**Genesis Commentary**

**Genesis Chapter 1**

Gen 1:1

**“In the beginning.”** The word “the” is not in the Hebrew text, so that leaves Genesis 1:1 open for some debate about how the verse should be translated and what it means. The absence of the definite article, along with the different ways some of the words can be structured or translated has given rise to a few different ways of translating—and ways of understanding—Genesis 1:1. These include, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (KJV, ESV); “When God began to create the heavens and the earth” (CEB); “At the beginning of God’s creating of the heavens and the earth” (Fox, The Schocken Bible).

**“In the beginning God.”** The first verse of the Bible says, “In the beginning God….” The word “God” is translated from the Hebrew word *elohim* (#0430 אֱלֹהִים), and it refers to our one God.

The word *elohim* is always found in the plural form and is often called a uni-plural noun. A uni-plural noun is a word that appears in the plural form but is used for singular and plural subjects alike. “Deer” and “fish” are examples of uni-plural nouns in English. As with many Hebrew words, *elohim* carries more than one definition. When it is being used in a plural sense, it refers to “gods” or “men with authority.” When it is used in its singular sense, it can refer to “God,” or “a god,” or “a man with authority, such as a judge.” The Hebrew lexicon by Brown, Driver, and Briggs is considered to be one of the best available and it has as its first usage for *elohim*: “*rulers*, *judges,* either as divine representatives at sacred places or as reflecting divine majesty and power, *divine ones*, superhuman beings including God and angels, *gods.*[[1]](#footnote-18579)”

In referring to a plural subject, *elohim* is translated “gods” in many verses. Genesis 35:2 reads, “Get rid of all the foreign gods you have with you,” and Exodus 18:11 says, “Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods.” It is translated as “judges” in Exodus 21:6; 22:8 and 22:9 (KJV, HCSB, NET, NIV). It is translated as “angels” (KJV) or “heavenly beings” (NIV) in Psalm 8:5. Some Trinitarians teach that since the word *elohim* is plural it implies a compound unity when it refers to God. However, in its plural use, there is no evidence that *elohim* implied that these “gods” had some kind of plurality of persons within themselves.

*Elohim* is also translated as the singular “god” or “judge,” and there is no hint of any “compound nature” when it is translated that way either. Examples of this use are: Exodus 22:20, “Whoever sacrifices to any *god* other than the lord must be destroyed.” Judges 6:31: “If Baal really is a *god*, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar.” Exodus 7:1: God says that He has made Moses a “god” (*elohim*) to Pharaoh. In Judges 11:24, the pagan god Chemosh is called *elohim*, and in 1 Samuel 5:7, the pagan god Dagon is called *elohim*. It is not taught or believed that these pagan gods were made of some kind of “compound unity” just because they were called *elohim*, and we should not conclude that because our true God is called *elohim* that He is a compound unity. He is not.

Scholars have debated exactly how to translate *elohim* in 1 Samuel 2:25 as to whether *elohim* in the verse refers to a human judge or to God. The KJV says “judge.” The versions are divided between them, some translating *elohim* as a man, others as God Himself. The fact that the scholars and translators debate about whether the word *elohim* refers to a man or God shows vividly that the word itself does not have any inherent idea of a plurality of persons otherwise the choice would be easy and *elohim* could not be translated as “god” when referring to a pagan god, or as “judge” when referring to a man. Thus, the evidence in Scripture does not warrant the conclusion that the Hebrew word *elohim* inherently contains the idea of a compound nature.

The great Hebrew scholar Gesenius is considered a foremost authority on the Hebrew language, and He wrote that *elohim* occurred in a plural form for intensification and was related to the plural of majesty and used for amplification. Gesenius states, “That the language has entirely rejected the idea of numerical plurality in e*lohim* (whenever it denotes *one* God) is proved especially by its being almost invariably joined with a singular attribute.”[[2]](#footnote-12320)

Another interesting point that Gesenius makes is that the singular pronoun is always used with the word *elohim*. A study of the occurrences of *elohim* will show that the singular attribute (such as “He,” not “They,” or “I,” not “We”) is always used in conjunction with *elohim*. Furthermore, when the word *elohim* is used to denote someone else besides the true God, it is understood as either singular or plural (depending on the context), but never as a “uniplural.” God is not a “compound” being in any sense of the word. He is the “one God” of Israel in the true singular sense. Another example of *elohim* being used of a singular god apparently occurs in Ruth 1:15, where *elohim* refers to Chemosh. The NET text note on Ruth 1:15 says, “it is likely that Naomi, speaking from Orpah’s Moabite perspective, uses the plural of majesty of the Moabite god Chemosh. For examples of the plural of majesty being used of a pagan god, see BDB 43 s.v. אֱלֹהִים 1.d. Note especially 1 Kings 11:33, where the plural form is used of Chemosh.” Many scholars agree with this, and *elohim* is translated “god” in a large number of versions (cf. ASV, CJB, RV, JPS, NAB, NET, NJB, YLT).

In addition, when we study the history and the language of the Jews who spoke Hebrew, we discover that they never understood *elohim* to imply a plurality within God in any way. In fact, the Jews were staunchly opposed to people and nations who tried to introduce any hint of more than one God into their culture. Jewish rabbis have debated the Law to the point of tedium, and have recorded volume after volume of notes on the Law, yet in all of their debates, there is no mention of a plurality within God.

[For more on the grammatical plural being used of God and other people, see commentary on 1 Kings 1:43. For more information on *elohim* not referring to a “God in three persons,” see Appendix 6: “Jesus is the Son of God, Not God the Son,” and see Appendix 7: “What is the Holy Spirit?” Also see Graeser, Lynn, and Schoenheit, *One God and One Lord: Reconsidering the Cornerstone of the Christian Faith*, 412-14.]

**“God created the heavens and the earth.”** Although there are scholars who translate Genesis 1:1 as saying something to the effect that “God began creating the heavens and the earth,” there is more circumstantial evidence from the nature of God that He would have created everything perfect in the beginning—He certainly has the power to do that. Then, due to the war between God and Satan, the earth became without form and void (see commentary on Gen. 1:2).

Gen 1:2

**“And the earth.”** There seems to be much evidence for a much younger universe (and earth) than secular scientists believe. The Universe could be even in the range of thousands of years old, not billions or even millions.

However, it seems to make the most sense that there is a gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:3, in which the world becomes without form and void, or, as the Hebrew says, *tohu va bohu*. E. W. Bullinger in *The Companion Bible* does a good job in showing that the world “became” without form and void.

Also, it is very important to take into account that Isaiah 45:18 says God did not create the world *tohu*. If He did not create it that way, and it became that way, then something happened to make it so. There is some evidence that “something” was the rebellion of Satan (Isa. 14; Ezek. 28). In Genesis 3, Satan is already against God. If Satan did not fall between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, and there is a 6-day creation as many now teach, then he had to fall while Adam and Eve were in the Garden. That seems untenable. It seems it would have taken many years for the pride to so build in Satan’s heart that he would consider rebelling against God, and even more years for him to convince a third of the angels to join him.

It seems that history could have played out like Bullinger and others suggest, that after God created the heavens and the earth, in the following many years potentially allowed for in Genesis 1:1 before things became without form, there was plenty of time for pride to grow in Satan’s heart and a rebellion form. Then, that rebellion would be a clash of great powers, enough to disturb the earth and make it without form and void. It certainly seems that such a clash of titanic powers could have caused the devastation spoken of in Genesis 1:2, and that devastation is also a reason that it is unlikely that the fall of Satan could have occurred after Adam and Eve were created and they were in the Garden of Eden.

Taking all the evidence together, a very likely possibility of what happened is that there was the time of Genesis 1:1 when God created the universe and the angels. We do not know exactly how long ago that was, but even 20,000 years is long enough. Then pride grew in Satan’s heart and he convinced a third of God’s angels to join him in rebelling against God. There was a war in which the earth “became” without form and void, a time when God’s creation, which was not originally without form and void, became that way. Then God began to put things back in order by speaking order into the universe.

One book that covers the subject in much detail is *Without Form and Void* by Arthur Custance. Custance points out that the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1 can be translated: “In a former state God created the heavens and the earth.” The entire book is on the opening verses of Genesis. As of this writing, this book may be found on the internet [here](http://www.custance.org/Library/WFANDV/intro.html).

Another book that had some insights was *God at War* by Greg Boyd. This book is not about Genesis, but contains evidence for the gap from his studies and from ancient myths which portray a great war between cosmic powers that destroy the earth.

**“was formless and empty.”** From the scope of Scripture, this could also be translated as “became formless and empty,” and there is evidence that that is exactly what happened.

**“the spirit of God.”** The “spirit of God” is God Himself, it is a way of describing God in action; His active power and presence. The Hebrew word translated “spirit” is *ruach* (#07307 רוּחַ), a feminine noun, and it can refer to a large number of things. The “spirit of God” in this context is not separate from God Himself, but is a way of speaking about His power in action. The phrase, “And the spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters,” is difficult to interpret, and it is easier to get a “big picture” of what is going on than a specific interpretation. This is due in part to the broad range of meanings of “spirit” and even “spirit of God.” It is important in the study of God’s Word to become familiar with the large semantic range of *ruach* because it includes things such as God in motion; wind; breath; the gift of holy spirit God put upon some people in the Old Testament; good spirit beings, evil spirit beings, the natural life of our fleshly bodies that is sometimes referred to as “soul”; the life force that will animate resurrected bodies in the future; and the activities of the mind including people’s thoughts, attitudes, and emotions.

Here in Genesis 1, there are at least three main possible meanings that make sense in the larger scope of the Word. One is “the spirit of God” is used as a designation of God in action, i.e., God was acting, brooding, moving, hovering over, the waters, preparing to bring forth the earth as we know it.

Another meaning is the “wind of God” (cf. NAB, NJB, NRSV), and according to that use of *ruach*, God’s wind was moving on the face of the deep, again giving us the picture of God moving and about to bring forth the earth as we know it. The idea of God’s wind gets support from the records in which the wind of God helped accomplish God’s purposes, such as when a great wind parted the Sea during the Exodus and Israel crossed the Sea on dry land. Also, in Hebrew, the “wind of God” can mean a “mighty wind,” but that idea has less scholarly support.

Still a third possible translation would be that the “breath of God” was moving over the waters. That translation is supported by God’s then speaking the earth as we know it into being. In that scenario, God was breathing over the waters, as if studying them, and then He spoke and brought the earth as we know it into being. Sometimes “the spirit of God” and the “breath of God” are basically used as synonyms. For example, Job saw “the spirit of God” and “the breath of God” as the same thing when it came to bringing him into being: “The Spirit of God hath made me, and the breath of *El* Shaddai gives me life” (Job 33:4).

While scholars hotly debate the “correct meaning” of *ruach* in Genesis 1:2, it might not ever be possible to be absolutely certain which meaning God intended. In fact, it is likely that God did not have one specific meaning in mind but rather wrote in a way that revealed His loving attention to His creation. Genesis 1:2 could apply to God being in action, and His breath, and His wind moving over the face of the watery deep in preparation for His acts to come. One thing that can be learned from all three of these possible meanings is that God was moving and preparing to bring the earth as we know it out of the chaos of Genesis 1:2.

[For more on the usages of *ruach*, spirit, see Word Study: “Pneuma.” For more on “the spirit of God, see Appendix 7: “What is the Holy Spirit?”]

**“hovering.”** The Hebrew word is *rachap* (#07363 רָחַף), a feminine verb agreeing with the word “spirit,” which is a feminine noun in Hebrew. and here *rachap* means “to hover” with the implication of brooding over and cherishing. Some scholars and translators prefer the translation “moving.”

Gen 1:4

**“And God saw the light, that it was good.”** That the created world that God made was “good” was a sharp contrast between what God revealed to the Jews and what many ancient cultures felt about the world, that it was evil, tainted.

Gen 1:5

**“And God called.”** The Hebrew can be translated as, “And God named” the light “Day.”

**“one day.”** The Hebrew is literally, “one day.” Although many versions have “the first day,” that is not the Hebrew text.

Gen 1:11

**“fruit trees of every kind on the earth.”** The emphasis of the text is that God made many different kinds of vegetation (Gen. 1:11-12) and many different kinds of animals (Gen. 1:24-25) on earth.

It has been a long-believed tradition that Genesis 1:11-12 and 1:24-25, are setting forth the fact that plants and animals reproduce “after their kind” (ASV, KJV), or “according to their kind” (cf. CEB, CSB, ESV, NASB, NET, NIV, RSV). That belief, and the translation that supported it, has been a helpful support for Christians who believe in special creation and not evolution. If plants and animals reproduce according to their kind, then evolution did not occur. However, that traditional understanding of the text is not the meaning of the text. While there is scientific evidence that evolution did not occur, Genesis 1:11, 13, 21, 24, and 1:25 do not contribute to that debate the way most modern creationists think they do. They are not speaking about the fact that animals reproduce after their kind, even though they do. These verses in Genesis are saying that all the different plants and animals were directly created by God, and God’s special and varied creation is the emphasis in the text.

God is a loving and magnificent Creator. In creating earth for humankind, He could have made life quite uninteresting, even boring. He could have made humans see everything in black and white, or He could have made only a few varieties of birds, fish, and animals—just enough to keep our bodies alive. But because of His love for humankind, He created a tremendously varied heavens and earth, and thus has made life truly pleasurable and interesting, and that is the point of these verses in Genesis. The NRSV translates Genesis 1:11 as, “Then God said, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.’ And it was so” (cf. CJB, JPS Tanakh 1985, NABRE).

The same idea is found in Gen. 1:12: “The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good” (NRSV). In fact, this same idea occurs in Genesis 1:11, 12, 21, 24, and 1:25. Evidence for this understanding of Genesis comes from Genesis chapter 1 as well as from other places in the Bible where the same basic Hebrew phrase is used, as we will see below. For example. the same idea occurs in Genesis 6:20 when God is speaking to Noah about the animals that will come to him to be taken on the ark. “Pairs of every kind” will come to Noah.

It helps to remember that at the time Moses wrote Genesis, the idea that animals and plants came about by an incredibly long period of unguided spontaneous development driven by mutation and adaptation (i.e., the modern concept of evolution) was not believed by God’s people. In fact, they would not have understood the concept even if Moses had written about it when he wrote the Torah, about 1,400 BC. It also seems clear that when William Tyndale translated Genesis from Hebrew in 1530—the first English Bible to do that—he was thinking about the great variety in God’s creation and not thinking about how things reproduced. The Tyndale Bible of Genesis 1:11 reads, “And God said: ‘Let the earth bring forth herb and grass that sow seed, and fruitful trees that bear fruit every one in his kind having their seed in themselves upon the earth.’ And it came to pass.”[[3]](#footnote-14914)

We also see the phrase that is translated in Genesis 1 as “according to their kind,” does not refer to reproduction in the other places the Hebrew phrase is used. In Genesis 6:20, when God is bringing animals to Noah, it is “every kind” of animal that comes (cf. BBE, CEB, CJB, JPS, NAB, NIV, NJB, NLT), and even in versions like the KJV or NASB that uses “according to its kind” (or “after its kind”), it is clear that the text is not talking about reproduction, but rather that the animals were brought to Noah “according to their *different* kinds,” that is, every distinct “kind” was brought to Noah. That is repeated in Genesis 7:14, when “every kind” of animal and bird came to Noah and got on the ark.

Leviticus 11:13-19 is another place where we can see that the Hebrew phrase refers to “every kind.” God is telling the Israelites what kinds of birds are unclean to them and that they should not eat. They are not to eat birds such as the horned owl, screech owl, gull, and “every kind of hawk” (Lev. 11:16). Even when the King James Version says, “and the hawk after his kind,” we can see that what the text means is every kind of hawk. The verse is not speaking of hawks reproducing more hawks.

Leviticus 11:22 continues the context about what God allowed the people to eat, and it reads, “From these you may eat: any kind of locust, any kind of katydid, any kind of cricket, and any kind of grasshopper.” The King James Version reads, “And the owl, and the night hawk, and the cuckow, and the hawk after his kind,” but we can see that the phrase, “the hawk after his kind” refers to every sort of hawk. We see the same thing in Deuteronomy 14:13-15 (REV), which reads, 13“and the red kite, and the falcon, and any kind of kite, 14and any kind of raven, 15and the ostrich, and the owl, and the seagull, and any kind of hawk.” Again, God is speaking about what the people can and cannot eat, so He says not to eat any kind of the birds mentioned in those verses. Leviticus 11:29 then says not to eat “any kind of large lizard,” which He then describes as “the gecko and the monitor lizard, the wall lizard, the skink, and the chameleon” (Lev. 11:30). Ezekiel 47:10 also uses the phrase for the many different kinds of fish that will be in the river that flows from the Temple in Jerusalem in the Millennial Kingdom.

The Hebrew words here in Genesis 1:11 are mostly singular, but are a collective singular, so the REV and many other versions read “plants” instead of “a plant,” which makes the text easier to understand. Thus, one “plant” is representative of plants in general, all plants, etc.

Gen 1:12

**“And God saw that it was good.”** This is the second time on the third day that God saw something that was good. The third day is the only day out of the six when God saw “good” two times.

Gen 1:14

**“Let there be lights.”** On the fourth day of God’s making the heavens and earth as we know it, He made the sun, moon, and stars (galaxies are seen as “stars” in the sky). There was light before the fourth day. God had made light on the very first day (Gen. 1:3-5), but that was ambient light with no apparent source (it seems that ambient light will again be the kind of light in the next heavens and earth; Rev. 21:23). For today, God has structured the universe such that there were light givers in the sky that gave light to the earth.

However, the sun, moon, and stars did more than just give light. They reveal the glory of God and the work of God’s power, His “hands” (Ps. 19:1). Also, they mark out days, years, and seasons, and mark out “appointed times,” and are also for signs. Modern people are generally not as attuned to the sky as the ancients were. Between our modern indoor living, light pollution, electric lights that can make it like daylight at any time of the day, and “grow lights” that can artificially grow plants, we modern people usually do not need to pay attention to what is going on in the sky. However, ancient peoples usually paid great attention to the night sky, and many noticed “signs” in the sky that are lost to us today. For example, the Magi saw the “star” around the time of Christ’s birth, and that “star” was apparently a configuration of stars and planets that was a sign to the Magi but was not apparent to other people who did not know what to look for—Herod and the Jews, for example, did not see it (see commentary on Matt. 2:2).

The stars, planets, and comets that were visible in the sky did not “just happen.” They were created by God and He named all the stars (Ps. 147:4).

**“seasons.”** The Hebrew word translated as “seasons” is *moꜥed* (#04150 מוֹעֵד), meaning an appointed time or place. The timing of celestial events was much more important for the ancients than it is for us today, because today we build our calendars based on complex computer models instead of when we can see certain events in the sky. In contrast, the ancient Jews marked the start of a new month by the first sighting of the new moon. But that sighting could be delayed by things such as cloud cover. Nevertheless, the start of the month determined the dates of the Jewish feasts and celebrations. For example, the Passover was killed on the 14th day of Nisan. But if the first day of Nisan was delayed by cloud cover, then the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread were delayed too. So the sun, moon, and stars really did determine the appointed days for things on earth.

Gen 1:19

**“And there was evening and there was morning.”** The Hebrew day started with sunset instead of midnight like our Western days do, so evening starts the day and comes first in the list.

Gen 1:20

**“living souls.”** The Hebrew word translated as “soul” is *nephesh* (#05315 נֶפֶשׁ), and *nephesh* has a wide semantic range. One of those meanings refers to the life force that animates humans, land animals, and many sea creatures. It is the “soul” animating the person or animal that makes the difference between a living person or animal and a dead one. For that reason, *nephesh* is also used for the “life” of a person, as in, “do not take my life,” i.e., “do not kill me.” *Nephesh* is also used in the sense of “individual,” both of people and animals. Therefore, it sometimes gets translated as “creature” (CJB, HCSB, ESV, KJV), because the living individuals in the sea were “sea individuals” or sea creatures. It is not well recognized in Christianity that the same life force that animates humans animates animals. In large part that is due to the fact that the word *nephesh* is not translated as “soul” in most English Bibles when it comes to animals. Here in Genesis 1:20, the animals were given life and became living individuals, living souls. In Genesis 2:7, Adam became a “living soul,” a living individual, just as these animals had earlier.

[For more information on “soul,” see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

**“across the expanse of the heavens.”** The Hebrew is more idiomatic: “upon the face of the expanse of the heavens,” as if the earth observer is looking upward and the heavens are the backdrop to the flying birds.

Gen 1:21

**“living soul.”** The Hebrew word “soul” is *nephesh* (#05315 נֶפֶשׁ), and in the Bible, *nephesh* often refers to the life force that animates humans and animals. It is also sometimes used of “individuals,” as it is here in Genesis 1:21, where “soul” (nephesh) refers to the individual animal and bird, which is why the text says God created “every living soul that moves.” Here, “soul” refers to the individual animals, which is why so many English versions translate *nephesh* as “creature” in Genesis 1:21. The “creature” is called a “soul” because it is animated by *nephesh*, soul. This is not well understood in the Christian world and it is often taught that animals do not have soul, but Genesis is clear that they do; they are animated by “soul” just as humans are, and when they die their life force, their “soul” is gone.

[For more information, see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

**“And God saw that it was good.”** This is in contrast to many ancient mythologies in which the creatures that lived in the seas were against God or were in chaos.

Gen 1:22

**“And God blessed them.”** This is the first use of “bless” in the Bible, and it will be a key concept in Genesis. Note that here the blessing is related to being able to bear young and reproduce.

**“fill.”** The Hebrew word is *male'* (#04390 מָלֵא), which means “fill.” God commanded that the animal life fill the earth.

Gen 1:24

**“Let the earth bring forth every kind of living soul.”** The process by which this happened is not described. It was likely how it happened with Adam when God pulled dirt from the earth together and then gave it life. Genesis 1:25 says God created the animals.

**“living soul.”** The Hebrew word “soul” is *nephesh* (#05315 נֶפֶשׁ), and *nephesh* is the life force that animates humans and animals, and it is also used of “individuals.” See commentary on Genesis 1:20.

[For more information, see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

**“livestock.”** In this context, this refers to domesticated animals. When God created the earth and humankind, and created the animals and birds to support, sustain, and beautify the earth, He made a distinction between the domesticated animals that would serve humans in various ways and the wild animals that generally cannot be domesticated, and today, thousands of years later, that distinction still holds true.

**“creeping thing.”** Or perhaps, “crawling thing.” This is very general and generally refers to small animals and reptiles. Apparently, it can also refer to insects, worms, etc., but that may not be its meaning here.

Gen 1:26

**“Let us.”** This “let us” is God speaking to His divine council, which is His council of spirit beings that God works with in ruling and running His creation. God’s divine council is an important but not commonly understood part of Scripture, so it deserves some explanation.

God is love. That simple statement explains why God created the universe as He did, and populated it with both spirit beings and human beings. God also gave those beings free will so that He could interact with them and they could serve Him and interact with Him because they chose to out of love. When God created the universe, and later when He created mankind and then the Church, He enlisted the help of His created beings to help Him govern creation. God does not rule over His created beings as a tyrant, making every decision by Himself and commanding His creation to carry out His wishes. Rather, God works with them and allows them to help Him govern His universe. There is evidence for this throughout the Bible.

For example, when God created the angels and other spirit beings, He created different categories and hierarchies among them so that there would be order as He worked with His creation. We see this in a number of different ways and places in Scripture. For example, when God created the angels, He created them with different abilities and in different positions. He made some of them to be “archangels” (*archangelos*; #743 ἀρχάγγελος) a word built from the Greek prefix *archi* (chief; highest; first) and the word *angelos* (messenger; “angel”). “Archangel” means “chief angel” or “ruling angel,” and the Christian world would have a much better grasp of the authority structures of the spirit world if the Greek word *archangelos* had been translated as “ruling angel” instead of transliterated as “archangel.”

The angelic world has a hierarchy, with some angels ruling over others. The ruling angel Michael is specifically called one of the “chief princes” (or “primary rulers”) in Daniel 10:13. Similarly, Revelation 10:1 and 18:21 mention “strong” angels who are more powerful than others. Not only do the angels differ in authority and power, there are also more kinds of spirit beings than just angels, such as cherubim and seraphim.

We also see different ranks of spirit beings in verses like Ephesians 6:12, which says that Christians wrestle against “rulers” (*archē*), “authorities” (*exousia*), and “world-rulers” (*kosmokratōr*) who are spiritual forces of evil. These are not just different words to describe the same spirit beings; these constitute different ranks of authority and power in the spirit world. Similarly, Colossians 1:16 mentions “thrones” (*thronos*), lordships (*kuriotēs*), rulers (*archē*), and “authorities” (*exousia*), and these are different positions in the Kingdom of God and the Church.

God rules over all the spirit beings of various ranks and powers, and they are called “gods.” Indeed, there are many “gods” (1 Cor. 8:5). That is why God is called the “Most High” God (Gen. 14:18)—because He is far greater than all the other gods. In fact, God is called the “Most High” God more than 50 times in the Old Testament, and nine times in the New Testament.

When God created mankind, He continued to allow the beings He had created to be rulers under Him. He gave Adam and Eve rulership over the animals (Gen. 1:28) and the responsibility of managing the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15). Later, as the human population on earth increased, God commanded that rulers and judges be appointed to help Him rule (Exod. 18:21-23; Deut. 16:18). Even in the future Messianic Kingdom God will have “under-rulers” who will help Him and the Lord Jesus to rule (Isa. 1:26; Jer. 3:15; 23:4; Ezek. 44:24; Matt. 19:28; 1 Cor. 6:2; Rev. 2:26). Of course, the greatest example of God allowing one of His beings to rule was when He gave His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18), and set him at His own right hand, “far above every ruler, and authority, and power, and lordship, and every name *that is* named…and he [God] put all things in subjection under his [Jesus’] feet” (Eph. 1:21-22). God made His Son Jesus ruler of His creation (Rev. 3:14).

When the Christian Church started, God continued His pattern of enlisting the aid of His creation to rule, and so He, via the Lord Jesus Christ, set up ministries to rule and equip the Church. Christ gave the equipping ministries of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers to help Him administer the Church and “to prepare God’s people for works of service” (Eph. 4:11-13 NIV84). This is why Paul speaks of the authority he has from the Lord as an apostle, which is the same authority that other called leaders have from the Lord (2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10; 1 Thess. 4:2; Titus 2:15).

Besides the fact that God rules the spiritual world through a council of spirit beings just as He rules the earth via earthly rulers and the Church through appointed ministers, there is good biblical evidence, and some extra-biblical evidence, that God has a ruling council of spirit beings with whom He consults. Of course, God would not need to have a divine council, He is certainly capable of doing things on His own, but having such a council is in harmony with His loving nature and His desire to work together with His creation.

When it comes to extra-biblical evidence that God has a ruling council of spirit beings with whom He consults, many cultures have recognized that there is some kind of divine council or “council among the gods.” The online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, notes: “The concept of a divine assembly (or council) is attested in the archaic Sumerian, Akkadian, Old Babylonian, Ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Canaanite, Israelite, Celtic, Ancient Greek, and Ancient Roman and Nordic pantheons” ([wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine\_Council](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_Council)).

The testimony of these cultures is important because ancient myths often have a kernel of truth in them. Especially when they agree with the Bible on basic facts, such as in the ancient accounts of the Flood, these myths add credence to what the Bible says and show that God was at work in those ancient cultures, revealing Himself and His truth to them and demonstrating His love for all mankind.

Some of the biblical evidence for God having an inner council with whom He works is very clear. Psalm 89:7 mentions God’s divine council, and the word “council” is translated from the Hebrew word *sōd* (#05475 סוֹד), which refers to a “council, secret council, intimate council, circle of familiar friends, assembly,” and also sometimes to the results of the deliberation of a divine council. Other verses mention the divine council (*sōd*) of God. See commentary on Jeremiah 23:18, 22, and Job 15:8. The divine council of God shows up with varying degrees of clarity in a number of verses in the Old Testament. While God supplies the power for what He does, He works in concert with His creation. Also, there is some good evidence that God meets with His ruling council on “the mount of assembly” (see commentary on Isa. 14:13).

When it comes to Genesis 1:26, “Let us make man in our image,” many Trinitarians believe that “God” worked together with the other “Persons” in the Trinity when He created things, and they point to Genesis 1:26 as a proof text for their argument. However, many scholars acknowledge that this interpretation is erroneous. Recently, Michael Heiser, a Trinitarian theologian, wrote: “technical research in Hebrew grammar and exegesis has shown that the Trinity is not a coherent explanation. …Seeing the Trinity in Gen. 1:26 is reading the New Testament back into the Old Testament, something that isn’t a sound interpretive method….”[[4]](#footnote-23614)

Although some theologians think this use of “us” in Genesis 1:26 could be the plural of majesty (also called the plural of emphasis), where God uses the plural “us” to magnify Himself, that is not the case here. Hebrew scholars point out that there is no other example of a speaker using the plural while addressing himself as the one being spoken to. More to the point, however, is the work of recent Hebrew scholars showing that the plural of majesty applies to nouns but not verbs. “The plural of majesty does exist of nouns…but Gen. 1:26 is not about nouns—the issue is the verbal forms.”[[5]](#footnote-21067) In Genesis 1:26, the verb “make” in the phrase “Let us make” is plural, and so the “us” is not a plural of majesty; it is God speaking to others about making mankind.

The most common objection to the “us” in Genesis 1:26 referring to angels is that Scripture attests that God made mankind. But God could easily have headed up a council with whom He conferred, and afterward did the work they decided upon. In fact, it is likely that in God’s divine council, as with many councils and corporate boards, the members do not initiate or act as much as they support and give input, and also learn what is being done and why. This certainly seems to be the conclusion we draw from Daniel 4, where “the decree of the watchers” is also called “the decree of the Most High” (Dan. 4:17, 24. See commentary on Dan. 4:17).

The New Testament also shows us that God works with leaders to rule His creation. We have already seen that He gave “all authority” to Jesus Christ, and works through him to appoint and direct the leaders who run the Christian Church. Although the New Testament does not have verses that are as clear as the Old Testament verses on the divine spirit council of God, there are New Testament references that imply its existence. The New Testament continues the use of the term “Most High” or “Most High God” when referring to the true God (Mark 5:7; Luke 8:28; Acts 7:48; 16:17; Heb. 7:1), indicating that the New Testament writers acknowledged that there are other “gods” besides Him. Although it has been assumed by many Christians that the other “gods” are demons, there is no reason to assume that all of them must be, especially in light of the Old Testament references to a divine council of gods.

There is a lot of evidence that God works with an inner council of spirit beings in order to rule His creation. However, although there is ample scriptural support for God’s divine council, there is not an overemphasis on it in the Bible. An overemphasis on God’s divine council would detract from the honor due God. God is still the Creator, the Most High, and the One who should get glory from both spirit and human beings.

The information on God’s divine inner council is scattered throughout the Bible. For example, there are several more verses besides Genesis 1:26 in which God uses “us” or says “let us.” These include Genesis 3:22; 11:7; and Isaiah 6:8. Daniel 4 shows God working with a council of “watchers.” Daniel 7:10 and 7:26 show God working with a panel of spirit judges to judge the Antichrist, and it is likely that those judges are the same as the 24 elders in Revelation 4:4 and the judges in Revelation 20:4 (see commentaries on Dan. 7:10; Rev. 4:4 and Rev. 20:4).

[For more on the divine council, see commentaries on Job 15:8; Ps. 89:7; and Jer. 23:18. In addition to meeting with His inner divine council, God also sometimes meets with larger general assemblies of spirit beings. For more information on those assemblies, see commentary on Job 1:6. For more on the “watchers in Daniel, see commentary on Dan. 4:17. For more on the Devil being the ruler of the world, see commentary on Luke 4:6. For more on the Millennial reign over the earth, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.”]

**“make humankind in our image.”** See commentary on Genesis 1:27.

**“have dominion.”** See commentary on Genesis 1:28.

**“creeping thing that creeps.”** There is a more specific word for “insect,” so these “creeping things” are more likely things that are close to the ground, things that “move” along the ground, like mice and other such animals.

Gen 1:27

**“So God created humankind.”** Genesis 1:27 is a summary statement. The details of the creation of humankind are in Genesis 2. The NET text note reads, “The Hebrew text has the article prefixed to the noun (הָאָדָם, haʾadam). The article does not distinguish man from woman here (“the man” as opposed to “the woman”), but rather indicates previous reference (see v. 26, where the noun appears without the article). It has the same function as English ‘the aforementioned.’”

**“in his own image.”** God both created and made humankind in His own image, in His likeness (Gen. 1:26, 27; 5:1; 9:6). There has been much discussion, and some disagreement, about what it means to be in the image of God, but a few things are certain. The immediately preceding context of Genesis 1 is God making the animals, which are not in the image of God. So being in the image of God involves things that are unique to mankind and different from the animals.

Furthermore, being in the image and likeness of God is not something that we humans “have,” it is something that we humans “are.” We are in the image and likeness of God because of the unique way God made us as humans distinct from animals. Thus, our being in the image and likeness of God is having many of the same qualities that God has, and this would include things like the desire and self-awareness to love and be loved, the desire to be part of a family, a sense of what is moral or godly, the ability to think abstractly, the desire to create, the ability to communicate at a very advanced and abstract level, and the capacity to worship God. God creating mankind in His image also expresses His intent that mankind would live forever together with him.

Something that helps us understand what it is to be in the image and likeness of God is that Genesis 1:26, which has both “image” (*tselem*, #06754 צֶלֶם) and “likeness” (*demuth* #01823 דְּמוּת), is also used in Genesis 5:3, which has both “image” and “likeness.” So whatever characteristics God gave Adam that gave him the image and likeness of God, Adam gave to his descendants. That made them in the image and likeness of Adam and thus also in the image and likeness of God. In fact, humans still have that image today in spite of their fallen nature (Gen. 9:6).

It is often said that since God is spirit, man must be a spirit being too. This has led to various false teachings, one of which is that every person is an eternal being and therefore intrinsically has everlasting life and will spend eternity in heaven or in hell. But when the Bible says that mankind is made and created in the image of God, it is not saying that mankind is like God in every way, and one of the ways we seem to be clearly different from God is that we are not “spirit beings.” God made mankind from the dust and then breathed into him the breath of life, making man a living soul. There is not a word in the creation record about mankind being, or even having, God’s nature of Holy Spirit. In that respect, we humans are very different from angels, who were made as spirit beings (Heb. 1:7 KJV, cf. NET, NIV, YLT).

There are some solid biblical reasons why mankind does not have to have holy spirit to be in the image of God. One is that after the Flood, which was more than 1600 years after Adam and Eve were created and long after the Fall, mankind was still said to be in the image of God (Gen. 9:6). Thus, even in our fallen state, mankind is still in the image of God, and that is the reason why God says murder is wrong and why a murderer must be punished. To get the full impact of what God says about mankind in Genesis 9:6, we must note that in the context, God had been talking about killing and eating animals. Animals were killed for their meat and for their skin, and this was acceptable, but God says it is not acceptable to kill a human being because “in the image of God has God made mankind” (NIV). Thus, humans, in their fallen state without holy spirit, still bear the image of God.

Similarly, 1 Corinthians 11:7 speaks of men being made in the image of God, and although the context is a Christian meeting, not everyone in such a meeting would of necessity be born again and have holy spirit. Even more to the point is James 3:9, which says that with our tongue we curse people, even though they are made in the image of God; but of course not every person we curse is saved and has holy spirit. The point James is making is that even in their fallen state, humans deserve respect because they are made in the image of God.

Another reason we know that the image of God does not refer to spirit is that Jesus Christ is specifically said to be the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). But when the Bible says that, it is not saying that Jesus is the image of God because he had holy spirit. If that were the case, Jesus would not have been considered to be the image of God until his baptism, at which point he received the holy spirit (Matt. 3:16). Also, when the Bible says that Jesus is the image of God, it is not saying that since every human is the image of God, Jesus is just like everyone else.

The verses that say Jesus is the image of God are elevating him. So, how is Jesus the image of God in a way that other humans, who are also the image of God, are not? The sin of Adam and Eve changed mankind, giving them a sin nature, which results in people sinning. The apostle Paul described how we humans live due to the Fall: “I do not understand my own actions, for I am not practicing what I *truly* want, but I am doing the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:15).

Like every human, Jesus was the image of God because God created us in His own image. But Jesus was able to take the innate image of God in him and live it out in a way that other humans cannot attain due to their sin nature. Jesus perfectly reflected the image of God by the way he lived. Jesus’ image of God was so clear and complete that he said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). In contrast, humans are not so clearly the image of God. We are still in the image of God, but that image can be hard to see at times. The Fall did not keep people from being the image of God, but the Fall has “blurred” the image. It keeps us from living according to the image of God in which we were created. We struggle to be like Jesus, who always loved, always made the right moral choice, always communicated well, and so forth.

In spite of the fact that we humans do not live up to the image of God inside us, that image is still there and is clearly a reason why God wants us to be loving toward each other and honor each other. Murder is wrong because we are made in the image of God (Gen. 9:6). Cussing out each other is wrong because we are in the likeness of God (James 3:9). We humans don’t “have” the image of God, we “are” the image of God. Now our challenge is to live like it.

**“Male and female.”** Human sexuality is different from the sexual differences between animals. When God created the other animals, i.e., the “livestock and creeping thing and *wild* animal of the earth” (Gen. 1:24), He never specifically said anything about them being “male and female,” even though they were. Human sexuality is woven into the fabric of life and family life in unique ways that have to do with God’s purpose for men, women, and the family. The two sexes are necessary for reproduction and important for the building of a godly family and godly children. God says He hates divorce because He created the man and woman to become “one” and have “godly offspring” (Mal. 2:15). This explains why the Bible consistently deals so severely with sexual sins that destroy the family that God is trying to maintain and protect, for example, adultery.

Along the same vein, the animals and plants are specifically said to be created, and thus to naturally reproduce, “according to their ‘kind,’” where ‘kind’ is roughly equivalent to genus (Gen. 1:11-12, 21, 24-25). Animals and plants can be placed into “groups” (“kinds,” “genera”) that are very similar and can crossbreed. That is why Noah took animals onto the ark “according to their kinds” (Gen. 6:20). Noah did not have to take every species of animal onto the ark. Taking the “kinds” was enough to ensure the survival of the “kind,” and they crossbred and divided into different species after the Flood. In contrast to animals and plants, humans are not said to be created “according to their kind,” because there is no other “kind” like us. Human beings are created in the image of God and are unique.

**“he created them.”** Adam was created from the ground, and Eve was created from material from Adam. Adam and Eve were the first two human beings and from them came every human who has ever lived.

[For more on Adam and Eve being literal and the ones who began the human race, see commentary on Gen. 2:7.]

Gen 1:28

**“fill the earth.”** The Hebrew word translated “fill” is *male* (or spelled *mala*; #04390 מָלֵא or מָלָא), and in this context, it means “fill.” Other meanings include, “be full, fullness or abundance, to be ended or accomplished, to satisfy or fulfill.” Adam and Eve were the first humans, and God commanded them to fill the earth, something that has now been accomplished.

Although all the modern translations read “fill,” including the New King James Version, there is some confusion about the translation because some older versions have “replenish,” including the KJV (1611), Noah Webster Bible (1833), RV (1885), and the ASV (1901), but not including the Geneva Bible (1599); Young’s Literal Translation (1898), or Rotherham (1902).

The translation “replenish” has, among other things, contributed to the belief that there were humans or humanoids on earth that existed before the catastrophe that occurred in Genesis 1:2 when the earth “became” without form and void. There is a simple but not well-known explanation as to why some early versions like the King James read “replenish” when other versions just as old, such as the Geneva Bible, read “fill.” Up until recently, one of the meanings of the English word “replenish” was “to fill.” In fact, the very first definition of “replenish” in Webster’s 1828 English Dictionary is “To fill; to stock with numbers or abundance.” As the second definition of “replenish,” Webster has “To recover former fullness.” As time passed, the first definition of replenish, “to fill” fell out of use, and the second definition became the standard definition of the word.

One of the dangers of reading older versions of the Bible is that words in them may have changed meanings over time, and no longer convey the proper modern meaning. The King James Version is full of these. A few examples in the KJV are: “by and by” (Luke 21:9) means immediately; “carriages” (Acts 21:15) means something that had to be carried, or baggage; “conversation” (Phil. 1:27) meant conduct; “instantly” (Luke 7:4) meant earnestly; “naughty” (Jer. 24:2) sometimes meant worth naught, or worthless; “nephew” (Judg. 12:14) sometimes meant grandson; “sometimes” (Eph. 2:13) meant at one time, formerly. In the KJV, “sometimes” never means occasionally, as it does in today’s English.

“Replenish” in the KJV, ASV, RV, etc., falls into the category of words that have changed meanings over time. God told Adam and Eve to fill the earth, and up until recently, “replenish” meant “fill.”

**“Have dominion.”** God gave Adam and Eve dominion over the earth, but they transferred it to the Devil. In Genesis 1:28, God gave the dominion over the earth to mankind. One piece of evidence of that dominion is that God brought the animals He made to Adam so that he could give them names (Gen. 2:19). The whole situation changed, however, when Adam and Eve sinned against God by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:6). When they followed the prompting of God’s arch-enemy the Devil and ate of the tree, they took on the crafty nature of the Devil, and also transferred dominion of the earth over to him. That is why the Devil told Jesus that the earth had been handed over to him and he could give it to anyone he wanted to (Matt. 4:9; Luke 4:6).

The fact that God gave Adam and Eve dominion over the earth not only displays God’s goodness and trust in humankind, but it reveals part of God’s purpose for humankind: to govern the earth on God’s behalf. We see this also in the fact that God placed Adam and Eve in the garden “to work it and to care for it” (Gen. 2:15). The future earth will be ruled by people (see commentary on Jer. 23:4).

[For more on God’s purpose for humankind, see commentary on Gen. 2:15. For more on Adam and Eve getting the crafty nature of the Devil, see commentary on Rom. 7:17. For more on the dominion of the earth being transferred over to the Devil and the Devil now being in control of much of what happens on earth, see commentary on Luke 4:6.]

Gen 1:29

**“you.”** The Hebrew suffix translated “you” is plural. God gave dominion and food to humankind, both men and women.

**“They will be food for you.”** The Hebrew subject is singular, literally “it” or “this,” but it refers to the plurality of plants and tree fruit, so we would say “they” in English. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve ate plants.

Gen 1:30

**“animal.”** The Hebrew is more literally “living thing.”

**“living soul.”** The Hebrew word “soul” is *nephesh* (#05315 נֶפֶשׁ), and *nephesh* is the life force that animates humans and animals, and it is also used of “individuals.” Here it refers specifically to the life force in humans and animals. See commentary on Genesis 1:21.

[For more information on soul, see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

**Genesis Chapter 2**

Gen 2:1

**“And.”** To keep the flow of the context, this verse should have been numbered Genesis 1:32 instead of 2:1, because in it God continues the work of the first week of creation. To make the creation story easier to understand, Genesis 2:4 should have been Genesis 2:1, and started the new chapter with telling the story of creation from another point of view.

**“with everything that was in them.”** The Hebrew word is *tsaba* (#06635 צָבָא), and it refers to an army. God uses it to refer to the organized and vast army of the stars (Deut. 4:19; 17:3), as well as the army of angels (1 Kings 22:19; Psalm 148:2). In Isaiah 24:21 it refers to the army of fallen angels. But the Hebrew does not have to have a militaristic meaning. It can simply refer to a huge organized number like an army. Here it refers to all the organized things in the heavens and earth, which could include the “organized” numbers of animals, fish, stars, etc.

One thing this verse clearly indicates is that God created things with inherent organization. He did not just throw the stars in heaven and see where they stuck. He created the swarms on earth and the vast array of stars in heaven to work together in an organized fashion. All of God’s original creation, working together, was “very good,” and it worked together in harmony. Every part in some way affected every other part. This organization and intimate interrelation was seriously affected by the Fall of man.

Gen 2:2

**“By the seventh day.”** The text can also be understood to be saying, “On the seventh day,” or “In the seventh day.” Other verses in the Bible support that God worked six days and rested on the seventh day (e.g., Exod. 20:11; 31:17; ). Furthermore, several English Bibles read “by the seventh day” (e.g., BSB, GW, LSV, NASB, NCV, NET 2nd ed., NIV, YLT). For centuries, people have seen a potential problem with Genesis 2:2 saying both that God finished His work on the seventh day and also that God rested on the seventh day. The Septuagint, Samaritan Pentateuch, and Syriac texts read that God finished His work on the “sixth day,” but that is not likely original. The better way to handle the apparent contradiction is to realize the semantic range of the Hebrew text and understand it as saying “By the seventh day” instead of “On the seventh day.”

**“ceased.”** The Hebrew word means “ceased” or “stopped.” It is the older use of “rest” which meant “stop,” like in the phrase, “Give it a rest,” meaning stop doing that. The NET text note reads, “The Hebrew term שָׁבַּת (*shabbat*) [related to the word “sabbath”] can be translated “to rest” (“and he rested”) but it basically means “to cease.” This is not a rest from exhaustion; it is the cessation of the work of creation.

**“work that he had done.”** The word “work” is a noun, and here it refers to what God had done, the things He had created; and also the activity that God had been involved in; as in His profession, His business. That is the reason that some versions read, “that he had made” and others read, “that he had done.”

Gen 2:3

**“made it holy.”** This is the first time that “holy,” or “set apart” is used in the Bible, and here the seventh day is set apart from the rest of the days. The seventh day is “holy.”

Gen 2:4

**“This is the history of the heavens and of the earth when they were created.”** This history is neither complete nor chronological. It focuses on the apex of God’s creation: humankind. First, God has to explain a little about how he prepared the earth for humankind by causing the earth to be watered so that there would be water to drink and plants for people (and animals) to eat. Then he explained how he made humankind—specifically Adam—and brought him to life. Then God made a Garden of Delight for Adam and put him in it. Then God provided wonderful plants for Adam, and made sure the garden was very well watered (in this case, the garden was watered so abundantly that the stream from it became four different rivers). Then God gave Adam guidance about the meaningful and valuable work that God had prepared for him to do and also gave him instructions about what to eat and what not to eat. Then God made great varieties of animals and birds to be a blessing to Adam and to serve him in his work and world. God gave dominion of the animals to Adam and demonstrated Adams dominion by bringing the animals to Adam so that he could name them (in the biblical culture, giving something a name was a way of exercising some amount of control or dominion over that thing; see commentary on Gen. 17:5). Then God provided a companion for Adam—Eve—a person whom he could be one flesh with, and at that point Genesis 2 ends, and then Genesis 3 picks up the history of the earth with the fall of Adam and Eve and an explanation of how the world that was so “good” became a harsh and evil place.

**“history.”** The Hebrew word translated as “history” is *toledot* (#08435 תוֹלְד֧וֹת), and it refers to generations, descendants, successors, or history.[[6]](#footnote-25701) Here in Genesis 2:4, the best translation seems to be “history,” while in places where human families are involved “descendants” or “generations” is more appropriate (cf. Gen. 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2). Since the overwhelming use of *toledot* in the Old Testament refers to family histories and descendants, we could think that here in Genesis 2:4, God considered the heavens and earth (and all the inhabitants thereof) to be a large family (cf. Eph. 3:15).

**“in *the* day.”** The Hebrew does not have the definite article, and “in day” is an idiom that refers to a period of time. God did not make the heavens and the earth in one 24-hour period. This is the same wording in the Hebrew text as in Genesis 2:17 (see commentary on Gen. 2:17). It could be translated as “when” Yahweh made the earth, and that is what the text means.

**“Yahweh.”** Genesis 2:4 is the first use of the personal name of God in the Bible. The Hebrew name of God consists of four consonants and no vowels, and there has been a long-standing debate about how to spell it in English and how to correctly pronounce it. The four Hebrew letters are *yod he vav he* (transliterated as YHVH). The REV uses the English spelling “Yahweh,” which is used by many scholars in their commentaries and in some English Bibles (cf. HCSB, LSB, NJB, *The Jerusalem Bible, Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible, New European Version, The Complete Bible: An American Translation, The Expanded Bible, Ancient Roots Translinear Bible*). No one knows exactly how YHVH was pronounced, and it seems that if God really cared that people pronounced it exactly correctly, then He would have done much more to make the pronunciation clear to us.

As for what the English versions do with the translation, most use the word “LORD” spelled with capital letters, but “LORD” is a title, not a name and the title takes the focus away from God’s use of His name since there are other Hebrew words properly translated “Lord.” The name “Jehovah” is used in some Bibles (cf. the 1901 ASV), but there is no “J” in Hebrew (although the early English translators used the English “J” for the Hebrew *yod*, and thus producing the English translations “Jerusalem,” “Joshua,” “Jeremiah” and such as that. Some modern scholars think that YHVH should be translated into English as “Yahowah” or something similar, but since the exact pronunciation of YHVH is unknown, and “Yahweh” is accepted in English versions and scholarly works, there is no compelling reason to use an unusual and seldom-used spelling for God’s name in the REV in an undocumentable attempt to be more correct.

Gen 2:5

**“Before any shrub of the field was on the earth.”** Genesis 2:5-6 tell us about the early earth. Two things seem to be especially important about what Genesis 2:5-6 is saying. The first is that Genesis 2:5 and 6 are one sentence and should be read and understood that way, and the second is that according to the verses, the springs that came up out of the earth watered the whole face of the earth, not just the Garden of Eden.

As for the first important thing, that the two verses are one sentence and should be read that way, it really would have helped people understand what Genesis is saying if the two verses were translated as one verse instead of two, as follows: “Before any shrub of the field was on the earth, and before any plant of the field had sprung up—because Yahweh God had not caused it to rain on the earth and *because* there was no man to till the ground— springs went up out of the earth and watered the whole face of the earth.”

Thus, Genesis 2:5-6 gives us two reasons why there were no shrubs or plants on earth yet: because there had not been any rain and because there was no human to till the ground. Genesis 1:11-13 says that the plants were made on the third day, but Adam and Eve were not made until the sixth day, so we see that Genesis 2:5 is correct when it says that when plants were made, there was no human to till the ground. God put the plants there first, before Adam and Eve, so that the earth would be ready for them to have wonderful things to eat and to look at. At that early time, God caused the subterranean water that was in the earth to bubble out of the ground as springs and water the entire earth, which is why the whole earth soon became covered with vegetation.

The second thing that it is very important to understand about Genesis 2:5-6 is that it is not speaking specifically about the Garden of Eden. Genesis 2:5-6 is speaking about how the whole earth was watered. The Garden of Eden will be introduced shortly, in Genesis 2:8.

At this early point in history, it had not yet rained on earth because this was the week when the earth was being reformed from its destruction (Gen. 1:2), and apparently there had not been enough time for the water cycle—evaporation, condensation, rain, and then more evaporation—to fully function on the earth, so there was no rain yet. The first rains likely came in a few weeks or months after the first week of creation. Some Christians believe that there was no rain until the time of Noah, but there is no reason to believe that. Rain is a natural function of evaporation and condensation, and would have started very quickly. The context of Genesis 2:5 is the first week of creation, not the entire 1,656 years until the rain of Noah’s flood.

Gen 2:6

**“springs went up.”** To understand the early history of earth, it is important to understand that Genesis 2:5-6 are one sentence and to read them that way (see commentary on Gen. 2:5)

**“springs.”** The Hebrew word is singular, not plural, but it could easily be a collective singular, which is sometimes done in the Hebrew text. The Hebrew word translated as “springs” is *ʾed* (#0108 אֵד) and the meaning of *ʾed* is debated because the word is unknown in ancient Hebrew outside of its two uses in the Bible. Scholars have tried to pin down a meaning from cognate languages such as Akkadian, Sumerian, and Eblite, but without certainty. It is noteworthy that both the Septuagint and Latin Vulgate refer to *ʾed* as springs. That tells us that the Jews before Christ and the early Christians thought the word referred to springs.

The traditional English translation “mist” came from its use in Job 36:27, but that one use is not definitive here in Genesis. The translation of *ʾed* varies greatly in the English versions. The translation “mist” is traditional and is in many versions, but other versions say “springs” (e.g., Douay Rheims, NET, NLT); “stream” (CEB, LSB, NAB, NIV, NRSV, The First Testament[[7]](#footnote-11472)); “underground water” (GW); “a flow” (JPS); “water” (HCSB, NJB); or “moisture” (REB). Part of the debate over the meaning of *ʾed* is due to the fact that mists do not come up from the earth, they come down from the atmosphere, and other scholars have asked how “springs” could water the whole ground. Furthermore, there is a much more common Hebrew word for “springs” that God could have used here. However, the idea of the text is that water came up from the ground and watered the whole face of the earth, so the translation “springs” seems appropriate. In any case, there is some uncertainty about exactly what the text is saying; i.e., in what form did the water come up out of the earth, did it come up as a mild spring or a more powerful stream?

Biblically and actually, all life depends on water: no water, no life. It would make sense in the grand scheme of God’s creation that He would start life in the Garden of Eden that He planted by having springs of water come up from the ground. The springs would come up from the great resources of underground water. Nahum Sarna writes, “The idea seems to be that the primordial, subterranean waters would rise to the surface to moisten the arid earth, thereby making it receptive to the growth and survival of vegetation and providing the raw material with the proper consistency for being molded into man.”[[8]](#footnote-23429) That the springs would water the “whole face of the ground,” could very well first apply to the land of Eden and then where the rivers it produced flowed. Eventually, there would be springs of underground water as well as rain over the earth, and the whole earth would be watered.

Thus, the water of life on earth could have started out as springs or streams that came up in the land of Eden and then flowed through the Garden God planted in Eden (Gen. 2:10), and then the water flowed out from it over the earth. This is parallel to the life-giving water in the Millennial Kingdom and Everlasting Kingdom. In the Millennial Kingdom, there will be a stream of living water that will flow out from the Temple to the east and west and give life (Ezek. 47:1-12; Zech. 14:8; Joel 3:18). Also, in the Everlasting Kingdom, there will be a “river of water of life” that will flow out from the throne of God and will give life (Rev. 22:1-2). So it would fit God’s pattern of doing things for Him to water the Garden of Eden, the place of the start of human life on earth, by springs that came up from the ground somewhere in Eden. The water from the springs flowed through the Garden and watered it and then became four great rivers that flowed out to other parts of the earth (Gen. 2:10). However, Genesis 2:5 tells us that when the subterranean water first came out of the ground it came out all over the earth, which would be why on the third day, vegetation could spring up all over the earth (see commentary on Gen. 2:5). Eventually there was rain over the entire earth to water the ground.

It is likely that when Genesis 2:10-14 mentions the four rivers that flow out of Eden, it is making the point that God is the source of life-giving water, even though the whole earth was watered by springs from the ground. We certainly see that same kind of thing when the water flows out of the Millennial Temple to the east and the west. Those will not be the only two rivers flowing in Israel but they are the focus of the Bible because they are from the Temple of God and thus focus on the fact that God is the source of life. We learn that there are other rivers on earth, even in Israel, from verses such as Joel 3:18. What Joel said is very important because it lets us know that the two rivers that came from the Millennial Temple were not the only two rivers flowing in Israel and the rest of the world. They were simply the two most important rivers because they started in God’s temple and thus emphasized that God is the ultimate source of life.

Gen 2:7

**“And Yahweh God formed.”** This is the first time that the Hebrew word translated as “formed” occurs.

**“man...ground.”** The two words are closely related in Hebrew and make a play on words: “Adam” (man, person) and “adamah” (ground, dirt, earth.”) Perhaps an English phrase that could somewhat capture the wordplay would be, “God made the earthling from the dust of the earth.”[[9]](#footnote-23614)

**“formed man of dust from the ground and breathed.”** The Hebrew could more literally be translated as, “formed man—dust from the ground—and breathed….” The human body was made from the elements in the earth, and God had already made those, so He just assembled them into a body. Genesis 3:19 says “You are dust.” As wonderful as human beings are, in the end, we are just dust that God has blessed and made alive.

**“and man became a living soul.”** This verse means that when God breathed life into the body of Adam that He had made, Adam came to life and became a living person, a living individual. Adam and Eve were the first two people, and the only two people that God created. They are the ultimate parents of every person on earth. There are people who believe in evolution that believe the Genesis record of Adam and Eve is not literal, and that the biblical record of Adam and Eve is just fanciful mythology, but the Bible says that God started the human race by creating Adam and Eve. God did something that no human can achieve: He made material substance come alive. Almost all discussion about evolution is about how one organism can evolve into another organism. But the far greater question, and the great proof that macro-evolution did not occur, is that there is absolutely no proof that nonliving material can organize itself, and somehow come to life. In fact, there’s not even a workable theory to explain that. That there are living organisms on the earth is a great proof of the existence of God.

There are also people, even some Christians, who add to the text of Scripture and assert that God created Adam and Eve, but also other people as well. However, there is no evidence for that. In fact, there is a substantial amount of biblical evidence against it. The Bible mentions Adam many times. Genesis has a very detailed record of the creation of Adam and Eve, and lists many of their descendants. 1 Chronicles gives a history of the human race beginning with Adam (1 Chron. 1:1). Job, who likely lived about 2,000 BC, spoke about Adam (Job 31:33). In his genealogy of Christ, Luke lists Adam as the first human (Luke 3:38). In Romans, Paul wrote about Adam being the cause of all people’s sin (Rom. 5:12-17, expounded on below). Paul wrote that “in Adam,” that is, in connection with Adam, everyone dies (1 Cor. 15:22), then he called Adam “the first man” (1 Cor. 15:45). Paul, agreeing with the Genesis record, wrote that Adam was created before Eve (1 Tim. 2:13). Jude also agrees with Genesis and with 1 Chronicles 1:1-3, and calls Enoch “the seventh from Adam” (Jude 1:14). So from the first book of the Bible, Genesis, until the second to the last book of the Bible, Jude, the Bible speaks of Adam and refers to him as the first human and the cause of sin in the human race.

Very notably, Romans 5:12-17 says that sin came into the world through “one man,” Adam. It is because of Adam’s sin that every person today has a sin nature and is led to do evil. Even Christians have a sin nature, and that sin nature fights against the spirit nature in Christians (Gal. 5:17). It is specifically because Adam sinned before having children that sin nature was passed on to all humankind, just as Romans says: “through one man sin entered the world and death through sin, and so death spread to all humankind…the transgression of Adam...many died through the transgression of one *man...*by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one...through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners (Rom. 5:12, 14, 15, 17, 19). If God had created Adam and Eve, but other couples as well, the descendants of Adam and Eve would have sin nature because of the sin of Adam, but the descendants of any other people would not have sin nature from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That would mean that the people on earth today would be divided into people who had a sin nature and those who did not. Not only is that unbiblical, but it does not fit history. Every person struggles with sin and evil, and the reason for that is simple: everyone is a descendant of Adam.

**“living soul.”** Here in Genesis 2:7, God gives us details about Adam becoming a living individual, a “living soul,” whereas Genesis 1:27 makes the simple statement that God created Adam and Eve. Earlier, God had given the animals life and thus they became “living souls” before Adam did (Gen. 1:20). The “soul” is not a ghost-like thing that inhabits the body and lives on after the person dies. The “soul” is the animal life—the animating life—of the human body. With soul, the body of a human or animal is alive, without soul the body is dead.

[For more on “living soul,” see commentary on Gen. 1:20 and for a more complete explanation of soul, see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

Gen 2:8

**“And Yahweh God had planted a garden.”** Yahweh had to have planted the garden when He was creating and making things, before He “ceased” His work (Gen. 2:2-3). That is why, when God made Adam on the sixth day, there was a garden to put him and Eve in. So Genesis 2:8ff is going back in time and adding detail in the same way that Genesis 2:7 added detail about the making of Adam, an event that happened before Genesis 2.

For centuries, people have looked for the Garden of Eden. All those efforts will likely be in vain for a number of reasons. One reason is that the garden would have been quite small, perhaps even only a few acres. Finding a tiny 6,000-year-old garden in the Middle East is almost certainly an impossible job. Furthermore, God told Adam “to work it and to care for it” (Gen. 2:15). Thus, the garden was not just a place to relax; it was an actual garden that produced food. Before mechanical devices such as tractors, one or two people could only take care of a few acres of garden, so even if the garden was as large as ten acres, which would be difficult for Adam and Eve to take care of and guard, it would still be hard to find in the Middle East. Also, the Hebrew word translated in the REV as “to care for it” is *shamar* (#08104 שָׁמַר), which means “to keep, guard, watch, watch over,” and all those definitions apply here. As part of taking care of the garden, Adam and Eve would have to guard it from the animals, which at this time all ate plants (Gen. 1:30). There is every reason to believe that when Adam and Eve were ejected from the garden it was soon overgrown with all sorts of vegetation and also ravaged by all the plant-eating animals, and it soon disappeared.

Another reason to believe that it would be impossible to find the garden is that the earth’s geography has changed dramatically since the time of Adam and Eve. Apparently, in the time of Peleg, the continents separated and formed the pattern of oceans and continents we have today (Gen. 10:25). There is no way to tell how different that continental shift made the whole earth from the times of Adam and Eve. Then, after that, Noah’s Flood changed the geography of the earth again. Mountains arose and the deep oceans were formed. So at this time, there is no way to tell what the geography around Eden looked like. We know that at the time of Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden was elevated above the surrounding geography because there were four rivers that flowed from it, and water flows downhill. In fact, if the Garden of Eden on earth paralleled the Garden of Eden in the spiritual world, it may well have been on the side of a mountain (cf. Ezek. 28:13-14). However, with all the changes in the geography of the Middle East, there is no way to tell if the land that used to be the Garden of Eden was still elevated.

Today we have the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, but there are important reasons not to equate them with the Tigris and Euphrates of Genesis 2:11-14. For one thing, they don’t fit the description in Genesis. Genesis 2 says that one headwater formed the four rivers, but the Tigris and Euphrates rivers today have totally different headwaters but the same basic confluence in the Persian Gulf. This is the opposite of what Genesis 2:10 says. That the rivers today have the ancient names of “Tigris” and “Euphrates” makes sense because when Noah got off the ark he would likely call things by the names he was already familiar with instead of inventing totally new names. This is common practice. For example, when the English came to America, they called part of it “New York” after the “York” in England. People tend to reuse names they are familiar with, and Noah seems to have done that same thing. There is probably nothing left of the Garden of Eden of Adam’s time that can be discovered today.

**“planted a garden in Eden.”** It is traditional to say, “the Garden of Eden,” and that can be a generalized name for the garden. But the more accurate understanding is that God planted a garden in the land of Eden. The Hebrew word *eden* (#05731 עֵדֶן) means “pleasure” or “delight,” and in this verse, “Eden” does not refer to a garden, but rather a place, a territory or piece of land, east of Israel: a delightful area. Thus, the “Garden of Eden” is more properly a Garden in the area of Eden, which is a delightful place (see commentary on Genesis 2:15, “garden of Eden”). The Bible is written from the geographical perspective of Israel, so “in the east” likely means at a place east of Israel. Although “Israel” did not exist as a nation when God put man in Eden, it did exist when Moses wrote Genesis.

Gen 2:9

**“Yahweh God had made every *kind of* tree.”** The trees had been made in Genesis 1. Here in Genesis 2:9, God is just adding some detail about them.

**“every *kind of* tree that is pleasant to the sight.”** This is very literal and accurate. The concept is expanded and easier to understand in the NIV: “The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.” God went to great lengths to make the earth a special place for humankind. Today’s neuroscience is proving that humans have a section of the brain which is hardwired for certain pleasures, and God hardwired us to enjoy His earth. That is why He can say that He made the trees to be “pleasant to the sight.” We humans did not have to “learn” to think that trees and nature were beautiful and relaxing—God created us to automatically feel that way about His creation.

Gen 2:10

**“A river went out of Eden to water the garden.”** In Genesis 2:6, the Bible says that springs (or streams) came up out of the ground, out from the earth, and watered the earth. The water did not come out of the garden, but came out of the land of “Eden” (“Paradise”) and then went through the garden, as Genesis 2:10 indicates. After the garden, it went on to form four different rivers. For the rivers to flow through the garden and then break into four different rivers, the garden must have been elevated, on higher ground than the land the rivers flowed to.

**“four headwaters.”** The Hebrew literally reads, “four heads,” but the “head” of a river is called a “headwater” in English. Rivers begin at a headwater, often a spring, and flow downhill from there, getting bigger and bigger as they go because they pick up water from other sources, such as other creeks, streams, and even rivers, along the way.

Gen 2:11

**“one.”** The Hebrew is literally “one,” just as it was with the days of the week, day “one.”

**“Pishon.”** The *HALOT*[[10]](#footnote-23495) says, “it is hardly possible to make any identification with a particular river and all attempts to do so are disputed.” The location of the rivers mentioned in Genesis 2 is unknown. For one thing, Noah’s Flood was so destructive to the geography of the world that these rivers may not even exist any longer. Also, the splitting up of the continents after the Flood may have moved them around into unrecognizable locations.

Gen 2:12

**“Bedellium.”** An aromatic resin much like myrrh. This may be a case where one aromatic resin is used as an example in place of different kinds of resin. It is unlikely that just one kind of incense is there.

Gen 2:13

**“Gihon.”** The Hebrew word transliterated as “Gihon” means “gusher.”

**“Cush.”** A biblical name for Ethiopia.

Gen 2:14

**“Hiddekel.”** The more common name of this river is the “Tigris.”

**“it runs east of Assyria.”** The modern-day Tigris actually flows through what was ancient Assyria, but there are parts of it that flow east of Assyria.

**“The fourth river is the Euphrates.”** There is almost no description of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, perhaps because they were better known to the Israelite people than the other two rivers.

Gen 2:15

**“garden of Eden.”** The Hebrew word *eden* (#05731 עֵדֶן) means “delight, or pleasure.” When God created Adam and Eve, He loved them and so He put them in the “Garden of *eden*;” the “Garden of Delight” (Gen. 2:15). It is unfortunate that the translators decided to transliterate the Hebrew word *eden* as “Eden” instead of translating it as “Delight.” The phrase “Garden of Eden” does not mean anything to most English readers except that it was a physical place on earth. In contrast, had the translators decided to say, “Garden of Delight” instead of “Garden of Eden,” we would still know it was a place on earth, but God’s love and purpose in putting people in a wonderful place would have been revealed.

It is important to realize that the Bible does not use the term “the Garden of Eden,” even though that is likely a very good name for the garden. The Bible actually refers to it as “the garden that is in [the land of] Eden.” “Eden” was the name of the area (Gen. 2:8), and the garden was planted in that area. So then God put Adam and Eve in His garden that He planted in the land of Eden, a delightful place, a “paradise.”

It is also an unfortunate result of history that the Old Testament was written in a different language (Hebrew) than the New Testament (Greek) because it makes it much harder to see the flow of God’s original plan from Genesis to Revelation. God’s plan was to have a “paradise” for humankind, but that plan was derailed by sin. Nevertheless, God will not be thwarted, and eventually His plan will be fulfilled and the earth will be a paradise again (cf. Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:4; Rev. 2:7). The Old Testament tells us that God originally put Adam and Eve into “Paradise” (Greek), into “Eden” (Hebrew) and the New Testament tells us that in the future God will rebuild “Paradise” on earth for all the saved people.

God put Adam and Eve in the Garden of Delight, which the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, translates as *paradeisos* (παράδεισος, pronounced par-a-'day-sos) which in English is “paradise.” Adam ruined “Paradise,” but Jesus Christ will restore it. He told the thief on the cross that he would be in “Paradise” (Luke 23:43). God showed the future Paradise to the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 12:4), and Christ will reestablish Paradise on earth, complete with the tree of life (Rev. 2:7) In the New Testament, “Paradise” was one of the terms used for the kingdom of Christ on earth; both his Millennial Kingdom and the Eternal Kingdom (Rev. 21-22).

Like many places in the Bible, the Garden of Eden is called by more than one name: it is also called “the Garden of Yahweh” (Gen. 13:10; Isa. 51:3).

[For more on Paradise and the Garden of Eden, see commentary on Luke 23:43. For more on the Millennial Kingdom, Christ’s 1,000-year kingdom on earth, which is described as “Paradise,” see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.” For more on how the future will unfold from this present age to the Millennial Kingdom to the Everlasting Kingdom, see commentary on Rev. 21:1.]

**“to work it and to care for it.”** God gave Adam and Eve dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28), which not only displays His goodness and trust in humankind, but reveals part of God’s purpose for them: to govern the earth on God’s behalf. Here in Genesis 2:15, we see part of that purpose spelled out—Adam and Eve were to work the garden and care for it. Working the garden gave Adam and Eve something productive to do and allowed them to care for their own needs, which promotes maturity, self-respect, and mental health. Also, caring for the garden involved a lot of responsibility. For one thing, before the Fall, all the animals on earth ate plants (Gen. 1:30), and the most luscious plants on planet Earth would have been in Adam and Eve’s garden. So “caring” for the garden would have meant protecting it from all the animals wanting to eat it as well as other “caring” type functions.

The Hebrew word translated as “work” also means “serve,” or even, in a religious context, “worship.” In a very real sense, humans “serve” the land, and in so doing bless God and bless themselves with good food.

Also, the “Garden of Delight” that God planted for Adam and Eve would have had to have been very small, perhaps only a couple of acres, or maybe a little more if there was an area for fruit trees. God did not create Adam and Eve just so they could work every day from dawn to dusk taking care of a garden. Caring for the garden would have been a joy, not an onerous task. But the Garden of Eden was only a start and promise of the greater garden that God intended to come in the future—dominion over the whole earth and the earth itself being a wonderful garden for humankind. After all, God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and have children and fill and subdue the earth (Gen. 1:28). So as Adam and Eve had children, and as those children had children of their own and humankind multiplied, the little Garden of Eden that God planted would not have been big enough for everyone. The progeny of Adam and Eve would have eventually spread out around the earth and turned it into a great big wonderful garden, which would fulfill God’s purpose that the earth be a blessing to humankind and be administered by them on His behalf.

However, due to the Fall of Adam and Eve, the world ceased to be a wonderful place, and life became difficult and dangerous. Nevertheless, the purpose of humankind to have dominion over the earth, which God placed in people’s hearts, is still there. Although people have struggled to get it done, much of the earth has been “subdued” by humankind. Sadly, because of the crafty (evil) nature in mankind (Gen. 8:21; Jer. 17:9), much of the work of taking dominion over the earth has been done in an ungodly way. For the most part, there has been little or no regard for really taking care of the earth and making it what it could be or what God designed it to be. Humankind has largely ignored the fact that we are just stewarding the earth for God, who owns it, and who will judge each of us for the job we have done in caring for His earth. Some of Jesus’ parables show God as the landowner who holds his servants responsible for how they steward His earth, its resources, and the profit that comes from it (cf. The Parable of the Vineyard Workers, Matt. 20:1-16; The Parable of the Wicked Tenants, Matt. 21:33-44, Mark 12:1-11, Luke 20:9-15).

The wonderful news is that God’s purpose for the earth and humankind will be restored. Jesus is going to come back to the earth, conquer it, set up his kingdom, and reign over the whole earth. Men and women who lived godly lives will help Jesus administer the earth, and it will be a wonderful and godly place, once again being a “Delight,” a “Paradise,” just as it was before the Fall. Under Jesus’ rule, humankind will have godly dominion over the earth and fulfill God’s original plan.

[For more on Christ reigning on earth in the future, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.” For more on the Garden of Eden being a paradise and the future earth being called “Paradise,” see commentary on Luke 23:43. For more on people who have lived godly lives in their first life helping rule the earth, see commentary on Jer. 23:4.]

Gen 2:16

**“Yahweh God commanded.”** This is the first time the Hebrew word “commanded” occurs. This was a serious demand and warning.

**“eat, yes, eat.”** The Hebrew text has the figure of speech polyptoton, which might be literally translated as “eating you may eat.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines polyptoton as: “A rhetorical figure consisting in the repetition of a word in different cases or inflections in the same sentence.” E. W. Bullinger gives it the English name “Many Inflections” and says that it is “a repetition of the same noun in several cases, or the same verb in several moods or tenses.” According to Bullinger, the Greeks called this figure of speech *metagōgē* (in essence, “to lead the same word through different inflections”), and the Romans referred to it as *casuum varietas* (a variety of cases). Bullinger says, “This figure, therefore, is a repetition of the same word in the same sense, but not in the same form: from the same root, but in some other termination; as that of case, mood, tense, person, degree, number, gender, etc.” Bullinger gives examples of polyptoton occurring in nouns, verbs, and adjectives.[[11]](#footnote-15734)

Here in Genesis 2:16, the last two words in the Hebrew text are “eat, eat.” However, the first verb is in one tense while the second one is in a different tense. This could be perhaps translated as, “eating you [may] eat.” That phraseology is hard to understand in English, but the translators pick up on the intent of what God is saying by using the translation, “you may freely eat.” While that translation gets the sense of what God is saying, some of the power and punchiness of what He said is lost, as is the emphasis on “eat,” which is clearly emphasized in the Hebrew text. To our knowledge, the Hebrew scholar Everett Fox[[12]](#footnote-13546) is the first one to suggest a translation that repeats the words like the Hebrew text does, and include the word “yes” between them, as if God is giving his approval to the emphasis, which of course He is since He is the author of the Hebrew text. If God says to Adam, “you may eat, yes, eat,” we should be able to understand that God is saying Adam is free to eat of the fruit.

The very next verse has another polyptoton. In contrast to saying that Adam may eat, yes, eat, of the trees in the garden, God says that if Adam eats of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he will “die, yes, die” (Gen. 2:17). The two polyptotons back to back add a force to the text that is very powerful and cannot be missed. In spite of that, however, when Eve is repeating to the serpent the statement God made to Adam about dying if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:3), she does not repeat the powerful figure of speech God used (Gen. 2:17), and thus loses the emphasis. In contrast, the serpent, in a bold move and perhaps because Adam was right there, said (if we use the same translating form): “No! You will not ‘die, yes, die.” Thus, the serpent boldly and directly contradicted what God said, even almost exactly quoting his words.

There are occasions when the translation formula of two words with a “yes” in the middle is used with the figure of speech epizeuxis instead of polyptoton. For an example of this, and the use of epizeuxis, see commentary on Genesis 7:19, “exceedingly, yes, exceedingly.”

[See Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

Gen 2:17

**“in the day.”** The wording of the Hebrew text does not make it clear whether Genesis 2:17 is speaking of a single day or a period of time. The Hebrew word is more literally, “in day” (or “in a day”) because there is no definite article “the” in the Hebrew text. The Hebrew is just the prefix preposition “b” (the letter *beth*), which means “in,” combined with the word “day” (*yōm*), making the Hebrew word *b-yōm*, “in day.” The Hebrew does not have the definite article, “the,” in the phrase, but it could have had by making a change in the vowel associated with the *beth*, which tells us that the Massorites did not think the text was saying “the day.” The decision whether *b-yōm* means “in the day,” referring to that very same day, or whether it refers to a period of time, has to be made from the context. But in Genesis 2:17 the context is unclear as to whether God meant “in the day,” or “in a day,” meaning at some later time.” The same Hebrew wording that is in Genesis 2:17 is in Genesis 2:4, which refers to a period of time and not in one day. Similarly, when the Hebrew text was translated into Greek starting around 250 BC, the Jewish scholars did the same thing in Greek as was in the Hebrew text; they used a phrase that could mean “in the day,” or could mean in a period of time (cf. Gen. 2:4; Exod. 32:34; Deut. 21:16; Ps. 102:2 (101:3 in LXX); Ezek. 33:12). In English, we also use “day” for a period of time.

So should the text be understood to say, “on the day” or “at some future time”? On the one hand, there seems to be evidence for the translation, “in the day.” For example, in most English versions, Genesis 2:17 ends with a phrase such as, “you will surely die” (NIV), and that is the translation of the Hebrew phrase, “dying you will die,” which is the figure of speech polyptoton, repeating the same root word for emphasis, in this case, to emphasize the fact that Adam would die.[[13]](#footnote-15606) Having the polyptoton adjacent to *b-yōm*, “in day,” seems to validate the translation, “in the day.” There are also a large number of verses where *b-yōm* refers to the same day.

On the other hand, however, Adam and Eve did not die the very day on which they ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but hundreds of years later, and that supports the translation of *b-yōm* as “on a day” (“someday,” “in a [future] time”). Further support for “a day” referring to a larger period of time comes from the use of *b-yōm*, in some other verses in the Old Testament. For example, Genesis 2:4 says, “…**in the day** when Yahweh God made the earth and the heavens.” In that case, *b-yōm* clearly does not refer to one day, but to a period of time—the time it took God to create the heavens and the earth. There are also other verses where a period of time is a more logical understanding of *b-yōm* than one single day (cf. Gen. 35:3; Num. 3:1; Deut. 21:16, 31:17; 1 Sam. 3:2, etc.).

So the Hebrew text in and of itself is not clear whether Adam and Eve would die the very day they ate of the forbidden fruit, or simply at some future time. What is clear and uncontested in the text is that God told Adam that if he ate of the forbidden fruit, he would die. The text note in the First Edition of the NET Bible says it well: “The Hebrew text (‘dying you will die’) does not refer to two aspects of death (‘dying spiritually, you will then die physically’). The construction simply emphasizes the certainty of death….”

In the final analysis, we may never know exactly what God meant, whether it was “in the very day,” or “at some day in the future,” but we do know that Adam and Eve did not die the day they sinned, or for hundreds of years afterward. However, something did die that day—an animal. We know that because God clothed Adam and Eve with animal skins (Gen. 3:21).

From what the Bible tells us about animal sacrifice as a covering for sin, and from knowing that Jesus, the “lamb of God,” died for our sin, it seems logical to conclude that God postponed the death of Adam and Eve and sacrificed an animal in their place. The animal sacrifices that temporarily covered sin ultimately pointed to God’s great act of mercy in commuting the death sentence and granting everlasting life to everyone who accepted the death of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, in place of their own death. If the conclusion that God postponed Adam’s death and sacrificed an animal is correct, then it is also logical to conclude that the animal that was killed to provide skin coverings for Adam and Eve was a lamb (or lambs), and it foreshadowed the sacrifice of the Messiah.

Properly understanding the Genesis record should clear up an incorrect belief that is held by some Christians who believe that God said that Adam would die that very day, so he must have died in some way that very day. Since Adam and Eve did not physically die that day, those Christians then conclude that Adam must have had holy spirit, and it was the spirit that “died” that day. However, that conclusion is based on faulty logic and evidence. For one thing, as we have seen from the Hebrew text, God did not necessarily say Adam had to die on the day he ate the forbidden fruit. Also, God said to Adam that “you” will die, He did not say, “a part of you will die.”

Actually, the Bible says nothing about Adam and Eve even having holy spirit before the Fall; that is just speculation that is generated by the assumption that God said Adam would die that very day, so therefore he had to die in some way. But since the Bible says nothing about Adam and Eve having or not having holy spirit, there are a lot of possibilities that have to be considered, and we will see that trying to introduce holy spirit into the Genesis record of Adam and Eve may not be the best one.

One possibility is that Adam and Eve never had the gift of holy spirit before the Fall. After all, the Bible says God made Adam’s body out of dust and breathed into it the breath of life, at which time Adam became a “living soul,” a living being. There is no mention of Adam and Eve having holy spirit, and they may not have needed it because God fellowshipped with them personally, like when He walked in the Garden (Gen. 3:8). Furthermore, while it is possible that God put His gift of holy spirit upon Adam and Eve after the Fall so that they could learn to live in a fallen world, just like He put it on Moses, Joshua, and the prophets, there is no verse that confirms that; it is just speculation.

Another possibility is that Adam and Eve had God’s gift of holy spirit upon them before the Fall, but that God did not take it from them when they sinned. The Old Testament prophets had holy spirit upon them, but God did not take it away from them every time they sinned. No verse says that Adam and Eve had spirit before the Fall, or that they lost it after they sinned, so speculation about it is not very helpful. On the other hand, studying the records of people who did have holy spirit upon them and lost it is helpful. For example, God took away His gift of holy spirit from Saul (1 Sam. 16:14), and also apparently from Samson (Judg. 16:20), because of the serious nature of their sin, but those men were not said to “die.”

There is no verse where God’s taking holy spirit from someone is called their death. The Church Epistles use the phrase, “dead in sin” (Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 2:13), but that is referring to people who were never saved and who will die instead of living forever; it is not a direct reference to having or not having holy spirit—holy spirit is not mentioned in any of the verses that use the phrase “dead in sin.”

It is true that in the Church Age, after Pentecost, when a person gets “born again” they receive holy spirit, which is the guarantee of everlasting life. So in the Church Age having holy spirit and having everlasting life are tied together, but that was not the case before the Day of Pentecost. The majority of the people in the Old Testament did not have holy spirit upon them, but that did not mean they would not be saved at the Judgment.

In Romans 5, the apostle Paul gave us more evidence that God telling Adam, “in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die,” did not mean Adam would die that very same day. Paul explained why every human dies, and he did so by a brief retelling of the record in Genesis 3. Paul wrote: “…just as through one man [Adam] sin entered the world and death through sin, in this way death came to all mankind” (Rom. 5:12). Paul showed that it was because of Adam’s sin that death entered the world, and not only did Adam die, but so did all his progeny, all mankind.

When Paul said, “through one man sin entered the world,” he was speaking of Adam’s sin of disobeying God and eating the forbidden fruit. Then, when Paul continued his sentence and wrote, “and death through sin,” he was referring to the sentence of death that God had told Adam about, which was not something that happened that day, but many years later after Adam had children who also died, which is how “death came to all mankind.” Thus, Romans helps us see that the meaning of *b-yōm* (in the day) in Genesis 2:17 refers to an indefinite time in the future, not the same day Adam sinned.

There are many lessons to be gleaned from the story of Adam and Eve. One is that we can be deceived by our five senses and our emotions; another is that if we disobey God, hurt and pain will be the result. However, it seems that the greatest lesson of the record of Adam and Eve is that God is so loving that even when we disobey Him, if we repent and return to Him, He will make a provision to cover our sin so that we can live forever with Him—and living forever with Him is what He wanted all along.

**“die, yes, die.”** This is a translation of the figure polyptoton (Many Inflections), that is in the Hebrew text. The Hebrew reads, “dying you will die.” The figure shows the certainty of Adam’s death if he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

Gen 2:18

**“I will make him a helper corresponding to him.”** The translation “corresponding to him” occurs in some modern translations (CSB, NET). The NET text note says, “The Hebrew expression כְּנֶגְדּוֹ (*kᵉnegdo*) literally means “according to the opposite of him.” Translations such as “suitable [for]” (NASB, NIV), “matching,” “corresponding to” all capture the idea. (Translations that render the phrase simply “partner” [cf. NEB, NRSV], while not totally inaccurate, do not reflect the nuance of correspondence and/or suitability.) The man’s form and nature are matched by the woman’s as she reflects him and complements him. Together they correspond. In short, this prepositional phrase indicates that she has everything that God had invested in him.” Nahum Sarna writes, “Literally, ‘a helper corresponding to him.’ This term cannot be demeaning because Hebrew *‘ezer*, employed here to describe the intended role of the woman, is often used of God in His relation to man.”[[14]](#footnote-29751) S. R. Driver wrote about Genesis 2:18 in his commentary on Genesis and starts by quoting the King James Version, then comments about it. He writes, “*an help meet for him*. Better, corresponding to him, i.e., adequate to him, intellectually his equal, and capable of satisfying his needs and instincts.”[[15]](#footnote-30183)

Gen 2:19

**“each living soul.”** The animals are called living souls in other places as well (e.g., Gen. 1:20, 24, 30).

Gen 2:20

**“there was not found.”** There is some debate about the translation of the Hebrew. The Masoretic text could be translated as “Adam did not find,” but the majority of scholars think the passage should be a passive.

**“corresponding to him.”** This is the same Hebrew word as is in Gen. 2:18 (see commentary on Gen. 2:18).

Gen 2:21

**“one of his ribs.”** The Hebrew word translated as “rib” can refer to a rib, but it can also refer to the “side” of the man (cf. Exod. 25:12), so the versions vary. Quite literally, the Hebrew reads, “he [God] took one from his sides.” For example, the NET reads, “he [God] took part of the man’s side.” The word “one” is in the text and the word translated as rib (or “side”) is plural, so translations that have “God took one of Adam’s ribs,” or “took from one of Adam’s ribs,” are very possible.

Gen 2:22

**“built the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman.”** Adam was created from the ground, whereas Eve was “built” from material from Adam. Adam and Eve were the first two human beings and from them came every human who has ever lived. The name “Adam” is related to the earth, whereas the word “woman” more refers to a “person.” A male person is an *ish*, and a female person is an *ishah* (an *ish* with the “*ah*” feminine ending). This is the only time the Hebrew word translated as “built” is used in the creation account. In Genesis 1, the male and female were “created,” but in Genesis chapter 2 we have more detail about exactly how that “creation” occurred.

[For more on Adam and Eve being literal and the ones who began the human race, see commentary on Gen. 2:7.]

Gen 2:23

**“This one at last.”** When Adam saw Eve, he referred to her as “This” or “This one” (JPS, NET). He had seen hundreds of animals, but none of them were right for him. Now, at last, “This one” was the one for him. It is noteworthy that when Adam saw Eve is the first time he spoke in the Bible.

**“will be called ‘woman,’ because she was taken out of man.”** The phrase is more clearly understood when we see the Hebrew: “will be called ‘woman,’ [*ishah*] because she was taken out of man [*ish*]. The words *ishah* and *ish*, perhaps better “female” and “male” are here used of Adam and Eve, but they are used of animals too (Gen. 7:2). The animals that came on the ark were *ish* (male) and *ishah* (female).

Gen 2:24

**“will leave his father and his mother.”** The way God established the family, the relationship between a man and wife supersedes the relationship between the man and woman and their parents.

**“and will join with.”** The Hebrew word translated “join” is more like “stick on” or “stick with,” which is close to the New Testament word that gets translated as “joined to” but more literally means “glued to.” It is hard to reproduce the Hebrew and Greek exactly, but the meaning is that there is a bond like glue between the couple.

**“wife.”** The Hebrew translated as “his wife” is the same word as “woman” in Gen. 2:23, but with the masculine possessive ending, thus literally, “his woman.” We understand that to mean “his wife,” but it is important to realize that there is not a different word for “woman” and “wife.” They are the same.

**“become.”** The man and the woman were not “one flesh” on their own, but they “become” one flesh together. God designed humans to be in relationship with one another.

**“one flesh.”** The phrase “one flesh” has many implications and a very deep meaning. The most obvious way a man and woman become “one flesh” is in the act of sexual intercourse, as we learn from 1 Corinthians 6:16. However, God never intended the act of sexual intercourse to fulfill what He meant by “one flesh,” even though sex is one way the two become one.

God’s desire in a one flesh relationship is that the couple becomes unified in many ways, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The two, together with God Himself, become a “threefold cord” (Eccl. 4:12).

One great lesson we learn from Genesis 2:22-24 is that it was God Himself who brought the man and woman together, and in doing so He both made, and defined marriage. Marriage is both a divine institution and a creation institution. It is not just for “believers,” or “God’s people,” but for all humans, and indeed, marriage is recognized by people groups of every historical time and culture.

Gen 2:25

**“naked.”** The Hebrew root word is *arvm*, which is a homonym—when two words are spelled the same but have different meanings, such as the “bark” on a tree and the “bark” of a dog. The two meanings of *arvm* that are important in Genesis are “naked” (Gen. 2:25) and “crafty.” Here, *arvm* means “naked,” but in Genesis 3:1 it means “crafty.”

[For more on *arvm* and why it is important to know it is a homonym, see commentary on Gen. 3:1. Mankind starts out naked, but becomes both “naked” and “crafty.”]

**Genesis Chapter 3**

Gen 3:1

**“serpent.”** The “serpent” is the Devil, Satan. Here in Genesis 3, the Devil is called the “serpent” (snake) by the figure of speech hypocatastasis (comparison by implication). Calling the Devil a serpent is similar to calling a sloppy person “pig,” or calling an overly cautious person “chicken” (for more on simile, metaphor, and hypocatastasis, the three main figures of comparison, see commentary on Rev. 20:2). Calling the Devil a “serpent” compares him with a serpent (snake), and assigns the characteristics of a serpent onto him, implying that he is an ambush killer who is sneaky, crafty, and deadly. We can correctly identify the “serpent” as the Devil here in Genesis 3 from 2 Corinthians 11:3 and Revelation 20:2.

Also, however, as we will see later in this study, the Hebrew vocabulary allows for the Devil to have actually appeared to Eve and Adam as a glorious “Shining One,” a glorious and powerful angel, yet still be called “the serpent” to portray his crafty characteristics.

The Bible never gives us the actual personal name of the Devil; the name he was given when God created him. We know the names of important angels such as Michael or Gabriel, but when it comes to the Devil, all the Bible gives us are appellatives and descriptions that let us know about his evil nature and his power. Many of the names in the Bible are given as “mini-portraits” of the person, and that is the case with the Devil. The “names” of the Devil portray him very well, names such as “Slanderer,” “Adversary,” “Opposer,” “Wicked One,” and “Dragon.”

Unfortunately, God calling the Devil the “serpent” here in Genesis has given rise to the tradition that the Devil came to Eve in the form of a snake, but that is highly unlikely. The name “the Serpent” is a fitting name for the Devil, and the sneaky, crafty way he approached Eve in the Garden of Eden made “serpent” the right name for him in that circumstance. Then, God gave references in other places in the Bible so readers would know “the serpent” was the Devil (Rev. 12:9 and 20:2).

There are a number of reasons for not believing that the Devil came in the form of a snake, but came as a powerful angel, a “Shining One.” For one thing, Genesis 3:1 says, “Now the serpent was more crafty than any animal of the field that Yahweh God had made.” The Bible does not say “a serpent” or “serpents,” as if snakes were more crafty than the other animals that God created, but “the serpent” (the Devil), was more crafty than any of the animals, including snakes, because this “serpent” was the Devil, the “anointed cherub” of Ezekiel 28:14, a gorgeous and powerful angel.

Also, it seems clear that snakes could not talk before the Fall, just as they cannot talk now. Thus, especially since Adam was with Eve when they sinned (Gen. 3:6), they would have immediately recognized that a talking snake was an abnormality from God’s creation and been suspicious of this new creature. The Devil did not want to arouse suspicion, but on the contrary, would have wanted to acquire immediate acceptance and trust, so coming as a talking snake would have been a disadvantage. Also, why would a snake question God? At this time before the Fall of Adam and Eve, snakes were part of God’s animal creation and were “good.” Furthermore, no snake would have known that Adam and Eve would be “like God” if they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Thus, the evidence is that the Devil did not appear in the Garden as a talking snake. In contrast to snakes before the Fall, the Devil was not good, already had characteristics that snakes would be known for after the Fall, and would have known things about the spiritual world that Eve and Adam would not have known.

So while it is possible that the Devil could have taken on the form of a snake, why would he? Since he would have been recognized by Adam and Eve as not being one of God’s created animals, why come as an animal at all? Adam and Eve knew about the angelic world, so it is much more logical that the Devil would come as the “Shining One,” an angelic being that lived in the realm of God and would have had knowledge that other animals would not have had.

E. W. Bullinger, the author of *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, recognized that the Devil did not actually come in the form of a snake, but as a shining, glorious being. He points out that the Hebrew word normally translated “snake” or “serpent” is *nachash* (#05175 נָחָשׁ), and that the “serpent” was in reality “the Shining One.” Bullinger writes: “The Hebrew word rendered ‘Serpent’ in Genesis 3:1 is *Nachash* (from the root *Nachash, to shine*), and means *a shining one*. Hence, in Chaldee it means *brass* or *copper* because of its shining. Hence also, the word *Nehushtan*, a piece of brass, in 2 Kings 18:4.”[[16]](#footnote-15725)

The book of Corinthians gives us good evidence that the Devil did not come to Eve and Adam in the form of a snake, but as a glorious angel of light. 2 Corinthians 11:14 says, “And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (ESV). But when in the Bible did Satan ever show up as an angel of light? He might have appeared that way to Jesus when he came to tempt him (Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:2). But it makes perfect sense that the Devil appeared to Eve and Adam as an angel of light, a “Shining One,” a glorious representative of the spiritual world, and as such he would have had immediate credibility and presumed authority when he spoke with Eve and Adam, and also in that form he certainly would have had knowledge of God and the spiritual world that Eve and Adam did not have.

So, Genesis 3:1 records an actual historical event. The Devil came to Eve and Adam as “the Shining One,” a powerful representative of the angelic world. But since in the Hebrew language, the word *nachash* (“shining one”) almost always means “snake, serpent,” God’s calling the Devil the *nachash* here in Genesis 3:1 both allows for the historical fact that the Devil appeared to Eve and Adam as a glorious “Shining One,” and is also represented in the text by the figure hypocatastasis as “the serpent,” the crafty and deadly ambush killer.

The Hebrew word translated in many English versions as “serpent” is translated as “snake” in some English versions (e.g., BBE, CEB, GWORD, NAB, NET, NJB). The Hebrew word means “snake,” but in English, both “snake” and “serpent” are generally synonymous. However, in English literature, “snake” most often refers to the literal reptile, while “serpent” carries overtones of evil, magic, or is used metaphorically, as it is being used here in Gen. 3:1. So, given its general use in literature, “serpent” is the better word to use here in Genesis 3:1, which is being used figuratively for the Devil who is evil.

[For a list of the names of the Slanderer, see Appendix 8: “Names of the Devil.”]

**“crafty.”** The Hebrew root word is *arvm*, which is a homonym (two words that are spelled the same but have different meanings such as the “bark” on a tree and the “bark” of a dog). The two meanings of *arvm* that are important for understanding Genesis are “naked” (Gen. 2:25) and “crafty” (Gen. 3:1).

The original ancient Hebrew text did not have any vowels except the Hebrew letters aleph and ayin, which are both “a.” The pronunciation and meaning of the original text had to be passed down accurately from generation to generation or much of it would be lost. Between the seventh and tenth centuries AD, a way of using little characters, which were mostly dots and dashes, and putting them before, after, over, under, and between the letters in the Hebrew text, was instituted to help people pronounce and remember the words. These characters are known as “vowel points,” and for generations now they have been in the standard Hebrew text known as the Masoretic Text.

If we illustrated the problem in English, an oversimplified example might be if the letters “HT” were in a manuscript. What is the correct way to put vowels with those letters to make words? In the case of the five English vowels, each of them can be used to make a different word: HAT, HATE, HIT, HOT, HUT. The words are totally different, even though the root, HT, is the same. Putting the vowels in the words helps us remember and properly pronounce the words.

