The GREAT STORY — *of* — ISRAEL

The GREAT STORY *of* ISRAEL

ELECTION, FREEDOM, HOLINESS

ROBERT BARRON

WORD on FIRE

Published by Word on Fire, Park Ridge, IL 60068

Printed in the United States of America

Cover design, typesetting, and interior art direction
by Nicolas Fredrickson, Sandra Jurca, Cassie Bielak, and Rozann Lee

25 24 23 22 1 2 3 4

ISBN: 978-1-685780-19-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022907597

Contents

Introduction

When I was doing my university and seminary studies some forty years ago, the privileged, practically dominant approach to the Bible was the historical-critical method. The purpose of this technique—employed in the Catholic context by such weighty figures as Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, Roland Murphy, Joseph Fitzmyer, John Meier, and, most notably, Raymond E. Brown—was to uncover as fully as possible the intention of the human authors of the biblical books. Accordingly, it involved a number of subdisciplines, including redaction criticism (which sought to identify the theological assumptions of the final editor of a biblical text), source criticism (which traced the history of the development of a scriptural writing), literary criticism (which focused on the genre employed by the writer/editor), etc.

There are numerous virtues to this method. First and most importantly, it takes with utter seriousness the groundedness of biblical religion in history. Though it certainly contains poetry, legend, song, and philosophical musing, the Bible is primarily the account of how God acted in history, precisely through the people Israel. And the climax of the biblical narrative (at least from the Christian perspective) is a very particular Jew, Jesus from Nazareth, who fulfilled God's promises to Israel through his dying and rising from the dead. If we forget that the texts of the Bible were written by real human beings operating within definite historical contexts and with their own perspectives and limitations, the Scriptures can devolve rapidly into abstract philosophy or vague "spirituality."

The historical-critical method holds off this tendency. Secondly, it very effectively blocks the temptation to hermeneutical whimsy, by which I mean wildly imaginative or irresponsibly speculative interpretations of biblical texts. In this, it represents a reiteration of the patristic commonplace—sometimes, admittedly, honored by the Fathers themselves more in the breach—that the spiritual sense of a scriptural text must always be based upon the literal meaning of that text. Thirdly, by stressing the role of the human author so strongly, it holds off a naïve reading of inspiration as tantamount to divine dictation, as though God were working through automatons. And in this, it respects the incarnational principle, so central to Christianity, that God acts noncompetitively with his rational creatures, his proximity enhancing rather than diminishing their own activity.

However, there are a variety of limitations to this method, and the almost exclusive practice of historical criticism in biblical exegesis and preaching has led to problems galore. First, by stressing so completely the human authorship of the biblical books, the method effectively bracketed the reason the Bible is still read in the Church—namely, that God in some very real way is the principal author of the Scriptures. Thomas Aquinas gives voice to the mainstream of the classical Christian tradition when he insists, at the very beginning of the *Summa theologiae*, that *auctor sacrae Scripturae est Deus* (the author of Sacred Scripture is God).[1] That Thomas holds to the integrity of the human authors of the Scriptures is clear from a number of his observations, but he understands those writers as acting instrumentally in service of the ultimate author. I can vividly remember how in biblical classes in the seminary, I would ask my professors, after we had laboriously gone through a historical-critical analysis of a given text, "Yes, but what is God saying?" To which the answer was, "That's for your homiletics class or your spiritual direction." That

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.1.10, in Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia, Leonine ed. (Rome, 1882), 4:25.

bifurcation between formal academic study of the texts on the one hand and spirituality, preaching, and prayer on the other was and is tragic, and it was bequeathed to us by a one-sided employment of the historical-critical method.

A related difficulty is that the historical-critical approach effectively atomizes the biblical writings, thereby eliminating the coherence of the Bible as, at least in a significant sense, one book. I have long argued against those who naïvely look for a single hermeneutical key to the Scriptures and insisted that the Bible is best construed as a library or a collection of books with different authors and audiences and written in a variety of literary genres. That said, given the uniqueness of the principal author of the Scriptures, we must see, even amidst all of this variety, a thematic coherence and a recognizable narrative arc. These features have been emphasized strongly in the so-called canonical approach, which focuses on the totality of the Bible as a finished product. N.T. Wright's exegesis, which highlights the history of salvation as a sort of five-act drama—stretching from creation and the fall, through the formation of a people Israel, to the coming of the Messiah and the age of the Church—represents a unified reading of the Bible as a whole.[2] If the stress, in the historical-critical manner, is on the particularities of each book and the peculiar emphasis of each author, one can easily lose the forest for the trees, and this is not a merely theoretical difficulty, for it leads to a radical undermining of Christian proclamation and preaching.

Still another difficulty is that the historical-critical method can effectively relegate the Bible to the past. Without gainsaying a bit of what I just argued regarding the basis in history of the Christian faith, it is crucial to see that the reflections of the authors of Genesis, Exodus, 1 Samuel, Ecclesiastes, and the Letter to the Romans do not have to do exclusively with their own times and

2. N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 121–143; *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2013), 121–127.

circumstances. Rather, they are conveying something of universal and transtemporal value, indeed, a revelation of God that speaks as powerfully to a contemporary audience as it did to the original recipients of the text—perhaps even more so. A Bible that belongs only to the past will be of interest to historians of religion or literary specialists, but it will provide little foundation for preaching or pastoral work.

A final problem—massively on display in the years that I was going through school—is that historical critics of the strict observance almost invariably see the theological tradition as a distorting overlay rather than as a clarifying lens. James Kugel's book *The Bible As It Was* illustrates this problem with particular clarity.[3] A great writer and a gifted exegete, Kugel dissects every major text of the Bible using the tools of historical criticism and discovers that they typically have to do with relatively mundane events in the ancient Near East: tribal conflicts, ethnic disputes, the founding of tiny towns, etc. His rational approach results in an almost total demythologization of the biblical books. Running on a completely parallel track to this historicizing interpretation is the ancient and elaborate theological reading of the Bible as the story of God's dramatic involvement in the history of Israel. Kugel more or less suggests that one can practice the high, spiritualized exegesis of the Bible, but that this has nothing finally to do with what the human authors of these books were actually talking about. On his reading, the classical theology of the Christian Church is a fanciful overlay with little real connection to what amount to mildly interesting ancient texts. Thus, many of the practitioners of the historical-critical method wanted to scrape away the speculations of Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Newman, and Rahner in order to get at what the Bible "really means," which, as we saw, typically amounts to what was in the minds of the human authors of the texts. However, this method is conditioned

3. James L. Kugel, *The Bible As It Was* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997).

by a sort of Protestantizing, *sola scriptura* set of assumptions. Far more realistic and illuminating is the Newmanesque approach, which assumes that theology represents a development and clarification of themes and ideas present in the scriptural texts.[4] Thus, for example, Augustine's highly refined Trinitarian theology was certainly not in the minds of any of the New Testament authors, but it nevertheless serves to render explicit many motifs implicitly present in the Gospels and epistles.

The commentary you are about to read was written in light of these concerns. It is not a work of historical criticism, but it deeply respects the achievements of that method and in many cases draws upon its findings, even as it attempts to push beyond them. Perhaps the most accurate term for its nature and purpose is "theological interpretation." Though it fully acknowledges that the human writers of the biblical books were operating within their own historical and cultural frameworks and were pursuing their own particular theological agendas, it assumes throughout that the prime author of the Scriptures is the Holy Spirit, working noncompetitively through instrumental causes and with his own "agenda" and purpose. Consequently, it takes for granted a deep coherence between the various biblical texts. It recognizes patterns, themes, trajectories, rhymes, and rhythms that obtain throughout the entirety of the Bible, and therefore it does not hesitate to read the parts in light of the whole, and each of the parts in relation to one another. Furthermore, it respects the spiritual and theological tradition, from the ancient world until the present day, as the organic development of motifs and patterns implicit in the Scriptures, and hence it is eager to use that heritage in the project of interpretation. With Joseph Ratzinger, it assumes a mutually enhancing relationship between doctrine and exegesis. Finally, it endeavors to read the Old Testament consistently in light of Christ, who is the new Adam, the new Moses, the definitive son of David,

4. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Classics, 2017), 27–44.

the yes to all the promises made of Israel, as St. Paul puts it (2 Cor. 1:20). It stands unapologetically in the Augustinian tradition that recognizes that "the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New."[5]

What you are about to read is the first of two volumes. The project is a theological reading of the entire Old Testament, this particular book covering the Pentateuch, the historical writings, and the biblical novellas. The second volume will treat of the prophets and the poetic writings of the first testament. The only two of the historical books that I do not consider are 1 and 2 Chronicles, and this is because they overlap narratively and theologically so thoroughly with 1 and 2 Samuel.

