of Israel. And Saul himself takes on the character of Esau.

We could maybe call him Esau. He's someone who despises his birthright. There are a number of scenes within the story of Saul where he's playing out the pattern of Esau.

There is the story of him in the darkness of the cave. And then again in the darkness of his sleep with the items taken from above his head. Is that your voice, David, my son? Playing out the story of the lost blessing.

And then what is his response? He lifts up his voice and weeps. The response that Esau had after he found that he had lost the blessing. And these stories are playing out against the backdrop of Genesis.

And in a way that connects the character of Saul, the Benjamite, with Esau. And so Israel's identity is always playing off its twin. Maybe this is why there is so much attention given to the genealogy of Edom in this place.

We can see further parallels between Edom and Israel in stories such as that of Hadar or Hadad. If you look in 1 Chronicles 1 verse 50, you'll see him described as Hadad. If Hadad is the Hadad of 1 Kings chapter 11, then he is someone who goes through the experience of Israel.

Joab tries to kill the baby boys of the land of Edom as David takes over that land. Hadad is brought down to Egypt where he marries and settles. And then he comes back to Edom at a later point and causes trouble for Solomon.

This is a similar pattern to Israel's experience under Pharaoh and its return to the land. So Saul ends up taking on the character of Esau and also some of the Edomites end up taking on the character of Israel. The character of Amalek in particular is mentioned within this chapter as Amalek was the great rival.

The brother that sought to destroy them as they came out of Egypt. And the struggle

with the Amalekites is one that plays out throughout the rest of scripture in various ways. We see it in the story of the Exodus.

We see it in the story of Saul. Indeed Saul's failure, the reason why he loses the kingdom, is in part his failure to deal with the Amalekites. Later on in the story of Esther, we see that Haman is an Agagite.

And Esther and Mordecai are Benjamites. Again, the Benjamites have to deal with the Amalekites. In the New Testament, we have another Edomite character in Herod, the Idumean.

And in his opposition to Christ and John the Baptist, we may be seeing more of this old rivalry of the twins playing out. A question to reflect upon. A number of the characters mentioned here have tantalizing connections to other characters in scripture.

We read of Bela, the son of Beor. Is that the same person as Balaam, the son of Beor? Is he connected with Balaam in some way? We don't know. Again, some people have seen in the character of Jobab the historical character of Job.

At the very least, it would seem that Job is connected with the land of Edom. In Lamentations 4, verse 21, Edom and the land of Uz are connected together. What other clues within this passage might connect the story of Job with the land of Edom? In Genesis 37, Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt.

This story, perhaps more than any other in Genesis, is a story where we need to hear the stories behind the story. The phenomenon of stories behind stories is something we find in Genesis and elsewhere in scripture. It is very important that we listen carefully to the words that are chosen, the details that are referenced, the patterns that are followed, because all of these things can highlight what is beneath the surface.

Before we consider the events of Genesis 37, we should get some of the background in mind again. Laban mixed up his two daughters and gave Jacob Leah instead of Rachel. Leah was not loved, Rachel was loved, and there was a rivalry between the two sisters.

Now, they resolved that rivalry, but the next generation, you can see that rivalry continue. Jacob seems to favour his children through Rachel over the children through Leah. When Dinah, his daughter through Leah, is raped, he does not take action.

It has to be Simeon and Levi, her brothers, who take the action to resolve the situation. Even when he is going to encounter Esau, he sends the handmaid's children and the children of Leah ahead of the children of Rachel. It is very clear that Rachel is the wife that really matters and her child is more important than the others.

So, these issues have already been bubbling beneath the surface. And now, those tensions are greatly aggravated by the actions and words of Joseph, along with the way

that his father treats him. Within this chapter, then, there are a series of aggravations.

First of all, he brings back a bad report on the sons of the handmaids. The bad report is language that is associated with spying. The spies, as they go into the land of Canaan, they bring back a bad report.

So, he is acting as a tattletale, a spy for his father upon the brothers, and you can imagine that serves as an aggravation. But he is not just loved over his brothers, he is favoured over them. So, you can imagine a father loving one child more than another, but treating them all equally.

That is one thing. But if the father loves one child more than the other, and then favours that child, gives them greater gifts, gives them special privileges, then that is a greater aggravation. Particularly, as in Joseph's case, it seems that Joseph is being treated as if he were the firstborn.

So, this is the second aggravation. The first one is him bringing back a bad report, acting as a tattletale for his father. And then, the second one, he is being treated as the firstborn, he is being favoured over them, he is being given this tunic in many colours.

And then there is the third aggravation. He has a dream, and then he tells it to his brothers. It is one thing to have a dream, it is quite another to try and put salt in a wound, and to stress his superiority and his privilege over his brothers.

But that is exactly what he does. And then, as if that is not bad enough, there is a fourth aggravation. As he has a further dream, and tells it to his father, about the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him, which Jacob instantly sees that that is a reference to him, to the mother, and also to the eleven brothers.

Now this raises the question of chronology, because Rachel died in chapter 35. And maybe, is this text out of order? Is this something that happened a few years previously, that is setting part of the background for what happens in the later part of the chapter? It could be. But then you also have the question of why eleven stars bowing down to him, when Benjamin was not yet born? Who is the eleventh son? Could it be that Rachel is pregnant at this time, but they haven't yet moved? These are possibilities.

It also could be the case that Leah is now treated as his step-mom, or maybe Bilhah. And so, these questions of chronology are worth considering. The brothers are angry with Joseph.

But it seems at this point that his father is also angry. And you can see maybe why he's angry. He's thought of Joseph as his favoured son, and he has treated Joseph as if he were his firstborn.

But now, it seems that Joseph might be getting ideas above his station. Is Jacob himself

going to bow down to Joseph? Is Joseph truly loyal? Or is he in it for himself? And that question of loyalty is a common theme within Joseph's life. Loyalty is perhaps Joseph's defining trait, and also a theme that runs throughout the story.

Joseph is a loyal son to his father, then he's a loyal servant to Potphar, then he's a loyal prisoner within the prison, working for the guard. Then he's finally a loyal servant and second-in-command to Pharaoh. And so, this question of loyalty is hanging in the background.

What does good loyalty look like? Is Joseph really loyal? Or is his apparent loyalty just a means to an end of his self-serving? Is he able to be loyal when loyalty will be costly to him? Is he able to be loyal when being loyal might make him appear disloyal? All of these are questions throughout the story of Joseph, and we need to be attentive to this theme. The events described then may have occurred before they moved to Hebron, but when he is sent out to his brothers, they have moved to Hebron by that point. Joseph is sent by Jacob to his brothers to see whether things are peaceful with them.

But yet, a few verses earlier, we've been told that his brothers cannot speak peacefully to him. We might then ask the question of whether Jacob is testing Joseph. Is he trying to see whether Joseph is truly loyal by sending him on a mission that appears dangerous and seeing whether he will go ahead? Now, the interesting thing is he's sent on this mission to a particular location, and the brothers are not in the location.

Indeed, they're 50 miles further on, and it's only by chance, an encounter with this man while he's wandering in the field, that he discovers that they have gone on to Dothan. This man just happened to overhear their plans. There is then the possibility that Jacob is setting up a test of loyalty.

There are ominous themes here. When he speaks to Joseph, Joseph says, It's the same language that Abraham uses to God when God tests him. Shechem is an ominous site too.

It seems that they still have association with the area, even after they've moved on. But there has been a bloodbath there. The brothers have massacred the Shechemites.

And then there are echoes of the testing of Abraham here. Does Abraham fear God? Does Joseph fear and honour his father enough to undertake a dangerous mission? And as we go through the text, we'll see a lot of other echoes of the story of Abraham. They see him afar off.

There's the statement, And then they lift up their eyes and they see an alternative, the Ishmaelites coming towards them. Just as Abraham lifted up his eyes and he saw the ram caught in the thicket. So there's something of the story of Abraham playing out here beneath the surface.

As I mentioned, a story beneath the story. But it's not the only one that's playing out here. There's also the story of Hagar and Ishmael that we saw in chapter 21.

In that story, Hagar is sent out with a skin of wine and some bread on her shoulder. And the word for shoulder is the same word as is used being sent towards Shechem. She wanders in the wilderness and is lost, much as Joseph ends up wandering in the field before he is met by this man who directs him in the direction that he needs to go to see his brothers.

The water in the skin is empty. Later on, the water in the pit is empty. They cast down Joseph into the pit.

Ishmael is cast down beneath the bush. And then Hagar goes at a distance so that she will not see her son die. And the brothers, reading between the lines of the text, go at some distance from Joseph so they can't hear and see him in order to have this meal together.

Then, lo and behold, who comes on the scene but Ishmaelites, connecting again the story of Joseph with the story of Ishmael. They bring him down to Egypt. In chapter 21, that's where Hagar and Ishmael went after they were delivered by the angel.

And then, as they go down to Egypt, Ishmael marries there and settles there, just as Joseph ends up doing. So there are all these parallels between the story of Joseph and the story of Hagar and Ishmael. We've already seen some with the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac.

But now there's another set. A further thing to notice, camels come from Gilead. Now, where have we seen Gilead before? We've seen Gilead in the story of Laban's pursuit of Jacob.

And at Gilead, Rachel is seated upon the camel and she hides the teraphim when it's searched and a death sentence is cast upon her. We'll return to that story in a moment. But here it's important just to notice these stories beneath the story.

These ways in which previous events are coming to the surface, coming to the surface in ways that disclose deeper meaning within this text. We'll get to one final background text in a moment. But who took Joseph out of the pit? It seems, in most people's understanding, that it was the brothers.

But yet in this translation it captures something more of the original text, which suggests that it was not the brothers but the Midianites who took Joseph out of the pit. Now, the Midianites seem to be a different group from the Ishmaelites. And the Midianites take Joseph out of the pit and they sell him to the Ishmaelites.

Now, what appears to be the case is that Joseph is out of the sight of the brothers, out of



hearing, and they see the Ishmaelites coming from a distance. And they think we'll sell him to the Ishmaelites. But maybe on the other side of the hill the Midianites come across this pit with this lad within it, take him out, and then they bring the lad to the Ishmaelites, sell him to the Ishmaelites, and then the Ishmaelites bring him down into Egypt with the caravan.

Reuben, has Reuben been away from his brothers? Probably not. He's been eating with his brothers. He's the first to the pit.

He arrives at the pit and he sees that it's empty, it's a crisis. And so he goes to the brothers and brings them the news of the situation, which they did not know beforehand. This is an unexpected development.

And so they have to come across a different plan in order to deal with this turn in events. They've already gone through a series of different plans. The first plan was to kill him and cast him in a pit.

Then Reuben suggests to save his life that they cast him into a pit and abandon him there. And then Judas suggests that they sell him to the Ishmaelites. So maybe if they were given a bit more time, they would have rejected all those plans and delivered him.

But the time was not afforded to them. And the Ishmaelites took Joseph down into Egypt as he was sold to them by the Midianites. It's worth bearing in mind some of the chance occurrences that happen within this text.

First of all, we've had this random person in the fields in Shechem who's overheard the plans of the brothers and is able to give it to Joseph. What is that character doing there? What bad luck for Joseph? And then later on we have another situation where there just happens to be these Midianites on the scene, completely unbeknownst to the brothers. Once again it might appear that Joseph is just having very bad luck or things just aren't working out for him.

And Reuben, although Reuben was going to deliver him, can't actually fulfil that plan. But when we go further on in the story, Joseph tells his brothers that whatever their intention, God had an intention for him to go down to Egypt. And in these sorts of events and details of the story, there's a suggestion that there's some other hand involved.

Some providential purpose that's leading these chance occurrences to the end of Joseph going down into Egypt. And going down into Egypt in a significant manner, in a way that will bring all these resonances of previous stories. He's cast into a pit.

Later on he will be cast into another thing described as a pit, the dungeon. Which suggests that we're supposed to hold these two things together, that there's a parallel between the two of them. Now, when the brothers later talk about the actions that they did concerning Joseph, they lament the fact that they did not listen to his cries.

Not that they sold him, which is interesting. Joseph may have thought that they sold him, but it does not seem to be the case that they actually sold him directly. They set up the situation so they were responsible for the act of selling him down into Egypt.

But they do not seem to have been the ones that received the money. The plan now becomes, this is the fourth plan that they've arrived at, that they take the robe of Joseph and put the blood of a goat on it and present it to their father. And see whether he recognises it, that he acknowledges that it belongs to his son.

And so they do that. Now, again, there's a story playing in the background here. Once again, we are seeing a story of a goat and a coat and of a father being deceived concerning his favoured son.

The sons are using the same sort of deception that Jacob used with his father Isaac, where he used a goat to disguise the fact that he was not the favoured son. And he wore his brother's garment. And so he's being deceived in the same way.

There's another thing going on here. The garment is presented with this bloodied garment. And this is maybe reminiscent of Rachel in the Terraphine.

If she had gotten up, what would you have seen? A bloodied garment. And the words that Jacob uses at this point again harken back to that event where the Terraphine were taken. He says, Teroth, Terath, he's surely torn.

And that reference would seem, put those words together, what do you get? Terraphine. There seems to be some parallel, some way in which it's playing off that earlier story. The camels have come from Gilead and they're going to take this son of Rachel and they're going to bring him into Egypt.

This death sentence that was cast upon the mother is coming back to haunt the child. And we'll see again later on in the story a similar thing happens to Benjamin. These stories in the background are important then.

So there's the story of the mother, the story of Rachel playing in the background, and the death sentence that was cast over the person who had the Terraphine at Gilead. And she was seated upon the camel. Now the camel has come from Gilead and the torn son reminds of the Terraphine.

The next story in the background is the story of Isaac being deceived by Jacob. And now Jacob is deceived by his sons concerning his favoured son using a goat and a coat. And then there's a third story.

That third story is the story of Abraham and his being tested by God in Genesis chapter 22. A number of references to that. And then the final story is the story of Hagar and Ishmael.

And that story I think is particularly important. In the story of Hagar and Ishmael we have an Egyptian maidservant that is eventually cast out. And the casting out of this son is a tragic event and there's a lot of injustice in that event.

But now we see a son of Jacob who is associated with the characters of Hagar and Ishmael. And he is sent down into Egypt. He's sent down into Egypt with the Ishmaelites.

There's an association between them here. And it will only be as Israel starts to see itself in the characters of Hagar and Ishmael that they will be able to be released, delivered and enter into the Promised Land. They will have to as Hagar was an Egyptian maidservant afflicted as a servant and a stranger within the land and the household of the Hebrews.

The Hebrews will have to be afflicted as strangers within the land of Egypt. And as they see themselves in that position they will be redeemed. And they will bring that pattern to full completion.

There will be a redemption of Hagar and Ishmael in some sense through this story. The story of Joseph going down to Egypt is a story that casts a shadow into the New Testament as well. Jesus is born as the son of Joseph, the son of Jacob.

Again we've seen a character called Joseph the son of Jacob before. And yet Jesus' father is called that name. He has dreams and he takes his son down into Egypt to deliver him and then brings him back to the land later on.

Jesus is the Messiah who visits his brethren. He's hated by them. He's betrayed, sold into the hands of the Gentiles and he's ultimately brought down to the pit.

There's a conspiracy and betrayal with his brother Judas or Judah. He's rejected and expelled by his brethren, his people, and they cast him out. He's sold for pieces of silver.

He's stripped of his robe. He descends into the pit but later rises again from the dead. He rises up, sits at the right hand of power.

He delivers his brethren and his brethren bow to him. The story of Joseph then provides a paradigm for understanding the story of Christ. Two questions to consider.

First of all, in Deuteronomy chapter 21 verses 15 to 17 we find a law that seems to reflect upon this story in Genesis. What insights can this law give us concerning the story? And what are some of the ways in which it picks up upon the language of Genesis in this chapter and elsewhere? The second question. What are some of the parallels between this story and the story of David in 1 Samuel chapter 17? And what might these parallels teach us? Genesis 38 is perhaps one of the most remarkable passages in the whole book of Genesis.