Although the Masoretic vowel points are mostly undisputed, a lot of time passed between when Moses, Samuel, and others wrote the original autographs and when the vowel points were added; in some cases, more than 2,000 years. So the vowel points are generally, but not universally, agreed upon, and they are not considered to have divine authority. This is one reason scholars often debate the meaning of a Hebrew word or phrase, and why translations of the Old Testament sometimes differ in places.

In the case of Genesis 2:25 and 3:1, the root word *arvm* is pointed with an “ō” when it is translated naked (#06174 עָרוֹם *arovm* “naked”) and pointed with a “ū” when translated “crafty” (#06175 עָרוּם *aruvm* “crafty”). Although many scholars say these two words are built from different trilateral root words, the spelling of the root words in Genesis is the same: ARVM; *ayin*, *resh*, *vav*, *mem*; as any good lexicon will show.

Clear verses like Genesis 2:25 and 3:1 are not problematic; no one thinks that before they sinned, Adam and Eve were “crafty” and the serpent was “naked.” But there are verses where it seems clear that both meanings—naked and crafty—are meant at the same time (Gen. 3:7, 10-11). In those situations, we can see the wisdom of God in authoring the text the way He did and choosing its vocabulary. By using a homonym like *arvm*, God can put both meanings into one verse in a way that the wise and studious will see it, but someone who is not deeply reading the text will miss it entirely. This is in line with Proverbs 25:2 (REV): “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but it is the glory of kings to search out a matter.”

When Adam and Eve sinned, they took on the character of the Devil: they became “crafty,” like the Devil. Furthermore, they knew they were *arvm*, both “naked” and “crafty.” Today, we call our inner craftiness the “sin nature,” and it is why every human has to be saved. We do not know the mechanism by which Adam and Eve took on the crafty character of the Devil, but we see its effect immediately. They became afraid of God, and they lied to Him. The books of Romans and Galatians have a lot to say about our human sin nature and why we need salvation through Jesus Christ.

[For more on our sin nature, our “crafty” nature, see commentary on Rom. 7:17. For more on man becoming both naked and crafty, see commentary on Gen. 3:7.]

Gen 3:3

**“You must not eat from it, nor are you to touch it.”** In the Hebrew text the verbs are plural, “‘You all must not eat from it, nor are you all to touch it….” Eve thus understood that when God said not to eat it, “or” you all who ate it will die,” He meant it for everyone, not just Adam. Anyone who ate would die.

**“or you will die.”** The text is plural, “or you all will die,” That is, anyone who ate would die. The translation “or” is better than “lest.” In English, the word “lest” is generally about a possibility. “You might die.” The Hebrew is more like, “If you eat you will die.”

Gen 3:4

**“You will not die.”** The Hebrew text much more graphically shows the boldness of the serpent than do most English versions. Once the Devil knew that Eve was not clear on what God said, he blatantly and powerfully contradicted it, ending his sentence here in Genesis 3:4 with the same two verbs with the same verb tenses that God had used in His command in Genesis 2:17 when He said, “die, yes, die,” but the Devil changed God’s singular verbs to plural verbs to include both Adam and Eve and said that they would not “die, yes, die.” God used the figure polyptoton for emphasis in Genesis 2:16-17, and the Devil used it here to renounce what God had said. God said if they ate they would “die, yes, die.” The serpent basically quoted God but in the negative, saying, “You will not ‘die, yes, die.’”

The Devil’s lie, that Adam and Eve would not die, is still believed among many people today, that a person never actually dies. Many Christians believe that the “soul” (the real person) continues to live.

[For more on the figure of speech polyptoton, see commentary on Gen. 2:16. For more on death being actual total death, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.”]

Gen 3:5

**“in *the* day.”** The Hebrew text does not have the definite article. This is the same wording as Genesis 2:17 (see commentary on Gen. 2:17).

**“you...your...you”** The Hebrew is a plural “you,” like “you all.” The Devil is not saying, “the day that you, Eve, eat, your eyes will be opened,” but rather, “the day that ‘you all’ eat,” i.e., that “anyone” eats their eyes will be opened. Thus, a more liberal way of translating the Hebrew text to catch the meaning would be, “in the day that anyone eats, their eyes will be opened and they will be like God.” The Devil was making it sound attractive: anyone who ate would become like God.

**“your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”** Here in Genesis 3:5, we see the very first interaction between humans and the Devil, and from it, we learn a lot about how the Devil and his demons communicate with humans and feed them false information. Something that consistently occurs is that the demons give people a blend of truth and error. That makes sense because if everything that the Devil or a demon said by revelation, séances, or by divination was wrong, people would soon stop seeking information from those kinds of sources. But the Devil combines information that is true (like, “your eyes will be opened” and you will know “good and evil”), together with information that is false (like, “you will not die”). The Devil did the same to Jesus and said, “If you are the Son of God” which he knew was true, but then he quoted Psalms out of context, which would have resulted in Jesus’ death (Luke 4:9-11).

The constant mixture of truth with untruth means that people have to be diligent to know the truth and also be diligent to divide truth from error in what they hear. This can cause problems among church people because there are evil, Satanic ministers (cf. 2 Cor. 11:12-14), and there are also ministers who either do not know what the Bible really says or they do not have the courage to “go against the crowd” and speak the truth that they know, and so what they teach ends up being a blend of truth and error. In those situations, Christians who do know the truth and divide the truth from error when they listen to teachings are often accused of “being picky” or “not getting the heart of what they hear.” In spite of criticism, however, Christians are to be like Christ and divide truth from error, and not like Eve who did not or could not see the error in what she was hearing and ended up disobeying God and causing devastation for the human race.

**“you will be like God.”** The Hebrew word translated as “God” is *elohim* (#0430 אֱלֹהִים), and it can refer to God the Father, or “gods,” or “a god,” or to human or angelic representatives of God. It seems like the most natural meaning for *elohim* in this context is the true God, the same “God” that appears early in the verse. However, that meaning of *elohim* is debated, and some scholars feel that the Devil would not want to make Eve think she would be like her Creator, but that Eve would be more comfortable simply being like “a god.” The Septuagint reads “gods,” so there were Jewish scribes about 250 BC who felt that was the correct meaning.

Gen 3:6

**“husband who was with her.”** We might translate that more freely as, “who was right there with her,” because that is the likely implication of the Hebrew text. Everett Fox says Adam was “beside” Eve.[[17]](#footnote-24830) However, the Hebrew text does not demand that Adam be right there, so we have to allow for the possibility that he was not right there. Adam failed in his duty as Priest and Protector.

Gen 3:7

**“knew.”** This is the common word for “know” in Hebrew, *yada* (#03045 ידע), but in this case, it is being used in a full sense of both knowing and knowing the implications. It is not being used for simple intellectual knowledge, as if Adam and Eve were nude before but were somehow ignorant of it. They now knew all the implications of their nakedness, including the sin that had opened their eyes to their being naked, and so they were afraid and ashamed (Gen. 3:10).

**“naked.”** The Hebrew root word is *arvm*, a homonym, and it can mean “naked” or “crafty.” Adam and Eve were naked [*arvm*] in the Garden (Gen. 2:25), when the “crafty” [*arvm*] serpent came to them (Gen. 3:1). They disobeyed God and sinned, and knew they were *arvm*, but here in Genesis 3:7, should *arvm* be understood as “naked” or “crafty?” Actually, both, and the original unpointed Hebrew word can mean both. They knew they were naked (*arvm*), so they made fig-leaf coverings. If nakedness was their only problem, those coverings would have taken care of the problem, but it didn’t because Adam and Eve had also become *arvm*, “crafty,” and so they were also afraid and ashamed, which is why they hid from God—and their inner craftiness and serpent nature was a problem that would be with them until they died. Genesis 3 then goes on to show how both men and women are crafty, and how that shows up in human life. Adam blamed God for giving him Eve (Gen. 3:12), and Eve blamed the serpent when it was her own desire that caused her to sin (Gen. 3:13). After being ejected from the Garden of Eden, mankind continued to show its crafty nature—a nature that without God’s intervention, ends in everlasting death for each human. Paul wrote: “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me out of this body of death? Thanks *be* to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom. 7:24-25). Jesus Christ is the way to everlasting life.

[For more on Adam and Eve being naked and now naked and crafty, see commentary on Gen. 3:1. For more on the sin nature that lives in mankind, see commentary on Rom. 7:17.]

Gen 3:8

**“They heard the sound of Yahweh God walking around in the garden.”** This is one of the times in Scripture that God came into human form to fellowship with His creation, in this case, with Adam and Eve. Anyone who has walked in the woods knows the “sound” (not “voice” as in some translations) of someone walking. There is a distinct rustling and crunching sound. Adam and Eve, who lived in the garden, recognized the sound of God walking in it and hid. The fact that Adam and Eve recognized the sound God made as He walked shows that He came regularly to the garden to fellowship with Adam and Eve.

The translation “walking around” comes from the fact that the Hebrew verb “walk” is a Hitpael participle and therefore means more than just “walk,” it means more like “walking around” (cf. NAB, NLT), “walking to and fro” (Rotherham); “walking up and down” (YLT), or “moving about” (NET). The Garden of Eden was a small plot of land, small enough for Adam and Eve to care for it and protect it by themselves, and it is a wonderful picture that God would show up in person and walk around in the garden He created.

[For more on God coming in the form of a human being, see commentary on Acts 7:55.]

**“at the time of the evening breeze.”** The Hebrew text is more literally, “at the *ruach* (spirit, wind) of the day.” In the evening in Israel as the sun goes down and the air cools there is a breeze (*ruach*, “wind”) that blows over the land and it is a wonderful time to relax after the heat of the day. So after a hard day tending and guarding the Garden of Eden (all the animals ate plants so the garden had to be guarded), Adam and Eve would relax in the cooling “breeze of the day” and God would come and fellowship with them.

Gen 3:9

**“Then Yahweh God called to the man and said.”** People discuss and debate about the existence of God. Believers are far beyond that. Believers know that God exists, and also that He does much more than that. God is involved with His creation. He loves people and interacts with them. God does not just exist, He speaks, just as He did with Adam and Eve. And it is important to notice that God speaks and interacts with fallen people, not just “perfect people.” Adam and Eve had just sinned, and sinned egregiously. Yet even in their fallen state God shows up and interacts with them, teaches them, and guides them. That God is involved in the lives of His people is a foundational belief and comfort in the lives of believers, as it should be.

**“Where are you?”** Here in Genesis 3:9, the “you” is singular. God called specifically to Adam. This was likely because the command to not eat went to him, and also where Adam was, Eve was likely to be as well.

Gen 3:10

**“naked.”** The Hebrew root word is *arvm*, and it is a homonym that can mean “naked” or “crafty,” and in this context, it means both. See commentary on Genesis 3:7. Since Adam apparently had a fig leaf loincloth on he was not technically “naked,” but he was expressing his feelings of shame. He knew the leaves were inappropriate coverings and he also clearly realized that God had created them without shame.

Gen 3:11

**“naked.”** The Hebrew root word is *arvm*, and it is a homonym that can mean “naked” or “crafty,” and in this context, it means both. See commentary on Genesis 3:7.

Gen 3:12

**“*fruit* from the tree.”** The Hebrew text leaves out the word “fruit.” Adam just said, “she gave to me from the tree,” as if he were so aware and ashamed of his sin that he could not bring himself to say what it was he ate. In our fallen state we naturally have a very acute sense of our faults and failures, and generally don’t like facing them.

Gen 3:13

**“The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”** While it is true that the Devil, the “serpent,” lied to Eve, it is also true that in believing the serpent she disobeyed God’s commands. She should have known better. Lying is one of the Devil’s most original tricks, and the wise Christian knows that and obeys God even when others say that God is wrong. If Eve somehow doubted God and thought the Devil might be correct, she should have at least gone back to God and asked Him about the situation.

The word translated as “deceived” is not the most normal meaning of the word. Fox[[18]](#footnote-22904) has “enticed,” which is likely included in the word’s meaning. Hebrew words can carry more than one meaning and sometimes more than one meaning gives a more accurate picture. The woman was “deceived,” but she was also “enticed” by what the Devil said. We get enticed into sin by our own desires (James 1:14-15).

Gen 3:14

**“you are cursed.”** The serpent is cursed. Eve is not “cursed,” and neither is Adam, but for Adam, the ground is “cursed.”

**“on your belly you will go.”** The serpent in the Genesis record is not a literal snake, it is the figure hypocatastasis for the Devil. In spite of that, however, God uses idioms that apply to a snake when talking to the Devil. Genesis 3:14 is a good example because the idiom “to crawl on your belly” is an idiom for oppression and humiliation, and even today that kind of idiom is used (Ps. 44:25). The only other use of this word for “belly” in the Bible is Leviticus 11:42.

[See commentary on Genesis 3:1, and also see Appendix 8: “Names of the Devil,” under “serpent.”]

**“you will eat dust.”** This idiom refers to being defeated; “utter defeat.” We can see it being used in Psalm 72:9. We still use the same idiom for being defeated today, although usually in the context of being a loser in some kind of race or contest. The Devil, that “ancient serpent,” will always be defeated. He wins minor skirmishes, but he has been defeated over and over for thousands of years now, and eventually will be totally defeated and destroyed.

Gen 3:15

**“your seed and her seed.”** The Hebrew word for “seed” can be singular or can be used as a “collective singular,” a plural, like “seed” or “fish” in English. The same is true for the word “offspring,” as some translations have. Also, although technically the female has an egg while the male has sperm or “seed,” the Hebrew word “seed” was used for offspring in general, including the children, the “offspring” or the “seed” of a man or woman. For example, Genesis 16:10 mentions the “seed” of Hagar, Abraham’s concubine. Genesis 24:60 speaks of the “seed” of Rebekah, Isaac’s wife).

Many verses use “seed” to refer to children, descendants (e.g., Gen. 3:15; 4:25; 9:9; 24:60; 46:6; Ruth 4:12; Esth. 9:27). The singular “seed” (offspring) of the woman, which was of primary concern to God at this time, was Christ, who would ultimately defeat and destroy the Devil (cf. what God said to Abraham; Gen. 12:7; Gal. 3:16), although the general nature of the prophecy would have included those among Eve’s “seed” (offspring) who were godly people and who throughout history have opposed the Devil and his minions.

The “seed” (offspring) of the serpent is all his children. For more on the children of the Devil, see commentary on Matthew 12:31.

**“I will put hostility.”** Once the Devil knew that he would be destroyed by one of the offspring of the woman, he started an aggressive campaign against them. At first, it was against all people, and resulted in God rescuing humankind by Noah’s flood. As the people who would bring forth the Messiah narrowed, the intensity against the progenitors of the “seed” increased; thus, for example, came the aggressive attacks on the Jews.

**“He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.”** The Hebrew text uses the same word, *shup* (#07779 שׁוּף), two times, and so it is translated as “strike” in both places in the REV and many other English versions (some versions use “crush,” but that meaning is less likely). The fact that the Hebrew text uses the same verb for both what the serpent (the Devil) does to the seed of the woman and what the seed of the woman does to the serpent points to a genuine and hard-fought battle between good and evil. The Messiah will come and conquer the serpent, but it will not be an easy battle. Both sides will be focused and determined, and both will suffer from the battle. God revealed more and more about this battle as the books of the Bible, and ultimately in the book of Revelation, were written, so Bible readers eventually learned from the text that Jesus suffered torture and death but was raised from the dead and healed by God, whereas the Devil will be destroyed in the Lake of Fire.

Some versions translate the word *shup* differently, for example, the NIV says, “he will crush [*shup*] your head, and you will strike [*shup*] his heel,” but there is no justification in the Hebrew text for having two different translations of *shup*.

Victor Hamilton writes: “Presumably we should translate the verb the same way both times, there being no evidence in the Hebrew text to support divergent readings…. It seems unwise to translate the first *shup* as ‘crush’ and the second as ‘strike at,’ as is done in the NIV and JB. For this creates the impression that the blow struck at the serpent is fatal—its head is crushed—while the blow unleashed by the serpent against the woman’s seed is painful but not lethal—it comes away with a bruised heel. …The precedent for translating *shup* in two different ways is the Vulgate rendering. While the LXX [the Septuagint—the Greek Old Testament] chose to translate *shup* both times with [the Greek word] *tereō*, ‘to watch, guard,’ the Vulgate uses [the Latin word] *conterero*, ‘to crush, grind, bruise’ the first time, but shifted to *insidior*, ‘to lie in wait, to lie in ambush, to watch,’ in the next phrase.”[[19]](#footnote-22800)

The Latin version known as the Vulgate was translated by Saint Jerome in the late 300s AD. Hamilton points out that it was because the Vulgate translated the Hebrew word *shup* in two different ways that scholars started suggesting that the verbs in the Hebrew text should be understood differently. Once the Roman Catholic Church adopted the Vulgate as its official Bible, there was a lot of pressure to understand the Hebrew text the way Jerome understood it. In fact, today some scholars suggest that the two uses of *shup* in Genesis 3:15 come from different verbal roots, in spite of the fact that there is no evidence for that being the case. Genesis 3:15 points to a titanic battle between the “seed of the woman” and the serpent, and that battle was described in more detail in later books of the Bible.

A noteworthy subtheme in the wording of the Hebrew text of Genesis 3:15 is that the word “heel” is part of the name of Jacob. There is good evidence that the original meaning of “Jacob” was “heel snatcher” or “heel grabber,” and the Hebrew can also mean “supplanter.” Genesis 25:23-26 speaks of the birth of the twins Esau and Jacob, who were born to Rebekah, and verse 26 says, “And after that [i.e., after Esau was born], his brother came out, and his hand was grasping Esau’s heel, so he was named ‘Jacob.’” The Devil has bruised the heel of the seed of the woman for generations, culminating with bruising the Messiah himself.

**“his heel.”** The Hebrew text uses the masculine singular here, indicating that the one who would be struck on the heel was a singular man, whom the ancient Jews properly understood to be the Messiah. He would be bitten too, but he would strike—lethally—the serpent’s head.

Gen 3:16

**“increase, yes, increase.”** The idea of “increase” is intensified by the figure of speech polyptoton, in which the verb “increase” occurs twice, the first time in the infinitive form and the second in the imperfect form. Most versions do not double the verb as the Hebrew text does but translate the double verb as something like “greatly increase” or “greatly multiply. The doubling of the verb intensifies the meaning but also catches the attention of the reader and brings emphasis to the text by so doing.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16, “eat, yes, eat.”]

**“I will increase, yes, increase your pain *and toil* in childbirth.”** The Hebrew word translated as “pain *and toil*” is *atsabon* (#06093 עִצָּבוֹן), and it has several meanings, including “pain, labor [toil], hardship, anxiety.” The problem with bringing Genesis 3:16 into English is that when God told the woman that she would give birth in *atsabon*, and that in *atsabon* the man would get his food from the soil, the word *atsabon* combined the different meanings. The woman would give birth in pain, and it would be hard work [toil] and there would also be anxiety involved. Similarly, the man would work hard to make the ground grow food, and there would be pain, and toil, and anxiety. The Hebrew does a marvelous job at using just one vocabulary word and showing all the pain, work, and anxiety that goes into childbirth and growing crops, but a single English word does not seem to do the job, thus the translation “pain *and toil*.” One interesting thing is that both Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and both had the consequences of “pain and toil” as a result of that disobedience—the woman in childbirth and the man in feeding his family.

Eve had broken God’s command for the sake of her earthly enjoyment and as a consequence, she now would have pain and anxiety in her pregnancy and childbirth. God had always intended that women would give birth, but now there is an unexpected consequence added because of Eve’s sin. In Eve and in all women we see that the sin nature in the body not only gives people a predisposition to sin, but weakens and sickens the physical body as well. In a sense, the single word “pain” is an understatement because the pain and danger associated with childbirth threaten both the life of the child and the life of the mother herself. There is a sad but important lesson we learn from Eve: that disobeying God for momentary earthly pleasure can result in long-term unpleasant consequences, not just for the one who sinned, but for others as well.

**“Your desire will be for your husband. ”** God had created Eve to be a “helper corresponding to” Adam (Gen. 2:18), and God’s desire was that the two of them would work together and build a life, family, and society. But now, due to the sin of Eve and then Adam, the relationship between them was changed and perverted. Here in Genesis 3:16, God told Eve about the consequences of her sin and how the sin nature she had acquired by following Satan instead of obeying Him would show up in life. God described the consequences of Eve’s sin in two parts: the woman’s desire concerning her “man,” and that he would rule over her (in both Hebrew and Greek, the word “husband” is just one of the words for “man”).

The Hebrew word translated “desire,” *teshuqah* (#08669 תְּשׁוּקָה), occurs three times in the Hebrew Bible (Gen. 3:16; 4:7; Song of Solomon 7:10). Although it refers to a “desire,” the evidence in the text is that it has two different meanings, both of which are true. One meaning is “desire for,” which is the way most versions translate Genesis 3:16, e.g., “your desire will be for your husband” (NASB). That seems to be the way the woman in Song of Solomon 7:10 is using it when, speaking of her lover, she says “His desire is toward me.” Understood that way, Genesis 3:16 is speaking of the woman’s desire for a man in her life for any of a number of different reasons (some are mentioned below). However, a second meaning that *teshuqah* (“desire”) can have is a desire for control. We see that only 15 verses later than Genesis 3:16, when sin has a “desire for” Cain, that is, a desire to control Cain. It is important to note that the Hebrew phrase “desire for” is the same in both Genesis 3:16 and 4:7 except for the change in person and gender (The Hebrew of Song of Solomon is a little different). If the meanings of the Hebrew text in Genesis 3:16 and 4:7 are the same, which seems reasonable given both the Hebrew text and the way couples have interacted since the Fall, then the text is implying that the woman, who has a fallen nature, has a desire to control her man. This idea is represented in versions such as the ESV, NET, and NLT. “Your desire shall be contrary to your husband” (ESV), and, “And you will desire to control your husband” (NLT; cf. NET). Both meanings of *teshuqah*, “desire for” and “desire to control,” will be covered below. It is quite likely that God authored the Bible the way He did to allow the one statement about Eve’s “desire” to be understood both ways, and both are true.

When it comes to the normal use of “desire,” scholars have suggested many ways that Eve could have desired Adam and women in general desire men, especially focusing on the desire for sex and the desire for security and provision. Since the desire mentioned in Genesis is specifically a result of the fallen nature of Eve (and thus all women), the desire would be a craving or longing that was intensified by the woman’s sin nature. C. F. Keil writes: “she was punished with a *desire* bordering upon disease (from תְּשׁוּקָה שׁוּק to run, to have a violent craving for a thing).”[[20]](#footnote-22776) Certainly there are exceptions, but in general, women have a strong desire to have a man in their life in spite of the fact that throughout most of history that meant being domineered and often mistreated. Also, especially until very recently women needed men in their lives because life was labor-intensive and dangerous, and it was important for a woman to have men in her life who could deal with much of the heavy work and who also could protect the family. Men desire women also, but due to a generally different mindset and their greater size and strength, they are less susceptible to abuse.

As was stated above, the second way that the Hebrew phrase can be understood is that the woman would have a “desire for” her husband, that is, a desire to control him, a desire that is contrary to him. The NET text note gives reasons why sexual desire is not likely the meaning of “desire” in Genesis 3:16, and then notes that “desire” in Genesis 4:7, “refers to sin’s desire to control and dominate Cain. …In Gen. 3:16 the LORD announces a struggle, a conflict between the man and the woman. She will desire to control him, but he will dominate her instead. This interpretation also fits the tone of the passage, which is a judgment oracle.”

Susan T. Foh writes about a woman’s desire for her husband: “These words mark the beginning of the battle of the sexes. As a result of the fall, man no longer rules easily; he must fight for his headship. Sin has corrupted both the willing submission of the wife and the loving headship of the husband. The woman’s desire is to control her husband (to usurp his divinely appointed headship), and he must master her, if he can. So the rule of love founded in paradise is replaced by struggle, tyranny, and domination.”

In the same article, Foh gives reasons why that interpretation is sound. She writes: “It is consistent with the context, i.e., it is judgment for sin that the relation between man and woman is made difficult.” She also notes that understanding the text that way allows for a consistent understanding of the Hebrew word “desire,” and it recognizes the parallel between Genesis 3:16 and 4:7.[[21]](#footnote-18301)

It is also worth noting that the genuinely harmonious marriages that we would expect to be almost universal since God created man and woman to be together are in fact hard to find. Divorce is common and unhappiness in marriage is just as common. The fallen nature of humankind has made having a truly harmonious marriage difficult. The Apostle Paul, penned, “those *who do marry* will have trouble in the flesh” (1 Cor. 7:28) and the reason for that goes back to the sin of Adam and Eve and the consequences of that sin that God spoke about in Genesis 3:16. Marriages can work, but it takes truly spiritually mature men and women working together to make it work.

**“and he will rule over you.”** Another part of the consequence to women due to Eve’s sin was being ruled by the men in her life. Throughout history, men have generally ruled over women because they are bigger and stronger and also because many women spent most of their youthful years pregnant or nursing or caring for children. The fact that many men harshly domineered their wives was not a consequence intended by God or brought about by Him but rather was a consequence of the sin nature in men showing up in their dominating women due to their greater size and strength.

It is worth noting that in Genesis 3:16, just as “desire” can be an unhealthy desire for a man and even a desire to control a man, it was also a consequence that man would “rule” the woman. But godly headship of the man was already part of the male-female relationship, as is stated in the New Testament (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23-24), so “rule” in Gen. 3:16 must include ruling in an ungodly way. So just as the woman “desires” in an ungodly way, the man “rules” in an ungodly way, rather than being a self-sacrificing leader as the New Testament directs (Eph. 5:25).

The consequences of sin that Adam and Eve received were not the design or desire of God, who warned them not to sin, nor were they prescriptive, they were descriptive. That is, what God told Adam and Eve were not commands about how to live but were descriptions of what would happen in life. For example, Eve was not commanded to desire her husband and let him rule her; instead, God gave her a description of how things would be in the now-fallen world. Those descriptions let Adam and Eve know what would happen as the sin nature outworked itself in them. Similarly, Adam was not commanded to work hard in order to eat; he was told that as a consequence of his sin, he would have to work hard to eat.

Interestingly, the consequences that both Adam and Eve received as a result of their sin related in some way to the sin itself. Eve sought pleasure in eating the forbidden fruit but got pain as a result. Also, she led Adam into sin, and as a consequence, she would now have an unnatural desire for her husband who would lead and rule over her, often harshly. Adam ate of the fruit he was forbidden to eat instead of the fruit he could freely eat, and now, because of his sin, eating would not be easy, but it would require hard work to produce food for himself and the family.

Thankfully, one day the Fallen World and sinful humankind will be redeemed by Jesus Christ, who will restore the earth to its Edenic state and restore humankind to mental and physical wholeness.

[For more on the coming Kingdom of Christ on earth, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.”]

Gen 3:17

**“To Adam he said.”** This is the first time in the Bible the man is called by his name, “Adam.”

**“cursed is the ground because of you.”** It is important to notice that the Bible just says, “cursed is the ground,” it does not say who cursed the ground. Although many people say God cursed the ground, that does not fit with God’s character. It is the Devil and his followers who come to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10), and who oppresses people (Acts 10:38). The translation “because of you” can be found in other English versions besides the REV (e.g., CEB, CSB, ESV, JPS, LSB, NAB, NET, NJB, NIV, NLT, NRSV, RSV). God gave the dominion over the world to Adam (Gen. 1:26, 28) and by sinning, Adam transferred the dominion of the world to the Devil, who said that dominion had been handed to him, and who then stated he could give it to anyone he wanted to (Luke 4:6). The Devil is now the ruler of the world (see commentary on Luke 4:6).

Gen 3:18

**“It will produce thorns and thistles for you.”** These plants cause hardship and take up ground that the edible plants would have taken up. The word translated “produce” is the same word translated “spring up” in Genesis 2:9. The now cursed ground will “spring up” thorns and thistles.

**“and you will eat the plants of the field.”** Up until this point, Adam and Eve enjoyed eating the plants in the Garden of Eden, but now they are driven out of the garden and will have to eat the plants of the “field.” The Bible is not specific as to whether or not all the plants of the garden will grow in the field, but we can be sure that the quality of the plants in the field is not the same as the plants in the Garden of Eden, and also the plants in the field will take much more work to grow, in part because the “field” will now be controlled by the Devil (see commentary on Luke 4:6).

Gen 3:19

**“face.”** The Hebrew word translated as “face” is not the normal one for “face,” but it refers more specifically to the region of the nose, and is used for “face.”

Gen 3:20

**“Eve.”** The Hebrew word translated as “Eve” is related to the word “life,” and in the Septuagint, the Greek word is *zōē*, “life.”

Gen 3:21

**“Yahweh God made tunics of skin for Adam and for his wife.”** God had told Adam that when he ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he would die (Gen. 2:16-17). Adam and Eve did not die the day they ate from the tree, but something did die; animals. The animals were most likely sheep or lambs—we will assume that for the purpose of this commentary—and God used their coats to clothe Adam and Eve. Everything in the Garden of Eden ate plants at that time (Gen. 1:29-30), so no animal was being killed for its meat (humans did not eat meat until after Noah’s Flood; Gen. 9:2-3). The sacrifice of the animals here in Genesis 3:21 was likely twofold: to provide Adam and Eve with proper coverings and also to make a substitutionary sacrifice that would atone for their sin before God, just as the later Levitical sacrifices atoned for sin (Lev. 1:4; 4:31, 35).

From what the Bible tells us about animal sacrifice as a covering for sin, and from knowing that Jesus, the “lamb of God,” died for our sin, it seems logical to conclude that God postponed the death of Adam and Eve and sacrificed an animal in their place to atone for their sin. Had Adam and Eve died the day they sinned, then God’s plan for a human race would have come to an end, so it makes sense that God would have planned for a way to save the human race and point to the Redeemer of the human race both at the same time, which an animal sacrifice did. The animal sacrifices that temporarily covered sin ultimately pointed to God’s great act of mercy in commuting the death sentence and granting everlasting life to everyone who accepted the death of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, in place of their own death.

More evidence that at least part of the reason God killed the sheep was as a sacrifice to atone for sin is that the godly practice of sacrifice had to start somewhere, and the most likely place would be God’s example in the Garden of Eden. We see by Genesis 4:4 that Abel brought a sacrifice to God from his flock, but what kind of sacrifice could an animal be at a time when people did not eat meat? It almost certainly would have been some kind of burnt offering, which would have been burnt on the altar (cf. the burnt offering; Lev. 1:5-9). It is hard to imagine that the practice of godly sacrifice could start any other way than God establishing the practice Himself. After all, it would not seem logical that a sinful person could be made right in the eyes of God by killing an innocent animal. It is not logical that someone would think, “I have sinned, but I can become right in God’s eyes by killing an animal.” How could the death of an innocent animal atone for the sins of a human being? The idea of animal sacrifice to atone for human sin had to start with God. God would have known His long-term plan and that He would redeem humankind from sin by the death of a sinless human being. Thus, God would have seen the value of setting forth an example of how the death of one (an animal or sinless person) could atone for the sin of another person; and God made that example concrete by setting forth the practice of animal sacrifice. But no human would have known God’s plan of redemption, and no human would have thought that the death of an animal would atone for human sin.

Given that the idea of sacrificing an animal to atone for human sin had to start with God, it is likely, but unstated, that after God sacrificed animals for Adam and Eve, that they themselves then presented offerings and sacrifices to God, and that is where Cain and Abel would have learned about it. It is unlikely that God started the idea of a proper sacrifice with Cain and Abel, or that God had somehow personally or through an angel taught them about sacrifice and the proper way to do it. The idea for a sacrifice that would atone for human sin via the death of a sinless Savior was already in the mind of God before Cain and Abel were born (Gen. 3:15; 1 Pet. 1:18-20; Rev. 13:8), and He started the idea when Adam and Eve sinned and they would have passed the idea down to their children, which would include Noah. The fact that Noah practiced animal sacrifice (Gen. 8:20) explains why almost every ancient culture practiced animal sacrifice, although as time passed the practice became quite perverted in many cultures.

It needs to be pointed out that the Hebrew can be understood to say, “God made tunics for the skin of Adam and for his wife,” and if this was the understanding of the text then what the tunics were made from is unspecified. This is a more difficult translation and is not as likely as the common understanding.

[For more on the death of the animals atoning for the sin of Adam and Eve, see commentary on Gen. 2:17, “in the day.”]

Gen 3:22

**“has become like one of us.”** God is speaking to His divine council of spirit beings, pointing out that Adam, like them, now has full knowledge of good and evil. The council would have become very aware of evil when the Devil sinned and rebelled.

[For more information on God’s divine council, see commentary on Gen. 1:26.]

**“knowing.”** The Hebrew word translated “know” is the common Hebrew word for “know,” *yada* (#03045 ידע). It means to know something intellectually and it is also used of knowing something experientially, and it is also used idiomatically. The context determines the meaning for any given occurrence.

Here in Genesis 3:22, “knowing” does not refer to intellectual knowledge, that is, mentally comprehending what good and evil are. Adam and Eve intellectually knew the difference between good and evil when they were created, because they knew it was wrong (and thus “evil”) to eat from the tree that God had commanded them not to eat from. So before they sinned they “intellectually knew” good from evil, but now that they sinned they both intellectually knew and experientially knew good from evil.

Genesis 3:22 also lets us know that someone can experientially know good from evil by experiencing it through the words and actions of someone else. Before they sinned, Adam and Eve were innocent. They had never experienced evil in any form. But how could God say to His divine council that the humans had now “become like one of us, knowing good and evil”? How could God and His top angels experience evil? They had experienced it in the Devil and the angels that rebelled against God (cf. Isa. 14:12-16; Ezek. 28:12-19).

Besides intellectual and experiential knowledge, “know” is often used idiomatically. For example, it can mean “to care about,” “to act lovingly toward.” Thus, Psalm 144:3 (YLT 1862/87/98) says, “what is man that Thou knowest him,” while the NIV(2011) translates that in a way that recognizes the idiom: “what are human beings that you care for them?” Similarly, Proverbs 12:10 (YLT) says, “The righteous man knoweth the life of his beast,” while the NIV(2011) has, “The righteous care for the needs of their animals.” When a word like “know” is used with a more expansive meaning than just its dictionary definition, scholars sometimes say it has a “pregnant sense.”

The word “know” is also used idiomatically for sexual intercourse. For a man to have sexual intercourse with a woman was to “know” her experientially, and often deeply intellectually as well (see commentary on Matt. 1:25). Many words in the Bible are occasionally used with an idiomatic or pregnant sense, for example, “remember,” “look” and “watch” (see commentary on Luke 23:42).

**“knowing good and evil.”** The fact that humans have an inherent knowledge of good and evil is very important in understanding the responsibility that humans have toward God. God holds people responsible for finding Him and then showing love and honor to Him by serving Him.

The knowledge of good and evil can move from the inherent to the intellectual via some very basic things: for example, we know that it hurts if people steal from us so we know not to steal from others. We know that it hurts when people lie about us, so we know not to lie to others. The basic understanding of good and evil is why law codes from all ages and all cultures have a deep similarity—although it happens that people and leaders can become so hard and selfish that their conscience becomes cauterized and they follow a path of hurt and pain (1 Tim. 4:2). The inherent knowledge of good and evil is why even children know quickly if a person is good and kind or selfish and hurtful. The inherent and internal basic knowledge of good and evil is why God says that people can do “by nature” the things in the Law that He gave from heaven: “indeed when Gentiles who do not have *the* law do by nature the things of the law, these, not having *the* law, are a law to themselves” (Rom. 2:14).

As a person is honest about life and follows their natural knowing of good and evil, they will become more aware of the world around them, how small and weak they are, and how big the world and universe are around them, and there is an instinctive knowing that a power bigger than themselves created the world. God says this plainly in Romans 1:20: “For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes—his eternal power and divine nature—are clearly seen, being understood through the things *he has* made, so that they are without excuse.” The fact that people have a natural, internal knowledge of good and evil, and a natural knowledge that there is a Creator is why God can righteously judge every human on the Day of Judgment. People instinctively know there is a power that is not human and that is bigger and wiser than themselves. That is why throughout the ages people have defied or ignored the direction of other humans but sought direction and guidance from a star, stone, stick, statue, crystal, or otherworldly apparition. Even atheistic cultures that supposedly deny God have hundreds of different superstitions in which invisible forces somehow affect what happens in life, so although they deny God intellectually, their actions testify that they bow to “invisible forces” that influence the world.

So although many proud and intellectual people deny it, human beings instinctively know good from evil at a basic level, and also know there is a creator. From that basic understanding, God expects people to use the wisdom He gave them and grow in their understanding and knowledge of Him. God said, “Wisdom is the principal thing, *so* get Wisdom” (Prov. 4:7), and He expects us to follow His direction and get wisdom. As we do, Wisdom says, “I will die.” Honest Curiosity asks, “What will happen when I die?” Then Logic suggests, “The Creator who created me in the first place likely has a plan for me after I die—another life. Otherwise, what was the point of my life in the first place?” At that point, often in many seemingly unlikely and impossible ways, the words of Jesus Christ come true: “Keep asking, and it will be given to you; keep seeking, and you will find; keep knocking, and it will be opened to you! For everyone who keeps asking receives, and the one who keeps seeking finds, and to the one who keeps knocking it will be opened” (Matt. 7:7-8). God is powerful, imaginative, creative, and ingenious, and if a person truly and honestly seeks answers and seeks their Creator, and so keeps asking, keeps seeking, and keeps knocking, then the God of Truth will find them, and they will gain everlasting life.

**“so that he does not reach out his hand and also take of the tree of life.”** Adam and Eve now had a fallen nature, so God did not want them to eat of the tree of life. In the phrase “also take of the tree of life,” the “also” is important because Adam and Eve had just eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, so God did not want them to “also” eat of the tree of life. The same root word translated “reach out” here is translated as “sent out” in the next verse, Genesis 3:23.

**“and eat, and live forever….”** God stops in mid-sentence, which is referred to as the figure of speech aposiopesis. The sentence and the thought are never completed. The consequences of living forever in a fallen state are too horrific to try to express.

[For more on aposiopesis, see commentary on Luke 19:42.]

Gen 3:23

**“sent him out.”** The verb is intensive, and in this form, the verb—given the context—shows that Adam and Eve did not leave on their own. God made them leave. For a similar use in context, see Numbers 5:3-5, where lepers were “sent out” of the camp of Israel. The lepers did not have a choice, they were forced to leave. Note that in Genesis 3:24, God “drove out” Adam and Eve from the garden.

Gen 3:24

**“stationed.”** The Hebrew word is more literally, “caused to dwell.” The cherubim were not just guarding the garden for a few hours or even a few days. They were “caused to dwell there” as long as there was a need. We do not know how long that was. Eventually, the garden likely became eaten by animals and overgrown with thistle plants.

**“cherubim.”** The Hebrew word “cherubim” is plural. There was not just one “cherub” guarding the garden, but at least two.

At this point in the biblical narrative, we know almost nothing about cherubim other than that God uses them as powerful guards. We learn more as we read the Scripture. For example, we learn they have wings in Exodus and also in Kings and Chronicles where they are associated with the ark of the covenant, no doubt at least in part to represent God’s guarding it (cf. Exod. 25:20; 37:9; 1 Kings 6:27; 2 Chron. 3:11, 13). However, it is not until Ezekiel 1 and 10 that we have a more complete description. They are said to be living creatures, they have four faces on their heads and four wings each, and arms and hands like human hands under their wings. They would then grasp the flaming sword mentioned in Genesis with their hands. Their powerful fast bodies, faces that looked in every direction, and ability to carry weapons made them formidable beings indeed.

**“with the flaming sword.”** The Hebrew reads “and a flame of the sword,” but it is clear that the cherubim are holding and wielding the swords and the swords were what we would refer to as “flaming swords,” hence the translation in the REV.

**Genesis Chapter 4**

Gen 4:1

**“knew.”** The word “know” is the common idiomatic word used for sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse gives the most intimate and personal “knowledge” of the other, so “know” was used throughout the biblical world as an idiom for sexual intercourse (cf. Gen. 4:1, 17, 25; 24:16; Matt. 1:25), which even included rape (Gen. 19:5; Judg. 19:25). Other idioms for sexual intercourse are, “go into” (2 Sam. 3:7), and “go near; approach” (Exod. 19:15 ESV), “uncover the nakedness” (Lev. 18:12); and sometimes “see the nakedness” (Lev. 20:17).

[For more on “know,” see commentary on Matt. 1:25.]

**“I have gotten a man.”** The Hebrew word translated “gotten” is *qanah* (#07069 קָנָה), and it has a very large semantic range. Many of these occur in the different English versions, thus, “I have gotten” (KJV); “I have acquired” (CJB, NJB); “I have obtained” (GNV); “I have produced” (NAB); “I have created” (NET); “I have brought forth” (NIV); and “I have gained” (TNK). It is impossible to determine exactly what Eve thought from the Hebrew text, but it is noteworthy that she understood that God had a part in her being able to give birth. It is also worth noting that she did not mention Adam’s role, although it seems certain that she knew it.

Gen 4:2

**“shepherd of flocks.”** The Hebrew word for “flocks” here is *tson* (#06629 צֹאן also spelled צְאוֹן; Ps. 144:13). The Hebrew is a collective singular, “flock,” and can be a flock of sheep or of goats or a mixed flock of sheep and goats, which is the most likely here. This is not the word for “sheep,” although *tson* is often used for sheep in the Bible. The context determines the meaning of the word.

Gen 4:3

**“And at the end of *the appointed* days.”** The Hebrew is literally, “and it happened at the end of days.” The NET text note correctly states, “The clause indicates the passing of a set period of time leading up to offering sacrifices.” E. W. Bullinger writes: “The time as well as place and offering probably appointed.”[[22]](#footnote-21240) The text does not specifically say this, but there clearly seems to have been a set time and place that a person would bring offerings to God, because both Cain and Abel “brought” offerings to Yahweh.

Also, however, the use of “days,” plural, in the Hebrew text usually refers to a period of time. Thus, it is likely that this was not the first time that Cain and Abel had offered sacrifices, and they had likely been doing it for a while. This may explain Cain’s defiant and irreligious attitude and action; he had grown tired of doing things “God’s way.” Thus, he was like the priests who became weary of the sacrifices they had to make (Mal. 1:6-13).

Cain and Abel would have learned the when, where, and how of sacrifices from Adam and Eve, and would have participated in making them as they grew up. Now fully grown, they are responsible for their own sacrifices and spiritual well-being. It is suggested by some scholars that sacrifices arose spontaneously from people’s thanksgiving to their gods, but that seems highly unlikely.

**“Cain brought an offering to Yahweh from the fruit of the ground.”** The “fruit” of the ground is the “produce” of the ground; it is not necessarily literally “fruit.”

It is sometimes taught that the reason that Abel’s offering was accepted and Cain’s was not was that Abel brought a blood offering while Cain brought grain. But that is not the reason Cain’s offering was not accepted. It is logical that an important part of the offerings made to God was the grain offering because grain, not meat, was the staple food of the biblical world. The Law of Moses makes it clear that if you grow grain, an offering of grain was acceptable (Lev. 2:1). Also, a tithe of your grain was accepted (Deut. 12:7; 14:23). Furthermore, often a grain offering was offered with the sacrifice (cf. Lev. 9:3-4, 17; 14:20; Num. 6:17). Specifics about the grain offering are given in Leviticus 2:1-16, 6:14-23, and 7:9-10. What is clear from the context is the heart of the offerer, not what the offerer brought. Abel brought the best from his flock, while Cain only brought “from” his produce, not the best of his produce.

Gen 4:4

**“of their fat portions.”** The reading in the REV seems to be the most likely meaning of the Hebrew text, given that it is supported by the sacrifices that were commanded by the Law of Moses. But the Hebrew could also be understood as reading the “firstborn” and the “best” of the flock.

The NET text note reads, “Two prepositional phrases are used to qualify the kind of sacrifice that Abel brought: ‘from the firstborn’ and ‘from the fattest of them.’ These also could be interpreted as a hendiadys: ‘from the fattest of the firstborn of the flock.’ Another option is to understand the second prepositional phrase as referring to the fat portions of the sacrificial sheep. In this case, one may translate, ‘some of the firstborn of his flock, even some of their fat portions’….”

The English versions read both ways. For example, the NET reads, “But Abel brought some of the firstborn of his flock—even the fattest of them. In contrast, the CSB reads, “And Abel also presented an offering—some of the firstborn of his flock and their fat portions.” Similarly, the NASB2020 reads, “Abel, on his part also brought *an offering,* from the firstborn of his flock and from their fat portions.”

Although it seems likely that the offering Abel brought would have been similar to what God required in the Mosaic Law, there is no way to prove from the text exactly how Abel offered his sacrifice here in Genesis 4:4.

**“Yahweh had regard for Abel and his offering.”** Many commentators think that the way Cain and Abel knew that Abel’s offering was acceptable was that it was consumed by fire from Yahweh (e.g., Lev. 9:24; Judg. 6:21; 1 Kings 18:38; 2 Chron. 7:1).

Gen 4:5

**“and the *expression on* his face fell.”** Cain was not just angry, he was upset in many different ways. The literal Hebrew is, “Why has your face fallen,” and it is an idiom for being downcast, dejected. We might say, “Why are you so downcast?”

Gen 4:6

**“face fallen.”** The literal Hebrew is, “Why has your face fallen,” and it is an idiom for being downcast, dejected. We might say, “Why are you so downcast?”

Gen 4:7

**“good...good.”** The Hebrew word is *yatab* (#03190 יָטַב), and it means to be good, to do well, to be pleasing, to make glad.[[23]](#footnote-12742) There is a profound but unstated truth here in Genesis 4:7, and that truth is that God is the creator of the heavens and the earth, and humankind, and He makes the rules. It is God who defines and determines what is “right” or “good” and what is “bad” or “evil.” Arrogantly, humans and human society often act like they can set the rules of life; that they can determine what is good and what is bad. But humans are fallen creatures in a fallen world and are not righteous like God, but are basically selfish, egotistical, mean-spirited, and ungodly. History has proved this over and over. Every generation sees the outworking of the evil in humankind in the fact that every generation faces war, crime, and people mistreating other people.

Furthermore, and importantly, although humans can often exercise somewhat effective control over other humans, they cannot control the earth or the spiritual battle that rages behind the scenes between godly forces, such as God and angels, and evil forces, such as the Devil and demons. It is demonic forces that cause natural disasters, famines, floods, plagues, and such evils. Only God’s blessing can mitigate those disasters, and the Bible shows us over and over that His blessing comes when people are obedient to Him (cf. commentary on Lev. 18:25).

Also, in the final analysis, a person’s life here on earth is short, but what is coming in the future is everlasting. Coming in the future is Judgment Day, when each person will stand before the God who created them and be judged either as righteous or unrighteous according to His standards, not the standards of any human society. The righteous will be granted everlasting life, while the unrighteous will be thrown into the Lake of Fire and suffer everlasting destruction. So here in Genesis 4:7 is a simple and profound statement of truth: if a person does “well” according to God’s rules, they will be accepted. If a person does not do well, they will fall prey to sin, and the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23), so they will be burned up in the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:11-15). God gives people the choice to do good or evil—it is up to the person (cf. Deut. 30:19). Given the choices before us, the decision should be easy: obey God; it is profitable in this life and the next.

[For information on how to get saved, see commentary on Rom. 10:9. For more on the destiny of the unsaved, which is annihilation in the Lake of Fire, see Appendix 4: “Annihilation in the Lake of Fire.” For more on the spiritual battle raging between Good and Evil, see commentary on Luke 4:6.]

**“will you not be accepted.”** The Hebrew text is idiomatic and basically says: “will it not be lifted up?” The idiom refers to one person coming to a superior with their face looking down towards the ground out of shame or respect. At that point, the superior would lift up the face of the person so that they were looking eye-to-eye. The lifting up of the face was a sign that the superior had accepted the person. Cain’s face fell when God rejected his offering (Gen. 4:5), but if he did God’s will his face would be lifted up—God would accept him. But the idiom is not easily understood in English, so many versions, including Young’s Literal Translation, put the meaning of the idiom in their translation instead of a literal translation, as does the REV.

**“accepted.”** The Hebrew words can be used for forgiveness.

**“sin crouches at the door.”** The Hebrew word “sin,” usually a feminine noun, is constructed with the masculine participle “crouches” here. Thus, sin is personified as a real thing, an animal or demon of the male gender, and may in this case even be a reference to the masculine noun, “serpent,” which occurs in Genesis 3. That sin is some kind of crouching creature, waiting to spring on its victim, is well portrayed by Everett Fox. He translates verse 7, “If you intend good, bear-it-aloft, but if you do not intend good, at the entrance is sin, a crouching demon, toward you his lust—but you can rule over him.”[[24]](#footnote-28141)

The NIV Study Bible text note on Genesis 4:7 says, “The Hebrew word for ‘crouching’ is the same as an ancient Babylonian word referring to an evil demon crouching at the door of a building to threaten the people inside.” Although the Devil and demons are always on the alert to be able to afflict people who turn away from God and godliness, there is an important truth in the Sin-Demon being at the door. Godly people can cleanse their houses of demonic materials and faithfully pray for the holiness and protection of their house, and that can keep demons from being able to enter, but demons may sometimes “wait at the door,” hanging around and waiting to find ways to afflict the inhabitants. God warned Cain about his sin and what could happen if he did not repent, but Cain ignored God’s warning and turned to the Devil for support and became “of that wicked one” (1 John 3:12). Cain committed the unforgivable sin, which is why he could not be forgiven, and he knew it (Gen. 4:13). When a concept like sin is portrayed as an animal, that is the figure of speech zoomorphism.

[For more on zoomorphism and personification, see commentary on Prov. 1:20. For more on the unforgivable sin, see commentary on Matt. 12:31.]

**“Its desire is for you.”** See commentary on Genesis 3:16.

Gen 4:8

**“Nevertheless, Cain said.”** The “nevertheless” is important because it connects Genesis 4:7 with Genesis 4:8. In Genesis 4:7 God told Cain that if he did good, then He would accept Cain, but if he did evil, sin was right at the door waiting to capture him. In spite of that advice, Cain acted purposely and did evil by murdering his brother Abel. The Bible does not let us know how much time passed between Genesis 4:7 and 4:8; it could have been a little or a lot.

**“*Let’s go out into the field*.”** The phrase, “Let’s go out into the field” was dropped out of the Hebrew text by copyists, and does not appear in many versions. It has been properly restored in many modern versions from the Septuagint and Aramaic (cf. BBE, CEB, HCSB, NAB, NET, NIV, NJB, NLT, NRSV, RSV). There is a good chance that in his parable about the good and bad seed (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43), Jesus took the illustration that “the field is the world” (Matt. 13:38) from the fact that Cain murdered Abel in the field.

**“Cain rose up against Abel his brother.”** Cain, the first son of Adam and Eve, was the first person to commit the unforgivable sin (Matt. 12:31-32) and become a child of the Devil. Cain became a child of the Devil by committing blasphemy against God in the time between Genesis 4:7 and 4:8. In Genesis 4:2-6, Cain had not given his best to God, and as a result, his sacrifice was not accepted. However, in Genesis 4:7, God told Cain that he could be accepted if he did “well,” i.e., did what God and wisdom directed. God also warned Cain that sin was close by, ready to pounce if given an opportunity. By portraying sin as a creature ready to pounce on Cain, God did His best to warn Cain, and us, of the Enemy that is always present and trying to turn us away from Him.

As late as Genesis 4:7, Cain could have repented and come back to God, but he did not. Instead of recognizing his sin and humbling himself to God, he arrogantly turned to the Devil as his god. After Genesis 4:7 God never again told Cain that there was a door of forgiveness and acceptance available to him. The New Testament lets us know that Cain became a child of the Devil: “Not as Cain, *who* was **of that wicked one**, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother’s righteous” (1 John 3:12 KJV). Thus, Cain was a child of the Devil when he murdered Abel, and murder is one of the things children of the Devil do to people who oppose them. The High Priest and his henchmen were children of the Devil and they wanted to murder Jesus Christ (John 8:37, 44).

Cain premeditated his murder of Abel, which is why he invited Abel into the field to get him away from the protection of the family (Gen. 4:8). Then, after murdering Abel, Cain lied to God about it and said he did not know where Abel was (Gen. 4:9), and lying is another one of the Devil’s primary traits; in fact, the word “Devil” means “slanderer,” and the Devil is the “father of lies” (John 8:44).

Cain was the first child of the Devil and the first person to commit what we now refer to as the “unforgivable sin.” Perhaps it was because he understood perfectly that he turned away from the true God and turned to the Devil to be his god that he knew that his sin could not be forgiven (Gen. 4:13).

[For more on the unforgivable sin, see commentaries on Gen. 4:9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15; and Matt. 12:31.]

“**and killed him.”** This is the first human death in the Bible, and it is worth noting that it is not a death from natural causes.

Gen 4:9

**“I do not know.”** Cain is now a bold-faced liar and is even blind to the fact that God can see right through his lie. This kind of blindness, and lying and murder, are characteristics of the Devil and his children (see commentary on Gen. 4:8). No wonder Jesus said that the children of the Devil were not really even able to say anything good (Matt. 12:34).

**“Am I my brother’s keeper?”** Children of the Devil prey on others and feel absolutely no responsibility toward them. The hate and indifference of the Devil and his children toward other people is completely in contrast to the love that God and his children have for others. Children of the Devil are notoriously interested in themselves rather than others. This explains why there is no biblical record of the religious leaders, some of whom were children of the Devil, rejoicing when Jesus healed or delivered someone. They invariably found some reason to disparage what he had done, even when he made the blind to see or raised the dead. There is no love for mankind among the children of the Devil, and Cain was one of them.

Gen 4:10

**“your brother’s blood.”** This verse reveals the horror of the sin of murder. Today there is so much bloodshed in movies, TV, video games, and day-to-day life that our culture has become insensitive to the terrible sin of murder. We must make no mistake: human life is priceless, and murder is a grave sin in the eyes of God, and it pollutes the land spiritually (Num. 35:33; Ps. 106:38).

Abel’s blood is personified here and is said to be calling out to God. In Genesis 4:10, the word “blood” is in the plural in the Hebrew text, which reads, “bloods.” This plural is the “plural of emphasis” to show the great seriousness of the crime of murder. There are quite a few times in the Hebrew text a noun is pluralized for emphasis.

[For more on the figure of speech personification, see commentary on Prov. 1:20.]

Gen 4:11

**“now you are cursed.”** People who make the Devil their god and become children of the Devil are cursed just as the Devil himself is. Genesis 4:11-12 reveals some of the terrible consequences that those who choose to become children of the Devil suffer in this life. For one thing, Cain and subsequently all children of the Devil, are cursed when it comes to the ground. This is explained in Genesis 4:12: the ground will not produce good crops for them. We see this truth played out in the life of Cain because he started out as a tiller of the soil (Gen. 4:2), but after becoming a child of the Devil the soil would no longer produce abundantly for him, which is why he built a city (Gen. 4:17). Godly men can live off the soil, but children of the Devil have to live off the production of others. It is no coincidence that Cain was the first city builder. Nimrod, a mighty hunter against God and whose very name means “Rebel,” was the second city builder (Gen. 10:9-12). Big cities have always been known for being centers of human depravity.

Another thing revealed in Genesis 4:12 about the children of the Devil is that they cannot be “at home” on the earth because they are by nature unsatisfied. They wander, sometimes from place to place, or from job to job, or from activity to activity, or from what they have to wanting more and more. Sadly, they also usually wander from victim to victim as they prey on others. Proverbs 4:14-16 says that the wicked cannot even sleep unless they are doing evil and hurting others.

**“the ground that opened its mouth.”** The ground here is personified.

[For more on the figure of speech personification, see commentary on Prov. 1:20.]

Gen 4:12

**“give its strength.”** The strength of the ground is the crops it produces, and they in turn give us strength.

**“a restless wanderer.”** The Hebrew text uses two synonyms.

Gen 4:13

**“My sin is too great to be forgiven.”** When the context and scope of Scripture are considered, this verse is best understood as, “My sin is too great to be forgiven,” rather than “My sin is greater than I can bear.” Cain knew he had committed a sin that could not be forgiven, and he did end up having to bear his sin, even though it was very great. The Hebrew word translated “forgiven” in the REV is *nasa* (#05375 נָשָׂא), and it can mean “to bear, carry,” “to lift up, be exalted,” or “to carry away, take away, forgive.” In Genesis 4:13 it is best translated as “forgiven,” even though it can be translated as “bear.” E. W. Bullinger in the text note[[25]](#footnote-12274) translates this phrase as a question (“Is my iniquity too great to be forgiven?”), but there is no contextual reason to translate the verse as a question, and besides that, Cain never asked for forgiveness; he tried to hide his sin and say he did not know where Abel was. Furthermore, at no further point in the text does Cain seem to want forgiveness or to have a close relationship with God. George Lamsa translates the phrase as, “My transgression is too great to be forgiven,”[[26]](#footnote-16174) and that seems to catch the primary meaning of the text.

The Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament produced about 250 BC, renders the phrase “My crime is too great for me to be forgiven.”[[27]](#footnote-10294) Also, the original translators of the 1611 King James Version put “forgiven” as a marginal reading in their Bible, which they did when they were not sure how to accurately translate a text. Although the actual 1611 KJV read (spelling as in 1611): “My punishment is greater, then I can beare,” the marginal note read (spelling as in 1611), “Or, my iniquite is greater, then that it may be forgiven.” The Thomas Nelson 1611 Bible[[28]](#footnote-28966) is a word-for-word reprint of the first edition of the Authorized Version, and in 1611, “then” had the meanings of both “then” and “than,” and the context revealed which sense it had. As the English language developed over the centuries and the word “than” came into common use, revisors went through and corrected the KJV so that it was easier to understand.

That Cain clearly stated he could not be forgiven is further supported by what he continued to say—four more statements of fact showing that he understood what he had done and its consequences, as we see in Genesis 4:14 (see commentary on Gen. 4:14).

It is worth noting that in Hebrew, the word for “sin” can also be understood to refer to the punishment for sin and thus in some contexts “punishment” is an appropriate translation. Nahum Sarna writes: “Hebrew *‘avon* means both sin and its penalty because in the biblical world view the two are inseparable, the latter inhering in the former. For this reason, the text contains an ambiguity.”[[29]](#footnote-21995) So the primary meaning of the phrase from the context and scope of Scripture is “My sin is too great to be forgiven.” Another lesser meaning of the text seems to be “My punishment is greater than I can bear,” reflecting Cain’s feelings that his punishment is severe and unavoidable.

In choosing the Devil and his ways over God and His ways, Cain was the first child of the Devil and the first person to commit what is sometimes referred to as the “unforgivable sin.” Perhaps it was because he understood perfectly that he turned away from the true God and turned to the Devil to be his god that he knew that his sin could not be forgiven.

[For more on the unforgivable sin, see commentaries on Gen. 4:9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15; and Matt. 12:31.]

Gen 4:14

**“Behold.”** Of Cain’s four statements in Genesis 4:14, the first three are true. First, he was indeed driven from the “face” of the ground. The word “face” represents intimacy, a closeness of relationship. Scripture had told us earlier that the soil would not produce well for him. Second, Cain was hidden from the “face” of God, i.e., from an intimate relationship with Him. Many of the Devil’s people have a lot of “head knowledge” about God, but they do not *really* know Him and they cannot be intimate with Him. This explains why there are religious leaders in Christ’s time as well as throughout the ages who seem to have theological knowledge but whose hearts are far from God. Third, Cain became a vagrant on the earth, someone who could not make a home on it and live a satisfied life.

Given the truth of the first three sentences, there is every reason to believe that Cain’s fourth statement, that he would be killed, would have also proven true if God had not intervened. But God did intervene, and Cain was able to go on living. Cain said, “whoever” found him would kill him. In these early generations after the Fall, mankind was not specifically commanded to police each other, as they were after the Flood, starting with Genesis 9:6. Nevertheless, people recognized good behavior and evil behavior, just as they do now. The sin of becoming a child of the Devil and having to prey on other people was so heinous that it would elicit a kind of vigilante action, by which good people would kill Cain due to the evil actions that would flow out of his evil nature. God intervened so that Cain and people like him would have a choice between good and evil, between God and the Devil, not that there is no justice for evil acts, but people are not executed simply for following the Devil (see commentary on Gen. 4:15).

**“face.”** The Hebrew is literally, “face,” and it means “surface.” Cain’s relationship with the ground has now changed. Cain was a worker of the soil, the ground, but now he has become evil and God will not bless the ground for him. Cain will no longer be able to farm as profitably as before. So Cain built a city so he could take advantage of the work of others.

**“and whoever finds me will kill me.”** The only “whoever” on the earth are the descendants of Adam and Eve, so it seems like Cain is saying that because he murdered Abel, any descendants of Adam and Eve would have the right to kill him as a matter of justice and blood vengeance.

Gen 4:15

**“Not so.”** These words were apparently omitted from the Hebrew text in a copyist’s error, but they are preserved in the Septuagint, Aramaic, and Vulgate versions. Some English versions, including the REV, include them (cf. Douay-Rheims, ESV, NIV, NLT, NRSV, Rotherham, RSV).

**“he will be avenged seven times.”** Although it is not clear exactly how this is to be.[[30]](#footnote-31575)

**“appointed a sign for Cain.”** The “mark” on Cain has been very misunderstood. Taking time to examine specific words in Genesis 4:15 will help us understand what it is saying. Cain would have been killed for his high treason against God, but God intervened so that he would not be killed, and said, “Not so” (the words “Not so,” in many English versions are taken from the sense of the Hebrew text—see the note in Bullinger’s *Companion Bible*—and from the Septuagint, Aramaic, and Vulgate versions.)

To ensure His statement would come to pass, God established a pledge or sign on Cain’s behalf so that he would be protected from the immediate wrath of God and people, a wrath Cain deeply deserved. To understand that God established a sign or pledge for Cain, we must carefully examine the Hebrew text of Genesis 4:15. Many versions read, that God “put a mark on Cain,” but that is not the proper translation. For one thing, the word “put,” should, in this context, be translated “appointed” or “established.” The Hebrew word is *sim* (#07760 שִׂים) and it occurs more than 550 times in the Old Testament. It has a large semantic range and is translated more than 30 different ways in the KJV. Its meanings include “appoint,” “ordain,” and “establish,” and in the context of the “mark” on Cain it is best understood as “appoint” or “establish.” God did not “put” a mark on Cain, but rather “established” a sign or pledge for him.

Also, the word usually translated “on,” should be “for,” meaning that God established a sign for Cain, i.e., on his behalf to keep him from being killed. The Hebrew prefix translated “on” in the phrase “mark on Cain” (NIV) is the Hebrew letter “L,” a prefix so flexible that the BDB[[31]](#footnote-11304) devotes eight and a half pages to defining it. Nevertheless, the first definition they give is, “to, towards, for,” and that is its meaning in this verse. It was a pledge or sign to or for Cain, i.e., to him and on his behalf.

Also, the word “mark” is not a physical mark. The Hebrew word is *oth* (#0226 אוֹת), and it means a sign, pledge, or token, not a physical mark like a tattoo or something. For example, the stars in the heavens are to be for “signs,” that is, they are to point to times and seasons (Gen. 1:14), they are not “marks” in heaven. If God had meant to say there was a physical mark on Cain, the Hebrew text would have employed the word *tav* as it does in Ezekiel 9:4 (“Go through the midst of the city…of Jerusalem, and set a mark (*tav*) on the foreheads of the men that sigh”) or perhaps *kethobeth*, an imprinted writing (Lev. 19:28). The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament done about 250 BC, supports the fact that this was not a “mark.” The Greek word is *sēmeion*, which means a sign, token, or indication by which something is known. So, for example, when Jesus turned the water into wine at Cana, it was referred to as a “sign” (John 2:11; sometimes mistranslated as “miracle”), because it pointed to him as Messiah. Had the translators of the Septuagint thought the “mark” on Cain was physical, they would have used *charagma*, a physical mark or impression, like the “mark” of the beast (Rev. 13:17).

No physical mark would keep Cain from being killed. Even if the mark were self-explanatory, like a sign saying, “Do not kill,” there would be no guarantee people would obey it. Furthermore, the “mark” would not only have to keep Cain from being killed by others, but it would have to protect all those who throughout the ages would follow “the way of Cain” (Jude 11) and become children of the Devil. Finally, if the “mark” on Cain were a physical mark it would be easy to tell those people who were children of the Devil—just look for the mark on them!

Properly rendered, the Hebrew text should be translated, “And the LORD established a pledge for Cain (i.e., on Cain’s behalf), or perhaps, “And the LORD appointed a sign for Cain,” (as per the English Revised Version). The Bible does not tell us exactly what the sign or pledge that God established is, but it kept Cain and others who committed the unforgivable sin from being killed by all who met them.

It is very important that we understand why God interceded for Cain. If Cain’s act of taking the Devil as his lord was worthy of death, why would God delay that judgment and justice? The answer is that God has given mankind genuine freedom of will, and He allows people to choose how and whom they worship, even if those choices are evil. God’s fairness allows people who choose not to worship Him to continue to live. If everyone who chose not to worship God was executed, then God would in essence be saying, “You have two choices: worship Me or die.” Then many who “chose” to worship God would be doing so out of fear of punishment instead of love for Him. God wants people to worship Him out of their love for Him, not because they are afraid that if they do not worship Him then they will suffer horrible consequences. God is love, and love is righteous and just, so He allows people to turn away from Him even if in doing so they support His archenemy. Of course, there will be a Day of Judgment when everyone will be rewarded or punished for what they have done, but the wicked are so arrogant that they are content to remain wicked, denying their wickedness, and/or denying the Judgment.

**“strike him down.”** The Hebrew word translated here as “strike…down” is *nakah* (#05221 נָכָה), and it means “to strike, to hit, to strike down (or “kill”).” The context determines whether it means simply to strike or to “strike down,” i.e., “kill.” Here in Genesis 4:25, it refers to killing.

Gen 4:16

**“Nod.”** This word is related to “wandering,” and could be symbolic. There is no other occurrence of this place in the Bible, so the place is unlocated except it is east of Eden. However, Eden is also unlocated so the direction “east” does not help.

Gen 4:17

**“knew.”** The word “know” is the common idiomatic word used for sexual intercourse. See commentary on Genesis 4:1.

**“Cain knew his wife.”** According to Genesis, Adam and Eve were the first two humans created, and Cain was the first son, so the question often arises, “Where did Cain’s wife come from?” The answer is that Adam and Eve had many children, and in those early years, and actually for many years after that, people married their siblings, their brothers and sisters, or married close relatives. The same thing happened after Noah’s Flood, and interfamily marriage still occurs today in some isolated family clans.

Genesis 5:4 says that Adam “became the father of sons and daughters,” and since those sons and daughters were the only people on earth in those early days, they married each other. The early chapters of Genesis spend a lot of time on genealogies and who gave birth to whom, and that in part explains where the people groups that populated the earth before the Flood, which we know little about, came from. The same emphasis on who gave birth to whom occurs again after the Flood when only Noah’s family was left on earth (Gen. 10:1-32; 11:10-30). Even Abraham, who lived more than 300 years after the Flood, married his half-sister. It was not until the Law of Moses was given to the Jews that God stated that people should not marry their close relatives, and the reason for that law was because people were in fact marrying their close relatives (Lev. 18:6; 20:17).

It is also important to note that when Genesis 4:17 says that Cain had a wife, there is no mention of the amount of time that had passed between Cain killing Abel and living in the land of Nod, and his taking a wife. In the days before the Flood people lived for hundreds of years, and so many years could have passed before Cain married. In fact, women have always married early in the biblical world, and given that fact, if Cain was 100 before he married, he could have married a woman that was five or more generations removed from Adam. That would have not been necessary, of course, Cain could have married a daughter of Adam and Eve that was closer to his age—the Bible just does not say.

A principle of correct Bible Interpretation is that if something was commonly done, or if logic and wisdom lead to a specific conclusion, then that conclusion is usually valid. For example, there are generally no references in the Bible to anyone going to the bathroom, but that did not mean they didn’t, it just means that it was so logical and necessary that there was no need to specifically mention it, and that same principle applies to a myriad of ordinary customs that were not written about.

Genesis is clear that Adam and Eve were the first two humans and they had sons and daughters who then married. In those early generations, they married their relatives for the simple reason that there was no one else to marry. Over 2,000 years after God created Adam and Eve, He commanded in the Mosaic Law not to marry a close relative. There is no need to speculate and invent all manner of unbiblical ideas about other races on earth at the time of Adam and Eve, which contradicts the clear and simple Genesis account. Cain married his sister or a close relative, as did everyone else in those early years after creation. This is so logical that it is not specifically mentioned, just as it is not mentioned for the grandchildren of Noah.

**“Enoch.”** There is an “Enoch” in Cain’s genealogy and in Seth’s genealogy. Also, there is a Lamech in both genealogies.

Gen 4:18

**“Irad fathered Mehujael.”** The word “fathered” is the same as the word “begot” or “begotten” in some English versions. The word just means to become the father of someone.

Gen 4:19

**“Adah...Zillah.”** The meanings of the names are not certain. Two possible meanings are “Dawn” and “Dusk,” but that seems less likely, and something like “Jewel” and “Song” (or Melody), which is more likely. It would be unusual for a person to marry two women whose names just happened to be “Dawn” and “Dusk” unless they were sisters, which does not seem to be the case here.[[32]](#footnote-21317)

Gen 4:20

**“father.”** In the biblical world and according to biblical custom, the word “father” had many meanings. Of course, it could refer to a man who was the literal father of a child. Also, because neither Hebrew nor Aramaic had a word for “grandfather” or “great-grandfather,” the word “father” was used of any ancestor. That is why the Bible speaks of “our father Abraham.” He is an ancestor.

The word “father” was also used of a person who was a father figure, mentor, or guide. Thus, Joseph said he had become a “father” to Pharaoh (Gen. 45:8). In the book of Judges, first Micah of Ephraim, and then people of the tribe of Dan, asked a Levite to be a “father” to them, that is, be their spiritual guide (Judg. 17:10; 18:19). The prophet Elisha referred to the elder prophet Elijah as his “father” (2 Kings 2:12), and the servants of the Syrian commander, Naaman, referred to him as “father” because he was a mentor and guide (2 Kings 5:13). The king of Israel referred to the prophet Elisha as his “father,” his spiritual mentor and guide (2 Kings 6:21). Job had been a wealthy man and said he had been a “father” to the poor (Job 29:16).

Closely aligned with the use of “father” as a guide and mentor, “father” was used of someone who headed something up, a leader. Thus, the leader of a caravan was referred to as its “father.” Also, if someone had a distinguishing characteristic, he was often referred to as the father of that characteristic. James Freeman points out that a man with a long beard might be called, “the father of a beard,” and he wrote, “Dr. Thompson was once called by the mischievous young Arabs, ‘the father of a saucepan,’ because they fancied that his black hat resembled that culinary utensil.”[[33]](#footnote-23620)

The word “father” was also used of someone who was the originator of something. In Genesis 4:20-21, Jabal is the “father” of those who live in tents and travel with their livestock, and Jubal is the “father” of those who play the harp and pipe. Satan is called “the father of lies” (John 8:44), while God is called “the Father of mercies” (2 Cor. 1:3). Jesus, who will start the Coming Age after the Battle of Armageddon, is called “the father of the coming age” in Isaiah 9:6 (which is almost always mistranslated as “Everlasting Father”).

[The word “son” also has many different uses. For more on the use of “son,” see commentary on Matthew 12:27.]

**“of those who dwell in tents and have livestock.”** It is interesting that things that greatly influence society come out of the genealogy of Cain but not out of the genealogy of Seth, the genealogy that led to Christ. Out of Cain’s line came shepherding and herding (Gen. 4:20), music from both stringed instruments and wind instruments (Gen. 4:21), and metalworking (Gen. 4:22). Yet Cain’s genealogy was totally wiped out in Noah’s Flood. Nevertheless, the lessons learned by Cain and his descendants were passed on to Noah and his family, and in that way survived the Flood.

Gen 4:21

**“His brother’s name.”** The implication is that Jubal was also Adah’s son.

**“harp and pipe.”** The words “harp” and “pipe” are a synecdoche for stringed instruments and wind instruments. Thus, the “harp” represents all stringed instruments, and the “pipe” represents all wind instruments.

Gen 4:25

**“knew.”** The word “know” is the common idiomatic word used for sexual intercourse. See commentary on Genesis 4:1.

**“Seth...appointed.”** In Hebrew, “Seth” and “appoint” come from the same root.

**“seed”** Here Eve’s “seed” leads to “the seed,” who is Christ (cf. Gal. 3:16, 19).

Gen 4:26

**“Then he began to call on the name of Yahweh.”** This sentence has generated much discussion and a number of possible meanings. It seems unlikely that the traditional translation, “Then men began to call on the name of the LORD,” is accurate because people had been calling on Yahweh since Adam and Eve (e.g., Gen. 4:1). Some scholars have proposed that people of this early time called upon “God” but not upon “Yahweh,” citing Exodus 3:13-15 and 6:3, but is much more likely that Adam and Eve, who knew God very intimately would have known his name and thus what the verses in Exodus refer to is God revealing Himself more fully than He had before.[[34]](#footnote-19514)

Because the Hebrew word *chalal* (#02490 חָלַל), which is translated as “began” in most versions, can also mean “pollute, profane,” some commentators understood the verse to have the meaning that it was in the time of Enosh the people began to “pollute” the name of Yahweh in various ways. Thus, E. W. Bullinger, in *The Companion Bible* text note on Genesis 4:26, says, “here, ‘began to call upon [their gods] the name of Jehovah,’ or ‘began to profanely call upon the name of the Lord.’” The translation of the Jewish scholar and rabbi Rashi is, “then it became common to call by the name of the Lord,” and Rashi comments that the Hebrew “is an expression of…profaneness: to name people and idols with the name of the Holy One.”[[35]](#footnote-20609) That translation makes sense here because it was long before the Flood that people began to build idols and worship them as if they were the true God. Kenneth Matthews writes, “The Jewish targums...rendered the Hebrew ‘began’ but also took it as the verb ‘pollute.’ Thus, the verse referred to the defilement of the name of Yahweh by the making of an idol and giving it the sacred name. Enosh then was viewed not as the paradigm of antediluvian godliness but the beginning of moral degradation.”[[36]](#footnote-24873)

A third and possible translation comes from the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate. Kenneth Matthews writes, “The LXX has…(‘This one [Enosh] hoped [i.e., ‘trusted’] to call upon the name of the Lord God’), and the Vulgate has (‘He [Enosh] began to invoke the name of the Lord’).” This translation is also possible and can be derived from the Hebrew text without much difficulty. For one thing, the word “men,” which is in many English versions, is not in the Hebrew text. Also, the verb translated “began” is singular, not plural, and also, strangely, it is a passive verb. Given the fact that the previous verses were all about Cain’s descendants, the fact that Adam and Eve’s grandson through Seth began to call upon the name of Yahweh makes some sense.

Of the above three readings, the second and third make the most sense, but which one was intended by the text is uncertain.

**Genesis Chapter 5**

Gen 5:1

**“record.”** The literal Hebrew is “scroll,” but this was not just one literal scroll, but was a record or a history that would have been kept on scrolls or tablets.

**“man.”** Here the word “man” refers to both men and women; humankind. The word “him” is singular.

Gen 5:2

**“Adam.”** In this context, the name “Adam” encompasses both men and women.

Gen 5:3

**“fathered.”** The KJV says “begat,” which just means “fathered.”

Gen 5:24

**“and he was no more.”** The literal Hebrew text is that Enoch “was not.” As we will see, Enoch was a prophet who pleased God and whom God moved from one location to another in order to save his life.

The situation with Enoch is debated, and many details of what happened and why are not in the Bible. The traditional Christian teaching about Enoch is that God took him to heaven, where he continues to live to this day. However, there are a number of problems with that belief. A major one is that if Enoch could go to heaven before Jesus Christ died to pay for his sins, then anyone could go to heaven before Christ paid for their sins, so then Christ did not need to die for people’s sins in order for them to be saved and live forever in heaven. But that goes against the entire teaching of Scripture. Jesus had to die to pay for people’s sins so they could have eternal life. Also, John 3:13 says “no one has gone up to heaven, but he who came down from heaven, the Son of Man.” So, if at the time of Christ, no one had yet gone up into heaven except Jesus, then Enoch had not gone up to heaven either. Still more evidence that Enoch died comes from the “heroes of the Faith” listed in Hebrews 11. Along with Abel (Heb. 11:4), Noah (Heb. 11:7), Abraham (Heb. 11:8), and Sarah (Heb. 11:11), Enoch is listed (Heb. 11:5), and then Hebrews 11:13 says, “All these people were still living by trust when they died.” So Hebrews testifies that Enoch, like the others in the list, died.

The biblical evidence is that Enoch did not go to heaven to be with God, but rather that Enoch died, and he likely lived 365 years, because Genesis 5:23 says, “All the days of Enoch were 365 years.” Throughout Genesis 5 there is the same wording about the number of years a person lived. For example, Genesis 5:5 says, “All the days that Adam lived were 930 years, and he died.” Then Genesis 5:8 says, “All the days of Seth were 912 years, and he died.” Then Genesis 5:11 says, “All the days of Enosh were 905 years, and he died.” Then Genesis 5:14 says, “And all the days of Kenan were 910 years, and he died,” and that same wording is used for Mahalalel (Gen. 5:17), Jared (Gen. 5:20), Methuselah (Gen. 5:27), and Lamech, the father of Noah, (Gen. 5:31). Similarly, Genesis 5:23 says, “And all the days of Enoch were 365 years,” so it would seem that the natural implication is that Enoch lived 365 years before he died. However, there is another possibility: Enoch could have lived 365 years and then God moved him to keep him from being killed, and then Enoch would have died years later without the Bible saying how many years he actually lived.

The Book of Hebrews adds a lot of information about Enoch that is not in the Old Testament. Hebrews 11:5 says, “By trust Enoch was moved so that he would not see death, and he could not be found, because God moved him, for before he was moved he obtained the testimony that he pleased God.” We know Enoch had an intimate relationship with God because Genesis says that Enoch “walked with God,” a phrase that indicates an intimate relationship. In fact, the Bible says that Enoch “walked with God” two times (Gen. 5:22 and 5:24).

So at some point in his life, God moved Enoch, as Hebrews 11:5 says. Enoch was a prophet (Jude 1:14), and it seems clear from what we know about the times Enoch lived in, which were very ungodly, that at some point God had to move Enoch from one place to another so Enoch would not “see death,” i.e., be killed. A number of scholars unwittingly acknowledge this when commenting on Genesis 5:24.

For example, Gordon Wenham writes: “‘and was not’: Enoch disappeared from the earthly scene. Sometimes the phrase is a poetic euphemism for death, e.g., Ps. 39:14 [13]; Ps. 103:16; Job 7:21; 8:22. But here it stands in contrast to the usual phrase “then he died,” which shows that Enoch did not experience a normal death. This is confirmed by the final remark, “because God took him,” a phrase used of Elijah’s translation to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:1, 5, 9, 10).”[[37]](#footnote-28522)

It is important to note that the wording that God took Enoch is also used of Elijah, because Elijah was also moved from one place to another (see commentary on 2 Kings 2:11), and so was Philip the evangelist (Acts 8:39-40). The point is that although Genesis 5:24 says Enoch was “no more” and “God took him,” that does not have to mean that Enoch died or that he went alive and bodily into heaven. It can simply mean that God moved Enoch from one place to another, which then makes Genesis 5:24 and Hebrews 11:5 and 11:13 fit together nicely.

Bruce Waltke writes about Enoch being taken and says: “**was no more because God took him away**. This describes a sudden and mysterious disappearance. Of all recorded Old Testament saints, only Enoch and Elijah are represented as not experiencing physical death (2 Kings 2:1-12; Heb. 11:5). The expression ‘took him’ (*lāqah*) differs radically from to take the life of someone, referring to an untimely death (cf. Jon. 4:3) or ‘to take from’ (*lqh min*), referring to depriving someone of life (cf. Ezek. 24:16). Schmidt rightly renders ‘took him’ in Gen. 5:24 and 2 Kings 2:3, 5 as ‘to rapture.’”[[38]](#footnote-12362) In this context, the word “rapture” refers to moving someone from one place to another, exactly what Enoch experienced according to Hebrews 11:5.

Kenneth Matthews writes about Genesis 5:24 and says: “… unlike the normative pattern, the phrase ‘and then he died’ is absent. His disappearance is simply but obscurely expressed: ‘he was not’ or ‘he did not exist’ (*’êninnû*). The explanation for Enoch’s disappearance is equally veiled by the text, ‘God took him away’ (v. 24). ‘Took’ (*lāqah*) is a common Hebrew term having a variety of meanings, the simplest being ‘to take, fetch.’ It may refer to death, where one’s life is ‘taken’ (1 Kings 19:10, 14), or the opposite, where one’s life is ‘snatched’ from death (Ps. 49:15[16]). …The writer to the Hebrews clarifies the meaning of ‘taken’ by adding ‘so that he did not experience death’ (Heb. 11:5).[[39]](#footnote-15142)

So when we put all the evidence together from both the Old and New Testaments, we see that Enoch was a prophet who walked with God, and like many prophets, his life was threatened by the evil people around him, so God moved him so that he would not be killed. The biblical evidence leans towards Enoch’s life being 365 years, but it is possible that he lived 365 years before God moved him and then an unspecified number of years after God moved him.

**“for God took him.”** Traditional Christianity teaches that Enoch was taken to heaven alive, but that cannot be the case. If Enoch could go to heaven before Christ paid for his sins then anyone could go to heaven without Christ’s death, and the death of Christ would have been unnecessary. The phrase can simply mean that God took Enoch from one place on earth to another, which is what Hebrews 11:5 says.

[For more on the dead being dead, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.”]

Gen 5:29

**“pain *and toil.*”** This is the same Hebrew as in Genesis 3:16 and 3:17. Jewish tradition says that Noah provided comfort by being the first one to invent the plow to work the soil or the first one to invent wine with its soothing effects. God said the ground was cursed in Genesis 3:17.

Gen 5:32

**“fathered​ Shem, Ham, and Japheth.”** Although Genesis 5:32 seems to say that all of Noah’s sons were born when he was 500 years old, only the oldest son, Japheth, was born at that time. This can be clearly seen by studying all the scriptures on the subject (see commentary on Gen. 10:21). Japheth is said to be the oldest brother in Genesis 10:21. Also, Ham is said to be the youngest son in Genesis 9:24, where the word “younger” is better translated as “youngest.” Shem is listed first in this list because of his spiritual priority in being the line to the Messiah. Ham is apparently listed second because of the relationship between the descendants of Ham and the descendants of Shem in the Bible. For example, the Egyptians and Canaanites were descendants of Ham, and they consistently interacted with the descendants of Shem.

The flood came when Noah was 600 (Gen. 7:11-12). Since Genesis 11:10 states that Shem was 100 years old two years after the flood, Shem could not have been born when Noah was 500, because then Shem would have been 102, not 100, two years after the flood. It was Japheth that was born when Noah was 500, then, the year of the Flood Japheth was 100 and Shem was 98, then Shem was 100 two years after the Flood (see commentary on Gen. 10:21).

**Genesis Chapter 6**

Gen 6:2

**“sons of God.”** The phrase “son of God” is a very specific phrase that refers to the beings that God has directly created, such as angels and cherubim. Here in Genesis 6, the Hebrew is *ben ha Elohim* (בְנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים), thus including the Hebrew definite article *ha*. However, the phrase occurs both with the Hebrew definite article *ha* (Gen. 6:2, 4; Job 1:6; 2:1) and without the definite article simply as *ben Elohim* (Job 38:7; בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים). It is also sometimes *ben el* (“son of God” using *El* instead of *Elohim* for God (Ps. 29:1; 89:6). It appears in the Aramaic in Daniel 3:25 as *bar Elohim* (the Aramaic *bar* and Hebrew *ben* both mean “son”). In the New Testament the equivalent phrase, “son of God,” is used of Adam who was a direct creation of God (Luke 3:38), of Jesus Christ who was “the Son of God,” and of Christians, who are “born again” into God’s family when God creates holy spirit in them, which makes them “new creations” (2 Cor. 5:17). Every time the phrase “son of God” appears in the text, it refers to a direct creation of God.

Genesis 6:2 is telling us in very straightforward terms that created beings of God, which we learn in this case (partly from Jude 1:6) are fallen angels (demons), took human women and by an act of genetic manipulation created a race of fallen people, the Nephilim. Although it seems from the vocabulary that the fallen angels took on a concrete form and had sexual intercourse with the women, they could not have had children by that means and produced the Nephilim; instead, the demons manipulated the genetics of the women to produce the fallen race. They had already successfully manipulated the genetics of many things in God’s creation, such as the plants that they changed so they would produce thorns. We learn from the Bible and from science that the egg of a female can be stimulated to produce offspring without being specifically fertilized by a male sperm.

Some critics say that these “sons of God” are not divine beings, and that the word “son” is also used of people who are in relation to God and who are not direct creations of God. It is true that the biblical and cultural use of the Hebrew word “son” is very broad, including natural children, disciples, and people who are dear to you. However, the specific phrase “son of God” is very different than simply the word “son,” and it only occurs eight times in the Old Testament, and all of them refer to spirit beings—direct creations of God.

We can also see that these “sons of God” are spirit beings by how they show up in the Bible. Here in Genesis 6:2 and 6:4, these “sons of God” took any of the daughters of men they chose. Fathers have always been protective of their daughters, and if these sons of God were humans, they could not have had any woman they chose. They could do so only because they were spirit beings. In Job 1:6 and 2:1, the “sons of God” come into the presence of God in heaven, and in Job 38:7, they were around when the earth was created. This shows they are spirit beings. Psalm 29:1 is a summons for the divine beings to exalt Yahweh. In Psalm 89:6, the “sons of God” are in heaven, in the sky. In Daniel 3:25, Nebuchadnezzar sees a divine being “like a son of God” (or perhaps to him, “a son of the gods”) walking in the fire. From the scriptural evidence, we conclude that the “sons of God” in Genesis 6:2 and 6:4 are divine beings, and from the context and scope of Scripture, we can see that the ones mentioned here in Genesis 6 are fallen angels.

[For more on the “sons of God” being spirit beings, see commentary on Gen. 6:4, “Nephilim.” For more on “fallen angels,” see commentary on Rev. 12:9.]

**“desirable.”** The context in Genesis 6 is fallen angels (who are called “sons of God”) wanting human women so they could produce a fallen race—the Nephilim. The Hebrew word we translate “desirable” is *tov* (#02896 טוֹב), which has a large semantic range. Generally, it refers to things that are “good,” “pleasant,” “beneficial,” “valuable,” “appropriate,” “right,” “happy,” etc. While it is true that *tov* is used in some contexts as “beautiful,” that is not its primary meaning here. The fallen angels did not come to the women because they were so beautiful they could not be resisted, but because the demons had an ulterior motive.

Although *tov* certainly may have overtones of “beautiful” or “attractive” here, its more appropriate contextual meaning is “desirable” [to bring about a specific end]; “beneficial,” or “good” [for the desired purpose]. We see this meaning a few chapters earlier in Genesis in the record of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Eve saw the fruit was “good (*tov*) for food,” that is, it was beneficial for her purpose. The fruit was also “pleasing to the eye,” or “attractive,” but that is the Hebrew word *ta’avah* (#08378 תַּאֲוָה), not *tov*.

Ancient mythologies have stories about gods seeing human women and coming down and seducing or raping them, and that, together with our natural romantic inclination, leads us to want to think that the “sons of God” (God’s created beings) saw that human females were beautiful and sexually attractive, so out of lust they came and took the ones they chose. However, the context and scope of Scripture, and also human history, militate against that interpretation.

It is doubtful that human women are attractive to angels and demons in the way that humans are attracted to each other. For one thing, there does not seem to be any way a spirit being can actually get some kind of what we know as sexual fulfillment by being with a human being. Furthermore, in the thousands of years since the last outbreak of Nephilim after Noah’s Flood, there have not been any more incidents of demons producing Nephilim by human women. This points to the fact that the demons were with the women only for the purpose of producing the Nephilim, not because they were so sexually attracted to them.

In the context, we see that the fallen angels had the ulterior motive of producing the “Nephilim,” or “Fallen ones,” a mutant race so evil that in a very short time, “every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” It would not have taken the Nephilim too long to destroy the genetically pure descendants of Adam and Eve and destroy any hope mankind had of producing the Savior, Jesus Christ, so God saved the human race by destroying the earth, including all the Nephilim, in the Flood. Noah’s Flood did not deter the Devil from his plan to prevent the Savior from coming, and so after the Flood, more demons produced more Nephilim, which is why Genesis 6:4 says, “and also after that,” i.e., after the Flood. But those Nephilim were killed off, and all the demons who produced the Nephilim were imprisoned in Tartarus, the Greek word that refers to a prison for the gods (2 Pet. 2:4; cf. 1 Pet. 3:18-20).

The Devil has continually tried to keep God’s Messiah from saving mankind and destroying him. He tried destroying the Christ-line and Israel many times; he tried having Jesus killed as a baby and stoned as an adult. The Nephilim were just one more plan the Devil tried, but it, too, failed.

Gen 6:3

**“man”** This is a collective singular referring to humankind. The collective singular takes the singular pronouns “he” and “his.”

Gen 6:4

**“Nephilim.”** “Nephilim” is a transliteration of the Hebrew word *nephilim*, which is the plural form of the word *nephiyl* (#05303 נְפִיל), from the Hebrew root word *naphal*, “to fall.” The word *nephilim* means “fallen ones,” and it is translated that way in Young’s Literal Version of the Bible. The Nephilim were a mutant humanoid race produced when fallen angels genetically manipulated human females. Because this race of mutant humans was a totally new species, the REV, as well as many other English versions, transliterate “Nephilim” directly into the English text rather than having a translation such as “fallen ones.” All humans are sinful and “fallen” in nature, but not all humans are demonically genetically mutated to be Nephilim.

There are a few English Bibles that translate *nephilim* as “giants,” and there are some lexicographers who accept that as the meaning of the Hebrew word, but the evidence is against it. However, the Septuagint uses the Greek word *gigantes*, “giants,” as the translation of the Hebrew word *nephilim*, and that is no doubt at least partly why some English versions, especially early ones like the Geneva Bible, King James, and Douay-Rheims, say “giants.” But it is also possible that the Septuagint translators used the word *gigantes* because the Bible says that at least some of the Nephilim were huge people, even giants.

It is worth noting that some scholars say that the Greek word *gigantes* should not be translated as “giants” in verses that refer to the Nephilim, because the Greek mythology, taken from Hesiod’s *Theogony*, depicts the races of giants—including the Hundred-handers, Titans, and Cyclopes—as the descendants of Uranus, and Gaia (the goddess personification of “Earth,” from *ge*, “earth” or “land”), and therefore *gigantes* should be rendered “earthborn.” Although that etymology of *gigantes* is likely not correct, it is worth noting that in Greek mythology various races of giants came from the gods, and biblically that would include the Nephilim.

The Nephilim were “Fallen Ones,” that is, “fallen” creatures made by demons, and they were made the same way the Devil and his demons made God’s wonderful plants into thorny plants and God’s wonderful animals into dangerous animals. The Devil has the ability—which we humans now have to some extent as well—to change the genetics of a plant or animal and mutate it into something different than its original state. When the Devil gained control over the earth after Adam and Eve sinned, one of the things he did was manipulate the genetics of things so that they became evil. This is not directly stated in the Bible, but the reason for that is at least twofold: the people on earth at that time were not knowledgeable about genetics and would not have understood the concepts, and also the conclusion can be deduced logically, and God expects us to think logically when reading the Bible. God would never have made His wonderful, “very good” Eden-world into the harsh and dangerous place it is today, and Adam did not have the ability to do it. Only the Devil had both the power and motivation to turn God’s paradise that He loved into a place of thorns, poisons, and danger. The Devil genetically altered God’s creation and then the genetically altered plants and animals reproduced after their kind so that the whole earth is now covered with these dangerous and poisonous plants and animals.

No one knows exactly what the Devil did to manipulate the genetics of the plants and animals, but it is clear that he did it. He did it to plants and animals, and he did it to human beings. So the Bible says that Satan’s demons, the “sons of God,” married human females and produced a race that the Bible calls the Nephilim. The Bible does not use the terminology or vocabulary that a modern geneticist would use to describe what the demons did to the human women so that they gave birth to the Nephilim. Instead, Genesis 6:2-4 uses simple terminology that the people of the time could understand: the “sons of God” (fallen angels) took the human females as wives, and “came into them,” (the standard biblical vocabulary for sexual intercourse), and the women “bore” children to them. But the “children” were not demons, nor were they “normal” humans—the way Adam had been created by God. They were a mutant human race: the “fallen ones.” They were completely fallen in their very nature, genetically engineered to be evil, and they were not capable of being godly or being saved. There is little doubt that the demons came into human form and had sex with the women. They still do that today. A demon that comes into concretion as a male and has sex with women is called an “incubus,” while a demon that comes into concretion as a woman and seduces a man is referred to as a “succubus.” Although many think that the existence of an incubus or succubus is just mythology, demons are real and that they come into human form is well documented, just as it is stated here in Genesis 6, and most of the time they do we know them as “ghosts.” But the key to understanding Genesis 6 is realizing that a human woman’s egg cannot be fertilized by a demon. A demon is an angel, and angels do not even marry (Matt. 22:30), and furthermore, God designed things to reproduce after their kind. So while a demon might have sex with a human woman, he could not impregnate her, but he could alter her genetics (or the genetics of a fertilized egg inside her) so that she gave birth to a genetically altered baby—a Nephilim.

God created mankind in His image. The Devil had the Nephilim made in his image: evil. He knew that the Messiah who was foretold to destroy him would be a human, so he tried to keep the Messiah from coming by producing the Nephilim. Then they could destroy all of the humans who had not been genetically altered and keep the Messiah from being born. Quite a few ancient sources say the Nephilim were the offspring of fallen angels and human females, including references in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, and the writings of Josephus. This position was also believed by early Church Fathers such as Tertullian and Lactantius, who was an advisor to Emperor Constantine. In fact, in his book, *The Genesis Record,* Henry Morris wrote: “Apparently the first Christian writers to suggest the Sethite interpretation [that the “sons of God” were humans] were Chrysostom and Augustine.”[[40]](#footnote-15400)

When we understand who the Nephilim were and where they came from, we can solve some of the perplexing questions many people have about God and the Bible. Two of those difficult questions are: “If God loved the world, why did He cause the Flood and kill everyone?” And, “If God is a loving God, why did He command the Israelites to totally destroy the inhabitants of the Promised Land, including the children?” (Deut. 7:1-6; 20:16-18). The answer is that God had to protect the human race from Satan’s race of “Fallen Ones” that were not genetically like God’s original humans. The problem was in the genetics of the Nephilim, so their “race” had to be killed off.