The Second Vatican Council called for a revival of biblical studies and a deepening of a biblical sensibility among the Catholic faithful. For a variety of reasons—not least the one-sided dominance of the historical-critical approach—this renaissance, in my judgment, has not happened. My hope is that this commentary can contribute, however modestly, to making that dream of the Council Fathers a reality.

5. See Augustine, *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum* 2.73; PL 34:623.

Genesis

CREATION NARRATIVE

It is, of course, with trepidation that one approaches these opening verses of the Bible, for they constitute one of the most famous and commented upon texts in the literature of the world. I would make this first general remark: these passages describing the creation of the cosmos are not intended to be either scientifically or philosophically precise. Their genre is theological poetry. That is to say, they are indeed making claims that have both scientific and philosophical implications, but their form and purpose are neither scientific nor philosophical.

Therefore, simply comparing this account to those offered by astrophysicists and cosmologists concerning the origins of the visible universe is to commit a category error. Similarly, to see in this story an original cosmic dualism of spirit and matter, along the lines of Aristotle's or Plato's philosophical cosmology, is also to miss the point. The purpose of this text is, first, theological and spiritual.

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). God creates everything, for "heavens and earth" is a kind of biblical code for the totality of the universe, both that which we can see and that which is less immediately available to us—in the language of the Nicene Creed, what is "visible and invisible."[1] And the creative activity of God obtains from the

1. "Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed," in Heinrich Denzinger et al., *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), no. 150.

beginning—which is to say that no aspect of time is outside of his control or not under his aegis. As St. Augustine said, it is incorrect to think of time moving along and then God intervening to create at a certain moment.[2] On the contrary, time itself is a creature.

From this elemental claim, much of the spiritual dynamism of the Bible flows. To be in right relation to God is to acknowledge one's total dependence upon him; to be in sin is to seek to stand somewhere apart from him, to find some place where or some time when he is not. God's press is from the beginning, and he embraces the heavens and the earth. He cannot be avoided.

From the very fact that God is Creator, we learn a great deal about his nature. Since he brings the whole of finitude into being—the heavens and the earth—God is not himself ingredient in the universe. Unlike the accounts we find in both ancient mythology and philosophy, the supreme reality is not a prime instance alongside other basically similar beings. Think here of the Greek and Roman divinities, which are super-humans, massively impressive beings, quantitatively but not really qualitatively different from humans here below. This qualitative otherness, signaled by the fact that God creates, has led the theological tradition to refer to God in strange and distinctive ways. For example, St. Anselm famously describes God as "that than which nothing greater can be thought."[3] A moment's reflection reveals that this reality cannot be a supreme being at the top of the chain of beings, for such a being plus the rest of finite reality would be greater than that being alone. Though it is a high paradox, it is correct to say that God plus the world he makes is not greater than God alone.[4] After creation, there are indeed more beings, but not more perfection of being. Thomas Aquinas expressed this conviction in his account of God as *ipsum esse* (to-be itself) rather than *ens summum* (highest

2. Augustine, *Confessions* 11.11–11.13.

3. Anselm, *Proslogion* 2–5, in *Anselm: Monologion and Proslogion*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996), 99–102.

4. Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 42.

being).[5] A key implication of this theology is that God and the world are not ontological rivals, competing, as it were, for space on the same metaphysical ground. Giving glory to God, therefore, is not tantamount to denying glory to creatures—just the contrary. I don't know if there is a theological principle in the Bible more important than this thesis of the noncompetitiveness of God vis-à-vis his creation—and we will trace it throughout this study.

Responsible for the to-be of his creatures, the Creator God is properly described as the uncaused cause, but in the most basic sense of this term—that is to say, God not only moves and affects finite things; he grounds them in their being. Existence as such is his proper effect. But this entails that, in the language of the scholastic theologians, God's very nature is to be.[6] If he received his act of existing from a source extraneous to himself, he would, quite obviously, not be the Creator, but rather a creature among others. Therefore, in God, essence (what he is) and existence (that he is) coincide. To be a creature is to be a type of being, or being according to some mode; but to be God is to be in an unrestricted way. "To be God is to be to-be," as David Burrell put it.[7]

And from this state of affairs, it follows that the Creator must be in possession of any and all perfection of being since his manner of existence is unrestricted or unconditioned. Thus, God must be all-powerful, all-knowing, all-benevolent, all-beautiful, etc. We will see these attributes assumed throughout the narrative sections of the Bible and sung in many of the poetic sections.

We hear that when he creates the heavens and the earth, "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep" (Gen. 1:2). If we are examining this from a purely philosophical perspective, we would have to accuse the author of committing an elementary error, for there is a strict contradiction between

5. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* 3.19; *Summa theologiae* 1.4.2, 1.11.4.

6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.2.3, 1.3.4.

7. David B. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 26.

"creating the earth" and the earth being already in existence. What matters here is the phrase "formless void and darkness," the English rendering of the famous Hebrew phrase *tohu wabohu*. It is not advisable to think of this in metaphysical terms, as though it signals prime matter or the elemental stuff from which God creates. Rather, I would follow Karl Barth in seeing it as the "nonbeing," the chaos that stands opposed to God's creative intentions.[8] Once we understand this, we can see this "watery abyss" resurfacing throughout the biblical narrative—in the waters of the Red Sea, in the flood of Noah, even in the stormy waters on which Jesus walks.

God has lordship over this opposition and remains permanently capable of bringing order and harmony out of it. The agency by which he effects this creation—both in the beginning and throughout salvation history—is the *ruach* (breath or wind) described as sweeping, or in some translations, "brooding" over the *tohu wabohu*. This is none other than the Holy Spirit, which calls forth, inspires, and gives rise to life, as Gerard Manley Hopkins saw: "Because the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."[9] Once more, as in an overture to an opera, one of the principal themes of the entire biblical drama is anticipated here: the *tohu wabohu* will not win, for the Spirit is brooding over it and bringing order out of the chaos. We will follow this motif in story after story in the Bible, until Jesus finally breathes the same Holy Spirit onto his Apostles, sending them out to bring order from the chaos of sin.

"Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). In practically all of the mythologies of the ancient world, creation comes through some primordial act of violence: one god conquering another; one army of divinities overwhelming another. And in the early philosophical accounts, the prime mover

8. Karl Barth, "God and Nothingness," in *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, vol. 3.3, *The Doctrine of Creation, Sections 50–51* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 1–78.

9. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in *Ignatian Collection*, ed. Holly Ordway and Daniel Seseske (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Classics, 2020), 179.

or creator god imposes himself on recalcitrant matter. In short, both types of myths of origin present a conflictual or at least interventionary explanation of order.

But on the biblical reading, God creates not through violence or intervention but through a nonviolent act of speech. God thinks, wills, and speaks the world into existence. Therefore, it seems as though nonviolence is metaphysically basic. Moreover, since God speaks the world in its entirety into existence, his knowledge of things is not passive and derivative, but rather active and creative. Things don't exist and subsequently God knows them; rather, God knows them and therefore they exist. Another crucial implication of this teaching is that all of creation, in every detail, is marked by intelligibility. Nothing in the universe is dumbly there; rather, everything is marked, at least to some degree, by harmony, order, reasonability. And this theological idea was indeed one of the necessary conditions for the emergence of the modern physical sciences. Unless a scientist has the mystical conviction that the world is intelligible, she will not go out to meet it with confidence. Further, it would be impossible to prove on scientific grounds that this is the case, since the very scientific method depends upon the assumption of it. In the language of Joseph Ratzinger, objective intelligibility is grounded in a more primordial subjective Intelligence.[10]

In the Genesis account, all created things come forth from the Creator in a kind of stately procession, one major aspect of creation following another and according to a definite temporal rhythm: "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day" (Gen. 1:5). We are meant to sense here a sort of liturgical rite, a procession of ministers. As is customary, the final character in a liturgical procession is the one who will lead the praise, and so we find human beings taking the final place in the procession of created things, for their role will be to lead all of creation in a chorus of praise to their Maker. Correlative to this point is the

10. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2nd ed., trans. J.R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 151–158.

subtle dethroning of false claimants to divinity that is implicit in this great poem. For practically everything mentioned in the creation account—the earth itself, mountains, animals, the sun and stars, etc.—was at some time in the ancient world worshipped as a divinity. By insisting that these are all creatures, the biblical author is holding off any form of idolatry: these are not to be worshiped; rather, they are to be worshipers in a great chorus of praise. St. Augustine commented that the very essence of sin is turning from the Creator to creatures, by which he means the rendering of some finite, conditioned thing as unconditioned.[11] From its first lines, the Bible is trying to hold off this tendency. In many ways, the entire scriptural story centers around this theme of right versus errant worship.