Many people have dismissed it regarding it as a later insertion into the text, interrupting the flow of the passage. So in chapter 37 verse 36 we read, Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard. And then you have the resumptive statement in chapter 39 verse 1. Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had brought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there.

Now it seems very strange that we'd have this whole passage devoted to another story entirely, interrupting the drama of the Joseph narrative. What is it doing here? It seems to be a very odd thing in its context. Properly to understand the presence and purpose of this text, we probably need to consider the musical character of text, the way that they're playing with particular themes, developing certain contrasts and other things like that.

And as we see what the text is doing on this front, it'll become more clear that it belongs exactly where it is. Joseph has just been sold down into Egypt and Judah was the leader of the brothers in the plan to do so. Judah's plan presumed that Jacob would get over things fairly quickly, that Jacob would hear the news of his son's death, think of it as a great tragedy, mourn him for a few months and then get over things with the love of his family.

But yet that doesn't happen. Jacob is going to descend to his grave in mourning. Indeed, there are three stories of descent alongside each other.

There's the descent of the father to the grave in mourning, there's the descent of Joseph into Egypt, and then there's the descent of Judah. And Judah descends from his brothers to a different location, maybe from the hill country to the plains, but then he also loses standing. He's no longer among his brothers anymore.

He used to be the leader of his brothers but perhaps after the failure of the plan, he is reduced to a lower status and to a certain degree of exile. And as we follow the passage through, we'll see a different sort of descent playing out as well. There are further connections between this passage and the passages surrounding it.

There's been a deception of the father using a goat and a coat. We see a very similar thing in this story. There's another goat involved, there's another act of deception and disguise.

Judah is also being contrasted with the character of Joseph. In the next chapter, Joseph will resist the advances of Potiphar's wife, but here in this chapter, Judah goes into a prostitute. There are many parallels between these stories.

In both cases, garments or items of possession are taken and later on presented as evidence. In Joseph's case, it's the garment that's taken from him and presented as

evidence of his sexual advances to Potiphar's wife. And in the case of Judah, it's his signet, cord and staff.

And there are further connections with the previous chapter as well. Judah has been involved in an act presenting tokens, seemingly of Joseph's death to his father, and says, please identify. At the end of this chapter, he's presented with tokens of his own sin and told, please identify.

As we explore such connections, it will become more apparent why this text is here. It's dealing with the themes of the surrounding texts. It's contrasting Joseph and Judah.

And it's also presenting the consequences and the outworking of Judah's sin in the previous chapter and showing how he might be involved in some sort of redemptive cycle. Judah descends from the brothers and he loses his status and his honour, but he also loses a number of members of his family. He loses Ur, his oldest son.

He loses Onan, his second oldest son. And then he ends up losing his wife as well, the daughter of Shewa. Then after being consoled concerning her death, he has illicit relations with a seeming prostitute and he's divested of personal items, which are later presented as evidence against him.

We might recognise some patterns here. In some respects, Judah is playing out the pattern of Esau. Esau was one who married a Canaanite.

He despises his birthright, the tokens of his office and rule, and he's deceived in a way that leads him to give up his title. After the death of the wicked son Ur, Onan fails to perform the duty of a brother-in-law to Tamar, to raise up children for his brother. And what happens is he violates and dishonours Tamar and his brother's memory.

He refuses to have proper, completed sexual relations with her, and the result is that he is killed by the Lord in consequence of his sin. But yet, Tamar appears like a black widow character. The truth, of course, is that Tamar isn't at fault.

It's the sin of Ur and then the sin of Onan. But to Judah's mind, Tamar is responsible for the death of his oldest two sons and he's in no hurry to give his youngest son, Shelah, to her. Judah's wife dies and he is consoled.

Now you may think about some of the contrast here. His father lost a son and could not be consoled, and the previous chapter ended on this great note of mourning. But the chapter that follows is full of death, and yet the mourning seems to be fairly brief by comparison.

In addition to the contrast, though, we may see some of the pattern of poetic justice playing out. A few chapters later, Reuben will say to his father, kill my two sons if I do not bring Benjamin back to you. Now Judah is responsible for the death, or the seeming

death, of Joseph, at least as his father understands the situation.

And now the chapter begins straight afterwards with him losing two of his own sons. Maybe we're supposed to see some poetic justice playing out here. Judah goes up to celebrate sheep shearing at Timnah, and Tamar goes to Enaim, meaning two springs, and maybe there's an intertextual connection with Dothan, meaning two wells, in the previous chapter.

And she situates herself on the way to Timnah at this particular location. Tamar seems to know that Judah will take the bait of a harlot, and this certainly does not commend his character to us. She doesn't seem to have to initiate anything on that front.

And there's a strange part of this chapter where you have all these details of the negotiation with the harlot, the two-stage negotiation, first payment with a pledge, and then the proper full payment when the pledge is restored. Now why on earth would the author of Genesis give us all these details about negotiations with a harlot? It just seems strange. But yet it seems to be part of the point of the chapter.

What has Tamar been waiting for? She's been waiting for Judah to give her a kid. And we can see throughout the book of Genesis there are associations with children and kids. The kids should be presented, but there is no kid.

In the previous chapter there was a kid, blood presented on the tunic to the father, and someone divested of personal items and a goat being used. But Judah has failed to give her, Shelah, his youngest son. And so there's a certain poetry to what's taking place here as well.

The kid should have been given to her, but no kid has been given. Judah, as pledged, gives his seal, his cord, and his staff. And these are associated with signs of office.

They're identifying items of his rule. And you might compare them with his passport and his credit card, but there seems to be something a bit more than that going on here. These are signs of authority, not just his ability to buy things and tokens of his identity.

They're something that signify his office. As in the story of Jacob and Esau, this is a great despising of the birthright. In this episode, Judah, like his uncle Esau, readily gives up something that should be valued above everything else.

And he despises his birthright in that respect. Let's step back and consider the movement of time in this passage. Indeed, the span of time covered in this passage is one of the most peculiar things about it, especially as it's interrupting a narrative in which there is no temporal break.

Think about what happens. Judah goes down from his brothers. He goes with Hiram the Adolamite, and he ends up marrying the daughter of Shewa.

He then has three sons by her, one after another, in different locations. Then his oldest reaches the age where he can marry, and then he marries Tamar. Then he dies.

Then Onan takes Tamar. Then he dies. And then Shelah grows all the way up and is not given to Tamar.

And then Judah's wife dies. He's consoled after her death. And he goes up to Timnah.

Now, all of that span of time must take at least 40 years or so. And yet, it's in this particular point in the narrative, it seems very strange. But what we should be noticing is how quickly all this time is passing.

About 40 years passing just in the span of a few verses. In a narrative where there is generally a lot of text given to fairly brief spans of time. Judah's house is dying, and he is wasting his life.

And it takes the action of Tamar to interrupt this freefall. But not before bringing Judah down to his lowest point, the rock-bottom point, where he gives away the last things that he really has to him. The goat that Judah sends in payment fails to reach its destination.

And this seems to be part of the point, both of Tamar's plan and of the textual meaning. It is a symbolic playing out of Judah's sin from the previous chapter, and also of his failure to give Shelah to Tamar. After the fact that Tamar is pregnant is discovered, there is a rash judgement from Judah.

Judah declares that she should be burnt. And Judah could cover up, but he confesses. It's a you are the man moment.

Tamar has been the scapegoat throughout the story to this point, but now she is finally vindicated. And Judah confesses. We should note that confession and praise are both associated with his name.

And he receives back his tokens of identity. The same expression, please identify, that's used of the tokens of Joseph's identity in the previous chapter. And we should not miss the comparison.

He gains two children, Perez and Zerah. He's lost two children at the beginning of the chapter. At the end of the chapter he receives two sons back.

And there's a possible connection here with Tamar being found at Eneim, meaning two springs. The two twins are switched in order. The scarlet-cord twin is replaced as the firstborn.

The kid associated with the red colour. Joseph's sons are also switched in order later in the story. This might make us think more about the story of Jacob and Esau.

The seeming Esau character is not the first one out in this instance. There's a reversing of that pattern. Other thing to notice, Perez or Peratz, breaking out, breaking away, pressing, etc.

is a key term in the Jacob and David narratives. So Jacob breaks forth in a multitude and he breaks away at the time of sheep shearing. In the story of Nabal in chapter 25 of 1 Samuel, Nabal talks about all these people breaking away from their masters at the time of sheep shearing.

Again, sheep shearing and again, Peratz. In 2 Samuel chapter 13, Absalom presses, same verb, David and Amnon to go to the sheep shearing festival that he holds to avenge his sister Tamar. So there are all these different connections that are worth paying attention to.

There are themes here that also fit in with the larger narrative of Joseph. There are sons lost and there's collateral given to someone in disguise. Joseph is lost to Egypt, then Simeon is lost to Egypt.

And Jacob must give Benjamin to the masked man in order to receive Simeon and Joseph back. In the same way, Judah must give Sheolah to Tamar, give the kid to Tamar, in order to receive back the lost sons. So he gets two lost sons back at the end.

Again, there's need for confession in order to receive that collateral back. The brothers have to confess their sin in order to receive back Simeon and Joseph. You can think of parallels with the story of Lot and his daughters.

As they think that their father's line will die out in the world and they take action to rectify the situation as they see it. Other things to notice, women deceiving the serpent type figure. Judah is not the righteous person in this story and he's deceived by his daughter-in-law.

And that follows a pattern that we've seen more generally in scripture. Michael deceiving Saul, Rachel deceiving Laban, Jael deceiving Sisera, Haman being deceived by Esther. In each of these cases there's a reversal of the pattern of the fall where the woman was deceived by the serpent.

Now the serpents are being deceived by the woman. Other connections with biblical stories. We might think of the story of Rahab, the prostitute.

Tamar dresses up as a prostitute. Jericho is called the city of palms and is burned with fire. Tamar means palm and she's threatened with being burned with fire.

There's a scarlet thread in both stories. There's a scarlet thread associated with the window and two spies rescued through it. Now is that connected with Tamar having two children? Perhaps.



It's not one I've put a lot of emphasis upon but it's a possibility. Think of the story of Ruth as well. Two dead sons and a dead spouse at the beginning of the story.

Returning to a father's house. Returning to a mother's house in the case of Ruth. Returning to a father's house in the case of Tamar.

Faithful women performing leveret marriage to restore a house that's been brought down to death. A young woman taking the place of an older woman and an older man taking the place of a younger man. Children being too young to be given for leveret marriage.

The failure of the near kinsman to do his duty. Ruth is the Moabites, a descendant of the woman who slept with her father to raise up seed and deliver the house of an unfaithful man from death. And the end of the book of Ruth foregrounds Tamar.

May your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah. So in all these ways these stories are connected together and the exact full picture of the connection escapes me. But there is very clearly something redemptive going on here.

That the story of Tamar is one that plays out later on in scripture. Tamar in the story of David is his daughter. She's associated with a multi-coloured coat.

She suffers a terrible fate and remains in the house of Absalom. There are events at the time of sheep shearing. Absalom, like Judah, has three sons and a daughter called Tamar himself.

So these stories are playing out again and again. Maybe think even of the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement begins in chapter 16 with the death of Nadab and Abihu.

The death of the two sons. Sending a goat by the hand of a suitable man. It's a day of mourning in the same way as Judah's story is one of mourning.

There's the divesting of Judah of his signs of office. The high priest is divested of his signs of office. There are twin goats, one distinguished by a scarlet cord within tradition.

You see that in William Hulman Hunt's painting of the scapegoat. This would not probably be the first time that we encountered these themes in the book of Genesis. In Genesis chapter 21 and 22 you have two parallel stories.

One kid being sent off into the wilderness by the hand of Hagar. And then one kid being presented on the mountain of the Lord, the Temple Mountain. It's a Day of Atonement pattern.

See the same thing in the story of Esau and Jacob. Two kids. One used to disguise Jacob as his brother Esau.

And the other used as food for the stew. In that story one of the brothers goes to the house of God and relates to God in that place where God goes up and down. And then the other brother is sent away from the fat of the land into the wilderness as it were.

And so there are these Day of Atonement themes playing out in the story more generally. And the Day of Atonement is also a day of confession leading to restoration which is what we see in the story of Judah. So I suspect there are connections here.

It's worth thinking about. If you see anything more that fills these pictures out please mention them to me. Because I don't know how to fit all these pieces together.

But they are exciting I think. Two questions to consider. First of all, what connections can you see between the story of Judah and Tamar in chapter 38 of Genesis and the story of Samson in Judges chapter 14 and 15? And the second question, why is Hira the Adolamite in this story? We don't read much about Adolam apart from the story of David.

And Hira the Adolamite is this friend who appears in three episodes in the story. But he doesn't seem to have much significance beyond that. His role seems fairly incidental throughout.

Yet he's named on these three occasions. Do you have any idea what he's doing here? In Genesis 39 it is once again extremely important that we read it alongside the passages that surround it. Chapters 37, 38 and 39 belong very much together.

In chapter 37 a garment is stripped from Joseph. He is cast into a pit and the garment is later presented as evidence. In the chapters that follow there is a story of goats and disguise.

And we see the same thing in the story of Joseph in chapter 37. This is the third iteration of some of these themes. And it highlights the entangled themes of Judah and Joseph and the ways that their stories and their characters are bound up together and playing off against each other as a sort of diptych.

Joseph once again is the favoured son in this situation. He's the favoured servant. He has things entrusted into his hands.

Judah is tempted to lie with a woman in chapter 38 and he gives in to that temptation. But when Joseph is tempted by part of his wife he resists. In both cases personal items are taken and later produced in evidence.

In the case of Judah it's the cord, the staff and the signet. And in the case of Joseph it's his garment. The story of chapter 39 is bookended by two statements.

In verses 1 to 6 and then in verses 20 to 23. In both of these sections we see the same sorts of patterns played out. Joseph is taken down to Egypt.

Joseph is placed in the jail. God is with him. God is with him in the house.

God is with him in the jail. He finds favour in the sight of Potiphar. He finds favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison.

All things are entrusted to his oversight in both situations. Potiphar does not concern himself with the property that he has entrusted in Joseph's hand. And the keeper of the prison pays no attention to anything in Joseph's charge.

God causes everything that Joseph does to prosper at the beginning and at the end. And so even in the most dramatic change in Joseph's condition there is still great continuity. And continuity also with what we see in chapter 37.

This recalls in some ways the story of Jacob in Laban's house. Where even as his external condition deteriorates and he's brought into a greater state of servitude. He still rises and is blessed and is made to prosper.

God blesses Jacob even in servitude and the same is true with Joseph his son. There are two temptation scenes with Potiphar's wife. In the first she comes and lifts up her eyes on Joseph and says lie with me.

He refuses and he gives three reasons. First of all his master's trust and his trustworthiness in response. Second the fact that she is the one thing that has been held back from him.

And then third the fact that he cannot do this thing and sin against God. Now this is a forbidden fruit story. Potiphar is like God in this situation and Joseph is like Adam.

Joseph sees himself as responsible to a higher master though. And the theme of loyalty in Joseph's story is an important one. The question of to whom is he loyal? Is he going to be faithful or is he going to be someone who is in it for himself? He is the one who exemplifies wisdom in the garden.

He resists temptation and he exercises shrewdness and wisdom and things prosper in his hands. Under the rule of a father figure. Just as in the Garden of Eden there is just one thing that is forbidden to him.

And he refuses to take the forbidden fruit of Potiphar's wife. On the other hand Potiphar's wife acts as an Eve type character. She sees that Joseph is good and she wants to take him.

Now this might remind us of some other stories as well. We might think of the story of Sarai in the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh sees that she is beautiful just as Potiphar's wife sees the handsomeness or the beauty of Joseph.

And wants to take him. However even if Joseph is faithful in resisting this temptation he

will end up being cast out of this garden type place. And having the garment removed from him.

This temptation is repeated day after day. She keeps tempting him in this way. And the second key temptation scene.