The Nephilim were well-positioned to destroy humans on earth. They were very wicked and at least some of them were very large and powerful. For example, Og, one of the Nephilim, had a bed that was over 13 feet (four meters) long and six feet (two meters) wide (Deut. 3:11). Goliath of Gath was over nine feet (three meters) tall (1 Sam. 17:4). There have been a number of archaeological discoveries and ancient drawings of very large people. Many anthropologists have assumed that when a very large person is depicted next to smaller humans, the picture was not meant to be an accurate depiction, but rather to show that the larger person was a king or one of the gods. However, that conclusion is an assumption and may well be wrong: the picture may be accurate and the larger person may actually be one of the Nephilim.

The Nephilim were the result of demonic genetic manipulation, so there was no way to teach or train them to be godly. Furthermore, when the Nephilim reproduced, they made more of their kind, just like when the genetically changed thorns and thistles reproduced, they made more thorns and thistles, and when poisonous snakes reproduced, they made more poisonous snakes. Because of their size and strength, and the demonic power behind them, before Noah’s Flood, the Nephilim were both reproducing themselves and also killing off humans who were not Nephilim, and this resulted in more and more of the earth’s population being Nephilim. The abundance of Nephilim on the earth explains why the Bible says that shortly before the Flood, mankind got to the point that “every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5).

In fact, there is evidence that right before the Flood, the only genetically pure line of humans left on earth was Noah’s line. Genesis 6:9 says that Noah was “blameless” in his generation. But the Hebrew word translated “blameless” is *tamiym* (#08549 תָּמִים), which means “whole, sound, complete or entire, innocent, having integrity,” and it is mainly used of animals that are without defect and therefore could be used for sacrifice. It is likely that in Genesis 6:9, the Bible is saying that “in his generation,” Noah was “without defect” genetically, as well as saying that Noah obeyed God.

The fact that mankind was completely wicked before the Flood is good evidence for the existence of the Nephilim. There are only 1,656 years from the creation of Adam to the Flood, but we can see that mankind became totally wicked in much less than that time because the Nephilim did not come along until people really began to multiply on the earth (Gen. 6:1). In contrast, it has now been more than 4,000 years since the Flood, and there are many good and loving humans on earth. This shows that humans do not become totally wicked on their own as a function of human genetics. It took demons genetically changing humans into a mutant race of “fallen ones” to make everyone so evil that every intention of their hearts was evil all the time.

Some people deny that the Nephilim were a mutant race of humans produced by demons, for three major reasons. Some say the Devil and demons do not exist, but we reject that argument and assert that the Bible makes it plain that they do. Others say that the vocabulary in Genesis 6 does not support the interpretation that demons somehow mated with humans and that the phrase “sons of God” can refer to descendants of Adam through Seth. However, a study of the phrase “sons of God” in the Hebrew text will show that it always refers to beings created directly by God, such as Adam, Jesus Christ, and angels (this must be a study of the exact Hebrew phrase, not the general idea of “son” of God, because, for example, Israel is referred to as God’s “son.” But the exact Hebrew phrase used in Gen. 6 of the “sons of God” is only used of God’s directly created beings).

There are many other lines of evidence besides the meaning of the phrase “sons of God” that show that the Nephilim were not ordinary humans. One is that the “sons of God” could take any human female they wanted, which is not normal human-to-human behavior, whereas demons would have the power and evil nature to take any human female they desired. Also, the blame for the evil “marriages” between the sons of God and daughters of men was never placed on the women, which would make sense if the women were forced into these unions by demons, but not if they had married evil husbands by choice. Also, the offspring of the “sons of God” and “daughters of men” are called “Fallen Ones.” But both godly and ungodly humans are “fallen,” so the specific designation, “Fallen Ones,” shows that these “children” were fallen in a different sense than just the regular fallen state of all humans. Also, many of the Nephilim were giants, but a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever does not produce children who are giants. To produce the giant Nephilim, one of the “parents” was not a normal human.

Lastly, the offspring of these “sons of God” and human women were extremely wicked, so much so that every thought of their heart was evil, and in not too much time, the whole earth was populated by beings who were this way. But even if the children of believers and unbelievers turn from God, rarely if ever is it true that every thought they have is wicked—that is not normal human behavior. All these facts together show that the Nephilim were the genetically manipulated progeny of humans and demons, engineered to be evil.

A third reason people say that fallen angels could not produce offspring by human women is because God made things to reproduce after their own kind (cf. Gen. 1:11, 21, 24, 25). While it is true that in a natural environment, things reproduce after their own kind, plants and animals (including humans) can be changed so that they reproduce in a way that does not follow their natural family or genus. Mutations and genetic changes can occur. Today, humans are doing many different kinds of genetic manipulation on plants and animals, and those genetically changed things then reproduce after their kind—and that is exactly what the Devil did to plants, animals, and even humans after the Fall. But the Bible warns against trying to crossbreed species: “You must not crossbreed two different kinds of your livestock” (Lev. 19:19 HCSB).

God responded to the Devil’s making of the Nephilim in two ways: He dealt with the demons who produced the Nephilim and He dealt with the Nephilim themselves. As for the demons who produced the Nephilim, God shut them up in Tartarus (2 Pet. 2:4), in the Abyss (Luke 8:31; Rev. 20:1), in “gloomy darkness” (Jude 1:6), so they were not free to do evil on earth anymore. As for the Nephilim themselves, they were mortal and were killed off.

There were two times in history when the demons produced Nephilim: before and after Noah’s Flood. In the first outbreak of Nephilim before Noah’s Flood, God killed them all off in the Flood. In the second outbreak of Nephilim after the Flood, people killed them off, just as God told Israel to do.

In spite of the fact that God put the demons who produced the Nephilim who lived before the Flood into Tartarus, it was not long after the Flood that the Devil again tried to stop the Messiah by producing more Nephilim. However, it seems the Devil had become aware that demons who participated in making the Nephilim would be imprisoned in Tartarus, so in the second outbreak of Nephilim there were only a limited number of them, and they seemed to be mostly concentrated in Israel, the Promised Land. However, there is evidence that there were also some Nephilim in other parts of the world. The Bible tells us that the Nephilim were the famous men who lived in ancient times (Gen. 6:4). Although many histories and ancient mythologies have been lost, distorted, or exaggerated, there are ancient records and mythologies that claim that “gods” cohabited with women and produced leaders and heroes such as the Greek heroes Perseus and Hercules, who were indeed famous. So even this second outbreak of Nephilim, although more limited in number, could have been widely spread.

That second outbreak of Nephilim occurred shortly after the Flood. We know that because when Abraham entered the land of Canaan, about 400 years after the Flood, “the Canaanite was already in the land” (Gen. 12:6). These “Canaanites” were Nephilim. We know that because, by Genesis 14:5, some of the inhabitants of Canaan were being called “Rephaim,” and the Rephaim were Nephilim, and were descendants of “Rapha.”

Like humans, the humanoid Nephilim had names, and the Bible gives us the names of some of them. “Rapha” was one of the names (Rapha apparently lived in the Philistine country in or near Gath, because his descendants were from around there, and some joined the Philistines and fought against Israel, including Ishbibenob, Saph, and two others who are unnamed, one of whom was Goliath’s brother and the other is called “a man of great size” (2 Sam. 21:15-22; 1 Chron. 20:6-8). Also, one of the Nephilim was “Anak” (Num. 13:33), and the descendants of Anak were the Anakim. Anak’s father was Arba (Josh. 15:13), which shows us that the child of a Nephilim was also a Nephilim. It is likely that Arba and Rapha were the names of two of the Nephilim who were, or were close to, the first generation “progeny” of fallen angels and human women.

After the Exodus, when the Israelites came out of Egypt, Moses sent spies into the Promised Land. The spies encountered Nephilim in the Promised Land and returned to Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness. The spies reported: “And we saw the Nephilim there (the sons of Anak come from the Nephilim), and in our own sight we seemed like grasshoppers, and we seemed that way in their sight” (Num. 13:33 REV). The report of the spies shows they knew what the Nephilim were and that the Nephilim were very large people, even “giants.” Moses told Israel to conquer Canaan and not to be afraid of the Nephilim. Moses said, “Hear, O Israel: you are to cross over the Jordan [River] today, to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you, cities great and fortified up to heaven, a people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim, whom you know, and of whom you have heard it said, ‘Who can stand before the sons of Anak?’” (Deut. 9:1-2 ESV). Thus in Numbers and Deuteronomy Moses referred to the Canaanite nations as being “Anakim,” descendants of Anak, which meant they were Nephilim (Num. 13:33).

Joshua and the Israelites conquered the Promised Land and killed off the Nephilim—except for the ones who lived in the southwest seacoast area bordering the Mediterranean Sea. That area was inhabited by the Philistines, whose capital cities were Gaza, Gath, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron (Josh. 13:3; 1 Sam. 6:17). “At that time Joshua proceeded to exterminate the Anakim from the hill country—Hebron Debir, Anab—all the hill country of Judah and of Israel. Joshua completely destroyed them with their cities. No Anakim were left in the land of the Israelites, except for some remaining in Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod” (Josh. 11:21-22 HCSB). So the cities that still had Nephilim after Joshua conquered Canaan included the city of Gath, and that is where Goliath, one of the Nephilim, came from.

The Nephilim that Joshua left in the Philistine cities were killed off by David, who had war after war with the Philistines. But whereas Joshua referred to them as “Anakim” because they were descendants of Anak (Josh. 11:22), in other places they are referred to as Rephaites or Rephaim because some of them descended from Rapha (1 Chron. 20:4, 6, 8). We should not be confused about the Nephilim in Israel sometimes being called Anakim and sometimes being called Rephaites or Rephaim, because it is likely that descendants of Anak married descendants of Rapha. After all, both Anak and Rapha were Nephilim and lived and had children in the same general area, so in a few generations, some of those children would be both Anakim and Rephaites.

Some of David’s wars with the Philistines specifically mention fights with descendants of Rapha. In one war, Sippai the Raphaite was killed; in another war, Lahmi, the brother of Goliath, was killed (which is how we know that Goliath was one of the Nephilim; if his brother was, so was he), and in still another war a huge man who was a descendant of Rapha, who had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot, was killed. These men were all descendants of Rapha (2 Sam. 21:16-22; 1 Chron. 20:4-8. In many English Bibles, “Rapha” is not transliterated as a name but translated as “giant.” He would have been a giant, but it helps us to follow the mutant race of Nephilim if he is called “Rapha”).

Scripture connects the Anakim and Rephaim, showing that they were both Nephilim. They were both huge in size and very wicked, and lived in the same area, and Deuteronomy 2:10-11 connects them, adding another twist: there are other names for these Nephilim. For example, Deuteronomy 2:11 says that the people of Moab called them “Emim,” which means “Terrors,” and Deuteronomy 2:20 tells us the Ammonites called them “Zamzummim” (the meaning of Zamzummim is disputed, but E. W. Bullinger says it means “Noisy Ones.”[[41]](#footnote-25193) Among them, we can be sure that all of the nations of Canaan had Nephilim intermixed with them. For example, Genesis 15:18-20 lists the Raphaim among other nations of Canaan; the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites. The Bible gives other lists that include these nations, sometimes leaving some nations out and including others (cf. Exod. 3:8, 17; 23:23; Deut. 7:1; 20:17; Josh. 12:8).

Once we understand that the gene pool of the Canaanites had been corrupted by the Nephilim, a mutant race that was evil and unable to be saved, we can see why God commanded Moses and Joshua to wipe them out, including the children. The baby of a Nephilim could not be trained to be godly any more than a baby rattlesnake could be trained not to have venom. Their behavior is influenced by their genetics.

God allowed the Israelites to marry women from the nations around the Promised Land (Deut. 20:10-15) because they had not been intermixed with Nephilim. But when it came to the nations in the Promised Land, the Israelites were to kill them off (Deut. 7:1; 20:16-18). God said if the Israelites allowed the Canaanites to remain alive, “they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods” (Deut. 20:18 NIV84). God never said a word about Israel being able to convert the Canaanites to being godly, because they could not be. The Devil had Nephilim made to destroy the human race and prevent the Messiah from coming, and God had to save the human race by having the Nephilim killed off. So God was not being unloving when He caused the Flood or told Joshua to kill the inhabitants of Canaan. He was being loving, determined to bring forth the Messiah and save the human race.

[For more on the meaning of the phrase “sons of God,” see commentary on Gen. 6:2. For supporting information on demons producing offspring via human women, see commentary on Jude 1:6 and 1:7. For more information on Tartarus, the “god prison,” see commentary on 2 Pet. 2:4. For more information on the first outbreak of Nephilim occurring in the time before the Flood, see commentary on 1 Pet. 3:20. For more information on the Abyss, see commentary on Rev. 20:1.]

**“those days.”** “Those days” were the “days,” or “time,” actually a period of years, when mankind was increasing on the earth and demons were at work producing the Nephilim. The earth was becoming a very evil place and the genetically pure humans were becoming scarcer, so God instructed Noah to build the ark and prepare for the Flood. In that context, the phrase, “and also after this,” means after that time before the Flood, i.e., after the Flood. Thus, the Bible lets us know that the Nephilim were on earth after the Flood as well as before it.

**“the mighty men who were of old, the famous men.”** The Nephilim were big and powerful and rose to the top of many societies. Nephilim like Og became kings (Deut. 3:11), and men like Goliath were renowned warriors. These people were some of the famous people of the ancient legends. No doubt, most of those ancient legends have been lost. One reason for that is that ancient societies fought one another and the losing towns were often burned, just like the great libraries of Alexandria in Egypt and Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia were burned.

In spite of that, we still have records of some Greek heroes who seem to have been Nephilim. For example, Hercules was the son of Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene; Perseus, who beheaded Medusa, was the son of Zeus and the mortal woman Danae; Helen of Troy was the daughter of Zeus and Leda; Minos, the son of Zeus and the mortal woman Europa, was the king of Crete and the first one to build a navy; Achilles, hero of the Trojan War and greatest warrior in Homer’s *Iliad*, was the son of the nymph Thetis and Peleus; and Odysseus (better known by his Latin name, Ulysses), was the hero of Homer’s *Odyssey* and a great-grandson of Zeus. The ancient mythologies are likely distorted, exaggerated, and somewhat fabricated, but the Bible says that some of the people who were the heroes of the ancient legends were actually Nephilim, “heroes” of old time.

Gen 6:5

**“great.”** The Hebrew text implies that the extent of the evil was not only great but was increasing.

Gen 6:6

**“And Yahweh regretted.”** This is one of the many verses of Scripture that shows the feelings of God, and that He is affected by what people do. Far from being the “unmoved mover” of some theological systems, a straightforward reading of Scripture shows that our God is an emotional God, who changes His mind and course of action in response to what people do. Many verses testify to this (cf. 1 Sam. 15:11, 35; Jer. 15:6; 18:1-11). See commentary on Jeremiah 18:6.

Gen 6:9

**“blameless.”** The word is used of animals used for sacrifice, that they are “without blemish,” “unblemished.” When applied to humans it took on the meaning “blameless.”

Gen 6:10

**“Shem, Ham, and Japheth.”** This is not the birth order of the sons, but the order of their importance in the Word of God. Shem was the son whose lineage led to Christ; Ham was the son from whom the Canaanites and Egyptians came, who constantly interacted with Israel, and Japheth was the son from whom the Greeks and other nations west of Israel came.

Noah can be seen as a kind of second Adam. Both Adam and Noah were to populate the earth and both had three sons, one of whom turned out to be evil.

[For more information on the chronology of the sons of Noah, see commentary on Gen. 5:32; 10:21; and 11:10.]

Gen 6:14

**“Make an ark.”** We do not know how long it took Noah to build the ark. It is often taught that it took Noah 120 years, but that is not correct. Noah’s sons were grown and married when God told him to build the ark, and Shem, Noah’s middle son, was 100 years old two years after the flood. So if we assume that Shem was around 20 years old when God told Noah to build the ark and get on board with his family, including his sons’ wives, then Noah would have been building the ark for less than 80 years, but it could have been considerably less than 80 years, the Bible does not say how long it took.

[For more on the chronology of Noah and his sons, see commentaries on Gen. 5:32; 10:21; and 11:10.]

**“gopher wood.”** The identity of gopher wood (“*gopher*” is transliterated directly from the Hebrew text) is unknown, although guesses and suppositions about exactly what kind of wood it is have been made. Since we do not know all the kinds of trees that existed before the Flood, and do not have Noah’s ark from which we could examine a sample, it is best to just leave the text “gopher wood.”

**“and cover it.”** The covering of pitch would seal the ark and make it waterproof.

**“pitch.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “a covering,” and that covering was likely bitumen. It would be confusing in English to say “cover it with a covering” because that sounds like Noah would have used a tarp or something.

Gen 6:15

**“cubits.”** This is using the shorter cubit of roughly 18 inches, which most scholars believe is the cubit Noah used.

Gen 6:16

**“an opening.”** This is a “window” for daylight and air. There would probably have been many on the ark, but the text just mentions one.

Gen 6:17

**“breathe its last.”** The Hebrew verb *gava* (#01478 גָּוַע) refers to dying and is fundamentally synonymous with the verb “die,” *muth* (#04191 מָוֹת), although it seems to refer to breathing and can refer to stopping breathing (see commentary on Gen. 25:8, “breathed his last”). The CEB has “Everything on earth is about to take its last breath.” Darby used “expire” (meaning “out-breathe”). John Goldingay has “Everything on earth will breathe its last.”[[42]](#footnote-12267)

Gen 6:18

**“establish my covenant.”** This is the first time the word “covenant” occurs in the Bible. The text is unclear whether this is the confirmation of an older covenant or a brand new covenant that God is making with Noah. In Genesis 9:9 the same language is used of the new covenant that God made with Noah.

Gen 6:19

**“two”** The Hebrew word is “two,” but in this context, it can be understood as a “pair.” Gordon Wenham translates Genesis 6:19: “At the same time you shall bring into the ark to stay alive with you some of every living thing, some of all flesh, pairs of everything: they shall be male and female.”[[43]](#footnote-19085) Some other English versions use “pairs” instead of “two” as well (cf. CEB; NLT). The designation “pair” is clear from the last phrase in the verse: “they are to be a male and a female,” and also from Genesis 7:2-3, which makes it clear that there were to be seven pairs of the clean animals and the birds on the ark. The fact that there were seven pairs of clean animals and birds on the ark also explains how Noah could get off the ark and sacrifice some of the clean animals and birds and still have animals and birds to reproduce the species (Gen. 8:20).

Gen 6:20

**“From every kind of bird.”** Every kind of bird and animal was to be kept alive. None were to perish. The wording of the REV is similar to the wording of other versions. For example, the NAB (revised edition) says, “Of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal, and of every kind of thing that crawls on the ground, two of each will come to you, that you may keep them alive.”

[For more on the translation “every kind,” see commentary on Gen. 1:11.]

**“pairs”** See commentary on Genesis 6:19.

**“will come to you.”** Noah did not have to engage in a huge animal hunt to round up all the animals to put on the ark. God brought the animals He wanted on the ark to Noah. This ensured that the animals on the ark were healthy and genetically sound, with as much potential for genetic diversification as possible. We must also remember that before the Flood, all the animals ate plants (Gen. 1:30), so they were not dangerous to Noah and his family.

Gen 6:21

**“and gather it to yourself.”** The living creatures would come to Noah, but the food he and his family had to go out and gather. This indicates that at that time before the Flood, all the food that animals and birds ate grew fairly close to the ark. Noah did not have to travel the world to gather up different kinds of food.

**Genesis Chapter 7**

Gen 7:1

**“your household.”** The Hebrew is just “your house,” where “house” refers to “household,” the immediate family.

Gen 7:2

**“seven pairs.”** The Hebrew text of Genesis 7:2 simply repeats the number seven twice, and literally reads, “seven seven,” which in this context means “seven pairs” (cf. CJB, HCSB, NAB, NIV, NJB, NLT, NRSV, RSV). What the “seven seven” means is clarified by the words that follow. The Hebrew text reads more literally, “seven seven, a male and his mate.” So Genesis 7:2 should be understood to mean “seven *males,* seven *females*; a male and his mate.” Thus, there were to be seven males and seven females of each clean animal on the ark. There were also to be seven pairs of the different kinds of birds on the ark (Gen. 7:3). The tradition that the animals went on only in twos comes from misunderstanding Genesis 6:19, which says that “two” of each animal was put on the ark, but in that context, the word “two” refers to “pairs,” not just “two” animals. See commentary on Genesis 6:19, “pairs.” The fact that there were seven pairs of clean animals and birds on the ark also explains how Noah could get off the ark and sacrifice some of the clean animals and birds and still have animals and birds to reproduce the species (Gen. 8:20). However, it seems that the unclean animals were only taken on board as “two,” that is, one pair. The word “two” is not repeated the way that “seven seven” is.

**“the male and his female.”** The Hebrew is different here than in Genesis 7:3. A more literal reading of Genesis 7:2 would be “a man and his wife,” (or a man and his mate), whereas in Genesis 7:3 it is literally “a male and female,” more specifically referring to the sexes.

Gen 7:3

**“to keep seed alive.”** To keep descendants alive on earth.

Gen 7:4

**“In seven days I will cause it to rain on the earth for 40 days and 40 nights.”** Noah and his family were on the ark for a year and ten days. They entered the ark on the seventeenth day of the second month of Noah’s six hundredth year (Gen. 7:11, 13) and left the ark on the twenty-seventh day of the second month (Gen. 8:14-19) of the six hundred first year (Gen. 8:13). We must keep in mind, however, that Noah and Israel used a lunar year, which is only 354 days, not 365 days, so a year and ten days lunar year is 364 days, or almost one solar year, which is the year that is used in most of the world today.

A common misunderstanding of this time period comes from not seeing that there was a seven-day period before Noah entered the ark during which the loading of animals took place. Genesis 7:4 says, “In seven days I will cause it to rain,” and then Genesis 7:10 records “after seven days.” During the seven-day period, Noah was loading the ark as God had instructed in Genesis 7:1-4. Anyone who has moved can appreciate the seven-day period it took for Noah to load the ark. Noah started loading the ark on the tenth day of the second month, and went in himself on the seventeenth day.

Because God told Moses to make Nisan the first month of the year, and since it seems that Adam and Jesus would have been “born” on the same day, the calendar from Adam to the Exodus would have been based on a Tishri year system. Therefore, the second month would be the month after Tishri, which is Marcheshvan (called “Bul” in 1 Kings 6:38).

**“Every living thing.”** The Hebrew word translated as “living thing” is quite unique and refers to things that are in existence.

Gen 7:5

**“Noah did according to all that God commanded him.”** This is parallel to Genesis 6:22.

Gen 7:9

**“by pairs.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “two two,” meaning pairs.

Gen 7:10

**“the seven days.”** God had said there would be seven days (Gen. 7:4).

Gen 7:11

**“windows.”** This is not the normal Hebrew word for “window,” but it is used for windows (Eccl. 12:3).

Gen 7:12

**“The rain fell on the earth.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “and the rain was on the earth,” but we would say the rain fell on the earth.

Gen 7:13

**“On that same day.”** That is, the same day the rain started. Matthew 24:38-39 also indicate that Noah and his family entered the ark the day it started to rain.

Gen 7:14

**“every kind.”** The Hebrew phrase is referring to “every kind” of animal and bird coming to Noah to the ark, just as Genesis 6:20 is.

[For more on the translation “every kind,” see commentary on Gen. 1:11.]

**“of *wild* animal.”** In contrast with the livestock, the Hebrew almost certainly refers to wild animals in the same way that Genesis 1:24-25 seems to. It is not referring to “all animals,”

**“every chirping bird.”** The Hebrew word is related to the word “chirp,” and this seems to be pointing to basic differentiation among the birds.

Gen 7:15

**“pairs.”** The Hebrew is literally, “two two,” referring to a pair.

Gen 7:16

**“and Yahweh shut him in.”** The Hebrew is perhaps more literally, “and Yahweh closed [the door] behind him” (or “on his behalf”). Noah did not close out the people outside the ark, Yahweh did.

Gen 7:18

**“floated.”** The ark had no means of steering or propulsion, it just floated.

**“the surface of the waters.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “on the face of the waters.”

Gen 7:19

**“rose very very high upon the earth.”** By repeating the word “very” (or “greatly”), the Hebrew text emphasizes the way the water covered the earth. Noah’s Flood was not a local event, as some people would have us believe. The Bible is clear that the water covered all of the earth that was under heaven. Besides, if the flood was local, God would have just had Noah and his family move away. That would have taken much less time and effort than building the ark.

The verse gets emphasis from the figure of speech epizeuxis. If a word is repeated in a sentence in exactly the same form, as it is in the Hebrew text here, it is the figure of speech epizeuxis.[[44]](#footnote-32047) In fact, if the words are repeated right next to each other as these are, Bullinger refers to it as a subset of epizeuxis called geminatio. If the root word is repeated but the word is inflected differently, that is the figure of speech polyptoton.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

[See Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

Gen 7:20

**“15 cubits.”** This is 22.5 feet.

Gen 7:21

**“took its last breath.”** The Hebrew verb *gava* (#01478 גָּוַע) refers to dying and is fundamentally synonymous with the verb “die,” *muth* (#04191 מָוֹת), although *gava* can imply a violent death (see commentary on Gen. 25:8, “breathed his last”).

**“every swarming creature that swarms on the earth.”** The same word “swarm” is in Genesis 1:20, where things swarm in the water.

Gen 7:22

**“dry land.”** The Hebrew text is specific to dry land. It is possible that some sea creatures that breathe air could have survived if this was the only verse on the subject.

Gen 7:24

**“150 days.”** Scripture says the waters prevailed for 150 days. There are commentators who assert that the 150 days proves that there is something they call a “prophetic month” of 30 days. They claim that prophetic times in Scripture are calculated on a premised 30-day month. However, there is no traditional source for such a thing—it seems to be a concept built to accommodate their calculations. The Jews based their month from the moon, and there is no Jewish concept of a straightforward 30-day month. That concept is being read back into history, but is not a part of it. Some of the authors who try to defend the 30-day month use for their first proof that the flood year with the statement of the seventeenth of the second month, when the rains started, to the rain’s end, the seventeenth of the seventh month, is listed as 150 days. So, they say from the seventeenth of Marcheshvan to the seventeenth of Nisan (of course, counting the first of the year being Tishri, as it was supposed to be in remote antiquity) is the 150 days, counting months as having 30 days. This would seem to be so, since counting that time as lunar months should come out to 147 days or so.

The first volume of “The book of Genesis” under the series “Books of the Bible” published by the Judaica Press contains the Hebrew text, their own translation, and extensive commentaries taken from Rashi, Rambam, Eben Ezra, and others.[[45]](#footnote-21147) What they say is that the “seventh month” means not the month on the calendar, but the seventh month, counting from when the rain started. Their calculation goes:

Kislev —three days (after the 40 days of rain beginning in the “second month” Marcheshvan, leaving three days in Kislev)  
Tevet 29, Shevat 30, Adar 29, Nisan 30, Iyar 29, = 150

These are Jews commenting on their own Scripture and we would give them more than a little weight on this issue.

**Genesis Chapter 8**

Gen 8:1

**“remembered.”** The word “remember” is used in the Semitic language in both a straightforward and idiomatic sense. For example, one place where “remember” is used in a straightforward sense in the Bible is when Pharaoh’s cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him. “Remember” is also used to mean “to keep in mind” (Ps. 103:14).

The word “remember” is also used in the Semitic languages, and thus in the Bible, in an idiomatic way. This is sometimes referred to by scholars as the “pregnant sense” of the word because it means more than “remember,” it means to act upon one’s previous knowledge. While the idiomatic sense of “remember” usually occurs in a positive sense, i.e., “to act favorably on one’s behalf” (Gen. 8:1; 1 Sam. 1:11), it can also refer to “remember and then act against the person,” (1 Sam. 15:2; 3 John 1:10 (“call attention to”); Rev. 18:5). The idiomatic sense of “remember” is part of the idiom of the Semitic languages, and is used by both God (Gen. 30:22; Exod. 2:24; Judg. 16:28; 1 Sam. 1:11) and people (Gen. 40:14; Deut. 16:12; Judg. 8:34). “Remembered” is used in its idiomatic way many times in the Bible; just a few examples are: Genesis 19:29; 30:22; Judges 8:34; 16:28; 1 Samuel 1:11, 19; Nehemiah 6:14; 13:31; Psalm 106:4; and Hosea 8:13.

The idiomatic use of “remember” also occurs in the New Testament. For example, the malefactor on the cross asked Jesus to “remember” him, which meant pay favorable attention to him (Luke 23:42; but they would have been speaking Hebrew or Aramaic. But see Gal. 2:10; Col. 4:18; Heb. 13:3).

[Many other words are used in an idiomatic or “pregnant sense,” including, “know,” “foreknow,” “look,” “watch,” etc. For more on these idiomatic uses, see commentary on Luke 23:42.]

Gen 8:3

**“The waters returned from *off* the earth, advancing and returning. At the end of 150 days the waters *began to* recede.”** These two sentences make different points about the same thing. The waters rose over the earth for 150 days. The first statement makes the point that the waters are going to start to go down (to return below land level) but they would return by a kind of tidal motion, decreasing then increasing, then decreasing some more. The second statement makes it clear that this decreasing of the water did not occur until the water had been over the earth for 150 days. By Genesis 8:4, the waters had receded enough that the ark could touch down on Mount Ararat.

**“advancing and returning.”** The idea of the Hebrew text is that the water started to go down, but in a kind of tidal motion, going down then back up, then down further, then back up. (For the translation “advancing and returning,” see E. Fox, The Schocken Bible; cf. also YLT, Smith’s Literal translation, Douay-Rheims, and the Literal Standard Version). The NET text note says, “the waters returned…going and returning.”

Gen 8:4

**“rested.”** This is the same root word as the name “Noah.”

**“in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month.”** This is the same day of the year that Jesus rose from the dead! The day that humanity was safe because Noah’s ark touched down safely on the land was the same day that Jesus rose from the dead and human life was safe and assured that there would be a resurrection to everlasting life.

It is difficult to see the parallel between Noah’s ark and Jesus for two major reasons: God changed the order of the months in the Hebrew calendar at the time of Moses, and orthodox Christianity teaches that Jesus died on Friday and got up Sunday morning, which makes seeing the parallel between Noah and Jesus impossible. We will look at both of these reasons.

At the time of Noah, the first month of the year was Tishri, and the seventh month of the year was Abib, also called Nisan. But at the time of Moses, God changed the calendar and made Abib the first month (Exod. 12:1-2), which made Tishri the seventh month. So at the time of Noah, the ark touched down on land in the seventh month, which was Abib at that time, and thus was the same month that Jesus died.

Furthermore, Genesis 8:4 tells us that Noah’s ark touched down on land on the seventeenth day of the seventh month. We know from the Law of Moses that the Passover lamb was killed on the fourteenth of Nisan (Exod. 12:3-6; Lev. 23:4-5). Also, Jesus taught that just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, he would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matt. 12:40). The orthodox church has fudged the counting of the three days and nights and asserts that Jesus was buried on Friday at sunset and raised from the dead before sunrise on Sunday morning, and yet orthodoxy teaches that that short time period is three days and three nights. But Friday at sunset to before sunrise Sunday morning is simply not three days and three nights. Furthermore, if Friday was the day Jesus died and was buried and was the fourteenth of Nisan, then Sunday would be the sixteenth of Nisan, whereas Noah’s ark landed on the seventeenth of Nisan, and thus there would not be any parallel between Jesus’ resurrection and Noah’s ark.

When we study the Bible carefully, we see that Jesus was crucified on the morning of the fourteenth of Nisan and died at 3 p.m. later that day, the same time as the priests were slaughtering the Passover lamb in the Temple. Then Jesus was put “in the heart of the earth,” that is, in the tomb, close to sunset. The year Jesus died, the fourteenth of Nisan 14 was a Wednesday, and from Wednesday, Nisan 14 in the evening to the evening on Thursday, Nisan 15 was one day and one night in the heart of the earth. Then to Friday, Nisan 16 at evening was two days and two nights, and to Saturday, Nisan 17 at evening was three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, and it was Saturday evening when Jesus got up from the dead. Thus, Jesus got up from the dead on the seventeenth of Nisan, the same day of the year that Noah’s ark landed.

In the Bible, going under water was sometimes symbolic of being dead, which is why in baptism a person goes under water and thus symbolically dies, and then comes up out of the water, symbolically being raised from the dead into new life. That symbolism is certainly part of the Noah’s ark record. The flood put humankind in danger of everlasting death—if every person on earth died, then no Savior would ever be born and everyone would die and be dead forever. Furthermore, even while the ark was floating around in the water, there was still a danger of it sinking and the eight people on board—everyone left on earth—dying. But when the ark touched down on the seventeenth of Abib, humankind was safe—well, at least for the moment. But the Savior still needed to come and complete his work and fully conquer death in order for humankind to be truly safe from everlasting death. And Jesus’ conquest of death occurred on the evening of the seventeenth of Abib, when our Savior, Jesus Christ, rose from the dead and made everlasting life a true reality. When Jesus rose from the dead, it was obvious that humankind was truly safe.

Another parallel between Noah’s ark and Jesus Christ is that after the ark landed on the seventeenth day of the seventh month, Noah had to stay on the ark until the twenty-seventh day of the second month of the following year, a period of seven months and ten days, while he waited for the earth to dry up and be fit for human life. In a similar situation, like Noah waited on the ark, humankind is now waiting on earth with all its corruption and unrighteousness, waiting for Christ to return and set up his godly kingdom on earth, and at that time the earth will be truly fit for wonderful human life.

So the Noah’s ark record and the record of Jesus’ burial and resurrection have a wonderful parallel. The day that Noah’s ark touched down on the earth was the seventeenth of Abib, and the day Jesus rose from the dead was the seventeenth of Abib, and once again we can see the magnificent hand of God at work planning for the complete redemption of mankind and weaving the story of Jesus Christ through the Old Testament records.

[To see a much more complete explanation of the three days and nights between Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the fourteenth of Abib being on a Wednesday, see commentary on Matthew 12:40. For more on the chronology of the last week of Jesus’ life beginning with his arrest, see commentary on John 18:13, “first.” For more on Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus burying Jesus, see commentary on John 19:40. For more on Christ’s wonderful future kingdom on earth, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.”]

Gen 8:16

**“Go out of the ark.”** God let Noah know that he could safely go out of the ark. God did not leave it up to Noah to guess if the time was right to disembark.

Gen 8:18

**“with his sons, his wife and his sons’ wives.”** This is the order in which they all got on the ark (Gen. 7:7). However it is not the order God suggested (Gen. 8:16).

Gen 8:21

**“Yahweh smelled the pleasing aroma.”** The Hebrew word can mean “soothing” or “pleasing” and the English versions differ. The basic idea is that the sacrifice pleased God and calmed Him down. We see that clearly here in the record of Noah. God saw that the wickedness of humankind was great and He decided to kill them off, but had compassion on Noah (Gen. 6:5-8). After the flood, when only Noah and his family were left of all humankind, Noah made a sacrifice to God and God smelled the pleasant aroma and said He would never wipe out humankind by a flood again (Gen. 8:20-22). Although the record does not say it, it was Noah’s heart to love and obey God that was behind the sacrifice that changed God’s mind, not the smell of the sacrifice. Sacrifices offered by ungodly and hypocritical people do not please God (see commentary on Amos 5:22). God accepts the offering and the worshiper at the same time. If the heart of the worshiper is right, the offering will be accepted and will be a blessing to God.

**“the imagination of people’s hearts is evil from their youth.”** The Devil promotes the lie that in our fallen world, people are basically good, but God says just the opposite, that people are basically evil. Experience should teach us this. Children need to be taught not to be selfish but to be polite. Adults have to constantly work at being godly but don’t have to put any effort into being angry or selfish. The Devil promotes the lie that people are basically good because it downplays the need for rules, regulations, and laws that keep society godly and safe. Jesus will have laws and rules when he rules the earth. In fact, that Jesus will rule the future earth with a rod of iron is a well-established prophecy (Ps. 2:9; Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15). If Jesus will need to have godly laws in his future kingdom on earth, then surely we need them now in our fallen world.

[For more on humans being basically evil, see commentary on Zeph. 3:1. For more on Jesus ruling over the earth in the future, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.”]

**“from their youth.”** It is interesting that the text says, “from their youth” and not “from their birth.” There seems to be a period of innocence when a baby is first born.

Gen 8:22

**“seedtime and harvest.”** “Seedtime” in the Middle East was largely in the fall, when the “former rains” began to fall and soften the soil for planting. “Harvest” started in the spring (usually April) and lasted through most of the summer, with different crops ripening at differnt times, the grains first, then the vegetables and grapes, then the fruits last.

**Genesis Chapter 9**

Gen 9:1

**“God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them.”** God does not mention the women here, most likely because in the Bible the genealogy, and thus the family members, were traced through the men, not the women.

**“Be fruitful and multiply.”** This is the same command God gave Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:28).

**“fill.”** See commentary on Genesis 1:28, “fill the earth.”

Gen 9:3

**“plants.”** The Hebrew reads the singular “plant,” but it is a collective singular. Up until after the Flood, people were to eat plants (Gen. 1:29), but now God released them to eat animals and fish as well.

Gen 9:4

**“But flesh with its life, its blood, you are not to eat.”** The Jews understood that the blood had to be drained from any meat before it was eaten, and this commandment also forbids eating anything when it is still alive. This ordinance was to be strictly enforced, so it is stated many times in the Law (cf. Gen. 9:4; Lev. 3:17; 7:26, 27; 17:10, 12, 14; 19:26; Deut. 12:16, 23; 15:23; and 1 Sam. 14:33).

Gen 9:5

**“Surely I will require a reckoning.”** Killing a human is a horrific sin in God’s eyes and will be punished. People who think they can “get away with murder” are only fooling themselves. God sees and makes note of everything (Eccl. 12:14).

**“From the hand of a brother human.”** For a human to kill a “brother human” is a horrific sin, in God’s eyes equivalent to a fratricide.

Gen 9:6

**“by man his blood is to be shed.”** The death penalty is commanded by God, and it is the responsibility of mankind to carry it out. It is in all five books of Moses, and in other books of both the Old and New Testaments as well. The first time it is mentioned, Genesis 9:6, is significant. Genesis 9:6 tells us what God expects. He gives people the responsibility to maintain a safe society by executing people who murder others. Both Scripture and history make it clear that, with a few exceptions, God will not kill evildoers in society. There have been a few exceptions, such as the Flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, but the exceptions are rare as any police officer or judge will testify. If humans do not police their own society, criminals run rampant. God’s rule, plainly spelled out in Scripture, is that if a person sheds the blood of another person, then it is by other humans that justice must be meted out.

Some people are against the death penalty, saying that mankind is the creation of God, and therefore a person does not have the right to take the life of another person. That may sound good, but it is contrary to Scripture. People have both the right and responsibility to execute murderers. God gave us that right and responsibility, and He will not take it back just because it is distasteful to us. God gave people the wisdom and ability to take care of their own society and its problems, and He tells us to do just that. People today are busy and overburdened, yet God is not running around among us mowing lawns, fixing broken appliances in the home, driving the children around from place to place, etc., and people do not expect Him to. We know that God will not go grocery shopping for us, so we do it ourselves. Similarly, we should know from all the crime in society that God will not get rid of the criminals among us; we must do it ourselves. God said that if a person sheds the blood of another person, then it is the job of the society to see that justice is done and avenge that bloodshed so that society will remain safe.

On the other hand, evil people in positions of power will put innocent people to death. This is a major reason that people should be very invested in voting and in getting the right people into office. The Bible has examples of ungodly leaders who put innocent people to death. One example is Jezebel, who framed Naboth and had him and his sons put to death (1 Kings 21:8-13; 2 Kings 9:26). Killing the innocent is mentioned in many places (e.g., Ezek. 13:19). God is not in control of human free will, and when people let evil people get into power God generally cannot stop the evil just because it would seem good if He did so. He has to honor the covenant He made with humankind via Noah, that in human society, people would put people to death.

[For more on the death penalty, see commentary on Exod. 21:12. For more on God not being in control of what happens on earth, see commentary on Luke 4:6.]

**“in his own image.”** For information on the image of God, see commentary on Genesis 1:27.

Gen 9:8

**“God spoke to Noah and to his sons.”** The Bible does not say how God spoke to Noah and his sons. There were no prophets alive on earth just after the Flood. It may have been through an angel or through an audible voice or in a vision of some kind.

Gen 9:10

**“every living soul that is with you.”** In this context, a “soul” was a living thing, including the birds, livestock, and animals of the earth.

Gen 9:11

**“by the waters of a flood.”** The Hebrew text reads, “the waters of the flood,” where “the flood” that just happened, a worldwide flood, will never happen again. Most English versions are like the REV and say “a flood” for clarity.

Gen 9:12

**“every living soul.”** Here meaning, “every living creature,” that is, every living creature that is alive because of the “soul” (life) in it. This is one of the verses that shows that animals are animated (made alive) by “soul,” just as people are.

Gen 9:13

**“I set my bow in the cloud.”** Although some versions read “rainbow,” the Hebrew word is the same as the “bow” of God that God uses in battle to fight His enemies and defend His people. In Psalm 7:12, God uses His bow to strike the disobedient. Lamentations mentions God shooting people with his bow (Lam. 3:12). God fights His enemies with bow and arrow (Hab. 3:9). Given the use of God’s bow in Scripture, and given the fact that God had just destroyed the earth with a Flood, it could well be that God set His bow in the clouds both as a sign that He would no longer flood the earth with water and that He was a God who avenged disobedience and sin.

**“and the earth.”** The whole earth. The land mass, the people, the animals, the birds—all were destroyed or marred in the Flood.

Gen 9:14

**“bow.”** See commentary on Genesis 9:13.

**“and the bow is seen in the clouds.”** The text does not promise that every time there are clouds that the bow (the rainbow) will be seen, but rather there are times when the bow will be seen in the clouds, and that is certainly the case. Scientifically, it takes water in the clouds and also sunshine refracted through that water to make a visible rainbow.

Gen 9:16

**“remembering.”** This reading, also in *The Koren Tanakh*, seems to catch the sense of the text well.

**“between God.”** God refers to Himself in the third person, seemingly for formality and due to the culture.

Gen 9:18

**“Ham is the father of Canaan.”** For the reason the text makes this specific point, see commentary on Genesis 9:22.

Gen 9:21

**“He was uncovered.”** The Hebrew can also read, “He uncovered himself inside his tent.” The versions and the commentators are pretty much split on the meaning.

Gen 9:22

**“Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father.”** The record in Genesis about Ham, his son Canaan, and Noah has been a problem for Bible scholars for generations. Ham did something to Noah that resulted in Ham’s son, Canaan, being cursed, but what did he do? Genesis 9:22 says that Ham “saw the nakedness of his father,” but what does that mean? When we study the record and pay attention to the facts and the idioms, we discover that when Noah was drunk and incapacitated, Ham had sex with Noah’s wife, and she got pregnant from that encounter and gave birth to Canaan, to whom Noah later gave a prophetic curse.

One thing that jumps out of the Noah-Ham record is that although all of Noah’s sons had children, Genesis 9 specifically points out two times that Ham is the father of Canaan (Gen. 9:18 and 9:22), and the Bible states it four times (Gen. 9:18, 22; 10:6; 1 Chron. 1:8). But why would that fact need to be so clearly stated when it is not stated that often for any of the other children of Shem, Ham, or Japheth? After all, Shem had five sons (Gen. 10:22); Ham had four sons (Gen. 10:6); and Japheth had seven sons (Gen. 10:2). So why say four times that Ham was the father of Canaan, and why would Noah single out Canaan and curse him? After all, Ham was the one who sinned. As we study the record, we see that the Bible says four times that Ham was the father of Canaan because ordinarily if Noah’s wife gave birth, the logical assumption would be that Noah was the father. But in this case, Ham was the father, so the Bible clearly states that fact.

Also, if we study the vocabulary and idioms in the Bible, we see what it means when Genesis 9:22 says that Ham “saw the nakedness of his father.” It is important when studying subjects that use idioms that we read a more literal version of the Bible such as the King James Version, New American Standard Bible, or English Standard Version. For example, in this case, the NIV translates Leviticus 18:6 as: “No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations.” While that communicates the sense of the verse, unless the translators translate the idiom consistently (which they do not in the NIV and some other versions), the Bible student reading an English version cannot see the connection between Leviticus and Genesis.

Ham “saw the nakedness of his father,” and the text in Genesis starts to become clear when we understand that “nakedness” is often used idiomatically. According to BDB,[[46]](#footnote-32678) the Hebrew word *ervah* (#06172 עֶרְוָה) means “nakedness” but it is used as “a euphemism for cohabitation,” and Leviticus 18:6 is cited as an example: “None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover *their* nakedness: I *am* the Lord” (ESV). In other words, the Mosaic Law commanded that people were not to “uncover the nakedness”—have sexual intercourse—with a close relative.

A study of the idioms in the Bible shows that the phrase “to uncover the nakedness” of someone can mean to have sexual intercourse with that person, and more importantly for this study, often to “uncover the nakedness” or “see the nakedness” of a man was to have intercourse with the man’s wife—having sex with a man’s wife was “uncovering” (or “seeing”) the nakedness of the man himself. This becomes very clear when we read literal translations of Leviticus 18:6-18 and Leviticus 20:17-21. What is especially important for this study, however, is to realize that the Bible says that having sex with your father’s wife is uncovering your father’s nakedness.

* **Leviticus 18:7 (ESV):** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness.
* **Leviticus 18:8 (ESV):** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife; it is your father’s nakedness..
* **Leviticus 18:16 (ESV):** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother’s wife; it is your brother’s nakedness.
* **Leviticus 20:11 (ESV):** If a man lies with his father’s wife, he has uncovered his father’s nakedness;
* **Leviticus 20:20 (ESV):** If a man lies with his uncle’s wife, he has uncovered his uncle’s nakedness;
* **Leviticus 20:21 (ESV):** If a man takes his brother’s wife, it is impurity. He has uncovered his brother’s nakedness;
* **Deuteronomy 27:20 (ESV):** Cursed be anyone who lies with his father’s wife, because he has uncovered his father’s nakedness.’

The above verses make it clear that to see the nakedness of one’s father was to have sex with his wife. Genesis 9:22 says that Ham “saw the nakedness of his father,” not “uncovered the nakedness of his father,” but as Leviticus 20:17 shows, the two idioms have the same meaning. Leviticus 20:17 (ESV): If a man takes his sister, a daughter of his father or a daughter of his mother, and sees her nakedness, and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace, and they shall be cut off in the sight of the children of their people. He has uncovered his sister’s nakedness, and he shall bear his iniquity.

Once we understand the idioms, “uncover the nakedness” and “see the nakedness,” and combine that with the text repeating that Ham was the father of Canaan, we can understand what happened in Genesis 9. Noah was drunk and apparently incapacitated, and Ham took advantage of that situation and had sexual intercourse with his mother, Noah’s wife, thus “seeing his father’s nakedness.” The result of that sexual encounter was that Noah’s wife got pregnant and gave birth to Ham’s son, Canaan. Knowing that Ham had intercourse with Noah’s wife who got pregnant and bore Canaan clears up perhaps the most difficult enigma in this record. According to Genesis 9:22, Ham sinned, yet in Genesis 9:25 Noah cursed Canaan, Ham’s son! At face value, this is not in harmony with the rest of the Word, because the Bible makes it clear that if a father sins a son is not to be punished, and if a son sins a father is not to be punished (Deut. 24:16; 2 Kings 14:6; 2 Chron. 25:4; Ezek. 18:20).

Ordinarily, Canaan would not suffer for the sin of his father, Ham. If, however, Canaan was born as a result of the intercourse between Ham and Noah’s wife, the enigma of his “curse” disappears. The curse of Noah is a prophecy of Canaan’s future, not a personal vengeance, in the same way that the “blessing” on Shem and Japheth is a prophecy of their future and not personal favoritism. Thus, Noah gave prophecies over his sons, just as Isaac prophesied over Jacob and Esau (Gen. 27:27-40), and Jacob gave prophecies over his sons (Gen. 49:1-28). However, likely because of Ham’s actions against Noah, Noah did not give a prophecy to Ham, but rather gave a prophecy to his wife’s last child, Canaan, and these prophesies occur in Genesis 9:24-27. Note that Noah’s prophecies to Canaan, Shem, and Japheth are all together, just as the prophecies of Jacob over his 12 sons are together.

Genesis 9:24-27 (ESV): 24When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, 25he said, “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers.” 26He also said, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. 27May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant.”

As we see from the prophetic curse, Canaan, the result of incest, did not fare any better than Moab or Ammon who were also born as a result of incest. And, true to the prophecy, the Canaanites did not do well as a people group. Occasionally the prophecy of a father was not a wonderful blessing, and that was the case with Canaan just as it was later when Isaac prophesied over his son Esau (Gen. 27:39-40).

Obviously, Noah eventually found out what Ham had done. Although the Bible does not say how Noah found out, there are many ways he could have, none of them being hard to believe. He could have awakened from his drunken sleep long enough to know that Ham was with his wife, or it is possible that he woke up and heard Ham boasting to his two brothers outside the tent (Gen. 9:22). Also, Noah may have been able to tell what Ham did simply because he knew his wife well enough, after all, if he married her when he was 20, he would have lived with her some 580 years. It is even possible that she simply told Noah.

Upon hearing Ham’s boast, Shem and Japheth were very respectful of their mother, and not only did they not take advantage of her sexually, they even went backward into the tent and covered her up so that they would not “see her nakedness” literally or idiomatically.

It is important to make one last point in this study. It is still believed by some Christians (based on a teaching that has existed for generations) that the “curse” on Canaan caused the black races and that black people are inferior to other races and are cursed. That is not true. Ham had four sons, “And the sons of Ham: Cush, and Mizraim, and Phut, and Canaan” (Gen. 10:6). Canaan was the only son of Ham that Noah ever personally mentioned in Genesis. If the “curse” on Canaan was that he would be black and inferior, then only the Canaanites would have been black and not Ham’s three other children. But the Canaanites were not black, they were “olive-skinned,” as are other Mediterranean people, and they did not move to Africa, but lived in what is now Israel. Ham’s other three children, Cush, who founded Ethiopia, Mizraim who founded Egypt, and Phut who founded Libya, moved into Africa soon after the Flood. It was in Africa that the black races developed, a product of genetics, in the same way as the American Indians eventually became more reddish, the Orientals more yellow or the Europeans more fair-skinned. But even in Africa, the descendants of Mizraim (Egypt) were not black but were olive-skinned, as they are to this day. There is absolutely no truth in believing that black people are black because they are cursed. If anything, the Canaanites were the ones who were cursed, and they were not black and do not exist anymore as a discernible people group.

Gen 9:25

**“Cursed be Canaan.”** For why Canaan was cursed, see commentary on Genesis 9:22

Gen 9:26

**“Blessed be Yahweh, the God of Shem.”** The prophecy of Noah in Genesis 9:26-27 over two of his sons (Shem and Japheth) and his grandson (Canaan; see commentary on Gen. 9:22) infers that the Messiah will come out of Shem. It was known that there would be a Messiah who would strike the head of the Devil, which implied that the troubles that the Devil caused for humankind and the earth would be rectified. But now, after the Flood, there was only one family on earth, and it had three sons. Which son would be the line to the Messiah? Genesis 9:26-27 point to the line of Shem. God is blessed in Shem, and Japheth will live in the tents of Shem. Meanwhile, Canaan will be cursed.

**Genesis Chapter 10**

Gen 10:1

**“descendants.”** See commentary on Genesis 2:4.

**“And sons were born to them.”** Sons and daughters were born to them, but the genealogy focuses on sons.

Gen 10:4

**“Dodanim.”** 1 Chronicles 1:7 has “Rodanim,” and many modern versions go that way likely thinking it is connected to the Island of Rhodes. But the Masoretic Hebrew text might be right. The NET text note says, “Dodona is one of the most ancient and revered spots in ancient Greece.”

Gen 10:5

**“each according to its *own* tongue.”** Genesis 10 is before the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11) so this is a summary statement, indicating what happened over time. It is not strictly chronological or instantaneous. The separating of the nations took time. The word “tongue” is different from the word “language.” This could refer to the beginning of different dialects and the different use of words in groups that were separated from each other.

Gen 10:8

**“He was the first to be a mighty one.”** This likely means the first after the Flood. He founded the city of Babel, which became the center of the very ancient Babylon. A number of versions recognize that “the first” is the meaning of the text here (e.g., BBE, CEB, CJB, ESV, JPS, NAB, NJB, NLT, NRSV, RSV).

Gen 10:9

**“Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before Yahweh.”** Nimrod did not live in Yahweh’s favor. In fact, the name “Nimrod” was almost certainly not his birth name, it was given to him because of his lifestyle of rebelling against authority and against God. “The Hebrew name Nimrod means ‘let us rebel,’ given by his contemporaries to Nimrod as one who ever had in his mouth such words to stir up his band to rebellion. Nimrod subverted the existing patriarchal order of society by setting up a chieftainship based on personal valor and maintained by aggression.”[[47]](#footnote-14592) Given that, the Hebrew phrase “before Yahweh” has been understood by many scholars to have the sense of “in defiance of” Yahweh;[[48]](#footnote-17182) or “against” Yahweh.[[49]](#footnote-22898) Some scholars disagree with that and think that it means more like “a mighty hunter in the eyes of God” (NJB; cf. CEB, CSB).

Gen 10:10

**“Accad.”** Accad is also spelled Akkad, and it is only mentioned here in Genesis 10:10 in the Bible. Its location is unknown, but it was a very important city. Akkad was apparently such an influential city that the Akkadian language is named after the city of Akkad, where Akkadian was spoken. Akkadian is now a dead language, known only to historians, but the fact that Akkad was part of Nimrod’s early kingdom is evidence that after the tower of Babel, one of the many languages God made for humans was Akkadian, and it was spoken in Akkad and the surrounding area. Eventually, however, the Akkadian language was spoken or understood in many places in the biblical world, because tablets with Akkadian writing are found in a vast geographical area: east to west from Iraq to central Turkey, and north to south from Iran to Egypt.

Gen 10:11

**“Out of that land he went into Assyria and built Nineveh.”** The Hebrew can also read that “Ashur” went out and built Nineveh and the other cities, but it makes more sense that it was Nimrod who was still expanding his empire.

Gen 10:14

**“from whom the Philistines came.”** The text is “from there the Philistines came.” In this case, the word “Casluhim” was used of both the people group and the country they lived in.[[50]](#footnote-22299) Amos 9:7 says the Philistines came from Caphtor, so it is possible that both the Casluhim and the Caphtorim, who were sons of Mizraim and thus brothers, contributed to the Philistines.

Gen 10:18

**“Afterward.”** The word “afterward” likely refers to after the Tower of Babel incident, but there is no way to prove that.

Gen 10:19

**“Sidon.”** In the far northwest of the land of Canaan. It was later part of Phoenicia.

**“Gaza.”** Gaza was in the southwest of Canaan.

**“*then* going in the direction of Sodom.”** Sodom and the other cities mentioned were in the far southeast of Canaan. So what is not listed in this verse is the eastern border of Canaan. We can assume that the territory of the Canaanites ended at the Jordan River.

Gen 10:21

**“the brother of Japheth the elder.”** The KJV and a few other versions read as if Japheth was the oldest, and he was (see commentary on Gen. 5:32). Most modern versions translate this as if Shem was the older brother of Japheth, but that is not correct and creates a contradiction in the Bible. Although given the construction of the sentence in the Hebrew text, Shem would ordinarily be the eldest, the fact that the Bible gives us clear information that Japheth is the oldest shows that the older versions such as the KJV and Darby’s Bible, which have Japheth as “the elder,” are correct.

The flood came when Noah was 600 (Gen. 7:11-12). Noah was said to have had children when he was 500 years old (Gen. 5:32), but he did not have all of them that year, only the oldest, Japheth. Since Genesis 11:10 states that Shem was 100 years old two years after the flood, Shem could not have been born when Noah was 500, because then Shem would have been 102, not 100, two years after the flood. It was Japheth that was born when Noah was 500. Then, the year of the Flood, Noah’s son Japheth was 100 and Shem was 98, and so Shem was 100 two years after the Flood. Martin Anstey writes: “We arrive at the age of Noah at the birth of Shem by means of an induction from the facts contained in Genesis 7:6 and Genesis 11:10. From Genesis 7:6 we learn that Noah was 600 years at the epoch of the Flood. From Genesis 11:10 we learn that Shem was 100 years old two years after the Flood. Therefore Shem was 98 years old at the Flood, that is, Shem was 98 years old when Noah was 600. Therefore Shem was born when Noah was 502.”[[51]](#footnote-22763)

Gen 10:25

**“Peleg.”** The name “Peleg” means “division.”

**“for in his days the earth was divided.”** This fact is important enough to be stated two times; here in Genesis 10:25 and also in 1 Chronicles 1:19. There are several possibilities as to what this phrase means. The geologic evidence is that at one time the continents of the earth were joined and there was just one single huge landmass. Then, through plate tectonics and continental drift the continents came apart and eventually positioned themselves where they are today, although they are still slowly moving. Although most scientists believe that process took millions of years, there is no reason or solid evidence for that. After the Flood of Noah, the continents could have separated very quickly into basically where they are now. That is one possibility for the meaning of the verse.

Another possibility that has been posited is that the “earth” is put for metonymy for the people of earth, and the verse is saying that it was during Peleg’s lifetime that the Tower of Babel event occurred and the people of earth were divided into different language groups and subsequently different areas of earth as well.

A third possibility is that both those things—the continents being divided and the people being divided due to the Tower of Babel incident—happened during the lifetime of Peleg.

Gen 10:26

**“Joktan.”** The sons of Joktan appear to have settled in the Arabian peninsula and in East Africa.

Gen 10:30

**“Mesha.”** Apparently in the northern part of Arabia.

**“Sephar.”** The location is unknown.

Gen 10:32

**“the nations were separated on the earth after the flood.”** This is a summary statement, and it anticipates the spreading of the people over the earth that is started in Genesis 11 with the tower of Babel. There are many summary statements in the Bible that omit details or are placed out of chronological order in order to make a major point (cf. Luke 5:11; 8:37; Acts 18:18).

**Genesis Chapter 11**

Gen 11:1

**“The whole earth.”** This is a metonymy, where the “earth” is put for the people of earth. All the people spoke one language, which initially was the language that Noah and his sons spoke.

**“one language.”** The Hebrew can also be “one lip,” but in Hebrew, one of the meanings of “lip” (and “tongue” as well) is “language.”

**“one set of words.”** The Hebrew text, which has “one” in the plural, refers to a limited vocabulary. The Schocken Bible has “one set of words,” as does the NET text note. The translation, “the same words” is used in several translations (e.g. the CEB, CJB, DBY, ESV, JPS, NAB, NASB). Compared to all the words in all the different languages, before the Tower of Babel event there was only one set of words.

Gen 11:2

**“they traveled east.”** The text does not specify who the “they” are until Genesis 11:5, “the children of men.” Thus the “they” refers to some of the people who descended from Noah who then decided to travel to the east. The text does not imply that all the descendants of Noah got off the ark and traveled east. The Hebrew words translated “east” do not have to mean “from the east” which does not make geographical sense, but can mean “eastward,” or as we would say, “east” (cf. Gen. 3:24; 12:8).

Gen 11:3

**“let’s make bricks, and burn them with fire.”** The Hebrew text is hard to reproduce. The words are both verbs and nouns, almost like “let us brick (verb) bricks (noun) and burn (verb) a burning (noun). But the sentence, “Let us brick bricks and burn a burning” would be difficult to understand, even though in the Hebrew it is perfectly understandable and very catchy to the eye and ear. A wonderful emphatic statement that communicates the mental energy and urgency that the people had to accomplish their task.

**“bitumen.”** The substance used as mortar was bitumen. Although the Hebrew word is sometimes translated as “tar” or even “asphalt,” the substance mentioned here is neither of those, it is bitumen. Bitumen is a naturally occurring sticky substance, which is one reason why it could readily be used as mortar for bricks.

Although bitumen, tar, and asphalt are all black and sticky there are distinct differences. For example, only bitumen is a naturally occurring substance and naturally occurs as a solid or semi-solid substance. In some places, like near the Dead Sea in Israel, it can be found bubbling out of the ground (cf. Gen. 14:10). In contrast, “tar” has to be distilled and thus only actually occurs as a liquid (but eventually becomes harder, but still melts when heated to about 115 degrees Fahrenheit). Asphalt is also man-made, and is made by combining bitumen with inert materials, and due to its composite nature is used in making road surfaces but has no other major use. Bitumen is more resistant to water and weathering than tar is and is less affected by changes in temperature than tar is, and thus it is more durable than tar, which makes bitumen better than tar for covering things like Noah’s ark, and although the Bible does not say what Noah covered the ark with, calling it only “pitch,” meaning a covering (Gen. 6:14), it was almost certainly bitumen. The water and weather that the ark would be exposed to, as well as the changes in temperature in the water and also the difference in temperature between the parts of Noah’s ark that were above the waterline versus below the waterline of the ark, made bitumen the best choice for a waterproof covering for the ark.

A search for “asphalt” on the Internet shows that bitumen and asphalt are often used interchangeably, but they should not be. The “asphalt” we use on roads today is not naturally occurring. Apparently, a primitive type of asphalt was made in the past when rocks or other materials were added to bitumen, but the refined asphalt we use today was invented in the 1800s.

Gen 11:4

**“lest we become spread out over the face of the whole earth.”** Yahweh had told the people to “fill the earth,” but here they resist that command.

Gen 11:6

**“Yahweh said.”** Yahweh was speaking to His divine council (see commentary on Gen. 1:26).

**“they are one people, and they have all one language.”** This is unity, but a good example of evil unity. Not all unity is good or godly.

Gen 11:7

**“Come, let’s go down.”** Genesis 11:1-9 is the record of the tower of Babel. God says, “let’s go down,” so no matter how high the humans build, it is still far below heaven.

The people building the tower of Babel were full of pride and evil desires. In response to their acting against His purposes, God said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (Gen. 11:6 ESV). God is speaking to His intimate divine council who supported Him. God would not have been speaking to all the spirit beings, which would have included the Devil and his demons, because those evil spirits supported the people’s rebellion against God.

In this verse, as in Genesis 1:26, the verb “go down,” which is associated with “us,” is plural, so this cannot be a plural of majesty. Since God often works with angels to accomplish His purposes, as He did at Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:13), we can see that the “us” is His divine council. From verses such as Genesis 1:26 and 11:7, we see that God’s divine council had something to do with ruling earth, but their exact role is not known, especially since verses such as Genesis 11:8 says Yahweh scattered the people—although it is well within linguistic boundaries that Yahweh acted through His agents, the spirit beings.

[For more information on God’s divine council and the plural of majesty, see commentary on Gen. 1:26. For more on God’s divine council, see commentary on Isa. 14:13.]

Gen 11:9

**“Babel.”** The NET text note reads, “Here is the climax of the account, a parody on the pride of Babylon. In the Babylonian literature the name bab-ili meant “the gate of God,” but in Hebrew it sounds like the word for “confusion,” and so retained that connotation.”

Gen 11:10

**“Shem was 100 years old and fathered​ Arpachshad two years after the flood.”** If Shem was 100 years old two years after the Flood, then he was born when Noah was 502 (see commentary on Gen. 10:21). Shem was the middle child of Noah, and the birth order of Noah’s children was Japheth, Shem, and Ham (see commentary on Gen. 5:32). It is sometimes taught that Noah was building the ark for 120 years, but that is not possible (see commentary on Gen. 6:14). Arpachshad seems to be the third son of Shem (Gen. 10:22), but was chosen to be the son in the line of Abraham.

Gen 11:11

**“Arpachshad.”** In Genesis 10:22, Arpachshad is listed as the third son of Shem, but here he is in the line of Abraham.

Gen 11:26

**“and fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran.”** This is a case when the sons are listed out of birth order. Abraham was not the oldest son. The text does not mean Terah had triplets or that all three children were born when Terah was 70. We have to work the chronology in the Bible to find out when the children were born. Genesis 11:26 is similar to Genesis 5:32, which says, “Noah was 500 years old, and Noah became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth” (see commentary on Gen. 5:32). Only the eldest son was born when Terah was 70 years old. We have to discover which son was the eldest and at what time the other sons were born by studying the related scriptures. The son born to Terah when he was 70 years old is not stated in the Bible. It could have been either Nahor or Haran. Terah was 130 years old when Abram was born, so there were 60 years between the birth of Terah’s oldest son and Abram. Abram’s birth year can be calculated from Scripture. When Terah died, Abram left Haran to go to the Promised Land (Genesis 11:31; Acts 7:1-4), so the year Terah died was the year Abram left Haran for the Promised Land. Genesis 11:32 says that Terah died at 205 years old, and Genesis 12:4 states Abram was 75 when he left Haran. Thus, 205 (Terah’s age) minus 75 (Abram’s age) equals 130, the age of Terah at Abram’s birth.

Gen 11:27

**“Now this is the history of the descendants of Terah.”** Little is known about the time from Adam to after Noah’s Flood. It is over 1,600 years, yet it only takes 11 chapters in the Bible. In contrast, the last 1,000 years of the Old Testament takes from 2 Samuel until the Gospels and the time of Christ. From Seth until the Exodus the Bible follows the development of one family that goes from Seth through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to Jacob’s 12 sons and their children, and ends with the Exodus. After the Exodus, God dealt with Israel as a nation (cf. Exod. 19:6).

The genealogy is important, in large part because it involves Abraham. As we see here in Genesis 11:27, Terah, whose wife is not named, fathered three sons: Abram, Nahor, and Haran. He also fathered at least one girl, Sarai (Gen. 20:12).

Abram married Sarai his half-sister (Gen. 20:12), who gave birth to Isaac. Abraham also fathered Ishmael through Hagar, Sarah’s slave (Gen. 16:15) and six sons by Keturah, his second wife (1 Chron. 1:32).

Nahor married Milcah (Gen. 11:29), the daughter of his brother Haran (and therefore his niece). Nahor and Milcah had a son Bethuel, who gave birth to Rebekah and Laban (Gen. 24:15, 24, 29, 47).

Abraham’s son Isaac married Nahor’s granddaughter, Rebekah. Rebekah gave birth to twins, Jacob and Esau (Gen. 25:24-26). So Jacob and Esau were the grandchildren of Abraham.

Jacob married Laban’s two daughters, Rachel and Leah, and between them and their slave-girls, had twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel. So all of the children of Jacob were great-grandchildren of Abraham. But Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun were direct descendants from Terah through Nahor, Bethuel, Laban, then Laban’s daughter Leah, while Joseph and Benjamin were direct descendants from Terah through Nahor, Bethuel, Laban, then Laban’s daughter Rachel (Gen. 29, 30; 35:16-18). So eight of the twelve tribes of Israel descended from Terah, six through Leah and two through Rachel, while the four tribes of Dan, Naphthali, Gad, and Asher were born to Jacob by concubines, and so they were descendants of Abraham, but they were not also descendants of Nahor, Abraham’s brother.

Gen 11:28

**“Haran died before his father Terah.”** This seemingly insignificant piece of historical information is actually quite significant. This is the first time in the Bible that a son is said to die before his father. The confusion and pain caused by sin are thus starting to be seen working through society. To many people, absolutely nothing in life is more painful than the death of one’s child.

**“in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldees.”** So Haran died while the family was in Ur of the Chaldees. If Haran died while the family was in Ur, then Haran died before Abraham reached 75.

**“in Ur of the Chaldees.”** Some scholars locate Ur of the Chaldees in the same area as Haran. Besides the commonly accepted “Ur,” there is another Ur closer to Haran that is almost certainly the “Ur” of Abraham’s origin (see commentary on Gen. 11:31).

Gen 11:31

**“Terah took Abram his son, Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram’s wife.”** It is noteworthy that Terah is not said to take his son Nahor with him, and this is evidence that supports “Ur” being the northern city of Ur (aka, “Urfa,” “Edessa”).[[52]](#footnote-12028)

**“Ur of the Chaldees.”** This “Ur” (aka “Urfa,” “Edessa”) is in northwest Mesopotamia and is about 20 miles (32 km) north of Haran. It is commonly assumed that “Ur of the Chaldees” is the well-known city of Ur that is about 150 miles northwest of the Persian Gulf and deep in the Neo-Babylonian Empire. However, the evidence weighs against that interpretation. There is another “Ur” in the ancient Near East that much better fits as being the “Ur” of Genesis 11:31. But this northwestern Ur has not been given much attention by scholars until recently. For example, it is not even listed as “Ur” in the well-respected *Oxford Bible Atlas* but is listed under its modern name, Edessa, and then called by its archeological site name, Urfa. The third and fourth editions of the Oxford Atlas only have one map that has Urfa on it, but it is called “Edessa.”

We can understand why scholars gravitated toward asserting that the southeastern Ur was the Ur of Genesis. In the 1920s and 1930s, Sir Leonard Wooley excavated the southern Ur, and it was huge and impressive. Furthermore, it was associated with a flood layer that Wooley—wide-eyed and overexcited—claimed was evidence from Noah’s Flood (that claim has now decisively been disproven). Needless to say, the southeastern Ur got a lot of attention and so there was much popular pressure to claim that this now-famous Ur was the Ur of Genesis. That fact, combined with the limited knowledge about northwestern Ur and the many gaps in our understanding of the history of the area and the people who lived around Abraham’s time, the Arameans, Akkadians, and Babylonians, resulted in the basically unchallenged belief that the southeastern Ur was indeed the Ur of Abraham. But that has now changed. A number of scholars have reexamined the evidence and now assert—and we agree—that the northwestern Ur is the Ur of Abraham.

The Ur that is now Edessa (or Urfa) is about 30 miles north of Haran. Victor Hamilton[[53]](#footnote-11276) gives seven good reasons that this northwestern Ur is actually the “Ur” in Genesis 11:31; the Ur of Abraham. Those reasons are summarized here:

1. The journey would have been incredibly long for a family to take at that time (and traveling through Haran was unnecessary to get to Canaan and added many miles).
2. There are hundreds of references to the famous Ur in the cuneiform texts, and not once is it called “Ur of the Chaldees.”
3. The famous “Ur” could not have been called “Ur of the Chaldees” because the Chaldees were an ethnic group that actually lived around where Urfa (Edessa) was, and did not migrate southeast until long after Abraham.
4. When Abraham wanted to get a wife for his son Isaac, he told his servant to go to his “country” and the land of his birth and get a wife (Gen. 24:4, 7). Yet the servant did not go to the famous Ur, but went to upper Mesopotamia where Haran and Urfa are (Gen. 24). When Genesis 24:10 mentions the city of Nahor as Aram-naharaim, the evidence supports that being the Ur in northwest Mesopotamia. The woman who became Isaac’s wife was Rebekah, and when she sent her son Jacob to get a wife, she sent him to her family in Haran (Gen. 27:43), not way down southeast to the famous Ur.
5. A tablet from Ebla refers to “Ur in Haran.”
6. The expression “Ur of the Chaldees” occurs four times in the Old Testament (Gen. 11:28, 31; 15:7; Neh. 9:7). Each time the Septuagint translates the word “Ur” with a word for land or region, so the translators of the Septuagint connected the Chaldeans with a region, an area.
7. Some of Abraham’s relatives had names that may be connected with sites in northern Mesopotamia.

It is worth expanding on point number four above that Victor Hamilton made, because it is quite decisive that the “Ur of the Chaldees” is the northern “Ur” (aka, “Edessa” and “Urfa”).

Terah, Abram’s father, had three sons: Abram, Nahor, and Haran (Haran fathered Lot, Abram’s nephew. Cf. Gen. 11:27). God called Abram out of Ur to go to Canaan (Gen. 11:31; 12:1). But at first, Abram and the family members who went with him only went as far as Haran, which was only about 30 miles south of the northern Ur (Gen. 11:31). When Abram left Ur and went to Haran, the only family he took was his father Terah, his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot (Gen. 11:31). That meant that Abram’s two brothers, Nahor and Haran, did not leave Ur. The Bible says Haran died in Ur (Gen. 11:28) and Nahor stayed near Ur, married, and had children. Nahor married Milcah and had a son named Bethuel, who married and had Rebekah and Laban (Gen. 24:15, 24, 29, 47). All this becomes important many years later because when Abraham sought a wife for his son Isaac, he sent his servant to “my country and to my relatives” (Gen. 24:4) to find a wife for Isaac. The servant went to “Mesopotamia to the city of Nahor” (Gen. 24:10). As we will see, the area that the servant went to in order to find Abraham’s relatives was the area of the northern Ur. The servant went there and found Rebekah and brought her back to Isaac (Gen. 24:1-67).

Rebekah married Isaac and gave birth to Jacob and Esau. Jacob stole Esau’s blessing, so Esau planned to kill Jacob (Gen. 27:42). To save Jacob, Rebekah said to him, “Arise, flee to Laban my brother in Haran” (Gen. 27:43). But Haran was not where Nahor was from if the Ur of Abraham is the southern Ur! The southern Ur is some 600 miles southeast of Haran. In contrast, as already stated, Haran was only about 30 miles from the northern Ur. So Rebekah sent Jacob to her brother Laban in Haran, which was very close to the northern Ur, where the family of Terah had originated. It is even quite likely that since Haran was the larger and more influential city, that Nahor or his son Bethuel, the father of Rebekah and Laban, had moved to the area of Haran. In any case, Rebekah would not have sent Jacob to Haran if her family had been in the southern Ur.

Still another point that supports that the “Ur of the Chaldees” (Gen. 11:28) is the northern Ur is that when God told Abraham to leave (Gen. 12:1), He said, “Go from your country and from your relatives.” Haran would not have been Abraham’s country, nor would his relatives live there if the “Ur of the Chaldees” was the southern Ur that was some 600 miles from Haran. But Abraham’s country and his relatives would have lived in the area of Haran if “Ur of the Chaldees” was the northern Ur, only about 30 miles from Haran.

Although it has been suggested that the traditional Ur is to be preferred because of what Stephen said in Acts 7:2 about Abraham coming from Mesopotamia, there is no reason to believe that Stephen did not consider Haran to be in Mesopotamia, which reaches as far west as eastern Turkey.

**“the land of Canaan.”** This is the first use of “the land of Canaan” in the Bible. The land no doubt got its name from Canaan, the grandson of Noah (Gen. 10:1, 6). Apparently, Canaan and his descendants settled in the land we now know as “the land of Canaan.” In these relatively early years after the Flood, many parts of land were named after the person who settled there. So, for example, Edom was settled by Esau, who was also called Edom, Moab was settled by Moab, a son of Lot, and so forth.

**“they went as far as Haran and settled there.”** The distance Abram’s family ended up going from Ur (Urfa; Edessa) to Haran is about 20 miles (about 32 km). Terah’s son Haran is spelled differently than the city of Haran in Syria. According to Acts 7:2-4, God first called Abram when he lived in the city of Ur in Mesopotamia. Stephen, drawing upon the Old Testament and history that had been faithfully passed down through the generations, said: “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia before he lived in Haran, and said to him, ‘Get out of your land, and away from your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.’ Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And when his father was dead, *God* removed him from there into this land in which you now live.”

That Abram was first called by God while he lived in Ur seems to be also clearly supported by Genesis 15:7 and Nehemiah 9:7. Yet Genesis 11:31 makes it seem like Terah, Abram’s father, was the one who took his clan from Ur to Haran. The apparent contradiction, and Abraham’s seeming disobedience to God in taking his family with him, can be explained by the strength of the cultural norms of the time. God told Abraham to leave his family (Acts 7:3), but he did not (although by “family” it is possible that God may have meant Abram’s more distant family members). Since Abram’s father Terah was going along, culture dictated that Terah, the father of the clan, was the de facto leader of the group. This explains the verbiage in Genesis 11:31, that even though it was Abram whom God called, the text says, “Terah took Abram his son…and Sarai his daughter-in-law…They went from Ur of the Chaldees.”

The Bible has nothing at all to say about the family’s stay in Haran. That should not surprise us, because God called Abram to go to the Promised Land, not go to Haran in Syria. In fact, the Bible does not even say why the family stopped in Haran, although we can set forth an educated guess—it was due to Terah’s age and declining health. From the call of Abram to the Exodus was 430 years (Exod. 12:40; Gal. 3:17), and Abram was called from Ur of the Chaldees. Also, Abram was 75 when he left Haran to go to the Promised Land (Gen. 12:4) and was 100 when Isaac, the “seed,” was born. Furthermore, we know that the length of time between Abram’s “seed” (Isaac) and the Exodus was 400 years (Gen. 15:13; Acts 7:6). But if there were 400 years from Isaac’s birth to the Exodus, and 430 years from Abram’s call to the Exodus, then the call had to predate the birth of Isaac by 30 years, five years before Abraham left Haran. That would mean that Abram was called to go to the Promised Land at age 70, when Terah was 200. The family traveled to Haran, at which point we can surmise that Terah was too weak to travel, so the family stayed in Haran for five years. When Terah died at 205, God called Abram again and he went into the Promised Land. Thus, the five years that Abram stayed in Haran was not something that God wanted but something that He accommodated, so He said nothing about it other than that it happened.

[For a more detailed account of the time periods between Abraham and the Exodus, see commentary on Exod. 12:40.]

**Genesis Chapter 12**

Gen 12:1

**“Now Yahweh said to Abram.”** Yahweh’s call to Abraham is the beginning of the “chosen people of God.” Out of all the people on earth, God chose Abraham to go to the land that would later be Israel, and God gave that land to Abraham and his “chosen” descendants. Abraham had eight sons, but God chose Isaac to inherit the land. Isaac had two sons, but God chose Jacob, not Esau, to inherit the land. Jacob had 12 sons, and they became the 12 tribes of Israel, then the nation of Israel, and those 12 tribes of Israel were chosen to inherit the land. Thus, “Israel” became the chosen people and the chosen nation.

In Genesis 12:3, as God continued to speak to Abraham, we learn the purpose of the “chosen people.” It was not just so they could be blessed by their special relationship to God, but also so that through them all the clans (or groups) of the world would be blessed. One way that the world would be blessed through Israel, if the peoples of the world would accept it, was through the laws and guidance that God gave to Israel. The civil and social laws that God gave Israel are truly exemplary, and many nations have been blessed by the guidance they provide. Another blessing of inestimable value is the knowledge that there is only one God, Yahweh. Abraham knew this (cf. Gen. 14:22) and he and his descendants could have brought that knowledge to the world if they would accept it—but they didn’t. In fact, sadly, even the direct descendants of Abraham other than Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s sons, abandoned Yahweh and turned to pagan gods. The world was awash with pagan gods, most of which ruled through threats and terror, and demanded things that degraded human life and society, such as ritual prostitution and human sacrifice. In contrast, the laws God gave were good.

Also, although God does not specifically state it in Genesis, as the Bible unfolds through the centuries, we learn that the greatest blessing to the world that came through Israel was the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who died for the sins of all humankind so that any person who desired to live forever could do so because Jesus died for their sins.

**“Go.”** In Hebrew this is emphatic, but it is difficult to reproduce in English. Everett Fox[[54]](#footnote-31469) tries to reproduce it: “Go you forth,” but that is awkward in English.

**“country.”** The Hebrew is literally “land,” but the translation “your land” makes it seem like Abraham was a landowner in Haran, which he was likely not. He was a herdsman and shepherd. God’s command to “go from your country” makes more sense when we realize that the “Ur of the Chaldees” was only about 30 miles from Haran. So both Ur and Haran were in the area where he lived, and thus his “country,” his land.

**“and from your relatives and from your father’s house.”** Normally family would stick together, so this is an unusual request that God made of Abraham. The likely reason for it is that Abraham’s ancestors did not worship Yahweh. They worshiped pagan gods (Josh. 24:2). God did not want Abraham’s family taking their pagan gods with them into the Promised Land, so He told Abraham to leave his family behind. God wanted to start a line of believers that could be “His people,” and He decided to start it with Abraham, the Father of those who believe, so He told Abraham to leave his family behind, and Abraham obeyed.

Gen 12:2

**“I will make of you a great nation.”** God promised Abraham that his seed would be a great multitude on a number of different occasions (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 16:10 (via Hagar); Gen. 17:6; 22:17).

Gen 12:3

**“treats you with contempt I will curse.”** Although many English versions say that the person who “curses” Abraham, God will “curse,” the two words that are often translated as “curse” are different. The first word is *qalal* (#07043 קָלַל ), which means more like “to treat someone lightly,” or “treat someone with contempt.” The second word usually translated as “curse” is *ʾarar* (#0779 אָרַר), and *ʾarar* is commonly translated as “curse.” What we learn here in Genesis 12:3 is that a person does not have to “curse” Israel in the strict sense of the word to be “cursed” by God.

**“clans.”** The Hebrew word translated “clans” here is *mishpechot* (#04940 מִשְׁפָּחָה) a term that generally refers to a group larger than a “family” (a father, mother, and children) but smaller than a tribe. The point is that the blessing of the Messiah will be available for every family group, every clan.

**“will be blessed through you.”** This is a promise from God to Abraham that the Messiah would be one of his descendants. This is the first time that the Bible tells us that God told Abraham that the Messiah would come through him, but God repeated that to Abraham at various times and ways. It seems unlikely that Abraham would forget God telling him that the Messiah would be one of his descendants, but God no doubt told him that a number of times to bless him and because of the magnitude of the promise. Also, since it is repeated in the Bible, we are not likely to miss it either. This promise in Genesis 12:3 is repeated (and expanded) in Genesis 18:18 and 22:18, and referred to in Galatians 3:8. Peter referred to this promise in Acts 3:25.

[For more on the blessings that would come through Abraham, see commentary on Gen. 12:1.]

Gen 12:4

**“Abram was 75 years old.”** So Abram, who lived to be 175 years old (Gen. 25:7), was 75, which meant Sarah was 65 years old at this time (cf. Gen. 17:17).

Gen 12:5

**“the souls whom they had acquired in Haran.”** These are the male and female slaves that Abraham and Lot acquired.[[55]](#footnote-10608)

Gen 12:6

**“Place of Shechem.”** The Jews referred to their Temple in Jerusalem as the “Place” (see commentary on John 19:20). Here it refers to a holy site.

**“At that time the Canaanites were in the land.”** This is much more than just a statement telling us that the children of Ham via Canaan had settled in the Promised Land, although it does explain why Abram could not have the land at this time and God said He would give the land to Abram’s descendants (Gen. 12:7): the land was already occupied by Canaanites. Here in Genesis 12:6, the word Canaanite is being used generically to include all the different evil tribes that occupied Canaan. Later on, the word “Amorite” is used generically to refer to the Canaanites because the Amorites were the dominant tribe in the area where Abraham was (cf. Gen. 15:16).

In this case, the word “Canaanite” was being used as it will be used later in Joshua when the Canaanites were known to be a race that had been genetically marred by demons and had to be destroyed completely (cf. Deut. 7:1; 20:16-18). Genesis 6:4, along with evidence from many other verses, shows that Satan, in order to destroy the human race that could produce the Savior who would destroy him, created a humanoid race of evil people called the Nephilim, the “fallen ones,” who made the earth so corrupt that God had to save it via a worldwide flood. But by the time of Abraham, Satan understood that God had his eye on the land of Israel and Satan wanted to claim that land for himself and destroy God’s people. So Satan made a second attempt at creating the fallen race, and that is why there were Nephilim in the Promised Land when Moses got to the edge of it (Num. 13:33).

E. W. Bullinger writes: “It is evident that from Terah’s and Abraham’s call, Satan knew the line by which ‘the seed of the woman’ (Gen. 3:15) was coming into the world. In [Gen.] chapter 6 he aimed at the whole human race. Now he aims at Abraham and his land. Here is the second explanation of ‘after that’ in [Gen.] 6:4. He [Satan] preoccupies the territory ready to dispute the advance. The Canaanite ‘was then’ – ‘being already’ there (cf. Gen. 13:7). The progeny of the latter attempt to corrupt the race had to be destroyed by the sword of Israel, as those ‘in the days of Noah’ had been by the Flood.”[[56]](#footnote-23343)

Satan is crafty, ruthless, and deadly, and believers are ignorant of him and his devices at their peril. The Bible says Christians are not to be ignorant of Satan and his schemes (2 Cor. 2:11). Although Christians will never defeat Satan in this life, we are called to stand against him and those who follow him in the same way that Jesus did. Although many Christians try to avoid conflict (and it is generally difficult and distasteful), the world is a battleground between Good and Evil, and we are called to “wrestle” against evil (Eph. 6:12) and be good soldiers for the Lord (2 Tim. 2:3). In chapter after chapter in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, believers take a stand against evil, and if evil is to be exposed and held in check, today’s believers must do the same.

[For more on the Nephilim, see commentary on Gen. 6:4.]

Gen 12:7

**“And Yahweh appeared.”** This is the first time that Yahweh appeared to Abraham.

**“I will give this land.”** This is the first time the Bible records God telling Abraham that his seed would get the Promised Land. The Hebrew text is future tense, “I will give.” Later, God will make this same basic promise in the past tense. God repeated the promise that He would give the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants many times, and said it in slightly different ways. He told Abraham that he and his descendants would get the land (Gen. 12:7; 13:15-17; 15:7, 18; 17:8). He told it to Isaac (Gen. 26:3). He told it to Jacob (Gen. 28:13; 35:12; 48:4). Then over and over He told Israel about the promise or that He would give them the land (cf. Exod. 6:4, 8; 12:25; 13:5, 11; Lev. 14:34; 20:24; 23:10; 25:2).

[For more on the promise God made to give the land to Abraham and his descendants, see commentary on Gen. 15:18.]

**“to your seed.”** This can be a collective plural, meaning “offspring” or “children,” or it can be an actual singular and refer to just one person, one “seed.” Eventually, we learn that the “seed” is Christ (Gal. 3:16).

**“So he built an altar there to Yahweh.”** Abram built an altar here in Shechem, and in the next verse, he builds another altar between Bethel and Ai.

Gen 12:8

**“having Bethel on the west and Ai on the east.”** Bethel is slightly more than two miles to the west (actually somewhat northwest) of Ai, and Abraham pitched his tent and built an altar just to the east of Bethel and thus just west of Ai. Many years later, Joshua would stage his attack on Ai from almost exactly the same spot (Josh. 8:9). The locations of both Bethel and Ai may not be exactly known and are disputed by some archaeologists (although there is mainly agreement about the cities, especially Ai), but even if we today are not exactly sure where they are, Abraham did and so did Joshua, and Abraham’s camp and Joshua’s troops were in basically the same area.

**“He built an altar to Yahweh there.”** In Genesis 12:7, Abram built an altar at Shechem, and here in Genesis 12:8, he builds a second altar between Bethel and Ai. Abraham’s building these altars at Shechem and between Bethel and Ai was more than a simple act of worship. We know that fact because Abram traveled through much of the land but only built altars in a few places. The fact that Abraham took the time to build an altar of sacrifice to Yahweh at Shechem and also between Bethel and Ai in the heart of the Promised Land was an act of trust that God would make good on His promise that he had given the land to Abraham, even though Abraham was still a wandering sheik, traveling with herds and flocks.

**“called on the name of Yahweh.”** The phrase “call on the name of Yahweh” refers to prayer and supplication. Abraham and others called on Yahweh to get His help and support in life just as we do. It was certainly appropriate at this time, just as Abraham was entering the land and not knowing exactly what he would be facing, that He prayed to Yahweh for guidance and support.

Gen 12:9

**“Abram traveled, going on by stages toward the Negev.”** The Hebrew text is brief, and involves the custom that Abraham lived in a tent and traveled with it. A much more literal translation of Genesis 12:9 could be: “And Abraham journeyed, going on and journeying toward the Negev.” Or “And Abraham pulled up [his tent pegs], going on and pulling up [his tent pegs] toward the Negev.” The picture in the Bible is that Abraham traveled and as he did he pulled up his tent pegs and moved himself and his extended family from tent site to tent site, moving south toward the Negev in the south of Israel. Esau used the same terminology about pulling up tent stakes (Gen. 33:12).

Gen 12:10

**“famine in the land.”** There are a number of times in the Bible that Israel had a famine. God wants to bless the land we live on, and the Devil comes to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). There is a war going on between Good and Evil, and, because of the sin of Adam and Eve, the Devil has control of much of what happens on the earth. That is why he is called the “god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4), and the “ruler of this world” (John 14:30), and controls or influences everything that happens in it (1 John 5:19).

The Devil was occasionally able to cause a famine that affected the people of God, and at least for some of these famines, godly people left the land of Israel. Abraham left the land because of a famine (Gen. 12:10). So did Isaac (Gen. 26:1). So did Jacob, who went to Egypt (Gen. 45-46). So did Elimelech (Ruth 1:1). Was it the right thing to do for them to leave Israel? Life is difficult. God gave every one of us different ministries and we all have different levels of risk tolerance. Many things in life are not “right” or “wrong,” simply different. Some people prefer to stay where they are in hard times and “tough it out.” Other people see the wisdom in trying to mitigate difficult circumstances by doing different things, one of which is moving.

Although some Christians assert that moving out of the land demonstrates a “lack of faith,” that is not true. It was often the wise choice, and Proverbs tells us that “wisdom is supreme” (Prov. 4:7 NIV84, HCSB). It is wise to move from danger. Abraham and the others saved their flocks and fortune. Jacob moved out of Israel due to a famine, but then his descendants made the mistake of not going back when the famine was over, and eventually they became enslaved. Moving once saved them, if they had moved twice they would have been saved again.

Life is uncertain and there is danger everywhere. To do our best for God we have to be convinced that this world is not our home. We cannot become too attached to any property here. We have to be ready to move if the situation calls for it. Often we are not sure. For example, a believer standing alone without a fellowship faces a difficult decision. He or she can go to the trouble of moving to be near a fellowship, or he or she can stay and keep witnessing in the hope that there will be fruit and a fellowship will develop. What is the right decision? Often, we don’t know, we just make the best decision we can and pray for God’s blessings. In the same situation, someone else might make the opposite decision. One thing is certain in these difficult situations; what we need from other Christians is understanding and support, not criticism for the decision we have made.

Gen 12:11

**“a beautiful woman.”** The Hebrew text is more literally, “a woman of beautiful appearance.”

Gen 12:13

**“Please say that you are my sister.”** This record in Genesis 12:10-20 is the first time Abraham asked Sarah to lie about being his wife in order to protect his life. He did it again later, and the situation is explained in more detail there (Gen. 20:1-18).

**“so that it will be well with me for your sake.”** That is exactly what happened. Genesis 12:16 says, “And he [Pharaoh] treated Abram well for her sake, so that Abram came to have sheep, cattle, male donkeys, male slaves, female slaves, female donkeys, and camels.” Although the text does not specifically say so, it seems almost certain that Pharaoh treated Abram well and through his association with Pharaoh, Abram came to have a lot of wealth.

**“so that my soul will live.”** Here in Genesis 12:13, the word “soul” is *nephesh* (#05315 נֶפֶשׁ), and is being used to mean “I.” Abram was saying that “I will live because of you.”

[For more information on “soul,” see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

Gen 12:15

**“Pharaoh’s house.”** Pharaoh’s “house” was the palace, but the palace was commonly called the “house” of the king.

Gen 12:16

**“And he [Pharaoh] treated Abram well for her sake.”** This is what Abram had asked for in Genesis 12:13, to be treated well. When Pharaoh took Sarai, he did indeed treat Abram well, and because of that, Abram came to have sheep, cattle, male donkeys, male slaves, female slaves, female donkeys, and camels. Although the text does not specifically say so, it seems almost certain that it was through his association with Pharaoh that Abram came to have a lot of wealth. In fact, some of, if not much of, that wealth may have come as a kind of bride price when Pharaoh took Sarai. However, as the supposed brother-in-law to Pharaoh, it is quite likely that a lot of people would have wanted to do business with Abram just to get into a closer or more influential relationship with a member of the royal family.

In any case, what we know is that Abram came into Egypt with some wealth (Gen. 12:5), but left Egypt with a lot of wealth (Gen. 13:2).

Gen 12:18

**“Pharaoh called Abram and said, “What is this that you have done to me?”** The Bible never says how Pharaoh found out that the plagues he was suffering were related to Abraham. It is enough for us to know that he did, and God likely did not put that in the text because Pharaoh would have discovered the reason for the disasters by revelation or some kind of divination. Throughout history, God energized many things that seem strange to us today, for example, the Urim and Thummim in the breastplate of the High Priest (Exod. 28:30); Gideon’s fleece (Judg. 6:36-40); and Jonathan’s declaration (1 Sam. 14:9-10).

Gen 12:19

**“Why did you say, ‘She is my sister.’”** In this context, it seems like Pharaoh is more godly than Abram. Abram assumed Pharaoh and the Egyptians would be ungodly, but that turned out to not be the case at all. We have to be very careful about making assumptions about people.

**“so that I took her to be my wife.”** The Bible does not say whether or not Pharaoh had sex with Sarai. Pharaoh was obviously upset. He simply said, “Take and go!”

Gen 12:20

**“and they sent him away.”** Pharaoh’s men sent Abram away, likely escorting him on his way out of Egypt.

**Genesis Chapter 13**

Gen 13:2

**“wealthy.”** The Hebrew is literally “heavy.” What Abraham had was indeed “heavy.” Abram came into Egypt with some wealth (Gen. 12:5), but left Egypt with a lot of wealth (Gen. 13:2; see commentary on Gen. 12:16).

Gen 13:3

**“*making and* breaking camp.”** Abraham had flocks and herds that had to eat and rest. He could not do a forced march from one point to another. The time he spent in any one place would vary depending on the pasture, water, people around, etc.

**“between Bethel and Ai.”** Abraham and Joshua’s army both camped there (see commentary on Gen. 12:8).

Gen 13:4

**“earlier.”** This is not the very first, but earlier, at the early stages of his travels.

Gen 13:5

**“and tents.**” The word “tents” here indicates that like Abram, Lot was the head of a small tribe of people. We soon later find out that both of them had numerous flocks and herds (Gen. 13:6-7).

Gen 13:7

**“the Canaanite.”** The Canaanites were descendants of Ham (Gen. 10:6), although in this context it means more than just that the descendants of Ham’s son Canaan settled there (see commentary on Gen. 12:6).