How wonderful that God finds everything he has created good, and the ensemble of creatures very good. Any form of matter/spirit dualism is thereby being held at bay. Though Gnostics and other dualists are compelled to see the Creator God of Genesis as a lesser or fallen divinity, the biblical author could not be clearer that the one who makes even the lowly things that creep and crawl upon the earth is the true God. This furthermore places the entire history of salvation within a properly cosmic context. The whole of creation is meant to praise God, and the whole of creation is involved in the falling away from right praise, and hence the whole of creation is the object of God's salvific action. The new heavens and new earth, dreamed of by the author of the Second Letter of Peter (2 Pet. 3:13), are the culmination of the process that commences with the creation of the material realm.

On the seventh day, after the work of creation, God rested. This hasn't a thing to do, obviously, with divine fatigue on the part of the omnipotent Creator. Rather, it expresses God's savoring of what he has made. Aquinas says that the two basic moves of the will are to seek the absent good and to rest in the possessed

11. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.20.

good.[12] The sabbath day is an example of the second function of the will and hence serves as an exemplar to human beings. They will indeed seek any number of absent goods, but the entire purpose of their existence is to taste and to savor the good, to rest in what they have. The sabbath is, accordingly, not a day of work but a day of play, in accord with the Aristotelian sense that the highest values are those that are sought for their own sake.[13] This is why it is entirely appropriate that the liturgy is a sabbath day activity, for liturgy is the highest form of play[14]: "So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation" (Gen. 2:3).

ADAM AND EVE

There is an interesting feature in the description of the garden in which God places the first human beings: a river flows out from Eden and then divides into four branches, including the Tigris and the Euphrates. What should draw our attention is the fact that Eden must be an elevated place, a kind of mountain, if the rivers flow out from it. This is the first mention of the great biblical symbol of the mountain, a place of encounter between God and human beings. Mt. Ararat, Mt. Sinai, Mt. Tabor, Mt. Calvary, and most especially, Mt. Zion, the place of the temple, are all locales where divinity, as it were, comes down, and humanity goes up. The presence of the mountain within Eden is an anticipation of the temple mount, which, precisely as the place of right praise, was meant to hearken back to the time before the fall. God gives to Adam the command to "till" the soil of Eden (Gen. 2:15), and the verb used here is the same one later used to describe the care of the temple by the Jerusalem priests.[15]

12. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1-2.3.4.

13. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* 1094a.

14. Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. Ada Lane (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 41–44.

15. John Bergsma and Brant Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible*, vol. 1, *The Old Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2018), 102–103.

So far, we have been describing the "priestly" function of Adam, but we might also speak of his "kingly" task. According to some of the earliest biblical commentators, Adam was given the responsibility to expand the borders of Eden, bringing the good order that comes from right praise to the wider world.

What follows the description of Eden is what I would characterize as the great permission. So much stress has been placed over the centuries on the single prohibition that God gives to Adam that we practically forget the extraordinarily rangy permission that the Lord gives to our first parent: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden" (Gen. 2:16). The Church Fathers took the luxuriant foliage of the garden and its fruit as representative of all forms of human flourishing: the arts, the sciences, politics, friendship, etc. God, who is in possession of all the perfection of being, cannot possibly benefit from creation, and hence he has no interest, in the manner of the Greek and Roman gods, in keeping humanity at bay or limiting its joy. Rather, as St. Irenaeus has it, "the glory of God is a human being fully alive."[16] God wants us to have life and life to the full, and this extravagant divine desire is expressed in the capaciousness of God's permission.

But then, we do indeed hear of the single prohibition: "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen. 2:17). These are among the most studied words in the literature of the world, and they have given rise to a variety of interpretations. I'd like to explore only two of them. The first, associated with Irenaeus and Hegel and coming to expression in the thought of Paul Tillich in the twentieth century, places a stress on the transition from a sort of dreaming innocence to something like mature self-possession.[17] On this reading, our first parents were more like adolescents than

16. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.20.7, in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 294.

17. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 259–260. See also Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.22.4, 3.23.5; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, trans. and ed. E.B. Speirs (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1895), 276–278.

fully constituted adults, living in a state of naïve and inexperienced innocence. Utterly under the heteronomous tutelage of God, they had not yet come to mature freedom and responsibility. At the prompting of the serpent, they do indeed fall away from God, but at least they fall toward something resembling freedom and self-possession. Like every teenager ever after, they tumble awkwardly into adulthood, recklessly choosing sheer autonomy over heteronomy. The answer—and it emerges in the long history of salvation—is theonomy, whereby they find their own freedom and integrity precisely in relation to the God who is not a rival to them. At the terminus of this interpretive trajectory, we find Jesus' words to his Apostles: "I do not call you servants any longer . . . I have called you friends" (John 15:15).

A second reading, articulated beautifully by St. John Paul II in his "theology of the body" talks on the book of Genesis, appreciates the eating of the fruit of the tree of good and evil as entirely wicked.[18] Here, the knowledge of good and evil is not so much a sign of intellectual and moral maturity, but rather a prerogative that belongs uniquely to God.[19] The being of God alone is the determining criterion in regard to moral rectitude and error. It is not a matter of cultural convention or popular consensus and most certainly not the result of an arbitrary and aggressive free choice. Therefore, the seizure of the fruit of that very particular tree evokes the tragic arrogating to oneself of what belongs uniquely to God, and hence it adumbrates the collapse of the moral project.

Both interpretations can accommodate the serpent's statement to Eve: "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4–5). On the first reading, the serpent is telling a half-truth, since coming to greater maturity will indeed

18. John Paul II, "General Audience: The Boundary between Original Innocence and Redemption," September 26, 1979, vatican.va; see also Carl Anderson and Jose Granados, *Called to Love: Approaching John Paul II's Theology of the Body* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 104–105.

19. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 396–398.

make the dreaming innocents more like God, but he is concealing from them the dark side of their choice of autonomy. On the second interpretation, he is simply deceiving them, for they will not in fact be like God; they will be pathetic simulacra of God, in fact losing their likeness unto the Creator. In either case, they have lost both their priestly and kingly competence. No longer connected to God, they tend to fall apart within (disintegrating) and to foster disintegration around them. The harmony within them has become a cacophony. And having succumbed to the wiles of the serpent, they lose their capacity to go on the march, extending the borders of Eden outward. We will interpret much of the Old Testament as God's patient attempt to restore the priestly and kingly identities of human beings.

On both readings, they move from innocence to guilt, and hence the knowledge of their nakedness as something shameful naturally follows. That the original sin is closely allied to sexual choice should not be surprising, since this most powerful of urges, in a way, forces the existential question. Under the pressure of that overwhelming desire, a decision at the fundamental level has to be taken. Having made fig leaves to cover their nakedness, they hide themselves in the underbrush of Eden. This provides a balance to their initial errant move of trying to grasp at divinity. When that attempt fails, they go to the other extreme and attempt to hide from God. But God, of course, finds them immediately. The one who is the sheer act of to-be itself cannot be either grasped or avoided, for he is, simultaneously, *superior summo meo et interior intimo meo*, as St. Augustine put it.[20] That is to say, he is greater than any finite being could ever understand or control, and he is closer to a creature than the creature is to itself. A supreme existent could be, in principle, understood according to conventional categories and hidden from somewhere on the metaphysical grid

20. Augustine, *Confessions* 3.6.11 (PL 32:688). For an English translation, see Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F.J. Sheed, ed. Michael P. Foley (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Classics, 2017), 50: "Yet all the time you were more inward than the most inward place of my heart and loftier than the highest."

that he has in common with other finite things. But with regard to the unconditioned reality, neither strategy is possible. This is why both the grasping at the fruit of the forbidden tree *and* the attempt to hide are pointless. We will see this theme reiterated over and again in the narratives, in the prophets, and in the poems.

The curse that God pronounces over the serpent and over Adam and Eve should not be read as an instance of divine pique. The God of the Bible is not like the easily offended gods of the classical world, who stand in a relationship of psychological and even physical need vis-à-vis human beings. God's punishments are not expressions of personal vengeance; they are best read as the consequences that follow naturally from sin. Since all things and all people are connected to one another through their common participation in God, a spiritual alienation from the Creator will result in a disintegration of creation, humans falling into disharmony with one another and with the realm of nature. We can sense the latter in God's words to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen. 3:15), as well as in God's observation to Adam: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. . . . By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken" (Gen. 3:17–19). The compromising of the man-woman rapport can be sensed in the childish blame game that breaks out in the presence of the divine judge: "The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12). In God, all things hold together; apart from God, they disintegrate. When Adam and Eve walked in easy fellowship with the Lord in the Garden, they were in the attitude of right praise, for they were moving with the Lord, listening to his voice. Expelled from Eden, they fall out of the stance of orthodoxy (*ortho doxa*, "right praise") and hence enter, spiritually speaking, into a desert.