She catches his garment and says lie with me. And he's in a very compromised situation here. She has evidence in her hand and yet there's no witness to bear up his side of the story.

And so if he's faithful he will end up being accused of unfaithfulness anyway. If he wants to be seen as faithful perhaps the best thing for him to do is to lie with her. She will keep the story secret and he'll appear to be a really good servant for his master.

His master will praise him as his mistress praises him. And yet he will have been fundamentally unfaithful. He would have taken the forbidden fruit.

The one thing that was forbidden to him. I've mentioned the story of Sarai and Pharaoh but there's another story that's more important as a background here. Abram, Sarai and Hagar.

In the story of chapter 16 a Hebrew mistreats an Egyptian servant. And in that case there's a sort of sexual end in the situation too. They want to use Hagar to raise up seed for Sarai.

And here the Egyptian mistress wants to use the servant Joseph, the Hebrew servant, for her own sexual pleasure. The accusation that she later makes against Joseph is a significant one. She makes it twice.

She claims that her husband has brought in this Hebrew to laugh at us. Now that's the same expression that is used of Ishmael in chapter 21 verse 9. It's the reason why Sarah wanted to cast out the bondwoman and her son. Hagar and Ishmael.

Once again Sarai blamed her husband in chapters 21 and 16. And here Potiphar's wife blames her husband. There are more fall themes playing out.

We saw that in chapter 16. It's a fall event that's taking place. The woman takes this forbidden fruit as it were, gives it to her husband.

And in that situation the husband listens to the voice of his wife. Calling back to the language used in the fall. Now Joseph is here suffering an Ishmael-like experience.

He's already been brought down into Egypt by the Ishmaelites. In chapter 37 there were a series of events that played according to the pattern of chapter 21. As Hagar and Ishmael are sent out into the wilderness.

And those patterns suggest that Joseph is an Ishmaelite character. He's a character who's connected with Hagar and Ishmael. Now Hagar was the Egyptian servant afflicted as a stranger in the house of the Hebrews.

Now we see a Hebrew servant afflicted in the house of the Egyptians. And once again there are themes that connect the story. Potiphar's wife in certain respects is behaving like Sarai.

Wanting to cast out the bondswoman and her son as the one who's brought in to laugh. Again the connection with Isaac's name there. What is the point of all of this? Well it seems to me that Hagar's story did not end in chapter 21.

It's playing beneath the surface of the story still. Abram and Sarai used Hagar as a means of raising up seed for themselves. But Hagar was never merely a means to an end.

Hagar is a person in her own right, seen by God. God visits her in the wilderness and delivers her. And God cares for Hagar.

And Hagar's not just going to be cast out of the story. Abram and Sarai may think that she's out of the story. And there may be a number of generations that have passed since she last appeared.

But now the story is playing out again. And it's playing out again because it will not be until Israel has seen itself and entered into the experience of Hagar and Ishmael and restored this lost son. This son who, like Ishmael, has been cast out of the family.

Until they restore that son, enter into that son's experience, place themselves in the shoes of Hagar and are redeemed from that situation and enter into Hagar's experience where she experienced a sort of Exodus-like event. Afflicted by Sarai, like Israel was afflicted by Pharaoh and then brought out of that land in which they were a stranger. They have to enter into the experience of the Egyptian.

Only when they've begun to see the world through Hagar and Ishmael's eyes will they be prepared to be part of that great deliverance and redemption that God has planned to work through them. As we're listening to these stories then, it's important to recognise the partial playing-outs of musical themes, as it were. Like listening to a piece of music where you hear snatches of a theme that calls your mind back to a previous set of events in an opera or something like that bringing to mind the charged emotions and realities of a past series of events and shows you that they are at play in the present.

That's what we see in the case of the story of Hagar and also in the case of the story of the Garden of Eden. Potiphar's wife gathers the men of her house first. Why is she doing this? I think it's because they are probably jealous brothers of Joseph in this situation.

Like the jealous brothers in chapter 37, they've seen Joseph advance ahead of them, favoured over them. And as jealous brothers they will want to support anyone who's going to bring Joseph down. It also gives her leverage against her husband.

Why is Potphour angry when she speaks to him? At whom is he angry? It seems to me it's quite likely that he's angry at her. He knows that there's something more going on in this situation, that Joseph is a faithful servant and that his wife is not faithful. He puts Joseph in with the king's prisoners, the prison that was under the control of the captain of the guard.

Now who is the captain of the guard? He is the captain of the guard. Why isn't he putting Joseph in with just common prisoners? Why is he putting him in a prison where he's with prisoners that would receive more favourable treatment, more significant figures? What's more, he allows Joseph to arise to prominence within this context and gives him great authority, much as he enjoyed earlier on in the story of chapter 39. It seems to me that he knows that his wife is not telling the truth and that Joseph is actually faithful.

A question to consider. There are lots of twos in the Joseph and the Judah stories. There are two dreams of Joseph.

There are two sons that die. There are two that are born through Tamar. There are two temptations by part of his wife.

There are two dreams in the prisons. Two dreams of Pharaoh. Two sets of seven years.

Two sons of Joseph. Two visits of the brothers. Two times the Egyptians begged for food, etc.

One of the twos we see are two stories of Joseph being stripped of a garment and thrown into a pit. And in both cases there is a garment presented as evidence against him. The story of Joseph being stripped of his garment and thrown into the pit in chapter 37 is one in which he had very little agency.

But in this situation there seems to be an amplification of his faithfulness for various reasons. Once again he's stripped of a garment. Once again he's thrown into a pit.

But there's a development, not just a comparison. There's something that moves forward in the story. What are some of the ways in which these two incidents differ even in their similarities? And what can we learn from those differences and developments? In Genesis chapter 40 some time has passed since Joseph has been placed into the prison.

And he has risen to a position of considerable responsibility within it. Even when reduced in status God continues to bless him and give him favour in the sight of his superiors. The king's prisoners are placed in the prison.

This is the prison run by the captain of the guard. It's not just for common criminals. And it would seem from the previous chapter that the captain of the guard, at least initially, was Potiphar himself.

The fact that Potiphar placed Joseph within this prison and gave him such authority or allowed him to rise to such authority is probably some indication that he did not take his wife's story at face value. He knew that there was something more to the picture. Now for some reason the cupbearer and the chief baker had offended Pharaoh in some way.

And they're placed into the prison until they'll be dealt with at some point. This suggests that there's a crisis of food in Egypt. These are not just regular servants but figures presumably with ritual roles to perform and significant tasks to oversee.

They're overseeing wine and they're overseeing bread. The cupbearer is the one who's responsible for keeping the wine and vineyards of Pharaoh operational to give him his fill of wine and perhaps also to serve as some sort of close advisor to Pharaoh. The chief baker is the one who should oversee the bread production of Egypt.

And these characters may stand for something more. There's a food crisis in Egypt. The chief people tasked with the bread and wine of Egypt are not up for the task.

Now as we go through the story we'll see that Joseph becomes, as it were, the baker of Egypt. The chief baker, the one charged with maintaining the production of bread. He also becomes the cupbearer.

He has the cup of divination a few chapters later. So maybe we should see some sort of foreshadowing here. There are paired dreams and we've already noted the fact that there are many pairs within the story of Joseph and Genesis more generally.

Often we'll see two characters juxtaposed with each other or associated with each other in some way. In the story of Joseph we've already seen twins. We've seen Perez and Zerah.

We've seen Joseph and Judah. We've seen two temptation scenes. And we also have three sets of paired dreams.

We have the paired dreams of Joseph earlier on in chapter 37. We have the dreams here and then we have the dreams in the next chapter, the dreams of Pharaoh. And these dreams should be connected.

Each of these pairs, the dreams, belong together. The paired dreams of the two royal officials here invite us to compare and contrast their fate and also associate them in certain ways. There are three sets of three within the dream of the cup bearer.

Three branches, three sets of growth, budding, blossoms coming forth and clusters

ripening into grapes. There are three actions, taking grapes, pressing them into the cup and putting the cup in Pharaoh's hand. So we see pairs are important but also threes.

And threes and pairs and sevens are all important within the Joseph story. And so pay attention to numerical patterns, to certain pairings, to things that are presented as triples. These are all patterns that can maybe help us to recognise structures that are playing out on the wider scale.

Three is important. Once you've worked out that the three corresponds to days, much of the rest would make sense. There's a temporal sequence in growth from budding to blossoms coming forth to clusters ripening into grapes.

And that suggests a quick passage of time and a movement into life. It's a coming forth of life. Joseph presumably knows that his Pharaoh's birthday in three days' time is a big state occasion.

There are most likely rumours and stories going around the prison of what's going to happen on that great day, what the festivities and celebrations will involve. And presumably Joseph recognises there are some important seats empty. There are some places in the Pharaoh's cabinet that have not been filled.

And so he needs to deal with that for his birthday presumably, as there will be state occasions and other things associated with it that need people in those offices. These aren't rebels or common criminals. They've displeased the king in some way but they have an important role to perform.

And Pharaoh does not in their absence have the right servants that he needs. Joseph declares that the chief cupbearer will have his head lifted up. The king will summon him and restore him to his office.

And the head lifting up suggests his summoning and also some sort of elevation in status. Having performed an important favour for the chief cupbearer, Joseph asks something in return, that the chief cupbearer will remember him when he comes back to his office. And he speaks of his own situation, that he has been stolen from the land of the Hebrews.

His position there is not as one of the people of the Egyptians, but as a foreigner who has been mistreated and there's no reason for him to be in the pit, as he calls it. I've noted previously that the association of the dungeon with a pit, the same word being used as the pit into which he is thrown by his brothers in chapter 37, suggests that we're supposed to hold those two things alongside each other. To see the stripping of his garment and his placing into the pit in chapter 37 as parallel with what happens in chapter 39.

And he calls for the chief cupbearer to deal with his situation by bringing him to



Pharaoh's mind. Pharaoh presumably doesn't know about him, but he wants Pharaoh to hear about his case and perhaps act to rectify it. Having heard the interpretation of the dream of the chief cupbearer, the chief baker is emboldened to ask about his dream.

Once again, there is the significance of the number three, three baskets, three days. On his head, his head will be taken up. The cupbearer sees a tree before him.

The baker will be hung upon the tree and the birds will eat his flesh like they eat the bread. They're twins. Both will have their heads lifted up and we see them both being described as having their heads lifted up.

But one is lifted up in a positive way and the other lifted up in a negative way. As often in the story of Genesis, there are pairings of characters that we're supposed to read alongside each other. To see, for instance, the similarities in the story of Abraham's entertaining of the angels and Lot's entertaining of the angels.

And then to see the differences. Likewise here, there's a pairing and we're supposed to see the similarities and the differences between the two characters. As Christians reading this story, we may notice other things.

There are two criminals alongside Joseph in the situation of judgment. One will be lifted up. The other will be hung on a tree and finally destroyed.

The chief cupbearer is restored and Joseph, in a sense, asks him to remember him when he comes into the kingdom. In the story of Christ, Christ is crucified with two criminals. One on the right, one on the left.

One is finally judged and the other is remembered when Christ comes into his kingdom. That theme of remembering in which a prisoner asks another prisoner who will be raised up to a favourable situation to remember him is something that connects this story with the story of Christ. Of course, Christ remembers the person who's crucified with him whereas the cupbearer fails to remember Joseph.

And it's only later on in the story that Joseph actually comes to mind for him. Then there's deliverance from the pit in both stories. Joseph will be delivered from the pit and in this story, Joseph will later be delivered from the pit.

Also notice that the raising up from the pit for the chief cupbearer occurs on the third day. And again, that would be a connection with the story of the Gospels. We might see in the forgetting of Joseph a connection with the beginning of the book of Exodus as well when a pharaoh arises who does not remember Joseph.

In that case, as well as in this, it may seem as if a divinely given destiny that had been declared previously had failed to come about. Following through the story of Joseph there's that movement from the brash young teenager who has the dreams and declares

with great assurance that his brothers and his father and mother are going to bow down to him to a figure who has been knocked back time and time again. He has been doing faithful things.

He goes on his father's mission to his brothers, faithful as a son, and yet is thrown into a pit and sold into slavery. He is faithful to his master Potiphar and yet as a result Potiphar's wife is thrown into the prison. And then in the prison he's faithful and does everything that he should do, rises to influence within the prison, helps out these prisoners.

And yet the very prisoner he's helped fails to remember him when he comes to a position of influence where he could actually reciprocate. And so Joseph can understandably feel a bit aggrieved. He can feel that maybe this destiny thing is not real after all.

Maybe God has forgotten me. Maybe I'm just stuck in this pit for the rest of my life and there's no more hope for me. But yet that does not seem to be the case.

Joseph time and again draws attention to God as the one that he is looking towards. So how can I do this wickedness against God? That is the ultimate answer that he gives to Potiphar's wife when she tempts him. Not primarily about his master, not primarily about his own honour, but about his relationship with God.

And here again he draws attention to the fact that it is God who has the interpretations of dreams. And so whatever his wisdom, whatever his abilities, it's ultimately God that he looks towards. And so that sense of God being active in his situation, even when he's in this lower state, even when it seems that his destiny has been thwarted in the most complete way possible, is one of the most remarkable features of the story of Joseph.

And at the end of the story when he can say that you meant it for evil but God meant it for good, seeing in all these negative apparent twists of his fate, these chants or small events that all conspired against him seemingly, he can see in each one of those the hand of God charting his course. And he's learned to be faithful to God ultimately. I've mentioned the theme of loyalty that runs throughout Joseph's life.

And that theme of loyalty ultimately focuses upon God. It's his loyalty to God even in situations where there's no reason apparently to be loyal to God. When it seems as though he's been stripped of the destiny that God gave him, even at that low point he can look to God and see God as being in control of his situation.

A question to consider. In the story of Joseph there are many parallels with other stories that we find elsewhere in scripture. Things like the story of Daniel for instance, another person who interprets dreams in the court of a king and rises to high office within the land as a result.

But the character I want to encourage you to think about is the character of Mordecai. Mordecai is involved in unmasking a plot in which there are two royal officials who conspire against the king and displease him. And he brings them to light, tells Esther and Esther brings it to the knowledge of the king.

There are also ways in which the events in Potiphar's house are mirrored in the story of Mordecai. Mordecai is asked day after day why he is not going to bow down or pay homage to Haman. And that expression of asking him day after day, an expression that we see in verse 4 of chapter 3 of Esther, is found one other place in scripture in the story of Potiphar's wife's temptation of Joseph.

Similar themes may be in play. In the story of Joseph he is tempted to keep favour with his master by sleeping with his master's wife, the one thing that is forbidden to him within the house. In the story of Mordecai he is tempted to bow down to Haman who seems to have pretensions upon the king's office, the one thing that Haman does not have a right to.

Haman has been elevated to extremely high office but he does not seem satisfied. He seems to want to take the office of the king and the status and the honour and the glory of the king for himself. And that is one thing that Mordecai is not willing to give him.

So maybe there are similarities there. I would like you to think about some other ways in which Mordecai and Joseph might be similar and how this particular connection might be filled out. And then consider what that might teach us about each of the characters as they are compared and contrasted with each other.

Genesis 41 begins two whole years after the events of the previous chapter. That's two full years dated from the birthday of Pharaoh. Is this the third birthday, the third day of Pharaoh? When he interpreted the dreams of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, three days was the day in which they would be raised up or destroyed.

In the same way maybe this was a message to Joseph about his own fate. At the beginning of the third year, on that third day as it were, he would be raised up. This is probably not something to put much weight upon but it's a possibility.

There are two dreams that Pharaoh has about the same event. Once again, two witnesses to the same reality. And these dreams both have a troubling, ominous significance to Pharaoh.

He knows that they are important but he does not know what they mean. And there are odd images here. What does it look like for thin ears of grain to swallow up fat ones? These are not things that we would commonly visualise.