**“Perizzite.”** A tribe of unknown origin that by the time of Joshua lived in the hill country of Judah and Ephraim. See commentary on Joshua 9:1. The Canaanites and Perizzites were wicked people, and would have been a threat to Abraham. Also, this lets us know that if there were Canaanites and Perizzites in the land at the time of Abraham, when Israel crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land some 400 years later they would have had time to multiply greatly, which they did.

**“were living in the land at that time.”** This use of “land” is more specific to the part of the land where Abram was at the time, not the whole area of the Promised Land.

Gen 13:9

**“If you go to the left, then I will go to the right.”** The Biblical world was oriented to the east. While we Westerners think of “up” or “ahead” as north, in biblical times “ahead” was east. So if Lot went “to the left,” that would mean north, while “to the right” would be south. Abraham and Lot were in the Negev at the time (Gen. 13:1), so practically speaking, if Lot went north he would go into central Israel. Instead, Lot went east.

Gen 13:10

**“plain of the Jordan.”** The Hebrew word translated as “plain” is *kikkar* (#03603 כִּכָּר), and its meanings include “round,” “circle” “talent” or in this context a flat valley. E. A. Speiser writes: “Plain. Not ‘circle’ as the Heb. is often translated, since ‘the circle of the Jordan’ would be difficult to justify topographically. The Heb. noun kikkār is used for the typical flap of bread, as well as the weight known as ‘talent.” Both shapes are round as well as flat. Here, however, it was evidently the latter feature that influenced the geographic application.”[[57]](#footnote-28997) Although there was a lush “plain of Jordan” at the time Lot viewed the property, it seems that after Yahweh destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah the plain submerged and formed the southern part of the Dead Sea. The southern basin of the Dead Sea was shallow and quite flat, and one can easily imagine that at one time it was a fertile plain even though that is not the case today.

**“Zoar.”** The name “Zoar” means “Little” or “Small,” which did not mean the town stayed that way throughout history (cf. Gen. 19:20-22). This is almost certainly not the Zoar in Egypt, but the Zoar south of the Dead Sea, in the Jordan Rift. From where he was, Lot could see the plain of Jordan and it was well-watered in the direction of Zoar. Lot was looking east, and the Zoar of Egypt is southwest. More evidence that this Zoar is in the Rift Valley is in Genesis 14:2, 8, which lists the king of Zoar as fighting in the five-king coalition against the invading kings from Mesopotamia. Still more evidence that this Zoar is not the Zoar that is on the way to Egypt is that Lot wanted to hide there, but later thought better of it and went to the mountains (Gen. 19:20-22).

**“all of it was well-watered...like the Garden of Yahweh.”** The “Garden of Yahweh” is also known as the Garden of Eden, which was well-watered (Gen. 2:6, 10-14).

Gen 13:11

**“So Lot chose the plain of the Jordan for himself.”** We can give Lot the benefit of the doubt and say that perhaps at this time Lot did not know that the people of Sodom were exceedingly wicked, and he simply chose that area because he saw that it would be good for his herds and flocks. Plus, being in the Jordan Valley, although the summers would be hot, he would not be subject to the cold winters of the hill country of Judah, which was just to the west of him. On the other hand, in those times people stayed safe by being keenly aware of the people and tribes who lived around them. As wealthy as Abraham and Lot were, it is hard to believe that they would not have had some information about the wickedness of the people in the cities of the plain such as Sodom and Gomorrah.

In any case, if Lot did not know about the wickedness of the people of Sodom when he first moved there, he would have learned about it quite soon. Yet, even though he was a mobile shepherd like Abraham was, he refused to move. In 2 Peter, God comments about “righteous Lot, who was worn down by the unrestrained way of life of immoral people (for as he lived among them day after day, that righteous man kept tormenting *his* righteous soul by the lawless acts that he saw and heard” (2 Pet. 2:7-8). Lot could have and should have moved. Not only did the sinful behavior of the people of Sodom torment him, it almost cost him his life, both when the angels were in his house (Gen. 19:9) and again when the Mesopotamian kings carried him off as a captive (Gen. 14:12). Lot is an example of how being weak-willed and getting entangled with the world can cost a person dearly. Godly people avoid evil. Proverbs has a lot to say about avoiding evil: “A wise person is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is angry and is overconfident” (Prov. 14:16). Also, “A prudent person sees evil and hides, but the naïve continue on and are punished” (Prov. 22:3; 27:12).

Gen 13:13

**“men of Sodom.”** This is almost certainly the generic use of the word “men,” meaning “people,” because it seems clear that the women were unrighteous also. In fact, God said that if there were ten righteous people in the city he would not destroy it (Gen. 18:32), and since there would likely be close to the same number of men in the city as women, the women could not have been righteous either. However, as seems clear from Genesis 19:4-11, the men were certainly actively involved in wicked behavior.

**“exceedingly wicked and sinful.”** The Hebrew is written in such a way that the text means exceedingly wicked and exceedingly sinful. The wording of the text is emphatic.

Gen 13:15

**“I will give to you.”** This is the second time God told Abraham that his seed would get the “Promised Land,” and this time God clarified that the land would be given to “you” (Abraham) and “your seed.” The first time God spoke of giving the land, it was just to Abraham’s seed (Gen. 12:7). God repeated the promise that He would give the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants many times, and said it in slightly different ways. He told Abraham that he and his descendants would get the land (Gen. 12:7; 13:15-17; 15:7, 18; 17:8). He told it to Isaac (Gen. 26:3). He told it to Jacob (Gen. 28:13; 35:12; 48:4). Then over and over He told Israel about the promise that He would give them the land (cf. Exod. 6:4, 8; 12:25; 13:5, 11; Lev. 14:34; 20:24; 23:10; 25:2). Also, in this context, the word “seed” can have a singular or plural meaning. In some contexts, the word is clearly plural, but here it can be either a plural meaning or a singular meaning, or both. Galatians 3:16 says, “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. It does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as referring to many, but referring to one, ‘**And to your seed**,’ which is Christ.” As the promise stated, Abraham’s “seed,” Christ, will rule the land forever.

[For more on the promise God made to give the land to Abraham and his descendants, see commentary on Gen. 15:18.]

Gen 13:16

**“like the dust of the earth.”** The “dust of the earth” is the figure of speech hyperbole (exaggeration) for a huge number. God promised Abraham that his seed would be a great multitude on a number of different occasions (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 16:10 (via Hagar); Gen. 17:6; 22:17). This is the second time God told this to Abraham, and it is a clarification of what He had said to Abraham earlier, in Genesis 12:2. God also told Jacob his seed would grow in number to be like the dust of the earth (Gen. 28:14).

Gen 13:17

**“I will give it to you.”** See commentary on Genesis 13:15.

Gen 13:18

**“And Abram moved his tent and went.”** Abram had been living between Bethel and Ai, about ten miles north of Jerusalem (Gen. 13:3). Now he moves his tent to Hebron, about 30 miles south of Jerusalem.

**“lived by the oaks of Mamre that are in Hebron.”** Genesis 14:13 tells us that these are “the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, the brother of Eshcol and the brother of Aner; and these were allies of Abram.” It would not be uncommon for a person to own property with trees, or even just the trees themselves. Abraham would have been allowed to tent there because Mamre and Abram were allies. Some scholars believe that here in Genesis 13:18, “Mamre” is a reference to a geographical site close to Hebron, but the fact that this text says the oaks were “in” (or “at”) Hebron, plus the clarification about the oaks being “the oaks of Mamre the Amorite” in Genesis 14:13, argues against that being the case.

**“and he built an altar to Yahweh there.”** This is the third altar that Abraham built in the Promised Land. He built one at Shechem (Gen. 12:6-7), one between Bethel and Ai (Gen. 12:8), and now one at Hebron (Gen. 13:18). In Hebrew, the word “altar” is more literally “slaughter site.” When Abraham built an altar, he killed animals on it—that was what altars were for. The killing and burning of an animal was not just to please God, although it did, but when properly understood, it was an indication that an “innocent” animal would die in place of a sinful human, and the death of the innocent would cover the sin of the guilt party. That is why 2 Corinthians 5:21 says that Christ died as an offering for sin.

**Genesis Chapter 14**

Gen 14:1

**“Amraphel king of Shinar.”** “Shinar” was the name of the ancient homeland of Babylon, encompassing both Sumer and Akkad. It was west of the northwest section of the Persian Gulf.

**“Arioch king of Ellasar.”** “Ellasar” has not been positively identified. Scholars used to think it was the Babylonian town of Larsa, but that has been disproven. It seems to be located somewhere in the western part of Mesopotamia or just south of that.[[58]](#footnote-13467)

**“Chedorlaomer king of Elam.”** Chedorlaomer was the leader of the coalition of these kings. Elam was north of the northwest end of the Persian Gulf.

**“Tidal king of Goiim.”** “Tidal” is a Hittite name, but Goiim is unlocated. If King Tidal was a Hittite, then this coalition of kings likely reached from what is today western Turkey eastward to the Persian Gulf, and the army they could have put together would have been formidable indeed.

Gen 14:2

**“Bera king of Sodom.”** The five kings who defended themselves against the Mesopotamian armies were minor kings; kings over cities, not countries, so they were outnumbered and lost the war. Four of the five kings are named. It is possible that the “names” were not given names, but names they were called in the culture, because “Bera is based on *ra*, ‘evil,’ and Birsha on *resa* ‘injustice,’ in symbolic censure of Sodom and Gomorrah.”[[59]](#footnote-29869)

Gen 14:3

**“Plain of Siddim.”** The Hebrew word translated as “plain” is *ꜥemeq* (#06010 עֵ֖מֶק), and it refers to a valley. However, a “valley” in biblical thinking can be very different than what we Westerners usually think of as a valley. For example, the “Valley of Jezreel” is a flat plain over five miles (8 km) wide in some places. True, there are mountains to the north and south of the plain, but is a five-mile flat plain really a “valley” even if it does have mountains on both sides? We would normally say “No.” We would call it what it is: a plain with mountains on both sides. Similarly, is the south basin of the Dead Sea, which seems to also be the “Valley of Siddim” at the time of Abraham (Gen. 14:3), really a “valley” when it is some five miles wide? We would normally refer to it as the “plain of Siddim.”

Although the “Plain of Siddim” has never been specifically located, that is very likely because it is where the southern basin of the Dead Sea is now, just as Genesis 14:3 indicates. The southern basin of the Dead Sea is shallow (mostly 20-30 feet deep) and mostly flat, and in historical periods has not been covered in water. E. A. Speiser writes about the Valley of Siddim: “Apparently the authentic name of the area at the southern end of the Dead Sea, which was later submerged.”[[60]](#footnote-14897)

**“that is, the Salt Sea.”** The “Salt Sea” is another name for the Dead Sea. Genesis was penned by Moses. Moses lived long after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, so what was a well-watered plain at the time of Abraham and Lot (cf. Gen. 13:10) was the southern basin of the Dead Sea at the time of Moses.

Gen 14:4

**“They served Chedorlaomer for 12 years.”** Although there were four northern kings that formed the coalition that attacked Israel and the Transjordan, the mention of Chedorlaomer in this context strongly indicates that he was the instigator and leader of the coalition. The Bible does not tell us how the southern kings “served” the Mesopotamian king Chedorlaomer for 12 years, but it likely meant making payments of flocks and herds and other things as well. Lot would have been part of this subjugation to Chedorlaomer because Lot lived near Sodom (Gen. 13:12) and was likely a subject of King Bera of Sodom (Gen. 14:2).

Gen 14:5

**“Chedorlaomer came, and the kings who were with him.”** Victor Hamilton writes about the route that these northern kings took through the Transjordan:

“The geographical exactness given to the description of the route followed by the invaders (Ashteroth-karnaim, Ham, Shaveh-kiriathaim, Seir/El-paran, En-mishpat, Hazazon-tamar) is striking. Equally striking is that the place names which are identifiable are all to be found along the central mountain range of Transjordan, which, according to Deut. 1-3, is the route followed in the opposite direction by the Israelites after they left Sinai for Palestine. This route is the ‘kings highway’ (Num. 20:17), which was the one that caravans and military expeditions followed between Syria in the north and the Dead Sea in the South.”[[61]](#footnote-19393)

**“struck down.”** The devastation produced by these strong Mesopotamian kings and their armies was huge, and had an effect that lasted for centuries.

Nelson Glueck wrote about the devastation: “Centuries earlier [than the Babylonian Captivity] another civilization of high achievement had flourished between the twenty-first and nineteenth centuries B. C., till it was savagely liquidated by the Kings of the East. According to the Biblical statements, which have been borne out by archaeological evidence, they gutted every city and village at the end of that period from Ashtaroth-Karnaim in southern Syria through all of Transjordan and the Negev to Kadesh(-barnea) in Sinai (Genesis 14:1-7). From then on, for hundreds of years, till the establishment of the kingdoms of Edom and Moab and Ammon in the thirteenth century B. C., there was a great gap in the history of permanent, sedentary settlement. Bedouins roamed freely throughout the length and breadth of most of Transjordan. With a few notable exceptions in the area of Ammon, the central and southern parts of the land knew no sound of the carpenter’s hammer and the ring of the stonemason’s chisel no more. Systematic agriculture became a thing of the past. Commerce ceased. There are no pottery remains of this period other than at several isolated places to testify of civilized activity….”[[62]](#footnote-21970)

The devastation caused by the Mesopotamian kings and their armies allowed Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob more freedom to roam and pasture their flocks than they otherwise might have been able to do. In a sense, this devastation was similar to what Samson did when he killed all the leadership of the Philistine kingdom (Judg. 18:27, 30), something that disabled that enemy of Israel during a time when they were establishing their first king and were truly becoming a united kingdom instead of a confederacy of independent tribes.

**“the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim, and the Zuzim in Ham, and the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim.”** The reason these three “beings,” the Rephaim, the Zuzim, and the Emim, are specifically named in this context is that they were Nephilim, large and powerful beings who were incurably wicked and due to their size and strength generally rose to leadership in the areas they lived (see commentary on Gen. 6:4).

**“Ham.”** This is not the same word as “Ham” the son of Noah—the names are spelled differently in Hebrew. The location is unknown, but it is likely in Gilead in the Transjordan.

Gen 14:6

**“Seir.”** “Seir” was a Horite, and the one whom Mount Seir is named after (cf. Gen. 36:20). By the time of Moses, the descendants of Esau had attacked and conquered the Horites, the people of Seir, and driven the Horites out. Thus at that time “Mount Seir” was Edom (cf. Deut. 2:4-5, 12, 22). However, at this time of Abraham, Seir the Horite and his descendants lived in the hill country south of the Dead Sea, in the area that was later called “Edom.”

**“El-paran...by the desert.”** It seems that “El-paran” is another name for the port city of Elath, or it could be a place in the desert (or wilderness) of Paran. This wilderness/desert area is west of Edom.

Gen 14:7

**“En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh).”** The fact that Genesis 14 has a mix of older and more modern names for the same places is a mark of its authenticity. If it had been written much later for a different audience, the older names would not have been necessary.

This “Kadesh” is the well-known Kadesh-barnea in the northern Sinai Peninsula, just south of the Negev. Genesis 14:7 is the first reference to Kadesh in the Bible. The area of Kadesh-barnea had four springs, so it had plenty of water, which made it an ideal place to stop and camp, or even to live. Traveling south from Israel, when one reached Kadesh-barnea, the main north-south road split into three. The main road continued south to Egypt, while one road turned west and followed the Wadi El-Arish to the Mediterranean Sea, and another road went southeast to the Gulf of Aqabah. Kadesh-barnea was the point at which Moses stopped short of the Promised Land and sent spies into it (Num. 13:26; Deut. 1:19-24). Also Moses’ sister Miriam died and was buried at Kadesh-barnea (Num. 20:1). Joshua conquered Kadesh-barnea (Josh. 10:41).

**“struck down all the territory.”** The Hebrew text uses the idiom: “struck down the whole field of the Amalekites.” The territory or “field” is being put by metonymy for the people who live there. The northern kings conquered the territory all the way down to the Red Sea.

**“Hazazon-tamar.”** “Hazazon-tamar” is one of the names of En-gedi, on the western shore of the Dead Sea (2 Chron. 20:2).

Gen 14:8

**“Plain of Siddim.”** See commentary on Genesis 14:3.

Gen 14:10

**“Plain of Siddim.”** See commentary on Genesis 14:3.

**“bitumen pits.”** For more information on bitumen, see commentary on Genesis 11:3.

**“as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled.”** It was not just the two “kings” who fled, but they and their armies. The Bible does not explicitly say these five kings were defeated, but we can see that they were defeated.

**“some *people* hid themselves in them.”** It is commonly believed that the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah “fell” (i.e., died) in the bitumen pits, and the Hebrew word sometimes translated as “fell” can refer to being killed or dying. But that meaning does not make good sense in this context. The kings and their armies who were from the area were well acquainted with the bitumen pits. Are we to believe they somehow accidentally fell in the pits and died as if in quicksand, or jumped into them to hide but then realized they were stuck in the bitumen and could not get out and so died there? Or that the presence of the pits slowed their escape so they were overtaken by the enemy and killed? Those explanations do not make good sense. Furthermore, they do not fit with the immediate or remoter context. For example, it seems apparent that the king of Sodom did not die because he appears again in Genesis 14:17. Also, we must remember that the kings—along with some of their army—were never actually said to die in the pits, that is simply assumed by translators. Also, they were never said to be killed by the enemy. The evidence of the text is that the men in the bitumen pits continued to live, just as the ones who fled to the hills did.

When we read the whole sentence of Genesis 14:10, we find that it is speaking about the people who did not die but instead escaped the northern invaders. It reads, “Now the Plain of Siddim was full of bitumen pits, and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some *people* hid themselves in them, and the rest of them fled to the hill country.” It was not just the two men, the king of Sodom and the king of Gomorrah, who hid in the bitumen pits, but some of their army; in fact, the two kings may not have been among the men who hid in the bitumen pits. The NIV expresses this fact well: “when the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some of the men fell into them and the rest fled to the hills.” The bitumen pits made good places to hide because they could not be easily seen from a distance. They were depressions in the ground and someone had to be quite close to them to see down into them or even know they were there.

There were two categories of people who escaped being killed by the northern army: those who hid in bitumen pits and those who fled to the mountains.

The idea that the kings or their army “fell” into the pits or “fell” (i.e., “died”) in the pits is not what the verse is speaking about. Victor Hamilton translates the phrase about the bitumen pits as, “they hid out in them, while the rest fled to the hills.”[[63]](#footnote-31929) He goes on to write: “Some commentators (e.g., Westermann) have registered surprise that the story would have the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah falling (so AV, RSV, NIV, etc.) into the bitumen pits (and as a result perishing) only to have the king of Sodom reappear later in Genesis 14:17. But this apparent problem disappears once it is remembered that *nāpal* may also refer to a voluntary lowering of oneself. For example, Gen. 24:64 refers to Rebekah who “lowered herself [lit., “fell”!] from her camel.”[[64]](#footnote-26298)

A few commentaries and versions have picked up on what really happened as the southern armies fled. For example, the CJPS version reads, “and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, in their flight, threw themselves into them, while the rest escaped to the hill country.” E. A. Speiser (The Anchor Bible) translates Genesis 14:10, “The kings of Sodom and Gomorrah flung themselves into these [bitumen pits] in their flight.”[[65]](#footnote-28196) Then Speiser comments, “*flung themselves*. Literally, “fell”; but the Heb. stem (*npl*) often carries a reflexive connotation, notably in the phrase “to fall on one’s neck” (Gen. 33:4; 14:14; 46:29), which describes a voluntary act; see also Gen. 17:3).”[[66]](#footnote-14274) Nahum Sarna agrees, and says, “Hebrew root *n-f-l* often has this meaning [of a voluntary “falling”]”[[67]](#footnote-11362) Henry Morris, in *The Genesis Record*, does not mention people dying in the bitumen pits, but instead says that they were “possibly hiding in the asphalt pits.”[[68]](#footnote-32408)

We can understand why the Hebrew text uses the word *nāpal*, “fell,” or “threw themselves.” The men were fleeing the enemy and wanted to get out of sight as quickly as possible, so they hurriedly got into the pits, where they hid. The southern armies, which included the armies of the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, were defeated and fled to save their lives. Some of the men hid in bitumen pits, while others fled to the mountains.

**“fled to the hill country.”** The Jordan River Valley, which runs north and south, has very high mountains on both the east side and the west side. The Bible does not say which side the army fled to, but since the invading army was coming down the Transjordan side, it would be logical that the defeated army fled west.

Gen 14:11

**“They took all the possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah.”** The “they” here refers to the four northern kings.

Gen 14:12

**“the son of Abram’s brother.”** Lot was Abraham’s nephew, the son of the brother of Abraham.

**“who lived in Sodom.”** Lot had moved from “near” Sodom to “in” Sodom (cf. Gen. 13:12).

Gen 14:13

**“the Hebrew.”** This is the first use of “Hebrew” in the Bible.

**“was living.”** Abraham lived in a tent and had many servants who watched his flocks and herds, and they would have also lived in tents with him, so this was a typical Bedouin tent encampment, with dozens of tents. Genesis 12:16 says that Abram had flocks, herds, donkeys, camels, and both male and female servants (more likely a mixture of slaves and servants. The Hebrew word can be used of either a servant or a slave, so readers have to tell from the context whether “servant” or “slave” is meant). We learn from Genesis 14:14 that Abram had 318 men who were fighting age who had been “born in his house,” that is, as part of his household of slaves and servants, so he had a huge camp. Thus, Abram was a powerful Bedouin chief. As the weather changed and grazing needs changed, the camp would move. This way of life is almost gone today, although a few Bedouin tribes that camp are left.

**“of Mamre the Amorite.”** “Mamre” was the name of a person and a place (Gen. 13:18). It is possible and even likely that the place was named after its early owner, Mamre.

Gen 14:14

**“he led out his trained men, born in his house, 318.”** Genesis 14:14 mentions the 318 men who were born in Abraham’s house, but it seems clear that there were other allies of Abraham who fought in the war. Genesis 14:13 says that Mamre the Amorite and his brothers Eshcol and Aner were allies of Abram, and according to Genesis 14:24, those three men (and the men who would have been with them) also got a share in the spoils, indicating that they had fought in the war against the Mesopotamian kings. So the Bible does not tell us how large Abraham’s army was, but it would have taken a lot of courage to go against the Mesopotamian kings who had been so successful. It is also very likely that when Abraham’s army attacked, the men who had been taken as slaves by the Mesopotamian kings joined Abraham’s army in helping to defeat the northern invaders.

The word translated as “trained men” occurs only here in the Bible. It could very likely refer to slaves since they were born in Abraham’s “house,” that is, in the extended camp over which he was the “father,” the leader, but it could also refer to servants or even, as some lexical evidence suggests, “retainers.” For more uses of “born in his house, see commentary on Genesis 17:12.

**“Dan.”** At the time of Abraham, and later when Moses wrote Genesis, the town was called “Laish” (Judg. 18:7, 27), but when the Danites conquered it they changed the name to “Dan” (Judg. 18:29). So it seems that an editor during or after the time of Judges edited the name in Genesis to “Dan” to clarify the location for later readers.

The phrase “pursued as far as Dan” can be confusing because the next verse, Genesis 14:15, says he pursued them to Hobah north of Damascus. Abraham pursued Chedorlaomer and his allies as far as Dan and fought an initial battle with them there, but when Chedorlaomer’s army retreated north, Abraham and his allies pursued them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus (Damascus was about 45 miles northeast of Dan).

Gen 14:15

**“Hobah.”** This site has not been located.

**“north of Damascus.”** The Hebrew is literally, “on the left hand.” In our Western culture, we ordinarily turn our maps to point north, and think of East as “to the right” of north. In the biblical culture, everyone thought of East as “straight ahead” because it was where the sun rose, and the sun was a blessing from God. So, for example, the Tabernacle and Temple had their entrances to the East. The Messiah is called, “the Rising Sun from on high” (Luke 1:78) because when he comes he will dispel these dark times. So the “left hand of Damascus is north of Damascus. It is important that the student of Scripture keep in mind that the biblical world was oriented to the East; it comes up in a number of verses.

Gen 14:16

**“the women and the people.”** Since Genesis 14:16 specifically mentions “women,” “the people” refers to the men. Since most of the men of fighting age either died in the war or were among the escapees (cf. Gen. 14:10), these “people” would have generally been older men and boys.

Gen 14:17

**“the king of Sodom.”** The king of Sodom is Bera (Gen. 14:2). That he was here to meet Abraham is evidence that he and others did not die in the bitumen pits, but only hid in them (see Gen. 14:10).

**“the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King’s Valley).”** The “Valley of Shaveh” is generally believed to be about where the Hinnom Valley and Kidron Valley meet, just south of Jerusalem.

Gen 14:18

**“Melchizedek.”** “Melchizedek” is perhaps more easily understood if it is spelled as a hyphenated word, “Melchi-zedek” (“My king is righteousness”). It is noteworthy that at this point during the time of Abraham, “Salem” (Jerusalem) was ruled by a godly king, but when Joshua entered the land some 450 years later, Jerusalem was ruled by Adoni-zedek (“My lord is righteousness”) who was a very ungodly king and organized a confederation of armies to attack Gibeon, which had made peace with Joshua (Josh. 10:1-5).

[For more on Melchizedek, see Heb. 7:1-17.]

**“Salem.”** “Salem” is apparently the oldest and original name of Jerusalem, and this is the first time it occurs in the Bible. “Salem” means “peace,” (related to *shalom*, “wholeness, peace”). The first time the city is recorded as being called “Jerusalem” is Joshua 10:1, and the king at that time was Adoni-zedek. When the Jebusite city of Jerusalem was finally conquered by David, the king of the city was not named, although the city was called “Jebus” as well as Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5:6-9; 1 Chron. 11:4-7).

**“bread and wine.”** This would not have ordinarily been any kind of grand reception in the biblical world; in fact, it is so ordinary that to a man of Abram’s wealth and stature, it would have been an insult. The bread and wine are mentioned because they prefigure the death of Jesus Christ, as he showed us at the Last Supper. It is likely that with, or after, the bread and wine that other food was brought out. We know that Abram knew about the coming Messiah, and in fact, would begin to offer his son in a way that pictured the Messiah (Gen. 22:1-18). This verse shows that Melchizedek also knew much about the coming Messiah.

**“a priest.”** The Hebrew text does not read “the priest,” even though many English versions have that reading. The Hebrew text is “a priest,” and that is almost certainly the case. At this early time before Israel existed and thus before God chose Israel to be His chosen people, the people who believed were God’s people, and there is little reason to doubt that some of those people acted as priests to God, not just Melchizedek. It may well have been to one of those other priests or prophets that Rebekah went when she needed to ask Yahweh about the children in her womb (Gen. 25:22).

**“of God Most High.”** In Hebrew the translation “God Most High” is very literal; the phrase means “the Most High God” (cf. NET) and that is the phrase that occurs in the New Testament.

Gen 14:19

**“Blessed be Abram.”** The Hebrew text does not have a verb, it is simply “Blessed...Abram.” That construction can be, and should be, interpreted many different ways at the same time. It would normally be taken to mean “Blessed is Abram,” (e.g., CSB, GW), but it can also imply that Abram will be blessed, or it can be a desire, “May Abram be blessed” (e.g. BBE). Furthermore, the genitive phrase “of God Most High” can refer to Abram being a godly person, or it can be instrumental and mean “blessed by God Most High.

**“creator.”** The *HALOT*[[69]](#footnote-19091) says “creator” for Genesis 14:19, and creator is a legitimate meaning of the Hebrew word *qanah* (#07069 קָנָה), which has a fairly wide semantic range and so, for example, can mean “create, possess, acquire, get.” Also, the Septuagint reads “creator,” not possessor. However, the Hebrew word can also mean “possessor.” It is difficult to choose whether to put “creator” or “possesser” in the REV text when the Hebrew word can have both definitions. A native Hebrew reader would see both meanings in the word at the same time.

Gen 14:20

**“a tenth of all.”** This is the first time in the Bible that a “tenth,” a “tithe” is mentioned. However, it was not the same as the tithe required by the Mosaic Law (Lev. 27:30-33). The tenth “of all” that Abraham gave was a tenth of the spoils of war he was bringing home from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him (Gen. 14:17). Abraham had fought them close to Damascus in Syria (Gen. 14:15) and was on his way back home close to Hebron (Gen. 14:13), which was about 30 miles south of Jerusalem. So to get from Damascus home, Abraham had to pass by Jerusalem (called “Salem” at the time), where Melchizedek was, and as Abraham was passing by Salem, Melchizedek came out and blessed him, and so Abraham, in recognition of the blessing and in the knowledge that Melchizedek was a priest of Yahweh, the Most High God, gave him a tenth of all the spoils of war he had taken. Abraham’s tenth was a one-time offering (it is never again recorded that Abraham gave a tenth—or any amount at all—to anyone else in recognition that they represented Yahweh, so Abraham’s tenth cannot be compared to the regular tithe commanded by the Law that was given every year. It was at the time of the Exodus, about 400 years after Abraham gave his tenth to Melchizedek, that God told Moses to establish the regular tithe.

The regular tithe in the Law was necessary because God established the Tent of Meeting (Tabernacle), which eventually became the Temple, and it needed lots of manpower and sacrifices to maintain it. So God commanded that the Levites could not own any land (Num. 18:20-24; Deut. 10:9-10), and their portion was to be the part of the tithes and offerings given to Yahweh by the other Israelites. Then, to sustain the Levites, God commanded that the other 11 tribes of the Israelites give a tenth of all they produced. Before the Tent of Meeting and the separation of the Levites, there was no regular tithe. That brings us to today in the Church Age. There are no more Levites, and the Body of Christ is the sanctuary. In that light, we can see why God changed from no regular tithe before Moses to a regular tithe when the Tent of Meeting and its regulations were established, and then changed back to giving from the heart as each person decided after the Levites and the Temple were made unnecessary by the death of Christ (2 Cor. 9:7). The New Testament Epistles encourage people to give to the poor (Rom. 15:26; Gal. 2:10), to the Lord’s people who needed it (1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8:14), and to those who serve the Lord (1 Cor. 9:6-14; 1 Tim. 5:17-18). God loves a cheerful giver, and will reward people for the gifts and good deeds they do today (2 Cor. 9:6-8).

Gen 14:21

**“Give me the people.”** The Hebrew is literally, “Give me the ‘soul,’” (with “soul” being a collective noun for “souls”) meaning the people. The Hebrew word *nephesh* (#05315 נֶפֶשׁ), often translated as “soul,” has many meanings, including a person himself or herself; the life force in a person, the person’s thoughts and emotions, and more.

[For more on *nephesh* and ‘soul,’ see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

Gen 14:22

**“lifted up my hand.”** One way a person swore a solemn oath was to raise his hand and swear. We still raise a hand and swear in our courts of law today, so this custom, thousands of years old, still survives in various forms. We see the custom of lifting up your hand to swear an oath in many places in Scripture (Gen. 14:22; Deut. 32:40; Ezek. 20:5, 6, 15, 23, 28, 42; 36:7; 44:12; 47:14; Rev. 10:5). Another ancient way of swearing was to hold the genitals of the one to whom you were swearing (see commentary on Gen. 24:2).

**“creator of heaven and earth.”** For the translation, see commentary on Genesis 14:19.

Gen 14:24

**“share *of the spoil*.”** It is an ancient custom that if men risk their life and go into battle that they get a share in the spoils of war. This included the arms and armor of anyone they personally killed. Abram recognized that the men who fought with him risked much, and wanted to make sure they got their reward for their bravery.

**Genesis Chapter 15**

Gen 15:1

**“word of Yahweh came to Abram.”** Some Trinitarians argue that the “word of the LORD/Yahweh” being referenced in Genesis 15:1 is a separate being from Yahweh himself. Many propose that the “word of the LORD” is Jesus. There are quite a few reasons why this is not the case.

Firstly, the Word of Yahweh never talks to Yahweh. Not once in the entire Old Testament. If the word of Yahweh was a separate person of the Trinity, as Trinitarians claim with this verse, one would expect maybe just one time, out of the 242 times the phrase appears, the Word would speak to Yahweh. This fact alone provides good support that the “Word of Yahweh” is not a different being from Yahweh himself.

Secondly, the Word of Yahweh is not a separate being from Yahweh any more than the word of Moses (Ex. 8:31; 12:35; 32:28) is a separate being from Moses. It is simply a Semitic expression to denote what someone said. Exodus 8:13 says, “So Yahweh did according to the word of Moses, and the frogs died out from the houses, from the courts, and from the fields.” Are we to conclude that there is a separate being from Moses, somehow related to Moses, whom God listened to? Surely not.

This Semitic idiom can be seen clearly in Numbers 3:51, which reads, “and Moses gave the redemption money to Aaron and to his sons, according to the Word of Yahweh, as Yahweh commanded Moses.” Here it can be clearly seen that “according to the Word of Yahweh” is simply an idiomatic way of saying, “as Yahweh commanded.”

This understanding is further solidified by the context. Earlier in this passage, in Numbers 3:44 and 48, it says, “Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying… ‘you are to give the money…to Aaron and to his sons.’” So, in context, who is giving this command to Moses? Yahweh. The “word of Yahweh” never gives this command to Moses. Only one being gives this command to Moses, Yahweh.

Thus, it is clear that by employing the phrase “according to the Word of Yahweh,” the author is not intending to say a different being besides Yahweh actually gave this command to Moses.

Now, there are times when the phrase, “the Word of the LORD” is used and Yahweh is not directly speaking to someone; rather, there is an intermediary. For example, in Joshua 8:8, Joshua is the one who actually communicates the Word of the LORD/Yahweh. It reads, “You are to do according to the word of Yahweh. See I have commanded you.” Joshua is the one speaking, yet the words he is saying are the words of Yahweh. All of this to say, “the Word of the LORD” is not a separate person, but a separate person can speak the word of the LORD to others.

Thirdly, some Trinitarians propose that this really is a separate being from Yahweh in Genesis 15:1, because it says that the “Word of Yahweh came to Abram.” The simple solution to this is that the phrase, ‘the word of \_\_\_\_ came to \_\_\_\_’ is a personification. This personification can be seen in 1 Samuel 4:1, which reads, “And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.” In context, 1 Samuel 3 just ended by saying that Samuel was established as a prophet of God. In other words, he was consistently speaking God’s words to Israel. So, when 1 Samuel 4:1 says “the word of Samuel came to all Israel,” it would be quite a creative interpretation to believe that a separate being from Samuel, that is somehow related to Samuel, literally came to Israel. No, rather, this is clear personification. It just means that Samuel spoke to Israel.

Therefore, when Genesis 15:1 says that “the Word of Yahweh came to Abram in a vision,” this by no means implies that there is a separate being coming to Abram in a vision, in fact later in the same passage it says that “Yahweh brought him outside and said, ‘Look now toward the heavens….’” So, in the context, Yahweh is identified as the one who was speaking to Abram.

It has been demonstrated that the biblical evidence and cultural semantics strongly support understanding Genesis 15:1 as a Hebrew idiom, not as teaching that a separate conscious being (Jesus) spoke to Abram. Lastly, remember that no New Testament or Old Testament author ever makes this claim, that Jesus is the “Word of the LORD” in these passages, so, at best, it is a speculative argument from Trinitarians.

**“vision.”** God can communicate His revelation to humans in many different ways (see commentary on Gal. 1:12). In this case, Abraham saw a vision. The Bible does not say what the vision was, but it was likely much like the vision that Jacob got when he saw Yahweh at the top of the staircase (Gen. 28:13). Abraham would have seen Yahweh, and Yahweh would have spoken His message to Abraham.

Genesis chapter 15 appears to be some visionary and some in real time and space. For example, Genesis 15:1-6 seems to be a vision, and God showed Abraham the stars at night in that vision, because Genesis 15:17, apparently much later, says the sun was just going down. Then, after Abraham fell asleep God again revealed truth to him in a dream-state vision (Gen. 15:12-21). Another possibility is that God appeared to Abraham in a vision on one day (Gen. 15:1-6) and then spoke to him about the land on another day (Gen. 15:7-21). In any case, the text does not give us the times these things occurred, making them part of a greater single experience between Abraham and God.

[For more on people seeing Yahweh, see commentaries on Gen. 18:1 and Acts 7:55.]

**“I am your shield.”** Abram needed a shield. From the time he left his homeland, Abram had been in danger. The Middle East has always been a lawless place, where tribes were constantly at war and travelers were attacked and robbed, or killed, or enslaved. Abraham openly feared that happening to him when he went to Egypt (Gen. 12:10-12) and again when he was in the southwestern area of the Negev near the town of Gerar (Gen. 20:1-18), and it likely happened in more places besides those two that are specifically mentioned (cf. Gen. 20:13). While Abram was living in the Promised Land, kings from Mesopotamia swept down on both the Transjordan and the Land of Israel and destroyed cities and carried away captives and material goods. So, for example, Lot was taken captive and only rescued because of Abram (Gen. 14).

**“your reward is exceedingly great.”** This seems to be the best and most logical translation of Genesis 15:1, and can be found in a number of English versions (e.g., AMP, BBE, CEB, CJB, CSB; ESV, JPS, NAB, NASB, NET, NJB, NLT, NRSV, RSV, and YLT). An older translation is, “Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward” (KJV). However, that translation has been rejected by most modern translations because it does not seem to make sense. How can Yahweh be Abram’s reward in any meaningful way? That would have to be some kind of shorthand statement for some way in which Abram’s relationship with God would be his reward. But nothing like that is ever mentioned again in the entire record of Abraham, which is chapters long. On the other hand, God promises Abraham that he will have innumerable descendants, which was something Abram wanted (Gen. 15:2-6), and God also promised Abram and his descendants the land, the Promised Land. So for his faithfulness, Abraham’s reward would indeed be very great.

Gen 15:2

**“But Abram said.”** Abraham is replying honestly to God. Genesis 15:2 should start with a “but,” not an “and” (e.g., CEB, CSB, ESV, JPS, NASB2020, NET, NIV, NLT, NRSV, RSV). Nahum Sarna writes: “For the first time Abram speaks to God. In unquestioning obedience to the divine command, he had broken his ties with his family and become a wanderer in a strange land. Life had been repeatedly in danger. The years had rolled by and the promises of progeny had not materialized. Through it all Abram maintained his silence. Now the measure of recurring disappointment and prolonged frustration had reached its limit. The bonds of restraint are broken, and the patriarch bears the bitterness of his soul in a brief, poignant outburst bordering on utter despair.”[[70]](#footnote-27800)

Genesis 15:2 shows us the open and honest relationship that Abram had with God. God wants us to speak with him openly and honestly, and Abram does that here (cf. Heb. 4:16).

**“what will you give me.”** Abram was wealthy (Gen. 13:2), so he did not need money or “things,” but even if he had been poor, the feeling of the value of having a family in biblical times was so strong that Abram’s sentiment would have been the same. If a man lived and died without children to enjoy and inherit the work of his years, he was considered cursed. Nothing was as valuable as a family. Abram would die having had eight sons. Ishmael, Isaac, and six by Keturah (Gen. 25:1-2).

**“childless.”** Abraham did not have any children yet, and at this point in Sarah’s life she was still barren, and therefore not naturally expected to have any children. Nevertheless, God had told Abram that he would have heirs (Gen. 12:2, 7; 13:16).

**“Eliezer of Damascus.”** Nothing is said of him other than what is in this verse (some assume that he is the chief servant mentioned in Gen. 24:2, and although that may be the case, there is no way to know for certain). This has led many scholars to think that the text has been corrupted or needs to be amended, but that would not have to be the case. Abraham was a powerful Bedouin sheik, with hundreds in his household (see commentary on Gen. 14:14), and he would have no doubt had powerful political and financial connections. It is likely that at that time, before Abram had children, he had made arrangements for this Eliezer to take over his household if he died. The fact that we know nothing else about Eliezer makes sense. He just comes up in a frank and intimate conversation between Abraham and God, and once Abraham had a male child Eliezer would no longer inherit the estate.

Gen 15:3

**“you have given no seed to me.”** The Hebrew text pulls “to me” to the front of the phrase for emphasis.

**“a member of my household is my heir.”** The Hebrew text reads more literally, “a son of my house” is my heir. The Hebrew text, translation, and customs are in question here, and the scholars are divided. It is most likely that Eleazar was actually one of the members of Abraham’s extended household, born in Abraham’s extended family or clan. He was not a literal son of Abraham, because the names of Abraham’s eight sons are known (Ishmael, Isaac, and the six sons of Keturah, who were Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah (Gen. 25:1-2)). As such, Eleazar was a servant who currently resided in Damasus, which was a major finance and cultural center at that time. If that was the case, then Abraham seems to be considering a custom of the Near East at that time, which was an adoption procedure whereby Eleazar could inherit Abraham’s estate. However, God intervenes here and assures Abraham that he will father his own son who will then be the legitimate heir.

Gen 15:5

**“So your seed will be.”** God promised Abraham that his seed would be a great multitude on a number of different occasions (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 16:10 (via Hagar); Gen. 17:6; 22:17).

Gen 15:6

**“He believed Yahweh.”** Genesis 15:6 is quoted in Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6, and James 2:23. Interestingly, although the Septuagint usually translated Yahweh as *kurios* (lord), here it translates Yahweh as *theos* (God).

In this context, the statement that Abraham “believed Yahweh” means much more than just that Abraham “believed in God.” It means that Abraham believed what God said. The text could even be translated as “Abram trusted God.” Many people today “believe in God” in the sense that they believe that God exists, but they do not believe what God actually says (for many people, that is because they are ignorant of what God actually says). Abraham believed what God said about him having more descendants than the stars he could see in the sky. Although there certainly seem to be a lot of stars in the night sky, astronomers estimate that a person can see with the naked eye 2,000-10,000 stars on a clear night. Abraham was over 75 years old and still childless when God told Abraham that he would have more descendants than the stars he could see in the sky, yet Abraham believed—really believed—what God said, and God counted Abraham righteous because of that. Abraham now has millions of descendants, far more than the stars he could see in the sky that night.

**“and he credited it to him as righteousness.­­­”** This statement teaches us a lot about what it means to be declared righteous in God’s sight due to trust, which is very important for people to know and understand because today people are saved—are granted everlasting life—because of their trust in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:22, 26-31; 10:9). All Abraham had to do to be declared righteous in God’s sight was to trust what God said (cf. Rom. 4:1-5). All we have to do to be saved today is trust that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was raised from the dead, and now is our Lord (Rom. 10:9).

Through the centuries, many well-meaning teachers have wrongly taught that trust (“faith”) in Jesus Christ is not enough to be saved. Many things have been added by various teachers or denominations to the simple truth that all a person had to do to be saved was trust in Jesus; that he died, was raised, and is Lord. Some of those wrongly added things include: being water baptized, confessing one’s sins, believing in the Trinity, going to church regularly, not sinning after “getting saved,” and not committing a “mortal” sin.

But in Abraham we see the Old Testament foreshadow of the New Testament salvation that is so clearly articulated in the New Testament Epistles. God declared Abraham righteous based only on his trust in God. Trust, nothing more. Abraham was declared “righteous!” before he was circumcised, which occurred after God declared him righteous (Abraham was circumcised in Gen. 17). Furthermore, Abraham was never water baptized. In fact, the kind of baptism practiced by John and Jesus does not seem to have been practiced by the Jews until after the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC, well over 1,000 years after Abraham. Furthermore, exactly when and under what circumstances the New Testament form of baptism came into existence is not known. When John started baptizing, the practice of baptizing had already begun in some form. The religious leaders did not ask John, “What is this that you are doing?” They asked him, “Why are you baptizing?” (John 1:25).

Also, Abraham sinned after God declared him righteous, and there is no hint that Abraham was no longer righteous in God’s sight because of that. For example, on two different occasions, Abraham told the lie that his wife was his sister, resulting in Sarah being taken into other men’s harems (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:1-18). While Sarah was, in fact, Abraham’s half-sister, that does not change the fact that he lied about her and allowed her to be taken into another man’s harem just to ensure his own safety. What about her safety and well-being? This proves what Romans 4 and Galatians 3 say: that righteousness is by trust, not works. Works don’t save us, and sin does not make us unrighteous in the sight of God. Righteousness and salvation come by trust. If Abraham had abandoned his trust in God, then he would not have remained righteous in the sight of God (cf. Ezek. 18:21-24; 33:12-16). On the other hand, since everyone sins, the key to being righteous in God’s sight is maintaining your trust in God.

It is due to the example of Abraham, and some other Old Testament verses and examples as well (cf. Ps. 40:6-8; Ps. 51; Hos. 6:6), that Romans says that salvation, being righteousness by trust, does not nullify the law but instead upholds the law (Rom. 3:31), and also that the Law and the prophets (i.e., the books written by the prophets, e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.) testify to “a righteousness from God apart from the law” (Rom. 3:21).

Salvation through trust in Jesus Christ is a major theme throughout the New Testament Epistles, but in Romans it is a very prominent theme and is stated in different ways through the book (cf. Rom. 1:17; 3:22, 28, 30; 4:2-3, 6, 9, 11, 13, 16, 22-24; 5:1; 9:30; 10:4, 6, 9). It is a great blessing from God, and a great comfort, to know that because God gave his only begotten Son to die in our place (Rom. 5:8), we can simply accept God’s gift and gain everlasting life because we trust in Jesus. God saves sinners, not “perfect people,” and He saves them because they trust that Jesus died for their sins, was raised from the dead, and now is Lord. While it is true that God expects saved people to work on living righteously in obedience to God, a process generally called “sanctification,” it is also true that everyone struggles with sin differently, and sin does not stop a person from being saved.

[For more on “faith” being “trust,” see Appendix 2: “‘Faith’ is ‘Trust.’” For more on Mark 16:16, which seems to say that a person must be baptized to be saved, not being in the original text of Mark, see commentaries on Mark 16:9 and 16:16.]

Gen 15:7

**“to give you this land.”** For notes on God promising the land to Abraham and his descendants, see commentary on Genesis 15:18.

Gen 15:8

**“how will I know.”** Perhaps the literal Hebrew is “by what,” making it somewhat clearer that Abraham was asking for some proof of God’s promise. To Abraham, God had promised children years earlier (Gen. 12:2, 7; 13:16), but Abraham had no children. Now God promises the land, which was occupied by pagan tribes, so we can see why Abraham would ask how he could know that God’s promise would come to pass.

Gen 15:9

**“a heifer...a female goat...a ram...a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”** These animals represented the animals that were offered for sacrifice: “cows, goats, sheep (a ram), turtledoves, and pigeons.”[[71]](#footnote-13925)

**“three years old.”** A three-year-old animal was considered full grown. However, why God specified that, especially in contrast with a “young pigeon,” is not explained in the text.

Gen 15:10

**“cut them down the middle.”** There were many different ways of making a blood covenant in the ancient world—although there were always some similarities, the exact way the covenant was made differed somewhat from place to place and through time. One of the ancient ways to make a blood covenant was to cut the animals in half, after which the parties making the covenant would walk between the bloody pieces (or, in the case of birds, between the bloody animals). This method was obviously practiced in the time of Abraham, and it was still in practice over 1,000 years later (Jer. 34:18). This particular covenant God made was unique because ordinarily, both parties to the covenant would walk between the pieces, but in this case, God put Abraham to sleep and made a covenant with himself; it was just a smoking firepot with a flaming torch, symbols that represented God, that went between the halves of the sacrifice. Thus, in effect, God made the covenant with Himself and so did away with the possibility of “human error.” In other words, by making the covenant with Himself, God was guaranteeing that Abraham and his descendants would get the Promised Land (cf. Gen. 15:8). God did not want Abraham’s descendants breaking any terms of the covenant and forfeiting the right to the Promised Land.

Gen 15:12

**“a deep sleep fell on Abram.”** Abram fell asleep, and while he was asleep, in a prophetic dream God revealed terrible things about the future of the descendants of his that would come through Isaac and later become the Israelites.

**“terror and a great darkness fell on him.”** This would have been some kind of nightmare Abram experienced as God revealed some things about the painful future of Abram’s descendants. God said, “Know, yes, know that your offspring will live as sojourners in a land that is not theirs (and will serve them and they will afflict them) 400 years.” The information was certainly horrible to hear, and the presence of God in that situation was likely disturbing as well. Many times the acute presence of God produces fear in people, even godly people (e.g., Adam (Gen. 3:10); Jacob (Gen. 28:17); Moses (Exod. 3:6), and the Israelites themselves (Exod. 20:18).[[72]](#footnote-18391) C. F. Keil writes about Abram’s sleep and prophetic dream-vision: “A deep sleep produced by God had fallen upon Abram…. The vision here passes into a prophetic sleep produced by God. In this sleep there fell upon Abram dread and darkness…. The reference to the time is intended to show ‘the supernatural character of the darkness and sleep, and the distinction between the vision and a dream’ (O. v. Gerlach). It also possesses a symbolical meaning. The setting of the sun prefigured to Abram the departure of the sun of grace, which shone upon Israel, and the commencement of a dark and dreadful period of suffering for his posterity, the very anticipation of which involved Abram in darkness.”[[73]](#footnote-13441)

Gen 15:13

**“400 years.”** The time of the sojourning of the children of Israel from the time of the weaning feast of Isaac (Gen. 21:8-13) until the Exodus from Egypt and giving of the Law was 400 years. Israel was not enslaved in Egypt for 400 years, as most people believe. See commentary on Exodus 12:40.

**“know, yes, know.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton, emphasizing that Abraham was to absolutely know this information. The phrase means “know for certain.”

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

[See Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

Gen 15:15

**“good old age.”** The Hebrew text uses an idiom: “good gray hair.”

Gen 15:16

**“In the fourth generation they will come here again.”** This is not the fourth generation from Abraham, because from the promise to the Exodus was 430 years. It is the fourth generation that Israel was in Egypt. Those four generations are Levi (Joseph’s half-brother who went down to Egypt), and Levi’s descendants, Kohath, Amram, and Moses.

[For a more detailed account of the time periods between Abraham and the Exodus, see commentary on Exod. 12:40.]

**“for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.”** The wickedness of the Amorites continued to increase until God judged their nation for its sin by the conquest of the Israelites when they entered the land.[[74]](#footnote-21690) C. F. Keil correctly states that in this context “Amorite” is “used here as the common name of all the inhabitants of Canaan, just as in Josh. 24:15.”[[75]](#footnote-24383) Nahum Sarna writes: “The history of all mankind is under the moral governance of God. The displacement of the native population of Canaan by Israel is not to be accounted for on grounds of divine favoritism or innate superiority (cf. Deut. 9:4-6). The local peoples, here generically called ‘Amorites,’ (see Comment to 10:16), have violated God’s charge. The universally binding moral law has been flouted and the inhabitants of Canaan have been doomed by their own corruption, as texts like Leviticus 18:24f. and 20:23f. explicitly aver. Yet God’s justice is absolute. The limits of His tolerance of evil—four generations—have not been reached, and Israel must wait until God’s time is ripe. Divine justice is not to be strained—even for the elect of God, even though its application relates to pagans.”[[76]](#footnote-22287)

The wickedness of the Amorites (the Canaanites) was full by the time Israel conquered the land (cf. Deut. 9:4-5). The same was true of Sodom and Gomorrah. God owns the earth, and He expects His created beings to live according to His laws and standards. When people greatly transgress the laws of God, there is a time when God works to get rid of them off the earth. That was the case with Sodom and Gomorrah, and it was the case for the Canaanites in the Promised Land.

Gen 15:17

**“a smoking firepot.”** The Hebrew word usually means “oven,” but our modern ovens are so different from the ancient ones that “oven” would not make sense to most people today. To better understand the ancient oven, imagine a large clay jar with a flat side. Then to cook, the jar was set on its flat side so that the hole of the jar was facing the side instead of the top. Then a fire was built inside the pot until the clay sides became very hot. Then the bread dough, which had a consistency ranging between our modern pancake batter and our modern unbaked bread dough, was put on the outside of the pot and left there until it cooked, at which point it was peeled off of the pot and eaten. A lot of breads are still cooked that way today in parts of the Middle East; this author has seen that kind of baking in Jordan.

So when a “smoking firepot” passed by, imagine a jar on its side with a fire and smoke inside passing between the pieces of the animals.

**“a smoking firepot and a flaming torch.”** Fire often represents the presence of God, and here in Genesis 15:17, God, representing Himself in two different ways, passes between the pieces and so makes a unilateral covenant. In a sense the covenant is with Abraham, because Abraham is the beneficiary of the covenant, but the actual covenant was unilateral and did not involve Abraham, who was asleep at the time. God wanted to make sure that this particular covenant could not be broken, so he made it with himself so that no human could break it or invalidate it.

Gen 15:18

**“cut a covenant.”** The Hebrew text is literally “cut a covenant.” Very few English Bibles translate the text that way, although some English versions do (cf. CEB, LSB, Schocken Bible, Tree of Life Version). Most English versions read “made a covenant.” The reason for the English translation “made a covenant” seems to be that there were many covenants made in the ancient world in which nothing was literally “cut.” For example, in the salt covenant, which was another common covenant, nothing was actually cut (cf. Lev. 2:13; Num. 18:19; 2 Chron. 13:5). Nevertheless, the phrase “cut a covenant” continued to exist in the common idiom of the language and pointed back to the ancient custom of actually cutting a covenant as we see Abraham did here in Genesis 15.

**“I have given this land.”** We would say, “I will give this land,” because the promise will be fulfilled in the future. The Hebrew text and translation use the Hebrew idiom of the prophetic perfect, which occurs when something that is future is spoken of as if it is in the past in order to emphasize the certainty that it will happen. God was absolutely going to give the land to the descendants of Abraham, so He said He had already given it to them. This prophecy was fulfilled in part at times in Israel’s history, but it will be ultimately and completely fulfilled only in Christ’s Millennial Kingdom on earth.

God repeated the promise that He would give the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants many times, and said it in slightly different ways. He told Abraham that he and his descendants would get the land (Gen. 12:7; 13:15-17; 15:7, 18; 17:8). He told it to Isaac (Gen. 26:3). He told it to Jacob (Gen. 28:13; 35:12; 48:4). Then over and over He told Israel about the promise or that He would give them the land (e.g., Exod. 6:4, 8; 12:25; 13:5, 11; Lev. 14:34; 20:24; 23:10; 25:2). This fact was also stated by the Psalmist (Ps. 105:8-10).

[For more on the prophetic perfect idiom, see commentary on Eph. 2:6. For more on the Millennial Kingdom on earth during which time God’s promise will be completely fulfilled, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.”]

**“from the river of Egypt.”** This is not the Nile, but the Wadi El-arish in the Sinai (cf. Num. 34:5; Josh. 15:4).[[77]](#footnote-22826)

Gen 15:19

**“*the land of* the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites.”** There are various lists of the tribes that were located in the land of Canaan both before and after Joshua’s conquest of much of the land, but this is the most complete one. Interestingly, however, the Hivites, who appear in some other lists are not listed in this list. Furthermore, the three tribes listed here, the Kenites, Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites, along with the Rephaim (Gen. 15:20), are not listed in the other lists (e.g., Exod. 3:8, 17; 13:5; 23:23, 28; 33:2; Deut. 7:1; Josh. 3:10; 24:11; 1 Kings 9:20; 2 Chron. 8:7). All these tribes or clans are sometimes referred to collectively as “Canaanites,” or “Amorites.”

**Genesis Chapter 16**

Gen 16:2

**“Yahweh has prevented me from bearing.”** In that ancient culture, if a woman did not have children it was commonly believed that Yahweh had prevented the pregnancy.

**“go in to my slave.”** The literal Hebrew text has “go to,” an idiom for sexual intercourse (Gen. 30:3; 38:8). It was a common practice in the ancient Near East that a woman who could not get pregnant would have children through a surrogate mother that was a slave. From a man’s point of view, if he wanted children he could just take a second wife, but then the first wife would not have control over those children; they would belong to the second wife. However, if the surrogate mother was the wife’s slave girl, the wife would have control over the children. Although this practice may seem strange to us today, in a time when there was no police force to protect people, and no government that would support people in their old age, having a large family, especially sons, was the best way to assure having protection and support (cf. Ps. 127:3-5).

Hagar apparently got pregnant very quickly. Abraham came into the Land when he was 75 (Gen. 12:4), and had lived in the land ten years when he had intercourse with Hagar (Gen. 16:3), so he was 85 years old. The following year, when Abraham was 86, Hagar gave birth to Ishmael (Gen. 16:16). Sarah was ten years younger than Abraham (Gen. 17:17), so Sarah was 75 when she gave Hagar to Abraham so she could have a child. Since she had been so many years without a child, at her age asking to have one by her slave girl seemed like a reasonable request. At the time this request did not seem like it was breaking any promise God made to Abraham. God said Abraham would have children, but in the biblical culture of the time, this was a way to have children, and Ishmael was indeed Abraham’s son. It was only later that God said specifically that Sarah would have a son (Gen. 17:16), and when He did tell that to Abraham, it is likely that Abraham thought that meant Ishmael would die or be killed, because he said, “Oh, that Ishmael might live before you!” (Gen. 17:18). As it turned out, both boys grew and founded nations, but the Messiah came through Isaac, Sarah’s child.

Gen 16:4

**“in to.”** An idiom for sexual intercourse (see commentary on Gen. 16:2).

**“mistress.”** In biblical times, a “mistress” was the wife of a slave’s master. The meaning of “mistress” has changed over time and now one of the primary meanings is a woman who is having an adulterous relationship with another woman’s husband.

**“insignificant.”** Hagar now looked upon Sarah as “insignificant,”[[78]](#footnote-21785) of little worth, and had contempt for her. Once Hagar conceived, it was abundantly clear that Sarai, not Abram, was the problem, and besides that, now Hagar had Abram’s child.

Gen 16:5

**“abuse.”** “Abuse” is the REV translation of the Hebrew word *chamas* (#02555 חָמָס), and it means “violence,” “wrong,” or “abuse,” and in this case “abuse” seems the better term.[[79]](#footnote-10556) The abuse and violence that Sarah was speaking about was the way she was now being treated with contempt by her slave girl. This blaming Abraham for what is happening is a very human outcome of a difficult and emotional situation. Since Hagar got pregnant very quickly, it was now more than apparent that Sarah’s not getting pregnant was not due to Abraham, but to her, and that would have had a huge emotional impact on Sarah. It is even possible that Sarah did not think Hagar would get pregnant, which would have somewhat freed her from feeling responsible that the family did not have children.

This is also a case of an all-too-human lack of foresight and planning for a changing situation, or as we know from life, sometimes when we change things there are unintended consequences. No doubt Sarah wanted a child, but she did not think through how Hagar would react to her if she got pregnant when Sarah could not. Sarah was likely so excited about the prospect of having a child that she did not take the time to even consider how getting pregnant and having a child would change Hagar.

Pregnancy did change Hagar, and somewhat for the worse: she now looked down on Sarah. That, combined with the shame and guilt that Sarah felt for not being able to get pregnant led Sarah to blame Abraham for the situation. We must keep in mind that in the biblical culture, for a woman to have children, especially sons, was of utmost importance, and not having them was considered a curse and shameful. God created women in part to have children, so a barren woman was considered accursed and abandoned by God—and it was public, not a family secret that could be hidden. The very first woman, whose name in English is “Eve,” is *Hawwa* in Hebrew and *Heua* in Greek, but the Greek “H” is only pronounced, there is no actual Greek letter “H,” so it is written as *Eua*, and thus we get the English “Eve.” Eve’s Hebrew name is derived from the Hebrew word *hayya*, to “live,” and thus even the name of the first woman showed that part of her purpose was to give life. Adam knew this, and named his wife accordingly: “Adam called his wife ‘Eve,’ because she was the mother of all living” (Gen. 3:20).

Sarah blaming Abraham for the situation is very human. It is in part blame-shifting, a common human failure that goes all the way back to the sin of Adam and Eve in Eden, when Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent. Sarah’s blaming Abraham is also no doubt in part due to the fact that since Sarah had given Hagar to Abraham as a “wife” (more technically a concubine), she felt that he was responsible for helping curb Hagar’s impudent behavior and supporting Sarah better. This explains Sarah’s concluding remark that Yahweh needed to judge between Abraham and her as to who was really at fault.

Abraham dealt with the situation (Gen. 16:6) by reminding Sarah that Hagar was still her slave and Sarah could deal with her however she wanted. Sarah responded to that in a surprising way when you consider how important having a child seemed to Sarah shortly before. She treated Hagar so harshly that even though Hagar was pregnant, she left and headed toward her homeland, Egypt. As we learn from Genesis 16:7-10, an angel met Hagar and told her to return to Sarah, which she did.

**“into your bosom.”** This is a euphemism for sex.

Gen 16:6

**“Look, your slave is in your hand.”** This is idiomatic. The essence is, “Look, your slave is under your authority.”

**“so she ran away from her.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “so she ran away from her face (or “presence”).

Gen 16:7

**“angel of Yahweh.”** This is the first time “the angel of Yahweh” appears in the Bible. The phrase “angel of Yahweh” is translated as “the angel of the Lord” in most English versions. It appears more than 60 times in the Bible and appears to be an angel who is high-ranking in God’s hierarchy of angels, however, that is never clearly stated and so it could be that “angel of Yahweh” refers to an angel who was on special assignment from God at that time. It is believed by some Trinitarians that in the Old Testament, “the angel of the Lord” is Jesus Christ before he supposedly “incarnated” as a human. That point is disputed, and with good reason. There is not a single verse that actually says that Jesus Christ is the angel of the Lord. The entire doctrine is built on assumptions. Why then, if the doctrine is not stated, do so many people believe it? The reason is that it is very awkward for Trinitarians to believe that Jesus is co-equal and co-eternal with God from the beginning of time, and yet he never appears in the Old Testament. Since Jesus Christ plays a very active role today as Head of the Church, it does not seem likely that he could have been around throughout the entire Old Testament and yet he never got involved with people. Therefore, many Trinitarians assume that “the angel of the Lord” is Jesus Christ.

However, Biblical Unitarians assert that the very fact that the text uses the phrase “angel of Yahweh” is very strong evidence that it is actually an angel who is being talked about, and that Jesus Christ did not yet exist during the Old Testament. The biblical evidence is that Jesus began his life when God impregnated Mary (Matt. 1:18). Furthermore, very strong evidence that the angel of Yahweh is not Jesus comes from Hebrews 1:1-2, which says that in old times God spoke through prophets, but in these end days God spoke through His Son. But if Jesus was the angel of Yahweh in the Old Testament, then Hebrews 1:2 is misleading at best and is actually wrong. If Jesus was the angel of Yahweh, then God had spoken through His Son in both the olden times and in these last days.

Exactly what are the reasons Trinitarians say that the angel of the Lord is Jesus? Trinitarians differ on the points of evidence (which is to be expected when working from assumptions), but the standard reasons are: he seems superior to other angels; he is separate from Yahweh; he is able to forgive sins (Exod. 23:21); he speaks with authority as though he were God; his countenance struck awe in people; he was never seen after Jesus’ birth, and, most importantly, he is addressed as God himself. All these points will be considered, but the fact that this angel is addressed as God will be considered first.

A study of the appearances of the angel of the Lord reveals that sometimes he is addressed as the angel and sometimes he is addressed as “the Lord” or “God” (see Gen. 16:13 and Judg. 6:16). The Jewish law of agency explains why this is so. According to the Jewish understanding of agency, the agent was regarded as the person himself. This is well expressed in *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*:

**Agent** (Heb. *Shaliah*): The main point of the Jewish law of agency is expressed in the dictum, “a person’s agent is regarded as the person himself” (*Ned*. 72b; *Kidd*. 41b). Therefore any act committed by a duly appointed agent is regarded as having been committed by the principal, who therefore bears full responsibility for it with consequent complete absence of liability on the part of the agent.[[80]](#footnote-18370)

In the texts in which the angel is called “God” or “the Lord,” it is imperative to notice that he is always identified as an angel. This point is important because God is never called an angel. God is God. So if a being is called “God,” but is clearly identified as an angel, there must be a reason. In the record in Genesis quoted above, the angel is clearly identified as an angel four separate times. Why then would the text say that “the Lord” spoke to her? It does so because as God’s agent or messenger, the angel was speaking for God and the message he brought was God’s message. The same basic idea is expressed when “God” is said to “visit” His people, when actually He sends some form of blessing (see commentary on Luke 7:16). God Himself does not show up, but someone unfamiliar with the culture might conclude from the wording that He did. Also, some of the people to whom the angel appeared clearly expressed their belief that he was an angel of God. Gideon exclaimed, “I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!” (Judg. 6:22).

There is conclusive biblical evidence that God’s messengers and representatives are called “God” (see commentary on Heb. 1:8). This is important because if representatives of God are called “God,” then the way to distinguish God from His representative is by the context. We have already seen that when the angel of the Lord is called “God,” the context is careful to let the reader know that the agent is, in fact, an angel.

Another piece of evidence that reveals that the angel of the Lord is an angel and not a “co-equal” member of the Trinity is that he is under the command of the Lord. In one record, David disobeyed God and a plague came on the land. “God sent an angel to destroy Jerusalem” (1 Chron. 21:15). We learn from the record that it was the angel of the Lord afflicting the people, and eventually “the lord was grieved because of the calamity and said to the angel who was afflicting the people, ‘Enough! Withdraw your hand.’ The angel of the Lord was then at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite” (2 Sam. 24:16). These verses are not written as if this angel was somehow God himself. There is no “co-equality” here. This is simply the Lord giving commands to one of His angels.

Another clear example showing that the angel of the Lord cannot be God in any way is in Zechariah. Zechariah was speaking with an angel about a vision he had. The Bible records, “Then the angel of Yahweh replied, ‘O Yahweh of Armies, how long will you not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which you have had indignation these 70 years?’ Yahweh answered the angel who talked with me with good words, comforting words.” (Zech. 1:12-13). The fact that the angel of Yahweh asked Yahweh for information and then received comforting words indicates that this “angel of Yahweh” is not a co-equal member of the Trinity with the same power and knowledge as Yahweh God. It is unthinkable that God would need information or need comforting words. Thus, any claim that the angel of Yahweh (“the angel of the lord”) is the preincarnate Christ who is in every way God just cannot be made to fit what the Bible actually says.

It is interesting that two pieces of evidence that Trinitarians use to prove that the angel of the Lord must be the preincarnate Jesus are that the Bible clearly states that he is separate from God and that he speaks with God’s authority. Biblical Unitarians assert that the reason the Bible shows that he is separate from God is because he is separate from God and he is exactly what the text calls him, an angel. Furthermore, he speaks with authority because he is bringing a message from God. The prophets and others who spoke for God spoke with authority, as many verses affirm. Also, the angel of the Lord speaks about God in the third person. For example, in Genesis 16:11, the angel says, “Yahweh has heard *and paid attention to* your affliction.” The angel does not say, “I have heard of your misery,” as if he were God. In Genesis 22:12, the angel said, “Now I know that you fear God,” and not “Now I know you fear me.” In Judges 13:5, the angel says Samson will be “a Nazirite to God,” not “a Nazirite to me.” So although the text can call the angel God, which is proper for a representative of God, the angel never said he was God and even referred to God in the third person.

Also, if Jesus were the angel of the Lord who spoke to Moses at the burning bush, then he did not say so in his teaching. Mark 12:26 records Jesus speaking with the Sadducees and saying, “...haven’t you read in the scroll of Moses, in *the passage about* the *burning* bush, how God spoke to him, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob?’” If Jesus had been the angel in the bush, and was openly proclaiming himself to be “the preexistent God,” he would have used this opportunity to say, “*I* said to Moses.” The fact that Jesus said it was *God* who spoke to Moses shows that he was differentiating himself from God. In accordance with the Jewish custom of Author-Agent, we can see that it was an angel speaking for God and representing Him who is called “God” in Exodus 3:4. Importantly, Stephen clearly identified the one who spoke to Moses as an angel (Acts 7:30), and if Stephen knew that the “angel” was Jesus, and he was trying to convince the unbelieving Jews in his audience that Jesus was the Christ, it seems that his speech to them would have been a good time to say it. The simple reason that Stephen said it was an angel who appeared to Moses is that it was an angel.

That the angel of the Lord seems superior to other angels is no reason to assume he is somehow part of the Trinity. Many scholars agree that angels differ in power and authority. The Bible mentions archangels in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and Jude 9, and an “archangel” is a ruling angel (see commentary on Jude 1:9). It would not be unusual that this angel would be one with greater authority. Neither is the fact that the angel of the Lord can forgive sins any reason to believe that he is God. God’s agents can forgive sins. God gave Jesus the authority to forgive sins, and then Jesus gave the apostles the authority to forgive sins (See commentary on Mark 2:7).

Although it is true that the countenance of the angel of the Lord occasionally struck awe in people, that is no reason to assume he is God. A careful reading of the passages where he appears shows that sometimes the people did not even realize that they were talking to an angel. For example, when the angel of the Lord appeared to Samson’s mother, she returned to her husband Manoah with this report: “A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn’t ask him where he came from, and he didn’t tell me his name” (Judg. 13:6). Note that angels had a reputation for having an awe-inspiring countenance, and the woman thought this “man of God” did too, but she still did not believe he was an angel. When Manoah met the angel of the Lord and the two of them talked about how to raise Samson, Manoah did not discover he was an angel until he ascended to heaven in the smoke of Manoah’s sacrifice. Therefore, just because someone’s countenance may be awesome, he is not necessarily God.

It is also argued that Jesus is probably “the angel of the Lord” because those words never appear after his birth, and it seems reasonable that this angel would appear right on through the Bible. The fact is, however, that the angel of the Lord does appear after Jesus’ *conception*, which seems inconsistent with the premise that the angel of the Lord is the “preincarnate Christ.” The record of Jesus’ birth is well-known. Mary was discovered to be pregnant with Jesus before she and Joseph were married, and Joseph, who could have had her stoned to death, decided to divorce her. However, “an angel of the Lord” appeared to him in a dream and told him the child was God’s. Matthew 1:24 states, “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.” Two conclusions can be drawn from this record. First, Jesus was already in Mary’s womb when the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph. From this we conclude that “the angel of the Lord” cannot be Jesus because Jesus was at that time “in the flesh” inside Mary. Second, it should be noted that in the same record, this angel is known both as “an” angel of the Lord and as “the” angel of the Lord. This same fact can be seen in the Old Testament records (cf. 1 Kings 19:5, 7).

There are many appearances of “an” angel of the Lord in the New Testament (cf. Acts 5:19; 8:26; 12:7, 23). From this, we conclude that it is likely that the same angel who is called both “the” angel of the Lord and “an angel” in the Old Testament still appears as “an angel of the Lord” after Christ’s birth. When all the evidence is carefully weighed, there is good reason to believe that the words describing the “angel” of the Lord are literal, and that the one being referred to is an angel, just as the text says.

[For more on the custom of the Author-Agent, see commentary on Matt. 8:5. For more information on God coming into concretion, see commentary on Acts 7:55. For more information on Jesus being the fully human Son of God and not being “God the Son,” see Appendix 6: “Jesus is the Son of God, Not God the Son.” For more information on “the Holy Spirit” not being a third Person in the Trinity, see Appendix 7: “What is the Holy Spirit?”]

**“spring on the road to Shur.”** Water was a vital part of life in the Middle East, and the need for water for humans and animals dictated that roads and caravan routes went where there was water. Thus, it seems sure that the spring of fresh water dictated where the road went, and not that there was a road and someone dug a spring next to it. “Shur” is a desert area just before reaching Egypt proper, in northwest Sinai (cf. Gen. 20:1).

Gen 16:8

**“I am running away from my mistress Sarai.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “running away from the face (or “presence”) of my mistress Sarai.”

Gen 16:9

**“The angel of Yahweh.”** See commentary on Genesis 16:7, “angel of Yahweh.”

Gen 16:10

**“The angel of Yahweh.”** See commentary on Genesis 16:7, “angel of Yahweh.”

**“I will make.”** Here in Genesis 16:10, we see Yahweh’s angel speaking in the first person, as if he were Yahweh. This is a good example of the Jewish custom of author-agent, where the agent of a principal can act or speak as the principal himself. This occurs quite often (e.g., Exod. 3:6; Isa. 7:10).

**“I will make your seed many.”** This is actually a continuation of the promise to Abraham that his seed would be like the stars in the sky.

**“many, yes, many.”** The Hebrew text has the figure of speech polyptoton, “to increase I will increase.” God was promising Hagar that her descendants would be great in number, and He did that by using the word “increase” (*rabah*; #07235) twice, in effect, “increase increase.” God had promised Abraham that his seed would be very numerous on a number of different occasions, but this promise is specifically of the offspring that would come through Hagar (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 16:10 (via Hagar); Gen. 17:6; 22:17).

[For more on polyptoton and translating it as many, yes, many, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

Gen 16:11

**“The angel of Yahweh.”** See commentary on Genesis 16:7, “angel of Yahweh.”

**“Ishmael.”** “Ishmael” means “God hears,” but in the Hebrew idiom, “hear” is often used in the pregnant sense of hearing and doing something about the situation. Very often the Bible saying God “hears” is not just a statement of fact, after all, He hears everything, but rather it is a statement that God hears and will act. We conflate the REV text to reflect that point.

Gen 16:12

**“a wild donkey of a man.”** This “description” has both positive and negative connotations. Desert donkeys were tough and survivors. On the other hand, they were stubborn and contentious. Throughout history, the Arab tribes have been both.

**“nearby.”** This phrase in Hebrew has two meanings. It is literally more like, “over against,” and it means either “in close proximity to,” or “in hostility to,” or both. It seems from history that both meanings are meant, and that is certainly the way the history of the Arab tribes has played out. They usually live quite close to each other, and they have been at war off and on throughout history (cf. commentary on Gen. 25:18).

Gen 16:13

**“You are a God who sees me,”** This translation seems to be the meaning of the text, and other versions agree (e.g., Douay, GNV, KJV, NAB, NASB2020, NET, NIV, NLT, YLT).

**“Here I have seen the one who sees me!”** The Hebrew text is admittedly obscure, and there are several translations that have been suggested by scholars. The REV translation works, (cf. NET), and seems to fit with the way Hagar would be feeling. After having been belittled and harshly treated by Sarai even though she was the mother of Abraham’s child, here at last is God who sees her as she is and supports her and sees value in her. Another translation suggested by scholars is basically, “Am I still alive after seeing him,” and while that could be a legitimate understanding of the Hebrew text, it does not seem to fit the situation and context as well as what is in the REV.

Gen 16:14

**“Well of the Living One Who Sees Me.”** Some versions leave the Hebrew: Beer-lahai-roi.

Gen 16:15

**“Abram called the name of his son.”** The angel gave the name Ishmael to Hagar, so Abram must have listened and believed Hagar and named the boy Ishmael. In naming the child himself, Abram legitimatized the birth of Ishmael. “Ishmael” means “God hears.”

Gen 16:16

**“And Abram was 86 years old.”** So Abram had been in the land for 11 years when Ishmael was born (cf. Gen. 12:4).

**Genesis Chapter 17**

Gen 17:1

**“Yahweh appeared to Abram.”** It is common for modern Christians to think of God as “everywhere present,” but even a brief overview of the Bible shows that this is not a very common concept of God in the ancient cultures or in the Bible. Although God sees and knows all, the implication in Scripture is that this occurs because God has spirits that are all over the earth that report to him (although there are also verses that say that God fills the heavens). However, many Scriptures indicate that God is in a single location. For example, throughout the Bible, God appears in human form to people where they are. He appeared in human form to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (they heard His footsteps, Gen. 3:8). God also appeared to Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 15:1; 17:1; 18:1); Isaac (Gen. 26:2); Jacob (Gen. 28:13); Moses and the elders of Israel (Exod. 24:9-11); Moses (Num. 12:8); Samuel (1 Sam. 3:10); Solomon (two times: 1 Kings 3:5; 9:2; 11:9); Micaiah (1 Kings 22:19-22); Isaiah (Isa. 6:1-5); Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:26-28); Daniel (Dan. 7:9-14); Amos (Amos 7:7); Stephen (Acts 7:56); and the Apostle John (Rev. 5:1-8). Although God’s human form may only be a form God generated for people to see so we can relate to Him, and He actually does fill the universe, the way the ancients perceived Him was the way He portrayed Himself.

The Bible has dozens of examples of God portraying Himself as being in a single location. For example, God is said to be “in heaven” (e.g., 2 Chron. 20:6; Dan. 2:28). At the tower of Babel, He was in heaven or on earth, but not both at once (Gen. 11:5, 7; cf. Eccl. 5:2). Also, when Yahweh wanted to deliver Israel from Egypt, He came down from heaven (Exod. 3:8), and when Yahweh met with Israel, He came down from heaven to the top of Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:18). Later, Yahweh went into the Tabernacle that the Israelites built for Him (Exod. 40:34; Lev. 1:1). Then God dwelt in the Temple Israel built for Him (Ps. 68:29). Then, Israel’s sin caused God to leave the Temple and eventually leave Jerusalem entirely (see commentary on Ezek. 8:4). God portrays Himself getting from one place to another by riding on cherubim (2 Sam. 22:11; Ps. 18:10). God also rides on a chariot-throne powered by cherubim (Ezek. 1:22-28; and read the commentary on those verses). God holds meetings for the spirits He created in specific places (Job 1:6; 2:1; 1 Kings 22:19). God was seen on a throne in a Temple in heaven (Isa. 6:1-4; Rev. 11:19). That the ancients believed that God lived in one place explains why Jonah got on a boat to leave Israel so he could get away from Yahweh, who lived in Israel (Jonah 1:1-3). Also, Naaman the Syrian wanted to worship Yahweh, but he did not think he could do that in Syria, so Naaman took some of the land of Israel back with him to Syria and worshiped Yahweh on the dirt from Israel (2 Kings 5:17). Other examples could be added to this list, but the point should be made that the ancients had ample reason, even from the Bible, to believe that God was generally in one place or another, not “everywhere at once.” To us today, however, we understand that God can be everywhere at once, but in order to relate better to us humans, He says He is in a given place, like in “heaven.”

**“El Shaddai.”** Genesis 17:1 is the first use of “El Shaddai” in the Bible, and God is referred to as “Shaddai” 48 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. Although El Shaddai is traditionally rendered “God Almighty,” as we will see below, the evidence points to “El Shaddai” meaning “God, the One of the Mountain.”

God is sometimes referred to in Genesis (and in Exodus 6:3) as “El Shaddai,” but after Exodus 6:3, starting with Numbers 24:4, God is just called “Shaddai” through the rest of the Old Testament. However, the REV adds “El” in italics in those places to help the English reader. Although many Christians are familiar with “El Shaddai” being a name of God, they are not as aware that “El” means “God” and that “Shaddai” is God’s actual title.

Although it is common for English versions to translate “Shaddai” as “the Almighty,” there is no “the” in the Hebrew text. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that the translation “God Almighty” is not correct and is even somewhat misleading. The NET Bible text note on Genesis 35:11 explains some things about the name “El Shaddai,” and it reads:

“‘El Shaddai’ has often been translated ‘God Almighty,’ primarily because Jerome [AD 342-420] translated it *omnipotens* (‘all powerful’) in the Latin Vulgate. There has been much debate over the meaning of the name. ...Shaddai/El Shaddai is the sovereign king of the world who grants, blesses, and judges. In the Book of Genesis, he blesses the patriarchs with fertility and promises numerous descendants. Outside Genesis, he both blesses/protects and takes away life/happiness. The patriarchs knew God primarily as El Shaddai (Exod 6:3). While the origin and meaning of this name are uncertain, its significance is clear. The name is used in contexts where God appears as the source of fertility and life.”

It seems that Jerome did not know the meaning of “Shaddai.” There is no evidence he had access to the ancient Akkadian language or texts, and the Akkadian language, written in cuneiform script, was not deciphered until the mid-1800s. Jerome translated “Shaddai” by the Latin word *omnipotens* because it made sense to him, and that translation became an accepted tradition that still influences translators today. The NET Bible text note on Genesis 17:1 adds more detail about “Shaddai.” A very important point it makes is that the best meaning we have today is related to the word “mountain.” That meaning is likely seen in an Akkadian cognate word meaning “mountain,” and thus it seems that “God, the one of the mountain” is the meaning of the title “El Shaddai.” *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* concurs, and notes that “the most widely accepted [belief] is that shadday is related to the Akkadian shadu, ‘mountain,’ and hence, el shadday would mean ‘El, the One of the mountain(s).’”[[81]](#footnote-12521) It is also worth noting that in Genesis 49:25, “there is an obvious wordplay between Shaddai and *shadayim* [breasts].”[[82]](#footnote-17407) Although there is no evidence of it in the Bible, we can imagine both a wordplay and a mental image in juxtaposing Shaddai related to “mountain” and the female breast.

The majority of the occurrences of “Shaddai” occur in Hebrew poetry or poetic books such as Job. This is noteworthy because poetry often uses older vocabulary or reflects ancient meanings. Nahum Sarna writes: “The overwhelming appearance in poetic contexts points a priori to a venerable tradition, for Hebrew poetry tends to preserve or consciously to employ early forms of speech. The remarkably high incidence of Shaddai in Job is of particular importance in light of that book’s patriarchal setting. …The Great Antiquity of the name and its obsolescence in Israel in the Mosaic period explain why there are no consistent traditions as to its meaning and why the ancient versions have no uniform rendering. The Septuagint variously has ‘God,’ ‘Lord,’ ‘All powerful,’ and ‘The Heavenly One,’ among others, as well as the transliteration *shaddai*. The Vulgate has ‘Omnipotens,’ whence the English tradition ‘Almighty.’ The Syriac has ‘The Strong One,’ ‘God,’ and ‘The Highest,’ along with [the transliteration] *shaddai*. The Greek rendering *hikanos*, ‘He that is Sufficient,’ found in the versions of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotian, reflects a rabbinic suggestion…. The modern conjecture that has gained widest currency connects *shaddai* with Akkadian *sadu*, ‘a mountain,’ often used as a divine (and royal) epithet. The name would originally have meant, ‘The One of the Mountain,’ probably referring to a cosmic mount or corresponding to the divine epithet, ‘The Rock.’”[[83]](#footnote-10412) Claus Westermann points out that the word “mountain” was often used in connection with divinities. Westerman wrote: “‘the One of the Mountain,’ This word is often used in connection with divinities, and so such a meaning [i.e., “the One of the Mountain”] is probable.”[[84]](#footnote-10385)

It also makes sense that the title El Shaddai would mean “God, the One of the Mountain,” because, as the NET text note quoted above pointed out, the mountain is “connected to the source of fertility and life.” In some ancient myths and also in the Bible, the place of God’s dwelling is the source of the water that gives life to the earth. For example, Clifford notes that “In the Ugaritic texts which describe the dwelling of El, El’s dwelling is at the “sources of the Two Rivers.”[[85]](#footnote-26255) Similarly, in Ezekiel 47:1-9, and Zechariah 14:8, during the future millennial reign of Christ on earth, water will flow out from God’s dwelling and give life to the land, and in the New Jerusalem described in Revelation 21 and 22, water will flow from God’s throne, which will be at the top of the city, and water the earth (Rev. 22:1).

Knowing that “Shaddai” was used in Akkadia and Mesopotamia as a name of God, we can see why Abraham knew God by that name because upper Mesopotamia was where Abraham lived when God called him (see commentary on Gen. 11:31). This helps explain why, one time when God appeared to Abraham in Canaan, God introduced Himself by saying, “I am El Shaddai” (Gen. 17:1). The name “El Shaddai” continued to be used as a name for God, mainly in the years before the Exodus. Thus, when Isaac blessed Jacob, he said, “May El Shaddai bless you” (Gen. 28:3). Later, when Jacob was returning from Padan-aram, in northwest Mesopotamia where Akkadian was a primary language, God spoke to Jacob, saying, “I am El Shaddai” (Gen. 35:11). The most occurrences of “Shaddai” in the Bible are in the book of Job—31 occurrences—and Job lived about the same time as Abraham.

While it might be confusing to us today that God would refer to Himself as having a title meaning “the One of the Mountain,” that title made perfect sense to the ancients. Many ancient Near Eastern peoples believed that many of the gods lived on mountains and ruled from there. This was certainly a belief in ancient Akkadia and then in Mesopotamia. “In the ancient civilizations from Egypt to India and beyond, the mountain can be a center of fertility, the primeval hillock of creation, the meeting place of the gods, the dwelling place of the high god, the meeting place of heaven and earth, the monument effectively upholding the order of creation, the place where God meets man, a place of theophany.”[[86]](#footnote-14335) “Among the Canaanites, the high god was thought to dwell in a temple or tent on the holy mountain.”[[87]](#footnote-23770) The god Baal was said to live on Mount Zaphon, a well-known mountain far north of Israel. Richard Clifford writes: “The Ugaritic tablets found at Ras Shamra since 1929 have enabled us to see more clearly the religious beliefs of the people of Syria-Palestine regarding the mountain. In contact with these people, Israel lived out her faith. The Canaanite storm-god, Baal-Hadad, lives on Mount Zaphon. Much of the lore concerning Ugaritic [Mount] Zaphon is found to apply to Mount Zion as well.”[[88]](#footnote-16651) “Gods are regularly shown in Hittite art standing on mountains.”[[89]](#footnote-23449) Also, the major Greek gods and goddesses were believed to live on a mountain, Mount Olympus, in Greece.

Understanding that many ancients believed gods lived on a mountain helps explain why the Old Testament portrays God ruling from a mountain, the “mountain of God.” In Isaiah 14:13, Satan is recorded as having said, “I will sit *enthroned* on the Mountain of Assembly; on the heights of *Mount* Zaphon! Also, In Ezekiel 28:14, God said of Satan, “You were the anointed guardian cherub, and I placed you *there*. You were on the holy mountain of God.” Then God goes on and says in Ezekiel 28:16, “you have sinned; therefore I have cast you out of the mountain of God as a defiled thing.” So the Bible reveals that there is a spiritual mountain—a mountain in the spirit world—where God and the ruling spirits meet and rule the world. Furthermore, the Bible and mythology reveal both God and Satan (with his false gods) as living and ruling from a mountain in the heavens. Satan would lie in what he revealed to people, but God would not. Yahweh was the chief ruler on the mountain, truly “the One of the Mountain” and also He was “the Most High God,” because His seat would be the highest in both rank and elevation. Thus, it makes sense why God is referred to as the “Most High” some 50 times in the Bible. Also, when Satan, a powerful angel, was expelled from God’s heavenly mountain of assembly, he and his demon leaders took up residence on mountains here on earth and revealed themselves that way to the people of earth, which is why so many ancient myths feature gods ruling from mountains.

When we understand that the title “Shaddai” refers to the ruler on the mountain, and that many ancients believed that the gods (and for the Jews, “God”) lived on a high mountain (or high in the air on something that to them would have been a solid floor), then some of the things that we see in the Bible make more sense. God wanted His “house,” the Temple, to be built on the top of Mount Zion. Furthermore, in the Millennial Kingdom the Temple will be built on Mount Zion, which at that future date will be a “very high mountain” (Ezek. 40:2), and, in fact, lifted up to be the highest mountain (cf. Isa. 2:2; Mic. 4:1, Ezek. 20:40). Also, it would make sense that Satan, who wanted to rule on the mountain of God, would portray the gods that represented him, as ruling from a mountain.

The best explanation for the almost universal belief that God and/or the gods lived “up” or on a mountain must have come from revelation and revelation visions of God and gods ruling on mountains and appearing in the air. The Syrians may likely have had some knowledge of the belief that Israel’s god was a mountain god, because in planning an attack on Israel, they said, “Their god is a god of the mountains…let us fight against them in the plain and surely we will be stronger than they” (1 Kings 20:23).

Also, when God met with humankind, or humankind wanted to meet with God, it was often on a mountain. God met Israel on Mount Sinai, and God met with Moses on top of Mount Sinai (cf. Exod. 19:16-18; see commentary on Exod. 19:3). After Elijah fled from Jezebel, God met him on “Horeb, the mountain of God” (1 Kings 19:8). It is common in the Bible that people went up onto mountains to worship God and the gods. Psalm 121:1 says, “I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; where does my help come from?”

From what the Bible tells us, it seems that the spiritual world, though invisible to us, is similar to our physical world in many ways. There are mountains in the spiritual world just as there are mountains in our physical world. And partly because God and spirits of all kinds revealed themselves as living on mountains, many mountains became spiritually important places in the religious life of the ancient people of the Near East. Since God portrayed Himself ruling from a mountain, and eventually chose Mount Zion to be the place of His “house” (the Temple), it seems that the ancient title for God, “The One on the Mountain,” is correct, and the linguistic and cultural evidence supports that meaning. God rules from His mountain, and has the highest place there, so He certainly is “the Most High God.” Given that, it seems that the best course of action for translators is to leave the transliteration “El Shaddai” in the English text or else translate it as “the One of the Mountain.”

[For more on God ruling on a mountain, specifically Mount Zaphon, see commentary on Isa. 14:13. For more on God appearing as a person, see commentary on Acts 7:55.]

Gen 17:2

**“exceedingly exceedingly much.”** The Hebrew text repeats the word “exceedingly twice in succession at the end of the verse. This is the figure of speech epizeuxis, and emphasizes “greatly.” We might say something like, “exceedingly greatly.”[[90]](#footnote-28909) The word “much” comes from the word “increase.”

God is speaking about Abram’s descendants, but the “increase” could include other things as well, like wealth, power, and fame.

This kind of historically verifiable prophecy is one of the reasons that we know the Bible is true. The Bible is the only holy book with any clear and unmistakable prophecy that has been shown in history to come true. Unlike the Greek oracles which were generally so obscure that they had to be fit to the facts after the event, the Bible says over and over—in very clear language—what will happen in the future, but that future is past to us today so we can verify the prophecy. Who would have thought that about 4,000 years ago a man with a barren wife would have so many descendants and become so famous that the majority of the people on planet Earth knew his name? Only the true God can foretell like that.

Gen 17:3

**“Abram fell on his face.”** This was a standard posture of worship. Upon hearing that God would make His covenant with Abram and multiply his descendants, Abraham immediately worshiped God.

Gen 17:4

**“my covenant is with you.”** This is idiomatic for, “I have made my covenant with you.” This is a clarification and expansion of Genesis 15:18, and an expansion of what God said in Genesis 12:3, “I will make of you a great nation.”

**“multitude.”** The Hebrew word is *hamōn* (#01995 הָמוֹן) and it means “murmur, roar, rush, tumult, confusion, crowd, multitude.” It often refers more to the sound a crowd or multitude makes than the number of the crowd, although a large number is certainly implied. This is a good description of the multitude of nations that would come from Abraham, and a very accurate prophecy. Far from being friends and similar in culture and custom, Abraham’s descendants are very different and sadly, often even enemies.

**“nations.”** Genesis 17:4, “You will be the father of a multitude of nations.” is quoted in Romans 4:17, where it includes the Gentile nations who trust in God (Rom. 4:16)

Gen 17:5

**“but your name will be Abraham.”** God changed Abram (“Exalted father”) to Abraham (“Father of a multitude). It was a fairly common custom in the Bible that when a powerful person gained control or fealty from a less powerful person, he changed the name of the less powerful person (Gen. 17:5, 15; 41:45; 2 Sam. 12:25; 2 Kings 23:34; Dan. 1:7). In the biblical culture, the name by which a person was known often said something about the person. It may be about the person’s character, or past, or destiny, but it often (but not always) revealed something about the person. Thus, Jacob was “heel snatcher.” Esau was “hairy” and Edom was “red.” Elijah was “My God is Yahweh.” Jesus was “savior.” Abraham was “father of a multitude,” and so forth. Not every name had significance, but most did.

**“I have made you.”** God speaks of Abraham becoming a crowd of nations as if it had already happened. This is a Hebrew idiom we call the prophetic perfect. By speaking of a future event as if it were past, God promises it will come to pass.

[For more on the prophetic perfect, see commentary on Eph. 2:6.]

Gen 17:6

**“exceedingly exceedingly.”** These are the same words God spoke in Genesis 17:2, so God is reconfirming what He said there, and retaining the emphasis in that verse. God promised Abraham that his seed would be a great multitude on a number of different occasions (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 16:10 (via Hagar); Gen. 17:6; 22:17).

**“kings will come out from you.”** If nations are going to come from Abraham, then it is only logical that kings would come from him. Otherwise, it would not be that nations would come from him, but only people who live in nations. For nations to come from him, then the leaders of those nations would come from him too. When David was first crowned king in Hebron, he would likely have been very close to where Abraham was buried, and at that time David may well have thought of this prophecy (2 Sam. 2:1, 4).

It is possible, and even likely, that Abraham did not tell this to Sarah right away, perhaps due to a limiting time factor. Genesis 17:1-16 could be one single conversation between Abraham and God. If Abraham could have told Sarah what God said here in Genesis 17:6 before God said what he did in Genesis 17:16 about Sarah having a baby boy but did not tell her, that would have likely been because she was already disappointed about not having children and the promise to Abraham in Genesis 17:6 that he would become nations did not yet include Sarah. It included her later, in Genesis 17:16.

Gen 17:7

**“I will establish my covenant.”** The Hebrew word translated as “establish” is *qum* (#06965 קוּם), and it has a semantic range that includes “establish,” “confirm,” “maintain,” “fulfill,” and more. Different English versions use “establish,” “confirm,” and “maintain” here in Genesis 17:7 (e.g., KJV, NET, and NAB). “This covenant with Abraham is something God initiates, something he maintains, and something he brings to fulfillment.”[[91]](#footnote-27240)

There are many ways that God establishes and maintains His covenant with Abraham and his “seed.” One thing he did was to say it to different people: For example, He told Abraham that he and his descendants would get the land (Gen. 12:7; 13:15-17; 15:7, 18; 17:8). He told it to Isaac (Gen. 26:3). He told it to Jacob (Gen. 28:13; 35:12; 48:4). Then over and over He told Israel about the promise or that He would give them the land (cf. Exod. 6:4, 8; 12:25; 13:5, 11; Lev. 14:34; 20:24; 23:10; 25:2).

Another way God established and maintained His covenant was that He did many things to help Israel inherit and keep the land, such as helping them in wars.

[For more on the promise God made to give the land to Abraham and his descendants, see commentary on Gen. 15:18.]

Gen 17:8

**“give to you...the land.”** God repeated the promise that He would give the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants many times, and said it in slightly different ways. He told Abraham that he and his descendants would get the land (Gen. 12:7; 13:15-17; 15:7, 18; 17:8). He told it to Isaac (Gen. 26:3). He told it to Jacob (Gen. 28:13; 35:12; 48:4). Then over and over He told Israel about the promise or that He would give them the land (cf. Exod. 6:4, 8; 12:25; 13:5, 11; Lev. 14:34; 20:24; 23:10; 25:2).