The Council of Trent sees the effects of original sin as the loss of "holiness" and "justice."[21] Holiness, which is related to wholeness or integrity, is compromised through incorrect worship. When something other than the Creator is placed at the center of one's concerns, the elements that make up one's personality split apart from one another. Justice has to do with right ordering, rendering to each his due. What is peculiarly due to God is praise. When this is undermined, fundamental justice is lost, and from that loss follows the rupturing of right relationship with nature and with one's fellows.

THE EFFECTS OF THE FALL

So far, we have covered, more or less, the key themes in the first three chapters of Genesis. Chapters 4 through 11 lay out, in a beautifully encapsulated manner, the consequences of the original sin, the basic permutations and combinations of human dysfunction. Chapter 4 tells the story of Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve, and we see in this narrative so much of the psychology and patterns of behavior that mark those in rebellion against God: rivalry, jealousy, resentment, anger at God, and ultimately murderous violence. Abel is a keeper of sheep, and he brings as a burnt offering to God the first fruits of his flock; Cain is a tiller of the soil, and he brings "an offering of the fruit of the ground" before the Lord (Gen. 4:3). God, we are told, preferred Abel's sacrifice to Cain's, but we are not told why. Various scholars and commentators over the centuries have speculated that perhaps Abel's bringing the first fruits made a difference or perhaps that Abel's offering is an anticipation of the animal sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple, which were more highly valued than grain offerings, but the bottom line is that we just don't know why God preferred one over the other, and in some ways, that is the point. Frequently, in the biblical stories, God acts in anomalous

21. Council of Trent, *Decree Concerning Original Sin*, in *Compendium of Creeds*, ed. Denzinger et al., no. 1511. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 375–376, 399–400.

and unpredictable ways, showing preference or favor in a manner that can seem arbitrary. But so it must, to some degree, always seem to finite minds. It would be arrogant in the extreme to presume that we could comprehend the divine purpose in every circumstance, and therefore the proper attitude is one of hope and receptivity. In point of fact, God addresses Cain when he sees his creature crestfallen and reminds him that, if he does well, he will be accepted. In other words, the choice that God makes is not, finally, of one over the other, but as we shall see throughout the biblical narrative, of one for the sake of the other. Cain's original sin, which gives rise to his murderous violence, is a failure to appreciate this dynamic.

What follows, of course, is the brutal and cold-blooded killing of his brother Abel. Resentment and jealousy lead to murder, and this pattern will repeat itself up and down the ages. But the God who cannot be hidden from asks, "Where is your brother Abel?" Lying, Cain claims he doesn't know, and then famously adds, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4:9). The implied answer is yes, since he is both a blood brother to Abel and, as a fellow creature of God, an ontological sibling as well. As if to hammer home the point, Cain is made, as a punishment, to wander the earth—which is to say, disconnected from family, community, common worship. Then, in a supreme irony, Cain, the wanderer and fratricide, becomes the founder of the first city.

To be sure, there is, throughout the Bible and especially in the book of Genesis, a kind of polemic against urban life, and we will return to this theme later, but for the moment, it is fascinating to remark the extraordinary perceptiveness of the author of Genesis in seeing that what can look like a just and flourishing society is so often predicated upon a primordial act of violence or some deeply dysfunctional attitude. In the twentieth century, René Girard speculated that all fallen forms of human organization are grounded

in the scapegoating mechanism[22]—which is to say, the exclusion and victimization of some group characterized as other. Long before Girard, St. Augustine remarked the parallel between the founding of Rome in an act of fratricide (Romulus killing his twin Remus) and the biblical assertion that a brother-killer is the founder of all cities.[23]

The key difference, which Augustine took to be significant, is that in the case of Rome, the original fratricide is seen as positive, whereas in the case of the biblical city, it is decidedly negative. Very much in line with this instinct, the Gospel of Matthew presents the devil as showing Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world in a single glance and declaring that he, the devil, would give them as a gift if Jesus but bowed down in worship before him. Jesus refuses, of course, but for our purposes at the moment, it is worth noting that the devil can offer every city in the world only in the measure that they all belong to him (Matt. 4:8–10). We recall that, in the New Testament, the two privileged names for the dark power are *ho diabolos* and *ho Satanas*—which is to say, the scatterer and the accuser. Both impulses are present in the founder of cities. Both will be undone by the founder of the kingdom of God.

What commenced with the murder of Abel in chapter 4 has become, by chapter 6, a generalized moral and spiritual collapse. The Bible is keenly sensitive to the interdependence of all things, especially as this manifests itself among human beings. Sin tends to spread like a disease, passing from one to another and from generation to generation. So we hear in Genesis 6:11: "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence." The original creation, which God found very good, has now devolved into chaos, and just as nonviolence is the principal quality of God's creative act, so violence has become *the* mark of the sinful human tribe.

22. See René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

23. Augustine, *The City of God* 15.5.

What follows, however, is one of the most important tropes in the Scriptures—namely, the singling out of a particular righteous man and his family in order to effect, in time, the re-creation of the fallen race. Nowhere is this clearer than in the choice of Abraham, but the theme is adumbrated here. God hates sin, but he is never satisfied simply with allowing the effects of sin to run their course. Rather, he concocts a sort of rescue operation, precisely through Noah and his family. The ark that the Lord commands Noah to build is designed to house a microcosm of God's good creation, even as the fallen world is swallowed up by the return of the watery chaos, the flood that hearkens back to the *tohu wabohu*. Taking representatives of all of the animals aboard links us to the creation narrative, and this signals, once again, that the salvation of human beings is inextricably linked to the salvation of the entire cosmos.

Eden, as we saw, is a kind of mountain and hence an evocation of Mt. Zion; in a similar way, the ark of Noah is an anticipation of the temple, the place where all of creation, under the headship of human beings, offers praise to God. The careful description of the building of the ark and the delineation of its proportions point forward to similar accounts of the construction of the tabernacle in the desert during the Exodus and of the Jerusalem temple. It is absolutely no accident that the great cathedrals of the Christian era were constructed with Noah's ark in mind, for they too were meant to be sanctuaries for a remnant of creation in the midst of the *tohu wabohu* of the sinful world. As was the case with the Jerusalem temple, the Gothic cathedrals were covered, inside and out, with symbols of the created order: stars, moon, sun, animals, plants, etc. In his *City of God*, St. Augustine reads the history of salvation, from biblical times through the era of the Church, as a tale of Noah's ark—the little ship, filled with a holy remnant, bouncing on the waves of the stormy sea.[24]

24. Augustine, *The City of God* 15.26.

After one hundred and fifty days, God causes the storm to subside, and the ark comes to rest on Mt. Ararat. Once he knows that the waters have sufficiently receded, Noah opens the doors of the ship and lets the life out. Though the temple is of central significance as the place of right praise, Israel is not meant to stay permanently in the temple; rather, they are invited to go out into the world. The Ark has been a place of safety, but the life that was preserved there was not meant to stay confined on a boat, but rather to reinvigorate the world. This represents a rhythm of withdrawal and advance that obtains throughout the history of Israel and of the Church. At times, Israel and the Church have to hunker down, carefully cultivating a form of life that is threatened. But hunkering down is not the default position—on the contrary. Adam was meant to go forth from the garden to Edenize the rest of creation; so Noah is meant to exit the ark, becoming a kind of new Adam. The command that the Lord gives to the new Adam, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen. 9:1), is one that will be repeated whenever God makes a covenant with his people throughout salvation history. Fertility, fecundity, life to the full will always be the marks of God's favor and presence.

It is of supreme importance that the first move that Noah makes upon exiting the ship is to offer sacrifice to the Lord: "Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar" (Gen. 8:20). Once again, orthodoxy, right praise, is the key to everything else. The new order that Noah hopes to establish on the purified earth must be grounded in the worship of God, or it will founder.

The downward trajectory of God's people toward idolatry and dissolution is foreshadowed in the curious story with which the Noah narrative ends—namely, that of the drunkenness of Noah. The great patriarch is identified as the first vintner, and we hear that he drank of the fruit of the vine and became drunk. Lying naked and senseless in his tent, he represents the compromising

of the mind and will that conduce inevitably toward sin. Noah's son Ham comes into the tent and sees his father in this disgraceful state, and the patriarch's other sons cover up their father. The shameful nudity of Noah is meant, of course, to call to mind the shame that Adam and Eve experienced regarding their own nakedness after their rebellion. On one of the Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes, Michelangelo beautifully expresses this moral and spiritual declension, depicting the drunk and naked Noah in a pose pathetically reminiscent of the noble posture of Adam at the moment of creation. The message is clear: even after the flood, trouble will come.