In the same way, what does it look like for the sun, moon and eleven stars to bow down to Joseph? Again, it's not entirely clear. But Pharaoh knows that these things are important

and that they probably relate to the same reality. He summons his magicians and wise men and they fail to interpret.

In various places in scripture we see the failure of the magicians and the wise men. And they provide a foil for the success of the faithful and righteous person. The person who looks to God for the true interpretation.

Rather than to human skill or magic or to the false gods of the nations. Having seen the failure of the magicians and the wise men, the chief cupbearer suddenly remembers Joseph. Joseph is the one who is able to interpret his dream and the chief baker's dream.

Maybe he will be able to help in Pharaoh's situation too. The chief cupbearer has the ear of Pharaoh, is privy to his dreams. He's obviously a high official.

There is a reversal of themes here as Joseph is summoned. He's given firstborn status in chapter 37. He relates his two dreams.

He then has garments taken from him and placed into the pit. But now he's taken from the pit, his garments are changed, he interprets two dreams. And then he receives firstborn status, returning to a father figure.

There is a there and back again pattern to Joseph's life. Pharaoh underlines the negative aspects of the images that he saw in his dream in the retelling. The ugliness of the cows, for instance, particularly stands out to him.

Ugliness that he had not seen anywhere else in Egypt. Joseph, however, seems to be able to interpret the dreams immediately. Time periods are important for understanding what's going on here.

There's a yearly cycle that is going awry. There's a succession of events. There's seven, followed by seven.

And the fertility of Egypt came from the Nile. The cows come from the Nile. There's a yearly cycle here but there is some sort of failure within it.

There's a problem with the Nile. And then there's a problem with the blighting of the east wind and the sun. So there's the failure of two key orders, the Nile and the sun.

This might be seen as a judgement also upon Egypt's gods. The key things that they look to for fertility have broken down. And maybe there's a religious crisis here.

But God is proving his supremacy, first of all, in pointing out these things that are going to take place. But also in the fact that he is in control over all these orders of reality. Joseph goes beyond interpretation to suggest action, a particular policy that should be taken.

Overseers should be placed over the land. And a fifth of the produce should be collected. Or either a fifth of the country should be divided into fifths.

Maybe there's some suggestion of martial law here. But the food must be gathered. Presumably to be ensured it's not sold outside of the land.

And the food that is taxed is brought in and gathered in these great granaries. But yet, after Joseph has given this interpretation of the dream, Pharaoh looks around. He sees his failed magicians and wise men.

And then he sees Joseph and it becomes obvious to him that Joseph is the one who has the most prudence and wisdom to be able to carry out this plan. He's the one who gave the suggestion of the policy. He seems to be the person to look to to administer it.

This wisdom that Joseph has comes from divine revelation but also involves prudent administration. We've seen that he's been given the spirit of the Lord that equips him to prosper in the house of his father, in the house of Pharaoh, in the house of the captain of the guard, the prison. And now he's going to prosper in Pharaoh's service as well.

He's someone who has been given wisdom and is able to enact wisdom under the rule of someone else. All of this maybe draws our mind back to the very beginning of the Bible. The story of the Garden of Eden where man and woman were supposed to learn wisdom within the context of the garden under God's instruction.

And then having learnt wisdom in that context to move out into the world. Here we have one who is faithfully exemplifying wisdom under an authority figure. And Joseph is the one in whom we see this theme of wisdom that's within the book of Genesis come to its fuller expression.

He's given a signet ring, garments of fine linen, a gold chain and is made to ride around the second chariot in the land and have people call out before him, bow the knee. Now what does this remind us of? Maybe of a few things. It might remind us of Daniel under Darius.

It also might remind us of Mordecai in chapter 8 verse 15 of the book of Esther. Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white with a great golden crown and a robe of fine linen and purple. And the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced.

It's a very similar pattern that we see here. But there's something else nearer to hand. Maybe it connects with the story of Judah.

Judah is someone who loses his signet, his cord and his staff. Signs of office. Joseph is stripped of everything.

But here he receives a signet ring, garments of fine linen and a gold chain. Things that connect with the signet ring of Judah and the cord that he has. Now he has a gold chain.

There's something about the elevation of Joseph that invites us to compare and contrast with the falling of Judah. Later he receives those things back. But there's something about Joseph's situation here that does invite that comparison.

He's given a new name and a new wife. And this suggests in part that Pharaoh is playing the part of a new father figure to Joseph. Joseph has left his family behind.

Maybe he thinks his father Jacob was involved in the plot to sell him into slavery. His father was angry with him when he told his second dream. He sent him on a dangerous mission to seek out his brothers, knowing that his brothers hated him.

Maybe it was his father's intention to cast him out of the family. He doesn't necessarily know at this point. But now as Pharaoh receives him, he seems to have this new father figure.

He functions as the firstborn. The only thing that Pharaoh is greater in regard to is the throne itself. This again connects with the events of the previous two chapters.

Where Joseph has enjoyed such high status, first of all in Potiphar's house and then also in the prison, that he is second in command and nothing under his charge is of any concern to his master. Because his master in both situations trusts him implicitly. The land is plentiful for seven years.

But Joseph too, he forgets the hardship of his father's house and he's fruitful. And he names his two sons after this. Joseph is about 30 years old at this time.

And he's coming to a new level of authority. 30 years is the age where priests would enter into their office. But it's also perhaps significant that he's about to embark on the 14th year of his life in Egypt.

He was sold into slavery at the age of 17 when he was first pastoring the flock with his brothers. And now he's about to enter the 14th year. The transition from the 13th to the 14th year is an auspicious time within the story of Abraham and in the story of Jacob.

In the story of Abraham, it's the 13th year after the birth of Ishmael that the birth of Isaac is promised. And then it's the entrance into that 14th year is the birth of Isaac. In the story of Jacob, he serves for 14 years.

And it's in that 14th year that Joseph is born and in which he seeks for release and to go his own way. Joseph's birth there is associated with the 14th year and with release in chapter 30. Now, let's think about the story of Joseph more generally.

And maybe there's something to be learned from the dreams of Pharaoh that relate not

just to the land of Egypt but also to Joseph himself. It describes seven beautiful cows followed by seven ugly cows grazing in the meadow or swamp or among the reeds. And when we actually look at that more closely, there seem to be plays upon words.

Joseph has been talked about earlier as pasturing the sheep with his brothers. And the way that grazing in the reeds is described, it plays upon the language of grazing the sheep with his brothers. Joseph's situation is very, very similar to the seven beautiful cows.

Joseph grazing the sheep with his brothers. Seven beautiful cows grazing in the reed grass. A word that seems similar to that for with their brothers.

Now, is there anything more that we can make of this? Is this just an interesting literary comparison? Maybe there is more to it. Joseph is swallowed up by his brothers. Jacob serves seven years for Rachel who's described as beautiful, just like the cows.

And seven years for the ugly cows, for Leah whose eyes are described as rakote. A word that has the same sound as words used to describe the ugly cows. Is there some connection? There are seven beautiful years in the story of Jacob's life in serving for Rachel.

And those seem to be swallowed up by seven ugly years. All the beauty of Rachel and her children seems to have come to nothing. Rachel has died.

The firstborn of Rachel, Joseph, has been taken down into Egypt. It seems that his life has been wasted. And what is left? The ugly cows.

The children of Leah and their handmaids. That do not seem to have produced anything of beauty. Rather, their situation is just as ugly as before.

They have eaten up Rachel and her children. But there's nothing really to show for it. Those seven years that Jacob served for Rachel, those beautiful years, those first seven years, seem now to be worthless.

All the fruit that they seem to have borne has been swallowed up by the ugly years. By the ugly cows. By the children of Leah and the handmaids.

But is there another way of reading the story? Is there another way of understanding how these years, how these children, can relate together? Maybe Joseph at this point suddenly sees something different about his life. Have the seven years been completely swallowed years? Or is there an alternative? Could the seven beautiful years provide for the seven ugly years so that all make it through together? And maybe there's something more in Joseph's own dream that he can see at this point. If you think about Joseph's own dreams, there are dreams related to sheaves in the field, which is interesting because they don't seem to be farmers.

They seem to be shepherds, which suggests that there's something odd about this particular picture. The second dream also involves the sun, moon and eleven stars bowing down. Now, what might that mean? Think about it.

There are the sun, the moon and the eleven stars, that's thirteen altogether, bowing down to him. He's the fourteenth. In the story of his birth in chapter 30, his birth represented the end of the fourteenth year.

The time of deliverance. His birth was that event that for Jacob was seen as the sign that he should move forward. That God had blessed him.

Suddenly his bride, Rachel, had born a child and this was a sign that God had blessed him. In the same way here, maybe Joseph is the fourteenth. Maybe this is about time, not just about his supremacy over his brothers.

Perhaps all of these fourteens mean something. Perhaps the fourteen of the seven years plus seven in serving for Rachel and Leah. Perhaps the fourteen years that he's just entering into the completion of in the events of his sail into Egypt and his service within Egypt.

Perhaps the fourteen that is associated with the sun, moon and eleven stars. Perhaps the fourteen that's associated with the seven years of plenty and the seven years of famine. Perhaps they're all connected to his life as well.

Perhaps he's part of the key to the puzzle. And perhaps the dream of Pharaoh is a key to the puzzle of his life. Bringing his life to the dream of Pharaoh and bringing the dream of Pharaoh to his life enables both of the things to come to light.

It helps him to understand what his life has meant. God's hand in his troubles to that point. But also it helps him to understand the plight of Egypt and how to address it.

Once again this interpretation is far from certain but it seems to have something to it. There are details here that are worth attending to. And as we look more closely into them perhaps we'll notice something that we have not seen before.

A question to consider. How does thinking back to chapter twelve and the promise given to Abraham and his call help us to understand some of what God is bringing to pass here? In Genesis chapter 42 we see something akin to a game of musical chairs. Similar stories to those we've seen in previous chapters are being played out but people are in different positions.

How will they act when tables are turned? When they have power that they did not have before? When they have the opportunity to replay something that they did in the past? Jacob sends his sons down to Egypt to get food there. The severe famine that's affecting the area seems to be beyond the specific local factors of Egypt, the particular winds and



the Nile, but has many different factors that are affecting many different places within the wider region. Jacob sends ten of his sons down to Egypt to get food.

The sons of Leah and the sons of the handmaids. And as he sends them down he holds Benjamin back. Why does he hold Benjamin back? Benjamin is all that remains to him of Rachel now that Joseph has gone.

And also he doesn't seem to trust the other brothers. He fears that harm might happen to Benjamin. Where would that harm come from? Well, maybe from the other brothers.

He's already seen what happened when he sent Joseph to the brothers. And now he's fearful of sending this other son of Rachel to the brothers. There is a great rift in the family along the lines of the favoured and the unfavoured wife and the sons.

And he has already seen that this rift can be expressed not just between the brothers but also against him. His son, his oldest son Reuben, has attempted a coup against him, sleeping with Bilhah, his concubine. The ten brothers arrive in the land of Egypt and they bow down to Joseph.

And here once again divine intention is foregrounded. What are the odds that Joseph and his brothers would encounter each other again under these circumstances? Even with Joseph having risen to power in the land. They're truly astronomical.

But yet God is bringing about the fulfilment of Joseph's dreams. They do not, however, recognise Joseph even though Joseph recognises them. We've seen stories of disguise already in the story of Jacob and Isaac and receiving the blessing.

But also in the story of Tamar and Judah. Seeing his brothers, Joseph is reminded of his dreams at this point. But the dreams don't teach Joseph exactly what to do.

He's seen his brothers and he knows that God is bringing to pass something that was foretold in the past. But at this point he really has to decide how he's going to respond to the situation. He begins by accusing them of being spies.

Now it's worth thinking back to the story of chapter 37. The first thing that set him at odds with his brothers there, the first inciting incident, was his bringing back a bad report on the sons of the handmaids. In that story, that language is the language of spying.

And now he begins by accusing his brothers of being spies. That maybe was what they accused him of being, a spy for his father. But now he presents them as spies.

They have to disclose and be open with him in order to prove their innocence. Now if he was just inquiring about their family and asking about their father and their brothers, the nature of his interest might have been suspicious. However, by beginning with an

accusation, he puts them on the back foot and puts them in a position where they have to protest and prove their innocence.

But they are none the wiser about the true cause of Joseph's interest in them. Joseph puts them in prison and they're placed in prison for three days. We've already seen the importance of three days earlier on in the story.

It's three days until the chief cupbearer and the chief baker will be raised up to a higher position or removed from their office. Joseph insists that they bring Benjamin back with them. And why is he doing this? Perhaps because he's wondering whether Benjamin is safe.

To their mind, he's just testing the truth of their story. But for Joseph, the real concern is, is Benjamin safe? Have they done with Benjamin what they did with him? Have they tried to cast him out of the family, leaving only the children of Leah and the handmaids? Why have only ten of them come? Surely there is another brother that could have come too. The fact that this son has not come with them is deeply suspicious to him.

And so he wants to check their story. He wants to confirm that there is indeed another brother. That the other brother is safe.

And also that he wants to see Benjamin again. Benjamin, when he left, was only an infant, presumably. And now Benjamin is probably around the age that he was when he was sold into slavery.

Hearing this request, the brothers are dismayed and they talk among themselves. They recognise in the situation some recompense for what they have done to Joseph. So Joseph sees the fulfilment of his dreams in their bowing down to him.

And they see that their punishment is coming upon them for what they did to Joseph. Both parties then recognise that this is a significant encounter. And that many events of the past are coming back at this moment.

Reuben protests that they should have listened to him. They should have spared Joseph. His name means, see a son.

And he was given that name because the Lord has looked upon my affliction. That's the reason why Leah gave Reuben that name. And he saw the affliction of Joseph and tried to act in that situation, living up to his name.

But Simeon did not. And so, hearing the conversation, Joseph decides to take Simeon and hold Simeon back rather than Reuben. Simeon is the one that seems to be more in with the rest of the brothers.

He was part of the plan. He did not stand against it in the same way. Reuben was the

natural choice at first.

He was the oldest, the firstborn. He was presumably the leader of the plot against Joseph. But the revelation of the fact that he stood against his brothers in the plot to kill Joseph suggests to Joseph that Simeon is the one to hold back instead.

Simeon is next in line to Reuben. Simeon was given his name because the Lord has heard that I am hated. But he did not show any care and concern for the hated son, for Joseph.

The other thing about Simeon that might make him a more apt choice is he's the second son of Leah. He's going to hold back the second son of Leah in order that they bring the second son of Rachel, Benjamin. When they find their money in their sacks on the way back, they are deeply concerned.

They've left a brother in Egypt and they are returning with money in their sacks. What is their father going to think? How are they going to return to Egypt when it might look that they are not just spies but also thieves? They might see that this is a trap set for them and it gives them an incentive not to return. They've got their money and they've got their food.

Do they value the brother over their money? They're now given the choice to have money in their hands and to leave their brother behind or to go on the dangerous mission back to Egypt to gain their brother again and to give back the money. There's a replaying of the choice that they had earlier with Joseph. Are they going to bring back the son and give up the money? Or are they happy to bereave their father and to destroy their brother for their own pockets and their own security? When Jacob sees them returned, he is concerned too, probably for different reasons.

He fears that they have done something to Simeon and want to do something to Benjamin too. He has already had his sons returned to him with tokens of a dead brother. Where did the silver come from? They have two different stories.

They have the story of Simeon being held back by the ruler of the land but they also have this story about this money just turning up in their sacks. Where did the silver come from? Jacob puts the pieces together perhaps of Simeon gone and the money in the sacks and maybe at that point it comes to his mind this helps to explain the seeming death of Joseph too. This has happened before and it's a very troubling memory.

Reuben offers at this point to kill his two sons, Jacob's grandsons, if he doesn't bring Simeon back. Reuben is probably not the sharpest tool in the box. This is an exaggerated and ridiculous offer.

But he cannot truly protest innocence in both the case of Simeon and of Joseph. He is to some degree complicit. So upping the stakes of it all by offering to kill his sons is a way

of trying to recover some degree of trust from his father in a situation where he knows he's not trustworthy anymore.