[For more on the promise God made to give the land to Abraham and his descendants, see commentary on Gen. 15:18.]

**“everlasting.”** The Hebrew word is *olam* (#05769 עוֹלָם), and here and elsewhere it can mean “everlasting” or “age enduring,” or “of long duration.” The Hebrews did not have a word that meant “forever” like English does. English time words are very specific: “forever” means forever, while “of long duration,” or “for a long time,” means for a long time but not forever. However, the Hebrew word *olam* can mean forever or it can mean “for a long time.” In this case, the whole earth will be changed when the New Jerusalem comes from heaven (Rev. 21:1-2), and the land we now know will cease to exist. But it has been 4,000 years since Abraham, and the Millennial Kingdom will add 1,000 years to that, so God’s promise will certainly qualify as being “for a long time.”

Gen 17:10

**“every male among you is to be circumcised.”** Circumcision was a requirement to be included in the covenant God made with Abraham. That is one reason that the Jews at the time of Paul were so insistent upon it. But the New Testament makes it clear that circumcision was not a requirement for Christians (Acts 15:1, 19-21; 1 Cor. 7:18; Gal. 6:12-15; Col. 3:11).

The reason Christians do not have to become circumcised to be “Abraham’s seed, and heirs of what was promised” is that we are completely in union with Jesus Christ. This means that in the eyes of God, we were crucified when Christ was crucified (Rom. 6:6), we died with Christ (Rom. 6:8), we were buried with Christ (Rom. 6:4); and we were made alive and then raised with Christ (Eph. 2:5-6). So too, we were circumcised with Christ, as Colossians says: “In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands” (Col. 2:11 REV). But, much better than ordinary human circumcision, which removes only the unnecessary flesh of the foreskin, when Christians are “circumcised,” God removes our whole dead-flesh body! Christian “circumcision” is “a circumcision made without hands, consisting of the removal of the body of flesh, by the circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:11 REV).

It is worth noting that the Hebrew text can be translated to say “every male shall be circumcised by you,” and that is the translation given by Victor Hamilton.[[92]](#footnote-21504) However, that would be literally impossible because Abraham did not live long enough to circumcise all his descendants. The translation preferred by English versions is “every male among you,” with the “you” referring back to “you and your seed after you.”

[For more on being in union with Jesus Christ, see commentary on Rom. 6:3.]

Gen 17:12

**“born in your house.”** This phrase is generally used to refer to slaves who are born in the household, and this is especially true when it is combined with the phrase, “or bought with money.” Any child of a slave was also a slave. Also, the “house,” or “household,” can refer to a tent encampment. “Born in your house” does not mean that the slave was literally born in the exact house (or tent) that the owner lived in, but rather that the slave mother was part of the extended household of the owner. A Medieval king might have a castle big enough for his immediate and extended family, as well as servants and even some guards and soldiers. However, a Bedouin sheik like Abraham lived in a tent with a wife and her children (if a man had two or more wives, it was customary for the other wives to have their own tents that the husband would visit when he wanted), while the extended family, slaves, and hired servants lived in tents encamped around him (we refer to Abraham as a “Bedouin sheik” in the sense that he was a nomad or wanderer, moving around from place to place while caring for flocks and herds, rather than staying in one place and farming the soil).

God’s point to Abraham is that any of his descendants, or any slave born under his authority or bought with his money, could be circumcised and be part of the covenant. What a great blessing to a slave! They were often not treated well by other humans, but they were treated like family by God.

Genesis 17:12-13 shows the inclusive love and largeness of God, “who wants everyone to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4 REV). God’s covenant with Abraham was not just for the actual physical descendants of Abraham, as if they were the only ones who would inherit the land, rather it was for everyone who aligned themselves with Abraham and wanted to be part of God’s covenant. This is still true in the New Testament times, because people who take Christ as their Lord and become Christians, become Abraham’s seed, his descendants, and thus heirs of what God promised him: “Now if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs of what was promised” (Gal. 3:29 REV).

Many Jews tended to be exclusive, as we see in the New Testament, and did not seem to have a heart that was open to include everyone, but that is never God’s heart. For example, if a foreigner wanted to join Israel and eat the Passover, he could, he just had to become part of the covenant with Abraham first, which involved getting circumcised (Exod. 12:48). Furthermore, in the Millennial Kingdom of Christ on earth, God’s Temple will be open to everyone who loves God and obeys His commands (Isa. 56:6-7).

Other places that refer to slaves who are “born in the house” are Genesis 14:14; 17:23, 27; Leviticus 22:11; and Ecclesiastes 2:7.

[For more information on the Millennial Kingdom, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.” For more on why Christians do not have to be circumcised, see commentary on Gen. 17:10.]

Gen 17:13

**“He who is born in your house.”** From the context, we can determine that this phrase refers to the children of slaves. Children of slaves were slaves themselves, and just like members of the immediate family, the children of slaves were to be circumcised. Both slaves who are “born in your house” and slaves who are “bought with your money” are considered part of the wider household, and are to be circumcised. This would be much harder on slaves who are bought because most of them would be older and the circumcision would be much more painful.

**“circumcised, yes, circumcised.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton for emphasis.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

Gen 17:14

**“The uncircumcised male who is not circumcised.”** Unlike in English where “uncircumcised” and “circumcised” are related words, in Hebrew, “uncircumcised” and “circumcised” are two completely different words. A more literal translation might be, “A foreskinned male who is not circumcised.” The Hebrew word translated as “uncircumcised” in the REV is *arel* (#06189 עָרֵל), and it refers to having a foreskin. Everett Fox translates this as “a foreskinned male.”[[93]](#footnote-29655) In contrast, the Hebrew word translated as “circumcised” in the REV is *mul* (#04135 מוּל), and it means “circumcised.”

Nahum Sarna adds, “his foreskin. That is, his own foreskin. Where the father fails to fulfill his duty, the responsibility falls upon the individual himself when he reaches maturity.”[[94]](#footnote-13339)

**“will be cut off from his people.”** People who broke the covenant were often “cut off” by God.[[95]](#footnote-26446) The verse is not saying that the believing community would go execute the person.

Gen 17:15

**“Sarai, for her name will be Sarah.”** Both Sarai and Sarah mean the same thing, “princess” or “queen.” It is even possible that “Sarah” is simply a “modernizing” of the ancient spelling “Sarai.”[[96]](#footnote-12895)

Gen 17:16

**“she will become *a mother of* nations. Kings of peoples will come from her.”** This verse is parallel to what God told Abram in Genesis 17:6: “I will make nations from you, and kings will come out from you.”

**“Kings of peoples.”** The meaning could be that kings of different people groups would come from Sarah, or kings who reign over different people groups would come from her. These different people groups would not just be Israelites; the sons of Esau were not Israelites. Kings would come from Abraham as well, but those kings would be potentially much more diverse than the kings from Sarah, because Abraham had eight children whereas Sarah only had Isaac (Gen. 17:6).

Gen 17:17

**“Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed.”** It is interesting that the Bible does not tell us why Abraham laughed. Joy? Doubt? Surprise? Or maybe a mixture of emotions… In any case, it is interesting that God did not question Abraham about it as He did Sarah even though they both laughed to themselves, not out loud (Gen. 18:12).

**“him who is 100.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic: “to the son of 100 years.” The same is said of Sarah: “a daughter of 90 years.”

Gen 17:18

**“live.”** This is the full or “pregnant” sense of “live,” meaning live and be blessed now, and have everlasting life in the future as well. It seems that when God told Abraham that he would have a son by Sarah, Abraham may have thought that Ishmael might die.

[For more on the full sense of “live,” see commentary on Luke 10:28.]

**“before you.”** This is in the culture and the meaning would be “in front of you,” a place where God’s watchful eye was on him, where Ishmael would also participate in the blessings of Abraham.

Gen 17:20

**“heard.”** This is the full sense of the verb “heard,” where it means to hear and to pay attention and respond to what was said. God did more than “hear,” He responded. God’s answer, “I have heard you,” makes a wordplay with Ishmael, which means “God hears.”

**“exceedingly exceedingly.”** The Hebrew word means “exceedingly” or “greatly,” and the Hebrew text has the figure of speech epizeuxis, where a word is repeated twice in succession to emphasize the “exceedingly.”

[For more on epizeuxis and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

**“He will become the father of 12 rulers.”** This prophecy was fulfilled and the 12 sons of Ishmael are listed in Genesis 25:12-16.

Gen 17:21

**“at this set time.”** Compare 2 Kings 4:16, which uses the same vocabulary. The time of life in human pregnancy is nine months. The phrase does not mean the pregnancy would begin immediately, but within a few months at least.

Gen 17:22

**“God departed from Abraham.”** The Hebrew text is literally, “went up from Abraham,” but “went up” is a common idiom for “left,” “departed from” (e.g. 2 Sam. 23:9; 1 Kings 15:19; 2 Kings 12:18; Jer. 21:2). There is no real proof that God literally “went up” to heaven from Abraham.

Gen 17:23

**“born in his house.”** This phrase refers to Abraham’s slaves, a point that is made very clear by being put with “bought with his money.” The child of a slave was a slave.

[For more on “born in his house,” see commentary on Gen. 17:12.]

**“all *the slaves* who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money.”** So even when the Abrahamic covenant started, many people who were not physical descendants of Abraham were included. It seems that throughout history, even though the descendants of Ishmael were circumcised they did not benefit from the covenant in the same way the Jews did.

Gen 17:25

**“Ishmael, his son, was 13 years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.”** So Ishmael was part of the covenant God made with Abraham, but God established the covenant through Isaac (Gen. 17:19, 21). Even today Muslims are circumcised, but they are circumcised at different times. Some groups circumcise at age 7, some at puberty or age 13.

Gen 17:27

**“born in the house.”** This phrase refers to Abraham’s slaves, a point that is made very clear because it is combined with “bought with his money.” The child of a slave was a slave.

[For more on “born in the house,” see commentary on Gen. 17:12.]

**Genesis Chapter 18**

Gen 18:1

**“Yahweh appeared to him.”** These verses pose a problem for Christians who have been taught that no one has ever seen God. The Hebrew text clearly says that Yahweh appeared to Abraham in the form of a man, and He was with two angels, who also took on human appearance. This should not be a problem for us to understand. God created humankind so He could intimately fellowship with us. It is reasonable that He would occasionally become visible and take on human form to be intimate with His creation. In fact, Scripture records a number of people to whom God appeared: Adam and Eve (they heard His footsteps, Gen. 3:8), Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 15:1; 17:1; 18:1), Jacob (Gen. 28:13), Moses (Exod. 34:5), Moses and the elders of Israel (Exod. 24:9-11), Samuel (1 Sam. 3:10), Solomon, twice (1 Kings 3:5; 9:2; 11:9), Micaiah (1 Kings 22:19-22), Isaiah (Isa. 6:1-5), Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:26-28), Daniel (Dan. 7:9-14), Amos (Amos 7:7), Stephen (Acts 7:56) and the apostle John (Rev. 5:1-8).

A study of Genesis 18:1 in Christian commentaries reveals that most theologians do not believe that Yahweh can appear in the form of a man. Before we examine why they say that, we must remember that, difficult to believe or not, that is *exactly* what the text says. Many theologians who do not believe what the text literally says have postulated other explanations. The standard explanations of the verse are: it was a dream and not real; or, it was the preincarnate Christ who appeared; or, it was an angel who appeared carrying the name of Yahweh.

Some theologians teach that the record of Genesis 18:1ff was a dream because of the circumstances, i.e., it was the heat of the day and the time for naps. However, the Bible never says it was a dream, and there certainly was no time in the record when Abraham “woke up.” Furthermore, what happened next with Yahweh and the angels, which was the record of Sodom and Gomorrah, was certainly not a dream. The angels left Abraham and went to the city of Sodom where they rescued Lot and his daughters from God’s judgment. There is just no solid Scriptural evidence that Yahweh*’s* appearance was a dream. Neither would this record being a dream explain the many other times Yahweh appears.

Many Trinitarian theologians say that Genesis 18:1 is an appearance of the preincarnate Christ. The evidence they give for their conclusion is twofold: Yahweh is invisible and no one has or can see Him, so it cannot be God Himself, and also the record clearly says it is Yahweh, so it must be the preincarnate Christ since they assert that Christ is a member of the Trinity. however, if it could be shown that Yahweh does indeed occasionally appear in the form of a man, then there would be good reason to take the Bible literally. Furthermore, the fact that Scripture never says that the one appearing is Christ is strong evidence that this is not Christ, but the strongest evidence that the “preincarnate Christ” did not appear is that there is no such being as the preincarnate Christ. Besides, there are at least two occasions where Yahweh and Christ appear together (Dan. 7, in future prophecy, and Rev. 5). This seems to us to force the conclusion that Yahweh cannot be Christ.

The major reason to make the “Yahweh” of this record into an angel is the same as the reason to make the record a dream or to make Yahweh into the preincarnate Christ. It comes from the preconceived idea that Yahweh just cannot appear in human form. Therefore, the temptation here is to make Yahweh of necessity a dream, an angel or Christ. Even though in other records angels are called God, this record is different. We have seen from other verses that angels are occasionally called “God” (see commentary on Gen. 16:7). However, a study of the records where the angel of the Lord is called “God” shows that he was always clearly identified as an angel, and it was clear that he was bringing a message from God. This record and the others mentioned above in which Yahweh appears are decidedly different. The “man” identified as Yahweh is among other angels, and the entire record identifies Him as Yahweh. And while other records show the angel of the Lord carefully avoiding the use of the first-person pronouns, “I,” “me” and “my,” referring to God, the “Yahweh” in this record uses the first person over and over.

Most Christians have not been taught that God can appear in a form resembling a person. They have always heard, “no one has seen God at any time.” In *Don’t Blame God*, the language of that phrase is examined and explained. John 1:17-18 states: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God….” The authors write:

Please note that truth, in its fullness, came not with Moses, but with Jesus Christ. It was he who for the first time in history made God truly understandable. It is not that the Old Testament believers knew nothing of God, but rather that their knowledge and understanding of Him were quite limited (“veiled”). Since truth came by Jesus Christ (“For the law was given through Moses; grace and **truth** came through Jesus,”), we believe that the first part of John 1:18—“no man hath seen God at anytime”—means that no man had “known” God [as He truly is] at any previous time. It is Jesus Christ who reveals, or makes known, God to man.

In many languages, “to see” is a common idiom for “to know.” In the Hebrew language, one of the definitions for “see” (Hebrew = *ra’ ah*) is “see, so as to learn, to know.” Similarly, the Greek word translated “see” in verse 18 (*horao*) can be “to see with the eyes” or “to see with the mind, to perceive, know.” Even in English, one of the definitions for “see” is “to know or understand.” For example, when two people are discussing something, one might say to the other, “I see what you mean.”

The usage of “see” as it pertains to knowing is found in many places in the New Testament. Jesus said to Philip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Here again the word “see” is used to indicate knowing. Anyone who *knew* Christ (not just those who “saw” him) would know the Father. In fact, Christ had made that plain two verses earlier when he said to Philip, “If you really knew me you would know my Father as well” (John 14:7).[[97]](#footnote-16191)

Further evidence that “see” means “know” in John 1:18 is that the phrase “no man has seen God” is contrasted with the phrase “has made Him known.” The verse is not talking about “seeing” God with one’s eyes, it is saying that the truth about God came by Jesus Christ. Before Jesus Christ came, no one really knew God as He truly is, a loving heavenly Father. Jesus Christ made that known in its fullness. Our study has led us to conclude that verses seeming to say that no one has ever “seen” God are either using the word “seen” as meaning “to know,” and thus referring to knowing Him fully, or they are referring to seeing Him in all His fullness as God, which would be impossible. We agree with the text note on John 1:18 in the *NIV Study Bible*, which says, “Since no human being can see God as He really is, those who saw God saw Him in a form He took on Himself temporarily for the occasion.”

Another point should be made about the word “seen” in John 1:18. If Trinitarians are correct in that Jesus is “God incarnate,” “God the Son” and “fully God,” then it seems to us that they would be anxious to realize that “seen” means “known” because it makes no sense to say that no man has seen God with his eyes and then say Jesus is God. Theologians on both sides of the Trinitarian debate should realize the idiom of “seen” meaning “known” in John 1:18.

The Bible also calls God “the invisible God.” This is true because God’s natural state is invisible to us. However, that does not prevent Him from occasionally becoming visible. Angels and demons are also naturally invisible to us, but they become visible at certain times. If angels and demons can become visible, then God certainly can too. It is worth remembering that the Bible plainly says, “Yahweh appeared to Abraham,” and to others as well.

It is often stated that the people could not have really seen Yahweh because a person will die if he sees God. This idea comes mainly from the conversation Moses had with God. Moses asked to see the glory of God, and God responded, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Exod. 33:20). The context indicates that the “face” of God was the “glory” of God, because that is what Moses asked to see. It is certainly the case that human beings are not equipped to comprehend God in all His fullness, but God created humankind so He could fellowship with us, and the human-like form that He has sometimes assumed in order to be near us is not His fullness.

There are two records very important to this subject because they describe God and also show Jesus Christ with Him. The first is a revelation vision of the future that Daniel the prophet had.

Daniel 7:9, 10, 13-14

**(9)** As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. **(10)** A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened. **(13)** In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. **(14)** He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

The “Ancient of Days” is Yahweh and He is described as being in the form of a man. Into his presence comes “a son of man” who is given authority and dominion. It is quite universally agreed among Christians that the “Ancient of Days” is God the Father, and the “son of man” is Jesus Christ, who receives his authority from God. Note that in this passage there is no hint of the Trinity. There is no “Holy Spirit” and no indication that the “son of man” is co-equal or co-eternal with the Father. On the contrary, while God is called the “Ancient of Days,” a title befitting His eternal nature, Christ is called “a son of man,” meaning one who is born from human parents. This prophecy is one of many that shaped the Jewish belief about their Messiah: he was not foretold as “God in the flesh,” but rather a man like themselves who would receive special honor and authority from God. For our purposes in understanding Genesis 18:1, these verses in Daniel demonstrate very clearly that God can and does appear in human form. And because in Daniel’s vision He is with the Messiah when He takes the form of a human, there is no reason to assume that the other times He appears it is actually Jesus Christ.

The other very clear record is Revelation 4-5. The length of the record keeps it from being printed here, but the reader is encouraged to read those two chapters. They portray God sitting on a throne surrounded by elders and creatures who repeat, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.” God is holding in His right hand a scroll that is written on both sides but sealed shut with seven seals. An angel calls out to summon those who could open the scroll, but no one was worthy. As John began to weep, an angel comforted him with the words, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll.” Then “a Lamb” (the context makes it clear it is Jesus Christ) “came and took the scroll from the right hand of Him who sat on the throne.” At that point, the creatures and the elders fell down before the Lamb and started singing a “new song.”

The record is clear. God is described as sitting on a throne and even holding in His hand a scroll that Jesus comes and takes from Him. This record again shows that God can and does occasionally take on human form so that we can better identify with Him.

This record and the others like it show a glimpse of what Christians have to look forward to. God loves us and created us to have a deep and abiding relationship with Him. He will not always remain as distant as He now sometimes seems. The Bible tells of a time when “the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev. 21:3).

[For more information on God coming into concretion, see commentary on Acts 7:55. For more information on Jesus being the fully human Son of God and not being “God the Son,” see Appendix 6: “Jesus is the Son of God, Not God the Son.” For more information on the angel of the Lord not being Jesus Christ, see commentary on Gen. 16:7.]

Gen 18:2

**“he lifted up his eyes and looked.”** When Yahweh appeared to Abraham, Abraham saw “three men.” For an explanation on God appearing as a “man,” see commentary on Genesis 18:1.

**“bowed down to the ground.”** A common way of bowing before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body to the earth. See Word Study: “Worship.”

Gen 18:3

**“Lord.”** The Hebrew is vowel pointed in the way that refers to Yahweh, thus the capital “L.” The NET text note says, “The MT [Masoretic Hebrew text] has the form אֲדֹנָי (ʾadonay, “Master”) which is reserved for God. This may reflect later scribal activity. The scribes, knowing it was the LORD, may have put the proper pointing with the word instead of the more common אֲדֹנִי (ʾadoni, “my master”).” (See also Genesis 19:18, where the same thing happens with “Lord”).

Gen 18:4

**“and rest yourselves under the tree.”** The text does not tell us why Abraham did not invite the men into his tent. Likely it was more comfortable under the tree, where the air moved more freely.

Gen 18:5

**“piece of bread.”** Abraham got more than a “piece of bread.” It was a biblical custom to take excellent care of guests and feed them well, both as a blessing to them and as a sign that God had blessed your house with all you needed. This custom was why Jesus could tell the parable of the man who had a guest come but had no bread, and so made the effort to wake up a neighbor even though it was late at night (Luke 11:5-10). But you must take care of your guest without making it seem like you are going to any trouble, even though you are. So Abraham, acting like it was no problem, told his guests to please take time to rest, wash their feet, and he would get them a piece of bread to eat.

Abraham would have taken good care of any guest. But in this case, Abraham knew he was feeding God, who had come to his house in human form, so he wanted to take especially good care of Him. He had Sarah get 3 seahs (about 21 quarts, or over 5 gallons [22 liters]) of fine flour for bread, and biblical “bread” was flatbread, like a pita or pancake. It usually takes about ¼ cup of flour to make a good-sized pancake, so at ¼ cup per flatbread, Sarah could have made over 250 loaves of bread with the amount of flour Abraham said to get (a full flatbread is referred to as a “loaf” in many Bible versions).

Then Abraham selected a tender young calf (the Hebrew uses an idiom and reads, “a son of the herd”) and hurried to prepare it. Generally, that preparation would have been to butcher the calf and then boil it, making a kind of stew that could then be eaten using pieces of the bread as spoons. People did not use forks and spoons as eating utensils in the biblical world of the Old Testament. By Roman times, the common people of Israel would have maintained the ancient custom of eating with the hands, using bread as a spoon, but many of the Romans used at least some utensils to eat. The spoon was the most prevalent utensil, then the knife, then, and rarely, a kind of fork (most of the time, if meat needed to be stabbed, the knife would do double duty).

Abraham had made it seem to his guests that feeding them was no problem to him and no inconvenience to the guests: just a piece of bread, a little rest, and they could be on their way. In reality, things were much different (and usually both parties understood that). Making the huge amount of bread would have taken some time; as did killing, butchering, and boiling the calf. No doubt at least a couple hours had gone by before Abraham was ready to set the feast before them, and then he acted like a household servant and stood watching over their needs while they ate, ready to pass them what they needed, get more of anything that needed to be replenished, and pour water over their hands when they were done to cleanse their hands (cf. 2 Kings 3:11).

Having a host stand and wait on the “table,” which for tent dwellers was usually a cloth spread on the ground, while you, the guest, ate, would make any modern guest uncomfortable, but the people of the time understood the special treatment that guests received, and so there was no protest from the three guests when Abraham stood and watched as they ate.

**“refresh yourselves.”** The Hebrew is more literally “strengthen your heart.” But that could be misunderstood in English.

**“For that is why you are passing by your servant.”** As a part of his hospitality, Abraham makes it seem like the reason that the three men have come that way is so that they can honor Abraham by letting him take care of them. The verb translated as “pass” or “pass by” occurs twice in the verse, once in the first sentence and then once in the second.

Gen 18:6

**“three measures.”** The Hebrew is three seahs, which was about 21 quarts, over 5 gallons (about 20 liters). See commentary on Genesis 18:5.

**“loaves.”** The Hebrew word is not technically “bread” but refers to the round “loaf” of bread that is essentially like a pancake today; round and flat.

Gen 18:8

**“curds.”** The Hebrew is a term for a milk product, but exactly which product is not known. English versions have “curds” (NET, NIV, RSV); “butter” (ASV, CEB); “thick and sweet milk” (DBY); and “yogurt” (NLT).

Gen 18:9

**“Where is Sarah, your wife?”** It is almost certain they knew where Sarah was, but they would be polite.

Gen 18:10

**“return, yes, return.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton, where the verb “return” is repeated twice but in different cases, emphasizing that God will return. Another English translation might be “absolutely return,” or “surely return,” but those miss the poetic beauty of “return, return.” God is assuring Abraham that Sarah will indeed have a son.

[For more on polyptoton and the emphasis it brings, as well as the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

**“at this time next year.”** The Hebrew text is perhaps more literally, “according to the time of life” but that is considered an idiom referring to the revival of that same time the following year, although it may be more literal and refer to the time of pregnancy (see commentary on 2 Kings 4:16).

Gen 18:11

**“The way of women had ceased to be for Sarah.”** Sarah was no longer having her menstrual periods.

Gen 18:13

**“Why.”** The Hebrew has a demonstrative pronoun (“this, such”) after “Why,” as if to say, “Why this laughter,” or “Why such laughter.” Thus, the Hebrew expresses God’s astonishment that Sarah would laugh, after all, He created the heavens and the earth. So, with Sarah listening, God expresses his astonishment to Abraham and says in essence (as it is well expressed in the NET text note): “Why on earth would Sarah laugh?” Once we see God’s expression of astonishment, we can better see why Sarah was afraid and denied it, especially after God goes on to say, “Is anything too hard for Yahweh?”

Gen 18:14

**“hard.”** The Hebrew is *pala* (#06381 פָּלָא), and it means to be marvelous, wonderful, surpassing, extraordinary, to be beyond one’s power. Thus, “hard” is an acceptable translation, especially in light of the fact that “wonderful” in Hebrew had the connotation of hard or beyond one’s ability, but it does not carry that overtone in English. Nevertheless, “hard” and “wonderful” are both conveyed in the Hebrew in this verse: Sarah’s getting pregnant is not too hard for Yahweh, and it is indeed “wonderful.”

**“at this time next year.”** The Hebrew text is perhaps more literally, “according to the time of life,” but that is considered an idiom referring to the revival of that same time the following year, although it may be more literal and refer to the time of pregnancy (see commentary on 2 Kings 4:16).

Gen 18:16

**“toward Sodom.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic: looked down toward “the face of Sodom.” The concept of “face” was important in the Hebrew culture because it expresses so much and was visible to all. In this case, the part of the city they could (possibly) see from the highlands of Judah was the walls and/or buildings that “faced” them, or the face of the city. Most translations ignore it because the expression can be confusing, but it is an important cultural concept.

Gen 18:17

**“what I am about to do.”** The Hebrew text indicates that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is imminent; it will occur very soon. So, for example, the NET text note says, “The active participle here refers to an action that is imminent.”

Gen 18:18

**“become, yes, become.”** The verb is repeated twice in different forms. This is the figure of speech polyptoton, and it magnifies the fact that Abraham will become a great nation.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

**“all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him.”** This is a clarification and an expansion of what God had said to Abraham in Genesis 12:3. There, all the “clans” (or extended families) of the earth would be blessed, while here in Genesis 18:18, all the “nations” of the earth will be blessed through Abraham. This could only happen if the Messiah would come through Abraham, then he would be a blessing to all nations. This prophecy is then expanded and clarified in Genesis 22:18, where the nations of the earth are foretold to be blessed through Abraham’s “seed,” and the primary meaning of “seed” is said to be singular and refer to Christ (Gal. 3:16).

Gen 18:19

**“chosen.”** The Hebrew is “known,” but this is the pregnant sense of “known,” where “known” is idiomatically used to mean that Yahweh has much more than just “known” Abraham, but has “known” him to the end that He has acted in his favor and “chosen” him.

**“house.”** This is the common use of “house” for those who live in the house, or the household.

**“Yahweh.”** Yahweh speaks of Himself in the third person.

Gen 18:20

**“outcry.”** Sodom had many innocent victims. Chapter 19 lets us know that the whole male population of Sodom willingly participated in raping visitors to their city, and so the crimes of the city must have been that and much more. The cries for help and justice came up before God, who, in the case of Sodom, answered with divine justice of burning fire and sulfur from heaven. God’s executing such rare justice in this life, and not the next, was meant to be a warning for all people that God will judge them for what they do—and people who defy God will die in the Lake of Fire (Jude 1:7; Rev. 20:14-15).

Sadly, people completely ignore the account of Sodom and Gomorrah as if it were some kind of fictional story. Worse, there are many Christians who believe that because God is “love,” that He will overlook people’s sin, and not destroy them in the fire, so they do not make any effort to warn people about the Judgment to come. But that misses the point of God being love. God loves the victims of sin, and since sinners make the free will choice to hurt their victims, the way God has set life up to stop sin is to stop the sinners—and they will be finally stopped in the Lake of Fire. The time to stop sinning is now, as Christ said that even if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away so that you don’t end up in Gehenna because of it (Matt. 5:29).

**“grievous.”** The Hebrew text reads *kabad* (#03513 כָּבַד), literally, “heavy,” used of something that is heavy, or serious, grievous, grave, hard; but also rich, honored, glorious, etc. To best understand this verse it is important to know that biblically, sin is often thought of as a weight. Furthermore, forgiveness is thought of as lifting off, or carrying off and away, that weight.

Gen 18:21

**“go down.”** Yahweh is with Abraham in the hill country of Judah and Sodom is to the east down by the Dead Sea, thousands of feet below them, so “go down” is literal here.

Gen 18:22

**“The men turned from there and went toward Sodom.”** From Genesis 19:1 we learn that of the three “men,” two of them walked toward Sodom.

**“Abraham remained standing before Yahweh.”** There is good evidence the original text read that Yahweh stood before Abraham. However, in the Hebrew culture that wording generally indicated that Abraham was greater than Yahweh, so the scribes changed the Hebrew text to read in a way that seemed more acceptable, which was to say that it was Abraham who stood before Yahweh.

Gen 18:26

**“spare.”** The Hebrew is *nasa* (#05375 נָשָׂא, or נָסָא nacah ), and it means to lift, to bear or bear up, to carry or carry away and thus also to take, support, sustain, forgive, and in this case, to “spare.” This is to be seen in light of the fact that the sin of Sodom was “heavy” (see commentary on Genesis 18:20), so it has to be lifted and carried away. This is a common way of depicting sin: it is a weight that must be carried, and eventually “forgiven,” (carried away).

Gen 18:28

**“because of five.”** Although many English versions have the word “lack” here, it is not in the text.

**Genesis Chapter 19**

Gen 19:1

**“was sitting in the gate.”** This is more than just a “fact,” it reflects a biblical custom and part of the culture. Kings, judges, and local elders sat in the gate. The phrase, “in the gate” is usually accurate. Many of the towns that had a gate had a “double gate” for protection. An enemy would have to break down the first gate to get to the second, but then could be attacked from above. Archaeological excavations have revealed some very well-fortified double gates. The text is telling us that Lot has taken a position of authority in the city, which is why the people said he appointed himself as a judge (Gen. 19:9). The reason Wisdom can be found at the city gates is the city elders and judges were there (Prov. 1:21; cf. Deut. 21:19; 22:15; 25:7; Josh. 20:4; Ruth 4:11; Lam. 5:14).

**“bowed down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth, as we see here.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Gen 19:2

**“my lords.”** This is the use of “lord” as a customary greeting of respect, like we would say, “Sir,” when we do not know the person.

**“city square.”** The open place associated with the gate complex of the city, if the city was a walled city, which Sodom was since it had a gate. It would be customary for these strangers to not accept such an invitation immediately, but to wait until they were pressed upon to accept.

Gen 19:3

**“pressed...strongly.”** Lot pressed the angels to come into his house. Later in the story, the men of the city would “press strongly” (same words in Hebrew) to get to the men. The double use of the word in these two contrasting situations highlights the different motives of the men involved.

**“banquet.”** The Hebrew word can mean “drinking bout,” and it generally refers to a meal with wine.

Gen 19:4

**“all the people to the last man.”** The word “outskirts” is the Hebrew for “end, extremity,” and some translators think it means, “to the last man” (ESV, NAB), while others think it means “to the end of the city” (CJB, NASB, NET, NIV, YLT). In either case, this verse explains why God could not find ten righteous people in the city, especially after Lot and his family left Sodom (Gen. 18:32).

Gen 19:5

**“know.”** This is the common idiomatic use of “know” for sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse gives the most intimate and personal “knowledge” of the other, so “know” was used throughout the biblical world as an idiom for sexual intercourse, including rape, as here and in Judges 19:25 (Gen. 4:1, 17, 25; Matt. 1:25).

Gen 19:7

**“my brothers.”** This is polite speech. Lot is trying to win the people. They are not “brothers,” they are Canaanites.

Gen 19:8

**“not known a man.”** Idiomatic: have not had sexual relations with a man. See commentary on Genesis 19:5.

**“what is good in your eyes.”** An idiomatic phrase meaning whatever seems good to you.

Gen 19:9

**“sojourner.”** The Hebrew word translated as “sojourner” is *toshav* (#08453, spelled תּוֹשָׁב or תֹּשָׁב), and it has a range of meanings but generally refers to a temporary resident or a resident alien (see commentary on Gen. 23:4).

**“and he is behaving like a judge.”** Lot demonstrated this when he sat in the gate of the city (cf. Gen. 19:1; Prov. 1:21).

Gen 19:11

**“blindness.”** This is a kind of mental blindness, although there may have been some kind of physical blindness as well—that the men just could not see what was before them. Mental blindness manifests itself in different ways. A bribe “blinds” the mind of a judge so he cannot think clearly (Exod. 23:8; Deut. 16:19). Similarly, a person bent on following false doctrine is “blind” to the truth. He cannot see it (Isa. 6:10; 43:8; Matt. 15:14). There are two cases in the Word of God where the blindness is not physical, it is mental, but it is a different quality of mental blindness than simply being blind to the truth of something.

Here in Genesis 19:11, and in 2 Kings 6:18, people were struck with a kind of blindness that blinded them to their physical surroundings. The blindness was not physical, for in that case in both Genesis and 2 Kings the people would have been so debilitated that they would have discontinued what they were doing. Instead, the blindness was a kind of mental confusion such that they continued what they were attempting to do, but completely without success or any real awareness of what they were actually doing.

The blindness of these men of Sodom here in Genesis, and the Aramean soldiers in 2 Kings, is somewhat similar to what is referred to as “highway hypnosis.” Highway hypnosis occurs when a person is so stupefied by driving for a long time without a break, or so mentally distracted, that he drives right past the place he wanted to go and never “saw” it. Usually in the case of highway hypnosis, after a while, the person “wakes up” mentally and notices that something is wrong, and then has to figure out where he is and what has happened. Although the Bible never specifically says the men of Sodom came out of their stupor before being consumed in the fire, the Aramean soldiers “woke up” and realized they were actually in the city of Samaria.

**“both young and old.”** This is likely what the text is referring to (cf. Gen. 19:4, which uses different vocabulary than here in verse 11, but likely with the same meaning). The Hebrew is “great and small,” and while that can be speaking of class differences in the society, it is probably speaking of age. Although it seems like every male in the city participated in the potential gang rape, that is a hyperbole for the greater number. There would be men who were too old, or too young, or sick, or even Lot’s sons-in-law, who would not have participated.

Gen 19:13

**“For we are about to destroy this place.”** God owns the earth, and He expects His created beings to live according to His laws and standards. When people greatly transgress the laws of God, there is a time when God works to get rid of them off the earth. That was the case with Sodom and Gomorrah, and it was the case for the Canaanites in the Promised Land (cf. Deut. 9:4-5; cf. Gen. 15:16).

Gen 19:14

**“who were takers of his daughters *in marriage*.”** The Hebrew is ambiguous as to whether or not the daughters in this verse were married or just pledged to be married. The rabbis and scholars argue about it. There are two possibilities and the text is unclear about it. One is that Lot had two daughters and they were pledged to be married to men in town but had not gone through the marriage ceremony yet. Nevertheless, in the custom of the people, an engagement was so strong it had to be broken by a divorce. The other scenario is that Lot had several daughters, and some were married to men in Sodom and two were young and were still at home. There is not enough information in the text to tell which of those scenarios is correct.

The Septuagint reads in a way that indicates those translators thought this verse referred to two daughters who were married to men in Sodom, and thus two other unmarried daughters at home. The better approach in understanding this verse is to not pick sides, but acknowledge the two possibilities.

Gen 19:15

**“because of the iniquity of the city.”** This is quite literal. Many versions say “the punishment of the city,” but that is really taking the word “punishment” as a metonymy, the result (punishment) being put for the cause (iniquity).

Gen 19:16

**“merciful.”** The Hebrew word is *chemlah* (#02551 חֶמְלָה), and it means “mercy, pity, compassion.”

**“and left him outside the city.”** For the meaning “left him,” see *HALOT*.[[98]](#footnote-13210) The angels got Lot outside of Sodom, but not far enough away from the city that his life was completely out of danger, as we learn from Lot’s wife, who lingered behind and was caught up in the conflagration. There is an important lesson in this: Many times God gets us moving in the right direction, but it is up to us to do what it takes to completely fulfill His will and be safe. God does His part, but we have to do ours.

Gen 19:17

**“one *of them*.”** Literally, “he,” referring to one of the angels.

**“look.”** The word “look” in this verse does not refer to a passing glance, but rather to a fixed gaze. Given Lot’s hesitation to leave, the angels were warning the family not to stop and take time to longingly look back; after all, they were leaving their home and possessions.

**“do not stop anywhere in the plain. Escape to the hill country.”** It was apparently God’s plan to wipe out the entire plain around Sodom, some of which is the lower part of the Dead Sea now. But Lot begged to stay in the plain and apparently God honored Lot’s request (Gen. 19:18-21).

Gen 19:18

**“Lord.”** Lot spoke to the two angels, thus the word “them.” The word “Lord” is plural, but it is the plural of majesty. The word “Lord” in the Hebrew text is vowel-pointed with the points from the word for God, and not for the plural “lords” (angels). It seems that Lot is speaking to God through the messengers, the angels. The scholars disagree on exactly what is happening here, and so some versions have “lords,” some have “Lord,” and some have “lord.” The same thing occurs in the text in Genesis 18:3.

Gen 19:19

**“your servant...your eyes...you have shown.”** The “you” is singular, indicating that Lot is speaking to God when he is speaking to the angels (see commentary on Gen. 18:3 and Gen. 19:18).

**“overtake.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “cling to, stick to, cleave to.” The essence is that Lot will not be able to escape the destruction and it will cling to him and destroy him too.

Gen 19:20

**“Look, this city is close *enough* to escape to.”** It seems like Lot convinces the messengers to scale down the foretold destruction.

**“my soul will live.”** The meaning is, “my life will be spared. The rhythm of the verse suggests the begging nature of Lot’s request. This is a good example of “soul” referring to the life of the person.

Gen 19:21

**“I will grant you this request too.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “I have lifted up your face,” but the meaning is a request that will be granted. The Hebrew language is very concrete and graphic, and this is a perfect example. Lot was sad and hurt over the destruction of his city and his house, and the loss of the men who were engaged to his daughters. His face was downcast and sad. The angels, in granting his request, “lifted up his face,” a beautiful idiom. The simple meaning is, “I have granted your request.”

Gen 19:22

**“Zoar.”** The Hebrew means “little, tiny” and perhaps “insignificant.”

Gen 19:23

**“sun had risen over the earth.”** Genesis 19:15 says it was dawn when the angels told Lot to leave, so it was an hour or perhaps a little more before the sun came up. When Lot and his daughters reached Zoar, the sun was up upon the earth. Thus, Lot had indeed hurried and Zoar was quite close to Sodom, so God did spare Zoar in His mercy. The sense of the sun “just” rising over the earth is in the structure of the Hebrew text, which reads more literally, “The sun, he had gone forth over the earth; Lot, he had reached Zoar.”

Gen 19:24

**“Then Yahweh rained.”** (Rotherham) “And, Yahweh, rained, upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah, brimstone and fire,—from Yahweh, out of the heavens.” Some Trinitarians say this verse proves that “Yahweh” is a compound God made of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It does not. Yahweh is the one God of Israel, and the form of the verse is typically Semitic in saying something two different ways for clarity and emphasis. The fire and sulfur came from Yahweh. This verse is similar to 1 Kings 8:1 (Rotherham) “Then, did Solomon call together the elders of Israel, and all the heads of the tribes, chiefs of the fathers of the sons of Israel, unto King Solomon in Jerusalem.” “Solomon” is mentioned twice for emphasis (see also 1 Kings 1:53).

The text says “Yahweh rained...sulfur and fire,” but the angels said they came to destroy the place (Gen. 19:13). The angels were the agents of God, but the plan and power were from Yahweh.

Gen 19:25

**“he overthrew.”** The verb is masculine singular, referring to Yahweh. Yahweh overthrew the cities but the angels were His agents, authorized and empowered by God for the mission to destroy the cities (Gen. 19:13).

Gen 19:26

**“But his wife.”** We know nothing about Lot’s wife. We don’t know when, where, or who he married.

**“looked back from behind him.”** It was customary for the woman to walk behind her husband, so it is quite possible that Lot never noticed that his wife was not following, but had stopped to reminisce over all they had left behind, and she was caught up in the destruction.

**“pillar.”** This is the only time in the Bible that this word is translated as “pillar.” Otherwise, it refers to a soldier, representative, overseer, governor, or even a “garrison.” This is not the normal word for “pillar.” So in the context of a military aspect, like a soldier or a non-military context like “representative,” it would be possible that she was a pile of salt, a “witness” to what happens when you ignore the warnings of God. The suggestions that she suddenly became a statue of salt seem incorrect. The “statue” idea comes from the word “pillar,” but that translation is more than suspect, as we saw above.

Gen 19:27

**“the place where he had stood before Yahweh.”** This was in Genesis 18:22.

Gen 19:28

**“toward Sodom and Gomorrah.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic: “toward the face of Sodom and Gomorrah” (see commentary on Gen. 18:16).

**“the smoke of a kiln.”** The Hebrew refers to a “kiln,” not a “furnace.” We generally think of a furnace being used to heat a house, but that is not what the text is referring to. There were kilns for making bricks, making pottery, blowing glass, and for working with metals (see commentary on Exod. 9:8).

Gen 19:29

**“God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow.”** This shows that the life and commitment of a righteous person can save the lives of other people. Lot had made many mistakes and does not appear to be that godly of a person, especially compared to Abraham. Genesis 19:29 shows us that God saved Lot because of the relationship that He had with Abraham, not because Lot was such a godly person.

Gen 19:30

**“for he was afraid to live in Zoar.”** The Bible does not tell us why Lot was afraid to live in Zoar.

**“lived in a cave.”** Southern Judea is hilly and has many caves, and Lot chose one rather than build a house. The Bible never says why he did not rejoin Abraham, who had haggled so earnestly so that he would be spared. Lot’s life and wealth went downhill from the time he decided to live in Sodom. Now apparently his flocks and herds were gone too. The angels told Lot to leave Sodom with his wife and two daughters (Gen. 19:15-16).

Gen 19:31

**“not a man on the earth.”** The daughter uses hyperbole (exaggeration) to make it seem like she and her sister were being forced to have incest. Her exaggeration is a lie. At a time when a man could have multiple wives, the city of Zoar that they had just left no doubt had men. Furthermore, there were many other men available, such as in Abraham’s camp, which was not very far away—perhaps about a day’s journey. Life in Sodom had apparently skewed the daughter’s morality. “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals.’” (1 Cor. 15:33).

**“come into us.”** The graphic but common way of speaking of sexual intercourse.

Gen 19:37

**“Moab.”** Or Mo-ab; sounds like “From [my] father.”

**“of today.”** That is, at the time Moses was writing.

Gen 19:38

**“Ben-ammi.”** “Son of my people.”

**Genesis Chapter 20**

Gen 20:1

**“Abraham traveled from there toward the land of the Negev.”** Abraham traveled south from the area of Hebron down to the Negev and then south of it. Then, he goes back north to Gerar, in the Negev. So Genesis 20:1 shows how Abraham traveled with his flocks and herds; back and forth from north to south then back north. It seems that Genesis 20:1 is giving us a couple of years of Abraham’s life and how he traveled around.

**“and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur.”** So apparently Abraham traveled back and forth in that area, likely camping where the grazing was best for all the animals (for more on Kadesh, see commentary on Gen. 14:7).

**“Shur.”** This is the wilderness of Shur in northwest Sinai.

**“Gerar.”** The well-known Gerar is in the southwest Negev. There are no other known cities of Gerar.

Gen 20:2

**“Abraham said about Sarah his wife, ‘She is my sister.’”** This is the second time Abraham lied about Sarah and let her be taken into another man’s harem in order to protect his life (cf. Gen. 12:10-20).

Gen 20:4

**“come near.”** Idiomatic for approach sexually; i.e., have sexual intercourse with.

**“will you kill a nation.”** It is likely that Abimelech had heard of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and did not question the ability of God to destroy a nation, but it seems He would not “kill” a righteous nation.

**“righteous.”** The Hebrew is “righteous,” here used for “blameless” or “innocent.”

Gen 20:6

**“I also kept you from sinning against me.”** Committing adultery with a man’s wife is not just sinning against the man, but against God as well.

Gen 20:7

**“Indeed.”** Many translations have the particle as causal, “for” instead of assertive, “indeed,” as the NET does, but “for” does not seem to be the heart of the meaning here. God does not want Sarah returned because Abraham is a prophet, but because she is married.

**“prophet.”** This is the first use of “prophet” in the Bible.

**“die, yes, die.”** An emphatic translation of the Hebrew, which uses the figure of speech polyptoton[[99]](#footnote-20996) and repeats the word “die” in different tenses.

[For more on polyptoton and the emphasis it brings, as well as the way it is translated in the REV, see commentaries on Gen. 2:16 and 2:17.]

Gen 20:8

**“in their ears.”** This is an idiom for “in their hearing,” i.e., in a way that they could all hear.

Gen 20:10

**“went on asking.”** The Hebrew is “said to Abraham,” but the word “said” is in the imperfect tense, which is important in this context; the verse could have been translated, “went on saying to Abraham,” but since Abimelech was asking questions, “asking” is a good translation here. This was not a short conversation. Abimelech was a righteous man, and Abraham’s fearful action put him and his kingdom in danger. He wanted to know what caused Abraham to act the way he did, and he was genuinely interested both for himself and his kingdom, if anything needed to be changed, and for Abraham, if he could help Abraham in any way. Abraham was a great man, but great men have faults. Godly people help others to grow in the Lord (cf. Heb. 10:24).

**“see.”** An idiomatic way of asking, “What was your reason” (NIV). The idiom has been freely translated into English in many different ways. “Whatever could have caused you” (CJB); “What did you have in mind” (NAB); “What prompted you” (NET); “What did you foresee” (E. Fox, The Schocken Bible).

Gen 20:11

**“said *to myself*.”** The Hebrew just has “said,” but it is clear from the context that this was what Abraham said to himself—what he was thinking, which he then told Sarah to get her to lie too. The conversations we have with ourselves are very important and they can be very wrong. That is one reason the Bible tells us there is safety in a multitude of counselors (Prov. 11:14). Everyone needs honest and godly people with whom they can confide.

Gen 20:13

**“God had me wander.”** The verb “wander” is plural, and the NET text note catches that and says, “The Hebrew verb is plural. This may be a case of grammatical agreement with the name for God, which is plural in form. However, when this plural name refers to the one true God, accompanying predicates are usually singular in form. Perhaps Abraham is accommodating his speech to Abimelech’s polytheistic perspective. (See GKC 463 §145.i.) If so, one should translate, “when the gods made me wander.” That explanation also fits Abraham’s use of “wander.” Abraham is downplaying God’s purpose in bringing him to the “Promised Land.” It would not have been wise for Abraham to tell Abimelech that God had promised him the land, land that Abimelech thought he owned.

Gen 20:15

**“seems good in your eyes.”** A Hebrew idiom that means wherever it seems good to you.

Gen 20:16

**“your brother.”** Abimelech here calls Abraham “your brother” as a sarcastic rebuke to both Abraham and Sarah.

**“a covering of the eyes.”** The 1,000 pieces of silver “covered the eyes” of the people with Sarah. The idiom and custom are difficult, but the essence is that the gift was to make it seem like no one saw what happened to Sarah, or if they saw what happened to her, they also saw that she was compensated for it, and thus she was vindicated or set right before all the people.

Gen 20:18

**“closed, yes, closed.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton, where “closed” is repeated twice in the Hebrew text, but the word is inflected differently.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

**Genesis Chapter 21**

Gen 21:1

**“Now Yahweh visited Sarah.”** This same verb is in 1 Samuel 2:21 when Hannah, Samuel’s mother conceived.

Gen 21:3

**“whom Sarah bore to him.”** This is in the text as emphasis that Sarah did indeed give birth to Abraham’s son.

**“Isaac.”** The Hebrew means, “he laughs.”

Gen 21:4

**“eight days old.”** The Hebrew text is idiomatic: “a son of eight days.” The commandment to circumcise on the eighth day is Genesis 17:12.

Gen 21:6

**“laugh.”** Laugh with joy. Sarah had been considered cursed and a cloud hung over her head. Now she was vindicated and had the joy of a baby boy.

Gen 21:8

**“banquet.”** The Hebrew word can mean “drinking bout,” and it generally refers to a meal with wine. This would have been a huge meal with lots of wine and likely beer as well.

**“on the day Isaac was weaned.”** Children were weaned late in the biblical world, sometimes at two, but sometimes as late as five. Infant mortality was high in biblical times, but if a baby lived long enough to be weaned, it had survived a very dangerous period of life, which was a cause for great celebration. For a wealthy man like Abraham, especially given that Isaac was a God-given miracle baby, this feast was a feast indeed. It may have even gone on for days.

Gen 21:9

**“laughing.”** The Hebrew is the participle form of the word “Isaac.” The context would indicate that Ishmael was laughing in mockery.

Gen 21:10

**“Send away.”** Abraham is not being harsh to Hagar, as “Cast out” indicates. He is simply sending her away from the family.

**“this slave woman and her son!”** Note that the reason for this is so that Ishmael will “not be heir with my son.” It seems that the inheritance law at the time was if the slave and her son were thrown out of the family, they lost their right to an inheritance. Sarah seems to be concerned that Ishmael would take some of Isaac’s inheritance.

Gen 21:11

**“the matter.”** Sarah’s demand caused Abraham great distress. He loved Ishmael, who was 14 when Isaac was born (Gen. 16:16; 21:5), and now, at Isaac’s weaning, may have been as old as 19. The Hebrew text translated as “matter” is *dabar* (#01697 דָּבָר), which is the common word for “word,” but also, like the Greek word *logos*, it had a wide range of meanings, including “thing,” “matter.”

**“distressing.”** The Hebrew word, *raa* (#07489 רָעַע), is more commonly “bad,” but has a wide semantic range, thus the English translation varies quite a bit. To Abraham, Sarah’s demand was “bad,” “wrong,” “hurtful,” “distressing,” “difficult,” “displeasing,” etc. All these accurately express what Abraham felt and was going through in facing sending away his son, whom he would never see again. In the next verse, we see that our gracious God spoke to Abraham and helped him deal with his emotions and the situation.

Gen 21:12

**“it is through Isaac that your seed will be called.”** This is God’s promise that the Messiah will come through Isaac. God’s promise in Genesis 12:3 was much more broad, that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through Abraham—a promise of the Messiah coming through him. Here God narrows the situation and says the Messiah will come through Isaac. Genesis 12:21 is quoted in Romans 9:7 and Hebrews 11:18.

Gen 21:14

**“took bread and a skin-bottle of water.”** These seem to be very skimpy provisions for Hagar to try to make it to Egypt (but she never got that far, Ishmael grows up in the wilderness of Paran). The skimpy provisions may be to emphasize that Ishmael was to get no inheritance from Abraham.

**“skin-bottle.”** A “bottle” or container made from animal skin. The Hebrew word only occurs three times and only in this chapter, so although “skin bottle” is a good guess, the actual container might be something different.

[For more on skin-bottles, which were usually made from the skins of goats, see commentary on 1 Sam. 10:3.]

**“*gave her* the child.”** According to the custom of the biblical world, the child of a slave born in a master’s house belonged to the master (Exod. 21:4), so Abraham had to give Hagar her son in order for it to be hers in the eyes of the culture.

**“wandered in the wilderness.”** This could mean “wander” like Abraham did, or it can refer to getting lost. Although there was a road to Egypt, Hagar may still have gotten lost or disoriented somehow.

Gen 21:15

**“placed.”** For contextual reasons, the verb should be understood as “placed” or “left,” not “threw,” or “cast.”[[100]](#footnote-21659) Ishmael was now at least 16 and may have been as old as 19 (Ishmael was born when Abraham was 86; Gen. 16:16), but it expresses Hagar’s desperate action to keep her son in the shade and alive a little longer. It is likely that Ishmael was weak and dehydrated and had grown faint, and Hagar was distressed and did not know what else to do, thus her action is somewhat hopeless desperation. She put him in the shade under a bush and walked a distance away to separate herself from her son. Indeed, it is likely that they both would have died without divine help at that time.

There is likely an intentional parallel between Abraham with Ishmael and then Abraham with Isaac (Gen. 22). In both cases, the child is on a journey to an unknown place; then the child is on the edge of death; then an angel of God intervenes, calling out from heaven; then the parent sees a way out (for Hagar, the water; for Abraham, the ram in the thicket); and then there is a promise of future blessing.[[101]](#footnote-21848)

**“she placed the child under one of the shrubs.”** It seems Ishmael was too weak to go on. The rabbis suggest that he was sick.

Gen 21:16

**“about a bow shot.”** About 100 yards (100 meters), more or less. Far enough to be near her son, but not see him from where she was.

**“lifted up her voice and wept.”** An idiomatic way of saying she cried loudly and uncontrollably. She had lost her home, the father of her child, and now was on the verge of watching her son die and likely herself as well. Hagar began to cry uncontrollably.

Gen 21:17

**“What troubles you.”** The Hebrew is an idiom, literally, “What to you?” It means, what troubles you, what is the matter, what is wrong.

**“Hagar.”** The angel more or less introduces himself by calling Hagar by her name and having knowledge of her trouble; things a stranger would not have known.

**“voice of the boy.”** Hagar was the one who was crying loudly and uncontrollably, but Ishmael also must have called out for help to God. He had been raised by Abraham for at least 16 years, and more likely 19, and he surely would have come to know, and to some extent rely on, Abraham’s God, Yahweh. The angel said to Hagar that God heard the voice of the boy, not her voice, not because God did not love Hagar, but in part to get Hagar’s focus off herself and also because God had promised that Ishmael would become a great nation (Gen. 17:20), and He would do what it takes to fulfill His promises.

**“in the place where he is.”** This phrase can have a broad meaning, and likely includes both his physical location and his situation. Thus, the HCSB has, “from the place where he is,” and the NAB has, “in this plight of his.” Both meanings likely apply. God knows both where we are and our situation.

Gen 21:18

**“hold him tightly with your hand.”** The reference is to holding him up or supporting him because he was so weak at this point.

Gen 21:20

**“God was with the boy.”** This points out that Ishmael would do well and prosper.

**“an archer.”** More literally, “a shooter of a bow.” So Ishmael lived off the land as a hunter, not a shepherd.

Gen 21:21

**“wife...Egypt.”** It was the custom that the parents of the man (or teenager; most boys married in their mid to late teens) negotiated the marriage and its details with the parents of an available woman (who was usually a young teen). Thus, it was according to custom that Hagar got a wife for Ishmael. She was an Egyptian, and she got an Egyptian wife, so she may have gotten a relative of hers or a contact from a relative. Samson had his parents get a wife for him, even though he knew the girl he wanted to marry (Judg. 14:2-3).

Gen 21:22

**“Abimelech.”** The king of Gerar, where Abraham had set up his tent camp (cf. Gen. 20:1-2).

**“Phicol.”** The commander of Abimelech’s army.

Gen 21:23

**“swear to me.”** Although both Abimelech the king and Phicol his general (and likely others are there with Abraham too), it is King Abimelech who speaks. The reason that Abimelech wants Abraham to swear to be honest with him is because Abraham lied to him about Sarah.

**“and the land.”** Abraham and his extended family group was growing in size and power, and Abimelech was concerned that his own land rights would be protected. It seems there was a kind of a land grab going on between Abraham’s group and Abimelech’s group (Gen. 21:25).

Gen 21:25

**“complained.”** The Hebrew word more often means “reprove,” or “rebuke,” but that seems a little strong here. Abimelech and Abraham were friendly enough to enter into a covenant, so “complained” seems the better choice.

Gen 21:26

**“I don’t know.”** Given Abimelech’s honest and upright behavior throughout his dealings with Abraham, this is an honest answer.

Gen 21:27

**“sheep and cattle.”** It was customary in the making of a covenant that gifts would be exchanged.

**“cut a covenant.”** Although the term “cut a covenant” is sometimes used as a general term for making a covenant even when it is not a blood covenant, it is likely that Abraham and Abimelech made a blood covenant at this time. However, the form of the covenant is not known. For example, instead of cutting themselves, they may have killed animals and walked between the pieces (cf. Gen. 15:10, 17; Jer. 34:18).

Gen 21:28

**“seven.”** This is the same Hebrew root as “oath,” so Abraham likely took the seven lambs as a visual statement about the oath he took with Abimelech.

Gen 21:30

**“so that it will be a witness.”** The whole process of taking the lambs is a witness, not just the lambs themselves. There were often customs such as this taking of lambs that made it clear that a deal had been made and finalized and both parties agreed to it. When it comes to covenants and agreements, it is easy to forget who agreed to what, and written contracts were rare, so customs developed such that everyone knew the deal had been made. In some cases, a sandal was given by one party to the other party (e.g., Ruth 4:7).

Gen 21:32

**“into the land of the Philistines.”** It is worth noting that Beer-sheba is not technically in the land of the Philistines, but Abraham has a well there.

Gen 21:33

**“planted a tamarisk tree.”** The tamarisk could grow in very arid regions, such as the Negev, and provide shade. There is no indication that Abraham planted the tree as some kind of religious act or dedication to God, but it is likely that there was some thinking about it. It is more likely that he intended to stay there in Beer-sheba, or have a place where, as he tented from place to place, he could return and have shade. Preparing for the future and providing for others are hallmarks of a wise and godly person.

It is also likely that Abraham planted the tree in the area of the well he had dug and thus had water rights to as a kind of gesture to himself, and perhaps his family as well, that God had promised him the land. That he would have a tree and a well could point to him having a stake in the land that would later belong to him and his descendants.

**Genesis Chapter 22**

Gen 22:1

**“God tested Abraham.”** The Hebrew word translated “tested” in Genesis 22:1 is *nasah* (#05254 נָסַה), and its meanings include “to test” and “to tempt.” It is helpful in biblical study to know that in both Hebrew and Greek, the same word can be either “test” or “tempt,” depending on the motivation of the one doing the testing or tempting. In a “test,” the most common idea is that the test would help the person in some way and result in success. In contrast, in a temptation, the motivation is that the person will fail. When it comes to *nasah* referring to a “test,” there are different uses of “test” in the Bible: people test God (Judg. 6:39); people test other people (1 Kings 10:1; Dan. 1:12, 14); people test things (1 Sam. 17:39), and God tests people (Gen. 22:1; Ps. 26:2). Understanding temptations is a little more challenging because people “tempt” God on their part (cf. Exod. 17:7; Num. 14:22), but God is not tempted by what they do, nor does God tempt anyone (James 1:13).

God’s “tests” are meant to strengthen the person in their walk with Him, and also accomplish His purposes. That is certainly the case here with Abraham. But it is important to understand that God testing Abraham is not unique because there are many times in the Bible that God “tested” people by asking them to do things for His purposes that the person did not want to do, but the word “test” is not in the text. Actually, on the most basic level, every person is tested by God. God commands people to do things, such as live a godly life, with the intention that people will obey and pass the “test,” and that is the basic idea behind verses that say God tests the heart (cf. 1 Chron. 29:17; Ps. 7:9; 26:2; Jer. 11:20; 17:10).

However, beyond God’s test to every person as to whether or not they will obey Him, God sometimes has specific jobs for people to do that severely test them because the job is unpleasant, a lot of work, or even dangerous. For example, God told Jeremiah not to marry (Jer. 16:1-4), not to go into a house where people were mourning the dead (Jer. 16:6-7), and to make a yoke with straps and crossbars and wear it around (Jer. 27). God had Ezekiel act out a number of prophecies; for example, to draw the city of Jerusalem on a tile and lay siege to it (Ezek. 4:1-3). Also, to lie on his left side for 390 days, then on his right side for 40 days (Ezek. 4:4-8). Also, to eat very little and drink very little, and bake his food over dung (Ezek. 4:9-17). God also told Ezekiel to shave his head and beard (Ezek. 5:1-13), and to leave Jerusalem as if going into exile (Ezek. 12:2-6). God told Hosea to marry a prostitute (Hos. 1:2-3). God told Amos, who was from Judah, to go into Israel and prophesy against it, a very dangerous assignment (Amos 7:10-17), and similarly, God told Jonah to leave Israel and prophesy against Assyria, which was also a very dangerous assignment (Jon. 1:1-2). The point is that although God’s asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was no doubt very challenging, it was not completely out of line with what God has asked of other people, especially since God knew He was going to stop Abraham before he killed Isaac.

In Genesis 22:1-18 God tested both Abraham and Isaac, although the text only uses the word “test” of Abraham. Abraham had to be willing to sacrifice his son, and Isaac had to be willing to die at the request of his father. Both tests were difficult, and both were necessary. God did not test them “for fun.” The prophetic picture produced by the willing participation of Abraham and Isaac produced the clearest depiction in the whole Bible of the willing sacrifices made by God the Father who gave His Son and Jesus Christ the Son as he willingly gave his life. Abraham’s love and obedience to God and Isaac’s love and trust in his father is an example that has now shown brightly down throughout some 4,000 years of human history. That clear example no doubt helped Jesus Christ understand his role in the salvation of all who would believe, and has helped many better understand the singular sacrifice of Christ as well as the difficult sacrifices we must sometimes make in this fallen world in order to help others.

Once we understand that God does “test” people the way He tested Abraham and many of the prophets, we are better prepared mentally for whatever the Lord may have for us to do. Actually, some of the things that God asks of every Christian, such as sharing their faith with others, can severely test some people, but God wants us to succeed and we should want to participate in His plan to save every person on earth.

Gen 22:2

**“your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac.”** The fourfold mention of Isaac as Abraham’s “son...only son...whom you love...Isaac” establishes the intimate relationship between Abraham and his son, which is especially the case since Abraham’s first son, Ishmael, had been sent away years before. Abraham’s hope lay in Isaac because he knew the promise was that the Messiah would come through Isaac. Also, the fact that God acknowledged that Isaac was loved by Abraham—“your only son, whom you love—precluded any idea that the reason that Abraham would be willing to sacrifice Isaac was that he did not really care about Isaac in the first place and was a selfish and cold-hearted man.

**“your only son.”** This is not an error in the Hebrew text or a contradiction in the Bible. Genesis tells us clearly that Abraham had another son, Ishmael, by Hagar (Gen. 16:4-16). God calls Isaac the “only son” as a point of emphasis to draw our attention to Isaac because he is the son of the promise, the son in the line of the Messiah (Gen. 21:12). If Isaac dies, humanity is lost because God’s promise of a Messiah through Isaac will go unfulfilled and there will be no Messiah to save mankind from death. In the line of the Messiah, and as the Hope of mankind, Isaac was the “only son.”

The offering of Isaac in Genesis 22 is a multifaceted portrait of the Messiah in which Isaac is a type of Christ and Abraham is a type of our Heavenly Father. No doubt Jesus himself received great inspiration and courage from it.

The multifaceted portrait includes: Abraham being the father who is willing to give his only son, while Isaac is the “only son” who is willing to give up his life. While it is often portrayed that Isaac is a small child, that is not the case. Isaac was a strong young man, as we can see by the fact that he carried the wood for the burnt offering on his back for three days, and that would have been quite a lot of wood (Gen. 22:5). Given the typology in Genesis 22, that Isaac was a type of Christ, and the fact that God was the One who spoke to Abraham and thus set the timing of this event, it makes sense that Isaac would have been around 30 or a little older when this happened, just as Christ was about 30 or a little older when he died. Furthermore, Isaac was 40 years old in Genesis 25:20, when Abraham sought a wife for him and he married Rebekah.

If Isaac had not allowed Abraham to bind him, then Abraham, likely around 130 years old, would not have been able to do it. Isaac was willing to die simply because Abraham told him it was the will of God.

Isaac and Abraham traveled for three days, during which time Isaac was as “good as dead” (Gen. 22:4), while Jesus was dead for three days and nights (Matt. 12:40). Isaac carried the wood he was to be offered on (Gen. 22:6), and Jesus carried the wood he was to be crucified on (John 19:17). Isaac was bound before he was offered (Gen. 22:9), Jesus was bound before he was offered (Matt. 27:2).

Also, Abraham and Isaac were both blessed with great blessings after they obeyed. Abraham was told his seed would become many—like the sand on the seashore; Isaac was told he would inherit the gate of his enemies (Gen. 22:17). Similarly, God and Jesus were both blessed after Jesus obeyed: God was blessed to have a huge family to live with Him forever, while Jesus will rule the earth as king, and indeed, inherit the gate of his enemy.

Still another parallel between God and Abraham is that Abraham was so confident in the promise of God that the Messiah would come through Isaac that he believed God would raise Isaac from the dead (Heb. 11:19). However, offering Isaac would still have been difficult for him—it would never be easy to kill your own son even if you knew things would be okay in the end. Similarly, even though God knew He would raise Jesus from the dead and make him ruler over His creation, that did not make it easy for God to watch His only Son suffer and die.

**“go.”** This form of the verb only occurs here and in Genesis 12:2. In Genesis 12, Yahweh told Abraham to “go” and it involved giving up his past (his father), whereas here, Yahweh tells Abraham to “go” and it seems he will have to give up his future (his son).[[102]](#footnote-15672)

**“Moriah.”** The name “Moriah” is composed of three elements. The prefix Hebrew letter *mem*, in this context, referring to “the place,” the Hebrew verb *ra’ah* (#07200 רָאָה), and “Yah,” indicating “Yahweh.” When used in the passive voice, the verb *ra’ah* means “to see,” while when it is used in the active voice, it means more “to provide.” Thus, the connotation of “Moriah” in this context would include both “the place where Yahweh sees,” and “the place where Yahweh provides.” The word *ra’ah* occurs throughout the record, showing God’s constant watchfulness and provision (Gen. 22:4, 8, 13, 14; and also as part of “Moriah,” v. 2). The word Moriah only occurs here in Genesis 22 and in 2 Chronicles 3:1 in the context of Solomon building the Temple on Mount Moriah

**“burnt offering.”** Although this was about 400 years before God gave the Law to Moses, the burnt offering was an indication of complete surrender to the will of God. Human sacrifice was forbidden by the Law (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; Deut. 12:31), and there is no indication that God condoned it in any way before the Law. In fact, when people engage in human sacrifice it is to demons, not God (Ps. 106:37-38).

God telling Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac is a unique prophetic picture in which Isaac was a type of Christ, and beyond that, God knew ahead of time that He would not allow Abraham to kill his son. Sadly, the record of Abraham and Isaac has been widely misunderstood. Some people have doubted that God really asked Abraham to offer his son as a burnt offering—to kill him and burn him. However, it is clear from Hebrews 11 that Abraham understood God correctly and acted out of his genuine trust in God, and thanks to Abraham’s trust and action, Isaac became a very clear type of Jesus Christ. Soren Kierkegaard[[103]](#footnote-23791) is one famous person who misunderstood the Abraham-Isaac record. He wrote four scenarios about Abraham and Isaac, none of them correct. In the first scenario, Abraham lies to Isaac and acts like killing Isaac is his own idea, trying to protect Isaac’s faith in God. In the second, Abraham’s trust in God is shaken because of God’s request, and so he sacrifices a ram instead of Isaac. In the third scenario, Abraham decides not to kill Isaac and prays to God to forgive him, and in the fourth scenario, Abraham cannot bring himself to kill Isaac, but Abraham’s lack of trust in God causes Isaac to doubt his own faith.

But God did ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering, and the Abraham-Isaac record in Genesis 22 is a vital piece of redemption history. Certainly, it is the clearest picture in the Bible of the father who is willing to give his son and the son willing to die according to the will of the father. But more than just picturing the willing father and son, it must have helped Jesus Christ on many levels. We know from Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane that he did not want to die, and yet he prayed, “not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). So Jesus was prepared to die; prepared to do what God wanted, no matter what it involved. The fact that Jesus knew that some 2,000 years earlier a real flesh-and-blood son, Isaac, had been willing to die simply because his father Abraham said it was necessary would have helped Jesus “set his face like a flint” (Isa. 50:7) and suffer what he had to suffer to accomplish redemption. No doubt that Jesus had reflected on the Abraham-Isaac record many times throughout his life, starting at a very early age.

Also, although God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son is unique and to some people even seems cruel, it is not completely out of the ordinary for God to ask very difficult things of His prophets. Also, the text of Genesis 22 reveals, not the confused and anxious angst of a caring father, but the calm resoluteness of a prophet of God who had personally met God on numerous occasions, who had been asked to do challenging things before, and who had always been protected and blessed by God. There is no hint of Abraham having confusion and anxiety in the text, instead, he figured that God would raise Isaac from the dead. Indeed, “he who had gladly received the promises was offering up his only begotten *son*…He reasoned that God was able to raise him up, even from among the dead, from which, as a parable, he did receive him back” (Heb. 11:19).

The prophetic picture of the father willing to offer his son and the son willing to die at the request of the father was a vital one to help people grasp what needed to happen with the Messiah in order to pay for the sins of mankind and make salvation available to anyone who wanted it. The record of Abraham offering Isaac is certainly historical, and no doubt it greatly helped Jesus, and it clearly teaches us that there may be things God asks us to do that we do not fully understand, but it is still important for us to obey God.

[For more on the times God appeared personally to Abraham, see commentary on Gen. 18:1.]

**“one of the mountains.”** The place where the Temple was built was Mount Moriah, but that does not mean Isaac was sacrificed on it, as is commonly assumed. Note that God told Abraham to “go into the land of Moriah” and sacrifice Isaac on “one of the mountains” there. God never said to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah itself. There is a huge controversy over the location of the place where Jesus was crucified, but there is good evidence that it was on the Mount of Olives. If that is the case, then it is very likely indeed that the mountain that Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac on was the Mount of Olives.

[For more information about Jesus being crucified on the Mount of Olives, see commentary on Matt. 27:33.]

**“I will tell you of.”** The Hebrew is slightly awkward when literally translated: “of which I will tell you.” The meaning is, “that I will show you,” or “that I will point out to you.”

Gen 22:3

**“saddled his donkey.”** Actually, put a blanket on his donkey. The saddle of the biblical world was just a cloth or blanket. The true saddle with stirrups may have been invented during the late first century, perhaps during the lifetime of the apostle John, but was not even around at the time of Christ.

Gen 22:4

**“on the third day.”** Abraham was traveling from Beer-sheba. A three-day trip would give Abraham plenty of time to consider what he was doing, and in spite of any misgivings he might have had he was faithful to obey God.

Genesis 22:4 is an important part of Isaac being a type of Christ. Jesus spent three days and three nights in the grave, dead (Matt. 12:40). This is the third day that Isaac has been as good as dead, Abraham intending to kill him but thinking that God would somehow raise him back up (Heb. 11:19).

Gen 22:5

**“Stay here with the donkey.”** This is one of the clear indications that Abraham was acting on revelation from God; acting by faith (Heb. 11:17). Ordinarily, Abraham would have taken the donkey, which already had the wood on it, to the place where he was going to sacrifice Isaac. But in this case, he left the donkey behind and loaded the wood on Isaac, a seemingly senseless thing to do. But today, with 20/20 hindsight, we can see that Isaac—the type of Christ—carried the wood he was to be offered on (Gen. 22:6), just as Jesus carried the wood he was to be crucified on (John 19:17). God was directing Abraham in ways that would build a very clear picture of the sacrifice of Christ without Abraham understanding the fullness of what he was doing and that two millennia later Jesus would in a sense replay what Isaac had already done.

**“bow down.”** The Hebrew word is *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), and it literally means “to bow down,” or “to prostrate oneself.” It was used of bowing down in homage or worship before a superior, and thus in the Bible, we see people bowing down before other people, angels, pagan gods, and God. Usually, translators use “worship” when the person bows before the true God, and “bow down,” “prostrate themselves,” etc. when bowing before people and pagan gods. While this may be an acceptable translation practice, it can give the English reader the wrong impression that only God was “worshiped.” The same Hebrew word is used of bowing down in homage before God and people. This is not meant to degrade God in any way; it simply points to how people showed respect to those superior to them by bowing down or prostrating themselves.

[For more on *shachah* and its referring to bowing down, prostration, or “worship,” see Word Study: “Worship.”]

**“then come back to you.”** This is an intriguing statement because God had just told Abraham that he would go and offer Isaac as a burnt offering (Gen. 22:2), so why would Abraham say here that both he and the boy would come back? Is Abraham a bad listener, not able to comprehend that he is about to lose Isaac? No. Abraham is displaying his faith and “reasoned that God was able to raise him up, even from among the dead” (Heb. 11:19). Abraham believed that both he and Isaac would come back, even if he went through with the sacrifice, he believed that God could even raise Isaac from the dead.

Gen 22:6

**“knife.”** This is not the most common word for knife, but generally refers to a larger knife.

Gen 22:7

**“My father!”** This address is the only spoken dialogue recorded between Isaac and Abraham in the entire Bible.

Gen 22:8

**“see to *providing*.”** The Hebrew more literally reads: “will see for himself.” The phrase is meant to bring the word “see” into the account, which emphasizes God seeing and providing. The Hebrew phrase means “to see to it,” or “to provide.” Later in the record (Gen. 22:14), Abraham will name the mountain, “Yahweh sees.”

Gen 22:9

**“And...and...and.”** The word “and” occurs five times in this sentence, running forward from one point to the next. It is as if the text is telling us that Abraham hurried through this action, which was no doubt difficult for him, even though he believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead after he sacrificed him (Heb. 11:19).

Gen 22:10

**“Abraham reached out his hand.”** This is a statement of purpose and drama. Abraham had not been just holding on to the knife, he had to purposely “send out his hand” (as per the Hebrew text) and take the knife. At this point in the story, you can “cut the tension with a knife” so to speak.

Gen 22:11

**“called to him from heaven.”** There are two places in the Bible where angels call to a specific human from heaven, and both of them involve an angel interceding for a child of Abraham. Here the angel protects Isaac, on the other occasion the angel protected Ishmael (Gen. 21:17).

Gen 22:14

**“Yahweh Will Provide.”** The Hebrew is “*Yahweh yireh*”(better known as “*Jehovah jireh*” from earlier versions such as the King James and ASV), more literally, “Yahweh will see,” the Hebrew word “see” is the common word *raah* (#07200 רָאָה), but in this case, the verb “see” also has the idiomatic or pregnant sense of “provide,” because God does not just “see,” He sees the need and then acts; He provides.

[For more on the idiomatic or “pregnant” sense of the word “see” or other words such as “remember” or “know,” see commentary on Luke 23:42.]

**“On Yahweh’s mountain it will be provided.”** Here again, as earlier in the verse, “provided” is more literally “seen.” In this context of Genesis, the translation in the REV and many other English versions—that Yahweh will “provide” on the mountain—is the primary emphasis of the verse. But the last phrase in the verse can also be translated as “on this mountain Yahweh is seen.”[[104]](#footnote-29480) This use of *raah* here is no doubt a very purposeful choice of words on God’s part and an amphibologia (double meaning)[[105]](#footnote-22585), because the mountain on which Abraham offered Isaac in a figurative sense (Heb. 11:19), is very likely the mountain on which Jesus was crucified. So it is very true that God “provided” on that mountain: He provided a ram for Abraham and years later He provided His Son for all of mankind so we could be saved. Also, however, just as we can “see” Abraham for who he is by the selfless way he showed his love for God by being willing to offer his son Isaac, so too we can “see” God for who He is and see His great love and compassion for humankind by the selfless way that He offered His Son for us on the mountain. God is truly “seen” on Calvary. In truth, the loving God and the obedient Son are both clearly seen for who they are on that holy mountain.

It is worth noting that in the Hebrew text, the phrase “it will be provided (or “seen”)” could also be translated “he will be provided (or “seen”).” Thus, the verse can both refer to the immediate provision of “it,” the ram Abraham needed, and also the “he” in the sacrifice of Christ that humankind needed for salvation.

[For more on the evidence that Jesus was crucified on the Mount of Olives and the sacrifice of Isaac was on the Mount of Olives, see commentaries on Matt. 27:33 and Gen. 22:2.]

Gen 22:15

**“And the angel of Yahweh called to Abraham.”** Genesis 22:15-17 is an excellent example of the Jewish principle of agency, where the agent is treated and referred to as the one who sent him. In this case, the Bible tells us it was an angel who spoke to Abraham, but he used the first person as if he were Yahweh himself: “And the angel of Yahweh called to Abraham a second time out of heaven and said, ‘I have sworn by myself,’ says Yahweh, ‘because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, that I will bless, yes, bless you, and I will make your seed many, yes, many, like the stars of the heavens and like the sand that is on the seashore. And your seed will possess the gate of his enemies.” Note that the angel uses “I” as if he were Yahweh.

[For more on the Jewish custom of agency, see commentary on Matt. 8:5.]

Gen 22:16

**“I have sworn by myself.”** Hebrews 6:13-18 makes Genesis 22:16 clear. People swear oaths by people or things greater than themselves, but there is none greater than God, so He swore by Himself, making a promise and an oath “so that by two unchangeable things, in *each of* which it is impossible for God to lie, we have strong encouragement” (Heb. 6:18).

Gen 22:17

**“bless, yes, bless you.”** The Hebrew text has the figure of speech polyptoton, using “bless” twice in the sentence but inflected in different ways. A more literal translation might be, “in blessing I will bless you.”

**“make your seed many, yes, many.”** This is the second occurrence in this verse of the figure of speech polyptoton. A more literal translation of this phrase might be, “in increasing I will increase your seed.” The double polyptoton in this verse powerfully emphasizes the blessing of God on Abraham and extending to his offspring. This blessing was not due to anything Abraham could have done on his own, but was in the plan and purpose of God to have a family and save that family through the man, Jesus Christ. God promised Abraham that his seed would be a great multitude on a number of different occasions (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 16:10 (via Hagar); Gen. 17:6; 22:17).

[For more on polyptoton, and the emphasis it brings, as well as the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

**“like the sand that is on the seashore.”** This is the first time and only that God uses the seashore analogy to describe the number of Abraham’s seed, and this verse is quoted in Hebrews 11:12. The analogy is used several times in describing Israel’s enemies (e.g., Josh. 11:4; Judg. 7:12).

**“And your seed will possess the gate of his enemies.”** This is referring to Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land in the time of Joshua and extending forward in time. In the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob no gated cities were conquered. But Joshua, David, and other kings of Israel and Judah did. The fact that Abraham’s seed would conquer gated cities testifies to the military strength Abraham’s seed would one day have with Yahweh’s help.

Gen 22:18

**“Through your seed.”** This is a clarification and an expansion of what God had said to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 and 18:18. In Genesis 12:3 all the “clans” (or extended families) of the earth would be blessed. That prophecy was expanded in Genesis 18:18, which states that all the “nations” of the earth will be blessed through Abraham. This could only happen if the Messiah would come through Abraham, then he would be a blessing to all nations. That prophecy is then expanded again and clarified in Genesis 22:18, where the nations of the earth are foretold to be blessed through Abraham’s “seed,” and the primary meaning of “seed” is said to be singular and refer to Christ (Gal. 3:16).

**“all the nations of the earth will be blessed.”** This is another promise from God to Abraham that the Messiah would be one of his descendants. It is similar to Genesis 12:3 (see commentary on Genesis 12:3).

Gen 22:20

**“sons.”** Below this, twelve sons are listed. Uz, Buz, Kemuel, Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, Bethuel, Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah. It is unlikely that Nahor did not have any daughters, but they are not listed.

Gen 22:21

**“Uz.”** The land of Uz (cf. Job 1:1) was almost certainly named after him. The exact boundaries of Uz are unknown, but the area was east of the Jordan River and seems to include some of Edom to the south and extend all the way north into Aram (called Syria today).

**“Buz.”** The land of Buz was also near Edom, but like Uz, the exact boundaries are unknown. Jeremiah 25:23 puts it close to Tema and Dedan. Elihu in the book of Job was a Buzite (Job 32:2). The Assyrian records of King Esar-haddon show he invaded Bazu and Hazu, and Bazu might be the “Buz” of the Bible. The Assyrian records show Bazu was full of snakes and scorpions, which would fit the desert territory near Edom (and also fit with the fact that when the Israelites were traveling through Edom the people were bitten by venomous snakes; Num. 21:4-9).

Gen 22:22

**“Chesed.”** Chesed is the likely ancestor of the Chaldeans,[[106]](#footnote-32701) located in the northwestern area of Mesopotamia (see commentary on Gen. 11:31).

**“Hazo.”** Likely settled in northern Arabia.[[107]](#footnote-27612)

Gen 22:23

**“Rebekah.”** She became the wife of Isaac (Gen. 24:15).

Gen 22:24

**“Tebah, and Gaham, and Tahash, and Maacah.”** These are all boys. No girls are mentioned.

**“Reumah.”** Likely from the area of middle Syria or northern Transjordan.[[108]](#footnote-15990)

**“Tebah.”** Likely settled in what became southern Syria.[[109]](#footnote-15095)

**“Tahash.”** Likely settled in the area between Damascus and the Orantes River.[[110]](#footnote-15029)

**“Maacah.”** Likely settled in the northern Transjordan.[[111]](#footnote-23859)

**Genesis Chapter 23**

Gen 23:2

**“Kiriath-arba.”** “Kiriath-arba” means “the town of Arba,” who was one of the Nephilim.

[For more on Arba and Kiriath-arba, see commentaries on Josh. 14:15 and 15:13. For more on the Nephilim, see commentary on Gen. 6:2.]

**“and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah.”** The Bible does not say where Abraham came from. It could have been from short or far. If Sarah had had a sickness that was causing her to go downhill, it seems Abraham would not have been far away. If she got sick quickly, he could have been away. The Bible just does not say.

Gen 23:3

**“rose up from before his dead *wife*.”** The Bible does not give the details of Sarah’s death, but both Abraham and the Hittites would have been close by, because the custom was to bury a person the same day that they died. Abraham, who had been mourning beside his wife of what was almost certainly over 100 years, stood up and spoke to the Hittites, who had likely come to pay their respects to Abraham when they heard that Sarah had died. Abraham was a good and godly man, and there is no indication in the text that Sarah’s death was a surprise, so no doubt Abraham’s request for the cave of Machpelah was well thought out.

**“sons.”** The Hebrew word is “sons,” but often it is translated “children.” In this case, it means descendants, but the ones Abraham would have negotiated with would have been the men of the tribe.

Gen 23:4

**“sojourner.”** The Hebrew word translated as “sojourner” is *toshav* (#08453, spelled תּוֹשָׁב or תֹּשָׁב), and it has a range of meanings but generally refers to a temporary resident or a resident alien. Although Abraham lived in the land of Canaan, he was not a landowner and so he referred to himself as a “sojourner.” The meanings of *toshav* (sojourner) and *ger* (foreigner) often overlap, and in some contexts can be almost synonymous.

**“foreigner.”** The Hebrew word translated as “foreigner” is *ger* (#01616, spelled גֵּר or גֵּיר), and it generally refers to someone who has had to leave his place of residence, his village or tribal area, and thus is in another place, but for how long is left open. Often the translation “stranger” applies well, because he is a stranger in the area and not known there.

**“Give.”** In this case, “give” is idiomatic for “sell,” and that was well understood.

**“for a tomb.”** The Hebrew word translated “tomb” is the same word as the word “tomb” in Genesis 23:6. The Hebrew word can mean “burying place,” but since Abraham did not have a family tomb, he would have wanted one. Therefore, the request, “give me property for a tomb,” is logical. There is no indication that Sarah died suddenly, and even if she had, there is every reason to believe that Abraham had thought about a tomb where she and he, and even their child Isaac, could be buried. In Genesis 15:15, God had told Abraham that he would die in his old age, but at 137 he was old, and Sarah was old at 127. It was the custom to bury families together whenever possible, and it is very likely that Abraham considered that fact when he bought the cave that would be his tomb. The fact that he knew exactly what cave he wanted to buy and where it was located is an indication that he had even looked around for a suitable tomb location. As we now know, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah were all buried in that tomb, which is located in Hebron. Abraham asked for the “cave of Machpelah.” The word “Machpelah” means something like “double cave” or “split cave,” so it had the potential to be a large multi-room tomb. So this either was a tomb or it had the potential to be a tomb that could hold multiple people (cf. Gen. 23:9).

It is noteworthy that Abraham prepared for his death. Many people are frightened of death and so they refuse to think about it, which then leaves their family in chaos and a mess when they die. Abraham knew he would die, but he knew the Messiah was coming and he would be resurrected to a wonderful life (John 8:56; Heb. 11:10).

**“bury my dead from before me.”** Sarah’s dead body needed to be buried. Abraham was asking for a place where she could be properly buried. “Bury my dead from before me” was simply a way of saying that Sarah’s body needed to be buried; it could not be just left out in the open.

Gen 23:6

**“Hear us, my lord.”** This use of “lord” is polite address, like we might say “sir.”

**“mighty ruler.”** The Hebrew uses the word *elohim* here like an adjective, which is a standard idiomatic use in Hebrew. Thus, the literal Hebrew phrase “ruler of God” means ruler with God-like characteristics, or “mighty ruler.” It does not seem that the Hittites would have recognized Abraham’s God as “the” God, or in this case, even “a” god, but they might have. “Ruler” (often translated “prince”) likely refers to a tribal chief. Abraham was indeed a mighty tribal chief among them. His encampment likely numbered in the hundreds.

**“Bury your dead in the best of our tombs.”** The local Hittites may have prepared places (tombs) for burial in the same way that Joseph of Arimathea had prepared the tomb that Jesus ended up being placed in, or it is possible that they used the word “tomb” to indicate places where tombs could be built. If the cave of Machpelah had already been prepared in some way to be a family tomb, that would help explain why it would be worth 400 shekels of silver. David paid 600 shekels for the top of Mount Zion where the Temple was later built (1 Chron. 21:25).

Gen 23:7

**“Abraham rose up.”** It seems to be the custom that negotiations were normally carried out while sitting down, perhaps because they normally took so long (Gen. 23:10; Ruth 4:1-2). The fact that Abraham “rose up” before he started to speak likely signifies the fact that he thought of this negotiation as of particular importance. He was asking for a permanent possession of land in the Promised Land. He would have sat back down again after making the request.

**“bowed down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth, as we see here. This is the same word that is translated as “worship” when the subject is God.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

**“sons of Heth.”** Genesis 10:15 tells us that Heth was a son of Canaan, so it makes sense that he and his descendants would settle in the land of Canaan. It is possible that these Hittites are related to the Hittites of Asia Minor that we today know as Turkey, but it is also possible that the name is the same but the people are not related.

Gen 23:8

**“willing.”** The Hebrew is *nephesh* (#05315 נֶפֶשׁ), often thought of and translated “soul,” but very often used in the Old Testament for the person himself or herself. In this case, nephesh is used for the activity of the mind: one’s thoughts and emotions. In this verse, it could be translated “If it is how you feel,” or “If you are thinking that,” or even, as some versions, “If you agree.”

[See Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

**“intercede with Ephron the son of Zohar for me.”** We learn from the context that Ephron was sitting right there with Abraham and the elders of the Hittites (Gen. 23:10), but culture and custom directed that it was wise for Abraham to use intermediaries. When someone of lesser status, power, or influence (in this case, Abraham) wanted something from someone of greater position (in this case, Ephron, who owned the land), the best way to move forward in the biblical culture was to secure an intermediary or intermediaries who had influence with the one from whom the favor was desired. Thus, Abraham, instead of looking at Ephron and saying, “I want to buy your cave,” asked the Hittite elders to entreat Ephron to sell the cave. As we see from other records in the Bible, sometimes these intermediaries, or “agents,” even spoke in the first person to the one they were negotiating with as if they were the principal person himself.

[For more on the use of intermediaries and the Jewish custom of agency, see commentary on Matt. 8:5.]

Gen 23:9

**“the cave of Machpelah.”** The word “Machpelah” means something like “double cave” or “split cave,” so it had the potential to be a large multi-room tomb. So this either was a tomb or it had the potential to be a tomb.

**“that he owns.”** Abraham, an astute businessman, is making sure that Ephron does indeed own the field and thus has the right to sell it. It is amazing how many real estate transactions occur and the buyer later finds out that the person who “sold” the land did not have clear title. Anyone buying or selling land can learn things from Abraham.

**“which is at the edge of his field.”** Abraham is making it clear that he does not want to buy all of Ephron’s land, only the cave.

**“full price.”** The Hebrew is “full silver,” and reflects the custom of trading using precious metals by weight. Coins had not been invented yet. Abraham is also making sure the Hittites know he is buying the land as a permanent possession, he is not just using the cave to bury Sarah.

**“in your presence.”** That is, with you sitting there as witnesses. It was important in cases like this to have witnesses who could testify to the transaction that occurred.

**“property.”** God had promised Abraham the land, and so he knew that someday it would be his and his descendants, but how that would happen had not yet been revealed. Nevertheless, Abraham takes a stake in the Promised Land by buying a burial site for his property. See commentary on Genesis 23:4.

Gen 23:10

**“in the hearing.”** The Hebrew text is idiomatic: “in the ears of the sons of Heth.” The elders of the Hittites were there to witness the negotiations between Abraham and them for a piece of the land owned by whichever one of them had the land that Abraham wanted. The witnessing of this event is repeated using “eyes” instead of “ears” in Genesis 23:18.

**“all those who come to the gate of his city.”** This idiomatic expression means more than simply, “those who go in and out of the city,” it refers to the “elders at the gate,” the important people and decision-makers in the city. Obviously, the whole city was not present for the negotiations between Abraham and Ephron, but the important people of the city were all there. The gate of the city was not just a door, it was a “gate area,” usually with an inner and outer gate, and places for sitting inside the gate area. So even at this early date, around 2,000 BC, Hebron was a walled city, and part of the city wall from this time has been discovered by archaeologists. This same phrase is used in Genesis 23:18.

[For more information on the elders at the gate, and that a person could seek wise advice there, see commentary on Prov. 1:21.]

Gen 23:11

**“I give you the field.”** It is unclear exactly what Ephron is saying here (and it may have been unclear to Abraham too). It may be that he is going back to the original Hittite position in Genesis 23:6, that Abraham was welcome to use the cave and the field as well, but Ephron was reluctant to sell it; or it may have been that Ephron was using an oriental custom of giving something away in full knowledge that custom would dictate that Abraham then would have to make certain gifts or concessions back to Ephron, and Ephron knew Abraham was rich and powerful. What is clear from oriental custom is that Ephron was not simply giving Abraham the field and cave. Abraham was not deterred by this unclear negotiation, and clearly insisted on paying for the cave, at which point Ephron decided upon what he considered a fair price and Abraham paid it.

**“Before the eyes of the sons of my people.”** The people could see the transaction and be witnesses.

Gen 23:12

**“bowed down.”** The same Hebrew verb, *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), is translated as both “bow down” and “worship;” traditionally “worship” if God is involved and “bow down” if people are involved, but the verb and action are the same, the act of bowing down is the worship.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Gen 23:13

**“in the hearing of the people of the land.”** Abraham, the wise negotiator, makes the deal in a loud enough voice that everyone can hear it.

**“price.”** The Hebrew is “silver.”

**“Accept *it* from me.”** Abraham knows the deal is not done until Ephron takes the silver. Then everyone knows the cave is sold. It is always good in negotiations if something physical changes hands; that avoids misunderstandings and “he said she said” later. The wisdom of the transfer of something physical was passed down in the culture and we see in the time of the Judges, over 500 years later, that one person gave the other his sandal (Ruth 4:7-9).

Gen 23:15

**“400 shekels.”** If the shekel of Abraham’s time is the same as later shekels, it was 11 or 11.5 grams, or about .4 ounces. So 400 shekels would be about 10 pounds or 4.5 kilograms. This seems to be a lot of money for the field, but we don’t know how big it was.

[For more on the shekel, see commentary on Gen. 24:22.]

Gen 23:16

**“according to the current merchants’ rate.”** In those early times there was no universal system of weights and measures, and different locations had slightly differing standards. In this case, the shekel that Abraham used was according to a standard in that location. When God put the Mosaic Law in place, the priests and Levites were in charge of assuring that there were standard weights and measures for Israel.

Gen 23:17

**“to the east of Mamre.”** The Hebrew text is literally, “before Mamre” (e.g., ASV, DBY, KJV, NKJV, YLT), but the biblical world was oriented to the east, in the direction of the rising sun. So from the standpoint of east, the field of Ephron was “before” one got to Mamre. A number of English versions read, “to the east” of Mamre (e.g., AMP, ESV, NCV, NRSV, RSV, NEB.)

**“all the trees.”** When someone buys a field today it is understood that he is buying the trees in it too, but that was not necessarily the custom in ancient times. The trees, especially any kind of fruit or olive trees, were very valuable in producing a cash crop every year, so they had to be clearly included in the price. One of the reasons that Israel was so denuded before the British took over after WWI was that the Turks who possessed the land since the 1500s taxed not only the land, but every tree, so many landowners cut down all their trees to save tax money. After that, the goats foraged the land and kept more trees from growing up. Worse, the weather over the centuries washed away much of the topsoil and left the country of Israel looking like a rocky desert. When the Jews regained possession in 1948 they started planting trees and controlling the goats and the land is slowly recovering.

Gen 23:18

“were deeded over ‘**to Abraham as a possession.’”** Genesis 23:17-18 is the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that he would get the land of Israel, the land that God promised to Abraham (thus the “Promised Land”). God promised the land to Abraham at different times and in different ways. God promised it just to Abraham (Gen. 13:17; 15:7-8), to Abraham and his “seed,” i.e., his descendants (Gen. 13:15; 17:8), and to Abraham’s seed (Gen. 12:7; 15:18; 22:17). The beginning of the fulfillment of that repeated promise starts here, but in a very common and undramatic way: Abraham simply bought the land—but it was not much land. Hundreds of years later we see from the Bible and history that Israel got the Promised Land by fighting for it for hundreds of years, from Joshua (c. 1400 BC) through David (c. 980 BC). There is a great lesson in all of this. Just because God says He will give you something does not mean that you will not have to work hard for it and even fight for it. For example, God may tell you that He is giving you a specific ministry or position in the Church, but that does not mean it will just easily fall into your lap, so to speak. A lot of prayer, patience, and work will likely go into obtaining that position.