In chapter 11, we see another form that this trouble typically takes. We are told that all of the human race spoke one language and that a particular group, having migrated from the east, resolved to "build [themselves] a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens," so that they could "make a name" for themselves (Gen. 11:4). Even at this early stage of the narrative, the attentive biblical reader should be on guard, for a particularly vivid red flag is being waved: through their own heroic effort, human beings will attempt to scale the heavens, moving into the space of God, taking to themselves divine prerogatives. God wants humans to be fully alive, but the divine life cannot, even in principle, be seized; it can only be received as a gift. Therefore, Promethean projects, designed to grasp at divinity and inflate the ego, are spiritually poisonous. God's coming down and confusing the language of the builders of the tower should not be construed as an arbitrary punishment or an act of cruelty; rather, it should be seen as a salutary gesture—God undermining a dysfunctional, imperialistic type of unity. The right sort of unity is on display, much later in the story of salvation, when, on the morning of Pentecost, those from all over the Roman world hear the one message of Jesus in their own various languages (Acts 2:6).

After the glorious opening of Genesis, we have followed an almost completely negative path, the original sin propagating

itself until the entire world became corrupt, and then, even after a thorough cleansing and restart, the human race has fallen, once again, into pride and dissolution. A basic biblical pessimism in regard to the human project is unmistakably on display and will continue to be insisted upon throughout the Scriptures. There is no sense of perfectibility in the Bible, no conviction that, given enough political, economic, or cultural reform, or given the influence of a sufficient number of heroic figures, things will straighten out. If the fundamental problem is in the mind and will of human beings, no amount of thinking or willing will address it. A power must come from outside. Evolution from within is not the solution, but rather invasion from without. No merely human voice or collectivity of human voices will articulate the path forward; only a Voice transcendent to the human project will direct the rescue operation.

ABRAHAM

And this is precisely what we find as chapter 12 of Genesis commences. From chapters 12 through 25, we find a narrative account of four generations of a family, which functions as the kernel, the seed, of a great people, formed according to the mind and heart of God. The mission of that people, on the scriptural reading, is to become, eventually, a beacon to the rest of sinful humanity, the vehicle by which the word of the true God goes out to all the nations. The story commences with Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans.

The first word from the Lord to Abram is that he has to move: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). The tendency of the sinful ego is to rest in itself, a condition Paul Tillich calls "*in sich ruhenden Endlichkeit*" (self-complacent finitude).[25] The self-obsessed ego wants the path of least resistance; it wants to rest in its own

25. Paul Tillich, *Die religiöse Deutung der Gegenwart; Schriften zur Zeitkritik* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1968).

world. The voice of God will thus sound to the sinner as a voice from without, summoning him to adventure. It is no accident that most hero's stories—from Jason and the Argonauts to Bilbo and Frodo—commence with a call to leave the comforts of home and to venture into the unknown. So Abram must leave everything he knows and go to a country he knows nothing about. That he listens to this voice is the key to everything good that happens to his people throughout salvation history. The entire narrative of the people Israel turns on this question: Do they listen or not? God assures Abram that, if he follows the voice, the Lord will make of him a great nation: "I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:2–3). This last observation is what links the remainder of the story of Israel with the opening eleven chapters of Genesis, for Abram is indeed singled out, and his people will indeed be called the specially chosen people, but he is singled out and they are chosen not for themselves but for the world. The first eleven chapters did not deal with Israel, but rather with humanity as a whole, and it is *for* humanity as a whole, indeed for the cosmos in its entirety, that Abram is called.

The summons and journey of Abram culminate in the gift of a place. When he and his family come to Canaan, the Lord appears to Abram and says, "To your offspring I will give this land" (Gen. 12:7). Throughout the history of Israel, this particular plot of earth, east of the Mediterranean, west of the Jordan, from Dan in the north to Beer-sheba in the south, would be of crucial importance. Whether they were loving it, longing for it, fighting over it, defending it, planting it with cities, counting its people, mourning its loss, or singing of its beauty, the Promised Land would be a unique obsession of the descendants of Abram. This, of course, is because it was much more than a piece of real estate; it functioned as a symbol of the divine favor, the land flowing with milk and honey, the base of operations for the announcement

of God to all the nations, and ultimately, an anticipation of the ultimate homeland of heaven.

Though convinced of the Lord's gift of land, Abram worried that he had no physical heir. But God's word came to him: "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. . . . So shall your descendants be" (Gen. 15:5). More important even than the land would be the family born of Abram's flesh and of his faith. They would be, in time, as numerous as the living things that came forth from the hand of the Creator God, and they would fill not only the Promised Land itself, but rather the whole earth. To seal this extraordinary promise, God led Abram through an elaborate ritual involving the severing in half of a goat and a ram and the offering of a turtledove and a young pigeon. Abram passed between the pieces and then, as night fell, "a smoking fire pot," evocative of the divine presence, passed between them (Gen. 15:17). This was a gesture that in the ancient near east typically accompanied the making of a covenant, implying, "May this same thing happen to me should I break the agreement that we have made."[26] Not so much an exchange of goods and services, in the manner of a contract, a covenant was much more an exchange of hearts, a pledge of mutual loyalty: in the phrase repeated frequently throughout the Bible, "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God."

This covenant was reiterated in even more extravagant language when Abram turned ninety-nine. On the assumption that Abram remains "blameless," God promises that he will raise up from him and for him a people "exceedingly numerous," and because of this fecundity, the patriarch will now be known as Abraham, which carries the sense of "father of many" (Gen. 17:1–2, 5–6). As a sign of the covenant, God asks that every male in the family of Abraham be circumcised, establishing thereby, in their flesh, a connection between the divine promise and the perpetuation

26. Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 1, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019), 49n8.

of their clan. Land, people, promise, circumcision, ritual, moral demand—the essential features of Israelite life—are already in place. Now we might easily be tempted to say that this covenant language reflects simply the extravagant wish-fulfilling fantasy of a minor ancient Middle Eastern tribe, but we are brought up short when we take into account the undeniable fact that Abraham's family—through Judaism, Islam, and Christianity—has indeed spread throughout the world in the most astonishing way.

In time, Sarah, the wife of Abraham, gives birth to their son, Isaac, though both parents, we are told, are in their upper nineties. The theme of unlikely conception, and birth against all natural expectation, is an extremely common one in the Bible, signaling the primacy of grace and the indispensability of trust in divine providence. The boy is called Isaac, from the Hebrew term designating laughter, partly because his mother had laughed at the implausibility of it when the child's birth was predicted and partly because, as Sarah puts it, "God has brought laughter for me" (Gen. 21:6).

Son of his extreme old age, a gift beyond his wildest hope, and the bearer of the sacred promise, Isaac was everything to Abraham—which is why it is surpassingly strange, and of signal theological moment, when God demands that Abraham sacrifice his son as a burnt offering. Because the narrative style of the biblical author is so austere and understated, and because he remains, for the most part, uninterested in exploring what we would call psychological motivations and feelings, it is perhaps easy to miss the sheer awfulness of this story. Surely Kierkegaard was right to state that the only proper response to it is fear and trembling,[27] and surely generations of believers have found their convictions about God shaken by it. Not to sense all of this is proof that one has simply not been paying attention.

27. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, in *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 1–124.

For three days, Abraham journeyed with Isaac to the land of Moriah, where the sacrifice is to take place. One cannot begin to imagine the depth of the patriarch's agony as this trip unfolds: walking side by side with Isaac, conversing with him, watching him as he laughs and plays, heedless of his fate. On the final stage of their itinerary, Abraham walks with his son alone up the mountain, the former carrying the knife and the latter carrying the wood for the offering. When Isaac says to his father, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (Gen. 22:7), Abraham's heart must have shattered from grief and guilt. When they get to the place of sacrifice, Abraham binds Isaac to the altar (hence the Hebrew name for this event, the *Akedah* [binding]) and raises his hand to slay the boy. Only at the last moment does an angel of the Lord intervene to stop the killing: "Abraham, Abraham! . . . Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Gen. 22: 11–12). In the wake of this breathtaking event/non-event, Abraham is once again reassured that the Lord will make him father of a great nation, indeed a blessing to all the nations of the world.

Even though the narrative has a "happy" ending, we might be forgiven for posing more than a few questions. What God would ever put a human being through such a dreadful ordeal? What man would have abided by such a morally objectionable command? What sort of religion would place such an offensive tale in its most sacred book? Before one even thinks of providing an interpretation of this story, she should allow those questions to weigh on her, to puzzle and confound her. For something indeed has to break in us, something has to give way, before we can take in what this narrative is conveying. Abraham loves Isaac as much as anything or anyone in this world *can* be loved. Among the finite things of the world, the boy is Abraham's supreme value. He would have sacrificed everything for him: wealth, pleasure, honor, power, status, even his wife and extended family. Yet Isaac, like every

other creaturely good, belongs to God, and his value is inferior to God's surpassing value. Therefore, even he must be "sacrificed" to God and God's purposes; even his worth has to be situated in the context of God's greater worth. Isaac belongs to God, not God to Isaac. None of this would be hard to see if we had never fallen; but having fallen, we need to be wrenched out of a sinful stance of hyperattachment to creaturely goods, which is precisely why the language and practice of sacrifice is called for. Walking in rhythm with God and appreciating all things from the standpoint of God was easy in the Garden of Eden, but on the desert ground of the fallen world, there is no proper communion with God without sacrifice. This truth has been enacted already in Noah's ritual sacrifice as well as in Abraham's, but it came to clearest and most awful expression in the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac.