It's reminiscent of the story of Judah and Tamar in some ways too. Tamar married Ur, then Ur died. Tamar then was taken by Onan and Onan died too.

And Judah had to send Shelah to Tamar and he was not willing to do so. To actually lose two of his sons and then give a third was too much for him to do. But yet had he done so he would have received sons in return.

In the same way in the story of Joseph, if Jacob is to receive the two lost sons back he has to give that third son. He has to give Benjamin. Pay attention to the language that Jacob uses at this point.

My son. Not your brother. It's my son over against the murderous brothers.

His brother. Not your brother. The other half of the family is virtually disowned at this point.

Benjamin seems to be the only one left to him. He speaks of him in that way as if he was the only child he had remaining. Jacob possibly now suspects that the sons of Leah and the handmaids are just devouring his family.

His hope and his life is hanging on by the thread of Benjamin alone. If harm should happen to him on the journey that you are to make you would bring down my grey hairs with sorrow to Sheol. A question to consider.

Joseph places the brothers in a position to test what they will do with regard to Simeon and Benjamin. Replaying certain themes of the story in which he was sold into slavery. But Joseph is also placed in a position by God.

His dreams seem to be coming to pass. God has placed him in power over his brothers. I want you to reflect upon the ways in which this would serve as a test for Joseph too.

In Genesis chapter 43 there's a slowing down of the pace of the narrative of the book. We've seen this already in chapters 17 and 18 where about 13 years intervene between the end of chapter 16 and chapter 17 and then there's a whole rush of events up to chapter 21 in the period of just over a year. Here again we see a very brief window of time with long extended speeches.

The pace of the narrative is really slowed down. The pace of the narrative more generally is important. When he has to the author of Genesis can recount details very briefly and succinctly.

But sometimes he goes into extreme almost novelistic detail as we see in this passage. So it's worth considering why is he slowing things down at particular points. Sometimes

we'll see this even in a single narrative such as in the story of Judah and Tamar where a period of anything of up to 40 years is passed over in a few verses and then the text slows down to a crawl after the encounter with Tamar.

The severity of the famine is mentioned at this point perhaps drawing our mind back to chapter 41 and the dreams of Joseph. The need for food drives Jacob to tell his sons to go down into Egypt again but Judah reminds Jacob of the problem. The Egyptian ruler has called for them to bring back Benjamin with them.

Jacob is annoyed and wonders why they would ever have told him that there was another brother but yet clearly he'd been looking for that information from them and they'd given him the information without thinking that he would ever require that they bring that son there. Reuben utterly failed to persuade Jacob to allow him to bring Benjamin with him at the end of the previous chapter but Judah persuades. Ironically it was Reuben who tried to protect Joseph from the other brothers and Judah that was instigating the plot to sell him and then to cover up his disappearance.

This is another story of sacrificing the beloved son. We've seen several of these in the book of Genesis so far. Lot has to be let go by Abram.

Abram presumes, I think, early on, that Lot will be his heir. That Lot will carry on his name, that he will be the seed as it were, this son of his dead brother. But that's not to be the case.

Again he presumes that Ishmael will be the one to continue his name. Again it is not Ishmael. And then Isaac.

He is called to sacrifice Isaac in chapter 22. The story of Jacob contains similar themes too. His mother and father have to leave him, depart and to go away from them in order for him to be safe.

Joseph is sent down into Egypt. Simeon is sent down into Egypt and does not come back. He's in prison.

And now Benjamin, that one son that remains to him, has to be sent too. In the story of Judah and Tamar there are two sons who die at the beginning. And it seems, to Judah at least, that Tamar is responsible for this.

Tamar married Ur and then Ur died and then Tamar had relations with Onan and Onan died. And so it seems natural that she's a woman who's causing all sorts of deaths in his family. He's not going to give his son Shelah to her.

But yet, until he gives the kid to Tamar, his family is not going to be restored from death. When he actually sends the third, the two sons are restored to him in Perez and Zerah. And we're seeing a similar thing here.

Until Benjamin is sent, Simeon and Joseph will not be restored. There are binding of Isaac themes then. Themes of sacrificing the beloved son.

Judah's willingness to act as surety for Benjamin is setting the scene for his turning away from the pattern of his previous actions and the situation being redeemed. He's now offering himself for the younger brother of Joseph, Rachel's youngest son. He covered up the death of Joseph.

Now he's offering himself as surety. They're sent with a sevenfold gift. Different riches of the land.

Like the caravan that went down to Egypt in chapter 37 that took Joseph with it. They are bringing balm, gum and myrrh. They're also bringing honey, pistachio, nuts and almonds.

This is a replaying in some ways of the caravan of chapter 37. And with it, they are bringing down double money. They're bringing back the silver that was in their sacks.

Now that double money may make us think of the firstborn portion. They're bringing that back with Joseph. Silver was taken from the sale of Joseph.

Now silver is being sent back as restitution. Double portion. Seeing Benjamin from a distance changes the situation for Joseph.

Benjamin's not dead. The other sons of Jacob have not destroyed his mother's son. The only thing left to him are Rachel.

Now he lifts up his eyes and sees Benjamin. In a number of significant encounters within the book of Genesis, it's described in this way. For Abraham lifting up his eyes and seeing the place where he's going to sacrifice Isaac.

Lifting up his eyes and seeing the ram caught in the thicket. And Isaac and Rebekah lifting up their eyes and seeing each other. Here again we're seeing that language used.

A key moment is occurring. The fact that they did not come with Benjamin the first time led him to fear the worst. That they had done away with Benjamin.

Now he sees Benjamin and he has the assurance that Benjamin is not dead. And that there is hope. Benjamin is spoken of as his brother Benjamin.

His mother's son. This is his strongest family attachment. It's the one brother he knows is innocent.

But also gives him some assurance of Jacob's part in the matter. He might have feared that his father sent him on a dangerous mission in order to get rid of him. He might have wondered whether Jacob was so angry after he had told him the dream that he just

wanted to get rid of him.

But now the fact that he held Benjamin back from harm and then only sent him on at this later point. Suggests to Joseph that actually his father was not involved. Perhaps that's something that's going on here.

He disguises his true emotions at this point but he weeps. His anguish was hidden from his brothers earlier when he was in the pit. And now his emotion is hidden from them again.

There are key occasions of weeping in the story of Joseph. And in the story of Genesis more generally. If we read the story of Jacob there are three key occasions of weeping.

Esau weeps when he finds that he has lost the blessing. Jacob weeps when he first meets Rachel. And then the two brothers weep together when they encounter each other at the beginning of chapter 33.

These different occasions of weeping, first divided and then joined together, are significant. And likewise with the story of Joseph. This gives us a sense of the power of the emotions that he's feeling.

But also connects with previous things that happened. He was once weeping alone away from his brothers when his brothers were eating at a distance. They did not see his weeping then.

They do not see it now. They eat bread at a distance once again. These are not just novelistic details.

They do give us a sense of the fuller picture of what's taking place and the emotional force. But it's replaying something that's happened before. Joseph orders them by age.

They might wonder whether he has the power of divination which comes into play later on in the next chapter. But the natural thing to do, having arranged them in order of age, would be either to treat them all the same or to distinguish the firstborn for special treatment. But he singles out Benjamin instead.

Note how Joseph is setting things up to test whether they are still characterised by envy. Although a younger brother was favoured above his brothers by his father, now he is favouring the youngest brother above the other brothers again. And this favouring of Benjamin puts them in a situation once again where they are tested in how they will act towards the favoured brother of the other mother.

A question to consider. Can you see any significance in the many details that are given to us concerning the actions of the steward and the various ways that they move and Joseph moves within the house? In Genesis 44, several themes of the story come

together. We've already seen a story like this before.

A story where Laban pursues Jacob and Rachel looking for the terrorfeme. He searches from the oldest to the youngest. There's a death sentence declared over the person in whose possession the terrorfeme are found.

That story was recalled in Genesis 37 as camels came from Mount Gilead, the place where the death sentence had been cast over Rachel concerning the terrorfeme. And they take the son of Rachel down into captivity in Egypt. And now we see a similar pattern of events playing out again.

It seems like the story of the terrorfeme might be coming to its ugly end. The death of Rachel, the seeming death of Joseph, and now the death of Benjamin too. The brothers, as they're going back to the land of Canaan, are buoyant.

Their mission has seemed to be a success. But yet there's this turn of events, this turn of events that they were not prepared for. They're pursued.

And they're pursued as those who have stolen something from Joseph. Now, what they're accused of stealing is a silver cup. It's important that it is a silver cup.

Once again, it was silver for which Joseph was sold into Egypt. And now he sent them back previously with silver in their bags. Now he's given them a silver cup.

And this cup isn't just any cup. It's a cup that represents Joseph himself. It's his cup.

It's the cup that he does divination supposedly with. We should note the similarity between this and the terrorfeme. The terrorfeme was supposedly used for divination too.

And so we have the association of the cup with the silver for which Joseph was sold, with Joseph himself as it is Joseph's cup. They've stolen the cup. They stole Joseph at one point too.

And it's also connected with the means of divination, the terrorfeme, and that earlier part of the story, and the tragic destiny of Rachel and her children. Joseph is the provider of bread to Egypt. And here we see he's also the cup bearer.

In chapter 40 there was a crisis with the chief cup bearer and the chief baker. And since then Joseph has been the one who provides bread to the land of Egypt and to the surrounding nations. But now we see he's also the one who has a cup.

He is associated with both bread and wine. And the silver is also associated with bread and the wine. The silver of the cup that he drinks from, and also the silver that was given for the bread.

The reference to divination is important here. It gives the brothers that fear that he



knows something about them, that he has some sort of occult insight into their guilt. And their sense of their guilt has been an important part of their reaction to these events, the events of their first visit and then subsequently.

The hidden knowledge of this Egyptian ruler brings their guilt back to them. He has exhibited his knowledge of them already by seating them in a particular order. And now they are searched in a particular order from the oldest to the youngest.

In the same way as there was this searching beginning at Leah and then the handmaid's tents and then in Rachel's tent. We should also consider this against the background of the previous chapter. Joseph has shown favoritism to Benjamin.

He has given him five portions rather than the one portion that was given to each of the other brothers. That favoritism recalls the way that Jacob treated Joseph and favored him above the other brothers. Maybe Benjamin wants to set himself up as a diviner, someone above his brothers.

His older brother had dreams of high status, of achieving some position over his brothers, had delusions of grandeur. Maybe his younger brother has these dreams too. Maybe he stole this Egyptian official's cup as a means of divination for himself, as a means of gaining power within his house.

And so you can see that Joseph has set this up quite masterfully. He has put them in a position where they are tempted to be mistrustful of Benjamin. He has brought to mind the old tensions and raised some of those hackles perhaps that they have against Rachel's side of the family.

But their response is very different. On this occasion they all tear their clothes, united in grief with Benjamin and with their father. And this contrasts with chapter 37 where there are two people who tear their clothes, Reuben and Jacob.

A tearing that in Jacob's case occurs when he believes that his son himself has been torn. But here they are united in their grief and their concern. They are described as Judah and his brothers.

Judah is the effective leader of the brothers at this point. He is the one who can reunite the brothers but requires him to confess, to be one who stands up and takes action at this point. Think about the meaning of his name which is connected with praise but also with confession.

This threat to Benjamin is a threat to their father too. The threat that their father would go down to Sheol in grief. Reuben has already rebelled against the father.

They have tried to put away the favoured son of their father but now they seem to be acting very differently. Now they don't just bow down to Joseph but offer to become his

slaves. But Joseph gives them an out.

Only the person in whose possession the cup was found will be his slave. And everyone else can go home. This will be difficult for their father of course.

He will see it as this tragedy from which he may never recover. But they will be okay. They won't have to serve as slaves.

But what they do instead is show solidarity with their brother, with their father and with their whole family. Judah admits the problem of the family. He recounts the speech of Jacob in a way that acknowledges the fact that he was not a child of the favoured wife.

My wife bore me two sons. My wife. What about Leah, Judah's mother? Once again there is a struggle between favoured and unfavoured sons.

People who have been shown favour and those who have not been shown favour. And how they feel these tensions with each other. One tempted to vaunt themselves over the others and the other tempted to violent envy against the other.

We see this in the story of Cain and Abel. In the story of Esau and Jacob. And now in the story of Joseph and Judah.

How should favour be used? Joseph has learned that favour should be used for the sake of the unfavoured. And how should a lack of favour be responded to? This is what we see Judah doing here. They have the opportunity to leave Benjamin as a slave in Egypt.

But they do not take it. This is the precise inverse of what happened in chapter 37. This is a situation where they are prepared to go down into slavery in Egypt in order to have solidarity with their brother.

This relationship between Benjamin and Judah is important too. And it plays out in the rest of scripture in various ways. You can see it in the story of David and Saul.

In the story of Esther and Mordecai. Benjamites who intercede for the Jews. The Judahites.

Judah is a type of Christ too in some ways. He is someone who gives himself up for his brother. On his brothers.

He offers himself for the brother. And in the same way Christ is one who gives himself up for us all. Judah was like Judas in the previous story.

The one who betrayed. The one who sold this person into captivity. But now he plays a very different part.

There is a redemption of Judah in this story. A question to consider. Note the boundaries

of the nation of Judah in the later history of the Old Testament.

Judah includes Benjamin, Judah, and within its territory much of the tribe of Simeon. How might this understanding of later history help us better to read the story of Genesis? It is hard to think of many more emotionally powerful passages in scripture than Genesis chapter 45. Joseph finally discloses himself to his brothers.

He weeps aloud. There are a number of key events of weeping in the book of Genesis. Critical junctures.

Esau weeping at the loss of the blessing. Jacob weeping when he meets Rachel. And Jacob and Esau weeping together later on when they are finally reconciled.

Joseph's concern throughout his speech is upon his father. Is his father still alive? He is eager to bring his father down to Egypt so he can finally be reunited with him. After all this time apart and all the pain on both sides.

The brothers themselves are unsure of how to react to this. The first time Joseph speaks they are nonplussed. They don't know what to make of it.

Could this really be him? Joseph has to speak to them again to insist it is I. It is Joseph. They have been shown remarkable favour on their previous trip. And then it all seemed to go against them as they were pursued and Benjamin was found in the possession of the cup.

Then Judah interceded and now the man who they have been dealing with to this point. Who has been causing them all sorts of concern. Turns out to be Joseph.

A brother presumed dead. Joseph stresses in his response to them that this is a matter of divine orchestration. Joseph can see clearly now that divine design was behind all of the things that happened to him.

And he makes a fourfold statement on this front. First of all. Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here.

For God sent me before you to preserve life. And then. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth.

And to keep alive for you many survivors. Again. So it was not you who sent me here but God.

And then finally. Thus says your son Joseph. God has made me lord of all Egypt.

Come down to me. Do not tarry. In each of these statements Joseph is hammering a point home.

It is God that is behind all of these things. Joseph has a profound sense of God's action in his life. Now compare the story of Joseph to stories that we've read to this point in the book of Genesis.

The Joseph story is not one of great miracles. It's not one with a fantastic flood or anything like that. God doesn't appear directly to him as he appeared to Abraham or to his father Jacob.

God doesn't even speak directly to him. In all of these ways it might seem that God has disappeared from the scene. But not to Joseph.

Joseph has a deeper understanding of God's involvement in history. God speaks to Joseph through his ordering of his life. And as Joseph looks back upon his life he can see the way that God's hand is revealed.

And it's this recognition that allows him to forgive his brothers. A strong belief in providence makes it easier to forgive people and not to hold grudges. The course of our lives is ultimately in the hands of God.

Not in the hands of other human beings. This belief is the belief that God acts in human history. God isn't always on the surface of the story.

Yet all of the story is about God. And as we've read through Genesis there have been many points where you might wonder where is God? And at this point we're beginning to see where God is. God is acting in all of these events.