There is another lesson about the Promised Land and the promises of God that we learn from the Bible, but it is not here in Genesis. God may give you something, but you may lose it through sin and disobedience. Israelite blood was shed winning the Promised Land, but then because of sin and disobedience, Israel lost the land. Solomon, and then his son, Rehoboam, sinned greatly, and so they lost the United Kingdom of Israel, which split into a northern kingdom called “Israel,” and a southern kingdom called “Judah” (1 Kings 11:11-13, 29-37; 12:16). Jeroboam, a man from the tribe of Ephraim (1 Kings 11:26) was the first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. But then, due to sin and disobedience, that kingdom was conquered by Assyria and thus lost the land to the Assyrians (2 Kings 17). Then, years later, the Southern Kingdom of Judah was conquered by Babylon and the land of Judah was lost to the Babylonians (2 Kings 24:1-25:21; 2 Chron. 36). Since those times no part of the Promised Land has been ruled by a Judean king, and it will not be until Jesus Christ returns and conquers the land and rules it and the world from his palace in Judea.

**“before the eyes of the sons of Heth.”** The elders heard and witnessed the negotiations according to Genesis 23:10, now they see the negotiations with their eyes.

**“all those who come to the gate of his city.”** The ones who “come to the gate of the city” are the elders of the city. This same phrase is used in Genesis 23:10.

Gen 23:19

**“east of Mamre.”** See commentary on Genesis 25:9.

**Genesis Chapter 24**

Gen 24:2

**“his servant.”** Despite the elevated status of this servant, he is not named. The importance of continuing the line of descendants from Abraham is thus magnified.

**“the senior one.”** The Hebrew text can refer to the oldest in age or the most senior in authority (or both).

**“put your hand under my thigh.”** This is a euphemism for “take hold of my genitals.” The word “thigh” was used in the biblical culture as a euphemism for the genital organs (cf. Gen. 24:2, 9; 46:26; 47:29; Exod. 1:5; Num. 5:21, 22, 27). The taking of solemn oaths in the ancient world took many forms. Perhaps the most common one we are aware of was raising a hand (Gen. 14:22; Deut. 32:40; Ezek. 20:5, 6, 15, 23, 28, 42; 36:7; 44:12; 47:14; Rev. 10:5). Also, another common form of oath was to hold a sacred object that was somehow related to the oath or to the god of the person who was making the oath. “Gestures accompanying oath-taking are universal in the ancient world. Most frequently, they involve the raising of a hand, as in Genesis 14:22, and/or the holding of a ritual object. In later times, a Torah scroll, phylacteries, or a Bible might be held for such a purpose.”[[112]](#footnote-29363)

Although a few scholars have asserted that Abraham asked his servant to take hold of his genitals as part of a curse that would be brought upon the servant if he did not follow through with his words, there is no evidence of that. Instead, parallels in ancient culture show us that it was a part of an oath that involved the descendants of Abraham, so grasping the genitals was deemed appropriate due to the seriousness and magnitude of the situation: after all, Isaac’s wife would be continuing the line to the Messiah.

In Genesis 47:29, Jacob requests that Joseph to hold his genitals and swear an oath to take Jacob’s body to the Promised Land and bury it. Although that certainly seems to have less to do with Jacob’s immediate descendants than in the case of Abraham’s oath, given the fact that God also promised Jacob the Promised Land (Gen. 28:13; 35:12; 48:4), and Jacob believed that he would have many descendants and then be resurrected and live among them, it makes sense that Jacob would also have Joseph swear on his genitals in that situation. Those are the only two occurrences of that practice in the Bible, and the purpose for it does not occur in ancient literature, so while swearing on the genitals was certainly not unknown, we believe it was not common, either.

The English word “testicle” is derived from the Latin *testis*, which ordinarily means “witness,” and does, rarely, refer to the testicles. Some people assert that the word testis, or “witness,” and its association with “testicle” comes from the practice of placing one’s hands on the genitals and swearing on the “little witnesses.” However, there are both lexical and anthropological reasons for denying that.

From a lexical basis, although we do not know why the Latin word *testis* means “witness,” that is the case for most words in every language: the words, or their ancient roots, came from the Tower of Babel—the vocabulary came from God to mankind and we don’t know why most words mean what they do. And how *testis* came to refer to both a witness and a testicle is unknown; assumptions may be thrown around, but the fact is that we do not know.

The study of ancient Roman customs is more definitive. We have literally hundreds of ancient Latin documents about or involving oaths, and none of them refer to making an oath while holding genitals; there is simply no evidence that was done in the Roman world, which is quite good evidence that the Latin word *testis* for witness did not come from the custom of swearing on a person’s genitals.

Gen 24:7

**“the land of my birth.”** The Hebrew can also be translated as “the land of my relatives” (see “relatives” in Genesis 24:4).

**“who has spoken to me, and who has sworn to me.”** God was not just an idea or theology to Abraham. The Creator of the heavens and the earth had spoken to him about his descendants, and he had no doubt about God’s purposes and the success God would give him. The line to the Messiah was at stake.

**“I will give this land to your seed.”** In this case, Abraham makes the point that the land is to be given to his “seed,” Isaac, and that is why he does not want Isaac to go back north to the land of Abraham and his relatives.

Gen 24:9

**“under the thigh.”** The servant took hold of Abraham’s genitals and swore to him. See commentary on Genesis 24:2.

**“of Abraham his lord.”** The Hebrew is literally, “his lords;” which is the grammatical plural, a plural of emphasis.

Gen 24:10

**“lord’s...lord’s.”** Both uses of “lord’s” are the grammatical plural, the plural of emphasis.

**“ten camels.”** This is one of the records where a lot of the details are left unsaid so that the central point of the record gets the attention. It would be unheard of for Abraham to send off his servant with so much wealth in livestock and material goods without an escort or armed men, and the Bible tells us that the servant had some of Abraham’s men with him in Genesis 24:59. Besides, if the journey was a success, Abraham would have wanted to ensure that the bride-to-be for Isaac would get back from the long journey safely. So we know that the servant had Abraham’s men with him, but just how many is not stated. We can well assume more than just a few. The camels, now empty of their load, became the transportation for Rebekah and her ladies (Gen. 24:61).

**“with him.”** The Hebrew text is idiomatic, literally, “in his hand,” i.e., under his authority.

**“Aram-naharaim.”** This name does not occur anywhere else in Genesis. Although some English translations have “Mesopotamia” (e.g., ASV, BBE, ESV, KJV, NASB, RSV), that is not correct. Nahum Sarna explains, “The Greek translation [the Septuagint] took the second element [*naharaim*] to be a dual form, ‘two rivers,’ and so arose ‘Mesopotamia,’ the land ‘between the two rivers.’ This term was misunderstood to refer to the entire territory between the Tigris and the Euphrates, or between the Euphrates and its tributary, the River Balikh. The Targums, however, with their ‘Aram which is on the Euphrates,’ have preserved a better tradition, for the name *naharaim* really means ‘the land along the river’ or ‘the land within the river.’ It is the territory bounded on three sides by the Great Bend of the Euphrates, within which lay the Kingdom of Mitanni.”[[113]](#footnote-27038)

Literally translated, “Aram of the Two Rivers.” This is the upper (northwest) Euphrates River. It is not technically “Mesopotamia,” which lies further to the southeast. The Tigris River, which is the second river of the two rivers that are the boundaries for “Mesopotamia,” does not extend nearly as far to the northwest as does the Euphrates River.

Gen 24:11

**“camels kneel.”** This is exactly according to custom. Camels are made to kneel down when they are stopped and resting, and people mount and dismount from that position.

**“outside the city by the water well.”** William Thompson who was a missionary for over 40 years in Syria and Palestine, and traveled extensively in the East in the 1800s and wrote about biblical customs, wrote:

“The place is said to have been by a well of water, and this well was outside the city. In the East, where wells are scarce, and water indispensable, the existence of a well or fountain [spring] determines the site of the city. The people build near it, but prefer to have it outside the town, to avoid the noise, dust, and confusion always occurring at it, and especially if the place is on the public highway. It is around the fountain that the thirsty traveler and the wearied caravan assemble; and if you have become separated from your own company before arriving at a town, you need only inquire for the fountain, and there you will find them or hear of them. It was perfectly natural, therefore, for Eliezer to halt at the well. The time was evening; but it is further stated that it was when the women go forth to draw water. True to life again. At that hour the peasant returns home from his labor, and the women are busy preparing the evening meal, which is to be ready at sunset. Cool fresh water is then demanded, and of course there is a great concourse around the well. But why limit it to the women? Simply because such is the fact. About great cities men often carry water, both on donkeys and on their own backs, but in the country, among the unsophisticated natives, women only go to the well or the fountain; and often, when traveling, I have seen long files of them going and returning with their pitchers, at “the time when women go out to draw water.”[[114]](#footnote-14905) (Thomson assumes Abraham’s servant is Eliezer, and that may be, but there is no way to be sure).

The Bible confirms Thomson’s observation that culturally it was the job of women, particularly young women, to draw water (cf. Gen. 24:11, 13, 43; 1 Sam. 9:11; John 4:7).

Gen 24:12

**“O Yahweh, the God of my lord Abraham.”** This is the first specific prayer in the Bible for personal guidance in which the prayer itself is recorded (or partially recorded—the servant’s actual prayer was likely much longer than Genesis records). Other people had prayed (cf. Gen. 20:17; cf. Gen. 12:8; 13:4; etc.), but what they actually said is not recorded in the Bible. We can learn a lot from this prayer. It was directed specifically to Yahweh. It gave credit to the man, Abraham, who had mentored this servant in the ways of Yahweh. The prayer was not a “formula” that was learned and repeated, the prayer was spontaneous, specific, and from the heart. Also, the servant asked for what he needed so that others, in this case especially Abraham and Isaac, could be blessed. The prayer of this servant is superb evidence that God looks on the heart when we speak and act, and He is not interested in “does the prayer use the right words and does it sound fancy.” Also, the servant’s prayer is wonderful evidence that “the prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect” (James 5:16). God heard the prayer and answered it. People should not think that the prayer of a priest or pastor is somehow more effective than their own prayer. A heartfelt prayer is a heartfelt prayer, and that gets God’s attention.

**“deal faithfully with my lord Abraham.”** The Hebrew word translated as “faithfully” is *hesed* (#02617 חֶסֶד), a word that cannot be easily translated into English. *Hesed* is rooted in relationship and the concept of covenant and relates itself to the faithfulness that God shows in keeping His covenants and His promises. *Hesed* wraps up in one Hebrew word many of the wonderful qualities of God: covenant faithfulness, lovingkindness, mercy, grace, and loyalty. *Hesed* is thus impossible to translate by the same word in all of its contexts; the translator/reader must understand the semantic range of *hesed* and use the meaning that best fits the context. However, since *hesed* is, on its most basic level, a relationship word, and when it comes to Israel and the Israelites it is a covenant word, it is good to try to use “covenant faithfulness” or something such as that when translating *hesed* if the context warrants it, which it often does when *hesed* is referring to the relationship actions between God and Israel.

Abraham’s servant was asking Yahweh to honor His covenant with Abraham and thus deal with Abraham in a faithful manner that befitted the covenant relationship that God and Abraham had between them.

[For more on *hesed*, see commentary on Ruth 2:20.]

Gen 24:14

**“let down.”** The young woman would have already filled the water jar and put it on her shoulder or on her head to return home, so to give this stranger a drink she would have had to take her water jug down.

**“Drink, and I will also give your camels a drink,’—let her be the one.”** This was an impressive “test” to find the woman who would be the wife of Isaac. Abraham’s servant knew he had ten camels, and if they were thirsty from the journey each camel could drink as much as 30 gallons of water. Assuming the jug a woman would carry on her shoulder would hold 2-3 gallons, it could mean the woman would make something like 100 trips back and forth to the well to get water for all the camels. We don’t know how much the jug that Rebekah was carrying held or how thirsty the camels were—and she didn’t know how thirsty they were either—but her willingness to help this stranger from out of town revealed her heart to help others. It is also noteworthy that what the servant was asking was too large a task for him to ask of a stranger. He could not politely say, “And could you also water my camels?” The woman would have to volunteer to do that, and Rebekah did.

**“faithfulness.”** See commentary on Genesis 24:12.

Gen 24:16

**“had known her.”** The word “know” is the common idiomatic word used for sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse gives the most intimate and personal “knowledge” of the other, so “know” was used throughout the biblical world as an idiom for sexual intercourse (cf. Gen. 4:1, 17, 25; 24:16; Matt. 1:25), which even included rape (Gen. 19:5; Judg. 19:25).

Gen 24:17

**“a sip, a little water.”** The word translated “sip” is more literally “swallow,” (*gama*, #01572 גָּמָא, “to swallow; to drink), but was also used of taking a drink, nevertheless, it implied a little one, which Abraham’s servant makes clear in the last part of the verse: “a little water from your water jug.” Notice how what he says to the young woman is much more polite than the conversation he had with himself in his head, which is in Genesis 24:14. He was likely very thirsty, but he is asking a stranger for a favor, and it is polite and godly to be kind and understate the case, and it allows the woman room to be truly generous and not just give in to a demand. Kindness and respect are fundamental to a polite, fun, and godly society. His kindness and tact are likely part of the reason he was head over Abraham’s household. The young woman responds with equal kindness and says for him to “drink,” using a different Hebrew word (*shatah,* #08354 שָׁתָה, to drink), and implying he can drink freely (Gen. 24:18). Also, unstated but certainly true, was that the men who were accompanying Abraham’s servant would need water too (cf. Gen. 24:32). No man would travel alone all the way from southern Judah to the area of Haran, well over 400 miles, with camels and valuables without a hefty group of men who would act as helpers and bodyguards. This was so prevalent in the culture that it is unmentioned except for Genesis 24:32.

Gen 24:19

**“until they have finished drinking.”** This is an amazing act of care and hospitality to a stranger. A thirsty camel can drink up to 30 gallons (about 115 liters) in about 15 minutes. Given that Abraham’s servant had ten camels with him, that would have required a lot of effort of pulling water up out of the well, not to mention the time it would have taken. This verse gives us a wonderful look into Rebekah’s character.

Gen 24:22

**“shekel.”** The exact weight of a biblical shekel is disputed, it seems to be roughly .4 ounces (11.4 grams). It is important to keep in mind, however, that in actual transactions, there was no effective way to make sure that the shekel that anyone used as a standard was exactly that—all the weights at the time were handmade, and most were of stone although some (but very rare) could have been made from metal.

**“nose ring.”** This “ring” was a nose ring (Gen. 24:47). Although some versions (cf. KJV) say “earring,” Genesis 24:47 makes it clear that the ring was a nose ring. Besides, if it was an earring, it would have been plural for two earrings but this is just one ring. It was not well-known at the time that versions such as the King James Version (1611) were written that women in the biblical culture customarily wore nose rings, which explains the translation “earrings” in the early versions. It was the custom in biblical times for women to wear nose rings rather than earrings because the women not only had long hair but also often wore head coverings, and those things covered any earrings such that they could not be seen. So women customarily wore nose rings for personal decoration (Isa. 3:21; Ezek. 16:12; cf. Prov. 11:22).

Gen 24:25

**“yes.”** Everett Fox[[115]](#footnote-11830) translates the particle *gam* (#01571 גַּם), which can mean “also, moreover, yes” as “yes” in this context because Rebekah is answering the question that Abraham’s servant asked, and confirming that he is welcome to stay. She is not just making a statement about the provisions her family has, but is graciously and enthusiastically extending hospitality—which is clearly demonstrated by the triple “yes.”

Gen 24:26

**“kneeled down and worshiped.”** The kneeling preceded bowing down to the ground. The two actions, kneeling and then bowing to the ground blended into one act of homage or worship. The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth. Also, instead of “kneeled down and worshiped,” the text could be translated “kneeled and bowed down,” with “kneeling” being understood as part of the process of bowing down, and “bowing down” was the act of worship. The same Hebrew verb, *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), is translated as both “bow down” and “worship;” traditionally “worship” if God is involved and “bow down” if people are involved, but the verb and action are the same, the act of bowing down is the worship.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Gen 24:27

**“relatives.”** The Hebrew word is “brothers,” but “brothers” was used loosely in Hebrew for any relative, in the same way we call a good friend or fellow member of a group a “brother,” for example, in the army close friends are called “brothers.” If the English word “brother” was used here it might confuse many readers.

Gen 24:28

**“things.”** The Hebrew text is *dabar* (#01697 דָּבָר), which is the common word for “word,” but also, like the Greek word *logos*, it had a wide range of meanings, including “thing,” “matter.” Thus, the translation might well read, “These matters,” or “These things.” The semantic range of words used in the Bible is the reason translators cannot use the same English word to translate the same Hebrew or Greek word. The meaning of the Hebrew or Greek word must be understood in its context and then the proper English word can be chosen as a translation. In this case, Rebekah did not just tell her family about Abraham’s servant’s “words,” but about all that transpired.

**“mother’s house.”** This is most likely referring to the women’s part of Bethuel’s home, where the women lived with privacy from the men. Women had their own quarters even if the family lived in a tent. It is quite possible that in that society a woman would refer to where she lives as her mother’s house, as we see in Song of Solomon 3:4 and 8:2.[[116]](#footnote-18285)

There are a number of reasons that Rebekah would have gone to her mother in the women’s quarters. As a young woman, she might have felt intimidated to go to the men in her family with such earthshaking news, and would have felt more comfortable going to her mother. Also, marriages were generally arranged by the parents, so it would have been natural for her as a woman to go to her mother.

Also, there were likely to be men around her father to whom she was not closely related. Her grandfather Nahor not only had Milcah as a wife, he had a concubine named Reumah who bore him four sons, who would have therefore been Rebekah’s half-uncles and who could easily have been with Bethuel or in the general vicinity because families often stayed quite close in those times. Under the circumstances, we can see why Rebekah would have gone to her mother. Although her mother’s name is never given in the Bible, she was clearly alive (see commentary on Gen. 24:38).

Gen 24:29

**“Laban.**” The Hebrew word means “white,” like the color white.

Gen 24:30

**“nose ring.”** This “ring” was a nose ring (Gen. 24:47). This is supported by the fact that Laban could see the ring. The nose ring was common in the biblical culture because the woman’s hair and/or head covering hid any earrings that she wore (cf. Isa. 3:21; Prov. 11:22).

Gen 24:31

**“Come, O blessed of Yahweh!”** Laban’s greeting, “O blessed of Yahweh,” shows that Abraham did the right thing in getting a wife for Isaac from among his relatives who believed in Yahweh. It might have been difficult on Isaac if Rebekah had been an idol worshiper. Esau married Hittite wives, and they caused grief to Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 26:34-35).

Gen 24:32

**“Laban.”** The Hebrew text reads “he,” but that is very confusing in this verse, so Laban was put in for clarity.

**“the men who were with him.”** Here we learn that Abraham’s servant did not travel alone with all that wealth. No doubt he had a healthy accompaniment of able men to help safely transport the treasure north, and women south.

Gen 24:38

**“my father’s house.”** Abraham had asked his servant to get a wife for Isaac from among his relatives, and Rebekah qualified. Terah fathered Haran, Nahor, and Abraham (Gen. 11:27). Nahor married his niece Milcah, Haran’s daughter (Gen. 11:29). Milcah bore eight sons, one of whom was Bethuel, so Bethuel was Abraham’s nephew through Nahor and his great-nephew through Milcah. Rebekah was both Abraham’s great-niece and great-great-niece through her father. Interestingly, Rebekah’s mother is never named and is unknown. That might possibly be because she was not related to Abraham in any way and would not have helped fulfill Abraham’s request about a wife. However, she was alive when Abraham’s servant arrived and asked to take Rebekah home with him, because she was given gifts (Gen. 24:53).

Gen 24:41

**“oath.”** The Hebrew word often refers to a curse, and in effect, an oath becomes a curse if it is broken. Breaking the oath results in a curse being upon the person who took the oath. In The Schocken Bible, Everett Fox translates the word as “oath-curse.”

Gen 24:47

**“I put.”** It is not likely that Rebekah would let this stranger touch her, but rather he gave her the nose ring and bracelets and she put them on, but because they came as a gift from him, in conversation he said he put them on her.

**“wrists.”** The Hebrew text reads “hands,” and this is an example of how the Hebrew word “hand” often includes the wrist.

Gen 24:48

**“kneeled down and worshiped.”** The kneeling preceded bowing down to the ground. The two actions, kneeling and then bowing to the ground blended into one act of homage or worship. The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth. Also, instead of “kneeled down and worshiped,” the text could be translated “kneeled and bowed down,” with “kneeling” being understood as part of the process of bowing down, and “bowing down” was the act of worship. The same Hebrew verb, *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), is translated as both “bow down” and “worship;” traditionally “worship” if God is involved and “bow down” if people are involved, but the verb and action are the same, the act of bowing down is the worship.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

**“my lord’s brother’s daughter.”** “My lord” refers to Abraham. Abraham’s brother is Nahor, and Nahor’s “daughter” (actually granddaughter—but there is no Hebrew word for granddaughter) was Rebekah. Rebekah is Abraham’s great-niece.

Gen 24:50

**“Then Laban and Bethuel answered.”** The word order is somewhat confusing. Ordinarily, the father, Bethuel, would be first. But Laban seems to be making all the decisions, so it is assumed that Bethuel was weak, sick, or very elderly. Note that Bethuel is absent from many parts in the record (e.g., Gen. 24:29, 53, 55).

**“We cannot speak to you bad or good.”** In this context, “bad” and “good” are two polar opposites, and juxtaposing them when speaking is the figure of speech polarmerismos, where two opposite ends are put for the whole. So, for example, the phrase, “when you lie down and when you rise up” in Deuteronomy 11:19 is the figure polarmerismos where lying down at night and rising up in the morning are put for the whole of life. In the same manner, not being able to speak good or bad means that nothing at all can be said. The matter was from Yahweh and the only thing left to do was obey.

[For more on polarmerismos, see commentary on Josh. 14:11.]

Gen 24:51

**“lord’s.”** In the Hebrew text, “lord’s” is a grammatical plural, literally, “lords’”

Gen 24:52

**“bowed down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Gen 24:59

**“the one who had nursed and raised her.”** The Hebrew is simply “her nurse,” but that would be confusing today. The wet nurse not only nursed and cared for the baby, but also often played a large part in raising the child. We learn later that this nurse was called “Deborah,” and she was with Rebekah for her whole life (Gen. 35:8).

Gen 24:60

**“may your seed possess the gate of those who hate him.”** The word “seed” is singular but it can be a collective singular, but the word “him” is singular. This is very similar to the promise God made to Abraham (Gen. 22:17). The phrase “may your seed” is an imperfect verb, and could also be translated “your seed will” (cf. Gen. 22:17). But this is Rebekah’s family speaking, so their speech is more likely a “may” than a “will.”

Gen 24:61

**“her young women.”** Rebekah had her own young female slaves who attended to her, as well as Deborah, who had nursed and raised her, as an advisor.

Gen 24:62

**“Beer-lahai-roi.”** The Hebrew is, “the well of the Living One who sees me.” It was on the way to Egypt and was where Sarah’s slave Hagar met an angel (Gen. 16:14).

Gen 24:63

**“stroll.”** The Hebrew is uncertain and quite unique. It may also mean to relax, or to walk, and some translations have “meditate,” but due to the modern meaning of meditate, that seems like a poor translation in this case. It seems he was taking a stroll, relaxing, thinking, praying.

Gen 24:64

**“So she got down from the camel.”** A sign of respect. Achsah dismounted before Caleb (Josh. 15:18), as did Abigail in the presence of David (1 Sam. 25:23). This shows Rebekah’s humility and general respect for the custom of the time. She did not yet know the man was Isaac, her future husband.

Gen 24:65

**“took her veil and covered herself.”** The custom of women veiling their faces was not common in the biblical culture except in times of special modesty, such as when a young woman would meet her future husband, as is the case here. The custom of veiling became common in the Muslim world, but we must not read that custom back into the biblical period. The ancient Egyptian and Assyrian monuments do not show women veiled, and the Greek and Roman monuments, mosaics, and statues do not either.

Gen 24:67

**“the tent of Sarah his mother.”** According to Eastern custom, this could refer to the “women’s quarters” in Abraham’s tent, but that seems less likely than Sarah having her own tent like Leah did (cf. Gen. 31:33).

**“and took Rebekah.”** Often there was no formal marriage ceremony in these early times. The marriage had been arranged and financial arrangements had been taken care of, so Isaac simply took Rebekah as his wife and consummated the marriage. It is often taught in books on customs of the Bible that a marriage ceremony looked a certain way and had certain specific elements. Although there were certainly similarities in many cases, there were also huge differences as well, and that is especially true given the different languages and cultures, the long span of years the Bible covers between Genesis and the New Testament, and even variations in taste and feelings of what was appropriate. Isaac was 40 years old at this time (Gen. 25:20).

**“after his mother’s death.”** The Hebrew text is simply “after his mother,” but many English versions add “death” for clarity.

**Genesis Chapter 25**

Gen 25:1

**“Abraham had taken another wife.”** The chronology is not specifically stated here. It seems that this marriage would have been after Sarah died, but before Isaac married Rebekah, but it is possible that Abraham married Keturah before Sarah died. Genesis 25:6 and 1 Chronicles 1:32 refer to Keturah as Abraham’s “concubine,” so it is quite possible that she was with Abraham before Sarah died.

Gen 25:4

**“The sons of Midian.”** The Midianites were likely a confederation of the descendants of the sons even as Israel was a confederation of the sons of Jacob.

Gen 25:6

**“the concubines.”** These concubines, lesser wives, were Hagar and Keturah.

**“to the land of the east.”** Grammatically this could also be a proper noun, “to the Eastland,” but is likely simply referring to the east.

Gen 25:7

**“175 years.”** Abraham came into the Promised Land at age 75 (Gen. 12:4), so he lived in the land for 100 years.

Gen 25:8

**“breathed his last.”** The Hebrew verb translated “breathed his last” is the single word *gava* (#01478 גָּוַע), and it refers to dying. The *NIDOTTE* says that it refers to “natural death as in the case of Abraham (Gen. 25:8), Ishmael (Gen. 25:17), Isaac (Gen. 35:29), Jacob (Gen. 49:33), and Aaron (Num. 20:29). Usually, however, the suggestion is that of violent and/or untimely death.” It also says that fundamentally it is synonymous with the Hebrew verb “die,” *muth* (#04191 מָוֹת).[[117]](#footnote-11295)

*The Complete WordStudy Dictionary* says that the word is used for the death of humans and animals, but adds, “The word [*gava*] is apparently from a root meaning to breathe out. …Sometimes the context of the word refers to the root meaning of breathing out (Job 34:14; Ps. 104:29).”[[118]](#footnote-30778) The fact that *gava* is related to breathing out, and thus breathing out one’s last breath and dying, is why a number of English versions translate the verb as “breathed his last” (CJB, ESV, NAB, NASB, NET, NIV, NJB, NKJV, NRSV, Rotherham, RSV; cf. “took his last breath” CEB, CSB). It would be quite accurate to simply translate verses such as Genesis 25:8 as “Abraham breathed out and died,” but that does not communicate as well as “breathed his last.” Some translations simply use the word “expire” and say, “Abraham expired and died” (DBY, YLT), and that is very accurate and also uses one English word “expired” to represent the one Hebrew word *gava.* Lexically it would be a good choice to use “expired” for *gava* because etymologically “expired” comes from the Latin “*ex*,” meaning “out” and “*spirdre*,” meaning “breathe,” thus “expire” means “to breathe out,” and that is exactly what the Bible is describing that happens when a person dies, they breathe out. Nevertheless, most English versions do not use the word “expire” because it is not common to use the word “expired” when speaking of a person’s death; it is more common to use “expire” to show that something is out of date or no longer in force, for example, “the warranty on the car has expired,” or we say that canned food “expires” after a time and should no longer be eaten.

From verses such as Genesis 25:8, we see that the Bible says that even great men like Abraham simply breathed their last breath and died. No one goes to heaven, “hell,” or any other place when they die. The dead body is usually buried or cremated, and the “person” goes to Sheol, the Hebrew word for the state of being dead (see Word Study: “Hades”). Yet, because of Church tradition, most people believe that when the body dies the “soul” (or “spirit”) lives on in an immaterial form, for example, as a ghost.

Early versions of the Bible helped spread the false teaching that when a person died, their “soul” lived on as an immaterial being. For example, many early versions of the Bible translated the Hebrew word *gava*, and the New Testament words *ekpneō* (#1606 ἐκπνέω; cf. Mark 15:37, 39; Luke 23:46), and *ekpsuchō* (#1634 ἐκψύχω; cf. Acts 5:5, 10; 12:23), which basically refer to “breathing out” or “breathing out one’s life,” as “gave up the ghost.” In 1534, William Tyndale used “gave up the ghost” in his English Bible, and Myles Coverdale used the phrase in the Coverdale Bible of 1535. Then it kept being used in later versions, such as the Geneva Bible of 1599 and the King James Version of 1611.

In the 1800s some versions got away from the phrase “gave up the ghost,” and these included Darby’s Bible (1884/1890), Rotherham’s “Emphasized Bible” (1902), the Moffatt Bible (1913/1924) and the Bible by Goodspeed and Smith (1923/27). However, the Bibles used by mainstream Christianity kept using the phrase, including the English Revised Version of 1881/1885, the Douay-Rheims Bible of 1899, and the American Standard Bible of 1901. All these important Bibles helped support the tradition that dead people were actually alive, and when people died, the person actually lived on as an immaterial being and even as a “ghost.”

The Revised Standard Version of 1952 was the first Bible intended for mainstream Christianity to not use “give up the ghost,” and it used “breathed his last” in the Old Testament and “died” in verses such as Acts 12:23. Then the modern versions followed the RSV in not using the phrase “gave up the ghost,” including the New King James Version (1982), which uses “breathed his last.” Those modern versions include the 1984 NIV, 1985 NJB, 1989 NRSV, 1991 NAB, 1996 NET and NLT, 1998 CJB, 1999 HCSB, and 2001 ESV. So the Bible’s testimony about even great men like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is that they simply took their last breath and died. They were then in Sheol, the state of being dead, awaiting the resurrection.

**“and was gathered to his people.”** This is the first use of the phrase “gathered to his people” in the Bible, and it refers to going to be with one’s ancestors, in this case, in the state of death. As great as Abraham was, at the end of his life the Bible just says that he died and was “gathered to his people” (Gen. 25:8). The phrase “gathered to his people” is significant in the study of what happens at death. The phrase shows that the Bible is consistent in saying that all people, good or bad, are in the same place when they die, which is simply that they are dead (see commentary on Job 3:13). Abraham’s ancestors, and thus the “people” he was gathered to be with, worshiped gods other than Yahweh (Josh. 24:2). Because Abraham’s ancestors were idol worshipers, it is likely that on Judgment Day some of them will be saved while others will not be. But where could all of Abraham’s ancestors be dead together? There is only one place where all of Abraham’s ancestors, good or bad, can be, and that place is the grave, Sheol, the state of being dead. Abraham is not alive somewhere. He is dead along with his ancestors, and all of them are awaiting the resurrection.

[For information on the dead being dead until the resurrection, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.” For more on “Sheol” referring to the state of being dead, see Word Study: “Hades.” For more on the resurrections, see commentary on Acts 24:15. For more on the soul not being immortal but dying when the person dies, see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

Gen 25:9

**“before Mamre.”** The Hebrew culture was oriented to the East, not the North like the Western culture is. So for the cave of Machpelah to be “before Mamre,” it was east of Mamre.

Gen 25:11

**“Beer Lahai Roi.”** This is in the far south of the Negev, south of Beer-sheba. The site is where the angel talked to Hagar, who was running away from Sarah (Gen. 16:14).

Gen 25:13

**“Nebaioth.”** Nabaioth could be an early progenitor of the Nabitean people, who came to prominence in the centuries before the time of Christ. The Nabiteans displaced the Edomites, who were attacked by Babylon.

Gen 25:16

**“and by their encampments.”** The Bedouin usually lived in large camps and could pick up their whole group and move from place to place according to the weather and the food and water available.

**“twelve rulers according to their tribal groups.”** These twelve rulers fulfilled the prophecy given in Genesis 17:20.

Gen 25:17

**“breathed his last.”** The Hebrew verb translated “breathed his last” is *gava* (#01478 גָּוַע), and it refers to dying (see commentary on Gen. 25:8, “breathed his last”).

Gen 25:18

**“And he settled.”** The text uses the word “he” to point to Ishmael, not specifically to his descendants. God made promises about Ishmael that He had to honor (cf. Gen. 17:20; 21:18). In fact, that explains part of why this section on Ishmael is in the Bible. If God would fulfill His promises about the lesser son, Ishmael, then He certainly will fulfill His promises of the Messiah, the Promised Seed. The point of telling us where the descendants of Ishmael settled is more than just a geographical fact, it is to assure us that when Abraham sent his other children away from Isaac that they really did settle down away from him, and in that manner, Isaac’s line to the Promised Seed was separated from theirs.

**“east of Egypt.”** The Hebrew reads, “before Egypt,” and if the word “before” is used in a specific context it can indicate anything the person is “before” (in front of), but when used standing alone it means “east;” the biblical custom was that people were oriented to the east just as in our Western world we are oriented to the north, and all our maps are made with north at the top. So for the people to settle “before Egypt” meant that they settled east of Egypt.

**“as you go toward Asshur.”** This is the Asshur that is in the southern Negev or northwest Sinai peninsula. It does not refer to the “Assyria” that later conquered Israel (2 Kings 17), even though some English translations have “Assyria.” This is the Asshur that is mentioned in Genesis 25:3 (Asshurites), and it is almost certainly in the northern Sinai, which is why it is mentioned as being East of Egypt. The description “from Havilah to Shur” is the same phase that is mentioned in 1 Samuel 15:7, when Saul fought the Amalekites. It is also mentioned in 1 Samuel 27:8 in the context of David fighting with enemies in the south.

**“And he lived near all his brothers.”** The Hebrew phrase is more literally, “he fell upon the face of all his brothers.” This phrase is brief and no doubt purposely ambiguous. The Hebrew text can mean to settle down and live in a place, but it is also used of raiding and thus being hostile to others, and it was a matter of convenience that most intertribal raiding was done to the tribes that were close by. This phrase is an amphibologia (double entendre), and both meanings—living near and living in hostility to—are true and no doubt intended. Actually, this is a fulfillment of the prophecy about Ishmael in Genesis 16:12: “He will be a wild donkey of a man. His hand will be against every man and every man’s hand will be against him. He will live nearby all of his brothers.” Like this verse, the last phrase in Genesis 16:12 can also mean he will live alongside of his brothers, but the wording of 16:12 makes the hostility more apparent.

Given the two different meanings of Genesis 25:18, we can see why different English versions went with different translations. For example, “they pitched camp alongside their various kindred” (NAB); and “he settled near all his kinsmen” (CJB); are in contrast to, “he lived in opposition to all his brothers” (HCSB); “they lived in hostility toward all their brothers” (NIV). Genesis 25:18 does seem to be a partial fulfillment of the prophecy of Genesis 16:12 because it was a general practice to raid the tribes close by. However, translating the verse in a way that pointed out that the tribes lived close to each other seemed the more important translation and it is certainly helpful in understanding both the history of the Middle East and the Old Testament, which mentions many different tribes and people groups. To anyone who knows the history of the various tribes in the Middle East, the fact that they regularly raided each other is well-known.

[See Word Study: “Amphibologia.”]

Gen 25:19

**“descendants.”** See commentary on Genesis 2:4.

Gen 25:20

**“the Aramean.”** Older versions such as the KJV have “the Syrian.” Biblical Aram is in large part the area of Syria today, but it was called Aram.

Gen 25:21

**“answered his prayer.”** The Hebrew has the same root word as in the phrase “Isaac prayed” earlier in the verse.

Gen 25:22

**“struggled.”** The Hebrew word is actually to crush or oppress, and it suggests a mighty struggle. Rebekah knew what was going on inside her was not normal so she sought Yahweh about it.

**“If *it is* so, why am I this *way*.”** The meaning of the Hebrew phrase in this context is uncertain. The literal is basically, “If so, why I this,” which is idiomatic and fleshes out to more like “If *this is* so, why *am* I this *way*? But what Rebekah meant by that idiomatic phrase in this context is debated. One suggestion is, “If it’s going to be like this, why go on living” (CJB). But that meaning is extremely doubtful. Another suggestion is, “If it is going to be like this, I’m not so sure I want to be pregnant” (NET). That translation seems to be a modern sentiment erroneously moved back into the biblical era. Pregnancy and having a child in that culture was so important to a woman (and these were her first children) that it is unlikely that she would have not wanted to be pregnant. To us, a much more likely meaning in the context is “Why is this happening to me” (HCSB, NIV; cf. ESV). It makes sense that Rebekah, after asking herself why this was happening to her, went and sought Yahweh for an answer. In seeking an answer from Yahweh, Rebekah is a good example to us. Too many people wonder what is going on in their life but never diligently ask the Lord for an answer.

Gen 25:23

**“And Yahweh said to her.”** It seems that when Rebekah went to inquire of Yahweh, she went to a recognized location where Yahweh had appeared or was regularly worshiped. Then when Yahweh “spoke” to her, it was almost certainly through a priest or prophet. There are a number of times in the Bible when a prophet or an angel who is representing God speaks in the first person as if he were God (see commentary on Matt. 8:5). Also, there were likely a number of priests and prophets that Rebekah could have gone to, including perhaps Melchizedek (see commentary on Gen. 14:18).

**“will be divided.”** This is a great example of how sometimes when we seek God for an answer, we really have to think and pray about the answer He gives. Although it may seem like God is saying that the two nations will be divided from Rebekah’s body when she gives birth, that is not the meaning of the text. The NRSV gets the sense of what God is saying: “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided.” This is an early prophecy of the future of Israel and the Arab tribes and how they will be divided and struggle with each other.

The two children were Jacob and Esau, and one of the two had to be greater, and the prophecy stated that the elder, who turned out to be Esau (who became the Edomite nation), would serve the younger, Jacob (who fathered the tribes of Israel). It was God’s choice to bring the Messiah through Jacob, although Esau and his descendants would have been blessed if they had obeyed Yahweh and stayed faithful to Him. Sadly, Rebekah did not believe that God could bring about His purposes in an honest manner (and she may have forgotten this prophecy), and worked with Jacob to deceive Isaac when he was blind so that Jacob could have his father’s blessing (Gen. 27:1-45). Her deceit cost her greatly because then her favorite son had to leave the country to escape Esau’s vengeance, and she died before seeing him again. Rebekah’s actions and consequences teach us that we need to remember what God said and trust it even when it does not look in the flesh as if God can bring His purposes to pass.

**“and the elder will serve the younger.”** This is a very important prophecy because it subtly points to the fact that, of the two sons, the younger would be the child in the genealogical line to the Messiah. Jacob was the last born and the younger of the two sons (Gen. 25:26). This prophecy is repeated in part in Romans 9:12.

Gen 25:25

**“reddish.”** The Hebrew reader already gets a peek at what will become of Esau. The word “reddish” is *admon*, which is a pun with Edom, the nation he would father.

**“Esau.”** The name Esau sounds close to the Hebrew word for “hair” but is is also closely related in sound and spelling (letters) to the Hebrew word “make,” as if Esau came out “fully made,” as if his hair made him look older than he was. Exactly what “Esau” means is unknown.

Gen 25:26

**“his hand was grasping Esau’s heel.”** The Hebrew word translated as “grasping” is *ʾochezet* (#0270 אֹחֶ֙זֶת֙), and it generally refers to holding firmly, grasping, gripping.

**“He was named Jacob.”** For an overview of the chronology of Jacob, see commentary on Genesis 47:9.

**“Isaac was 60 years old when she bore them.”** Jacob was born when Isaac was 60 years old (Gen. 25:26), and lived 147 years (Gen. 47:28). The key to dating the events of Jacob’s life is that Jacob was 130 years old when he stood before Pharaoh (Gen. 47:9). This was the second year of the famine (Gen. 45:6 and 45:9). Joseph would have been 39 years old that same year. Thus, the age of Jacob at Joseph’s birth was 91 years. Joseph was born in the last year of Jacob’s 14-year service for Laban (Gen. 30:25-26). So Jacob was 77 years old when he started working for Laban and 84 years old when he married Leah and Rachel. He was 97 when he returned from Haran to the land of Judah (Gen. 31:38-41). Given that Jacob had two wives and two concubines, he had 11 of his 12 sons in just seven years.[[119]](#footnote-19665)

Gen 25:27

**“a man of the field.”** In this case, it seems that the word “field” represents more than just the outdoors that Esau hunted in. Cain said to Abel, “Let’s go out into the field” just before he murdered Abel. (Gen. 4:8). Also, in the Parable of the Good and Bad Seed, Jesus spoke of the field and then explained, “the field is the world” (Matt. 13:38). God would likely use the word “field” in this context with the same general meaning, so saying that Esau was “a man of the field” meant more than just that Esau liked hunting outdoors, but he was a worldly person as well.

**“quiet man.”** The exact meaning of the Hebrew word is debated, but it apparently refers to someone who is quiet, well-behaved, without sin (meaning not unruly, out of control), wholesome. English Bibles describe Jacob with words like “quiet, plain, simple, peaceful, mild, civilized, and even-tempered.” Jacob and Esau were very different indeed.

**“staying among the tents.”** The Hebrew is more literally, staying “in” the tents, but that is unclear in English. There would have been a considerable number of tents in Isaac’s encampment, and instead of ranging out into the world like Esau did, Jacob stayed among the tents, close to the tents, working the soil and no doubt helping with the animals.

Gen 25:28

**“loved.”** This is a good biblical example of when the word “love” is used in the cultural and idiomatic sense of “liked more,” or “preferred.” Both Isaac and Rebekah loved their children, but Isaac favored Esau while Rebekah favored Jacob.

**“because he had a taste for his *wild* game.”** This translation in the REV captures the sense of the Hebrew text, which is very idiomatic. The literal Hebrew is more like, “because game was in his mouth.” Isaac loved the wild game that Easu brought to him. The Schocken Bible by Everett Fox has, “Yitzhak [Isaac] grew to love Esav [Esau], for (he brought) hunted-game for his mouth.”

Gen 25:29

**“exhausted *and hungry*.”** The Hebrew word is *ayep* (#05889 עָיֵף), and it means exhausted, weary, but it can also refer to exhaustion from hunger. In this context, it means exhausted both from effort and from hunger, which is why the versions are divided between “exhausted, weary” and “famished, hungry.” Both the word “exhausted” and the word “hungry” are important to the record, so the REV reads “exhausted *and hungry*,” like the NLT, which reads that same way.

Gen 25:30

**“gulp down*.”*** The Hebrew for “gulp down” is not any of the regular words for eat, such as appears in Genesis 25:34, but rather *laat* (#03938 לָעַט), which is to gulp down, swallow greedily, devour. It is used in later Hebrew for the way animals eat. “Gulp down” seems to catch the meaning and intensity very well (cf. CJB, NAB), especially in comparison to translations such as “let me eat,” or “feed me,” which don’t seem to properly catch the desperation that Esau was feeling, and that Jacob picked up on and thus asked such a high price for a meal.

**“that red *stuff*, that red *stuff.”*** Esau’s desperation is easily seen in the desperate and emphatic way he expresses himself, and also in his willingness to sell his birthright. The Hebrew for “that red stuff” is one word in the Hebrew text repeated two times with the same meaning, making this the figure of speech epizeuxis, repetition for emphasis. We might say the same kind of thing if we came home from work very hungry and said to a family member: “I’m starving; starving!”

**“exhausted *and hungry*.”** See commentary on Genesis 25:29.

**“Edom.”** “Edom” means “red.”

Gen 25:31

**“First.”** The Hebrew reads “today,” but Jacob means right now, before you eat. Most versions render this as “first.” The Schocken Bible[[120]](#footnote-24973) renders it “here and now.”

Gen 25:32

**“I am about to die.”** The Hebrew text could also be translated, “I am going to die” as Young’s Literal Version has. The statement is an obvious exaggeration, but people exaggerate all the time. Hyperbole is common in every language. What really should grab the reader’s attention in this context is that Esau is willing to give up his birthright for some stew. The birthright gave the oldest son a right to twice as much inheritance as any other son received, but apparently that did not mean much to Esau. He was not interested in the things like flocks and herds that Isaac could pass down to Jacob, even though it had come as part of the inheritance that God gave to Abraham, who passed it to Isaac (Gen. 25:5). However, when Jacob got the blessing that Esau coveted, he was angry and bitter and wanted to kill Jacob (Gen. 27:41).

Gen 25:34

**“ate, drank, got up, and went off.”** The Hebrew verbs are all joined by “and,” portraying a quick and “businesslike” succession of events. That would be awkward in English, so the REV uses commas. Jacob and Esau were rivals, which is why Jacob demanded such a high price for some lentil stew when under ordinary family circumstances we would think Jacob would have seen Esau coming in tired and hungry and gladly offered to feed him and be kind to him. There was no friendly family chat at this meal.

**Genesis Chapter 26**

Gen 26:2

**“Live in the land where I will tell you.”** There was a famine in the land and Isaac was apparently about to leave.

Gen 26:3

**“I will give all these lands.”** Here God promises the land to Isaac and his descendants. God repeated the promise that He would give the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants many times, and said it in slightly different ways. He told Abraham that he and his descendants would get the land (Gen. 12:7; 13:15-17; 15:7, 18; 17:8). He told it to Isaac (Gen. 26:3). He told it to Jacob (Gen. 28:13; 35:12; 48:4). Then over and over He told Israel about the promise or that He would give them the land (cf. Exod. 6:4, 8; 12:25; 13:5, 11; Lev. 14:34; 20:24; 23:10; 25:2).

[For more on the promise God made to give the land to Abraham and his descendants, see commentary on Gen. 15:18.]

Gen 26:4

**“all the nations of the earth will be blessed.”** It is grammatically possible that the word blessed can be reflexive, “bless themselves” (CJB, JPS, NJB), but that does not seem to be the intent of the text here, even though God gave people freedom of will and people can choose to do what leads to a blessing or they can ignore becoming blessed.

Gen 26:5

**“listened to.”** In this case, the Hebrew word *shama* (#08085 שָׁמַע), which fundamentally means “to hear, to listen to,” also has the fuller sense of “to obey,” as it does in many places. But since that is clear in this context, and all obedience starts with listening, we thought it best to retain the basic meaning of “listen to” in this verse. Far too many people never obey God because they don’t listen to Him in the first place.

**“my requirements, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.”** The essence of this, mentioning all these things, is to say that Abraham obeyed in everything.

Gen 26:6

**“Gerar.”** Gerar is in Philistine country.

Gen 26:8

**“Isaac was caressing Rebekah.”** The Hebrew is a wordplay on “Isaac.” Almost literally it could be “Isaac was Isaacing Rebekah.” But “Isaac” means “laughter,” so the indication is that Isaac was with Rebekah and they were laughing and likely touching each other. They were acting like husband and wife.

Gen 26:9

**“Because I said.”** It is understood from the context that Isaac said this to himself, which is why some translations have, “I thought,” instead of “I said.”

Gen 26:10

**“brought guilt on us.”** In this record, Abimelech, the Philistine king of Gerar, shows himself to be much more godly than Isaac. Godliness is an individual matter and also can vary from circumstance to circumstance. Some people who come from the “right family” are ungodly or do horribly sinful things, and some people who come from the “wrong people” are wonderfully godly, or do great acts of kindness. Later in the Bible, the Philistines were known for their ungodliness, but that is not the case here.

Gen 26:11

**“touches.”** The word “touch” is used in the idiomatic sense of “harm, mistreat, or molest,” including sexual mistreatment.

**“death, yes, death.”** The English phrase “put to death” is the translation of one verb in the Hebrew text and that verb is repeated twice. The first verb is an infinitive verb and the second verb is an imperfect verb. Repeating the verb twice in succession is the figure of speech polyptoton and it is used for emphasis, in this case highlighting both the seriousness of the sin and the penalty for it. The Hebrew text is more literally translated as “put to death, yes, put to death,” and it occurs quite a few times in the Bible, always emphasizing the enormity of the crime and the punishment for it.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16, “eat, yes, eat.” Also, see the Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

Gen 26:12

**“and reaped in that same year a hundredfold.”** In Genesis 26:2 Yahweh told Isaac to stay in the land, so Isaac did and Yahweh blessed him greatly.

Gen 26:13

**“great.”** The word “great” in this context primarily refers to wealth, but because wealth brought power and influence, “great” is appropriate.

Gen 26:14

**“servants.”** The Hebrew word can refer to slaves, and it is quite likely that a large number of the people were slaves, not just servants.

Gen 26:15

**“the Philistines stopped up and filled with dirt.”** The Philistines were envious of Isaac, and they wanted to make him less prosperous and also they wanted him to move further away from them.

Gen 26:16

**you are much stronger than we are.”** The implication is stronger in number and therefore in the number of fighting men.

Gen 26:17

**“encamped in the valley of Gerar.”** Isaac was in Gerar, and now it seems he moved east up the Valley of Gerar. However, archaeologists are not certain where the town of Gerar actually was.

Gen 26:19

**“running water.”** The Hebrew text reads “living water,” which is water that is running on its own like a spring, creek, or river.

Gen 26:20

**“Esek.”** Esek means “quarrel” or “contend.”

Gen 26:21

**“Sitnah.”** “*Sitnah*” means “strife, accusation.” The word *sitnah* is the same root as “Satan,” the Adversary.

Gen 26:22

**“Rehoboth.”** Rehoboth refers to wide places. Now there was wide space, or room, for everyone.

Gen 26:23

**“he went up.”** Beer-sheba was higher in elevation than where Isaac was.

Gen 26:24

**“for I am with you.”** God can be “with” people in many different ways. In this case, God was with Isaac to bless him and make him successful.

**“will bless you and multiply your seed for my servant Abraham’s sake.”** At this point there is no revelation from God as to whether Isaac’s “seed” (the Messiah) would come through Jacob or Easu.

Gen 26:25

**“So he built an altar there.”** Years later it seems likely that his son Jacob came to that place and sacrificed on the altar that Isaac had built (Gen. 46:1).

**“pitched his tent there.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “spread out his tent there.”

Gen 26:28

**“oath.”** The Hebrew word translated as “oath” is *ʾalah* **(**#0423 אָלָה), and it refers to an oath, but it also refers to a curse. Everett Fox translates the word as “oath-curse.” The point is that it was an oath, but if someone broke the oath, then it became a curse and had consequences.

**“and let us cut a covenant with you.”** Although this record in Genesis 26 never explicitly says that Isaac and the Philistines made the covenant, Genesis 26:30 says they made a feast together, and it was the custom to eat together when an important covenant was made, so we can safely assume that Isaac made a covenant with the men of Gerar.

Gen 26:29

**“so that you will do us no harm.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic and reads like the start of an oath-curse formula, something like, “If you ever deal badly with us….” However that would be confusing in English, so most versions avoid the literal.

**“not touched you.”** This is idiomatic for “hurt” or “harmed.” It is also used that way in Joshua 9:19 and Ruth 2:9.

Gen 26:30

**“banquet.”** The Hebrew word implies a drinking feast in which there is a lot of wine or other drinks. Everett Fox (The Schocken Bible) has “drinking feast.”

Gen 26:33

**“Shibah.”** “Shebuah” is related to the word “oath,” but “shibah” is more related to “seven,” looking backward to the oath that Abraham made. Both *shebuah* and *shibah* are from the same Hebrew root.

Gen 26:34

**“When Esau was 40 years old.”** So Isaac would have been 100 years old. He was 60 when the twins were born.

Gen 26:35

**“a source of bitterness.”** The Hebrew text is literally, “a bitterness of spirit.” This is the use of “spirit” (Hebrew: *ruach* #07307 רוּחַ) that refers to the activities of the mind: the thoughts, attitudes, and emotions. Esau’s Hittite wives caused bitter thoughts and attitudes in Isaac and Rebekah.

[For more on the uses of “spirit,” see Word Study: “Pneuma.” Usage #13 concerns thoughts and emotions.]

**Genesis Chapter 27**

Gen 27:2

**“I am old.”** Here in Genesis 27:2, when Isaac says he is old and does not know when he will die, it seems that Isaac was 135 or close to that age. He died decades later, at 180 years old (Gen. 35:28). The age of Isaac in Genesis 27, when Jacob stole Esau’s birthright, can be roughly determined from the life of Jacob. Isaac was 60 when Jacob and Esau were born (Gen. 25:24-26). Jacob was 130 in the second year of the famine in Egypt (Gen. 45:6; 47:8-10). Joseph would have been 39 that year (Joseph had been sold into slavery in Egypt when he was 17 (Gen. 37:2); he started serving Pharaoh when he was 30 (Gen. 41:46); then there were seven years of plenty, and Jacob came to Egypt in the second year of the famine (Gen. 45:6). So if Joseph was 39 when Jacob was 130, then Joseph was born when Jacob was 91.

The 60 years of Isaac’s life before Jacob, and the 91 years after Jacob was born until Joseph was born would make Isaac 151 when Rachel gave birth to Joseph up in Padan-aram. Jacob stole Esau’s birthright before he went to Padan-aram and stayed with Laban, his mother’s brother, and met Rachel and Leah. Jacob served Laban for twenty years in Padan-aram (Gen. 31:41). So, even if Joseph was born in the last year that Jacob was with Laban in Padan-aram, Isaac would have been 131. But Rachel had given birth to Joseph before the end of the 20 years and Jacob stayed with Laban after that (Gen. 30:25-27, 43). Thus, it is more likely that Joseph was born perhaps after Jacob had been in Padan-aram for 15 years in Padan-aram, which would make Isaac around 135 years old here in Genesis 27:2.

**“I do not know the day of my death.”** That people did not know when they were going to die was much more true in biblical days than today. Today, even people who have heart attacks or strokes can often recover and live very active lives. Also, today there are lots of medications and surgeries that prolong life. In the biblical world, when a person became old, death often came quite suddenly, and often even if it didn’t, people being infirm for years generally did not happen like it does today when older people have things like COPD, or heart arrhythmia that goes on for years.

Gen 27:3

**“quiver.”** This is the only use of this word in the Bible, so its exact meaning is unknown. It comes from the word “hang,” so quiver makes sense because it hangs down from the body.

**“*wild* game.”** This word for game comes from the same root as the word “hunt” earlier in the verse. Originally in English, “venison” referred to any wild game taken in hunting, but eventually “venison” came to refer only to deer meat. But here in Genesis it simply refers to wild game.

Gen 27:4

**“my soul will bless you before I die.”** This concept of being blessed is a theme in Genesis 27, and occurs in Genesis 27:4, 10, 19, 23, 27, 31, 33, 35, 36, 38, and 27:41. The blessing given to children by a father is a very powerful thing and can add meaning and joy to any child. This is even more the case if the father is walking by the spirit of God and his words include revelation words from God.

Note that Isaac was the first to speak of blessing his son (Gen. 27:4). Then Rebekah desired that blessing be given to Jacob (Gen. 27:10). Then the blessing was important enough that Jacob got it from his father Isaac by trickery (Gen. 27:19), but Esau wanted it (Gen. 27:31) and felt so betrayed by Jacob who “stole” it from him, that he decided to kill Jacob (Gen. 27:41) and he begged Isaac to bless him too (Gen. 27:38). On his part, when Isaac realized Jacob had tricked him, he trembled greatly (Gen. 27:33).

Gen 27:10

**“so that he will bless you before his death.”** Rebekah’s well-meaning act, to get her favorite son blessed, is a good example of how we humans can mean well but cause trouble for ourselves and others when we walk by the flesh and not by the spirit. Isaac’s blessings upon Jacob and Esau came from God, not from Isaac; Isaac was just the speaker. Jacob’s disguise may have fooled Isaac, but it did not fool God, who gave the message in the prophetic blessing. There is no reason to believe that the blessings on Jacob and Esau would have been substantially different if Jacob had not disguised himself but had simply gone to Isaac for a blessing, and it would have prevented a lot of heartache. Jacob’s deceitful act broke up any brotherly love between Esau and Jacob, and Jacob had to flee for his life to Haran, where he stayed for some 20 years, and after Jacob left, Rebekah died without ever seeing her favorite son again. For His part, God made a lemonade out of Rebekah’s and Jacob’s lying lemon by giving Jacob the correct prophetic blessing and also blessing him in Haran with the children who became the founding fathers of the tribes of Israel—something he no doubt would have done if Jacob had simply married wives properly, just as his father Isaac had married Rebekah.

Note that when Jacob blessed Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, God guided Jacob in the blessing (Gen. 48:13-20). Joseph started to interfere, based on what he saw in the flesh, but Jacob held to what God was showing him, and the prophetic blessings came to pass just like God showed Jacob by revelation. Life is murky and uncertain, and believers need to be patient, pray, and walk by the spirit to keep from messing things up by making hasty fleshly judgments.

This concept of being blessed is a theme in Genesis 27, and occurs in Genesis 27:4, 10, 19, and 27:31 (see commentary on Gen. 27:4).

Gen 27:12

**“In his eyes I will be a deceiver.”** At this point in his life, Jacob is more concerned with the potential consequences of being caught his deceit than in doing what is morally right. That is so like many people! They would do wrong if they could just guarantee that they would not get caught. Believers need to do what is right just because it is right.

Gen 27:16

**“on his hands.”** The “hands” in this case would include up the arm to at least the elbow.

Gen 27:19

**“so that your soul will bless me.”** This concept of being blessed is a theme in Genesis 27, and occurs in Genesis 27:4, 10, 19, and 27:31.

Gen 27:20

**“Yahweh your God.”** Jacob was lying to Isaac, and he used Yahweh to make his lie believable. Although there is no specific consequence for this in the Genesis record, it displeases God to lie and greatly displeases Him to implicate Him in the lie. Those who honor God should never do that.

Gen 27:23

**“(He did not recognize him….”** This is a summary statement to explain why Isaac went ahead and blessed Jacob. It was because he did not recognize Jacob.

Gen 27:24

**“I am.”** Throughout his talking with his father Isaac, Jacob is really economizing his words so his father will not discover his identity. The Hebrew is not “I am, “ it is simply “I.”

Gen 27:25

**“wine.”** Shepherds usually do not have a lot of wine. The family likely traded with local farmers for the wine they had.

Gen 27:27

**“of his clothing.”** The clothing was Esau’s clothing.

Gen 27:28

**“new wine.”** This is not the same Hebrew word for wine as was used a few verses earlier in Genesis 27:25. This “new wine” refers to unfermented grape juice which then can be consumed or turned into wine or wine vinegar.

Gen 27:29

**“let peoples serve you.”** This prophetic blessing in Genesis 27:29 covers both the peoples and nations that are not related to Jacob and also Jacob’s “brothers” (actually going back to Abraham, Jacob’s “brothers,” in this context meaning “relatives”). When Christ rules the earth from Jerusalem in the Millennial Kingdom, it will be from Jerusalem surrounded by the tribes of Israel (cf. Ezek. 48).

[For more on Jesus ruling over the earth during his Millennial Kingdom, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.”]

**“master.”** The Hebrew word only occurs twice in the OT, and it comes from the root “strength,” “prevail.” Jacob was to be the “strong one” among his brothers.

**“over your brothers.”** In this context, “brothers” does not only refer to just Esau. It refers to relatives going back at least as far as Abraham’s descendants, including nations like Moab and Ammon that came from Lot. The nation of Edom, which was comprised of descendants of Esau, was subjugated to Israel in the time of David (2 Sam. 18:14).

**“bow down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before someone was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body to the earth.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Gen 27:30

**“gone, yes, gone out.”** This is the figure polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

Gen 27:31

**“in order that your soul will bless me.”** This concept of being blessed is a theme in Genesis 27, and occurs in Genesis 27:4, 10, 19, now in Genesis 27:31.

Gen 27:34

**“Bless me, me also, father!”** This event is mentioned in Hebrews 12:17.

Gen 27:36

**“He took away my birthright...now he has taken away my blessing.”** Nahum Sarna points out the interesting double entendre in the Hebrew text, because the root of the word translated “take away” can mean to “take away” and also “to purchase.”[[121]](#footnote-20114) Jacob “bought” the birthright, but stole, “took away,” the blessing.

Gen 27:37

**“all his brothers.”** In this context, “brothers” refers to relatives. Esau was Jacob’s only blood brother.

Gen 27:38

**“And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.”** Esau sought the blessing with tears (Heb. 12:17).

Gen 27:39

**“far from the fatness of the earth will be your dwelling place, and far from the dew of heaven above.”** The meaning of what Isaac said is debated because the Hebrew can mean two different things. The Hebrew “from” is a preposition that can mean “from” or it can be partitive, “far from.” If it is taken as a simple “from,” then it seems like Esau is sharing in Jacob’s blessing, i.e., that Esau will live off the fatness of the earth and the dew of heaven. If the preposition is taken in its partitive sense, then Isaac is saying that Easu will live “far away from the fatness of the earth and far away from the dew of heaven.

From Esau’s reaction and desire to kill Jacob, it seems a partitive sense, “far from” is the more dominant meaning. Although Edom, where Esau settled, has enough vegetation and game to sustain life, it is a hard life, and Edom does not enjoy the heavy dews that Israel does, which sustain the vegetation in the dry season. Thus, where Esau ended up making his home was far from the fatness of the earth and far from the dew of heaven. English versions that favor “far from” include the Amplified Bible, CSB, CEB, CEV, ESV, GNT, LSB, MSG, NAB, NASB, NIV, NLT, NRSV, and RSV.

Gen 27:40

**“By your sword will you live.”** This likely includes raiding caravans, as well as protecting itself from other hostile tribes. Nahum Sarna writes about that prophecy: “Edom shall subsist, not from pastoral or agricultural pursuits, but from violence and pillage, raiding its neighbors and plundering the caravans that pass through its land.”[[122]](#footnote-32086)

**“you will shake his yoke from off your neck.”** Edom was subjugated to Israel for many years, and tried to revolt and break free of their dominion several times. Finally, during the reign of Jehoram, king of Israel, they successfully revolted against Israel and were never under Israelite control after that (2 Kings 8:20-22). It is noteworthy that Isaac, who was so blind that he could not tell Jacob from Esau, was not blind spiritually, and his prophetic words were razor sharp.

Gen 27:41

**“held a grudge.”** Although “hated” is the more common meaning for the Hebrew word, in this context, “held a grudge” seems to be the better way to translate the verb (e.g., CSB, JPS, NAB, NASB, NET ([Full-Notes](https://bible.org/sites/bible.org/resources/netbible/index.htm?gen27.htm)), NIV).

Gen 27:43

**“obey my voice.”** Twice in this record, Rebekah tells Jacob to obey her voice. Once, when she tells him to trick Isaac to get the blessing (Gen. 27:8) and now, when she tells him to flee to her brother to avoid Esau’s wrath for stealing his blessing.

Gen 27:44

**“A few days.”** No doubt Rebekah purposely understated the amount of time she expected Jacob to be gone in order to make it easier for Jacob to leave and to make the absence of her favorite son easier for her to bear. What neither of them could have foreseen is that Jacob was in Haran with Rebekah’s brother Laban and his daughters Leah and Rachel for twenty years (Gen. 31:38, 41). During that time, Rebekah died, so Rebekah and Jacob never saw one another again. However, Jacob did see his father Isaac, and when Isaac died, both Jacob and Esau buried him (Gen. 35:27-29).

Gen 27:45

**“Why should I be bereaved of you both in one day?”** Rebekah is thinking about the fact that if Esau kills Jacob, a relative, an avenger of blood, would then kill Esau.

Gen 27:46

**“And Rebekah said to Isaac.”** Rebekah has to figure a way to get Isaac to send Jacob away, and she does that by complaining to Isaac about Esau’s wives. Thus, her request is that Jacob be sent back north to Haran to Rebekah’s family.

These are the last words of Rebekah recorded in Scripture. Her death and burial are not recorded. She told Jacob to be gone for “a few days” (Gen. 27:44), but he was gone for 20 years, and during that time, Rebekah died.

**“the daughters of Heth.”** An idiom that refers to Hittite women, specifically in this context, the women that Esau married (Gen. 26:34).

**Genesis Chapter 28**

Gen 28:2

**“Take a wife from there from the daughters of Laban.”** The Bible does not tell us how Isaac knew that Rebekah’s brother Laban had daughters. Although it is possible that Isaac and Rebekah visited Laban, or that Laban had visited them, that is not likely. Much more likely is that Isaac got his information from merchants and traders that traveled through.

Gen 28:3

**“El Shaddai.”** “El Shaddai” is the name of God that is commonly translated as “God Almighty” (see commentary on Gen. 17:1).

Gen 28:4

**“*the land* that God gave to Abraham.”** It is noteworthy that when Isaac was sending Jacob out of “*the land* that God gave to Abraham” and back to the land of Abraham’s ancestors, Isaac blessed Jacob with a blessing that demanded that Jacob come back into the land of Israel. So in essence Isaac was saying “Leave this land that God gave Abraham and go back to the land of Abraham’s ancestors and get a wife from there, and then come back here.” And that is exactly what Jacob did, except he came back with two wives and two concubines instead of “a wife.”

Gen 28:9

**“Nebaioth.”** Nebaioth is the firstborn son of Ishmael (Gen. 25:13).

**“Mahalath.”** In Genesis 36:2-3, Mahalath is called “Basemath.”

Gen 28:11

**“He arrived at a certain place.”** The Hebrew text makes it clear that Jacob had not predetermined the spot, it just happened to be a good place to stop for the night after the sun had set.[[123]](#footnote-10999) However, after God met Jacob there, the spot, known as “Bethel” (house of God), became famous.

Gen 28:12

**“the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”** This is one of the places where angels appear in the form of people. If they had wings they would not be walking up and down the staircase. Jesus seems to have alluded to this in John 1:51 (see commentary on John 1:51). It is worth noticing that the angels are first mentioned as ascending up the staircase, as if they were reporting back to God.

Gen 28:13

**“the God of Abraham your father.”** God’s promise to Jacob here is the continuation of the covenant that God made with Abraham. It is noteworthy that God chose to continue His covenant through Jacob, and not through Esau, Jacob’s older brother.

**“land…I will give it.”** Here God promises the land to Jacob and his descendants. God repeated the promise that He would give the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants many times, and said it in slightly different ways. He told Abraham that he and his descendants would get the land (Gen. 12:7; 13:15-17; 15:7, 18; 17:8). He told it to Isaac (Gen. 26:3). He told it to Jacob (Gen. 28:13; 35:12; 48:4). Then over and over He told Israel about the promise or that He would give them the land (cf. Exod. 6:4, 8; 12:25; 13:5, 11; Lev. 14:34; 20:24; 23:10; 25:2).

[For more on the promise God made to give the land to Abraham and his descendants, see commentary on Gen. 15:18.]

Gen 28:14

**“the dust of the earth.”** This hyperbole is also in Genesis 13:16; see commentary on Genesis 13:16.

**“the clans of the earth.”** For the translation “clans,” see commentary on Genesis 12:3.

Gen 28:15

**“for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised.”** God comforted Jacob by telling him that he would be successful in Aram and that God would not leave him up there, out of the Promised Land. This verse is not saying, nor does the Hebrew text imply, that God will leave Jacob after bringing him back to his home in the Promised Land. Jacob was leaving home for a place where he had never been, and apparently needed the comfort of knowing that God would not ask him to go there and then just abandon him there.

Gen 28:16

**“and I, I did not know it.”** The Hebrew text emphasizes the word “I.” This is quite a statement of humility by Jacob. He had just seen Yahweh and admitted that he did not know that Yahweh was in that place, which is somewhat astounding because that land had been promised to Abraham and his seed by Yahweh who made a covenant to that fact (Gen. 15:7-21). It seems Jacob did not really understand that, but this dream/revelation was part of Jacob’s growth in the Lord.

Gen 28:17

**“This is none other than *the* house of God.”** The Hebrew text does not have the word “the,” and so properly it should be translated, “a house of God.” But we don’t really know what Jacob thought about God at this time in history. It is possible, and perhaps even likely, that he thought God would have more than one “house,” one place to dwell and so he said it was “a house” of God.

Gen 28:18

**“set it up as a standing-stone.”** Jacob set up four standing-stones. His first was a small one here at Bethel (Gen. 28:18.) His second was when he made a covenant with Laban (Gen. 31:45). His third was when he went back to Bethel after being gone to Syria where he married and had children (Gen. 35:14). He erected a fourth standing-stone over Rachel’s grave, no doubt as a memorial for her (Gen. 35:20).

The Hebrew word translated “standing-stone” is *matstsebah* (#04676 מַצֵּבָה) and *matstsebah* can refer to a standing-stone or to a garrison or army, but it almost always refers to a standing-stone (some 34 times in the Old Testament). It was a quite common practice in the ancient Near East to set up stones to commemorate events or to represent gods or goddesses. Sometimes the stones were worked or shaped, but many times they were simply natural stones that happened to be somewhat cucumber-shaped and were simply stood up on end, as Jacob did here in Genesis 28:18. However, in specific contexts, *matstsebah* can refer to a specific type of standing-stone, such as an obelisk (Jer. 43:13). Hundreds of standing-stones have been discovered by archaeologists and historians, and they range from little stones that are only a few inches tall to huge monolithic stones that are several yards high.

If the standing-stone is carved or shaped at all, some of them face east, and some of them have little hollows or shelves for small offerings. Standing-stones are often found in a cultic setting, for example, in or near temples or sanctuaries, and they are often found with altars, benches, and basins close by. Also, there are often two, three, or more standing-stones set up close to each other. When a number of standing-stones are found grouped together, they may have represented known groups or families of gods. Also, when the stones are grouped together there are bigger and smaller ones set in close proximity and it is theorized that this may represent more powerful and less powerful gods, and similarly, when there are two stones side by side and one is wider and the other narrower it is theorized that the broad one represents a god and the narrower one represents a goddess, but we do not know for certain.

Sometimes the meaning of the standing-stone would not be apparent, which would be the case here in Genesis with the one that Jacob set up to commemorate his encounter with Yahweh, and then people had to be prepared to pass down the reason for the stones from one generation to the next (cf. Josh. 4:6, 21). However, there were times when the location or shape of the standing-stone might indicate its purpose, for example, if it represented a specific god.

A standing-stone could be a godly thing or an ungodly thing depending on its purpose. Many godly people set up standing-stones as memorials or witnesses. Jacob seems to especially have liked setting up memorial standing-stones, and set up four of them. He set his first one up to commemorate his meeting with Yahweh (Gen. 28:16-22; 35:14-16), and it would have been quite small because he had used it as a pillow (Gen. 28:11, 18). He set up his second standing-stone as a witness to the covenant that he had made with Laban (Gen. 31:45), and his third when he returned from Syria to Bethel, which was the second one that he set up at Bethel (Gen. 35:14). He set up his fourth on Rachel’s grave as a memorial (Gen. 35:20).

Moses erected twelve standing-stones at the foot of Mount Sinai where God made the Old Covenant with Israel, one stone for each of the tribes of Israel (Exod. 24:4-8). Joshua erected a standing-stone as a memorial and a witness of the covenant that he made with Israel in Shechem (Josh. 24:26). Samuel erected a standing-stone that he named “Ebenezer” (“Stone of Help”) as a memorial that God helped Israel defeat the Philistines (1 Sam. 7:12). These memorial standing-stones helped people remember their history and the great works of God. Isaiah 19:19 says that in the future Kingdom of Christ on earth, the Egyptians will erect a standing-stone to Yahweh on their border.

In contrast to the godly standing-stones that were set up mainly as memorials, the majority of standing-stones were set up to worship pagan gods. Standing-stones often represented specific deities, and sometimes it was even thought that the deity resided inside the stone. That is why Israel was strictly commanded not to set up those kinds of standing-stones (Lev. 26:1; Deut. 16:22).

Also, there may have been many more standing-stones in Israel due to its Canaanite past, but God commanded that Israel destroy the pagan standing-stones (Exod. 23:24; 34:13; Deut. 7:5; 12:3) and some of the kings obeyed that command (Joram of Israel, 2 Kings 3:2; Jehu of Israel, 2 Kings 10:26-27; Hezekiah, 2 Kings 18:4 and 2 Chron. 31:1; Josiah, 2 Kings 23:14; ). However, when the worship of Baal and other pagan gods grew in Israel, sometimes kings of the people set up standing-stones for those gods (1 Kings 14:23; 2 Kings 17:10).

It is likely that there was a large standing-stone at Gibeon (2 Sam. 20:8), although nothing is said about who set it up or when. Gibeon was a Hivite city (Josh. 11:9) so the standing-stone was likely set up long before Israel invaded the Promised Land.

Although many versions translate these standing-stones as “pillars,” that translation can give the wrong impression. We usually think of a “pillar” as something man-made, sculpted, and tall. In contrast, most standing-stones were not shaped much if at all. Some of them can be seen at archaeological sites today, for example, there is still a broken standing-stone at the site of the temple of Baal-berith at Shechem. Tel Gezer also has impressive standing-stones.

**“and poured oil on top of it.”** This is the first standing-stone that Jacob erected (Gen. 28:18), and since he did it alone it must have been fairly small. This first one was a small one at Bethel, and he did not erect an altar along with it. That likely would have required more time and effort than he could afford, although when he erected his third standing-stone, which was also here in Bethel, he built an altar with it. His second standing-stone was when he made a covenant with Laban (Gen. 31:45). Then his third he erected back in Bethel (Gen. 35:14), and although the Bible does not describe it, it almost certainly would have been larger than the first one he erected there because he had his sons and servants with him to help with it. He also built an altar at that time (Gen. 35:7). He erected a fourth standing-stone over Rachel’s grave, no doubt as a memorial for her (Gen. 35:20).

Gen 28:19

**“but the name of the city was Luz at the first.”** Nothing is said about the city of Luz, and if it was not mentioned here in Genesis 28:19; 35:6, and Judges 1:22-25, we would likely not know it even existed. It is clear from the context and from Judges that Luz was a Canaanite city. Jacob would not have put his standing stone, and then an altar, in the middle of a Canaanite city, so he must have found some ground nearby where he could sleep safely and then set up the standing stone.

Gen 28:21

**“in peace.”** The Hebrew is *shalom*, which means more than just “peace.” *Shalom* means more like “wholeness,” or “wellness,” but if you are well and whole, you are also generally at peace.

Gen 28:22

**“will be a house of God.”** That is, a place of worship. True to his word, many years later Jacob did build an altar to God at Bethel (Gen. 35:1-7). Jacob would have sacrificed on the altar even though the text does not specifically say so, because sacrifice was what altars were built for.

**“a tenth, yes, a tenth.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton, which occurs when the same word occurs in succession in a sentence but the word is inflected in different ways. It is unclear exactly how, or to whom, Jacob would give a tenth of what God gave him.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16, “eat, yes, eat.”]

[See Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

**Genesis Chapter 29**

Gen 29:1

**“went on his journey.”** The translation is idiomatic. The literal translation of the Hebrew is that Jacob “lifted up his feet.”

**“the land of the children of the east.”** In this context, this refers to the people of the northern Euphrates River.

Gen 29:4

**“My brothers.”** In this context, “my brothers” is a friendly opener, much like if we meet someone and say “Hey friend,” when they are not actually friends yet, and may never be. Jacob did not know whether these men were relatives.

Gen 29:6

**“And look, here comes Rachel his daughter with the sheep.”** The timing of Rachel showing up when Jacob was there is one of the many examples of God’s invisible hand guiding and directing things on earth. Humans cannot make that kind of “godly coincidence” happen, which is why believers need to be faithful in prayer. James says, “You do not have because you do not ask” (James 4:2), so believers need to be faithful in asking for God’s guidance and help.

Gen 29:7

**“He said *to the shepherds*.”** The NET amplifies but also clarifies the meaning of the verse. “Then Jacob said, ‘Since it is still the middle of the day, it is not time for the flocks to be gathered. You should water the sheep and then go and let them graze some more.”

It seems strange that Jacob would just arrive in the area as a stranger and outsider and yet tell the shepherds from the area that they were gathering the sheep too early. Jacob was used to herding sheep since his father Isaac had flocks and herds (Gen. 26:14), nevertheless, it seems presumptuous of him to tell the local shepherds how to manage their flocks. It seems that Jacob really wanted to have time alone with Rachel and so he was trying to get rid of the shepherds, who obviously would have been interested in any conversation between this stranger and the young girl Rachel.

Gen 29:8

**“We can’t *do that* until all the flocks are gathered together.”** Since Jacob himself rolled the stone off of the mouth of the well (Gen. 29:10), the fact that the shepherds said, “we can’t” did not refer to their physical ability, but apparently to some previously agreed upon reason that all the flocks should be there when the stone was rolled away. However, no one seemed to be upset when Jacob rolled it away to water Rachel’s flocks.

Gen 29:9

**“for she was a shepherdess.”** It was not totally uncommon in the ancient Near East that women would be shepherdesses. Jethro’s daughters were shepherdesses (Exod. 2:16-19).

Gen 29:10

**“his mother’s brother.”** The threefold repetition of “his mother’s brother” in Genesis 29:10 is awkward in English, but it demonstrates the importance of family and extended family in biblical times. There was no police force back then, and no one to keep people safe in a “might makes right’ society except for family and clan. So for this stranger to suddenly appear and be found as one of the family was very welcome.

Gen 29:11

**“lifted up his voice and wept.”** The weeping would have been part from joy and part from relief from anxiety. When Jacob left for Haran, there was no guarantee that he would find his relatives, or if he did, if they would believe him and accept him. But now, upon arriving, here is his mother’s niece and his cousin right at the same well where he was.

Gen 29:12

**“her father’s relative.”** Here, the literal Hebrew “brother” is used in the wider sense of relative. In Semitic languages, words like “brother” have a wide range of meanings, so the meaning in any given context must be determined by that context. Here it means “relative,” specifically “nephew,” and Jacob was a cousin to Rachel and Leah.

Gen 29:14

**“Surely you are my bone and my flesh.”** What Jacob said convinced Laban that Jacob was indeed Rebekah’s son.

Gen 29:17

**“Leah’s eyes were weak.”** The Hebrew word we translate as “weak” is *rak* (#07390 רַךְ), and it is unclear in this context how to translate it. It can mean “weak,” and describe Leah in a bad light, or it can mean “tender, soft” and describe at least one nice thing about her. Nevertheless, she was overshadowed by her gorgeous sister Rachel. The translations differ: “weak; ordinary” (CJB, HCSB, ESV, NAB, NASB, NIV); “tender; delicate” (ASV, KJV, NET, YLT). Of the two choices, we went with “weak.” Women were modestly dressed in the biblical culture and did not have much open contact with men, but before any marriage, the women of the family of the prospective groom would get to sit with and inspect the prospective wife, and in this case, it seems obvious that Leah’s family was anxious to avoid that and get Leah married, which they did by deceiving Jacob. This turned out to be difficult for both Leah and Jacob.

**“Rachel was beautiful in form and attractive.”** The Hebrew phrase is used twice in the Bible, once of Rachel and once of Joseph, and the translation is adapted for the male and female; Rachel is said to be “beautiful in form and attractive” (Gen. 29:17), while Joseph is said to be “well-built and handsome” (Gen. 39:6).

Gen 29:18

**“I will serve you seven years for Rachel.”** This seems like a very long time to serve someone for a wife. It likely points to the fact that both Leah and Rachel were young. If Rachel was ten, Jacob was having her wait until she was 17, which could have been considered late for marriage in that culture. So it seems that Rachel may even have been eight or nine at the time. If Rachel was in her teens, making her wait for seven years before marriage would not have seemed right.

Gen 29:20

**“Jacob served seven years.”** Jacob was 77 years old at the start of this seven-year period.

[For an overview of the chronology of Jacob, see commentary on Gen. 47:9.]

Gen 29:22

**“banquet.”** The Hebrew word can mean “drinking bout,” and it generally refers to a meal with wine. This would have been a huge meal with lots of wine and likely beer as well.

Gen 29:23

**“he went to her.”** An idiom for sexual intercourse (cf. Gen. 29:23; 30:4; 38:2, 18; Judg. 16:1; Ruth 4:13; 2 Sam. 12:24).

Gen 29:24

**“Laban gave her Zilpah his slave; *he gave her* to his daughter Leah as a slave.”** The Hebrew is quite choppy. The repetition may have something to do with formality in transferring the ownership of a slave.

Gen 29:25

**“Why have you deceived me?”** This seems ironic coming from the mouth of Jacob, whose very name can mean “Deceiver,” and he certainly deceived many people in his life. But now that someone deceives him, he is very upset about it (which is understandable in the situation). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that people who deceive others are generally very upset when they are deceived.

Gen 29:26

**“to give the younger before the firstborn.”** The text does not explain why Laban could not have found a husband for Leah in those seven years.

Gen 29:27

**“Fulfill the bridal week of this one.”** “This one” is Leah, and “the other” is Rachel. Laban told Jacob to be with Leah for a week and then he could marry Rachel, for whom he would then serve Laban for another seven years. This activity predates the Mosaic Law. Once the Mosaic Law was given, marrying a woman and her sister was disobedience to the Law and a sin (Lev. 18:18).

Gen 29:28

**“and fulfilled her bridal week.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “and fulfilled the bridal week of this one,” but the “this” is feminine in Hebrew, indicating Leah, but in English, “this” has no gender, so the sentence would be unclear.

**“Then he gave him Rachel his daughter as wife.”** After Leah’s bridal week, Laban gave Rachel to Jacob as a wife. Jacob was tricked and first had sex with Leah, thus consummating a marriage to her. But he was only married to her for a week when he married Rachel, and then he served another seven years for her. Thus, Jacob served Laban for 14 years for his two wives.

Gen 29:30

**“So Jacob also went.”** The Hebrew text reads “he,” but that makes the sentence unclear in English, so a number of English versions replace the pronoun “he” with the name “Jacob”

Gen 29:31

**“Leah was hated.”** In Hebrew and Greek, the word “hate” has a large range of meanings, from actual “hate” to simply loving something less than something else, neglecting or ignoring something, or being disgusted by something. In this context, “hate” refers to being less loved. Jacob did not “hate” Leah in the usual modern sense of “hate,” he simply loved her less than Rachel and thus tended to ignore her.

[For more on “hate,” see commentary on Prov. 1:22.]

Gen 29:32

**“Reuben.”** The Hebrew means “See, a son!”

Gen 29:33

**“Simeon.”** The Hebrew is the diminutive of the word “to hear.”

Gen 29:34

**“my husband will be joined to me.”** The Hebrew word translated as “joined” can mean that, or it can have the meaning of “attached to” in the sense that a husband and wife can be “attached to” each other.

**“Levi.”** The exact meaning of “Levi” is debated, but the name comes from a Hebrew word that sounds like the word translated as “joined.” Some say it basically means “joiner.”

**Genesis Chapter 30**

Gen 30:1

**“or else I will die.”** The exact meaning of this phrase spoken by Rachel here in Genesis 30:1 is not known, and it likely had several meanings in her mind. No doubt she was expressing her great disappointment about not having children and her feeling that she might as well be dead than live without children. Also, although she almost certainly did not mean that she would die quickly, she might have had her future in mind. She knew that Jacob was many years older than she was, and so she was likely concerned that she would not have anyone who would take care of her in her old age. Also, she could have had in her mind that without children her line and her memory would die away into nothingness. For a young woman without children who was married to an older man, all those thoughts would likely be floating around in her mind, and contribute to the outburst, “Give me children or else I will die.”

Gen 30:3

**“build *a family* by her.”** See Gen. 16:2.

Gen 30:4

**“Jacob went in to her.”** An idiom for sexual intercourse (cf. Gen. 29:23; 30:4; 38:2, 18; Judg. 16:1; Ruth 4:13; 2 Sam. 12:24).

Gen 30:6

**“God has judged me.”** The word “judged” is used in the sense of “vindicated,” or “judged in my favor.” Rachel had felt betrayed by God, but now that she had a surrogate son she felt vindicated. Leah’s love for God showed up in the names of her children, whereas Rachel’s bitterness shows up in the names of her first two sons. Sadly, Rachel died while giving birth to Benjamin (whom she named “son of my sorrow,” but Jacob called him Benjamin, “son of my right hand”). It is possible that a life of bitterness and idolatry (Gen. 31:19, 34-35) contributed to her death.

**“and has given me a son.”** Rachel’s statement gives us a window into the laws and thinking of the ancient Near East. If a woman was childless but had a slave girl, a child by the slave girl could be claimed as a child of the woman herself. Sarah took advantage of the same law (Gen. 16:2).

Gen 30:8

**“mighty wrestlings.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic and is more literally, “With wrestling of *elohim* [God].” In the biblical culture, the word *elohim* [God] can be used when something was extreme in some manner. It is possible that the verse should be translated more like the CSB: “‘In my wrestlings with God, I have wrestled with my sister and won,’ and she named him Naphtali.” If the CSB has captured the correct nuance of the text, it indicates that Rachel felt God had kept her from childbearing and she had wrestled with Him about it. It is likely that the Hebrew phrase meant both things to Rachel: that she wrestled mightily and also wrestled with God over childbirth.

Gen 30:11

**“How fortunate.”** The marginal reading is more like, “*Good* fortune has come.” Although some versions have a translation such as “a troop is coming” (cf. KJV) the evidence is although “troop” is a related word, that is not the meaning here (see commentary on Gen. 49:19).

Gen 30:13

**“for the daughters will call me happy.”** Jacob did not yet have any daughters. In this context, the “daughters” are the women in the area. Women understood how important it was for them to have children that would grow up to strengthen the family and the clan, and to provide for their parents in their old age. The men wanted children, but were generally not as exuberant about them as the women, so it was the “daughters” who would call Leah happy.

Gen 30:14

**“In the days of wheat harvest.”** This would typically be May and June.

**“mandrakes.”** The mandrake plant has large leaves that spring from the root, so there really is no stalk per se, and the mandrake plant has violet flowers and yellow fruit that is about the size of a tomato. The Hebrew word translated as “mandrakes” is very close to the word “love,” such that even today the fruit is popularly called a “love apple.” Everett Fox[[124]](#footnote-11049) refers to them as “love-apples” in his translation, and the Amplifed Version puts “love apples” in brackets after “mandrakes.” The CEB reads “erotic herbs” instead of “mandrakes.” However, there is no known scientific connection between eating mandrakes and getting pregnant.

Gen 30:18

**“Issachar.”** The root of Issachar is the same as the word “reward” (or “hire”) in the verse. Thus, Issachar means something like “man of hire,” or “man who is my reward.”

Gen 30:20

**“will honor me.”** The English versions differ, and usually vary between “live with me” or “honor me” (or “exalt me”). The difference is due to a difference in the Hebrew root word, some scholars choosing one and some the other.

**“Zebulun.”** In the context, the name Zebulun seems to be related to honor, exaltation.

Gen 30:22

**“Then God remembered Rachel.”** The verb “remembered” here has the meaning of show favor to (see commentary on Luke 23:42).

Gen 30:24

**“Joseph.”** The name “Joseph” is related to the Hebrew word for “add.”

**“May Yahweh add another son to me.”** In naming Joseph, Rachel prays that God would add another son to her. In that sense, Joseph’s name is almost a prayer.

Gen 30:27

**“If I have found favor in your eyes…for I have learned.”** This is the figure of speech aposiopesis (sudden silence).[[125]](#footnote-23861) The figure occurs when the full sentence is not expressed for some reason. In this case, had Laban fully expressed his desire, he would have said, “If I have found favor in your eyes, keep working for me, for I have learned by divination….” However, Laban did not want to be so bold as to ask Jacob directly to keep working for him, so he implied it by the sudden silence. The figure aposiopesis is often employed effectively by parents who are trying to control their unruly children. A mother might say through the door to her unruly child, “Don’t make me come in there…!” She is implying “Don’t make me come in there or you will be punished” in some unstated way.

**“learned by divination.”** The Bible does not tell us what kind of divination Laban used, but in this case, it seems clear that God used it to convince Laban that He had blessed Jacob.

Gen 30:30

**“increased.”** It is hard to capture the forceful nuance of the Hebrew word, which means “to break out.” It is not just that Laban’s wealth had increased, it had “broken out” into abundance. Laban was now very wealthy.

**“wherever I turned.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic, more literally, “according to my foot.” We might render it, “wherever I stepped,” but “wherever I turned” is good too. Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible has “at my every step.” The NLT, which is more paraphrased, has “through everything I’ve done,” which catches the sense well.

Gen 30:33

**“in the future.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic: “in a day of tomorrow.”

**“my wage that is in front of you.”** Jacob’s “wage” was the flocks and herds that he culled because of their appearance, such as having spots. Laban could see the flocks and herds, so they were “in front of” him.

Gen 30:35

**“he removed the male goats.”** In the context, the “he” is Laban. Laban is interested in promoting his own wealth, not Jacob’s wealth, so he removes the spotted and dark animals and gives them to his sons to care for so that Jacob, who is caring for Laban’s flocks, will have little chance of producing spotted and dark sheep since he is only caring for the normal sheep.

**“gave them into the hand of his sons.”** This is idiomatic. He gave the animals to be under the authority of his sons. Jacob’s sons would have been on the verge of being too young to care for the sheep by themselves. Jacob’s oldest at this time was likely only 13.

Gen 30:37

**“*oriental* plane tree.”** A tree that grows in wet or swampy places, whose bark is easily peeled.

Gen 30:38

**“And they bred when they came to drink.”** It is possible that there was something in the wood that caused the sheep and goats to be more sexually active.

Gen 30:39

**“the flocks gave birth.”** The Hebrew word “flocks” is feminine here.

Gen 30:40

**“set them in the direction of the streaked.”** Jacob set his flock apart in the direction of Laban’s flock. The Hebrew is idiomatic, and reads that Jacob “put the faces of the flocks toward” Laban’s flocks.

Gen 30:41

**“in order that they would conceive by the branches.”** Although the common understanding of this verse is that the flocks conceived “by” or “nearby” the rods, *The Complete Jewish Bible* has “Jacob would place the rods in the troughs, before the eyes of the animals, [in order] to bring them into heat by [means of] the rods” (brackets theirs).[[126]](#footnote-13861) It is believed by some that Jacob knew that there were chemicals in the plants that would speed up conception and increase his chances of building his own flocks and herds. That has never been proven scientifically, but it is a possible meaning of the Hebrew text.

Gen 30:42

**“an *animal of the* flock *or herd*.”** The Hebrew text only has one word, basically equivalent to “flock,” so “herd” is in italics. Just having “flock” in the REV might cause a problem because in the understanding of the ancient Hebrews, the flock animals included sheep and goats, whereas in modern English we refer to a group of sheep as a “flock” and a group of goats as a “herd.” Having “flock *or herd*” in the text helps the reader understand the situation. Jacob was caring for sheep and goats.

**“was feeble.”** The Hebrew word translated in the REV as “feeble” can also refer to being slow or delayed. Thus, the Complete Jewish Bible reads, “But if the animals would delay, he would not place them, so that the ones that delayed were Laban’s, and the ones that bore their first became Jacob’s.”[[127]](#footnote-29701) In either case, the idea was that the feeble or slow normal-colored sheep would not breed while the stronger ones bred quickly, so over time Laban’s flock became more and more feeble, while Jacobs became stronger and stronger. Furthermore, Rabbi Rashi comments: “But if…would delay: Heb. וּבְהַעִטִיף, a term denoting delay, as the *Targum* renders וּבְלַקְשׁוּת, but Menachem (*Machbereth Menachem* p. 132) associated it with (Isa. 3:22): ‘the tunics and the wraps (וְהַמַּעִטָפוֹת),’ a term denoting a wrap, meaning that they enwrapped themselves in their skin and their wool, and they did not desire to come into heat through the males.”[[128]](#footnote-32734)

**Genesis Chapter 31**

Gen 31:1

**“Jacob has taken away all that was our father’s.”** This is an exaggeration. When people are upset they typically exaggerate, as Laban’s sons do here. The Bible accurately shows how people act in stressful situations. However, in this case, the exaggeration was an accusation against Jacob, and believers must be careful when they are upset not to falsely accuse other people. False accusations are sin, and often are breaking the 9th commandment (Exod. 20:16).

Gen 31:2

**“his attitude toward him had changed.”** This is more idiomatic in Hebrew, that Laban’s face “was not toward him as before.”

Gen 31:3

**“relatives.”** The Hebrew word can also refer to a place, usually your birthplace or where your relatives live (cf. JPS, NAB, NJB).

Gen 31:7

**“and changed my wages ten times.”** This is likely hyperbole, an exaggeration, although it is possibly literal. At this time, Jacob had worked for Laban for 20 years (Gen. 31:38, 41), so Laban could have changed Jacob’s wages ten times.

**“but God didn’t allow him to hurt me.”** Jacob likely meant this statement in several ways. Laban could have attacked Jacob or his young family and physically or mentally hurt them. Also, by changing Jacob’s wages, Laban tried to limit the size of Jacob’s flocks and herds. However, he was unsuccessful, and so did not end up hurting Jacob from a prosperity point of view.

Gen 31:10

**“mated with.”** The Hebrew is literally, “went up on” the flock.

Gen 31:12

**“that mate with the flock.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “all the he-goats that are going up on the flock,” referring to mating.

Gen 31:13

**“I am the God of Bethel.”** Genesis 31:11 tells us that this was an angel speaking, so this is likely the Jewish custom of agency, where the agent, the angel, is speaking as if he were God.

**“where you anointed a standing-stone.”** Jacob set up and anointed a standing-stone to commemorate the place where God appeared to Jacob in a dream (Gen. 28:18).

[For more on standing-stones, see commentary on Gen. 28:18.]

Gen 31:14

**“Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father’s house?”** This is a rhetorical question, with the answer being “No,” as we see in the next verse, Genesis 31:15.

Gen 31:15

**“For he has sold us.”** Laban did in fact “sell” his daughters for Jacob’s 14 years of service, but that was not their complaint. Victor Hamilton explains: “Their complaint that Laban *sold* them and *devoured* what was due them indicates that in early Israelite society, the father enjoyed the fruits of the bride price only for a while. The money, in whole or in part, was to revert to the daughter at the time of succession, or if she were impoverished by her husband’s death. Laban’s sons have displaced Laban’s daughters. Financially, they were abandoned. Because Jacob paid for his wives with service instead of money, they feel they are entitled to the equivalent of his service in money.”[[129]](#footnote-20854)

**“our money.”** This refers to the bride price. In the 20 years that the women were married to Jacob, their father Laban alienated his daughters by his selfishness.