But that is only part of the story, spiritually speaking. The lower goods of the world have to be sacrificed to God in the measure that they have come to take the place of God. But precisely because God is not the supreme being, not one competitive reality among others, whatever is sacrificed to him does not accrue to him as a sort of benefit, becoming an advantage in a zero-sum game. Rather, it breaks, as it were, against the rock of the divine simplicity and self-sufficiency and comes back to the benefit of the one who made the sacrifice. And this is what is symbolized in the interruptive move of the angel, who gives back to Abraham what he had endeavored to sacrifice. When seen within this properly theological perspective, all objections along forensic or psychological lines simply fall away. God is not cruelly manipulating Abraham or compelling his hapless creature to commit a crime. What we have in this admittedly strange scene is a sort of icon representing certain key dynamics in the spiritual order, which have to be interpreted with spiritual eyes. A relatively superficial fear and trembling gives way once we grasp this, permitting the emergence of a more authentic fear and trembling before the living God, whose glory is that we be fully alive.

As we mentioned, Genesis 12–50 basically tells the story of four generations of the same family: Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to Joseph, with myriad subnarratives and scenes. Of the four principal figures, Isaac, the son of Abraham, is the least developed. From the moment of the *Akedah*, where he appears as a largely passive and youthful figure, until he reaches old age, practically all we hear of Isaac, aside from a few incidental tales, is that he married Rebekah, and the story of his betrothal and marriage centers much more around her than him. One feature of that tale is worth dwelling upon—namely, the manner in which she was discovered. We hear that Abraham had sent a trusted servant to return to Abraham's home country to find a bride for Isaac. The man found his way to the city of Nahor, and while waiting by the well, made a kind of bargain with God: "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today. . . . Let the girl to whom I shall say, 'Please offer your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels'—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac" (Gen. 24:12–14). After the beautiful Rebekah presented herself at the well and responded exactly as the servant had envisioned, he knew he had found Isaac's wife. What makes this more than simply a charming story of divine providence is that it sets the tone for a number of similar encounters throughout salvation history: Jacob finds his wife by a well (Gen. 29:1–14), as does Moses (Exod. 2:15–22), as, in a curious manner, does Jesus, who makes a kind of spiritual marriage with the Samaritan woman whom he meets by Jacob's well (John 4:1–42). It is no accident, of course, that marriage, the vehicle by which Israel propagates itself and thus fulfills the promise, is proposed precisely at a spot that desert people would associate with life.

JACOB

The biblical parsimony in regard to Isaac is not duplicated in regard to his son Jacob. With Jacob, we find an entire arc of life,

comparable to those of Joseph, Moses, and David, and with a similar psychological perceptiveness and theological richness. We first discover Jacob grasping at the heel of his twin brother as the two exit the womb of their mother, Rebekah. From this infant grappling, we learn that Jacob will be something of a wrestler and that a conflict with his older brother will be the hinge on which his life will turn. Right away, the archetypal difference between the twins is highlighted: "Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents," and while Isaac loved Esau, Rebekah preferred Jacob (Gen. 25:27–28). This clear differentiation, rife with symbolic overtones, has made the brothers fascinating to psychologists, but it is meant primarily to communicate something about the chosen people. Throughout their history, they will be marked by internecine conflict, brothers, as it were, grappling with one another, culminating in the centuries-long battle between Israel and Judah, the northern and southern tribes. This proved not only politically compromising but, more importantly, spiritually disastrous, for a divided nation would be unable to fulfill its mission as a unifying force for the tribes of the world.

From the story of Cain and Abel, we already know that the book of Genesis tends to favor the younger child over the older, but the theme emerges with particular clarity in the twenty-fifth chapter. Coming in from the field, Esau smells a savory dish that his brother is preparing. Displaying a rather crude grasp of culinary finery, Esau says, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" Sensing an opportunity, the ambitious and far cleverer brother replies, "First sell me your birthright." Unfazed, the elder twin readily agreed to surrender his most precious spiritual possession for some "red stuff" (Gen. 25:30–32). To be fair, neither brother comes out of this episode looking particularly good: Esau is appallingly immature and superficial, while Jacob is disturbingly avaricious for power and ruthlessly manipulative. Though he will indeed inherit the promise and come to spiritual leadership, Jacob, like his son Joseph after him, will require a lengthy preparation.

The sale of his birthright at a comically low price is but a preparation for the famous scene in which Esau finds himself duped out of the formal blessing of his father through the machinations of Jacob and their mother. Covering his smooth skin with animal fur that bore the scent of the field, Jacob managed to fool his nearly blind father into thinking that he, Jacob, was Esau and to procure the sought-after and irrevocable blessing. When the subterfuge is made clear, Isaac remains powerless to retract his benediction, and Esau can do nothing but cry out in anguish. Thus Jacob, the younger son, does indeed come to bear the promise, but we shall see, in accord with a sort of biblical law of karma, that he must pay dearly for what he has received. Fearful for Jacob's life, Rebekah urges him to go to her brother, Laban, and seek refuge.

While on his way, Jacob is graced by one of the most profound and seminal encounters with the sacred in the entire Old Testament tradition. Near Beer-sheba, Jacob takes a stone as an improbable pillow and lies down for the night. He dreams of "a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." And in the dream, the Lord spoke to him, saying, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring" (Gen. 28:12–14). The "ladder," which Robert Alter renders as a "ramp" (Gen. 28:17),[28] is probably something akin to a ziggurat, a stepped incline, and the ascent and descent of the angels is a signal that this ladder is a conduit, a link between the realm of contingent reality and the unconditioned realm of God. As Jacob will recognize after awaking from the dream, this means that the very place where he slumbered is specially charged

28. Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 1:100.

with the presence of God, that it has a sort of sacramental quality. But more broadly, it entails that Israel itself, God's specially chosen people, will function as a place of connection between heaven and earth. From Israel, the longing and prayers of the human race will go up to God, and through Israel, the grace of God shall descend. Mind you, I am insisting that this connectivity has to do with the whole of God's family, and not simply Israel. As God's own speech makes clear, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" in the family that comes forth from Jacob. We have in this ladder, therefore, a kind of master metaphor for the whole of Israelite life: covenant, prophecy, temple, liturgy, sacrifice—all of it will function as a conduit between God and the world he is endeavoring to save.

From a Christian point of view, it is crucially important to note Jesus' own reference to this scene in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. Addressing Nathaniel, who had been flabbergasted by Jesus' knowledge of him from a distance, the Lord says, "'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man'" (John 1:50–51). In this extraordinary observation, Jesus gathers all of the institutions of Israel under his aegis, implying that he himself is the fulfillment of temple, prophecy, liturgy, etc. He himself is the definitive ladder between heaven and earth, that toward which the whole of Israelite history was looking and tending.

Waking from his dream, Jacob exclaims, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" He then takes the stone upon which he had rested his head, sets it up as a sacred marker, anoints it with oil, and declares, "This stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house" (Gen. 28:16, 22). What the patriarch is anticipating, obviously, is the Jerusalem temple, which will come to be recognized as the place of encounter *par excellence*, the locale that God will uniquely choose as his dwelling place.

After his life-defining meeting with the Lord, Jacob, still following his mother's advice, comes to the land of Laban, his uncle. Sitting down by a well, he meets Laban's beautiful daughter Rachel and, exhibiting almost superhuman strength, he single-handedly removes the stone covering to the well and waters Rachel's flock. This pattern is, of course, familiar to us, since it unfolded in a practically identical way in regard to the finding of Rebekah as a wife for Isaac, and it will be repeated, much later, with respect to Moses' discovery of Zipporah, daughter of Jethro, as his wife. Since the promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had to do with progeny, it is no surprise that the finding of wives and the procreation of children is of prime importance to the biblical author.

Laban, we discover, has two daughters, Rachel and Leah, and Jacob is enamored of the former. He makes an agreement with Laban that he will work for his uncle for seven years in exchange for Rachel's hand in marriage, and since he loves her so, the years "seemed to him but a few days" (Gen. 29:20). At the close of the seven years, arrangements are made for the union, but on the night of the wedding, Leah is swapped for Rachel, though Jacob doesn't realize it. Enraged upon discovering the subterfuge, Jacob complains, and Laban offers the rather lame excuse that, in his country, the youngest daughter is never given in marriage before the older and then he extracts from Jacob the promise to work another seven years to obtain Rachel. The trickster has been tricked. The one who gained the blessing through deception is now deprived of his love through deception. Though it is decidedly more a book of grace than of rough justice, something like a law of karma often obtains within the Bible: as Jesus would put it, "the measure you give will be the measure you get" (Matt. 7:2). At the same time, this is never simply a matter of tit for tat, for God presides over the entire scenario in love, achieving his providential design. Though Jacob was undoubtedly frustrated and angry, his long apprenticeship and unexpected association with Leah, as well

as his marriage to Rachel, will result in the sons that God wants as the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel.