There may be many different actors on the surface of the story. But there's one actor holding all of the story together beneath the surface. This is actually one of the reasons why typology matters.

Because one of the things we see in typology are traces of another hand at work. It isn't just chance. It's not human intent.

It's not just Joseph's contrivance in some of these events. In every single one of these events God is ultimately at work. God is bringing about his purpose in history.

And this challenges us to read the entire story of Genesis on a deeper level. As Joseph and the brothers reread their life stories as ones in which God is the primary actor. It changes the way that they view things.

Joseph as he's reunited with the brothers first weeps with Benjamin. Benjamin is the bridge to the other brothers. And then he weeps with each of the other brothers.

The meeting at this point is reminiscent of the meeting between Esau and Jacob in chapter 33. After they've greeted and wept together they talk to him. Now this might seem a bit anticlimactic.

After all the drama and the emotion of this chapter they just talk together. But chapter 37 presents the failure to be able to speak peaceably to each other as the beginning of the story. And now they can speak.

There's the resolution of the underlying problem. Pharaoh instructs them to come back to the land with their father. So they return to Canaan with the joyful news to tell their father that they have found Joseph.

That he is still alive and that he wants to see his father down in Egypt. And when Jacob hears his heart stands still. He can't process the news.

He can't believe it. It's too wonderful. It's too unbelievable.

And yet when he's persuaded, when he sees the gifts that are sent ahead, he knows that it is in fact true. And his response, it is enough. Joseph my son is still alive.

I will go and see him before I die. Notice the similarity with this and the earlier statement that he made when he heard the message of Joseph's death. I shall go down to Sheol to my son mourning.

Now he's again talking about going down to his son and about death. But it's different this time. He's going to go down and find resolution for all these things in his life that have seemed tragic and beyond repair.

Joseph my son is still alive. I will go down and see him before I die. And we could read the entire story of Joseph going down into Egypt and then up to this point as a great binding of Isaac story.

Jacob has sent away his son. It seems as if the son was lost for good. And then the son is restored to him as if from the dead.

And at this point Jacob himself revives. It seems as if he's been like a living dead person for almost 20 years. His son has gone down to death.

And now that son has come up from the grave. He's still alive and his spirit comes to him again. This chapter then is one of the most powerful ones that shows how God's secret providence exceeds human design.

God is restoring history that seemed broken. Lives shattered beyond repair. Families torn apart.

Things lost beyond recovery. And this is all foreshadowing and picture of God's greater work in history. God is going to wipe away every tear from our eyes.

God is going to make all things new. God is going to restore the things that were broken. To recover the things that were lost.

And in the dramatic and emotional moment of Joseph meeting with his brothers. And finally seeing in his life God's hand leading him and them to this point. We will see a glimpse of what awaits us.

Of God's greater purpose in history. A question to consider. Looking through the book of Genesis and the changing ways in which God reveals his presence to his people.

And his action to his people. Are there any particular lessons that we can learn for discerning God's action and presence in our own lives? Especially in those times when he feels absent. In Genesis chapter 46 Jacob goes down to Egypt.

On the way down to Egypt he stops at Beersheba. Which is just on the borders of the land. And God appears to him at Beersheba as he appeared to Isaac at Beersheba in chapter 26.

He identifies as the God of Jacob's father. Much as he identified himself as the God of Abraham to Isaac. There is a chain of divine grace following all the way through this story.

By identifying himself as the God of the person's father. God shows that he is the one who has been faithful through generations. He is the one who has led Abraham.

He is the one who has led Isaac. And now he is the one who is going to lead Jacob. He calls to Jacob.

Jacob, Jacob. And the response is here I am. I will bring you down.

And then I will bring you up again. Use singular. He will be made into a great nation within this space.

Jacob is the individual but he is also Israel, the nation. And the way that he is addressed here is similar to the address that God gives to Abraham in chapter 22. Before the binding of Isaac.

Jacob is going to have to descend with his family into a realm that is not their own. A realm that is one in which they may feel very vulnerable. He is going to have to enter into something akin to a state of death.

And then trust God to raise him up again. That instruction, fear not, is an instruction that is given both on this occasion. And also when God speaks to his father Isaac at Beersheba.

The promise is that God will bring them out. And that the journey won't be completed until after the exodus. This theme will become more prominent as we go on.

Particularly as we read about the burials of Jacob and of Joseph. He has also promised

that Joseph will close his eyes. And that is a great assurance to him.

A promise that he will be finally able to rest. That he will have physical contact with his son once more. At the end of chapter 37 he spoke of descending in mourning to Sheol.

And then when he hears the news that Joseph is alive his spirit revives. Now he has promised that he will truly be able to rest. That Joseph will close his eyes for him.

That he will be able to rest in peace having fulfilled his full journey of his life. Now at this point we have something that may be a little surprising. We have a list of the names of the descendants of Israel.

Just at this great moment of charged emotion we have a genealogy. It all seems very anticlimactic. Why on earth would that be put here? Let's think about it a bit more.

One interesting thing we may have noticed earlier is that there is no genealogy in Genesis 37. We read the genealogy of Esau in chapter 36. And then in chapter 37 these are the generations of Jacob.

And then Joseph being 17 years old. It just goes straight into the story. It seems strange.

There seems to be something like a missing stair perhaps. Maybe we can see this as if there has been a blockage in the pipe. The family of Jacob can only truly appear on the other side of salvation once they have been delivered.

And the genealogy is split between Egypt and Canaan. Some of these children were born in Egypt. Manasseh and Ephraim and others were in Canaan.

And they have to be united. It is a saved family seemingly lost. And all this story has to take place before we can actually read about the descendants of Jacob.

Because it is only as God has worked to redeem this family that they can be a family in the true sense. This is a family that has not just arisen from the flesh. This is a family of promise.

A family that has been received as if from the dead. So the fact that we have to wait to this point to read about the descendants of Jacob I think makes sense for that reason. The genealogies and lists of names that we find in scripture also usually serve a narrative purpose.

And as we look at them more closely we will often see numbers, structures, literary patterns or details that stand out to us. This particular genealogy is structured around the number 7. It is given in the place of Beersheba which is connected with the number 7 as we have seen earlier on in the book of Genesis. There are 7 named women within it.

There are 70 individuals. And there are different groups of the family. Jacob served for 7

years for both groups.

Leah has 7 sevens associated with her. Leah 33 children and Zilpah 16 children to make 49 altogether. Rachel has 3 sevens associated with her, 21.

14 of her own children and 7 children by Bilhah. There are 70 here but then there are also 70 nations in Genesis chapter 10. In scripture we see these numbers 12 and 70 both having importance.

There are 12 tribes. And then there are also 70 nations. 70 leaders of the people.

In Exodus chapter 15 at Elim there are 12 springs and 70 palm trees. These numbers 12 and 70 are important. Likewise in the New Testament Jesus calls 12 disciples to be apostles and sends out 70 individuals.

Why might we see a connection with this and the story of Noah? Israel is entering into a new arc. Jacob is like a new Noah. He is bringing his family and his livestock into a realm of safety.

And he is descending into this realm awaiting a deliverance that God is about to effect. So Egypt is like an arc. And Israel will carry forth the mandate of Noah to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth, to bring God's salvation to the world.

There are some interesting patterns within this genealogy which James Bajon in particular has drawn my attention to. Gad for instance is the seventh son. He has 7 sons.

His name has a gematrial value of 7. And there are other things associated with Gad and the number 7. Now these sorts of patterns are a means by which the text would be preserved. Because when you have these numerical patterns you know when a name gets lost. You can remember things a bit better.

There's an order to things. And there's also a proof of preservation. When you have these details, numerical details in place, it helps to demonstrate that nothing has gone missing.

That all the details are here. And so it's one way in which these genealogies with many different names could be better remembered and better preserved. This genealogy restores the wives and their children in their proper order.

In some ways it may be seen pushing back against the favouritism that has characterised the family to this point. We might also notice that the wives have twice as many children as the handmaids. Leah has 33 children.

Zilpah has 16. Rachel has 14 children. Bilhah has 7. And so there seems to be some implicit comment being made here.



When they go down into Egypt they are to introduce themselves as shepherds. As shepherds they are to be separated from the Egyptians. And this is important to protect the people from just assimilating into Egypt and becoming Egyptians themselves.

There will be a time for them to come back up again. And by being identified as shepherds they will be kept apart from Egypt. They will be kept as distinct people and in time they will be able to come up again.

This is so important for the story. That they are descending into Egypt in order that they might one day come up again. As shepherds we might also think of the association that they have with Abel as a keeper of sheep.

That Abel-Cain opposition in Genesis chapter 4 seems to play out in other parts of scripture. Maybe it's playing out here. Cain is associated with the workers of the land.

Egypt becomes associated with the brick kiln. And Cain is the one whose family is associated with metal work, with working upon the land, with these great buildings of empires, all these sorts of things. So maybe what we see with Israel and Egypt is a proper relationship between the keepers of sheep and the workers of the land.

The people who are more settled upon the land, who are people of agriculture, who are people of city building, brick making, metal work, etc. There's also a restoration of the theme of keeping sheep. The story of Joseph began with him keeping sheep with the sons of the handmaids.

And now they've returned to keeping sheep together again. The response of Jacob to meeting Joseph is a powerful one. There's a sort of nunctimitis here.

Now let me die, since I have seen your face and know that you are still alive. Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation. Joseph is the one who will round off the story of Jacob.

The eyes of Israel will be closed. They will enter into the deep sleep of death and the deep sleep of Egypt. Egypt is the grave.

Egypt is the womb. Egypt is this deep realm of sleep from which they'll be woken when they're ready and come out of Egypt to go into the promised land. A question to consider.

Judah is sent ahead of Jacob to meet with Joseph. And then Joseph readies his chariot and comes to meet his father. What significance might we see in Judah's part within this movement? In Genesis 47 we're well into the denouement of the story of Joseph.

Joseph presents some of his brothers to Pharaoh and then Jacob blesses Pharaoh. And then there's the continued events and outcome of famine and Joseph pledges to his

father to bury him in the land of Canaan. Joseph first of all presents five of his brothers to Pharaoh.

This number might be associated with strength. It's the number of the hand. It's the number that's associated with military numbering at many points.

And presumably they have a large company of people at this point. We've read earlier on that Abraham had 318 fighting men. Esau came to meet Jacob with 400 men.

Jacob himself and Isaac his father seemed to have had large numbers of people around them. So it's likely that they came into Egypt with a number of thousands of people at this point. But the core people of the family were 70.

They settled with these people in the land of Goshen near Ramses where they will be part of the life of Egypt but yet also distinct from it. It's one of the reasons why it's important that they declare themselves to be shepherds. As shepherds they will be kept apart from the wider nation and they won't just assimilate.

Jacob blesses Pharaoh as a father. And here one of the things we're seeing is a fulfilment of some of the promises that are given to Abraham in his call. The promise that nations will be blessed through him.

Here Jacob is literally blessing one of the great rulers of his day. And that ruler is treating him as a father figure not just as a subject of his authority and rule. Jacob describes his own life experience as a painful one.

Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life. Compared with the life of his father and grandfather it might seem that Jacob suffered a great deal more. Think about the early years of his life characterised by wrestling with Esau and the failure of his father to bless him and recognise him as the son that should be favoured.

Then he goes to the house of Laban and he's sorely mistreated there. He has the painful domestic issues of having been forced into a marriage that he did not want with a wife that he does not love. And then a wife whom he loves who is barren.

And then the rivalry in his family, his sons and all the tragedy that happens with his sons. Joseph sold into slavery, the actions of Simeon and Levi causing him trouble in Shechem. The actions of his oldest son Reuben who tried to stage a coup against him.

In all of this his experience has been a painful one. He can see God's work in his life but it has not been easy. They remain sojourners in the land but they're treated very favourably.

They have the trust of Pharaoh, they're given positions of authority. Pharaoh wants more people like Joseph, competent and blessed. And so he offers to take any gifted people

among the brothers and the company into his service.

Now the famine continues at this point. Canaan depends upon rain for its agriculture and Egypt depends upon the Nile. So it seems that this is a larger breakdown than just one agricultural system.

It's a wider problem for the whole region. And then the money fails. They've run out of money, they can't pay for the food anymore.

So at that point Joseph takes their livestock. And then the next year they have nothing left but their land and their bodies. What is steadily happening here is that the people of Egypt are being decapitalised to survive the famine.

So they're depending upon the shrewdness of Joseph to provide for them. And as a result they become the slaves of Pharaoh. The choice that they have is between dying and becoming dependent upon some provident party.

When Joseph buys them as the slaves for Pharaoh they have to give a fifth of what they have to Pharaoh. And this situation, it's important to consider what this means. It is not an ideal situation for people to be reduced to this sort of serfdom.

It's not an ideal situation but it's a lot better than dying. And Joseph, by his provident activity and by reducing the people to slavery and dependence upon his providence, he established the strength of the state of Egypt. The ideal is that people will be able to provide for themselves.

That people will own their own productive property. The Bible speaks about the ideal situation with everyone being beneath their own vine and fig tree. Not just working for the state or for Big Fig Incorporated or Megavine.

You don't want to be a serf, a slave or even a wage slave. The ideal is that you end up working on your own land and having your own property. But where that's not possible, where you don't have the providence, where you don't have the resources, in that situation it can be good to have some other party to depend upon.

Whether that's the state or some big corporation, whatever it is. Egypt, however, is a house of bondage. And this is one of the ways in which it is a house of bondage.

The people of Egypt are the slaves of Pharaoh. They work for him. So the house of bondage is not just the state of Israel within the land.

It's the state of everyone within the land. Slavery is not an ideal but it's a sort of safety net. But in Egypt it seems to become a bit more institutionalised.

Now, in the case of an extreme famine, there can be a need for a bigger organisation to deal with such shocks. And Joseph is a really gifted administrator. He's the sort of person

that a state needs to deal with these sorts of crisis situations.

He has worked for his father and for various other masters at this point. And for each one of them he has proved himself to be incredibly gifted and to be blessed in whatever he does. But there are dangers to a really gifted administrator, especially if they're serving for people who are not good.

When a pharaoh arises that has forgotten Joseph, he still has all the power that Joseph has accrued to the Egyptian state. And so this is a very powerful machine that he now has in his hand. Joseph is great as the administrator of a good master.

But there are limitations when it comes to the situation of the exodus. And you have a bad master in charge of all that state machinery that Joseph has established. You need someone like Levi who has zeal and is even prepared to use violence in a particular way.

Kings have a degree of prudence in setting up these sorts of structures and for setting rates of taxation and things like that. And Joseph seems to illustrate that here in his approach. Now that the people of Egypt are the slaves of Pharaoh as well, there's a lot more possibility to arrange things and organise the people.

So there's more scope for central planning. And in particular, in some texts it mentions that Joseph removed people to the cities. He's seemingly undertaking a new urbanisation project.

And this enables Egypt to become a far more centralised and organised society. During this time Israel is settling in the land of Goshen. And they're really thriving.

They're filling the land, they're fruitful and they're multiplying. Note this is referring to language that we find in Genesis chapter 1 where they're called to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it and exercise dominion over its creatures. They're starting to really fulfil the dominion mandate within the context of the land of Goshen.

And this comes near the end of Jacob's life. He has been in the land for 17 years at this point and the end of his life is at the age of 147. Note again this is one of the Patriarch Ages with a mathematical pattern.

So Abraham dies at 175 which is 7 times 5 squared. Isaac dies at 180 which is 5 times 6 squared. And then we have Jacob dying at 3 times 7 squared.

So there is a pattern here. Jacob wants Joseph to promise that he will bury him in the land of Canaan with his fathers. And there is a conflict here beneath the surface.

The conflict is between Pharaoh and Jacob to an extent. To which father figure is Joseph going to be faithful? Has Joseph been Egyptianised? Now of course Joseph is pleased to see his father and his family again. But the question is has he become one of the

Egyptians? Is he truly going to be a person that identifies with the covenant people? Or has he so become accustomed to status in Egypt and being seen as an Egyptian that this is where he wants to settle and remain? Does he value status in Egypt or being part of the covenant people? And the promise that Jacob makes is a very important one.