Gen 31:16

**“God has taken away.”** “Taken away” is the same verb as in Genesis 31:9.

Gen 31:17

**“his sons.”** The phrase “his sons” is used generically here for all his children, including his daughter Dinah.

Gen 31:19

**“Rachel stole.”** Rachel was a beautiful woman in appearance (Gen. 29:17), but her heart was dark, which shows up in several places. Proverbs 11:22 well applies to Rachel: *Like* a gold ring in a pig’s snout, *so too* is a beautiful woman who turns aside from good judgment. The idea in Rabbi Rashi’s commentary, that Rachel wanted to separate her father from idolatry doesn’t ring true.[[130]](#footnote-32381) Since Laban was an idolator, he would simply replace the teraphim.

**“teraphim.”** Teraphim were household gods. There is some evidence they were connected with dead relatives, and also that they had something to do with the authority in the house. It has been suggested that Rachel stole them to take authority from Laban and transfer it to her husband Jacob, but there is no solid proof of that, she might well have stolen them because she used them for some kind of divination. Teraphim were used in divination, which makes sense if they somehow represented dead ancestors, because then asking of a teraphim would be like asking a dead relative (cf. 1 Sam. 15:23; Ezek. 21:21; Zech. 10:2). Teraphim were idol gods, and as such, they were an abomination to God. Josiah got rid of them in Judah in accordance with the Law (2 Kings 23:24).

Believers need to recognize that trying to get information from idols or occult practices is a lose-lose situation. When idols are consulted or divination is used, it is not God who answers the person; it is demons. If the demons think they can get away with giving evil and harmful advice, they do, and cause trouble for those who ask for answers from them (cf. Zech. 10:2). On the other hand, if the demons give good advice, then people trust them and are pulled deeper into idolatry and disobedience to God, which always has bad consequences.

**“stole.”** Stealing now becomes a keyword in the rest of the chapter, occurring seven times in the chapter.

Gen 31:20

**“concealed”** The Hebrew is idiomatic, and reads, “Jacob stole the heart of Laban.” The meaning of the idiom is debated. Suggestions include “concealed” (REV, CJB);[[131]](#footnote-22297) “stole away unawares” (ASV, KJV, Rotherham; cf. BBE, NKJV); “deceived” (CEB, CSB, NASB); “outwitted” (CJB, NJB, NLT); “would not confess” (Douay-Rheims); “tricked” (ESV); “kept Laban in the dark” (JPS); “hoodwinked” (NAB). In biblical culture, the heart was thought to be related to knowledge, so that Jacob stole the heart of Laban likely means that he did something that Laban did not know about, which supports the translations such as the REV, ASV, KJV, and JPS. While it is true that Jacob tricked Laban, that is likely not the primary meaning of the text.

**“flee.”** The word “flee” would be too strong for the circumstances if Laban had just cheerfully allowed Jacob to leave with his wives, children, and belongings, but that is unlikely. Laban was so selfish that he would have made it very hard for Jacob to leave, and even after Jacob was on the road, Laban would not have been as kind to Jacob as he was if God had not personally intervened and warned Laban to not harm Jacob.

Gen 31:21

**“crossed over the River.”** This is the north-western area of the Euphrates River.

**“hill country of Gilead.”** Gilead is slightly southeast of the Sea of Galilee, in the Transjordan. This is a similar route to the one that Abraham took years before when he left the area of Padan Aram and traveled into Israel.

Gen 31:22

**“on the third day.”** It likely took a day to realize that Jacob had actually left, and a couple days to reach Laban with the news.

Gen 31:23

**“a seven days’ journey.”** Many scholars have noted that the seven days is almost certainly not literal, but perhaps a number that reflects completeness: the full journey up to that time. If Laban made the journey to Jacob in seven days, then Jacob had been traveling for that seven-day period plus his three-day head start, for a total of ten days. But the journey from Padan-Aram to Gilead would have been close to 400 miles, and perhaps even longer, depending on where in Gilead he was. But in order to cover that distance, Jacob would have had to have averaged traveling about 40 miles a day with his wives, concubines, young children, servants, and flocks and herds, which would have been impossible. Armed nomads on camels barely make 50 miles a day, and that from hard riding. So, asking flocks and herds to make 40 miles a day would almost certainly be impossible.

Gen 31:24

**“a dream at night.”** The Hebrew is literally, “a dream of the night.” So this was not a vision, it was a revelation dream.

**“from good to evil.”** The Hebrew text means that God told Laban not to threaten Jacob with any harm. Although many English versions have the phrase, “either good or bad,” that would mean that God was forbidding Laban from speaking to Jacob at all, which is not what happened. The Hebrew is idiomatic and meant that Laban was not to threaten Jacob. Victor Hamilton writes: “That Laban is forbidden from threatening Jacob with any harm (lit., ‘lest you speak with Jacob from good unto evil’) does not mean that Laban is not allowed to speak ‘any word at all’ against Jacob. Silence is not imposed on him.”[[132]](#footnote-30458) Young’s Literal Translation of the Bible reads, “Take heed to thyself lest thou speak with Jacob from good unto evil.

Gen 31:25

**“nailed down his tent.”** Jacob and Laban “nailed” down their tents. The Hebrew word translated as “nailed” is *taqa* (#08628 תָּקַ֤ע) and it is not the normal word used for pitching a tent. The word *taqa* is commonly used of blowing a trumpet (as in war), supposedly because the sudden blast on the horn was somewhat like the sudden hit of a mallet on the tent peg. The Hebrew word is also used for “driving” a tent peg into the ground or thrusting someone through with a sword or weapon. So interestingly, a Hebrew word associated with battle and fighting is used here of both Jacob and Laban, who were at odds with one another and “thrust” their tent pegs into the ground. Nahum Sarna writes, “...the choice of this unusual verb here is intended to convey something of the hostile atmosphere that pervades the scene.”[[133]](#footnote-30299)

Gen 31:26

**“concealed *your plan*.”** This is the same Hebrew idiom as we find in Genesis 31:20 (see commentary on Gen. 31:20).

**“carried away my daughters.”** Note that Laban refers to Leah and Rachel as “my daughters” and not “your [Jacob’s] wives.” They were Laban’s daughters, but they were now Jacob’s wives.

**“captives *taken by* the sword?”** The Hebrew text is more literally, “captives of the sword,” which means “captives taken by the sword,” which would generally refer to captives taken in war. For Laban to use the vocabulary that Jacob “carried away,” “my daughters,” and “captives of the sword” strongly indicates that Laban did not consider that Leah and Rachel left with Jacob willingly, and even more than willingly, they wanted to leave. Laban was focused on himself, as usual, and did not consider that his daughters actually wanted to go with Jacob, which is why he likely would have harmed Jacob if God had not intervened in a dream and told Laban not to harm Jacob.

Gen 31:27

**“conceal it.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “stole me.” This is slightly different from Genesis 31:20, 26, where the text is “stole my heart” (see commentary on Genesis 31:20).

**“so that I could have sent you away with joy and with songs, with tambourine and with harp.”** Laban makes it sound like he would have joyfully sent Jacob back home to Israel, but actually, that was very unlikely. Laban was selfish and self-centered and would likely have put up a huge fuss about them leaving, and in fact, might have prevented it altogether. Jacob realized this and said his piece about how Laban would have really sent him away (Gen. 31:42).

Gen 31:28

**“*grand*children.”** The Hebrew text is “sons,” but “sons” can be used generically of “children,” which would be the case here because Leah had a daughter Dinah.

Gen 31:29

**“the God of your father.”** The word “your” is plural in Hebrew, so Laban knows that Yahweh is more than just Jacob’s God, but the God of his children as well.

Gen 31:30

**“went, yes, went...longed, yes, longed.”** Laban employs the figure of speech polyptoton, in which a Hebrew word is repeated twice, for emphasis (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

Gen 31:31

**“for I thought.”** The Hebrew word “thought” is literally “said,” but it is used of saying to oneself, or thinking. The phrase “said *to myself*” could have been used as well.

Gen 31:32

**“he will not live.”** This is likely generic for both men and women rather than Jacob thinking that the women were above suspicion.

Gen 31:33

**“Laban went into Jacob’s tent.”** This was a huge insult and indicated that Laban actually thought that Jacob could have been the one to steal his teraphim. No wonder Jacob was upset with Laban when the teraphim were not found.

**“into Leah’s tent…and entered Rachel’s tent.”** In the biblical culture, when a man had more than one wife, each woman had her own tent. The idea that the man would have both women in bed with him is erroneous. Furthermore, as the women had children, they would identify with their birth mother rather than think of themselves as “one big happy family.”

Gen 31:34

**“teraphim.”** Teraphim were household gods (see commentary on Gen. 31:19).

**“the camel’s saddle-cushion.”** The Hebrew word conveys the meaning of something like a fluffy cushion, which well could have been used as the camel’s saddle to soften the ride.

**“Laban felt around the whole tent.”** The Hebrew has that Laban “felt” around the whole tent, which is likely true. There would be things to feel underneath.

Gen 31:35

**“Let my lord not become angry.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic: “Let it not be hot in the eyes of my Lord….”

**“the way of women is upon me.”** Rachel told her father that she was having her period and could not rise up. This may or may not be true. Rachel may have been lying, knowing she had to use desperate measures to keep the teraphim from being discovered. However, if Rachel was on her period, then sitting on the household gods would show great disrespect for them, even though it would have kept them from being discovered. It is unlikely that Rachel would have purposely disrespected the gods, after all, she seems to have stolen them because she believed in their helpful power.

Gen 31:36

**“Then Jacob was angry and argued with Laban.”** At this point, thinking he had been falsely accused, the twenty years of trickery, oppression, and hardship that Jacob had suffered at the hands of Laban came out with a vengeance. He spoke harshly with Laban, and then helped build a spiritual dividing wall that would keep them apart. He did not want any further association with Laban, and he didn’t have any. When they parted here in the hill country of Gilead, they never saw one another again.

**“Jacob answered and said.”** The phrase, “answered and said” is an idiom, but it has a literal overtone behind it. The phrase can be confusing because it is often used when no one asked a question, which is the situation here in Genesis 31:36. The person who “answered and said” may not have been answering a direct question from someone, but they were answering and addressing the situation that was presenting itself before them (see commentary on Matt. 11:25).

Gen 31:37

**“that they may judge between the two of us.”** The Hebrew word translated as “judge” usually means “decide,” but in this context, the meaning “judge” is justified. Although it won’t happen, Jacob is calling for a tribunal of the relatives that they may judge and decide who is the real thief, and who has stolen from whom. For example, in Genesis 31:39, Jacob bore the loss of animals that were killed by predators, even though that was against Eastern custom.

Gen 31:38

**“Your ewes.”** The Hebrew is “your rachels,” because “rachel” refers to a young female sheep. Was Jacob purposely using “rachel” to make a point with Laban?

**“miscarried.”** The Hebrew is literally, “cast their young.”

**“I haven’t eaten the rams of your flocks.”** Since one ram could impregnate a lot of sheep, it was quite common to eat a ram once in a while. Jacob could have done that and still preserved the flock, but he did not even do that.

Gen 31:39

**“What was torn by wild animals, I didn’t bring to you.”** Usually, as long as a shepherd could prove he did not sell or eat the animal, the owner of the flock would absorb the cost (see commentary on Amos 3:12).

**“stolen.”** The same Hebrew word as in “You must not steal.” This is likely referring to animals stolen by people.

Gen 31:40

**“parching heat.”** The Hebrew word can mean “heat” or “drought.” In both, the shepherd usually did not get enough to drink and endured thirst. English versions differ in their translations, each having some truth (e.g., “drought” (ASV, KJV, YLT); “heat” (CSB, ESV, JPS ); “dry heat” (CEB); “thirst” (CJB)).

**“piercing cold.”** The Hebrew word can mean “ice,” “frost,” or by extension, “cold.”

Gen 31:41

**“you have changed my wages ten times.”** Given the heated emotion of the moment, this may be a generalization. However, knowing how selfish Laban was, in the twenty years Jacob worked for Laban it is possible that it is a correct number or even an understatement.

Gen 31:42

**“the Fear of Isaac.”** One of the names of God. Also in Genesis 31:53.

**“surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed.”** This is the real situation: Laban would have sent Jacob away empty-handed, not with all the joy and festivities that Laban portrayed (Gen. 31:27).

Gen 31:43

**“The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine.”** This statement reveals the dark and selfish heart of Laban very clearly. The statement is a lie and a total misrepresentation of the facts. The daughters were Jacob’s wives whom he had worked for, the children were Jacob’s children, and flocks and other things were Jacob’s that he had worked very hard for.

**“And what can I do this day for these my daughters.”** Exactly what Laban means is unclear. But that would not be unusual in this context. Laban was so caught up in exaggeration and lies that he himself might not have known exactly what he was trying to say.

As it is translated in the REV and some other versions, it may mean that Laban thinks he is now so poor he cannot bless his family in a way he would want to. Or, he may be saying, as in the CEB, “But what can I do now about my daughters and about their sons?” In that case, he may be saying that he thinks Jacob has stolen everything, but he cannot do anything about it now. Exactly what Laban was thinking in that dark heart of his is not exactly expressed. The confusion in the wording reflects the confusion in Laban’s heart.

Gen 31:45

**“set it up as a standing-stone.”** In this case, Jacob set up the standing-stone to be a witness to the agreement that he had made with Laban. This is the second standing-stone that Jacob erected. His first was a small one at Bethel (Gen. 28:18.) This second one was when he made a covenant with Laban (Gen. 31:45). His third one is again in Bethel (Gen. 35:14). He erected a fourth standing-stone over Rachel’s grave (Gen. 35:20).

[For more on standing-stones, see commentary on Gen. 28:18.]

Gen 31:46

**“And Jacob said to his relatives.”** Although the Bible does not specify who these “relatives” (literally, “brothers”) are, it is almost certain that they included people who Laban brought with him. This may be why in Genesis 31:51 Laban claimed that he was the one who built the heap of stones. Heaps of stones were sometimes used as witnesses to some event (e.g. Josh. 4:7; 24:27).

Gen 31:47

**“Jegar-sahadutha.”** This is Aramaic. This is the only Aramaic in the Pentateuch. Both the Aramaic and Hebrew mean something like “Witness heap.”

Gen 31:48

**“Gal-ed.”** It is most likely that the whole area was named after this: Gilead.

Gen 31:49

**“Mizpah.”** The Hebrew word refers to a lookout spot; a high place from which people could see quite far. It can refer to a man-made watchtower, although often a *mizpeh* is not man-made. The reason the place was called “mizpah” was that Laban and Jacob would “watch” for one another and make sure neither crossed over into the other person’s territory.

**“Yahweh watch between me and you.”** Laban and Jacob did not trust each other, so they stated that Yahweh would keep watch between them such that they would not harm each other (cf. Gen. 31:52). In an ironic misuse of the sentence, “Yahweh watch between me and you, when we are out of sight of each other,” modern Christians have engraved that line onto a piece of jewelry that one person would give to a friend to symbolize their friendship—that when they were absent from one another God would watch over them. But in its proper context and as it was spoken by Laban, the sentence is a curse, saying that Yahweh will keep watch and avenge any harm that one party does to the other. That Laban and Jacob were not to cross over the boundary established by the standing-stone and the heap of stones with harmful intent is made quite clear in Genesis 31:52.

Gen 31:50

**“or if you take wives besides my daughters…!”** Laban does not complete his threat, which lets the imagination of the listeners run. It is common in emotional situations to not complete a sentence, and is grammatically a figure of speech called aposiopesis in Greek, and reticentia in Latin.[[134]](#footnote-13239)

[For more on aposiopesis, see commentary on Luke 19:42.]

Gen 31:51

**“the standing-stone.”** This standing-stone was a witness to the covenant that Jacob and Laban had made together (Gen. 31:44).

[For more on standing-stones, see commentary on Gen. 28:18.]

**“cast up.”** The Hebrew uses a word for “throw,” which seems unusual. Laban once again shows his selfishness by claiming “this heap and the standing stone that I have cast up.” Jacob set up the standing stone, and had the idea for the heap of stones (Gen. 31:45-46). Victor Hamilton writes that Laban, “falsely claims for himself (as in v. 43a) what is Jacob’s.”[[135]](#footnote-19150)

Gen 31:52

**“standing-stone.”** For more on standing-stones, see commentary on Genesis 28:18.

Gen 31:53

**“May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father.”** There are at least two different “gods” here in Genesis 31:53. The verb “judge” is plural, so Laban is asking that the god of Abraham, and also the god of Nahor and Terah—so there are two different “gods”—to judge (plural) between Laban and Jacob. Terah was an idolator (Josh. 24:2, 15), and from this verse, it seems that Terah and his son Nahor worshiped the same pagan god. Thus, it is logical that Nahor’s son Laban worshiped that same god too. We know that Laban was a polytheist; for example, he considered his teraphim to be gods (Gen. 31:30). Although the Bible does not name the gods that Terah, Nahor and Laban worshiped, at the time they lived and in the area they lived, Nannar (Semitic: “Sin”), the moon god, was the principal deity, so it seems very likely that he would have been at least one of the gods that Terah, Nahor, and Laban, worshiped.

**“the God of their father.”** The father of Abraham and Nahor was Terah (Gen. 11:27). The genealogy is Terah, then his son Nahor (a brother of Abraham), then Nahor’s son Laban.

**“judge between us.”** As the dealings of Laban and Jacob draw to a close, Laban intensifies his desires. In Genesis 31:44 and 48, the stones were a “witness” of the statements and covenant that Laban and Jacob made, and God was to keep watch between them. But now Laban, who believes he is in the right, states, “may” the gods “judge” the situation.

**“Then Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac.”** While Laban swore by the unnamed gods of Terah and Nahor, Jacob swore by the “Fear of Isaac,” which was Yahweh. We now say that “The Fear of Isaac” is one of the many designations for Yahweh (cf. Gen. 31:42).

Gen 31:54

**“and called his relatives to eat bread.”** This would include Laban and the people with him. Generally, part of a covenant was eating a meal together. Laban is there with the whole family in the next verse, Genesis 31:55.

Gen 31:55

**“and kissed his *grand*children and his daughters.”** The Hebrew is literally, “kissed his sons and his daughters,” but biblical Hebrew has no word for “grandson,” and the word “son” is sometimes used generically for “children” (as in “the children of Israel,” which is literally “the sons of Israel”). Laban kissed his grandchildren, the children of Jacob, and he kissed Leah and Rachel, his daughters.

**Genesis Chapter 32**

Gen 32:1

**“angels.”** Angels are the “messengers” of God, and the Hebrew word translated as “angel” is also translated as “messenger,” as we see in Genesis 32:3 when Jacob sent out “messengers.” The Hebrew word is the same in Genesis 32:1 and 32:3, but the translation is different to fit the context. These were angels, not just human messengers.

Gen 32:2

**“This is God’s camp.”** This is a wonderful example of how God can work to comfort us in difficult times. Meeting the angels should have been very comforting to Jacob, who was already on edge about meeting Esau. God had told Jacob to return to the land of Israel (Gen. 31:3, 13), and then God sends a band of angels to show Jacob that He was with him and protecting him. But even after being told by God to go back to the land and even meeting God’s army, Jacob was afraid when he heard Esau was coming with 400 men (Gen. 32:6-7).

**“Mahanaim.”** Mahanaim means “two camps,” or “double camp.” Many geographical words have a dual form, and Jacob refers to it as “this,” a singular. Although the reason for the name is not specifically explained, it can be surmised. Jacob and his people had just left Laban and his people, and the two groups, who met up with each other in the hill country of Gilead (Gen. 31:25), were two hostile camps. He then moved deeper into Israel and met a band of angels, at which point he exclaimed that he must be at the camp of God, the place where God’s army camps, and he named the place “Two Camps” because there was the angels’ camp and his camp.

Gen 32:3

**“territory.”** The Hebrew actually reads “field.” In English in this kind of context, “country” refers to a political entity, but that is not its meaning here.

**“to Esau his brother in the land of Seir.”** From where Jacob was, north of the Jabbok River, to the territory of Edom was a long way, about 90 miles, depending on where in Edom the messengers were headed.

Gen 32:5

**“in order to find favor in your eyes.”** This is a peaceful gesture. Jacob is indicating that he is coming in love, not to pick a fight.

Gen 32:6

**“The messengers returned.”** There would have been a passage of quite a few days for Jacob’s messengers to get to Esau and then return, a total distance of likely 180 miles or so. We can assume that more than a week had passed, and perhaps close to two weeks.

**“and there are 400 men with him.”** This would have been a round number, not an exact one. Many years later, David took “400 men” to avenge the wrong done to him by Nabal (1 Sam. 25:13).

Gen 32:7

**“distressed.”** The word can mean “pressed.” The CEB translation reads, “felt trapped.” We can see how Jacob felt trapped from both sides. He could not retreat to the north back to Laban, and he did not know what would happen when Esau showed up from the south.

**“flocks.”** Likely “flocks” of sheep and goats.

Gen 32:9

**“And Jacob said, “God of my father Abraham.”** This prayer of Jacob in Genesis 32:9-12 shows a huge shift in the heart of Jacob, and tremendous growth from the Jacob of earlier records. It is a model prayer in very many ways. It is honest, humble, simple, and straightforward. It recognizes God’s faithfulness to Jacob’s ancestors, shows Jacob’s acknowledgment of God’s promises, and demonstrates a deep humility that Jacob only has what he has because of God’s blessing. Jacob’s prayer also contains a bold and desperate request—that he be delivered from his brother Esau—but not just for himself, as a younger Jacob might have asked, but for his wives and children as well.

The prayer is also based upon God’s covenant promise about Jacob’s seed multiplying as the sand in the sea for multitude. Although when God talked to Jacob, He had said “the dust of the earth” (Gen. 28:14), in this prayer Jacob goes back to covenant roots that are based in Abraham (Gen. 22:17), showing that Abraham had passed the promises of God down to his offspring.

Did it take being afraid for his life and the lives of his family to congeal in Jacob’s heart that he needed God, could not succeed without God, and would succeed only with God? Many soldiers testify that it was only when they thought they were going to die in battle that they got serious about God, and that is certainly the source of the saying, “There are no atheists in foxholes.” That certainly may be the case with Jacob. However, we must not discount that it is more likely that Jacob had been maturing in his heart for years. The threat of death may have congealed Jacob’s trust in God, but the foundation of his relationship with God had been building over the years. However, God, in His grace, did not allow this newly formed sincerity in Jacob to exist without burning it into Jacob’s life. God sent an angel whose interaction with Jacob no doubt left a deep and lifelong impression—even if that impression was helped along by Jacob’s newly caused limp.

One sure thing we can learn from this prayer is that a powerful prayer is one that is bold and honest, and spoken from the heart. Long, flowery prayers may seem impressive, but bold and honest prayers touch God’s heart.

**“and I will do good *things* for you.”** The Hebrew text is causative, more like, “I will cause good *things* to happen for you.”

Gen 32:10

**“faithfulness.”** The Hebrew is in the plural, but it is the plural that reflects essence, and should be translated as a singular, as in the REV. Here, “faithfulness” is the translation of *chesed* (#02617 חֶסֶד), which is often understood to mean “covenant faithfulness.” It is usually “faithfulness” that is based on a covenant or mutual understanding about something.

**“steadfastness.”** The Hebrew word translated as “steadfastness” is *emeth* (#0571 אֱמֶת), which more often has the meaning of “truth,” but in many contexts, it has the meaning of faithfulness, steadfastness, or even covenant loyalty.

**“faithfulness and all the steadfastness.”** The English versions differ greatly as to how the two Hebrew words should be translated in this context. The differences in the versions in part reflect the wide semantic range that the Hebrew words have. Examples include “lovingkindness, truth” (ASV); “loyal, truthful” (CEB); “kindness, faithfulness” (CSB, NAB, NIV); “steadfast love, faithfulness” (ESV, NRSV). “mercies, truth” (KJV); “lovingkindness, faithfulness” (NASB).

Gen 32:12

**“But you yourself said.”** Here Jacob uses what God said as a basis to get what he is praying for.

**“good...yes, good.”** The Hebrew text has the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

Gen 32:15

**“their calves.”** The Hebrew reads “with their sons,” but in this context “sons” would refer to both male and female calves. The young offspring of a camel is referred to as a “calf,” just as with cows.

Gen 32:16

**“each herd by itself.”** The word “herd” is being used in a general sense here because the groups of animals are mixed, so neither “flock” nor “herd” is a perfect description. Some English versions use “drove,” but that is not a perfect fit either.

**“Cross over.”** This is a key to where Jacob was, which was on the north side of the Jabbok River gorge, which is a little over halfway down between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea on the east side of the Jordan River (cf. Gen. 32:23). Thus, he told the people with him to “cross over” the Jabbok River ahead of him.

**“put a space between herd and herd.”** An examination of the text seems to show that Jacob made a total of three groups. The first contained the animals and his two concubines, then the second group had Leah, and the last group had Rachel (Gen. 33:1-2).

Gen 32:17

**“To whom do you belong?”** Esau would assume, and correctly in this case, that any group that was first in line to meet an approaching band of men would be servants and slaves, so they “belonged” (or, “were connected to”) to some lord or master.

**“To whom do these *herds* ahead of you belong?”** This would be referring to the animals, which would have been being driven ahead of the first group of people but would belong to Jacob.

Gen 32:18

**“He himself is behind us.’”** Even the servants in the first group were to let Esau know that Jacob was close behind them.

Gen 32:19

**“This is how you are to speak to Esau.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “According to this word are you to speak to Esau.”

**“when you come upon him.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “when you find him,” but that is idiomatic. The groups would meet Esau, they would not “find” him.

Gen 32:20

**“I will appease him.”** Jacob anticipates that the presents he is sending to Esau will change Esau’s angry face into a peaceful face. The intimacy and idiomatic language in this section is meant to grab our attention. The word “face” occurs four times in the verse. More literally it says, “I will cover [the anger of] his face with the present that goes ahead of my face; and afterward, I will see his face. Perhaps he will lift up my face.” Furthermore, the use of “face” continues in the context and occurs in Genesis 32:21 and 32:30, and Jacob’s name for the spot, “Peniel,” means “face of God.”

**“that goes ahead of me.”** This is idiomatic. It is more literally “that goes ahead of my face.” The use of “face” was common in the culture as we see here in Genesis 32:20, where, in this verse alone, in the Hebrew text the word “face” occurs four times.

**“accept me**.**”** “The Hebrew is an idiom, “lift up my face.” To lift up someone’s face was to accept them: the person was downcast or bowed down in your presence, and by lifting up the face the person knew they were accepted.

Gen 32:22

**“two female slaves**.**”** This refers to Bilhah, Rachel’s slave girl who she gave to Jacob to have children (Gen. 30:1-8), and Zilpah, Leah’s slave girl who she gave to Jacob to have children (Gen. 30:9-12). The two slave girls had four of Jacob’s 12 sons.

**“and crossed over the ford of the Jabbok.”** The text is not completely clear about Jacob’s crossing the Jabbok. Here in Genesis 32:22, it seems Jacob crossed over with his wives and children, while in Genesis 32:24, “Jacob was left alone.” It does seem that Jacob did cross the Jabbok, but then sent his family on ahead of him, although why he would do that is unclear. In any case, Jacob was alone when an angel showed up and wrestled with him.

Gen 32:23

**“stream.”** This is not the normal word for river. “Stream” is a good translation here, especially when we know the actual geography of the place.

**“and brought across whatever he had.”** It seems that Jacob was going back and forth over the stream, going first with one group and then taking another across.

Gen 32:24

**“a man.”** We learn from Hosea 12:4 that the “man” was an angel.

**“wrestled with him.”** The angel “wrestled” with Jacob. This wrestling is not described in the text, but wrestling involves grabbing, holding, and tussling back and forth. The Hebrew word for “wrestle” has the same stem as “dust,” such that “wrestling” is “getting dusty,” and the fact that the angel asked Jacob to let him go (Gen. 32:26) indicates that Jacob and the angel had been physically wrestling.

**“until the coming of dawn.”** This is no doubt a literal statement; the daylight was beginning. However, statements about light and darkness sometimes involve a double entendre and indicate a mental or spiritual condition. For example, when Judas left the Last Supper to betray the Lord, the text says “and it was night” (John 13:30). While it was literally “night” when Judas left the Last Supper, the interjected phrase “it was night” seems to also include the idea that it was night in Judas’ soul and also “nighttime,” a time when evil is more prominent. Similarly, Genesis 32:24 seems to have a double meaning. While it is true that the day was dawning physically, a new light was dawning in Jacob; the “heel grabber” was now “Israel,” the one who would recognize and submit to God’s fighting on his behalf.

The angel wrestled with Jacob “until the coming of dawn.” Although the text is not precisely clear, it seems that the angel left Jacob in that dawn time when the sky was getting brighter but the sun had not risen yet, so it was still quite dark. It is almost like the angel did not want Jacob to be able to see him clearly.

Gen 32:25

**“And when he saw that he did not prevail against him.”** The commentators generally agree that “he (the angel) saw that he (the angel) did not prevail against him (Jacob). Exactly what is going on here is mysterious. Of course, an angel could defeat Jacob, so from God’s perspective this is some kind of symbolic battle.

**“the socket of his hip.”** In this battle, though the “man” could not seem to prevail against Jacob, at the same time he showed Jacob he could win the contest whenever he wanted. The word translated as “hip” is more literally “thigh” in Hebrew, but the “thigh” does not have a socket, the hip does. The socket of the thigh refers to the hip socket.

**“was strained.”** Although many versions say “dislocated,” that is not likely because then Jacob would not have been able to walk at all. The reading “strained” (JPS, TNK) or “wrenched” (NIV) is much more likely. It is extremely difficult to put a dislocated hip back in place, and it seems unlikely that Jacob could have done it.

Gen 32:26

**“I won’t let you go unless you bless me.”** This is not all there is to the story. Jacob was afraid for his life and the life of his family when this ordeal with the angel started, and now, faced with the opportunity to ask a favor of an angel of God, he “wept and sought his favor” (Hos. 12:4). Jacob stole the blessing from Esau, and now he wants one from this angel. That the angel blessed Jacob is a confirmation of the patriarchal blessing upon Jacob.

Gen 32:27

**“And he said, “Jacob.”** When Isaac asked Jacob who he was, Jacob lied (Gen. 27:18-24), but here when the angel asks for his name, Jacob tells the truth and says, “Jacob.”

Gen 32:28

**“Israel.”** The meaning of the Hebrew word is debated, and that is because the root of the word is debated. It can be more “rule” or more “strive.”

**“because you have struggled with God and with men.”** What the angel said was certainly true. Jacob had struggled through life, making many of his own decisions and forging his own way. He stole Esau’s blessing and had an uncomfortable relationship with Laban that had lasted twenty years. And Jacob did prevail. He was now wealthy and had two wives and eleven sons and a daughter.

Jacob had “struggled with God” in the way he lived his life, but now he would struggle with God in a more personal manner (see commentary on Gen. 32:30).

Gen 32:29

**“Why is it that you ask for my name?”** There was an ancient custom, preserved in folklore, that to know a person’s name was to have power over him. We all have a certain sense of this when a stranger calls us by name and we get an uneasy feeling and ask, “How did you know my name?” Jesus Christ has a name that no one knows but he himself (Rev. 19:12). This angel’s answer is somewhat similar to the angel’s answer in Judges 13:18.

**“And he blessed him there.”** This blessing must not be underrated. This is not just a “God bless you,” or a mere verbal statement that God was somehow pleased with Jacob. In this context, the blessing had meat and meaning. It meant that Jacob would now have God’s blessing on his life and he would be successful in what he did. And indeed, although Jacob’s life continued to have difficulties, he was blessed. He lived to a very old age and yet was survived by all 12 of his sons, and lived to see his family united and prospering in Egypt.

Gen 32:30

**“Peniel.”** The word means “face of God.”

**“I have seen God face to face.”** Jacob knew he had not literally seen “Yahweh,” the creator of the heavens and earth, but rather that he had seen a representative of Yahweh, in this case, an angel (Hos. 12:4). The angel was God’s representative, and so in the culture and language of the Bible, God’s representative could be referred to as “God.” This is the custom of the “author-agent” (see commentary on Matt. 8:5).

**“and *yet* my life has been spared.”** There was an ancient Near-Eastern custom that seeing God would kill a person, which is why Jacob said what he did (cf. Judg. 13:22).

Gen 32:31

**“The sun rose on him.”** This was literally true, but it is put in the text as an indication of the blessing of God on Jacob’s life. The sun shining upon a person generally indicated a state of blessing.

**“as he crossed by Penuel.”** Jacob had come to Mahanaim from the east. He had come south from Padam-aram and then turned west toward the Jordan River and he was south of the Jabbok River when he came to Mahanaim. So now he turns north, following the geography and easy route, and crosses the Jabbok River from south to north, and then heads east to Succoth.[[136]](#footnote-16652)

Penuel is spelled differently in the Hebrew text of Genesis 32:30: Peniel, but the place is the same. The name of the place is also “Penuel” later on in the text.

Gen 32:32

**“the tendon of the thigh.”** Jewish tradition identifies this with the sciatic nerve, but that may just be tradition.

**Genesis Chapter 33**

Gen 33:3

**“He himself advanced in front of them.”** Jacob had sent the groups ahead of him, but as he got close to Esau he moved ahead of his family.

**“bowed down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth. Interestingly, when Jacob stole Esau’s blessing, part of Isaac’s blessing was that Jacob’s mother’s sons would bow down to him (Gen. 27:29). But now Jacob bows down before Esau.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Gen 33:4

**“hugged his neck.”** The Hebrew text is idiomatic, more literally, “fell on his neck.” It means to hug the neck.

Gen 33:6

**“the female slaves.”** That is Bilhah and Zilphah.

Gen 33:7

**“Joseph came near with Rachel.”** At this point, before Benjamin was born, Rachel only had the one child, Joseph.

Gen 33:12

**“begin our journey.”** The Hebrew more literally is, “let us pull up [our tent stakes] and go,” (see commentary on Gen. 12:9).

**“and I will accompany you.”** The Hebrew can also read, “and I will go ahead of you,” but Genesis 33:14 makes it clear that Esau had asked to go with Jacob, but Jacob wants Esau to go on ahead of him.

Gen 33:13

**“My lord knows.”** This is one of the many verses that show that the word “lord” was used as a title of respect for anyone who was superior to the person speaking.

**“young.”** Jacob’s children were young, the oldest likely being 12 or 13 at best. Jacob says the children are “soft,” “weak,” or “tender” but that was because they were quite young.

Gen 33:14

**“livestock.”** The Hebrew word can be used of livestock, but it normally refers to work or to objects. In this case, it likely refers to, or includes, the livestock who would then go at their own “pace.” The Hebrew word does not normally mean “livestock,” so the English versions differ as to how to translate it (e.g., “cattle” (ASV); “animals” (CEB); “herds” (NET); “flocks (NJB); “droves” (NIV84); “work” (YLT)).

**“toward Seir.”** The Hebrew reads “toward Seir” or “in the direction of Seir.” The Hebrew is not “in” Seir or “at Seir,” although many English versions read that way. Jacob never fully commits to going with Esau to Seir, but only with him “towards Seir.” It seems like in this case, that “Jacob,” that trickster, is here being more like the Jacob of old, and is purposely being unclear so that he does not have to go to Seir. Jacob was likely playing on Esau’s assumption that Jacob would come to Seir to be with him, but in fact, Jacob never went to Seir but went into Canaan proper, eventually going to Beer-sheba, many miles from Seir.

According to Obadiah 1:21, Seir will one day be ruled from Mount Zion.

Gen 33:15

**“My lord has already been kind enough to me.”** The Hebrew text is more literally, “Let me find favor in the eyes of my lord,” but that is too idiomatic to be clear in English. Jacob is refusing Esau’s request in a polite manner, and from the context, we see Esau respects Jacob’s request and leaves with his men.

Gen 33:17

**“Sukkoth…shelters...Sukkoth.”** The Hebrew word means “booth,” “shelters,” or “tabernacles,” and it occurs three times in the verse. When the text says that Jacob traveled to “Sukkoth,” the city had not yet been named that. It was named that because Jacob camped there. However, the record was written down after Jacob encamped there, so by the time the record was written, the name of the town was Sukkoth. So, when Moses penned Genesis long after Jacob lived, people knew the town as Sukkoth, so that is what Moses called it for his readers.

**“and built himself a house.”** The Hebrew word translated as “house” is *bayit* (#01004 בַּיִת), which means “house.” It is not the Hebrew word for “tent,” even though it seems that Jacob had been living in tents until that time. So, Genesis 33:17 either is some kind of metonymy or hyperbole for “tent,” or else Jacob spent some time there, enough time to build and live in a house. So this verse clearly indicates that Jacob stayed for some time in Sukkoth, but we don’t know how long.

Gen 33:18

**“Jacob came safely.”** The Hebrew word translated as “safely” is literally the adjective “peace.” Jacob had prayed to Yahweh and made a promise in Gen. 28:20-21: “And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, ‘If God will be with me and will watch over me in this way that I am going, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then Yahweh will be my God….’” Jacob was good for his vow, and Yahweh was his God.

Gen 33:20

**“erected an altar.”** In this case, the Hebrew does not use the normal word for “built.” There is some evidence to show that when this Hebrew word is used in combination with “altar,” the altar was normally used as some kind of memorial or statement of faith; it was not used for sacrifice.

**“El Elohe Israel.”** This phrase could well be translated as “God, the God of Israel” or “The God of Israel is God” or, less likely, “The God of Israel is mighty.” Jacob had just recently been named “Israel,” and there was no nation of “Israel” yet, just some young sons of Jacob/Israel. So here in Genesis 33:20, “Israel” refers to Jacob’s name, and thus a way of understanding what Jacob said is, “God, the God of Jacob.”

**Genesis Chapter 34**

Gen 34:1

**“the daughters of the land.”** Women are often called “daughters,” whether they are young or old. Genesis 34:1 is not implying that Dinah only went out to see the young women. The women generally were found together, not in groups separated by age.

Gen 34:2

**“and lay with her by force.”** The Hebrew verb translated as “lay with her by force” is *ꜥanah* (#06031 עָנָה), and in this context, it means “to rape.”[[137]](#footnote-20933) Shechem raped Dinah. However, afterward, he loved Dinah. That is unusual, because generally after a man rapes a woman he denigrates and rejects her. However, Shechem loved Dinah and made a diligent effort to marry her. Although the Hebrew verb does not have to mean “rape” and can mean to have sex in unfavorable circumstances, it is most unlikely that Dinah would have willingly had sex with Shechem without the permission and support of her family. Dinah’s brothers were furious at the circumstances and exacted revenge on the whole tribe of Shechem (Gen. 34:24-26).

The circumstances of Dinah being raped are not disclosed in the Bible. Initially at least, Dinah would have been with other women. However, those women may have felt powerless to say or do anything against Shechem, the son of Hamor, the ruler of the land. In any case, we do not know the circumstances that led to Dinah being raped.

Gen 34:3

**“was strongly attached.”** The Hebrew verb indicates a strong attachment, and its meanings include “stick to, cling to, hold to.”[[138]](#footnote-15506) This is very unusual in a rape situation. Usually, after a man rapes a woman he rejects her (cf. Amnon with Tamar; 2 Sam. 13:1-15), but that is not the case here.

**“and spoke tenderly.”** The Hebrew text is idiomatic: he “spoke to the heart” of the young woman, meaning that he spoke tenderly and lovingly to her.

Gen 34:4

**“girl.”** Here in Genesis 34:4, when Shechem is speaking to his father, he calls Dinah a “girl,” a *yaldah* (#03207 יַלְדָּה). However, when he is speaking about Dinah to Jacob and his sons, he calls her a *naꜥarah* (#05291 נַעֲרָה, Gen. 34:12). Although *yaldah* and *naꜥarah* overlap in meaning and are sometimes used synonymously, it seems that here there is a difference because Shechem is the speaker both in Genesis 34:4 and 34:12, and he describes Dinah by these two different words. Technically, a *yaldah* (girl) is usually younger than a *naꜥarah*, a “young woman,” and thus the word *naꜥarah* carries more respect than *yaldah*, which would explain why Shechem referred to her as a *naꜥarah* when he was speaking to Jacob and his sons. However, the biblical text also refers to Dinah as a *naꜥarah* (Gen. 34:3), so she was certainly of marriageable age. Although we do not know her age when this event occurred, she could have been in her early teens because she was born after Leah had all six of her sons (Gen. 30:20-21), but almost certainly would have been born before Rachel gave birth to Joseph.

Gen 34:5

**“his sons were with his livestock in the field.”** The Hebrew text does not tell us how far away Jacob’s sons were. In this case, it seems like they were only a few miles away, but it could have been many miles. For example, in Genesis 37:12, when Jacob sent Joseph to check on his sons, Jacob thought they were in Shechem, some 50 miles from Hebron where Jacob was, but as it turned out, the sons were in Dothan, even further away than that. Although the text does not say so, it seems natural that Jacob sent a messenger to his sons, but the text would not have to tell us that because it would have been the natural thing for him to do.

Gen 34:7

**“against Israel.”** At this point in history, “Israel” was not even a nation, much less a land area, a country. “Israel” was the name the angel gave Jacob (Gen. 32:28). If the translation “in Israel” is correct, it is a historical anachronism, likely introduced when Moses wrote the Torah so that the idea was plain to the reader. However, it is possible that “Israel” here is being used as the name of Jacob, and Shechem had done something foolish “to Israel,” i.e., to Jacob, by lying with Israel’s daughter Dinah. Some English versions translate the text as “to Israel” (cf. AMP, EXB, NCV2005). or “against Israel’s family,” which would seem to be using “Israel” to refer to the man, Jacob (cf. GW, NLT).

Other translations read “against Israel” or something similar, which could be referring to “Israel” (Jacob) the man, or could be referring anachronistically to “Israel” as a confederation of all the tribes or to Israel as a nation (cf. CEB, CJB, CSB, NET(2nd ed), NJB, YLT).[[139]](#footnote-15758) Thus, it seems by translating the Hebrew as simply “against Israel,” the translations are not forcing a decision about whether “Israel” refers to the man or the nation. Furthermore, the man Jacob often embodied the idea of himself and his children, the tribes of Israel.

Gen 34:8

**“Hamor spoke with them.”** In the negotiations for a bride for Shechem, Hamor speaks first. This is according to custom. The marriages were arranged. Shechem would not speak first, and at no point did anyone ask Dinah what she thought. The negotiations are between Hamor and Jacob and his sons, and Shechem only speaks up after the negotiations have been started. Interestingly, at no point in the narrative does Hamor or his son Shechem admit to doing anything wrong, but culturally what Shechem did was very wrong.

**“as a wife.”** The translation “as a wife” is better than “as his wife” because as the grown son of a ruler, it was not only possible but likely that Shechem already had at least one wife. In that case, Shechem, like many rulers after him including David, was building his harem with women he was attracted to.

Gen 34:9

**“Make marriage alliances.”** The Hebrew word means more than just to marry, it generally refers to making an alliance by marriage. The NET text note reads: “This includes the idea of becoming allied by marriage.”

Gen 34:10

**“and acquire possessions in it.”** The Hebrew verb means “to grasp, to take hold of” and although some English versions read “get property,” the idea of the text seems to be much more inclusive than that. The “possessions” that Jacob and his sons would acquire would include land, livestock, and other possessions.

Gen 34:11

**“ask.”** The Hebrew word is actually “say,” thus, “whatever you say to me,” but in this context the better English is “ask.”

Gen 34:12

**“the bride-price and the *marriage-*gift.”** Although scholars differ on this point, there seem to be two gifts being offered by Hamor and Shechem: the “bride-price” and the “marriage gift.” It is difficult to determine exactly what these gifts were and who they were paid to, in part because the ancient evidence is scanty, but also because customs differed in different places and in different time periods. Generally speaking, the bride-price was fixed by custom, although in this case, it seems to be negotiable. That the groom paid a price for the bride is mentioned in Exodus 22:16 and 1 Sam. 18:25. The “marriage-gift” was an extra gift that was given to the bride’s family,[[140]](#footnote-14864) although perhaps it was given to the bride herself.[[141]](#footnote-32683)

**“whatever you ask.”** In Hebrew, the “you” is plural, thus Shechem is speaking to Jacob and his sons, and is including them in the negotiations.

**“the young woman.”** See commentary on Genesis 34:4.

Gen 34:13

**“The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and Hamor his father deceitfully.”** The Bible does not explain why Jacob’s sons answered Hamor and Shechem deceitfully. Yes, Shechem had defiled their sister, Dinah, but unless they were already plotting a way to exact revenge, one might wonder why they just didn’t say that they were going to leave. An answer might be that Dinah appears to still have been with Shechem in the city of Shechem, and Jacob’s sons might have thought if they said they were taking Dinah and leaving that the Shechemites may not have let her go.

Interestingly, the deceitful talk seemed to be coming from both parties. Jacob’s sons were deceitful, but so were Hamor and Shechem. They fully intended that if Jacob and his family stayed in the area, eventually they would be absorbed into the city and local population, and all “their possessions and all their animals” would become the Shechemites’ (Gen. 34:23).

Gen 34:17

**“then we will take our sister.”** From this phrase we can assume that Dinah had never returned to Jacob’s family, and that is confirmed by Genesis 34:26.

Gen 34:19

**“household.”** The Hebrew is simply “house,” but in this context, it stands for “household.”

**“he was the most respected of all the household of his father.”** This phrase is likely included because he was able to influence the men of the city to become circumcised. We might well wonder, if Shechem forced himself upon Dinah and had sex with her, why was he the most respected person in his father’s household? It is possible that they did not really know him, but it is just as likely that, being Canaanites, none of the household was very godly.

Gen 34:20

**“went to the gate of their city.”** The gate of a city was the great meeting place for the people of the city and it was where the elders of the city sat and gave advice and judged the people (see commentary on Ruth 4:11). At the ancient tell of Shechem, two gates have been discovered that are almost certainly from the Bronze Age, this time period. One of those would likely have been the gate where this gathering took place.

Gen 34:23

**“Won’t their livestock and their possessions and all their animals become ours?”** Hamor and Shechem thought that Jacob and his household would be absorbed into the Shechemites, so they were being deceitful just as Jacob’s sons were (see commentary on Gen. 34:13).

Gen 34:24

**“All who went out of the gate of his city.”** This phrase is repeated at the beginning and end of the verse, and has a specialized meaning in this context. Every inhabitant of the city went out of the gate at one time or another, and that mixed crowd of men, women, and children was not who Hamor and Shechem had to convince, nor were they all circumcised.

In this context, “all who went out of the gate of the city” refers to the able-bodied men, especially those who were influential and those who would be able to go out of the city to fight an enemy. Some versions read “men” or “males,” while other versions are more specific (cf. “able-bodied” men (CEB, REB, HCSB, NEB), “the men who assembled at the city gate” (NET), “all the citizens of the town” (NJB), “all who go out [to war] from the gate” (Schocken Bible)). All the able-bodied men of the city were circumcised.

Gen 34:25

**“Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers.”** Jacob’s wife Leah had five children, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, and Dinah. So two of Dinah’s full brothers, Simeon and Levi, killed the able-bodied men of Shechem, all who had been circumcised.

This is an interesting record with lots of unanswered questions. Why did only Simeon and Levi participate in killing the able-bodied men of Shechem? Where were Reuben and Judah, Dinah’s other two full brothers? Also, while circumcision certainly makes a person sore, how is it that two men could kill the male population of an entire city, even if it was small? There seems to be information missing as to how Simeon and Levi pulled off this massacre. For example, did they also have slaves or servants from Jacob’s camp that helped them? The Bible does not say; the important point is not how they did it, but that they did it.

**“came upon the unsuspecting city.”** The way the Hebrew text should be translated is unclear, so the English versions are divided. The Hebrew word translated in the REV as “unsuspecting” is *betach* (#0983 בֶּטַח), which more literally means “secure, undisturbed, quiet.” In this context, it can refer to the city as being “secure, quiet,” thus “unsuspecting (CEB, CSB, NAB, NET, NIV), or feeling “secure” (ESV). Or the Hebrew word *betach* can refer to the two men, and how they came into the city securely, thus “boldly (CJB, KJV, REB, Rotherham); “confidently” (YLT); “unopposed” (NJB, cf. NLT); “unmolested” (JPS); or “unawares” (NASB, NRSV, RSV).

There are no conclusive arguments on either side, and frankly, it is quite possible that the Hebrew text is purposely written in a way that allows for two interpretations, and that both interpretations are true: the city was “unsuspecting” and the two men were “feeling secure” in the success of their attack. In that case, this verse is the figure of speech amphibologia, where one statement is made but it can legitimately be understood in two different ways, both of which are true.

Gen 34:26

**“the mouth of the sword.”** Used to show great or utter destruction, as if the sword were eating its victims (see commentary on Josh. 6:21).

**“and took Dinah out of Shechem’s house.”** Dinah was being kept in Shechem’s house, and that could be a reason why Simeon and Levi decided to attack the city and kill the men so that they could get Dinah back.

Gen 34:27

**“they had defiled their sister.”** The text is making it clear that Jacob and his sons attributed the guilt of defiling Dinah to more than just Shechem. The text says that “they” (i.e., the people of Shechem) had defiled Dinah. No one in the city protected her, so in a sense the whole city was guilty.

Gen 34:28

**“and...and...and...and.** The repetition of “and” in the Hebrew and English text is the figure of speech polysyndeton, “many ands.” Putting an “and” before every thing in a list emphasizes each thing in the list. Jacob and his family cleaned out the whole city. They even took the wives and children (Gen. 34:29). That they could manage all the captives and the material goods they took reveals something about the size of the group that was with Jacob. He had more than just himself and his eleven sons, he had slaves as well.

Gen 34:29

**“They took captive all their little ones and their wives.”** That Jacob and his sons took all the children and women of the city of Shechem captive means that the city became deserted. The wives and children would have been taken as slaves and eventually become part of Jacob’s extensive extended household. Exactly how Jacob and his sons could have controlled what must have been dozens of women and children is not explained. It is worth noting that when Genesis 46:8-27 gives the names of the people who went down to Egypt with Jacob, none of Jacob’s four wives are mentioned, and neither are his extended household which would have included many of these people, who were taken as slaves and servants, and Jacob had more slaves and servants than these. So when Genesis 46:27 says that Jacob’s family that went down to Egypt was 70 people, the true number was larger—perhaps much larger—than that.

[For more on the people who went down to Egypt with Jacob, see commentary on Gen. 46:27.]

**“in the houses.”** In the Hebrew text, the word “house” is singular, but in this case, it is a collective singular referring to each “house” in Shechem, so for clarity in English, the REV and other English versions read “houses” (e.g., CJB, CSB, ESV, JPS, NAB, NASB, NET, NJB, NIV, NKJV, NLT, NRSV).

Gen 34:30

**“and I will be destroyed.”** Jacob does not mention that it was highly possible that if Jacob’s camp was attacked by the Canaanites and Perizzites, some of the people he had just taken captive would turn against him and join the Canaanites and fight against him. That would depend on whether or not the Shechemites hated the Canaanites and Perizzites, or whether they were allies with them.

Jacob does not seem to be just exaggerating, but rather his fear has caused him to focus on himself instead of relying on the promise of God that he had been given.

**Genesis Chapter 35**

Gen 35:1

**“go up to Bethel.”** Although there is a sense of pilgrimage in the phrase “go up,” in this case from the heart of Shechem to Bethel is an increase in elevation, so “go up” is geographically as well as culturally accurate.

**“God who appeared to you.”** God appeared to Jacob in a revelation dream (Gen. 28:12-16).

Gen 35:2

**“household.”** The Hebrew text is more literally “house,” but it is used for the “household,” which is what it means here.

**“purify yourselves.”** The exact means of ritual purification for believers before the Mosaic Law is not described. We can surmise it likely involved washing with water, but we cannot be sure. In any case, God told them to purify themselves and Jacob must have known from the culture how to do that.

**“change your clothing.”** The Hebrew does not mean “wash your clothing,” it means “change” your clothing. The idea is that the sin of bloodshed and the sin of idols had stained the very clothing Jacob and his family were wearing, so God told them to change it. Ostensibly this means to get rid of the old clothing, but that is not specifically stated. It does, however, seem unlikely that the family was to simply put on different clothing for a day or so and then put on the old clothing.

There is likely a spiritual lesson here. Demons are attracted to pagan symbols and symbols and drawings of idols and other ungodly things. If the clothing that Jacob and his family were wearing had those kinds of things, then it seems they would be destroyed, and that may have been what happened.

Gen 35:3

**“go up to Bethel.”** Although there is a sense of pilgrimage in the phrase “go up,” in this case from the heart of Shechem to Bethel is an increase in elevation, so “go up” is geographically as well as culturally accurate.

**“on whatever road I traveled.”** The idea of “road” here is idiomatic. The meaning is, “in whatever happened to me.”

Gen 35:4

**“and the rings that were in their ears.”** So the earrings must have had pagan symbols on them or had been dedicated to pagan gods.

**“Jacob hid them under the oak.”** It is unclear why Jacob did this. No doubt Jacob “hid” them by burying them, but why bury them and not destroy them? Some scholars have guessed at reasons, but there is no definitive answer in the text or culture. One thing is clear. That kind of behavior is a boon to archaeologists, who consistently find things that were buried in the ground ages before.

Gen 35:7

**“El Bethel.”** The phrase means “God of the house of God.” The word “beth” means “house” (e.g. Bethlehem means “house of bread”) and “el” means God, so El Beth-el means “God of the house of God.”

**“because the divine beings were revealed to him.”** The Hebrew word *elohim* can refer to divine beings as well as “God,” “a god,” or “gods,” and Jacob saw divine beings, both God and angels, in his revelation dream (Gen. 28:10-16). The verb, translated as “were revealed” in the REV, is plural, and thus the phrase can refer to when Jacob had his vision and saw angels and God at the top of the stairway. Nahum Sarna writes, “Atypically, the Hebrew has the verb in the plural, suggesting that, as in 3:5*, elohim* means here ‘divine beings” and refers to Jacob’s dream of angels ascending and descending.”[[142]](#footnote-11758) Victor Hamilton writes that the Masoretic Hebrew text “could be translated ‘for there the gods [or angels? or divine beings?] revealed themselves to him.” [[143]](#footnote-32083)

The NET text note makes the point that the Hebrew text may not actually refer to “God” being revealed, but could be that “divine beings” were revealed to Jacob. The NET note has “revealed themselves,” and adds, “The verb נִגְלוּ (*niglu*), translated ‘revealed himself,’ is plural, even though one expects the singular form with the plural of majesty. Perhaps אֱלֹהִים (ʾelohim) is here a numerical plural, referring both to God and the angelic beings that appeared to Jacob.”

The NET takes the Hebrew verb “revealed” as a reflexive, “revealed themselves,” but a verb in the Niphal aspect can also be a passive form, thus, “were revealed,” which seems to make more sense here; i.e., that the divine beings were revealed to Jacob, which was the case. Of course “revealed themselves” fits also, because God and angels are normally invisible, so if Jacob saw them, that fact alone means they revealed themselves.

Although some Trinitarians take Genesis 35:7 as supporting the Trinity, there is no reason to do that, and the evidence weighs against it.

Gen 35:8

**“Deborah.”** Deborah had been with Rachel most of her life, and was with Isaac’s wife Rebekah before that (Genesis 24:59). The NET text note correctly says, “This woman had been Rebekah’s nurse, but later attached herself to Jacob. She must have been about 180 years old when she died.” Her many years of faithful service explain why her burial place would be called the “oak of weeping.” She started serving Rebekah when she was still in Syria and traveled with Rebekah to where Isaac lived. She got back to Syria to be with Jacob, but the text does not tell us when that occurred. It could be Rebekah sent her back when Jacob got married, or perhaps Isaac sent her back when Rebekah died.

**“its name was called Allon-bacuth.”** The name “Allon-bacuth” means “the oak of weeping.”

**“she was buried below Bethel.”** The town of Bethel was on a hilltop, so Deborah was buried below that, likely on a slope near Bethel.

Gen 35:9

**“God appeared to Jacob again,”** It seems that this is a second time God appeared to Jacob after leaving Padan-aram. The first occurred at the Jabbok River, and this event then occurred at Bethel.

Gen 35:10

**“Your name will not be Jacob anymore, but your name will be Israel.”** This is a second time, and a confirmation, that Jacob’s name was said to be changed from “Jacob” to “Israel.” Nahum Sarna suggests that the reason this confirmation was needed was that the first time Jacob’s name was changed, near the Jabbok River, it was an angel who told Jacob about his new name, and so that needed to be confirmed by God Himself.[[144]](#footnote-13336)

Gen 35:11

**“El Shaddai.”** “El Shaddai” is the name of God that is commonly translated as “God Almighty” (see commentary on Gen. 17:1).

**“even many nations.”** The phrase “even many nations” (cf. NLT) seems to be the meaning of the text. Other phrases for the nations, i.e., “assembly of nations,” “company of nations,” and “community of nations,” seem to imply more order and complicity than the text is actually saying.

**“kings will come from your loins.”** The Hebrew means that nations and kings will be your “physical” descendants, therefore this verse is not speaking about children adopted from non-Israelites, although that happened later in Israel’s history that non-Israelites were considered Abraham’s seed (cf. Gal. 3:29).

Gen 35:12

**“the land that I gave.”** This is the second time God promises the land to Jacob and his descendants; the first was Genesis 28:13. God repeated the promise that He would give the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants many times, and said it in slightly different ways. He told Abraham that he and his descendants would get the land (Gen. 12:7; 13:15-17; 15:7, 18; 17:8). He told it to Isaac (Gen. 26:3). He told it to Jacob (Gen. 28:13; 35:12; 48:4). Then over and over He told Israel about the promise or that He would give them the land (cf. Exod. 6:4, 8; 12:25; 13:5, 11; Lev. 14:34; 20:24; 23:10; 25:2).

[For more on the promise God made to give the land to Abraham and his descendants, see commentary on Gen. 15:18.]

**“Abraham and Isaac.”** Even though the Bible says God gave the land to Abraham and Isaac, neither of them, nor Jacob, ever possessed it. But they will in the Millennial Kingdom (see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth”).

Gen 35:14

**“set up a standing-stone.”** This is the third standing-stone that Jacob erected. His first was a small one at Bethel (Gen. 28:18.) His second was when he made a covenant with Laban (Gen. 31:45). Now his third he erects back in Bethel, and although the Bible does not describe it, it almost certainly would have been larger than the first one he erected there. He had poured oil on the first standing-stone he had erected (Gen. 28:18) and he did that again with this third standing-stone. He erected a fourth standing-stone over Rachel’s grave, no doubt as a memorial for her (Gen. 35:20).

[For more on standing-stones, see commentary on Gen. 28:18.]

Gen 35:18

**“as she was dying.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “for as her life (Heb. *nephesh*) was going out.”

**“Benoni.”** More literally, “son of my affliction,” or “son of my suffering.”

**“Benjamin.”** Literally, “son of right hand,” where the right hand symbolized strength or power (the “my” is in “Benoni,” but not in “Benjamin”). The idea of the “right hand man” is more modern and was not in Jacob’s thinking.

Benjamin is the only son of Jacob who was born in the Promised Land.

Gen 35:19

**“So Rachel died and was buried on the road to Ephrath (which is Bethlehem).”** There is a long tradition that Rachel was buried near Bethlehem in Judah, and there is a traditional monument there in honor of Rachel. However, Wikipedia notes that the earliest records of that tradition seem to have been from the early 500s AD, and Wikipedia also notes, “the site is considered by some scholars as unlikely to be the actual site of the grave.” [[145]](#footnote-19604)

Bill Schlegel, author of *The Satellite Bible Atlas*, writes: “The traditional location of Rachel’s burial is near Bethlehem of Judah. However, the Biblical record indicates that Rachel was buried in the territory of Benjamin, north of Jerusalem (1 Sam. 10:2; Jer. 31:15). The Ephrath/Bethlehem associated with Rachel’s burial must be the Bethlehem of Benjamin, not Judah (Gen. 35:21; Ezra 2:21). Linguistically, the name Ephrath is preserved at the Parat/Parathon spring, which Jacob may have been heading towards to avoid Canaanite cities and to water his flocks. A black point on the map suggests a location of Rachel’s burial. Tombs from the Canaanite period were found here, still known as ‘the tombs of the Sons of Israel.’”[[146]](#footnote-26883)

Gen 35:20

**“Jacob set up a standing-stone on her grave.”** This is the fourth standing-stone that Jacob set up. His first was a small one at Bethel (Gen. 28:18.) His second was when he made a covenant with Laban (Gen. 31:45). His third was when he went back to Bethel (Gen. 35:14). He erected a fourth standing-stone over Rachel’s grave, no doubt as a memorial for her (Gen. 35:20). The standing stone was still there many hundreds of years later (1 Sam. 10:1-2).

[For more on standing-stones, see commentary on Gen. 28:18.]

**“marking Rachel’s grave to this day.”** So when Moses penned Genesis, the standing stone was still on Rachel’s grave. The location of Rachel’s grave was still known centuries later, and it is likely that the standing-stone set up by Jacob was still there (1 Sam. 10:2).

Gen 35:21

**“Migdal-eder.”** The Hebrew means “tower of the flock,” and it was a fairly common name for places that had built a sturdy watchtower from which to guard the flocks of sheep and goats—there were many places that would have been called “the Tower of the Flock.” In Micah 4:8, Jerusalem is compared to a tower that could watch over and protect the sheep, and the lame and scattered sheep were coming to it. The picture is appropriate because in the End Times, the Lord will gather his flock to the Promised Land.

Gen 35:22

**“Reuben went and lay with Bilhah.”** Bilhah was Rachel’s slave, and Rachel had just died. Nahum Sarna suggests that the verbs “went and lay” indicate that this was an intentional act, not just an act of misplaced attraction.[[147]](#footnote-16202) Sarna also suggests that Reuben purposely had sex with Bilhah to establish some kind of authority among his brothers. Because Bilhah was the slave of Rachel, Jacob’s favorite wife, and was Jacob’s “concubine” (the only time she is called “concubine”), Reuben, by having sex with her, was likely trying to show that he was supplanting Jacob as the most important man in the family. We see this same kind of thing when Absalom had sex with David’s wives on top of David’s palace so everyone could see (2 Sam. 16:21-22), thus showing that he had supplanted David as the most important and powerful man in the kingdom.

Reuben’s plan backfired, and instead of being blessed like he should have been as the firstborn son of Jacob, he received unwanted consequences (Gen. 49:3-4). Joseph, the firstborn son of Rachel, got the double blessings (both his children, Ephraim and Manasseh, inherited tribal land in Israel), and Judah, the fourth son of Leah, was the son in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. One might say that the first three sons of Leah disqualified themselves (Gen. 49:3-7).

Gen 35:26

**“These are the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.”** The reader is expected to know that Benjamin was not born in Paddan-aram (Gen. 35:16-20). The text is making a general statement, and perhaps the details were collapsed to make the record shorter and thus more punchy.

Gen 35:27

**“Kiriath-arba.”** This means, “City of Arba.” Arba was one of the Nephilim. Abraham’s wife Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (Gen. 23:2).

[For more on the Nephilim, see commentary on Gen. 6:4.]

Gen 35:29

**“breathed his last.”** The Hebrew verb translated as “breathed his last” is *gava* (#01478 גָּוַע), and it refers to dying (cf. Gen. 6:17; 25:8, 17; see commentary on Gen. 25:8 “breathed his last”).

**“and was gathered to his people.”** See commentary on Genesis 25:8.

[For information on the dead being dead until the resurrection, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.” For more on “Sheol” referring to the state of being dead, see Word Study: “Hades.” For more on the resurrections, see commentary on Acts 24:15. For more on the soul not being immortal but dying when the person dies, see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

**Genesis Chapter 36**

Gen 36:1

**“Now these are the descendants.”** For the REV translation, see commentary on Genesis 2:4.

Genesis includes many more genealogies than just the genealogy that led to Jesus Christ. There are several reasons that these genealogies would be included. They explain how many of the tribes and peoples that Israel had to deal with, especially after coming out of Egypt, came to be (e.g., we get the start of the Amalekites in Gen. 36:12). It shows how the cultures developed quickly, more quickly than Israel becoming a nation (cf. Gen. 36:31). It shows what happened to Esau, who received a divine blessing from Isaac (Gen. 25:23; 27:39-40), and how that blessing was fulfilled. Like Jacob, Esau too had rulers and kings as descendants. It also reveals the Canaanite origin of many of the descendants (cf. Gen. 26:34; 36:2) that Israel had to deal with and sometimes conquer.

In Edom’s later history, it was displaced by the Nabateans, and the Edomites were driven west into southern Israel and became known as the Idumaeans (cf. Mark 3:8).

Gen 36:2

**“Esau took his wives from the daughters of Canaan.”** The three wives of Esau in Genesis 36 are Adah the daughter of Elon, Oholibama the daughter of Anah, and Basemath, the daughter of Ishmael (the women have different names in different records, which is not unusual in the genealogies in the Bible). This would have been a little clearer if Genesis 36:2 and 36:3 were one verse that included all three wives and not two separate verses.

**“and Oholibamah the daughter of Anah *and* the granddaughter of Zibeon the Hivite,”** The genealogy is Zibeon, and his son Anah, and the daughter of Anah, who was Oholibamah. The genealogy is less clear in Hebrew than the REV translation in English, because Hebrew does not have a word for “granddaughter.” Hebrew only has “daughter.” So the Hebrew text literally reads, “Oholibamah the daughter of Anah the daughter of Zibeon the Hivite.” In English, that makes Oholibamah the daughter of Anah, who, as the “daughter” of Zibeon, is a woman. But Anah is not a woman, he is the son of Zibeon. This would be somewhat easier to see in Hebrew than it first appears because Anah is a man’s name. Nevertheless, a literal rendering of Genesis 36:2 would leave the English reader with the wrong idea about the genealogy.

Gen 36:6

**“and went into a land away from his brother Jacob.”** Eventually, Esau settled in what we now know as the territory of Edom.

Gen 36:7

**“their possessions.”** The Hebrew is singular, but it is a collective singular for all that they owned.

**“were too great for them to dwell together.”** There was plenty of room in Israel for the two of them, because many other tribes lived in Israel. But there was not enough room for them to live together as a family.

Gen 36:12

**“Timna.”** Timna was a Horite (Gen. 36:21-22).

**“Eliphaz.”** Eliphaz was the son of Esau and Adah.

**“and she bore Amalek.”** The son of Eliphaz and Timna was Amalek, who was the progenitor of the Amalekites, a major enemy of Israel.

Gen 36:13

**“The grandsons.”** The Hebrew text just has “sons,” but Hebrew has no word for “grandson.” The REV reads “grandsons” for clarity.

Gen 36:15

**“chiefs of the sons of Esau.”** The Hebrew word refers to the chief or leader of a family clan, part of a tribe.

Gen 36:20

**“Seir the Horite.”** Mount Seir is named after him, and later it was conquered by Esau and his descendants, the Edomites (Deut. 2:12, 22). The word “Horites” seems to come from the word for “cave,” and the original Horites were cave dwellers. There are plenty of caves in the area of Mount Seir (Edom).

Gen 36:24

**“the hot springs.”** The meaning of the Hebrew words is unknown. The current reading comes from the Latin Vulgate, but has no actual support. The Jews have a tradition that it refers to breeding mules, but that too is just a tradition. The fact is that what the text is saying is not known.

Gen 36:31

**“before any king reigned over the children of Israel.”** The pagan tribes developed political structure very early, whereas God’s intent for Israel was that He would rule over them, and local elders and judges, along with the priests and Levites, would maintain order in the community and give God’s laws and directives to the people. That did not work too well, as is attested in the Book of Judges: “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 21:25). The people sinned and many of the judges were corrupt. On the other hand, Israel did not do very well when they had kings, either.

Gen 36:35

**“Midian.”** A descendant of Abraham (Gen. 25:2).

Gen 36:37

**“by the river.”** This is most likely the Zered River, that divided Edom in the south from Moab to the north. Today the river is called the “Wadi Hasa” (or sometimes spelled Hesa). The River Arnon gorge is the northern border of Moab.

Gen 36:39

**“His wife’s name was Mehetabel.”** Interestingly, the ancestry of Hadar (or “Hadad” as per Chronicles, some Hebrew manuscripts, the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the Syriac) is not given, but the ancestry of his wife is. She must have come from a very distinguished family, but the records of it are lost today.

Gen 36:40

**“according to their places.”** In this list, the “names” are the names of places, not people.

**Genesis Chapter 37**

Gen 37:1

**“Now Jacob lived in the land.”** By this time Jacob seems to have moved to Hebron (Gen. 35:27).

Gen 37:2

**“These are the descendants of Jacob.”** See commentary on Genesis 2:4.

**“Joseph, being 17 years old.”** Joseph was 17 years old when he was sold into slavery in Egypt (Gen. 37:2). He was 30 years old when he became second in command in Egypt (Gen. 41:46). The Bible does not say how those 13 or 14 years in slavery were divided up between being in Potiphar’s house (Gen. 37:36; 39:1) and being in prison (Gen. 39:20). After Joseph was taken from prison and elevated to second in command over Egypt there were seven years of plenty and seven years of famine. Joseph was 44 when the famine ended. Joseph died at 110 years old (Gen. 50:22). Jacob and his family traveled to Egypt in the second year of the famine (Gen. 45:6; 47:8-9), and Jacob lived there 17 years, dying at age 147 (Gen. 47:28).

**“*working together* with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah.”** It is not stated why only the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah are mentioned, and not the six sons of Leah. While it is possible that Joseph was only working with Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher, the sons of Bilhah and Zilphah, it seems more likely that he was working with all of Jacob’s sons except Benjamin. If he was not working with the sons of Leah, it was perhaps they did not like him because they saw him as more of a potential rival since he was the son of Jacob’s favorite wife, Rachel. But it seems more likely that when Joseph gave a bad report about “them” to his father Jacob, that he would have been referring to all his brothers, not just four of them. In any case, shortly, all ten of his older brothers hated him.

**“his father’s wives.”** Here Bilhah and Zilpah are elevated from being the slaves of Leah and Rachel, to being the wives of Jacob. They were still slaves, but the fact they are called “wives” shows that they had born children to Jacob and were considered Jacob’s legitimate children by the family.

Gen 37:3

**“because he was the son of his old age.”** The real son of Jacob’s old age was Benjamin, but at this point, Benjamin is likely still too young to carry out the duties of a mature man in the family, thus Jacob turns his attention to Joseph. It is also possible that Rachel being the birth mother of Joseph had something to do with Jacob’s increased affection for Joseph.

**“a multi-colored tunic.”** The Septuagint and Vulgate have a coat “of many colors.” The Hebrew seems more like “a striped tunic,” but actually the meaning of the Hebrew word is not known, which is why the English versions differ, e.g., “coat of many colors” (ASV, ESV, KJV); “long coat” or “long robe” (BBE, CEB, ); “long-sleeved robe” (CJB, CSB); “ornate robe” (NIV); “decorated tunic” (NJB); “special tunic” (NET). Different material had different colors, and also strips of material could be dyed different colors and then sown together, and that seems to be the most likely choice for the tunic that Jacob made for Joseph.

Gen 37:4

**“more than all his brothers.”** This phrase is likely repeated because “all his brothers” came from three different wives of Jacob.

Gen 37:7

**“we were binding sheaves.”** Harvesting grain was a process. After being planted and given time to grow, the grain was first cut down (referred to as “reaping”) and just allowed to lay in the field. Then harvesters walked through the field and gathered the cut grain into small bundles, called “sheaves” which they tied together by wrapping some grain stalks around the bundle. After being wrapped, the sheaf was just dropped back onto the ground until more harvesters could come and pick up all the sheaves and take them off to be threshed and winnowed on the threshing floor.

In his dream, Joseph saw himself and his brothers picking up the cut grain and tying it into bundles, thus “binding sheaves.” But the sheaf that Joseph had bound rose up off the ground and stood upright, and the sheaves the other sons were tying encircled Joseph’s sheaf and “worshiped” it by bowing down to it.

**“bowed down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth. The Hebrew word is also translated as “worship.” The dream pictured Joseph as the ruler and the others as giving him homage.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Gen 37:8

**“reign, yes, reign...rule, yes, rule.”** The brothers repeat the verbs twice in different inflections for emphasis. This is the figure of speech polyptoton. “Reign” and “rule” are two different Hebrew words. The verse could well be translated as “Will you reign as king, yes, reign as king over us? Or will you rule, yes, rule us?” They were very upset at the dream.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

**“hated him even more.”** The Hebrew is more literally that they “added” more hate to him.

Gen 37:9

**“the sun, and the moon, and 11 stars.”** The meaning was well understood by Jacob, and thus we know that the “sun” represented Jacob, the “moon” Jacob’s wife (wives), and the 11 stars were Joseph’s brothers (Gen. 37:10).

**“bowing down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth. The Hebrew word is also translated as “worship,” and the text could read, “were worshiping me.”

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Gen 37:10

**“come, yes, come.”** Jacob repeats the verb twice in different inflections for emphasis revealing that he is upset and perhaps offended. This is the figure of speech polyptoton.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

**“I and your mother.”** Joseph’s mother was dead (Gen. 35:19). We know she was dead at this point because Joseph is surrounded by 11 brothers, which would have included Benjamin, and Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. So, in this case, “your mother” is either a general reference to the three: Leah, Bilhah, and Zilphah, who would have helped take care of Joseph and Benjamin, or it is a reference to Bilhah, Rachel’s slave, who would have taken over the care of Rachel’s children when Rachel died.

**“bow down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth. Jacob expresses his exasperation at the dream by using the full expression, “bow down to the ground,” instead of just saying, “bow down.”

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Gen 37:11

**“but his father kept the matter in mind.”** The Hebrew word translated “matter” is *dabar* (#01697 דָּבָר), which is the common word for “word,” but also, like the Greek word *logos*, it had a wide range of meanings, including “thing” and “matter.” Thus, the translation might well read, “The matter,” or “The thing” as well as “the word” (i.e., the message; what was said).

While Joseph’s brothers completely discounted what Joseph said, Jacob, who loved and trusted Joseph, kept what Joseph dreamed in mind and likely wondered what it meant. While it certainly seemed fantastic to him, he would have wondered in what way it might have truth to it.

Gen 37:12

**“to pasture their father’s flock in Shechem.”** Jacob and his family were shepherds, and they wandered the Promised Land as the seasons changed, looking for the best pastures for their flocks. Genesis 37:12 reveals something of the range of that wandering. Jacob was living in Hebron (Gen. 37:14), and Shechem was about 50 miles north (over 80 km), and even more as one wandered over the hills and through the valleys. The great distance between Hebron and Shechem has raised a question among scholars as to why the brothers would have gone so far from their home but no reason other than to find pasture has ever been discovered.

Gen 37:14

**“And he said to him.”** We see from the context that Jacob was talking to Joseph. The Hebrew text uses pronouns, whereas the average English reader would like more clarity on who is talking to whom. The text is written in a way that forces the reader to pay attention and use their mind to make sense of the record.

**“and bring back word to me.”** Joseph’s round trip of over 100 miles would have taken at least four days, and likely more. This whole record brings up lots of unanswered questions. Why did the brothers go so far away to find pasture? Why did they go to Shechem where there had been trouble between them and the native population (cf. Gen. 36)? Didn’t Jacob know that Joseph’s brothers hated him and likely might harm him? What exactly did Jacob think Joseph could do if it was not “well” with the brothers and the sheep? If there were problems, then Joseph would have ended up in the middle of them. Who is the unnamed man, “the man,” who knew that Joseph’s brothers had gone some 15 more miles north of Shechem to Dothan to pasture their flocks? These are challenging questions that are not answered in the text.

**“the Hebron Valley.”** The Hebrew word translated as “plain” is *ʿēmeq* (#06010 עֵ֖מֶק), and it refers to a valley. However, a “valley” in biblical thinking can be very different than what we Westerners usually think of as a valley. For example, the “Valley of Jezreel” is a flat plain over five miles (8 km) wide in some places. Thus, the translation “valley” here can be a little misleading, because it can refer to a very wide valley that we would likely refer to as a “plain.” Practically speaking, Hebron is not in a valley, but in fact, it is surrounded by mountains, although most of them are quite far away.

[For more on “valley,” see commentary on Gen. 14:3.]

Gen 37:15

**“he was wandering in the countryside.”** The Hebrew “countryside” usually refers to a “field,” but it is not like Joseph was in some field near Shechem wandering aimlessly back and forth. He was walking the countryside around Shechem trying to see where his brothers might be pasturing their flocks. This would have had to have been a frustrating time for Joseph. The area around Shechem is very hilly, and the brothers and their flock could have been very close but on the other side of a hill and Joseph could have missed them completely. No wonder it looked like he was “wandering.” The Complete Jewish Bible by Stern has the translation “countryside” as well.

Gen 37:16

**“Please tell me.”** Joseph assumed that the man was a local, and because a large flock being brought into the area would have caught the attention of the locals and been a subject of discussion, Joseph also assumed the man might know where they were. Amazingly, the man knew about them and even that they had gone on to Dothan, about 15 miles to the north.

**“pasturing *their flock*.”** The words, “their flock” are added to Genesis 37:16 for clarity. In the Hebrew language and culture, the word “pasturing” would be enough because everyone would know that they were pasturing their flock, but in English and in a non-agricultural society, just saying “pasturing” might be unclear. English versions that add “flock” are divided, some saying “flock” and some saying “flocks.” Genesis 37:12 has “flock” in the Hebrew text in the singular, so the REV carries that forward in verse 16. However, it is quite possible that each son had a separate “flock” inside the huge flock that was said to be their father’s flock.

Gen 37:17

**“Dothan.”** This verse reveals some of the travel that was involved with shepherding large flocks and finding water and good pasture for them. The brothers had started in Hebron (Gen. 37:14), then went to Shechem (Gen. 37:12, 14), about 50 miles north, then traveled about 15 more miles north to Dothan. Sheep do not move very fast, so this journey would have taken many days if made at one time.

[For more on shepherds and their travels, see commentary on Exod. 3:1.]

Gen 37:18

**“conspired.”** In this context the Hebrew word means to plot or plan with cunning or deception, thus some English versions read that they “plotted” to kill Joseph.

Gen 37:19

**“master of dreams.”** The Hebrew word translated as “master” is “*baal*,” but here it does not refer to the god Baal. Rather, it carries the meaning of “lord,” “master,” or “owner.” The brothers did not believe Joseph’s dreams and mocked him, referring to him as a “master of dreams.”

Gen 37:20

**“throw him into one of the cisterns.”** A “cistern” was a man-made pit that could hold water. Many of them were quite deep and if a person fell in they could not get out on their own without help. Joseph’s brothers were developing their plan as they talked. As we see, being thrown into the cistern did not kill Joseph. On the other hand, he would eventually die in the cistern, but they had to have something to say to their father, thus the part about the wild animal. Actually, cisterns like that in the deserted areas can be quite dangerous. It has happened quite a few times that the hole of a cistern gets covered by brush or debris and cannot be seen, and an unsuspecting person traveling alone falls into it and cannot get out and eventually dies in it.

**“a wild animal.”** The Hebrew uses the word “evil,” but the brothers were not ascribing evil motives to an animal, they were describing the wild animal as “evil” in the sense that it was wild and dangerous. Given that, the translation “wild animal” is better than “evil animal.”

Gen 37:21

**“Reuben.”** It is not likely that Reuben loved Joseph more than his brothers but rather that as the oldest son he was feeling responsible for the care of the whole family. Reuben would be the clan head when Jacob died, and with Jacob very old and the brothers many days walk away from Hebron, Reuben had to be prepared for that at any time.

**“delivered him out of their hands.”** In this context, that Joseph was delivered “out of their hands” is idiomatic for the fact that they were going to murder Joseph.

**“We must not take his life.”** The Hebrew is not cohortative, “Let us.” It is a simple imperfect, “We are not.” The phrase is idiomatic, and more like, “We must not strike the soul,” with *nephesh* (soul) here meaning Joseph’s physical life. Reuben was distressed when he discovered what had happened to Joseph (Gen. 37:29-30). We can see this sentiment of Reuben repeated in the next verse, Genesis 37:22.

Gen 37:22

**“that is *here* in the countryside.”** The Hebrew word translated in the REV as “countryside” is *midbar* (#04057 מִדְבָּר). The word *midbar*, is one of the Hebrew words for which there is no really good English translation. *Midbar* is traditionally translated either as “wilderness” or “desert,” depending on the context and English version used. However, neither of those words captures the real meaning except in certain specific contexts. For example, the area that is east of Moab is, for the most part, a desert, and so in Numbers 21:11, using “desert” as a translation of *midbar* is quite accurate. But the area around Dothan is neither a “wilderness” nor a “desert,” it is simply uninhabited countryside, but the Hebrew word is still *midbar*, because the land is uninhabited land with natural fields that have different varieties of weeds, grasses, and thistles.

**“do not lay *your* hands on him.”** In this context, “do not lay *your* hands on him” refers to killing Joseph.

**“so that he could deliver him.”** The sentence is incomplete and moves to the reason in the sentence, which is the important part: “so he could deliver him.” A more complete sentence would have been, “Reuben said this so that he could deliver him….”

Gen 37:24

**“threw him into the cistern.”** The phrase “threw him into the cistern” is almost certainly idiomatic. Cisterns were dug to hold water for the dry season, so most of them were quite deep and quite large. However, they normally had only a small opening at the top, a couple of feet across at most, in order to limit evaporation and make the cistern easy to cover. Given those parameters, there is little chance that Joseph was “thrown” into the cistern. Instead, the word “thrown” is being used idiomatically to express the callous treatment that the brothers gave Joseph.

**“no water was in it.”** The most likely reason the cistern was empty was that it was the dry season, likely late summer. This would also explain why the brothers had traveled from Hebron and gone some 65 miles north to Dothan looking for pasture for their flocks.

Gen 37:25

**“Then they sat down to eat *their* food.”** That the brothers sat down to eat continues to reveal their callous hearts toward Joseph. They heard his cries now and as they sold him, and ignored them (cf. Gen. 42:21).

**“a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead.”** The city of Dothan was right beside a major trade route between Damascus and Egypt. These Ishmaelite traders would have left Damascus and traveled south through the area of Gilead east of the Jordan River, then crossed the Jordan and traveled west up the Jezreel Valley, then headed south by Dothan, then west again until they intersected the “Way of the Philistines” and taken that major route down into Egypt. The position of Dothan on that major route explains why a caravan of Ishmaelites traveled by. Although the Bible does not tell us how many camels were in the caravan, considering the valuable goods they were carrying, and the wild and lawless country they had to travel through, several thousand camels would not be unusual, because there was strength in numbers.

**“spices and balm and myrrh.”** The actual identity of the three things is debated, but “spices and balm and myrrh” are very likely what the merchants were carrying. These were apparently things that were greatly valued in Egypt, because later, when Jacob wanted to send a present to the “the man” who was in charge of Egypt (who was Joseph, but they did not know it), three of the gifts Jacob sent were spices, balm and myrrh (Gen. 43:11).

Gen 37:26

**“and cover up his blood.”** Judah uses “cover” or “cover up” in the same way police do today. To “cover up” the blood was to conceal what really happened to Joseph, not to literally cover his blood with dirt or something.

Gen 37:28

**“Midianite men who were merchants passed by.”** The Midianite men were in a camel caravan. If the camel caravan was several thousand camels long, which is very likely, it could have been passing by for quite a while. Caravans were large for safety, and the more camels the better, in fact, caravans often had thousands of camels, and camel caravans with 10,000 to 20,000 camels were not unknown in history (see commentary on Matt. 2:1, “arrived”).

It seems this caravan had been organized by Midianite merchants, who had gathered men from other nations to travel along with them. This caravan had Midianite men and also Ishmaelites. Midian and Ishmael were half-brothers, both descendants of Abraham (Gen. 25:1-2). That they would caravan together would not be uncommon, The Midianites descended from Abraham and came from Midian, which was in western Arabia. The Ishmaelites were descendants of Abraham’s son Ishmael. Ishmael had twelve sons (Gen. 17:20; 25:12-18), and although exactly where they settled is debated, it can be documented that they were somewhat scattered and settled in the Sinai and western Arabia, and in the Transjordan. So it makes sense that a caravan organized in Midian would have Ishmaelite traders in it as well, likely picking up some of the Ishmaelites as they traveled north from Midian through the territory where Ishmaelites lived.

In this case, the caravan must have traveled north from Arabia to where spices were sold and sold their wares from Arabia and bought spices to trade in Egypt. The traders were now heading back south to Egypt, where the spices, balm, and myrrh were greatly valued.

Some scholars who believe in the documentary hypothesis try to prove their view is correct by using Genesis 37:28 as support. The documentary hypothesis is that the books of Moses were actually written in parts and by different people, and then later scribes worked to patch the pieces together to get what we have today. Scholars say that in Genesis 37, one scribe wrote that the traders were Midianites and one wrote they were Ishmaelites, and that is why the verse seems contradictory. But Genesis 37:28 is not contradictory at all. If we understand how ancient caravans were put together, and how large they were, and also realize how close the Midianites and some Ishmaelites lived, it makes sense that they were traveling together, but also would generally be together as separate groups in the caravan.

**“and the brothers pulled *him* up.”** The text reads “they” pulled him up, but that is confusing in English and seems to refer to the Ishmaelites, whereas it is referring to Joseph’s brothers.

**“and sold Joseph...for 20 pieces of silver.”** According to some ancient texts, this was an average price for a slave (cf. Lev. 27:5). The Israelites and the Ishmaelites were not so distant relatives, both groups coming from Abraham, and so it is sadly ironic that the Ismaelites would buy an Israelite and sell him in Egypt as a slave just to make a profit. It is very unlikely that they were unaware that Joseph had been a free man and had only been captured by force. In light of that, we can imagine that Joseph did not try to escape from Egypt and get back home to Israel because he was angry and bitter about the treatment he got from his family.

Gen 37:29

**“When Reuben returned to the cistern.”** This makes it clear that Reuben was not with the other brothers when Joseph was sold to the Ishmaelites, but the Bible does not say where he was. A likely possibility is that he was with the sheep.

Gen 37:30

**“where am I to go.”** This idiom has the force of “what do I do now?” As the oldest son, Reuben had the responsibility for protecting the family, but what could he do now? How could he tell his father Jacob what had happened?

Gen 37:31

**“and slaughtered a male goat.”** A male goat was less valuable than a female goat which would give birth to more goats and also give milk.

Gen 37:32

**“your son’s tunic.”** The brothers distanced themselves from Joseph.

Gen 37:33

**“A wild animal has devoured him.”** Jacob deceived his father Isaac with the skin of two goats (Gen. 27:9-16), and now Jacob’s sons deceive him with the blood of a goat.

Gen 37:34

**“Jacob tore his clothes.”** Tearing the clothes was an ancient and widely practiced custom. A person would tear his clothes as a sign of grief, mourning, or anguish. It occurs here in Genesis, and it was still being practiced during the early Church (Acts 14:14). When it came to the High Priest in Israel, his clothing was considered sacred, so he was not allowed to tear his clothes (Lev. 21:10). At the trial of Jesus Christ, the High Priest became so enraged at Jesus saying he was the Messiah that he ignored God’s command and tore his clothes (Matt. 26:65).

Although there was no set way to tear one’s clothing, in the last couple centuries missionaries to the Middle East reported seeing people grab the top of their garment and tear it (or cut it with a knife) a handbreadth. So apparently tearing the clothes was more of a symbolic act and did not involve tearing the garment from top to bottom. Tearing one’s clothing is mentioned many times in the Bible (Gen. 37:29, 34; 44:13; Num. 14:6; Josh. 7:6; Judg. 11:35; 1 Sam. 4:12; 2 Sam. 1:2, 11; 13:19, 31; 15:32; 1 Kings 21:27; 2 Kings 5:7; 6:30; 11:14; 18:37; 19:1; 22:11; Ezek. 9:3; Esther 4:1; Job 1:20; 2:12; Isa. 36:22; 37:1; Jer. 41:5; Matt. 26:65; Acts 14:14).

**“and mourned for his son many days.”** The Bible does not say how long, but from the fact that his children tried to comfort him but he rejected it tells us that it was longer than customary.

Gen 37:35

**“all his daughters.”** The Bible only records Jacob having one natural daughter, Dinah, so it is likely that this refers to his sons’ wives, and perhaps granddaughters.[[148]](#footnote-23140)

**“I will go down to Sheol.”** Jacob correctly understood that when he died he would be dead, not alive in heaven or anywhere else. Although some scholars think Jacob did not understand the afterlife and thought he would go to some kind of underworld place, there is no reason to assume that Jacob, who had personally met God, did not know the truth. It is Christian tradition that is wrong about the afterlife, not Jacob.

[For information on the dead being dead until the resurrection, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.” For more on “Sheol” referring to the state of being dead, see Word Study: “Hades.” For more on the resurrections, see commentary on Acts 24:15. For more on the soul not being immortal but dying when the person dies, see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

Gen 37:36

**“Meanwhile, the Midianites.”** While Jacob was mourning over his supposedly dead son, the Midianites were selling the living Joseph into slavery. This contrast and irony is brought out much more graphically in the Hebrew text than in English. In the Hebrew text, “father” is the last word in Genesis 37:35, while Genesis 37:36 reads, “and the Midianites.” The Hebrew text is even more compressed than the English can make it, because the “and” and “the” become attached to the word “Midianites.” So the Hebrew text reads, “and wept for him his father and the Midianites sold him.”

**“sold him in Egypt.”** Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt when he was 17.

[For more on the chronology of Joseph, see commentary on Gen. 37:2.]

**“to Potiphar.”** That Joseph was sold to a man like Potiphar shows God’s invisible hand of blessing at work. Potiphar was a man of position and power, and Joseph would have learned a lot from him. Considering all the people in Egypt who could have bought Joseph, Joseph’s being sold to Potiphar was a blessing.

**“the captain of the guard.”** The translation “captain” is not meant to be a title here, but rather a position, the top man. The Hebrew could also be translated as “leader,” “ruler,” “commander,” “captain,” or whatever fits the context best.

The literal Hebrew of the word translated as “guard” is “slaughterer,” which can fit many different contexts. A “slaughterer” can be a cook (butcher), soldier, executioner, or bodyguard. Or the word can simply be a title that does not exactly fit the meaning of the word. A modern example would be the title “secretary,” which often does not mean “secretary” in the common sense of the word (e.g., the “Secretary of Defense”).

Thus, the meaning of the Hebrew phrase is debated. English translations include “captain of the guard” (ASV, CJB, NET, NIV) “commander of the royal guard” (CEB), “captain of the bodyguard” (NASB), “captain of the soldiers” (Douay), “chief steward” (JPS, NAB), “head of the executioners” (LSV, Rotherham, cf. YLT),

Given all the different uses of the phrase in the Bible, the title “captain of the guard” is sufficiently broad to capture the meaning. That Potiphar was the top man in the guard would have meant that he was almost certainly known by Pharaoh.

**Genesis Chapter 38**

Gen 38:1

**“And at that time.”** Genesis 38 interrupts the Joseph narrative, the main part of which goes from Genesis 37 until Genesis 45, with the exception of Genesis 38 about Judah and Tamar. One of the important things that Genesis 38 shows (with ancillary evidence from earlier chapters in Genesis), is that without intervention, the tribes of Israel could have been easily assimilated into the Canaanite nations. Jacob had twelve sons, and not one of them is said to have married an Israelite wife. Here too, in Genesis 38, Judah, in the Christ-line, marries a Canaanite (Gen. 38:2), who has three sons by Judah (Gen. 38:3-5). The other sons of Jacob had children by their non-Israelite wives as well (Gen. 46:8-27). It seems it would not have taken much for the tribes of Israel to be absorbed into the Canaanite nations by intermarriage. But then, changing the situation completely, Jacob and his sons go down into Egypt. In Egypt, the Israelites intermarry among each other and multiply, and eventually become the rootstock of the nation of Israel. The Egyptian culture was quite xenophobic and the Egyptians seem to have stayed very separate from the Israelites (cf. Exod. 1:8-12). This separation allowed the tribes of Israel to grow into a large and separate people group, who then left Egypt as a group at the Exodus, and who, as a group, conquered Canaan, and replaced the Canaanites.

**“Judah went down.”** Jacob’s 12 sons were wild and crazy, and there no doubt could have been many stories recorded about them, but this record about Judah is especially important and makes it into the Bible because Judah was Jacob’s son in the genealogy of Jesus Christ, and so was Judah’s son Perez whose mother was Tamar (and see commentary on Gen. 38:2).

**“and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah.”** The Bible never says why Judah took that general time, when Joseph was being sold as a slave in Egypt, to visit Hirah. Hirah was an Adullamite, that is, he was from the town of Adullam, which was about 12 or so miles northeast of Hebron. Judah could have taken that time because things at home were uncomfortable. Jacob was in mourning, and Judah was part of the big lie that the brothers had told their father Jacob.

Gen 38:2

**“a daughter of a certain Canaanite.”** In the record of Judah we never learn the name of his wife, who died long before he did (Gen. 38:12).

**“He took her.”** This is idiomatic for marriage, and some versions actually have marriage in their translations. For example, the CEB has, “and he married her” (cf. BBE, CSB, JPS, NET, NIV, NKJV, NLT, NRSV, RSV). This is one of the verses showing that in these early times before the Exodus there was no prohibition against marrying women from other cultures, pagan cultures.

**“went in to her.”** An idiom for sexual intercourse (cf. Gen. 29:23; 30:4; 38:2, 18; Judg. 16:1; Ruth 4:13; 2 Sam. 12:24).

Gen 38:5

**“And it was at.”** The Hebrew reads more literally, “and he was at,” but the text can be read as a neuter, “it” (e.g., CSB, NASB, NIV). Many versions read “she,” following the Septuagint, but the Hebrew text does read “he,” which could be “it” or “he” meaning Judah. The ESV and Geneva Bible put “Judah” in their translation to clarify the pronoun “he.”

**“Chezib.”** “Chezib” seems to be another name for the more common name, “Achzib,” in Judah, which is only a few miles west-southwest of Adullum.