All told, Leah would bear Jacob six sons and a daughter, one of Leah's maids would bear him two more, one of Rachel's maids another two, and finally Rachel herself would give birth to two sons, Joseph and Benjamin. What Jacob originally wanted was marriage and children with Rachel, and he was compelled to wait and work fourteen years to achieve the marriage—and many more years to father the children. But the entire time, when the patriarch was almost certainly cursing his fate, God was accomplishing his own purpose, as it were, behind Jacob's back, eventually giving Jacob more than he could have imagined. We find this theme of the noncompetitive and noninterruptive quality of God's causality everywhere in the Bible. The one who is the Creator of all, the unconditioned existent, does not have to manipulate or work around the beings that he has created, even those creatures of his who have free will. Rather, divine and human agency can cooperate, each acting within its proper scope. The prophet Isaiah will express the notion with admirable understatement: "O Lord . . . it is you who have accomplished all we have done" (Isa. 26:12 NAB).

Finally, having fathered many children and having amassed an impressive fortune, Jacob resolves to return home and make peace with the brother whom he had, long ago, duped out of his rightful inheritance. He sends out messengers and receives the unnerving response that Esau is indeed coming to meet him, but with a small army of four hundred men. Jacob can only imagine that his brother, who had become a local potentate, is seeking revenge. It is on the eve of the confrontation with Esau that Jacob, in accord with his identity as a grappler, engages in arguably the most famous wrestling match in human history. We are told that Jacob, having sent his family ahead of him, is left alone. Then, "a man wrestled with him until daybreak" (Gen. 32:24). Who was this figure? We are not directly told, though at the close of their fight, his opponent gives Jacob a new name, Israel, and explains,

"You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:28). It is certainly true that Jacob has been a fighter all his life. Coming out of the womb, he contended with Esau, and then he battled his brother for the inheritance. For seven years, he fought Laban for the right to have Rachel, and then he was compelled to fight him for seven more. And it is also true that he usually came out the winner in these contests. But what is fascinating in his opponent's account is the insistence that he has also, in the process, wrestled with God.

In many mysticisms, philosophies, and religions, both ancient and contemporary, God is presented as an impersonal force, which can be approached by us but which remains fundamentally indifferent to us. This is true, for example, of Aristotle's prime mover, Spinoza's absolute, or Schleiermacher's infinite;[29] but none of these has a thing to do with the biblical conception of God, who is emphatically a person, passionately and actively involved in the world that he has made, especially in the lives of human beings who bear his own image and likeness. We are searching for God of course, but the God of the Bible is searching for us with an even greater intensity. For a thousand reasons, we wrestle with God, seeking to understand his purpose, his activity, his seeming inactivity; but for ten thousand reasons, God wrestles with us—luring us, cajoling us, threatening us, promising us great things. As a theologian, I have spent most of my life grappling with God, and at times, I have been sorely tempted to let go, but God has not let me go. Moreover, like Jacob, I have been wounded in the fight, permanently affected, marked: "When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint" (Gen. 32:25). At the same time, I have never come away from a battle with God without

29. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.1071b; Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, trans. Edwin Curley, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 408–446; Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1893), 36, 39, 101.

being blessed in some way. Keeping a distance from God or merely seeking him on one's own terms yields no blessing. But getting in close contact with him, wrestling with him, even when such an engagement seems fruitless, always produces a benediction.

That Jacob receives the name Israel, which in turn becomes the name of the people that comes forth from him, is of tremendous moment. Just as Israel as a collectivity across many centuries functions as a Jacob's ladder, connecting God and humanity, so Israel as a family has the privilege of wrestling with God on behalf of the world. In a way, every people seeks after God; but Israel wrestles with God, and that has made all the difference. The Bible itself, which has blessed countless individuals across space and time, is the product of this peculiarly Israelite identity.

In a sense, after this hyperdramatic and mystical account, the meeting between Jacob and Esau is something of an anticlimax. Yet how wonderful that, despite Jacob's fears, his brother meets him with consummate graciousness. After bowing to the ground seven times as a signal of his obeisance and repentance, Jacob looks up to see Esau racing toward him, not in aggression, but in eagerness to embrace: "Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept" (Gen. 33:4). The reconciliation of the brothers—Jacob's penitence and Esau's forgiveness—is a beautiful icon of what a reconciled Israel could become for the rest of the world. It anticipates the gathering of all the tribes under the headship of David, the unity of the nation under Solomon, the return of the exiles from Babylon, and eventually, the coming together of the Mystical Body of Christ.

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

After describing Jacob's confrontation with the angel and his reconciliation with Esau, the author of Genesis moves into what amounts to a novella focusing on Jacob's next-to-youngest son, Joseph. It is no exaggeration to say that the story of Joseph is one of the most beautifully told, psychologically profound, and

theologically illuminating narratives that has come down to us from the ancient world. It easily ranks with the story of David in 1 and 2 Samuel, and though it is, of course, much briefer, it compares in literary quality with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. That Thomas Mann, one of the most sublime writers of the twentieth century, could compose a novel of nearly fifteen hundred pages on the basis of a narrative that takes up about fifteen pages in most Bibles witnesses to the extraordinary power of the stories regarding Joseph.

As the thirty-seventh chapter of Genesis opens, we hear of Joseph at the age of seventeen. He is described as a shepherd, which, given the typical biblical association, anticipates Joseph's role as leader. But as is so often the case, this future shepherd of Israel has to endure a long and painful apprenticeship before he will be ready to lead. Since he was the child of his father's old age, Joseph was the particular favorite of Jacob, who gifted the boy with a lovely long-sleeved robe, probably hinting at something like royal status. Naturally, his brothers hated him. Making matters worse, Joseph was a dreamer who never hesitated to share his dreams with his family. And making matters worse still, no Freudian feats of dream interpretation were required to understand that these nighttime fantasies served to aggrandize Joseph's ego. In one, he and his brothers were binding sheaves, when suddenly Joseph's stood upright and those of his brothers bowed down in homage; in another, the sun, moon, and stars—the cosmic elements themselves—paid homage to Joseph. When the boy lays out the second dream, even his adoring father upbraids him for arrogance: "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" (Gen. 37:10). That Joseph was a man of physical attractiveness, extraordinary intelligence, self-determination, and practical skill becomes eminently clear in the course of the narrative, but as a seventeen-year-old, he quite obviously was not ready to channel those gifts in a positive direction. Though the dreams proved

perfectly prophetic—his brothers would indeed bow down to him one day—their fulfillment would be a long time coming.

At his father's prompting, Joseph goes to visit his brothers, who are tending the flock. When they see him coming, they conspire to slay him: "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him" (Gen. 37:19–20). So they strip him of his special coat and throw him into a pit. At Judah's suggestion, they don't murder the boy, but rather arrange for his sale to a passing caravan of Ishmaelite traders on their way to Egypt. Icarus-like, Joseph, who had certainly been flying too high, is now cast down—down into the pit and then "down" into Egypt. This is the humiliation of the self-elevating ego, which is always a necessary propaedeutic to real transformation: one must go down in order, properly, to rise high.

Though he is passing through a time of enormous trial, and though things will get even worse for him, Joseph, we are told, is under the special providence of God: "The Lord was with Joseph" (Gen. 39:2). He is sold into the service of Potiphar, a high official in the government of Egypt and special confidant of the Pharaoh, and in short order, he is entrusted with the running of Potiphar's household. As is true throughout his life, his physical attractiveness and his obvious gifts serve him well. However, also very much in accord with a biblical pattern, Joseph's beauty is a source of enormous trouble as well. We are told that Potiphar's wife, finding the young slave enticing, tries to seduce him: "Lie with me." Citing his loyalty to his master as well as the commands of his God, Joseph refuses her importuning. She persists day after day, and finally, when she finds herself alone with Joseph, she again orders, "Lie with me," but this time, she catches hold of Joseph's garment, and when the young man escapes, he leaves the vestment in her hand, giving her ample evidence with which to frame him (Gen. 39:7–15).