Because it underlines the fact that Jacob and his family are still destined for the land of Canaan. They are going to go down into the land but then they are going to come back up again. And so they are not going to remain in Egypt.

And burying Jacob in the land of Canaan is a statement to that effect. They have a parcel within the land and this anticipates that they will one day come into full possession of the land. But in confidence of that fact Jacob wants to be buried there.

And by being buried there he is bringing the rest of his family into a greater sense of the knowledge that Egypt is not their home. Egypt is not where they are going to remain. They are going to be there as sojourners for a period of time and then they are going to come up again.

You can imagine if you were Jacob at this time there would be many thoughts going through your mind about what Joseph thought about the situation. Joseph has come into the land of Egypt. He has been in slavery.

He has been in prison. And then he has been taken out of that by Pharaoh. And Pharaoh has treated him literally royally.

He has been someone who has been given the second status in the land. He has been treated like the first born son of Pharaoh. He has been given immense rule and power.

He has been given status and privilege. He has even been given a wife by Pharaoh. And in all these different ways he has been treated as if he was Pharaoh's own son.

Now Jacob comes along. Jacob is a man with influence and power but nothing remotely near that of Pharaoh. And you can imagine that in his mind he is wondering to whom does Joseph look to as his true father? The man who he remembers from when he was a kid, in his teens? Or the man who has blessed him in all these different ways in his adulthood? And at whose side he has been serving these last few decades? These are the big questions that he will be wrestling with at this point.

And you can imagine that Pharaoh would not be particularly keen on Joseph burying his father back in the land of Canaan. It would be an unwelcome sign. Joseph is the saviour of the people of Egypt.

We want to count him as an Egyptian. He is a great hero of our people. And now he is going to bury his father back in the land from which he came? He was taken as a slave from that land.

He doesn't belong in that land anymore. Why would he ever think of returning to a place where all he knew was difficulty? Why wouldn't he want to think himself one of these people? We have treated him so well. Why wouldn't he want to be one of us? And if he is burying his father there, surely that is a bad sign.

And so for Joseph it would be very easy to go along with the will of Pharaoh at that point. But the fact that he is faithful to his father and makes this pledge is a great sign. First of all of Joseph's faithfulness.

And also it's a source of comfort for Jacob at the end of his life. That things have come full circle. He may have had questions about the faithfulness of Joseph near the beginning of his life.

Was Joseph merely in it for himself, for his own advancement? But now he sees that Joseph is truly faithful to him. A question to consider. Jacob lives in the land of Egypt for 17 years.

When have we last read about 17 years? And why might this be significant? Genesis 48 continues the extended coda of the book of Genesis. And it's important to read this against the backdrop of the rest of the book. Half of the book of Genesis is given to the story of Jacob and his sons.

And here we're coming to the end of that story and the summing up of its themes. And there is a retrospective flavour to this chapter that I think is particularly important to reflect upon. The story of the blessings of the sons of Joseph is singled out as a paramount example of Jacob's faith in Hebrews 11.

You can think of all the different things that happened to Jacob in his life. And yet it's this particular event that stands out to the author of the book of Hebrews. In verse 21 we read... This chapter concerns a pivot point in the story.

Jacob is no longer going to be the patriarch. He's about to die. And Joseph is about to take his place as the leader of the brothers.

And then he's looking towards those who will succeed. The sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh. And this sheds light on the rest of the story because Jacob recounts his own life experience in his blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh.

And his selection of them as those who would particularly represent him. He recalls the events of chapter 29, the meeting with God at Bethel. And there's a chain of blessing of passing on from generation to generation.

We can see this in the story of Isaac where he's blessed for the sake of Abraham. We can see it in the story of Jacob where he is blessed by the fear of Isaac. So there's a chain from one generation to another.

And as he blesses the sons of Joseph, Jacob is looking back upon his own life and the way that God has led him. He takes the sons of Joseph and declares that they will be like Reuben and Simeon to him. They will be adopted as it were as his sons.

Not just his grandsons but as those who will represent him more directly. When we think about the tribes of Israel, Ephraim and Manasseh are counted among the tribes. Even though they're the grandsons of Jacob rather than his sons.

Why is this? It's because Joseph receives the firstborn portion. And as the firstborn portion, he receives a double portion. And that double portion is that each of his sons receives a full portion.

This is described in 1 Chronicles chapter 5. The sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel, for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, the son of Israel, so that he could not be enrolled as the oldest son. This is why we do not have a tribe of Joseph except on rare occasions. We have a tribe of Ephraim and Manasseh and those tribes stand for Joseph.

They are Joseph's tribes. In preparing to bless the sons of Joseph, Jacob recounts the story of his life and the way that God has led him to that point. He recalls his return to the land and Rachel's dying on the way before reaching Ephrath or Bethlehem.

Now there's a common theme between Rachel's story and Jacob's story. He's going to die before reaching the promised land. He has asked Joseph to promise that he will bury him within the promised land.

But he's going to die outside of the land. He's going to wait until he's going to be brought into the land. And in the same way as Rachel, he's going to die on the way.

And the experience of Joseph and his brothers will be the same. They're going to die on the way. They're going to have to wait to be brought into the promised land.

His eyes are dimmed. He uses expressions like, who are these? And there seems to be some sort of repetition of themes of the blessing scene in Genesis chapter 27. It's that episode that hangs over the whole story of Jacob to this point.

The switching around of the two sons. But yet here there seems to be a reaffirmation of that in some ways. He switches the older and the younger.

Something similar happened in chapter 38 as the two sons of Judah, Perez and Zerah, switched order as they came out of the womb. Reminding us of Esau and Jacob and reaffirming the switch of the two. We also see here that grandsons are being named as sons in the same way as Perez and Zerah were named as sons.

Joseph is displeased by the switching of the order of his two sons. He thinks that they

should be blessed in the order of their birth. But Jacob insists this is the way that it must be done.

He blesses Joseph through Ephraim and Manasseh. As I noted earlier, this is how Joseph receives the double portion. There's a three-fold character to Jacob's blessing.

So on the one hand God is the one whom he serves, depends upon, fears, is oriented towards, prays to and relates to as father and as the God of his fathers. And then there's God who is the one who provides throughout his way, who directs his path, who gives life and strength and all that he needs. And then finally God is associated with the angel, the one who redeems in times of need and distress.

The one who is the kinsman redeemer in many respects, the one who sticks closer than a brother. And this is important within Jacob's life. He says, in them let my name be carried on.

His name being Israel. Later on when the kingdom is divided it's through Ephraim and Manasseh that the name of Israel is continued. And then there's also this promise that people will be blessed through them.

This draws our mind back to the promise made to Abraham when he's first called. That he would be a blessing and that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Perhaps it is because here Jacob affirms all that God has been doing in his life.

He looks back on his life and he sees God's hand throughout it all. He's able to see even in the struggles and the difficulties and the other things that he experienced as obstacles at the time. That God's hand was present.

He recounts God's dealing with him in the events of Bethel. God's preservation of him from all the things that assaulted him and the way that the angel was with him in that. He believes also that there is a legacy to be passed on.

And he passes on a blessing that he himself has received. He reaches that point in his race where the baton is to be handed on to the next generation. He has fought the fight.

He has finished the race. And he has kept the faith and he's passing something on. His has been a difficult life.

His life has been painful and miserable and a struggle in many respects. But yet he's able to see God's hand in it. He's able to see a blessing in it.

And he's able to see in the next generations that this blessing will be continued and borne by others still to come. As we have already noted at the end of the previous chapter, he insists that he will be buried in the land. And he says that again here.

It's important for him that his destiny is there. He is dwelling in Egypt as a sojourner. His



story has not yet fully ended.

He has to be returned to the land. And the blessing that he gives also speaks to God's consistency. That God is one who does not change.

The same God who has been with him will be with the sons of Joseph. He wrestled with the angel but yet recognised that the angel is the one who redeemed him from all evil. He also recognises in the angel his true father, his true brother, the true one that has been faithful to him.

Even as the males in his family were struggling against him or causing him difficulty. Whether they were his sons, whether they were his father, whether it was his uncle or whether it was his brother. All these men were against him.

But yet the angel as his kinsman redeemer was with him throughout and was protecting him and guiding him. He reaffirms also the promises given to Abraham and passes them on to some people who will succeed him. What is the land that he refers to at the end here? He wants Joseph to bury him in the land but also wants Joseph to know that he is a sojourner too.

So he gives Joseph a portion of his land within the land of Canaan. That portion seems to play upon the word for Shechem perhaps. But where is this land? It's land that he took with his sword and his bow from the Amorites but there's no mention of this in the actual text previously.

I think it's most likely part of the land that he purchased near Shechem. And so he fought for the land and he also purchased it most likely. In Joshua chapter 24 verse 32 we read As for the bones of Joseph which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for a hundred pieces of money.

It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph. So the way that this land is described there would seem to be some common features between it and the land that's given to Joseph. A question to consider.

Jacob is presented to us as an example of faith in Hebrews chapter 11 specifically with reference to this event. What are some of the things that we can learn from the example of Jacob when it comes to speaking about our own life stories and God's involvement in them? Genesis chapter 49 is one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the whole Bible. There are so many different words and expressions in here whose meaning is unclear that many of our remarks upon the passage will have to be speculative.

Jacob is here at the end of his life pronouncing in a poetic form judgments and blessings upon his children. This pattern of a poetic testament is also found in the story of Moses and in David. David ends his life with a poetic statement concerning his legacy in 2

Samuel chapter 22 and Moses does the same in Deuteronomy chapter 33.

We also see poetic judgments concerning the tribes in Judges chapter 5 in the Song of Deborah. And Noah has something similar in his judgments upon his sons in Genesis chapter 9. There's a foreshadowing of the future. This is the seed of the national destiny.

And there's a prophetic significance to what he's declaring. This is what will befall you in the latter days. The judgments that he casts seem to be effective concerning them too.

There's a summons to here. Not just Jacob the individual father but also Israel the official father of the nation. This is Israel speaking as a people, as the representative of the whole nation and its destiny.

The tribes are ordered as follows. Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, and then Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, and finally Joseph and Benjamin. The order here is Leah followed by the handmaids followed by Rachel.

The one interesting detail is that Zebulun and Issachar are switched in order. Dan and Naphtali are both sons of Bilhah yet occur on either side of the sons of Zilpah. Incidentally they also frame two brothers from a different mother in 1 Chronicles 2.2 where they are found on either side of Joseph and Benjamin.

There's a great deal of word play in this chapter but also lots of uncertain and unusual words and expressions. Four sons are particularly focused upon. Reuben, Simeon, paired with Levi, Judah, and Joseph.

These five sons are associated with the name of Yahweh in Genesis 29-30 where we read about the birth of the sons and the names that are given to them and the meanings attached. The destiny of the people hang on these four or five sons in particular. But of these sons, Judah and Joseph are particularly singled out.

Judah will be the dominant tribe of the nation in the south. Joseph, represented by Ephraim and Manasseh, will be the dominant tribe in the north. Notice the way the two are juxtaposed both in the contents of the blessings concerning them and just in the space that is given to them and the ways that they frame the chapter more generally.

This is not the first time that they have been juxtaposed. We saw this also in places like chapter 38 compared with chapter 37 and 39. There is a structure to be observed here.

There are three disqualified sons, as it were, the three firstborn, Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. And then there are the other sons. Those sons appear in a bookended structure.

It begins with royal Judah, who is the king who tears prey, and it ends with royal Benjamin, who is the king who tears prey. Next it speaks of Judah as associated with donkeys and sons. And then it has royal Joseph at the other end, associated with themes

of a warrior donkey.

Then there is Zebulun, the animal that lies down and has dominion. On the other side there is Naphtali, the active animal. Issachar, then, good land for food.

Asher, good land for food at the other end. Then there is Dan, getting into the centre, there is the serpent biting the heels. And on the other side there is Gad, the goads at the heels.

And in the very middle of this whole pattern is that statement, I wait for your salvation, O Lord. It sums up something greater that is going on here. Going through the blessings one by one, it begins with Reuben.

And there are ten statements which refer back to Reuben's sin in Genesis chapter 35. He loses his birthright on account of this, something that is referenced in 1 Chronicles chapter 5. It is described as frothy like water. There is a shift also to he.

So it begins by addressing Reuben directly, but then shifts to addressing the larger group, telling them what Reuben has done. There is no mention of this previously in a public discussion. Nothing has been said about what Reuben did.

But now his father is revealing his crime to others. And there is something similar to the judgement upon Ham here, perhaps. At his deathbed, Jacob is making clear that this son has been disqualified.

There are devastating consequences of the attack that he made upon his father. He lacks all prominence afterwards. No judges, kings or prophets come from the tribe of Reuben, despite Reuben being the firstborn.

It moves on to Simeon and Levi, and there are ten more statements. In this case it is talking about them rather than to them. They are spoken of as confederates.

They belong together. But there are a lot of uncertainties about the words used here. Some have wondered whether it refers to swords or circumcision swords or trade or wedding feast.

It is not entirely clear. The statement about them hamstringing an ox might refer back to chapter 34 verse 30, being a play upon the sound and word of Akal. In that earlier chapter it is that statement, you have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land.

The tribes of Simeon and Levi are detached from each other. They are separated. And Simeon ends up becoming the smallest tribe at the end of the book of Numbers.

They decrease from 59,300 to 22,200 between Numbers chapter 1 verse 23 and Numbers chapter 26 verse 14. In Joshua chapter 19 verses 1 to 9 Simeon is assigned an

enclave. And they are excluded from the blessing in Deuteronomy chapter 33.

Levi in Joshua chapter 13 verses 14 are dispersed to 48 cities. Both of them are scattered. And yet they are scattered in different ways.

Levi ends up being the priestly tribe. Their scattering becomes a good thing. Whereas on the other hand Simeon's scattering is an enervation of their power as a tribe.

The Levite tendency to violence is harnessed for good. Later on in the story of the Exodus Levi is the leading tribe. They are the ones that bring forward zeal as that great trait.

They are the ones that are involved at the forefront of the deliverance. And that zeal sets them apart as fitting priests. The sort of people that will exercise zeal on God's account.

There is no such redemption for Simeon. The Levite Phineas ends up killing Zimri a leading Simeonite in Numbers chapter 25. And there seem to be parallels between Genesis chapter 34 and Numbers chapter 25 and 31.

Move on to the blessing upon Judah. There is a play upon the name of Judah and its meaning. Judah your brothers shall praise you.

Judah's name means praise and there are other plays upon the words around that. Playing upon the sound of his name. Judah is the lion.

He has triumphed and now has the prey between his legs. No one dare touch it. There is a military success being suggested here.

The lion of the tribe of Judah. The king of the beasts. Judah is like Joseph here as well.

Joseph is the one that the brothers bow down to. And here the father's sons bow down before Judah. He is the one who has become the leader of the people.

Again something that we see in 1 Chronicles chapter 5. Note the statements that are made both to Judah and to the brothers. They are to regard him in the light of this and treat him like the lion that he is. A descendant of Judah will always be the king.

He is a young lion. He is also a mature lion. And the scepter won't depart from him.

Between his feet. It's the realm of generation. He is the one who will give birth to the kings.

Until Shiloh comes or until tribute is brought to him. Until he comes whose it is. We're not sure what that word means.

And some have suggested that there's a connection maybe with Sheila. Or others have with Shlomo. That this is Solomon.

The rule over the peoples. Is this referring to the Gentiles? Note the way that Judah stands for the entirety of the people. We can see this in Balaam's prophecy as well.

That Judah is the one that will ultimately give his name to the entire nation. He is the one that stands as the head of the nation. And we'll later on refer to the Judahites as the Jews.

And that is the name that they take on because Judah is the leading tribe. Note the reference back to the preceding narrative. The staff and the sons might recall chapter 38.