And so, Joseph's downward journey continues. Potiphar in his rage sends Joseph to prison, where he is compelled to spend several years. Given what we found out regarding Joseph's self-absorption and indifference to the feelings of his brothers, we ought not to be surprised that his chastening humiliation takes considerable time. The way out of the pit comes through dreams. When he very successfully interprets the prophetic dreams of two of his fellow prisoners, his skill comes to the attention of Pharaoh himself, who is endeavoring to understand two of his own confounding dreams. A fascination with dreams has certainly persisted across cultures and across the centuries, and various methods of divination have been practiced. What is crucially important in regard to Joseph is that he claims no specialized skill or mystical method. Rather, as he plainly says to one of his fellow prisoners, "Do not interpretations [of dreams] belong to God?" (Gen. 40:8). The point is that, from his earliest days, Joseph remains open to the direction of God and that he continues, even in his darkest moments, to attend to what God is telling him through his own dreams and those of others.

Pharaoh had dreamt of seven healthy cattle devoured by seven emaciated cattle and of seven plump ears of grain devoured by seven blighted ears. With blithe confidence, Joseph interprets these as both indicating that Egypt would experience seven years of agricultural plenty followed immediately by seven years of drought and famine, and that, if steps are not taken, the famine will be so severe that "all the plenty will be forgotten" (Gen. 41:30). Therefore, he concludes, Pharaoh must appoint someone immediately to preside over the fields and granaries of Egypt so as to prepare, even now, for the disaster to come. So impressed is the king with this reading of dreams and this canny assessment of the practical situation that he immediately appoints Joseph as a sort of prime minister with plenipotentiary power over the entire realm. In one fell swoop, the slave, languishing hopelessly in prison, is lifted to a position of almost limitless authority, and the shepherding role,

foreseen for Joseph from his youth, is now, in the most unexpected way, realized.

From the moment of his ascent, Joseph's gifts of mind, will, and imagination are focused on bringing succor to the people of Egypt. If he had come to power when he was a boy of seventeen, bragging to his brothers about his dreams of glory, he undoubtedly would have used his position and authority to aggrandize himself or punish his enemies or satisfy his various lusts. It was precisely the long period of confinement, rejection, and deep suffering that worked an alchemy in his soul and prepared him for the task at hand. Power is spiritually valid only when it remains tied to truth and to love; untethered from those, it wreaks havoc. In the New Testament account of Jesus before Pilate, we see the latter state of affairs. When Jesus tells the Roman governor that he has come to testify to the truth, Pilate responds, either with contempt or weary cynicism, "What is truth?" and then he sends a man he knows to be innocent to his death. In the Crucifixion of Jesus, we see the result of Pilate's indifference to both truth and love.

Another key biblical theme is signaled in Joseph's rise to power, one that we see in the stories of Moses, Esther, and Daniel—namely, the infiltration of a child of Israel into the leadership of a foreign nation. Though it will remain mostly only seminal and surreptitious in the Old Testament, the meaning of this motif will emerge with clarity in the New Testament. As we have seen, Israel is meant not for itself but for the world. Finally, the chosen people are destined to bring the God of Israel to all the nations. We see this benign invasion for the first time in the rise of a Hebrew slave to the summit of Egyptian society. And we see a further signal of Israel's universal attractiveness in the streaming of the people toward the Egyptian granaries during the famine that Joseph predicted. When the Egyptians themselves cry out, the Pharaoh says, simply enough, "Go to Joseph; what he says to you, do," and in time the surrounding nations were compelled to follow the same advice: "Moreover, all the world came to Joseph in

Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world" (Gen. 41:55, 57). So, in the Christian dispensation, all the nations would come to Jesus, the King of Israel, for their spiritual sustenance.

As Joseph foresaw, Egypt and the surrounding countries, after seven years of plenty, fall victim to a devastating drought. Deeply affected are Jacob and his remaining eleven sons. And so, the old patriarch directs his children to journey to Egypt and procure provisions, which in turn leads to one of the most poignantly ironic scenes in the Bible. As was foreshadowed in his teenage dreams, the brothers of Joseph do indeed bow down to him in homage, though they have no idea that it is Joseph, covered as he is in the finery, makeup, and headgear of an Egyptian potentate.

What ensues is a carefully orchestrated drama in which Joseph, fully controlling the situation, compels his brothers to answer for what they did to him many years before. In a way, Joseph acts out the role of the God of justice vis-à-vis his errant brothers. At the same time, in typically biblical fashion, we also see, it is fair to say, some of Joseph's own limitations on display, for there is more than a little cruelty in what he does to his brothers and, indirectly, to their father. After hearing their appeal, he baldly tells them, "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land!" (Gen. 42:9). When they strenuously object, Joseph tells them that, to prove their veracity, they must produce their youngest brother, who remains with their father in Canaan. Knowing full well that this request will break their father's heart but realizing that they have no choice, they acquiesce. When Jacob hears the news, he is, indeed, devastated: "If harm should come to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol" (Gen. 42:38). The brothers undoubtedly know that they are being punished for their cruelty to Joseph, and Jacob undoubtedly fears that he might be placing his youngest son in the questionable hands of those who, he suspects, had something to do with Joseph's death.

When they present themselves once more before Joseph to petition for more grain, all seems to go well, but then the vizier of Egypt plants a silver cup in the traveling bag of Benjamin. When the brothers set out for home, they are stopped by one of Joseph's assistants, who accuses them of theft. Upon examining their baggage, he finds the cup with Benjamin, and the group returns, terrified, to Joseph. At this point, Judah makes a speech, one of the longest and most affecting in the entire Old Testament. He lays out the entire scenario to Joseph, once again emphasizing that the loss of Benjamin would be beyond devastating for their father, and then offers himself in place of the young man: "Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers" (Gen. 44:33). With these words, the price has been paid, the imbalance redressed. For a brother who had abandoned Joseph, his own flesh and blood, to slavery is now willing to become a slave in order to liberate Benjamin. Moved by Judah's offer and satisfied that justice has been done, Joseph, through tears, reveals his identity: "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" When his brothers, stupefied, huddle around him, he continues, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life" (Gen. 45:3–5).

Two observations are in order here. First, having expressed the divine judgment, which is never arbitrary or cruel but rather curative, Joseph now gives voice to the divine mercy and forgiveness. His embrace of his brothers, who had grievously sinned against him, is a foreshadowing of the father's embrace of the prodigal son (Luke 15:20) and Jesus' forgiveness of the disciples who had denied, betrayed, and abandoned him. Even after they had performed a kind of satisfaction, they still received far more than they deserved. So it goes with the divine grace. The second point has to do with the problem of evil, and this is one of the first and most pointed biblical references to it. The story of Joseph and his brothers is,

quite frankly, filled with terrors: fierce jealousy, cruelty, indifference to one's own family, manipulation, false accusation, the buying and selling of human beings, unjust imprisonment, forced exile, humiliation, starvation, and existential anxiety. What, we might be permitted to ask, is the point of all this? How does this rather awful story make spiritual sense? Joseph says, "For God sent me before you to preserve life" (Gen. 45:5). At the climax of this narrative, Joseph is the man who is effectively feeding the world, but what made that state of affairs possible is the entire train of events that the author of Genesis has traced. We will see this point made again and again in the Bible, most emphatically in the book of Job: God permits evils within his creation in order to make possible certain goods that could not have come about in any other way. To be sure, while Joseph was languishing in prison, unjustly condemned, and while his brothers were contemplating the prospect of summary execution at the hands of the Egyptian vizier, their lives seemed unrelievedly bleak. But the Bible consistently takes the long view and urges patience with the working out of a divine purpose that typically remains opaque to us.

And in point of fact, we must keep this great scriptural principle in mind as the narrative moves from climax to denouement. The brothers return to Canaan and tell their father the impossibly good news about Joseph. Subsequently, at the invitation of the Pharaoh himself, the entire extended family makes their way to Egypt to take up residence on prime real estate in the land of Goshen. In a scene of almost unbearable poignancy, Joseph rides out on a chariot to meet his aged father, and when the two of them meet, they embrace, and Joseph, we are told, "wept on his [father's] neck a good while" (Gen. 46:29). We might be tempted to say, at this point, all's well that ends well. But keeping that biblical long view in mind, we must acknowledge that the transplantation of Jacob's family to Egyptian soil, effectively abandoning the land promised to him and his forebears, leads by a fairly short route to the centuries-long enslavement of Israel. The "Egyptianizing" of

Israel is given special emphasis in the very last words of the book of Genesis, when we learn that Joseph himself, upon his death, was embalmed in the distinctively Egyptian manner and placed "in a coffin in Egypt" (Gen. 50:26). From that small seed would grow the Israelite presence, but on alien soil.

To be sure, from this tragedy would come the liberation, which stands, to this day, at the heart of Jewish consciousness and as, for Christians, a correlate to Christ's liberation of humanity from the slavery of sin. God's providence, as we will discover in the book of Wisdom, "reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and . . . orders all things well" (Wis. 8:1), various goods emerging but often only after and because of deep suffering.