The scepter or the staff had departed from him until the kid was sent. Does this suggest a connection between Shiloh, that strange word used here, and Sheila, the son that is not given in chapter 38? Some have suggested so and seen within these statements a subtle reference back to the events of that chapter and the chapter preceding. Washing garments with wine.

A wine connected with blood. That might remind you of the fact that Judah was the leader of his brothers in placing the blood upon the robes of Joseph to disguise the fact that he had gone. And there are also parallels between Ur, his name connected with donkey, and the name Onan with the expression the son of a Shias.

There is much more that could be explored about the details of the blessing given to Judah. Is the vine connected with Tamar? Is the Shias the daughter of the Canaanite Shua? It's something that we can speculate about. But even if there are references back to the events of chapter 38, I think they're giving us positive spin here.

This is fundamentally a blessing. Later on in Zechariah 9, verse 9, for instance, we can see an association between the king and the Ass or cult. We might also see references to the land being blessed with wine and milk and the beauty of the king.

Some of the imagery that we find in the Song of Songs. The blessing of Zebulun is interesting because there's a reversal of the order between Zebulun and Issachar. We see a similar thing in Deuteronomy chapter 33, verse 18.

Zebulun's name is connected with the theme of dwelling. And there seems to be a play upon that meaning here. Even if it's not the same word, it's a synonym of the meaning of his name.

There are questions here about the territory that Zebulun is going to live in, though. Zebulun seems to have inland rather than coastal territory in Joshua 19, verses 10-16. We also see the same sort of thing in Deuteronomy 33, verses 18-20.

Sidon needn't necessarily refer to the city itself, but to the Phoenicians. Is this a reference to living by the Sea of Galilee? Is there a sea trade there? The territory of

Zebulun is not necessarily set as sharply as we might suppose. Josephus, in his Antiquities, writes, So it seems to bear out some of the ways that they're being described here.

Issachar comes beneath Zebulun, even though that reverses the birth order. He's again being described as a strong animal. He settles in a fertile land.

And maybe there's an ironic play upon his name, meaning wage or hire, in that he's described as a slave or serfs on good land. That's the status that they have in the land that they finally settle. Dan comes next, again playing upon the meaning of the name, meaning judge.

Dan shall judge his people. Again, it's not entirely clear what this refers to. Could it be with reference to Samson? He's described as a serpent, by the way, biting the heel.

Maybe think back to Genesis 3.15. There's a wisdom of the serpent, a sneak attack of a smaller tribe that still holds its own. Dan is associated later with guerrilla warfare, and they migrate north in Judges 17 and 18. In the central statement of this bookended section, it speaks of waiting for God's salvation.

Maybe this is referring to the precarious state of the Danites. But it's the central statement in that order. Gad comes next.

Again, it's playing upon the meaning of his name. A troop shall tramp. Once again, there's a reference to the heels.

They're skilful warriors. Asher, like Issachar, is associated with good food. While Issachar is associated with service, however, Asher is associated with riches.

Naphtali comes next. He's a doe let loose, given birth to fawns of the fold. Finally, the penultimate in the list, but paired with Benjamin who comes next, as both sons of Rachel, and paralleled with Judah on the other end, you have Joseph.

Joseph is compared to a vine or maybe a wild donkey. Some have read it like Wenham. Joseph is a wild ass, a wild ass beside a spring, his wild colts beside the wall.

It parallels there, in that reading, with Judah, a son of a wild she-ass, the whelp of a lion. The word play upon Ephraim, with the reference to fruitfulness. What is the reference to the archers about? Well, we can think of the archer that's been mentioned previously, which is Ishmael.

Ishmael goes down into Egypt and becomes an archer. He's left at a distance of a bow shot from his mother, and those things are probably connected together. Joseph's story is also spoken of in terms of archers.

He's been shot at by his brothers, by all these other forces that have been attacking him,

and yet his bow has remained firm. What does this mean? That he's been shot at, but he hasn't released his arrows at anyone. He's held back.

How has he done that? He's done it because the God of Jacob has made his arm strong. He's able to resist vengeance. He's able to resist answering violence with violence, giving back what he has been given.

He is in a position of considerable authority. He has all the resources of Egypt at his disposal, and his brothers come and kneel before him, and he has complete power over them. But he holds that arrow and does not let it fly at them.

He does not attack them and do to them what they did to him. He has all the power. He shows that he has the power in the ways that he sets up the situation.

But he does not take vengeance. And that, I think, is the way in which we're supposed to understand the archer's imagery there. His bow remains firm.

Here Jacob refers to Joseph's relationship with the mighty one of Jacob. Again, it speaks of the shepherd and the stone of Israel. This language is referring to Jacob's own life and his experience of God.

And he relates his own experience of God to Joseph's experience of and relationship to God. He sees in his son something of a continuation of his relationship with God and his journey. The God of Jacob has been made known in the story and life of Joseph too.

The blessings that are made to Joseph are also noteworthy. They're associated with fertility and fruitfulness and blessing and life. It refers to the parallels between the creation and the woman's body.

So the blessing of heavens above paralleled with the blessings of the breasts. And then there's the blessings of the deep that crouches beneath. And then the blessings of the womb.

And there's a play upon these words in the Hebrew too, their sounds. Finally, we have Benjamin. He's described as like a ravenous creature.

He's like Judah in this respect. He's reminiscent of Judah's blessing. Again, this is a kingly tribe.

He is a tribe that will lead the people in Saul. The conclusion of this chapter is the first mention that we find in the whole book of Genesis and in the Bible more generally of 12 tribes. These are not just 12 sons now.

They're 12 tribes with destinies set out before them. Once again, there's a reference to the son's duty to bury Jacob in Canaan. There's also the first reference that we see to the death of Rebecca.

That she died and was buried in the cave of Machpelah. Jacob gathers his sons together at the beginning of this chapter. And at the end, he is gathered to his people.

In chapter 47, verse 28, we learn of the years of his life. This is the sort of thing we'd expect to find in a final statement just before someone dies or after they have died. But two whole chapters intervene between that statement and the final end of Jacob's life.

All of this is playing out the significance of his death. And what his legacy is. And what we see clearly at the end is that his legacy is Israel itself.

The 12 tribes. The destiny set before them is a destiny set before them by Israel. The forefather.

Jacob, the man who has gone through this wrestling with God and man and has prevailed. A question to consider. If you compare this passage to Genesis chapter 29 and 30.

The names given to the children as they are born and the meanings assigned to them. And Deuteronomy chapter 33, as Moses blesses the different tribes. What are some of the similarities and contrasts and connections that you notice? In Genesis chapter 50, the stories of Jacob and Joseph finally reach their end.

And the book is concluded. Jacob has twice made a solemn charge. Once to Joseph and then once to the brothers that he be buried in Canaan.

He made Joseph take an oath to him that he would do so. They're not just living as regular sojourners within the land now though. They are people with privileged positions, with great land given to them.

And with positions of authority and influence within the ruling administration. Joseph has two father figures in his life. He has his father Jacob and he has Pharaoh.

He spent the first 17 years of his life with his father Jacob. And then the last 17 years of his father's life with him. But in the interim period he was separated from his father.

He didn't know if his father was involved in sending him down to Egypt. He was raised to new authority by Pharaoh. Pharaoh gave him a new job, a new name and even a wife.

And so there are these two father figures whose interests compete. And the question is who will ultimately have his loyalty? After Jacob dies he's embalmed. The embalming process takes about 40 days.

And then there's a period of mourning for about 70 days. Quite likely the embalming period is within that 70 days. This was a huge event.

This is the father of the saviour of the nation. And he is being mourned like a royal



figure. And as such a figure he's going to be embalmed, he's going to be placed in the casket and he's going to be buried in a very magnificent tomb.

But yet there's a twist in the tale. Joseph speaks to the people of the household of Pharaoh, not Pharaoh directly but indirectly and says that he was made to swear by his father that he'll be buried in the land of Canaan. Now what's the purpose of the embalming? It seems to this point that it's the typical preparation for the Egyptian afterlife.

Here is a body being prepared for an Egyptian funeral and burial. But yet for Joseph the preparation is so that the body can be transported to somewhere different entirely. That it might be taken out of Egypt and brought to the cave of Machpelah and buried there.

This is quite a startling request that he makes of Pharaoh. Here is the saviour of the people who was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers and yet has risen to the highest heights of authority in Egypt. He's someone with influence and power second only to Pharaoh himself.

His family has been given this vast land that they can occupy. They have great riches and wealth and influence. They have high authority and positions of power.

And now the patriarch of this people has requested to be buried in the land of Canaan. Don't they recognise that Egypt is their new home? You can imagine why Joseph approaches this request rather gingerly. They've just had 70 days of mourning for this guy.

This guy is treated as Egyptian royalty and now Joseph is asking for that body to be buried elsewhere. Something seems to be ungrateful about this request. But Joseph does have a benefit in the fact that he was made to swear by his father to bury his body in the land of Canaan.

This means it's not just his choice. He is bound by filial responsibility to his father and that gives him some leverage in the conversation with Pharaoh and his household. While Pharaoh is not probably very pleased about this request, he accepts it.

And Joseph goes up to bury his father. But he is not alone. He is accompanied by all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household, the elders of the land of Egypt, and all the household of Joseph, his brothers, his father's household, and just the children and the flocks are left behind.

Far from just grudgingly accepting this, the Egyptians are fully involved. They provide an honour guard for the funeral procession to the land of Canaan. And they take the long way round.

They go beyond the far side of the Jordan rather than straight up to Hebron. And they

wait some days on the far side of the Jordan. And then Joseph and his brothers cross and bury their father.

And why do they take this particular route? Well I think in part because it's the same route as they later take in the Exodus. Their father Israel is the one who bears the name of the people. And he's buried in the land.

He represents the destiny of his sons, that his sons will one day follow him back. And perhaps one of the most interesting features of this particular narrative is the suggestion that the Egyptians could have played a role in that story too, if things had been otherwise. In this story, Pharaoh is being presented with a difficult request concerning a son that had to prefer loyalty to his true father over loyalty to him.

See, similarities may be between Moses and Joseph. Moses is taken into the royal family but ultimately identifies with Israel. Israel is God's firstborn son.

It's not God's only son but it is God's firstborn son. And God says to Pharaoh, let my people go. That demand is not dissimilar from the demand that Jacob makes upon Pharaoh.

Let my son go that he may serve me, that he may bring me to the land and bury me in the land. Recognize that he is my son ultimately, not your son. And while he may rule wisely in your kingdom and in your name, ultimately he belongs to a different father.

He is not yours. Let my firstborn son go. And that possibility that Pharaoh would have let Israel go is one that is held out within this chapter.

If Pharaoh had submitted to the will of this father in the same way as the earlier Pharaoh submitted to the will of Jacob concerning his son Joseph, then things could have been very different. Rather than chariots pursuing to be destroyed in the Red Sea, chariots could have gone up with Israel as an honor guard. Recognizing again that Israel is God's firstborn son but not his only son.

Egypt can be seen as a son of God too. Egypt can enter into the blessing that Israel has. Instead of a pursuing party, they could have been an honor guard.

After all of this takes place, after the death of Jacob, there is another crisis that arises. The question of whether Joseph has truly forgiven the brothers or whether merely for the sake of his father he delayed his vengeance upon them. Think back to the story of Esau who said that he would, when his father died, that he would kill Jacob.

In a similar manner, perhaps Joseph is just delaying his wrath until Jacob dies. And so the brothers deal with Joseph indirectly through messengers in a similar way to the way that Joseph deals with Pharaoh's household. They relay a message that Jacob supposedly gave concerning the brothers before he died.

Now I think it's unlikely that Jacob actually gave that message. Rather they're trying to save themselves using the authority of their father as leverage. It is interesting to observe the way that they speak of God in this context.

They speak of the God of your father. Your father, not our father. And the God of your father.

As if Joseph had a closer relationship not just with Jacob but also with God. Their relationship both with Jacob and also to an extent with God is mediated by Joseph's relationship with them. But Joseph's peaceful response emphasises God's sovereignty in history.

God is in control of the course of events, not ultimately human will. In a famous statement Joseph says to them, This echoes the statements of chapter 45. And then later on, Joseph's recognition of God's hand in the control of the events of history allows him to forgive his brothers.

To recognise that their agency is not the ultimate decider of events but God's purpose. And in light of that to be able to show mercy and grace to people who had sought his harm. Joseph dies at the age of 110 years.

And as we've gone through the stories to these points we've noticed the pattern to be observed in the age of the patriarchs. Abraham being 175 years old, 7 times 5 squared. Isaac being 180 years old, 5 times 6 squared.

Jacob being 147 years old, 3 times 7 squared. And now Joseph, 1 times 5 squared plus 6 squared plus 7 squared. There's a progression from 7, 5, 3, 1 and then ascending squares.

5 squared, 6 squared, 7 squared and then 5 squared plus 6 squared plus 7 squared. This progression is an interesting mathematical feature of the text. But I think there's a deeper theological significance here.

The destiny of the family of Abraham is played out through the various lines of that family. The destiny of each character is developed in the next. And we've seen this in the emphasis upon the way that the characters pass things on to the next generation.

Through blessings and also the role of the next generation in burying their fathers. And the loyalty to their fathers as they continue their legacy. Also in the way that God is named in reference to the father.

The God of your father Abraham to Isaac. The fear of Isaac to Jacob. The God of your father to Joseph.

In each of these cases we're seeing a developing line of blessing. A developing line of

God's covenant commitment to his people through history. It's a cumulative story.

Joseph makes the sons of Israel swear that they will bring up his bones from the land of Egypt. Now he's not getting them to bring his bones up immediately as in the case of Jacob. Rather he's anticipating a later departure from the land.

That his bones are held as a guarantee that that will in fact take place. And as they are left in the land of Egypt the promises that they will go up at one point in the future. Usually when we read about a character's death and being put in a tomb it's the end of the story.

But this is the end of the book of Genesis but it's not the end of the story of Joseph's body. Joseph's bones are the beginning of a later story. They set things up for the story of the Exodus.

The deliverance of those bones from the land of Egypt. And the burial of those bones within the land of Canaan. Now the fate of Joseph's bones frames the whole story of the Exodus.

In Exodus chapter 13 verse 19 in the context of the description of Israel leaving the land of Egypt. We read, And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him. For Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear saying, God will surely visit you and you shall carry up my bones with you from here.

And the end of the book of Joshua has a number of echoes of the end of the book of Genesis. It ends with the story of Joshua's death and his burial. And then it mentions the bones of Joseph.

As for the bones of Joseph which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for a hundred pieces of money. It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph. And that is at the very end of the story of the conquest of the land.

So at the very beginning of them leaving Egypt and at the very end of the conquest of the land, the bones of Joseph turn up. Joseph's statement concerning his bones is not just something tagged on at the end of a book as the narrative energy dies down. Rather it sets things up for what's going to happen in the future.

And once again the author of Hebrews appreciated this. By faith Joseph at the end of his life made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones. The fate of Joseph's bones and the fate of Israel are bound together.

So the faith of Jacob is seen in sending his body ahead of Israel and the faith of Joseph is seen in the promise that they will one day go up with his body, with his bones. The story

of Joseph is the story of the lost son, of the son that goes down into Egypt. A story like the story of Ishmael.

And the story of the exodus is the story of bringing back the lost son. That son that has been abandoned in Egypt is now being returned to the land. And at the very end of the story of the exodus, when things have reached their rest, when the land has been settled in the book of Joshua, we see Joseph's bones turn up again.

This is no accident. This is what is set up at the end of the book of Genesis. And it completes so many of the themes that we have seen in the book to this point.

A question to consider. One feature of the end of Joshua that might be interesting is the fact that Joshua dies at 110 years old, the same age that Joseph dies at. Is there some parallel between those two characters? It's a question worth asking.

We might also think of parallels between Joseph and other characters, such as David. We have also discussed the parallels between Joseph and Jesus at various points. What can we see in the character of Joseph that is played out in future characters in biblical history?