Gen 38:6

**“Tamar.”** “Tamar” means “date” or “date palm.”

Gen 38:8

**“the duty of a brother-in-law.”** If a man died before his wife had children, the man’s brother was supposed to marry the wife and raise up children that would then be considered as the original husband’s children (Deut. 25:5-10). But this custom started way before the Mosaic Law. The technical term for a brother-in-law marrying his dead brother’s widow is a “levirate marriage,” from the Latin word *levir*, “husband’s brother.” It is widely believed that the origin of the custom was that the woman had been purchased by marriage and therefore was part of the dead husband’s estate, thus remaining the property of the clan after her husband died. Remaining part of the family clan assured the woman of protection and provision.[[149]](#footnote-28543)

Gen 38:9

**“he wasted *his semen* on the ground.”** Onan would withdraw from Tamar before ejaculating to prevent impregnating her. The Bible does not tell us what Er did that was so evil, or why Onan decided not to support his brother’s memory by having sex with his widow.

Gen 38:11

**“Remain a widow in your father’s house.”** Judah sends Tamar back to her own home.

Gen 38:12

**“after many days.”** This is an idiom; in this case, it would have been a number of years that Tamar had obediently waited, because Shelah was now grown up.

**“When Judah was comforted.”** In this context, Judah being “comforted,” meant that the official period of mourning had passed. Some English versions translate that right into the text. So, for example, the CEB reads, “after a period of mourning,” while the CSB reads, “When Judah had finished mourning” (cf. JPS, NAB, NASB, NLT, NRSV).

**“Timnah.”** “Timnah means “allotted portion,” and there are two cities called “Timnah” that are potential candidates for the Timnah in Genesis 38. The most likely one is Khirbet Tibneh, which is about two miles south-southwest of Beth-shemesh.[[150]](#footnote-29349) A major reason for thinking the more eastern Timnah is correct is the Bible says Judah went “up” to Timnah, and from where Judah was, the more eastern Timnah would have been “up,” while the more western Timnah would have been “down,” and the Bible is usually quite accurate when it comes to directions.

Gen 38:14

**“the clothes she wore as a widow.”** Many cultures have special clothing that widows wear, and apparently that was true in the ancient Near East as well. Tamar would have been wearing those clothes for a long time, which seems unusual, but perhaps she wore them as a reminder that she should have been given in marriage to Shelah, but had not been.

Gen 38:18

**“Your seal and your cord and your staff that is in your hand.”** Tamar was very wise. She knew Judah did not like her and would have liked nothing better than for her to die or somehow be out of his life. So Tamar likely knew that if she showed up pregnant that Judah would order her death, which indeed he did (Gen. 38:24). So she asked that she be given in pledge things that no one could deny belonged to Judah himself: his personal seal, cord, and staff.

The seal would have been a ring, stamp, or cylinder on a cord worn around his neck, and the cord would have been handmade and unique. Given that Judah had lived in Mesopotamia for many years, his “seal” was likely a cylinder seal. Also, his staff was the staff of the patriarch of the tribe and would have been widely recognized. Ordinarily, Judah would never have handed these over, but in this case, he was so overconfident that this prostitute would give him his things back because they would have been basically useless to her that he gave them to her.

[For more on signet rings and cylinder seals, see commentary on Gen. 41:42.]

**“and went in to her.”** An idiom for sexual intercourse; the Hebrew is more literally “he went to her,” but it can also mean that he went “into” her, that is, he had sexual intercourse with her. This idiom occurs in a number of verses (cf. Gen. 29:23; 30:4; 38:2, 18; Judg. 16:1; Ruth 4:13; 2 Sam. 12:24).

**“and she conceived by him.”** This is one of the many times in Scripture that we see the invisible hand of God guiding history. It is normally unlikely that a woman gets pregnant by having sexual intercourse only once. Also, she herself would not have known it for at least a few weeks.

Gen 38:25

**“the seal.”** This would have most likely been a cylinder seal, but it could have been a signet ring on a cord.

[For more on signet rings and cylinder seals, see commentary on Gen. 41:42.]

**“cords.”** Here the word “cords” is plural, while in Genesis 38:18 it is singular. It is likely that the “cord” was made up of a number of cords woven together and was unique and beautiful, aiding the identification as Judah’s cord.

Gen 38:26

**“She is in the right rather than I.”** The Hebrew construction and the context indicate that Judah was not claiming to be right here, although the Hebrew phrase can be translated in a way that implies a comparison and most English versions do that (i.e., “she is more righteous than I”). However, some versions are closer to the REV (cf. GW, NAB, NJB). The Septuagint is also similar to the translation in the REV. It seems that Judah was trying to be very honest here, and admitted that Tamar was right in doing what she did, and Judah was wrong in withholding his son from her. To properly understand this interaction, it is valuable to keep in mind that often later in a woman’s life, her best resource and help was her own children, not stepchildren. That was a major reason why being childless was considered a curse for a woman. So this whole event was more than just Judah withholding his son from Tamar; it endangered her future.

**“But he knew her again no more.”** That is, Judah did not have sex with Tamar again. The word “know” is sometimes used idiomatically for sexual intercourse (see commentary on Matt. 1:25).

Gen 38:29

**“Perez.”** The word means, “a breach,” “a breaking out or through,” so in essence the name means, “he who breaks out.” While being the oldest son has not come to mean much in modern culture, in the biblical culture being the first son had a lot of honor and responsibility. The Hebrew text has the verb and the noun: “What a breach [noun] you have breached [verb] for yourself.” The idea seems to be, “What a breaking out [to life] you have broken out [to life] for yourself.

Gen 38:30

**“Zerah.”** The Hebrew root is related to the word “shine.”

**Genesis Chapter 39**

Gen 39:1

**“Joseph was brought down to Egypt.”** Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt when he was 17.

[For more on the chronology of Joseph, see commentary on Gen. 37:2.]

Gen 39:2

**“Yahweh was with Joseph.”** This is a theme in the Joseph record (e.g., Gen. 39:2, 3, 21). Yahweh was with Joseph, and that originally set up Joseph himself, and his family when they came to Egypt, for success.

**“lord.”** The Hebrew text uses the grammatical plural, literally, “lords.”

**“he was in the house of his lord the Egyptian.”** Here again in the Joseph record we see the invisible hand of God guiding and blessing Joseph. Potiphar was apparently rich, and had a house and fields (Gen. 39:5). Joseph could have easily ended up a field worker, but God blessed him and he worked in Potiphar’s house, where Potiphar got to see him work.

Gen 39:3

**“lord.”** The Hebrew text uses the grammatical plural, literally, “lords.”

**“made all that he did successful.”** The Hebrew text is more idiomatic: “Yahweh made all that he did to prosper in his hands.”

Gen 39:4

**“And Potiphar made.”** The Hebrew uses the pronoun “he” instead of Potiphar, but that is confusing when brought into English. Some other English versions make that change for clarity (cf. NIV).

Gen 39:6

**“Joseph was well-built and handsome.”** The Hebrew phrase is used twice in the Bible, once of Rachel and once of Joseph, and the translation is adapted for the male and female; Rachel is said to be “beautiful in form and attractive” (Gen. 29:17), while Joseph is said to be “well-built and handsome” (Gen. 39:6).

Gen 39:7

**“lord.”** The Hebrew text uses the grammatical plural, literally, “lords.”

**“cast her eyes on Joseph.”** The Hebrew text reads, “lifted up her eyes toward Joseph,” meaning that she saw him and desired him. The Bible does not say why Potiphar’s wife wanted to have sex with Joseph, but marriage problems have been an almost universal problem, occurring in every time and culture.

Gen 39:8

**“lord’s.”** The Hebrew text uses the grammatical plural, literally, “lords” (the second use in the verse is not a grammatical plural).

Gen 39:14

**“to mock us.”** The Hebrew word translated as “mock” is *tzachaq* (#06711 צָחַק). It primarily means “to laugh at,” “make fun of,” or “joke with,” but it also has sexual overtones, “to dally with, fondle,” and it is used of conjugal caresses. Potiphar’s wife thus implies that Joseph was laughing at the Egyptians and had sexual intentions with Potiphar’s wife. The Schocken Bible has the translation “play around with us,” which also has sexual overtones in English.

Gen 39:16

**“lord.”** The Hebrew text uses the grammatical plural, literally, “lords.”

Gen 39:17

**“whom you have brought to us.”** That Potiphar’s wife added this cutting phrase is indicative of the marital problems between them, and why she likely wanted to have sex with Joseph in the first place. Potiphar brought Joseph into the house to help manage it, and he was a good judge of character: Joseph was doing an exceptional job.

Gen 39:18

**“I raised my voice.”** Inside a town, a woman’s defense against rape was to cry out as loudly as she could (cf. Deut. 22:24-27).

Gen 39:19

**“lord.”** The Hebrew text uses the grammatical plural, literally, “lords.”

**“his anger flared up.”** Potiphar was likely angry at the situation. His wife was unloving and unfaithful and he likely suspected it; Joseph was honest and capable but naive. He knew Potiphar’s wife wanted to have sex with him, and he let himself get trapped. Potiphar was in a no-win situation. He had to support his wife, but the evidence indicates he did not believe her. If he had, he likely would have had Joseph executed.

Gen 39:20

**“lord.”** The Hebrew text uses the grammatical plural, literally, “lords.”

**“and put him into the prison.”** In Hebrew, the word translated as “prison” is “round house” (lit. “house of roundness”) an interesting phrase that only occurs in the Joseph record. Perhaps it refers to a structure that was originally some kind of fortress; the scholars are not sure.

Joseph was 17 years old when he was sold into slavery in Egypt. He was 30 when he became second in command in Egypt (Gen. 41:46). The Bible does not say how those 13 or 14 years in slavery were divided up between being in Potiphar’s house (Gen. 37:36; 39:1) and being in prison (Gen. 39:20).

**“the king’s prisoners.”** It is interesting that in the record of Joseph, Pharaoh is sometimes called “the king” and sometimes “Pharaoh.”

Gen 39:21

**“Yahweh...gave him favor.”** That Yahweh gave Joseph favor is a major theme in Genesis 39, occurring in Genesis 39:2, 3, 21, and 39:23.

**“extended.”** The Hebrew word translated as “extended” means to stretch out or reach out, as if God is stretching out His hand toward Joseph to help him.

**“covenant faithfulness.”** In the context of Genesis 39:21, “covenant faithfulness” is a good translation of the Hebrew word *hesed* (#02617 חֶסֶד) because God was blessing Joseph in part because of His covenants and promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

[For more on *hesed*, see commentary on Ruth 2:20.]

**“warden.”** The Hebrew word translated as “warden” is a word that has a wide semantic range and has meanings that include “ruler, leader, official, and officer.” In the context of a prison, the translation “warden” is appropriate.

Gen 39:23

**“under Joseph’s hand.”** The Hebrew text reads “his hand” instead of “Joseph’s hand,” but many English versions read “Joseph’s hand” for clarity.

**Genesis Chapter 40**

Gen 40:1

**“cupbearer.”** The cupbearer (and “cupbearer” seems to be the correct translation of the Hebrew word) and baker were two very important positions in the ancient world because a major way of killing well-protected people who were in high positions in a kingdom was to poison them. So the cupbearer and baker were normally trusted servants.

**“committed an offense.”** The Hebrew text uses a word that is normally translated “sinned,” but in this social context “committed an offense” is more appropriate.

**“lord.”** The Hebrew text uses the grammatical plural, literally, “lords.”

Gen 40:4

**“many days.”** The Hebrew just has “days” in the plural. The implication is that it was for many days, but the text does not say how many.

Gen 40:5

**“And they both dreamed a dream.”** Genesis 40 starts a reversal of the fortunes of Joseph. In Genesis 37, Joseph had dreams that led to his downfall and a downward spiral in his life. Now, people have dreams (the cupbearer, the baker, and Pharaoh) and those dreams led to Joseph’s exaltation.

Gen 40:6

**“troubled.”** The Hebrew word translated “troubled” is *zaaph* (#02196 זָעַף), and it has a wide semantic range, including to be troubled, sad, vexed, perplexed, in bad humor, angry, and enraged. Thus, English translations include: sad, upset, distraught, troubled, disturbed, dejected, depressed, gloomy, and morose. It is likely that the cupbearer and baker felt a mix of emotions including being sad and troubled, and likely somewhat depressed.

Gen 40:7

**“lord.”** The Hebrew text uses the grammatical plural (a grammatical plural possessive), literally, “lords’.”

Gen 40:10

**“And as soon as it was budding.”** The vine grew with supernatural speed. It budded, blossomed, and had ripe grapes almost simultaneously.

Gen 40:12

**“the three branches are three days.”** Joseph’s interpretations were revelation from God.

Gen 40:14

**“kindness.”** The Hebrew word is hesed, often translated “covenant faithfulness,” but that translation is not appropriate here. “Kindness” is a better choice.

**“place.”** The Hebrew word is “house,” but the prison was not literally a house, so “place” seemed a better translation here.

Gen 40:15

**“I was stolen, yes, stolen.”** Joseph repeats the verb “stolen” twice for emphasis, using different forms of the verb (an infinitive and then a perfect tense). This is the figure of speech polyptoton, and it greatly emphasizes Joseph’s assertion that he was in prison unjustly.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

[See Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

**“from the land of the Hebrews.”** The phrase, “the land of the Hebrews” would have identified Canaan to the cupbearer, even if there were not many Hebrews there, which there were not.

**“dungeon.”** The Hebrew word is more literally “pit.” The prison was not literally a “pit,” but it may have seemed that way to Joseph, who at this point had been there a long time. Joseph likely had memories of his brothers putting him in the “cistern” (Gen. 37:20), which is the same word, “pit,” in Hebrew. In a sense, Joseph thought of himself as going from one pit to another.

Gen 40:20

**“banquet.”** The Hebrew word can mean “drinking bout,” and it generally refers to a meal with wine. This would have been a huge meal with lots of wine and likely beer as well.

**Genesis Chapter 41**

Gen 41:1

**“the Nile.”** That is, the Nile River.

Gen 41:2

**“fat.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “fat of flesh.”

**“came up out of the Nile.”** The Nile River was the source of all of Egypt’s prosperity.

Gen 41:3

**“thin.”** The Hebrew is literally, “thin of flesh.”

Gen 41:6

**“scorched by the east wind.”** In Egypt, the east wind would have come off the great Arabian Desert and been very hot and dry.

Gen 41:8

**“spirit.”** Here the word “spirit” is being used of Pharaoh’s mental state; his thoughts and emotions.

[For more on all the various uses of “spirit,” see Word Study: “Pneuma.”]

Gen 41:9

**“faults.”** The Hebrew is literally, “sins,” but the cupbearer would refer to them as “faults.”

Gen 41:14

**“dungeon.”** The Hebrew word is “pit.”

**“He shaved.”** The Egyptians were clean-shaven, in contrast to the Hebrews who wore beards. Interestingly, when the Egyptians were in mourning, they let their beards grow, but when the Hebrews were in mourning, they sometimes shaved their beards (Isa. 15:2). It would have been offensive to Pharaoh for Joseph to appear before him unshaved, so even though Pharaoh’s summons was urgent, Joseph took the time to shave and thus make himself acceptable. It is very important to make a favorable impression and not needlessly offend people or cause them concern: “An offended brother *is harder to be won* than a strong city” (Prov. 18:19).

It is universally true that people feel comfortable around other people who think and act like they do. We say our modern culture is tolerant and accepting of individuality, but that is more a facade than a reality. You can be “different” as long as your particular difference is acceptable, but a lot of differences, especially conservative Christian ones, are not at all acceptable among many “liberal” people who say they respect individual differences. Christians should be more interested in winning people to Christ than showing off their individual preferences.

Gen 41:16

**“a favorable answer.”** The Hebrew uses the word *shalom*, which refers to well-being.

Gen 41:19

**“cows.”** The Hebrew text uses the pronoun “them,” referring to the cows. The REV adds “cows” for clarity.

Gen 41:21

**“eaten them up.”** The Hebrew text is idiomatic: “come into their midst,” that is, the thin cows had eaten up the fat cows such that the fat cows had “come into their midst,” i.e., the fat cows were inside them.

**“you would not know that they had eaten them.”** More literally, you would not know “they were inside them.”

Gen 41:32

**“The dream was doubled to Pharaoh.”** It was common in the Semitic culture to double things, often by saying them in different ways, to emphasize and establish what was said. Although this practice can be seen throughout the Old Testament, it can easily be seen in Proverbs, where many times something is said twice in different ways so that the point is emphasized (e.g., Prov. 1:8, 15, 18, 20; 2:3, 4, 16, 21). Pharaoh had two different dreams with the same basic message, and Joseph explained that, and the dreams, to Pharaoh.

Gen 41:33

**“now let Pharaoh look.”** Although the Bible does not say so, it is very likely that as Joseph came to understand the situation he was in, he expected Pharaoh to choose him as the “discerning and wise man.” After all, Joseph had the dream about his father, mother, and all his brothers bowing down to him (Gen. 37:9-11), and being second-in-command to Pharaoh would easily fulfill that dream.

Gen 41:34

**“collect one-fifth.”** There is no individual verb in the phrase. The verb “collect” comes from the one verb that the REV translates as “collect one-fifth.” The Hebrew is more literally, “one-fifth of the land of Egypt.”

Gen 41:35

**“keep it under guard.”** The Hebrew word translated as “keep it under guard” is *shamar* (#08104 שָׁמַר), which means “to keep, guard, watch, watch over.” Some English versions have “keep” and others have “guard,” but in this context it seems like both words are appropriate. The grain had to be kept in store for the years of famine, but it also had to be guarded from hungry people. The translation “keep it under guard” seems appropriate (cf. The Schocken Bible by E. Fox).

Gen 41:37

**“his servants.”** In the authority structure of the ancient world, everyone was a “servant” of the king. In this context, the “servants” of Pharaoh are his high officials.

[For more on the word “servants” being used for people of high position in the kingdom, see commentary on 2 Sam. 11:1.]

Gen 41:38

**“the spirit of God?”** This “spirit” is the gift of holy spirit that God put upon certain people in the Old Testament so that they could do His work. This is the first time in the Bible that someone is said to have “the spirit” of God. Daniel was another person who was said to have the spirit of God (Dan. 5:14).

[For more on the usages of “spirit” in the Bible, and the use of “spirit” in this context, see Word Study: “Pneuma,” particularly section 6, “*Pneuma* is used of the gift of holy spirit that God put upon certain believers, such as prophets, before the day of Pentecost.” It would also be helpful to see Appendix 7: “What is the Holy Spirit?”]

Gen 41:40

**“Over My House.”** This is a title (see commentary on 1 Kings 4:6). It generally referred to the person who was in charge of the palace, but here in Genesis, Joseph was given more wide-ranging authority than just Pharaoh’s palace.

**“by your command.”** More literally, “by your mouth,” with “mouth” being put by metonymy for what comes from it, the words and commands.

[See Word Study: “Metonymy.”]

**“be ruled.”** The Hebrew text is literally, “kiss.” Thus, “by your mouth will all the people kiss.” The idiomatic use of “kiss” here most likely refers to being obedient and submitting to rule (cf. Ps. 2:12), but it could also refer more directly to paying homage to Joseph and then by extension obeying him. Thus, the NASB translation: “and according to your command all my people shall do homage.”

Gen 41:42

**“signet ring.”** The signet ring was a ring that was engraved with special letters and/or characters that identified the owner of the ring. The signet ring was used to sign official documents much like a notary public has a special seal that he or she uses in signing and sealing official documents. Anyone who had Pharaoh’s signet ring was authorized and delegated by Pharaoh to “sign,” (by sealing with the signet) his name. “The title ‘Royal Seal-Bearer’ was well-known in Egyptian bureaucracy.”[[151]](#footnote-20265)

Signet rings and other ways of “signing” and sealing documents were well-known in the ancient world. Signet rings occur in a number of places in the Bible (e.g., Gen. 41:42; Exod. 35:22; Num. 31:50; Esther 3:10; 8:2, 10; Isa. 3:21; Jer. 22:24; Dan. 6:17; Hag. 2:23). Also, the word “seal” often referred to a signet ring, cylinder seal or scarab seal (Gen. 38:18, 25; Exod. 28:11, 21, 36; 39:14, 30; 1 Kings 21:8; Job 38:14). The signet rings, scarab seals, and cylinder seals were usually made of stone and the characters or symbols were carved into the stone like a gem cutter cuts stone (cf. Exod. 28:11).

Particularly common in Egypt was the scarab seal, a stamp-seal that was carved in the shape of a scarab beetle, with a flat bottom that had the name or special characters of the owner carved into it. Small scarab seals often had holes bored through them so they could be worn around a person’s neck. A common type of seal that was especially popular north of Israel in Mesopotamia was the cylinder seal. As the name implies, this type of seal was a cylinder that had letters and/or characters on it, that when rolled over soft material like clay left a distinct impression that served as the owner’s name or position. Thousands of cylinder seals have been found all over the Middle East. Many of them had holes bored through them so that they could be worn around a person’s neck.

Judah likely had a cylinder seal and gave it to the woman he thought was a prostitute in return for her services. Tamar, in disguise as a prostitute, asked to be given “Your seal [i.e., “signet”] and your cord and your staff that is in your hand.”(Gen. 38:18). When she later turned up pregnant, she used those things to prove who the father was, saying, “By the man to whom these belong I am pregnant.” (Gen. 38:25). Judah could not deny that the seal and other things belonged to him, they were, after all, very personal.

Gen 41:43

**“the chariot.”** This is the first use of “chariot” in the Bible. However, chariots could have been in use much earlier than this record.

**“Bow the knee.”** The meaning of the word that appears in the Hebrew text is debated. It would seem to be an Egyptian word, but even so, its meaning is debated. “Bow the knee” or “kneel” are favored possibilities, although “Make way” (BBE, NEB, NIV) and “Attention” (CEB, CSB) are also possibilities.

Gen 41:45

**“Pharaoh called Joseph’s name Zaphenath-paneah.”** In the biblical culture, changing a person’s name was a way of exercising some kind of control or dominion over the person (see commentary on Genesis 17:5).

Genesis 41:45 shows some of the depth of Egyptian worship and belief in the gods. For example, Zaphenath-paneah means “the god speaks and he (the newborn child) lives.” “Asenath” means “belonging to Neith” (an Egyptian goddess). The name Potiphera means “he whom Ra gave” (Ra being the sun god). “Potiphar,” the man who bought Joseph, is a shorter form of that name. “On” is another name of Heliopolis, where the chief temple of Ra, the sun god, is located. “On” is mentioned in Genesis 41:45, 50; 46:20, and Ezekiel 30:17.[[152]](#footnote-25811)

Gen 41:46

**“Joseph was 30 years old when he stood before Pharaoh.”** In this context, the idiom, “stood before” Pharaoh, means to serve as an officer or official of Pharaoh. Joseph was 17 years old when he was sold into slavery in Egypt (Gen. 37:2). He was 30 when he became second in command in Egypt (Gen. 41:46). The Bible does not say how those 13 or 14 years in slavery were divided up between being in Potiphar’s house (Gen. 37:36; 39:1) and being in prison (Gen. 39:20).

[For more on the chronology of Joseph, see commentary on Gen. 37:2. For more on sitting or standing before the king, see commentary on Isa. 14:13, “sit.”]

Gen 41:47

**“the land produced abundantly.”** The Hebrew text is idiomatic. The Hebrew is more literally, “the land produced by handfuls.” In the ancient world, a “handful” was a large amount, but in modern English a “handful” might be considered only a small amount, so the REV and many other English translations use words like “abundantly” or “bountifully,”

Gen 41:51

**“Manasseh.”** The name Manasseh means “making forget.” Joseph had put his past behind him and was moving on. During the seven years of plenty, he did not ever even ask about his birth family. He must have been quite bitter about what happened to him, and he seems content to simply forget his past. But God had plans for Israel and would bring it all back to him when his brothers arrived.

Gen 41:52

**“Ephraim.”** The name means “fruitful” or perhaps “made me fruitful,” but the word is a dual masculine form, leading some scholars to believe the word means “doubly fruitful,” which may be the case.

**“affliction.”** This same word is used of the affliction of the nation of Israel in Egypt (e.g., Exod. 3:7, 17; 4:31).

Gen 41:56

**“sold.”** The Hebrew word can also mean “provide,” indicating that Joseph was not taking advantage of the Egyptians, but providing for them by selling them what they needed.

**Genesis Chapter 42**

Gen 42:1

**“Why are you looking at one another?”** In other words, “Why are you standing here doing nothing?”

Gen 42:6

**“one in power.”** The text uses a rare Hebrew word for one who is in power. The word could almost be translated as a title, “the one-in-power” (cf. Eccl. 10:5).

**“bowed down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth, as we see here.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Gen 42:8

**“but they did not recognize him.”** This is part of the parallel between Joseph and Christ. Joseph’s brothers did not recognize him, and Jesus’ brothers, fellow Israelites, did not recognize him.

Gen 42:9

**“Joseph remembered the dreams”** The dreams are recorded in Genesis 37:5-10.

Gen 42:19

**“for your hungry households.”** The Hebrew is choppy and more literally, “carry in grain the famine of your houses.” Many versions have smoothed that out for the English reader.

Gen 42:21

**“we saw the distress of his soul.”** Some of the pain Joseph went through is in Psalm 105:18.

**“distress...distress.”** Joseph’s brothers apparently believed that God would pay back equally what a person had done, so their distress was payment for the distress they caused Joseph.

Gen 42:22

**“Reuben answered them.”** This is the first time Joseph would have learned that Reuben tried to prevent what happened to Joseph. Reuben wanted to save Joseph (Gen. 37:21-22, 29-30).

Gen 42:23

**“for there was an interpreter between them.”** Joseph had been in Egypt for some 22 years or so since he had been sold into slavery in Egypt, and in that time he had learned the Egyptian language. He was sold at age 17 (Gen. 37:2), and stood before Pharaoh at age 30 (Gen. 41:46), then there were seven years of plenty and now this is apparently the first year of the famine.

Gen 42:24

**“He stepped away.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “he turned away,” but it is not just that Joseph turned his head away, he turned himself away and left, as we can see from the context. The CEB has, “he stepped away.”

Gen 42:25

**“money.”** The Hebrew word translated as “money” is actually “silver,” and it likely referred to something like silver nuggets that could be weighed. Genesis 42 occurred before coins for money were invented, which occurred during the time of the Greeks. At this early time, much trade was by barter, and silver and gold were weighed out. We don’t know the form of the silver that Jacob’s sons had.

The word “money” (literally, “silver”) is very prominent in the Joseph record, occurring seventeen times (Gen. 42:25, 27, 28, 35 (twice); Gen. 43:12 (twice), Gen. 43:15, 18, 21 (twice), Gen. 43:22 (twice), Gen. 43:23; 44:1, 2, 8). The brothers sold Joseph for 20 pieces of silver (Gen. 37:28), and now silver is seemingly emphasized in the Joseph record.

Gen 42:27

**“sack...pack.”** This is two words for the same thing, the pack or sack in which was the grain. But the money would have been in a smaller bag to keep it separate from the grain.

**“money.”** Literally, “silver.” See commentary on Gen. 42:25.

Gen 42:37

**“Reuben spoke.”** This is the last time that Reuben, Jacob’s oldest son, speaks in the Bible.

**“You may kill two of my sons if I do not bring him to you.”** Reuben had four sons (Gen. 46:9). What Reuben said sounds completely stupid. If Jacob is worried about losing another son, how could killing two of his grandsons help in any way? Reuben was just trying to make the point about how diligent he would be about getting Benjamin back to Jacob safely.

Gen 42:38

**“and he alone is left.”** Jacob is using hyperbole. Benjamin was the only remaining son of Jacob’s favorite wife, Rachel.

**Genesis Chapter 43**

Gen 43:3

**“warned, yes, warned.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton, which is used for emphasis (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

Gen 43:7

**“asked, yes, asked...known, yes, known.”** These are the figure of speech polyptoton, which are being used for emphasis (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

Gen 43:9

**“You may hold me responsible for him.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic and hard to understand when translated literally. More literally the text reads, “of my hand you will require him.” Judah pledged himself to be responsible for Benjamin, and later he was good for his word. When Joseph threatened to jail Benjamin, Judah offered himself to be Joseph’s slave instead of Benjamin (Gen. 44:32-34).

**“all my life.”** Literally, “all the days.”

Gen 43:11

**“a little balm, a little honey, spices, myrrh, nuts, and almonds.”** These things must have been lacking in Egypt, because the Midianite traders who took Joseph to Egypt also had spices, balm, and myrrh (Gen. 37:25).

Gen 43:12

**“money.”** The Hebrew is “silver” (see commentary on Gen. 42:25).

Gen 43:14

**“El Shaddai.”** “El Shaddai” is the name of God that is commonly translated as “God Almighty” (see commentary on Gen. 17:1).

Gen 43:16

**“butcher *an animal*.”** Egypt had a very hot climate and there was no effective refrigeration in ancient times, so animals were butchered right before they were eaten. The butchering, preparation, and cooking of the animal would take time, so this meal was not eaten right away, but likely a couple hours later. The fact that this meal was prepared as the noon meal shows that Joseph’s brothers had appeared before him quite early in the morning. It was common for the business of the day to start early in ancient times, and often official business ended early as well.

Here in Genesis 43:6, the Hebrew word translated as “butcher” is singular, hence the translation “an” animal. If the Hebrew word had been plural, the translation would have likely been “some animals.”

Gen 43:17

**“The man…the man.”** The text repeats “the man” twice, likely so that the reader knows that at this stage Joseph worked with his brothers through intermediaries.

Gen 43:18

**“along with our donkeys.”** This verse shows the value of donkeys in that culture. To us today, the value of the donkeys was insignificant in comparison to being personally taken as slaves. But in the biblical culture, the donkeys were valuable, so the men were concerned about them.

Gen 43:20

**“came, yes, came.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton, repeating the verb twice for emphasis (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

Gen 43:22

**“brought down.”** This is literally true. Egypt is lower in elevation than Canaan.

Gen 43:26

**“bowed down.”** The Hebrew word translated as “bowed down” *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), and it literally means “to bow down,” or “to prostrate oneself.” The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth.

The Hebrew uses the same word for bowing down before people as for “worship” when the subject is God. Thus, the verse could be translated, “and worshiped him.”

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Gen 43:27

**“He asked them how they were doing.”** The Hebrew text is idiomatic. More literally, what Joseph said was “how is your peace (*shalom*).”

Gen 43:28

**“kneeled and bowed down.”** This kneeling preceded bowing down to the ground. The two actions, kneeling and then bowing to the ground blended into one act of homage or worship. The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth. Also, instead of “kneeled and bowed down,” the text could be translated “bowed down and worshiped,” with “kneeling” being understood as part of the process of bowing down, and “bowing down” was the act of worship. The same Hebrew verb can be translated as both “bow down” and “worship;” traditionally “worship” if God is involved and “bow down” if people are involved, but the verb and action are the same. The act of bowing down is the act of worship.

[For more information, see Word Study: “Worship” and commentary on 1 Chron. 29:20.]

Gen 43:30

**“overcome by affection.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic. The Hebrew word translated as “affection” uses a word that refers to the insides, gut, or womb (see commentary on 1 Kings 3:26), but here refers more to the emotion associated with the womb or guts, “compassion” or “affection.” The verb translated as “overcome” is more literally, “to grow warm.” Joseph’s emotions heated up and he looked for a place to weep. He was in his palace, but it would have been huge, and he wanted a private place.

**“He went into a room and wept there.”** Joseph was going through some serious emotional changes at this time. He had been bitter about his family, and even though he ruled Egypt for seven years during the time of plenty, he never bothered to send someone to find out if his family was even alive. He seems to have written them off. But now they show up as honest men, even bringing back the money that they thought got returned to them by accident, and they brought Benjamin and said Jacob was still alive. Family love welled up inside Joseph, but he was certainly conflicted. His older brothers had abandoned him for years, and he did not know that his father and Benjamin thought he was dead. How could he move forward from here? He decided to keep his identity secret and give the family another test. How honest were they really, and how much did they care about each other? Would they sacrifice themselves for Benjamin and to bless their father Jacob?

Gen 43:31

**“He controlled himself.”** In this situation, when Joseph was with his brothers, he was able to control himself and maintain his ruse. However, in their next meeting, Joseph was not able to control himself (Gen. 45:1).

**“Serve the food.”** The Hebrew word translated as “serve” is more literally “put” or “place,” and the Hebrew word for “food” is more literally “bread,” but it is used of other food as well. The range of possible translations explains the variation in the English versions: “Serve the meal” (CSB); “Set on bread” (Darby); “Place bread” (LSV); “Set out the food” (NET).

Gen 43:32

**“and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves.”** The Egyptians were very xenophobic and generally did not like foreigners. “On account of Egyptian beliefs about racial and religious superiority, and their contempt of foreigners (i.e., Hebrews), who were regarded as unclean, Joseph’s Egyptian royal staff were segregated, eating by themselves.… Likewise, it was abhorrent to Egyptians to engage with shepherds (Genesis 46:34). …Finally, the Greek historian Herodotus writes in *The Histories* that the cow was taboo to the Egyptians but eaten by the Greeks. He further reports that no native Egyptian would kiss a Greek, use his kitchen utensils, or even eat the flesh of an ox that had been cut with the knife of a Greek.”[[153]](#footnote-20000) Egyptians did eat bulls, but not the cows, which were sacred to Isis.

The Bible does not tell us if Joseph provided different food for his brothers, just that Joseph, his staff, and his brothers all ate separately.

[For more about how the Egyptians being xenophobic helped form the nation of Israel, see commentary on Gen. 45:7]

Gen 43:33

**“and the men were astonished.”** Joseph’s brothers, and likely his Egyptian staff, were astonished that Joseph could seat the brothers in birth order.

Gen 43:34

**“from his table.”** This is the meaning of the text. The Hebrew is more literally, “from before his face,” but that would refer to his table, and the idiom would not be clear to the English reader.

**Genesis Chapter 44**

Gen 44:8

**“Why would we steal silver or gold.”** The question is a good one. The brothers had just brought back silver (translated as “money”) to Egypt that they thought had been mistakenly returned to them. If they felt they needed silver, they could have just kept the silver they had. They were confident that no one had taken any silver from Joseph’s house.

**“lord.**” This is a grammatical plural, literally, “house of your lords.”

Gen 44:9

**“let him die, and we also will be my lord’s slaves.”** The brothers are so confident that no one has stolen from Joseph’s house that they propose a very harsh sentence if the object is found to be with them.

Gen 44:10

**“Now also let it be according to your words.”** The Egyptian over Joseph’s house says that the punishment will be “according to your words,” but then ignores that and gives a different punishment. What is going on? Victor Hamilton explains. “The difference on [the] suggested penalty may be due to more than mercy on the steward’s part. A unique feature of Egyptian law (in contrast to cuneiform law), is that both witnesses and the accused were allowed to propose their own punishment for perjury or the crime in the form of an oath (as in verse 9). The steward knows that if the cup is found in Benjamin’s sack (or anybody’s sack, for that matter), their suggested punishment will be binding, and thus Benjamin will be condemned to death. To circumvent that possibility, the steward deliberately ignores or mishears them, and accepts only that portion of their self-imposed sentence that will be acceptable to Joseph.”[[154]](#footnote-11848)

Joseph’s brothers had stated a very severe penalty, but the Egyptian deliberately ignored it because he knew the cup was in Benjamin’s sack, so he restated the penalty so that it would be acceptable to Joseph.

Gen 44:13

**“Then they tore their clothes.”** At the thought of losing Benjamin, the men tear their clothes. Jacob tore his clothes when he thought he had lost Joseph (Gen. 37:34).

Gen 44:14

**“Judah and his brothers.”** Judah now steps to the front because he was the one who made the oath to Jacob and guaranteed Benjamin’s safety (Gen. 43:8-10).

Gen 44:16

**“justify.”** The Hebrew verb is more technically, “to be righteous,” but in this context, it means “justify,” i.e., show ourselves to be righteous concerning the cup we supposedly took.

Gen 44:21

**“see him.”** The Hebrew is literally, “set my eyes on him.”

Gen 44:29

**“from me.”** The Hebrew is literally, “from before my face.”

Gen 44:32

**“For your slave pledged *to be* security.”** Judah had promised Jacob that he would be security for Benjamin to ensure Benjamin’s wellbeing (Gen. 43:9). Here he shows that he really meant what he said, and this no doubt affected his feelings toward his brothers. They sold him, Joseph, into slavery, but they would not let Benjamin be taken into slavery. They seem to be changed men.

Gen 44:33

**“let your slave stay instead of the boy.”** Judah was the one who suggested that Joseph be sold into slavery (Gen. 37:26-27). Now he offers himself to be the slave of the one he said to sell into slavery. The story has come full circle. What Judah suggested for Joseph he now suggests for himself.

Gen 44:34

**“come on.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic; literally “find my father.” But evil is not looking for Judah’s father Jacob, the Hebrew is simply an idiomatic way of speaking.

**Genesis Chapter 45**

Gen 45:2

**“The Egyptians heard.”** In the ancient world, there was very little actual privacy. There were no effective glass windows, and big buildings might have had some doors, but the expectation of total privacy did not really exist. Besides, Joseph would have had guards who would have stayed close enough to hear if he needed help.

We can imagine that the Egyptians were very puzzled as to why Joseph wanted to eat with these people from Canaan. The Egyptians were very xenophobic when it came to other nationalities, and to them, there was nothing special about these people from Canaan that would be of interest to Joseph.

**“the house of Pharaoh heard.”** News about Joseph would have been “big news” in Egypt, so it is not surprising that news of what was happening with Joseph reached Pharaoh very quickly.

Gen 45:3

**“dumbfounded.”** The Hebrew word can refer to being afraid or being in shock, dumbfounded. No doubt there were both emotions present.

Gen 45:7

**“God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on the earth.”** Joseph continued and told his brothers, “So now it was not you who sent me here, but God” (Gen. 45:8). Although we generally think of the time of slavery in Egypt as a terrible time and tragedy, it also likely saved the nation of Israel.

By the time Joseph was ruling Egypt, the other sons of Jacob had married, and some of the sons had apparently taken multiple wives (see commentary on Gen. 46:27). However, as far as we can tell from the biblical record, none of Jacob’s sons married Dinah, Jacob’s daughter (who she married is unstated in the Bible) and none of the wives of Jacob’s sons were descendants of Isaac. Esau, Isaac’s other son, married and took his family far away from Jacob and his family (Gen. 36:6). It is possible that some of the wives of the sons of Jacob were descendants of Abraham through Hagar (i.e., daughters of Ishmael) or through Abraham’s last wife, Keturah (i.e., daughters of her sons; Gen. 25:1-4), but the Bible does not attest to that. It seems if that had happened, the Bible would have said something about it in Genesis or 1 Chronicles, or somewhere.

The implication in the Bible is that the sons of Jacob married girls in the local Canaanite population. That was certainly the case with Jacob’s son Judah. He married Shua, a Canaanite, and had three sons by her (Gen. 38:2-5). Then he took a Canaanite wife named Tamar for Er, his firstborn son. As history turned out, Judah himself ended up having sons—Perez and Zerah—by the Canaanite woman Tamar, and Perez was in the genealogy to Christ. Given the pagan wives that Jacob’s sons and grandsons married, it would have been likely that if the extended family of Jacob continued to live in Canaan, they would have been assimilated or partially assimilated into the Canaanite culture. In contrast, going to Egypt saved them from assimilation into a pagan culture, and molded them into the Israelite nation.

Henry Morris writes: “Although Egypt was, if anything, even more polytheistic in its religion than Canaan, there was not the danger of assimilation that perpetually confronted them in Canaan. The Egyptians felt themselves racially superior and were reluctant to mix and intermarry with foreigners, especially shepherds (Gen. 43:32; 46:34). …Thus, although they [the Israelites] could profit much, both financially and culturally by associating with the Egyptians, they would be forced to dwell apart by themselves, developing their own peculiar culture, and in particular, learning to center their lives around the God of heaven and earth rather than the gods of the nations. All of this would forge them into a distinct and unique people, ready to receive and promulgate the laws of God and the great plan of God.”[[155]](#footnote-27888)

The sojourn in Egypt was actually a “circumstantially mandated separation,” which was essential for the people of Israel to become the “nation” of Israel before going to the Promised Land. God knows human nature and human tendencies so well that He knew that the Israelites could not stay separate from the pagan nations, but that separation was essential if they were to become a separate and (supposedly) holy nation until the coming of the Messiah.

Consider the number of times in the OT Israel was commanded to “separate yourselves” from the pagans. The people of Israel just could not seem to do that. Even after the return from the Babylonian Captivity, when they really should have known better, they intermarried with the pagans in the vicinity (this enraged Ezra and Nehemiah, cf. Ezra 9-10; Neh. 13:23-31). So, in the sojourn in Egypt, we see the brilliance of God, once again finding a way to see His will accomplished without violating man’s free will or His own character. A great irony in Israel’s sojourn in Egypt is that the Egyptians felt themselves racially superior and so they would not intermarry with the Jews! The Israelite men would have married their women in a heartbeat, but the Egyptians would not consider it.

Yes, Israel did suffer when in Egyptian servitude, but even in those circumstances they prospered, and they wanted to return to Egypt when the going got tough in their wilderness wanderings (Num. 11:4-6; 14:3). The alternative of never forging an identity as a people and holy nation, and thus not being a people among whom the Messiah could be born and raised would be eternally catastrophic. The circumstances that led to Israel being in Egypt and the events that led up to the Exodus were a back-and-forth chess game in which Good and Evil faced off and human free will decisions were a factor. The events fit with the character of God and the plan and drama of redemption.

So it seems that while the sojourn in Egypt was a personal tragedy for many, it was a national victory for God. It was in Egypt that the basis of the “nation of Israel” was formed, although they still often acted as disparate tribes even under King Saul and King David.

**“and to save you alive by a great deliverance.”** Some scholars also argue for a translation like the ESV, “keep alive for you many survivors.” It is possible that both meanings are correct, because the deliverance of Joseph from slave to second-to-pharaoh was great, and also that there would be many survivors in Jacob’s family because of Joseph and what he accomplished for Jacob’s extended family and descendants.

Gen 45:8

**“So now it was not you who sent me here, but God.”** See commentary on Genesis 45:7.

**“father.”** Here used as “mentor” and “guide.”

[For more information on the uses of “father” in the Bible, see commentary on Gen. 4:20. For information on the disciples of a Rabbi being called his “sons,” see commentary on Matt. 12:27. For information on the disciples of a Rabbi being called “orphans” if the Rabbi died or left the area, see commentary on John 14:18, “orphans.”]

Gen 45:9

**“God has made me lord of all Egypt.”** Joseph is a type of Christ in many ways. In Acts 2:36, the same idea of God and Christ is expressed; that God made Jesus both Lord and Christ.

Gen 45:10

**“in the land of Goshen.”** Goshen was in the eastern delta of the Nile River. It was closer to Israel and not right in any of the metropolitan areas in Egypt, which allowed the Israelites to stay somewhat separate from the Egyptians.

Gen 45:13

**“my glory in Egypt.”** The Hebrew word translated as “glory” is *kabod* (#03519 כָּבוֹד), and *kabod* has a broad semantic range. It can mean glory, splendor, honor, distinction, reputation, importance, essence, power, and even heaviness or burden, depending on the context. In this context, “glory” seems to fit very well, because Joseph certainly had a lot of glory in Egypt. He had honor and splendor as well, but “glory” seems to capture the sense both physically and emotionally.

Gen 45:14

**“He fell on his brother Benjamin’s neck.”** This is idiomatic, but a common idiom. Joseph hugged Benjamin closely and wept, and Benjamin wept as well.

Gen 45:15

**“Then he kissed all his brothers and wept on them.”** Joseph was weeping over his brothers, starting with Benjamin, and he wept and hugged each one. At that point, Joseph no longer needed to keep his distance from them, so he talked with his brothers up close.

Gen 45:16

**“his servants.”** In this context, the “servants” of the king are his high officials (see commentary on 2 Sam. 11:1).

Gen 45:19

**“Now you are commanded.”** The “you” is singular. So this is Pharaoh giving orders to Joseph to relay to his brothers.

Gen 45:20

**“Do not let your eye look with regret.”** This is an idiomatic way of saying, “Do not concern yourself with your things.”

Gen 45:24

**“Do not quarrel on the way.”** We can well imagine that once Joseph’s brothers got on the road back home they would have broken into quarreling over a number of issues, such as whose idea was it to sell Joseph and what they would tell their father Jacob. After all, they had lied to him about what happened to Joseph and kept up that ruse for some 22 years (Joseph was 17 when he was sold, 30 when he stood before Pharaoh, then seven years of plenty and two years of famine all add up to 22 years). They had a lot of explaining to do.

An alternate translation of the Hebrew renders what Joseph said as “don’t be overcome with fear” (e.g., NET). However, although that is lexically possible, it does not seem very likely and is rejected by most translators.

Gen 45:26

**“His heart went numb.”** The Hebrew is hard to express because the emotions that Jacob was feeling are difficult to express simply in English. Jacob heard what his sons said, but could not really even take it in. He was “numb” (ESV, JPS); “stunned” (CJB, CSB, LSB, NASB, NIV); “shocked” (EXB, NCV); “overcome” (BBE), “confounded” (NETS). Jacob “did not believe them,” not because he thought they were lying, but because he could not mentally grasp all the implications of what it meant to believe them. Of course, he quickly saw the physical evidence and believed them, but the Bible leaves out the details of this encounter. Jacob would have been angry with his sons, but overjoyed that Joseph was alive. We can only imagine the hundreds of different conversations that occurred among Jacob’s family in the next couple of days between his sons, his daughter, the wives of the sons, the children of the sons, and many more people of the extended household. There would be conversations about the past and what had happened, and conversations about the future and what would happen.

Gen 45:28

**“I’m convinced!”** The NIV catches the sense of the Hebrew text with the translation “I’m convinced!” The Hebrew is more literally something like “Enough!” However, “enough” can have a negative meaning in English, which is not the case here.

**Genesis Chapter 46**

Gen 46:1

**“all that he had.”** This included people, not just stuff.

**“Beer-sheba.”** At Beer-sheba, Jacob comes full circle. It was at Beer-sheba that he had tricked his father Isaac and gotten the blessing that his brother Esau coveted, and had to flee for his life from Esau. So he left Beersheba as an unmarried man and headed for Haran, the home territory of Abraham, his grandfather (Gen. 28:10). On the journey northward to Haran, God appeared to him and told him that He would bring Jacob back to the land. And so it was that, many years later, with two wives, two concubines, twelve sons, and a daughter, he came back to the land. Now here in Genesis 46, towards the end of his life, Jacob is again at Beer-sheba and again leaving the Promised Land, the land that God had promised to Abraham, and to Isaac, and to Jacob himself. And God appeared to Jacob again—for the last time in the Biblical record—and told him not to fear going down to Egypt, and that He, God, will ensure that Jacob will again come back to the land (Gen. 46:3-4). Jacob did come back to the land, but this time as an embalmed corpse. But he was buried as he wanted, in the tomb with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and his first wife, Leah.

**“offered sacrifices.”** It is most likely that Jacob offered sacrifices on the altar that his father Isaac built (Gen. 26:25). It seems that Jacob took this opportunity to worship Yahweh and build family recognition of Yahweh and family unity at the same time. Many of the people in the group going to Egypt with Jacob did not come from a family whose God was Yahweh (aka El Shaddai), and since when Jacob worshiped Yahweh as the family head and patriarch, generally the others would have participated as well.

Gen 46:2

**“God spoke.”** This is the last time God speaks to any of the patriarchs until God speaks with Moses. The Bible records God appearing to Jacob eight times (Gen. 28:13, 31:3, 11; 32:1, 30; 35:1, 9; 46:2).

**“Israel…Jacob.”** Both “Israel” and “Jacob” are used throughout this chapter and in the Jacob narrative in general. Although there are certainly times when the names seem to be used synonymously, there are likely purposeful differences. “Jacob” points to Jacob’s given name, and seems to place more emphasis on his humanity, along with all its faults and failures. In contrast, “Israel” points to the man as the national head of the nation that God is calling out and building to be His people.

Gen 46:3

**“I am God, the God of your father.”** God identifies Himself as the God of Isaac, Jacob’s father.

**“because I will make you into a great nation there.”** What God said came true, but not in a “nice” way that some would have liked. The approximately 200 years that Israel spent in Egypt started out wonderfully but ended up being many years of bitter slavery (see commentary on Exod. 12:40). Nevertheless, when Israel came out of Egypt, and especially when they fought together to conquer Canaan, they acted like a nation. That was finally solidly the case when Saul was anointed king over Israel.

Gen 46:4

**“bring you up, yes, up.”** God uses the figure of speech polyptoton for emphasis, repeating the same verb in different conjugations. God spoke to Jacob in an emphatic way that would have left him no doubt that going to Egypt at this time was the will of God. It is noteworthy that although God clearly stated that He Himself would be with Israel in Egypt, during their slavery they did not feel that way. That is such a life lesson because so often when a person is going through a difficult time in life it feels to them as if God has left them. God did eventually bring Jacob back into the Promised Land, but sadly, it was as a corpse. Jacob died in Egypt, but Joseph made sure he was buried in the family tomb of Abraham in Hebron, so Jacob was buried with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and with his first wife, Leah.

[For more on polyptoton and the form of translation, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

**“Joseph will close your eyes.”** It often happens when people die that they die with their eyes open, and then someone has to touch their eyelids and close their eyes. There is no Scripture that confirms that Joseph closed Jacob’s eyes after he died, and it is possible that he did, or possible that Jacob died with his eyes closed. It seems that what God meant to communicate to Jacob when He said, “Joseph will close your eyes,” was that Joseph would be there with Jacob when he died, and that seems to be the case (Gen. 49:33).

Gen 46:7

**“his daughters, and his sons’ daughters.”** With rare exception, these daughters of Jacob’s sons are not mentioned in the list of the 70 people who went to Egypt (Gen. 46:8-27). Nevertheless, this is an important part of figuring out how it was that the children of Israel multiplied into a nation while they were in Egypt: the descendants of Jacob in Egypt married each other. There is a good possibility that if Jacob and his family had stayed in Canaan, eventually they would have been absorbed into the local population (see commentary on Gen. 45:7).

Gen 46:8

**“These are the names of the sons of Israel who came into Egypt.”** This is exactly the way that the Book of Exodus starts. The list of the names of the people who went into Egypt are almost all sons; there were only three daughters, two named and one assumed. It is highly unusual that of the 69 people who are listed (or assumed), there were apparently only three daughters. In fact, we know there were more than that, likely many more (Gen. 46:7). Jacob’s wives are not counted in the number 66 or 70. Furthermore, any children of the women who had been incorporated into Jacob’s extended household, which included slaves and servants, would not have been counted either (for some who were likely with Jacob but not counted, see Gen. 34:29). The people named are “children of Israel,” i.e., children and grandchildren of Jacob.

The list of people, which begins here in Genesis 46:8, begins with the sons of Leah (Gen. 46:8-15). Then come the sons of Jacob by Zilpah, Leah’s slave (Gen. 46:16-18). Next come the sons of Rachel (Gen. 46:19-22). Last come the sons of Jacob by Bilhah, Rachel’s slave (Gen. 46:23-25).

**“Jacob and his children.”** There is no word in Hebrew for “grandson” or “granddaughter.” They are just called “sons” and “daughters.” Similarly, there is no Hebrew word for “grandfather” or “grandmother.” They are simply called “father” and “mother.” This can cause confusion in the text and calls for careful reading to get the order of descendants correct.

Gen 46:10

**“and Shaul the son of a Canaanite woman.”** We can conclude from Genesis 46:10 and Exodus 6:15 that Simeon had at least two wives, because Shaul was the son of a Canaanite woman. The other wife (or wives) are not spoken about.

Gen 46:13

**“Job”** The Masoretic Hebrew text reads “Job” here, but the Septuagint reads *yashub*, “Jashub,” and so does Numbers 26:24 and 1 Chronicles 7:1. It is possible that the Hebrew text was corrupted, but it is very possible that “Job” was called by two different names. Many people were.

Gen 46:15

**“his sons and his daughters were 33.”** The number given is 33, but the number in the list of the “sons” and “daughters” (i.e., descendants) of Jacob is only 32. So we can surmise that there had to have been another daughter who for some unexplained reason is not named in the list. Some people try to make Jacob himself the 33rd person, but that does not work for two reasons: the list is of the “sons and daughters” of Jacob, which would not include Jacob, and secondly, Jacob is part of the four people who are added to the 66 people (Gen. 46:26) to make 70 people (Gen. 46:27). The four added to the 66 are Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph’s two sons. Since there are a number of people who went to Egypt with Jacob who are not named, it is not unreasonable that there would be an unnamed daughter in the list.

Gen 46:20

**“Asenath.”** Asenath is the only wife of any of the sons of Jacob who is named.

Gen 46:26

**“who came out of his thigh.”** The “thigh” is euphemistic for the genital organs, and the idiom “came out of his thigh” refers to his direct descendants (see commentary on Gen. 24:2).

[For more information on sexual euphemisms, see commentary on Isa. 47:2.]

**“not counting Jacob’s sons’ wives.”** Neither Jacob’s four wives, nor his son’s wives, were counted in the list (and all of his sons were married and had children; and some of his sons likely had more than one wife, like Abraham and Jacob themselves did). The reason for this is not given in the Bible.

**“all the souls were 66.”** So Jacob had 66 people who were his direct descendants go with him into Egypt. That number did not include Jacob’s four wives, nor his son’s wives, because they were not descendants of Jacob. Nor did the number include any of Jacob’s slaves or servants (see commentary on Gen. 46:27). However, it did include the daughters Dinah (Gen. 46:15) and Serah (Gen. 46:17), because they were direct descendants of Jacob. What we can conclude is that the number of Jacob’s extended household in Egypt numbered quite a few more than 70. The wives alone (including Joseph’s wife) would have taken the number to at least 86, but even that number is likely low because it seems some of Jacob’s sons may have had more than one wife (see commentary on Gen. 46:27).

Gen 46:27

**“All the souls of the house of Jacob who came into Egypt were 70.”** The number 70 comes from the 66 people in Genesis 46:26, then adding Jacob himself, and Joseph, and Joseph’s two sons. Those four, plus the 66 people in Genesis 46:26, equals 70.

It is worth noting that Genesis 46:27 saying “all the souls of the house of Jacob” who went to Egypt is 70 is not strictly true. “All the souls” who went with Jacob were not counted. For example, none of the four wives of Jacob are counted in the list, and neither are any of the wives of Jacob’s sons counted in the list, and that would have been at least 11 more wives for a total of 15 people that, strictly speaking, should have been added to the number 70. All 11 of Jacob’s sons who stayed with him in Canaan had at least one wife, since they all had children, and the biblical and chronological evidence indicates that at least some of Jacob’s sons had more than one wife. For example, Benjamin was young when Joseph was sold into Egypt, yet according to Genesis 46:21, when Benjamin went down to Egypt he had ten sons (Gen. 46:21). Although it is possible that Benjamin married young and that his wife had ten sons in a short amount of time, that seems highly unlikely. It is more likely that Benjamin had children by more than one wife. Also, it seems clear that Simeon had more than one wife (Gen. 46:10; Exod. 6:15). If any of Jacob’s sons had more than one wife, those wives would add even more people to the 85 people that included the 70 people plus the wives of Jacob and his sons.

But there would have been more people than that! Besides the wives of Jacob’s sons in Jacob’s family not being counted, none of the servants and slaves of Jacob and his family were counted, although there may well have been a lot of them, and technically, they were part of Jacob’s “house.” For example, Jacob’s extended household would have grown quite a bit when he and his sons captured all the women and children from Shechem (see commentary on Gen. 34:29). In fact, since in the biblical culture men claimed for themselves women who were captured in battle, it would be almost certain that some of the unnamed wives in the Genesis 46 list of the souls who went to Egypt would have been women who were captured from Shechem. For example, Genesis 46:10 says Simeon married a Canaanite woman, but she would not have been the only non-Israelite wife. Until Jacob’s descendants had daughters, there were no Israelite women to marry except Dinah, so all the wives would have been non-Israelite, even if the young men married them while Jacob was with Laban in Padan-aram.

As for the number 70 given in Genesis 46:27, see the counting below. But in fact, the actual number of people who went with Jacob into Egypt is not known, but was no doubt larger—perhaps quite a bit larger—than 70. The number 70 is in some sense figurative, and is used as a general term. The specifics of the calculation differ (cf. Exod. 1:5; Deut. 10:22).

Genesis 46:8 says, “These are the names of the children of Israel [aka, “Jacob”] who came into Egypt.”

Gen. 46:9, 5 people  
Gen. 46:10, 7 people  
Gen. 46:11, 4 people  
Gen. 46:12, 6 people  
Gen. 46:13, 5 people  
Gen. 46:14, 4 people  
Gen. 46:15, 1 person (Dinah)  
Plus (assumed) 1 unnamed daughter **SUMMARY**: Gen. 46:15 (Gen. 46:8-15, the descendants of Leah) = **33 people**

Gen. 46:16, 8 people  
Gen. 46:17, 8 people (including Serah, Asher’s daughter) **SUMMARY**: Gen. 46:18 (Gen. 46:16-18, the children of Zilpah) = **16 people**

Gen. 46:19, 2 people.  
Gen. 46:20, 2 people.  
Gen. 46:21, 10 people. **SUMMARY**: Gen. 46:22 (Gen. 46:19-21, the children of Rachel) = **14 people**

Gen. 46:23, 2 people.  
Gen. 46:24, 5 people **SUMMARY**: Gen. 46:25 (Gen. 46:23-24. the children of Bilhah) = **7 people**

**SUMMARY**: Gen. 46:26. The above in Genesis 46:8-27 add up to 70 people. But Genesis 46:26 gives the number as 66. That is because the summary statement in Genesis 46:26 limits the number of people by saying that the 66 people included all the people who came “with Jacob” into Egypt (not counting the wives of the sons). So Jacob himself is omitted because the list is the people who “came with Jacob.” Also, Joseph and his two sons are not counted in the 66 because they were already in Egypt. So the number of people who came “with Jacob” to Egypt after Joseph sent people to get Jacob and his household from Canaan is 66 (Gen. 46:26). In contrast, Genesis 46:27 gives the whole number of people in Jacob’s family who ended up in Egypt, which was 70. The four people who make the 66 into 70 are Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph’s two sons.

As stated in Genesis 46:26, neither the number 66 nor the number 70 includes Jacob’s son’s wives. But nor does it count any of the servants or slaves they had with them, and it seems they would have had a lot (see commentary on Gen. 34:29). When Jacob went down to Egypt, he took “all that he had” (Gen. 46:1), which certainly indicates his extensive family group, and he would have needed help with all his flocks and herds (Gen. 46:6, 32). It is possible that the reason they are not numbered is that most, if not all of them were slaves, but that does not explain why none of Jacob’s wives nor his son’s wives were counted in the 70 in Egypt.

**SUMMARY**: Gen. 46:27: The 66 people from Genesis 46:26 plus four more people, Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph’s two sons = **70 people**

It is worth noting that the Septuagint says “75,” not “70.” The explanation of that is that for some reason the Greek translators of the Old Testament ignored the list of names here in Genesis 46 and added to the number the grandchildren of Joseph: Ephraim had three sons and Manasseh had 2 sons, for a total of five. Those five, added to the 70 in the list of Genesis 46:8-27, equals 75, the number in the Septuagint. Stephen was obviously using the Septuagint when he was speaking of the history of the Jews to the people in Acts 7:14.

Gen 46:28

**“He sent Judah.”** Jacob sent Judah ahead.

**“to give notice before *his arrival* at Goshen.”** The Hebrew text is unclear at this point, and numerous scholars have tried to piece together what it said or meant. The wide difference among the English versions reveals the lack of clarity in the text. Although a number of English versions have settled on the translation, “to show the way,” that does not seem like it would be correct. For one thing, there would have been a number of Egyptians who came along with Joseph’s brothers to make sure that they and all the valuable provisions they were carrying arrived safely in Canaan, and then that Jacob and his household and possessions got safely back to Egypt. If the group needed someone to “show the way” to Egypt, people who would have been qualified to do it would have been Egyptians, not Judah.

It is because the Hebrew is unclear that the English translations of the Hebrew phrase are so varied (e.g., “to direct him” (AMP); “to guide him” (NASB2020); “to get directions” (BSB); “to lead the way” (NRSV); “to get word from Joseph” (BBE); “so that Joseph could explain the way” (CEB); “to prepare for his arrival” (CSB); “to give notice before he came” (Darby); “so that he might meet him in Goshen” (NAB); “to see Joseph” (NCV); “to accompany him” (NET); “to advise him that he was on the way” (REB).

However, if we read the verse in its context and understand the history and geography of the time, the meaning of the verse becomes clearer. Joseph had sent a large group of wagons, provisions, and lots of food to get Jacob and the extended family (Gen 45:19, 21-23). Jacob became convinced that Joseph was alive and he and his family traveled to Egypt. Joseph knew that the Egyptians did not like foreign shepherds, so he arranged for his family to live in the land of Goshen, which was to the northeast of the larger cities of Egypt. This would keep the Egyptians and Israelites fairly separate. But Joseph did not live in Goshen, he would have lived further to the southwest, presumably in one of the capital cities. In order for Joseph to meet his family on the road and escort them to Goshen, he had to be made aware of when they were arriving. That is what Judah and some of the Egyptians who would have traveled with him were doing. They went ahead of the big group and got to Joseph and told him the group was arriving in Goshen. Then Joseph prepared his chariot and went and met his family and escorted them to Goshen (Gen. 46:29).

Gen 46:32

**“These men are shepherds because they have *always* been keepers of livestock.”** In the ancient world, most men followed in the footsteps of their father and did the same job their father had done, and that was considered honorable. So Joseph presented his family as shepherds from generations of shepherds.

Gen 46:34

**“because every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians.”** It is unclear why shepherds were an abomination to the Egyptians. A few possible ideas have been set forth. One is that it was only foreign shepherds that were an abomination. Another is that, although the Egyptians did have flocks and herds, they were mostly vegetarians, whereas families of shepherds ate a lot of meat in comparison.

**Genesis Chapter 47**

Gen 47:1

**“with their flocks.”** It is better to translate the Hebrew text as “flocks,” and not “sheep.” The flocks of Jacob and his sons would have been composed of both sheep and goats. For example, at the time of the Exodus, the Passover “lamb” could be a sheep or a goat (Exod. 12:5).

Gen 47:3

**“shepherds.”** The Hebrew is singular, “shepherd,” but it is a collective singular.

Gen 47:4

**“We have come to sojourn in the land.”** The word “sojourn” means to stay somewhere temporarily, and that is an accurate representation of what the children of Israel intended to do. Some translations have “to live as foreigners,” but that is not as accurate in this context because it does not communicate the intended temporary nature of the stay, and it also seems like they did not intend to settle peacefully among the Egyptians but intended to stay separate. They did intend to stay separate, which suited the Egyptians well, but they would not have stated that that was their intention.

Gen 47:6

**“put them in charge of my livestock.”** The Hebrew uses the word sar (#08269 שַׂר), which refers to a ruler and depending on the context can mean “leader,” “ruler,” “chief,” “commander,” etc. This is why the KJV, which is quite literal, has, “make them rulers over my cattle.” The phrase, “put them in charge of my livestock” catches the sense, although the word “ruler” speaks more strongly that this was an official position of authority.

Gen 47:8

**“How many are the days of the years of your life?”** This is idiomatic for, “How old are you?”

Gen 47:9

**“The days of the years of my sojournings are 130 years.”** Jacob was born when Isaac was 60 years old (Genesis 25:26), and lived 147 years (Genesis 47:28). The key to dating the events of Jacob’s life is that Jacob was 130 years old when he stood before Pharaoh (Gen. 47:9), which was in the second year of the famine (Gen. 45:6, 9). There had been seven years of wonderful harvest in Egypt, and now there had been two years of famine. Joseph was promoted by Pharaoh when he was 30 (Gen. 41:46) so now, when Jacob was 130, Joseph would have been 39. So if Jacob was 130 when Joseph was 39, Jacob would have been 91 years old when Joseph was born, which was the last year of the 14 years of service that Jacob owed Laban as a dowry for marrying Leah and Rachel. So Jacob would have left Israel and fled to Haran and become betrothed to Rachel (although it turned out to be Leah) when he was 77 years old.

Joseph was born the last year of Jacob’s 14-year service for Laban (Gen. 30:25-26), and Jacob could not leave Haran until the 14 years of service were over (the fact that Jacob had eleven sons in seven years is not impossible because he had two wives and two concubines, all of which had children).

The wording of Genesis 30:25-26 shows us that Joseph was born that fourteenth year, when Jacob was 91.[[156]](#footnote-11417) That means that Jacob was 77 years old when he started working for Laban and 84 years old when his first seven years of dowry-service were over and he was allowed to marry Leah and Rachel (Gen. 29:19, 26-30). After Joseph was born, Jacob stayed six more years in Haran, working for Laban and building his wealth of flocks and herds (Gen. 31:38, 41). So Jacob was 97 when he returned from Haran to the land of Judah (Gen. 31:38-41). Rachel died in childbirth when Jacob and his family were back in Israel, but they had not yet reached Bethlehem (Gen. 35:16-19).

**“Few and hard.”** The Hebrew word translated as “hard” is *ra* (#07451 רַע), which is the standard word for “evil,” and it can mean “evil” in a moral sense (as in, “that person is evil”) or it can be evil simply meaning “bad.” In this case, Jacob was pointing to the years of his life and saying they had been “hard,” “difficult.” or even “very hard.” In any case, it is not that the days had been morally evil, they were just “hard.” The Bible teaches us that life in this fallen world is hard (Gen. 3:17-19; John 16:33; Acts 14:22).

**“sojournings.”** Jacob and his ancestors were shepherds and herdsmen, and so they traveled from place to place to feed their flocks, so “sojournings” is very accurate.

Gen 47:10

**“went out from the presence of Pharaoh.”** The Hebrew is more literally that Jacob went out from the face of Pharaoh.

Gen 47:11

**“in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses.”** That the Bible mentions “the land of Rameses” is thought by many to be a historic anachronism and as such shows that later editors changed the Mosaic text. There is good biblical evidence that when it comes to Egypt, the standard dating used by most archaeologists is incorrect. Most archaeologists do not believe in Noah’s Flood, and thus date the start of the Egyptian chronology earlier than it actually could have started. Furthermore, the Pharaohs of Egypt are misplaced chronologically. Although a standard belief is that Rameses II is the pharaoh of the Exodus, that cannot be for several reasons. A major one is that the pharaoh of the Exodus died in the “Red Sea” (Lit. “Reed Sea”) (Exod. 14:9, 22; 15:19) but we have the mummy of Rameses II. That excludes him from being the pharaoh of the Exodus.

The name “Rameses” means “Born of Ra” (the Sun god). It is possible that so common a name existed before Rameses’ dynasty (19th Egyptian Dynasty, ca. 1290-1190 BC). There is no specific reason that the name Rameses would not have been used before the well-known Rameses dynasty. The Bible testifies that the name was used early. Modern scholars are quick to discount the Bible and claim that the evidence they find is true. But every year there is more and more evidence that supports the Bible as being historically accurate. Furthermore, there are modern historians who agree with the Bible and deny the “late” chronology of the Exodus.

[For more information on the Israelites in Egypt and the time of the Exodus, see David Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings*]

Gen 47:12

**“according to *the number of* their little children.”** Joseph provided so much food for his family that every little child in the family was well fed. This seems normal to us today, but in ancient biblical society, sometimes it seems that the little children were not well cared for; the men and older children got cared for first.

Gen 47:13

**“the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan.”** This likely suggests that at this time Egypt exercised considerable influence over Canaan. It also shows that if Jacob and his family had stayed in Canaan, they would have been in serious trouble.

Gen 47:14

**“money.”** The Hebrew word is literally “silver,” which was the standard word for “money” in the ancient Near East. This was centuries before coins were invented, so ordinarily the silver was weighed out in scales.

**“that was in the land.”** The Hebrew text is idiomatic: literally, “the money that was found in the land.” However, that makes it seem that the only money that Joseph collected was money that was “found” by people, and that misses the sense entirely. People did not have to “find” their money, but “find” is sometimes used in the ancient Hebrew almost as “existed.” It would not be far off the mark to translate the verse that Joseph collected all the money that existed in Egypt,” but that overstates the situation; the meaning is that he collected the money in Egypt.

**“And Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh’s house.”** Joseph was an honorable and godly man, and he brought the money to Pharaoh, he did not take any for himself.

Gen 47:16

**“livestock.”** The people had not yet eaten their livestock, which they had also managed to keep alive. This gives some credence to the historians who say the ancient Egyptians were for the most part vegetarians.

Gen 47:17

**“horses.”** This is the first time horses are mentioned in the Bible.

**“he helped them survive.”** The normal use of the Hebrew word that is translated as the phrase “helped them survive” is “to guide, to lead.” That fits in the context when we realize that the way it is used is generally in the context of “guiding” sheep to water or pasture or guiding animals to food. Joseph “guided” Jacob’s extended household to food by providing the food. Thus, the expanded translation is that he “helped them survive” by the food he provided.[[157]](#footnote-32489)

Gen 47:18

**“for my Lord.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “before the face of my Lord,” and it refers to the fact that the Egyptians had given all they had; money and livestock, so there was nothing left of theirs before Joseph that he could see. The essence of what they said was that there was nothing left “for my lord” but the people themselves (cf. CEB, CSB, NASB, NJB, NIV).

**“our bodies.”** The Hebrew word for “bodies” here is the normal word for a “corpse.” All they had left to give was their flesh body.

Gen 47:21

**“he made them servants.”** This is the reading of the Septuagint, which is almost certainly correct. The Masoretic Hebrew text reads, “he moved them to the cities,” but the Hebrew text could easily have been miscopied at this point. A number of English versions besides the REV follow the Septuagint reading (e.g., BBE, CJB, CSB, ESV, NAB, NCV, NET, NJB, NLT, NIV, NRSV, RSV).

The reading that Joseph made servants (slaves) of the people fits with what the people had said, that they would be servants (Gen. 47:19), It also fits with Genesis 47:23-24, in which the people work the land and give a fifth part of the produce to Pharaoh. If the people had been moved to cities they would not have been on the land to work it. So the Masoretic Text reading does not fit the context of the chapter, but the Septuagint reading does. This section of Genesis does not appear in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

[For more detail on how the Masoretic text could have been miscopied, see Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* [NICOT], 616.]

Gen 47:27

**“and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly.”** This was a partial fulfillment of what God had stated earlier in other places (e.g., Gen. 17:6; 35:11).

Gen 47:28

**“Jacob lived in the land of Egypt 17 years.”** It is noteworthy that Jacob lived with Joseph for 17 years before Joseph was gone, having been sold into slavery (Gen. 37:2). And then, at the end of Jacob’s life, he got to spend another 17 years with Joseph before he died.

**“were 147 years.”** For an overview of the chronology of Jacob, see commentary on Genesis 47:9.

Gen 47:29

**“The days drew near for Israel to die.”** Jacob was getting old, so the time when he would die was drawing near. Although some versions say, “must die,” that is not what the Hebrew text says. In the Hebrew text, “to die” is an infinitive.

**“put your hand under my thigh.”** This is a euphemism for “take hold of my genitals,” and it was done as part of the oath Jacob wanted Joseph to swear to him.

[For more on the practice of swearing an oath while holding the genitals, see commentary on Gen. 24:2.]

Gen 47:30

**“sleep.”** The Hebrew verb is more literally, “lie down,” but it is a euphemism for lying down in death. Note that Jacob did not expect to “go to heaven.” He expected to die and be dead. He did not say, “When my body lies down,” but when “I” lie down.

**“bury me.”** Jacob, the whole person, was buried when he died. At death, the body is lifeless and the soul (and/or “spirit”) is gone also. Jacob was under no illusions that “he” would still be alive in some form but his body would be dead. He did not say, “bury my body,” he said, “bury me.”

[For more information on the dead being actually dead and not alive in any form, see Appendix 3: “The Dead are Dead.”]

Gen 47:31

**“He said, ‘Swear to me,’ and he swore to him.”** Joseph swore that he would bury Jacob in Canaan in the cave with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and where Jacob had buried his first wife Leah, and Joseph kept his word (Gen. 50:13).

**“bowed down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth. Here Jacob would likely just bow his upper body down on the bed. It may have been at this time or a little earlier that Jacob was also using his staff for support (Heb. 11:21). This bowing is an expression of Jacob’s trust in God, that God, via Joseph, would fulfill his promise that Jacob would return to the Promised Land (cf. Gen. 46:3-4).

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

**Genesis Chapter 48**

Gen 48:1

**“your father is sick.”** This is the first time in the Bible that someone is recorded as being sick.

**“So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.”** It is important to keep in mind that these children were born in Egypt before Jacob arrived. In fact, Joseph was married nine years before Jacob arrived. Also, Jacob had now lived in Egypt for 17 years. If the boys were born fairly shortly after Joseph was married, say within the first four years after Joseph was married, then at this point they would have been in their early 20s when they stood before Jacob. They were not small children, they were full-grown and likely assisting Joseph in his work. In the biblical world, most sons followed in their father’s occupation.

Gen 48:3

**“El Shaddai.”** “El Shaddai” is the name of God that is commonly translated as “God Almighty” (see commentary on Gen. 17:1).

**“appeared to me.”** Here Jacob recalls the very first time God appeared to him when he was fleeing from his brother Esau and going to Haran. The record is Genesis 28:10-19, and Luz is mentioned in Gen. 28:19. Luz was the old name, Jacob renamed it Beth-el (or Bethel) “the house of God.”

Gen 48:5

**“Now your two sons...are mine.”** This is highly unusual; Jacob must have made this statement by revelation from God. As it turned out, Ephraim and Manasseh each got a tribal land area in the Promised Land just as if they had been birth sons of Jacob. Also, however, Joseph gave up his birth-possession, because he did not get a tribal area in Israel, but was displaced by his sons.

In order for Jacob to pass a tribal name and possession to his grandsons, he would have had to formally adopt them into his family as his sons. Although that ceremony is not described in detail here in Genesis, there are enough clues that we can tell that must have been what happened.

**“Ephraim and Manasseh.”** Ephraim and Manasseh received prime real estate in central Israel.

Gen 48:6

**“Your offspring whom you father after them.”** This is hypothetical. There is no evidence that Joseph had other sons besides Ephraim and Manasseh, even though he may have had sons after Ephraim and Manasseh. If Joseph did have any sons after Ephraim and Manasseh, they would have had to become part of the tribe of either Ephraim or Manasseh by location or association.

Gen 48:7

**“on the road, when there was still some distance to come to Ephrath.”** There is evidence that is likely correct that Rachel’s tomb is some distance north of where the traditional tomb is located (see commentary on Gen. 35:19).

Gen 48:8

**“Who are these?”** There are a couple of suggestions as to why Jacob would say this. Nahum Sarna suggests that Jacob would have known his two grandsons, whom he had been near for the last 17 years, and what is happening here is part of the formal adoption process, in which Jacob adopted Ephraim and Manasseh as his own sons. Part of that process was a formal recognition of who it was that was being adopted.[[158]](#footnote-11640) There is a good possibility that Sarna is correct, and that is the reason, or part of the reason, for Jacob’s statement, “Who are these.”

Many scholars suggest that Jacob asked for the identity of those who were before him because Jacob’s vision was so poor that he could not recognize Ephraim and Manasseh. While that may have been the case and part of the reason that Jacob asked who was before him, it is also possible that he had flashback memories of when his father, Isaac, was old with failing vision (Gen. 27:1), and thus he was able to trick his father into blessing him instead of his brother Esau.

Given the fact that Jacob seemed to know that Joseph was standing before him, it is doubtful he thought he was being tricked, and it seems that Nahum Sarna’s suggestion has merit.

Gen 48:9

**“so that I can bless them.”** The NET text note explains the translation: “The cohortative with prefixed *vav* (ו) indicates purpose after the imperative.”

Gen 48:10

**“and he kissed them and embraced them.”** It is important to keep in mind that these children were born in Egypt before Jacob arrived. In fact, Joseph was married nine years before Jacob arrived. Also, Jacob had now lived in Egypt for 17 years. If the boys were born fairly shortly after Joseph was married, then at this point they likely would have been in their early 20s when they stood before Jacob.

Gen 48:12

**“from beside Israel’s knees.”** This is the meaning of the text, not “from between his knees.”[[159]](#footnote-15716) Ephraim and Manasseh were born before Jacob entered Egypt, and Jacob had now lived there for some 17 years, so the “boys” were likely 20 years old or a little older. They would not have been “between” Jacob’s knees, but beside them.

**“he bowed down.”** Joseph bowed down. The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth, as we see in this verse.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Gen 48:13

**“and brought them close to him.”** In Genesis 48:12, Joseph took his sons from beside Jacob and moved them toward himself. Now he moves them back to where Jacob can easily reach them so Jacob can bless them.

Gen 48:15

**“The God in whose presence.”** The literal Hebrew is “before whose face,” and the ultimate sense is likely picked up in the JPS, “in whose ways” my fathers lived.

Gen 48:16

**“the angel.”** This is agency. God blesses them, but does so through the angel. This is one of the places where a plural subject takes a singular verb (cf. Exod. 4:29, “Moses and Aaron went (the went is singular). Judges 5:1, “saying” is singular. 1 Kings 1:34, “anointed” is singular. 1 Kings 22:29, “went up” is singular; 2 Kings 10:23, “went” is singular but Jehu and Jehonadab went). It sometimes happens that a plural subject takes a singular verb. Gesenius says, “As in other languages, so also in Hebrew, the predicate, in general, conforms with the subject in gender in number...there are, however, exceptions to this fundamental rule.”[[160]](#footnote-31979)

**“bless the young men.”** Joseph’s sons would likely be in their early 20s. The verb is singular. This has caused some theologians to say that God is a Trinity because here God and the angel are spoken of with a singular verb, “bless.” But there is much wrong with that logic. For one thing, it occurs a number of times in the Bible that a plural subject is paired with a singular verb (cf. Exod. 4:29 (“went”); Exod. 8:8; 10:3; Josh. 8:3; etc.). Also, in this case, the angel may have been representing God in this context, as angels often do; there is no “and” before “the angel,” so the angel could be representing God, and this would be a case of divine agency. That would make this verse about the representative of God, just like the angel who wrestled with Jacob and changed his name to Israel.

**“and let my name be named on them.”** Jacob was acting as the adoptive father and claiming Ephraim and Manasseh as his sons (cf. Gen. 48:5).

Gen 48:17

**“it displeased him.”** The Hebrew is literally, “it was bad in his eyes.”

Gen 48:20

**“By you.”** The “you” is singular, so by that, Jacob sets Ephraim first and puts the emphasis on him.

**“make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh.”** In the blessing, Ephraim is first, before Manasseh. When Moses set the tribes around the Tabernacle, Ephraim had a more exalted place. In Ruth 4:11, Rachel is placed first, before Leah, although Leah had Jacob’s first four sons, one of which was Judah.

Gen 48:21

**“and bring you again to the land.”** This prophecy was fulfilled at the Exodus, when the Israelites took Joseph’s mummified body out of Egypt and buried it in the territory of Manasseh.

Gen 48:22

**“I have given to you.”** Jacob is speaking to Joseph. Joseph gets two portions in the Promised Land; a double inheritance. The eldest son gets two portions, and Joseph was the oldest son of Rachel, whom Jacob intended to marry first.

**“with my sword and with my bow.”** There is no record of this.

**Genesis Chapter 49**

Gen 49:1

**“and I will tell you what will happen.”** Interpreting the prophecy of Jacob is not at all straightforward. For example, in many cases, the Hebrew words in the prophecy have multiple meanings and so what the prophecy is actually saying is unclear. That is especially true when one phrase or sentence has more than one word with multiple meanings, and thus the phrases can be translated in several different ways. This lack of clarity can be seen in the various English translations, which often differ widely in how they read.

**“in the future.”** The phrase refers to the future without a precise delineation, i.e., exactly when in the future these prophecies are to apply and be fulfilled is not stated. Nahum Sarna writes that the meaning is “simply ‘in the future’ without definition. In the Torah the phrase is used in a context of historical time, but in prophetic literature the phrase became a technical term for the ‘end time’ (*eschaton*), when the historical process would reach its culmination and God’s grand design for the human race would be fulfilled.”[[161]](#footnote-16786) As it turned out, most of Jacob’s prophecy was fulfilled in the time after Joshua when Israel conquered the Promised Land, but some of it does refer to the actual End Times.

Gen 49:4

**“Uncontrollable.”** The Hebrew noun translated as “uncontrollable” in some English versions only occurs here in the Bible and so there is disagreement among the scholars as to how to translate it. Translations that occur in other versions include “boiling over” (ASV); “wild” (CEB); “unstable” (CJB); “turbulent” CSB; and “destructive” (NET).

**“you will not excel.”** This prophecy certainly came to pass. The tribe of Reuben was the southernmost of the tribes of Israel that settled in the Transjordan, and they settled on the northern border of Moab, with Ammon to their east. They never had a position of influence in the tribes of Israel located in the Promised Land and they disappeared from history when Assyria conquered Israel and the Transjordan in 722 BC. Also, the evidence supports the birthright that would have been Reuben’s was passed down to Judah, the fourth son (Simeon and Levi were passed over also, due to their sin, as mentioned in Jacob’s prophecy).

**“you went up on your father’s bed.”** Reuben had sex with Jacob’s concubine wife Bilhah (Gen. 35:22).

**“He went up on my couch.”** The Hebrew text reads “he.” Some English Bibles follow the Septuagint, Syriac, and Aramaic Targum in reading “you” but pronouns are known to shift quickly in the Hebrew text and the reading “you” is likely a scribal emendation to the original.

Gen 49:5

**“their agreements are weapons of violence.”** The Hebrew text is very unclear here. The Hebrew word translated “agreements” is *mᵊḵērâ* (#04380 מְכֵרָה), and it is a very rare word, only used here in the Old Testament. Victor Hamilton gives seven different interpretations given by scholars as to what the word means.[[162]](#footnote-13569) There are a number of versions that translate the verse in a way that points to the conspiracy that Simeon and Levi made when they planned to kill the men of Shechem (Gen. 34:13, 24-25). So, for example, the BBE has “secret designs.” The NJB has “their malicious plans.” The REB has “their counsels.” Rotherham has “their agreements,” The agreement, or conspiracy, that Levi and Simeon made between themselves also fits with the continuation of Jacob’s prophecy, which speaks of being part of their “council” and “assembly” (Gen. 49:6). Jacob wanted no part of the evil plans of Levi and Simeon.

Gen 49:6

**“and hamstrung an ox.”** What this phrase refers to is debated. It could easily be literal, that in their anger Levi and Simeon went amuck and killed both the men of Shechem and hamstrung an ox or two. However, that does not seem to make sense.

The Hebrew word translated as “ox” is singular, although most English versions take it as a collective singular and translate it as “cattle” or “oxen.” However, there is no reason to make the noun plural here, and a good reason not to. When Levi and Simeon killed all the men of Shechem, they took the women, the children, and the livestock as plunder (Gen. 34:27-29). Presumably, when Levi and Simeon took away from the people of Shechem “their flocks and their herds and their donkeys” (Gen. 34:28), that would include the cattle as part of their herds.

As for the cattle, there are two primary reasons that hamstringing the cattle does not make sense. One reason is that cattle were valuable, and there would have been no reason for Simeon and Levi to hamstring the cattle because then they could not lead them away as plunder; they would have had to leave them in Shechem lame or kill them. And even if they killed an ox or two to eat while they were there, they would not have taken the time to hamstring the cow first.

The other reason that hamstringing the cattle does not make sense is that there was simply no reason to do it. Levi and Simeon killed the men of Shechem and took away the women and children. There was no one left in town. So why hamstring the cattle and just leave them there? If Levi and Simeon did not want the cattle, and did not want anyone else to have them, then just kill them, don’t take the time (and risk) to hamstring them. Given the reasons why the phrase “hamstrung an ox” does not make sense, we can see why what it refers to is debated.

Interestingly, there is a possibility that “an ox” is being used by metonymy for the leader of the city. So, for example, both the YLT and the LSV read that they “eradicated a prince.” That could make sense. Levi and Simeon would have killed the men of the city and made sure that the leader of the city was dead too. However, it must be said that scholars do not favor that reading.

Another possible reading, one found in the KJV and a few other versions, is that the men “digged down a wall.” Although that reading is grammatically possible, the scholars do not favor it and there does not seem to be any reason the men would do that.

Gen 49:7

**“I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel.”** This prophecy came true. The Levites served the Tabernacle and were scattered in Israel, being given cities in each of the 12 tribal areas. Simeon was not given a specific tribal area like the other 11 tribes that got land, instead, they inherited in the tribal area of Judah and eventually became more or less consumed by Judah.

Gen 49:8

**“on the back of the necks of your enemies!”** As if they were fleeing away and were caught. There is a better word for neck if God wanted to use it.

**“bow down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

**“Your father’s sons will bow down before you.”** This was fulfilled in the Davidic dynasty in Israel, and will be ultimately fulfilled when everyone bows before Jesus Christ, who was from the tribe of Judah and thus a direct descendant of Judah and David.

Gen 49:9

**“like a lion.”** The lion eventually became the symbol of the Kingdom of Judah.

**“lion...lion.”** The Hebrew uses two different words for “lion.” In the second colon, the word that in the KJV and other English versions is translated as “lioness” is not feminine, and furthermore, it is followed by the pronoun “him.” It is assumed that Jacob juxtaposed “lion” with “lioness” because lionesses fiercely protect their young, but that does not seem to be a solid enough reason to ignore the masculine noun and seemingly ignore the following pronoun, “him.” It is very common in Hebrew to juxtapose two words that mean basically the same thing for clarity and emphasis.

Gen 49:10

**“The scepter will not depart from Judah.”** This particular prophecy of Judah is not well understood. It points to the coming of the Messiah but seems to say that the tribe of Judah would have the leadership until that time, which it did not. Although the tribe of Judah did take a leading role at times in Israel’s history, the leaders after Jacob, including Moses and Joshua were not from the tribe of Judah. Once Israel settled in the Promised Land there were judges that in a sense took the leadership role, but only a couple of the Judges were from Judah, most were not. Then, when a king was finally appointed over Israel, the king was Saul from the tribe of Benjamin instead of being someone from the tribe of Judah. When David became king and the Davidic dynasty of Judah finally began, it only lasted a shade over 500 years before Judah was destroyed by Babylon, and after that, the appointed leaders governing Judah were subjects of Babylon, then Persia, then Greece. After Greek domination came the Hasmonean Dynasty, but its leaders were from the tribe of Levi, not Judah. Then the Romans controlled the Promised Land (King Herod ruled by the grace of Rome) and did so until years after Jesus Christ came on the scene. So it is not really understood by scholars how the prophecy that the scepter would not depart from Judah until the Messiah came was fulfilled. It may be that in the context of Jacob’s prophecy, it meant that no other tribe would have the rule of Israel except Judah, but even that does not really work because many of the Judges were not from Judah, nor was King Saul. So this prophecy in the Old Testament is not well understood.

**“until he comes to whom it belongs.”** The NET text note points out that there are four major translational possibilities, and many variations of the four. As listed in the NET note, the four possibilities are: “1) Some prefer to leave the text as it is, reading “Shiloh” and understanding it as the place where the ark rested for a while in the time of the Judges. (2) By repointing the text others arrive at the translation “until the [or “his”] ruler comes,” a reference to a Davidic ruler or the Messiah. (3) Another possibility that does not require emendation of the consonantal text, but only repointing, is “until tribute is brought to him” (so NEB, JPS, NRSV), which has the advantage of providing good parallelism with the following line, “the nations will obey him.” (4) The interpretation followed in the present translation, “to whom it [belongs]” (so RSV, NIV, REB), is based on the ancient versions. Again, this would refer to the Davidic dynasty or, ultimately, to the Messiah.”

Another prophecy that is quite similar to Genesis 49:10 that God will give the Messiah the kingdom is Ezekiel 21:27.

Gen 49:11

**“Binding his foal to the vine, his donkey’s colt to the choice vine.”** The act of tying the donkey to the vine meant war was over; it was a time of peace. More than one thousand years after Jacob’s prophecy, the prophet Zechariah foretold that the Messiah would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, bringing “salvation” (Zech. 9:9). At the time Zechariah wrote, “salvation” usually meant physical deliverance, but could include everlasting deliverance.

Jacob’s prophecy about Judah in Genesis 49:8-12 is incredibly accurate. The first two verses, Genesis 49:8-9, portray both leadership—even kingship—and conflict. Then Genesis 49:10 points to the kingship being from Judah. Then Genesis 49:11-12 point to a time of peace. The donkey is tied to a vine. A mature vine indicates a time of lasting peace (cf. the Messianic times portrayed in Mic. 4:4; Zech. 3:10). Furthermore, there will be an abundance at that time, in fact, so much abundance that a person could wash their clothes in wine, showing that wine would be so abundant it would be treated as if it were water.

So the picture portrayed in Genesis 49:8-12 is one of the ascendency of the tribe of Judah mixed with conflict until the Messiah comes, then he comes and rules, then there is peace and abundance in the land. That mini-description is a good overview of the past and what is still future.

**“will wash his clothing in wine.”** The Hebrew is an example of the prophetic perfect idiom, speaking of a future event as if it were past. That “Judah” would wash his garments in “the blood of grapes” is a picture of abundance, but also almost certainly of the coming Messiah’s conquest of the earth. The Battle of Armageddon is referred to as the “winepress” because of all the blood that is spilled in that battle. There will be millions of people killed at that time, and their blood will splash onto Christ’s garments (Isa. 63:3; cf. Rev. 19:13). The Battle of Armageddon is also referred to as “the winepress” in Isaiah 63:2-3; Joel 3:13; Revelation 14:19-20 and 19:15 (see commentary on Rev. 19:15).

That Judah would wash his clothing in wine may also be a kind of hint about what territory God would assign to Judah. The hill country that the tribe of Judah inherited by lot in the time of Joshua was well-known for its grapes.

[For more on the prophetic perfect idiom, see commentary on Eph. 2:6.]

**“the blood of grapes.”** A graphic and poetic way to write about abundant grape juice. The phrase is first used here in Genesis 49:11 in Jacob’s prophecy to his son Judah, but also used in Deuteronomy 32:14.

Gen 49:12

**“His eyes, darker than wine.”** The translation of this verse is disputed. The translation can be something like, “Darker, his eyes than wine; whiter, his teeth than milk.” Or it can be similar to the NET Bible: “His eyes will be red from wine and his teeth white from milk.” Having eyes darker than wine and teeth whiter than milk describes ideal beauty in the ancient biblical culture, and that translation would imply that Judah would be a beautiful people blessed by God. On the other hand, having eyes red from wine and teeth white from milk implies that Judah would have an abundance of good things. That fits the context well because Genesis 49:11 indicates that wine will be so abundant in the tribe of Judah that it will be treated like water and used to wash clothes. Although the REV follows the interpretation in the NET (cf. ASV, BBE, DBY, GNV, KJV, NASB, NJB, RSV, YLT), it is quite possible that this is an amphibologia (double entendre) and that both meanings are true and intended in the text: Judah will be blessed with beauty and abundance. To fully understand that, in the biblical culture of the Old Testament, having eyes red from wine did not imply the person was a drunkard and sinner, but rather that he had an abundance of good things.

We must remember that this is a prophecy, but it turned out to be very accurate. When Jacob gave this prophecy, the tribal locations for the tribes of Israel had not been assigned by Joshua. Judah got their inheritance in the Promised Land some 150 years later when it was conquered (cf. Joshua 13-18). But when Judah got their inheritance Jacob’s prophecy was shown to be extremely accurate. C. F. Keil writes, “The soil in Judah produced the best wine in Canaan, near Hebron and Engedi...and had excellent pasture land in the desert by Tekoah and Carmel, to the south of Hebron.”[[163]](#footnote-15359) So Judah did have an abundance of wine and milk.

In the context, Genesis 49:12 flows well with the situation in Judah when the Messiah reigns; there will be an abundance of blessings (see commentary on Gen. 49:11).

Gen 49:13

**“His border will be at Sidon.”** Zebulun and Issachar are mentioned in Jacob’s prophecy after Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah because those are the children of Leah, the first and most legitimate wife of Jacob, who had six sons. This prophecy of Zebulun is confusing. When Joshua divided up the Promised Land, the tribal area of Zebulun did not touch the Mediterranean Sea, nor was it close to Sidon, nor were there any ships in Zebulun, because the tribe was landlocked. Asher to the west bordered the sea and came close to Sidon, while Naphtali to the east reached the Sea of Galilee. The prophecy of Zebulun puzzles scholars. It may be that the prophecy over Zebulun did not come to pass because of something that happened between the time Jacob gave the prophecy and when the territory was being given out in Joshua 19. But we just do not know.

Given the fact that up to this point Jacob’s prophecy mentioned the sons of Jacob in Leah’s birth order, we would expect that Issachar would come before Zebulun, but Zebulun is mentioned before Issachar. Perhaps that is because Issachar’s future of being a bearer of burdens and servant to others was not as glorious as Zebulun’s prophecy.

Gen 49:14

**“strong-boned.”** The Hebrew word is simply “bone,” a “bone donkey,” but the phrase indicates that the donkey was very strong.

**“campfires.”** The meaning of the Hebrew word is debated and the English versions differ (e.g., “sheepfolds” (ASV); “village hearths” (CEB); “saddlebags” (CSB); “borders” (Douay Rheims); and “burdens” (KJV)). For the translation “campfires,” see Word Biblical Commentary[[164]](#footnote-29200) on Judges 5:16, the only other place this Hebrew word is used.

Gen 49:15

**“and became a servant doing forced labor.”** There were likely several times in the history of Issachar that the people were forced into labor. A likely one is in Judges 4, when Jabin, king of Canaan, “severely oppressed” the Israelites (Judg. 4:3).

Gen 49:16

**“Dan.”** Dan is the first son of one of Jacob’s concubines to be mentioned in Jacob’s prophecy (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun and Issachar were from Jacob’s wife Leah), but he was considered equal to the other tribes of Israel even though the son of a concubine.

**“Dan will judge his people.”** It is not clear exactly how this prophecy will be fulfilled. It well may have been partially fulfilled when Samson was a judge over Israel (Judg. 13-16; cf. Judg. 16:31).

**“the tribes of Israel.”** This is the first use of the phrase, “the tribes of Israel” in the Bible. By the time Jacob gave this prophecy, the descendants of Jacob were so numerous that the descendants of his sons had grown into tribes. As the history of Israel developed, sometimes the tribes acted very independently, and sometimes they acted with unity. Israel became a kingdom under their first king, Saul, but became truly powerful and unified under David.

Gen 49:17

**“Dan will be a serpent on the road.”** The Danites left the tribal area allotted to them by Joshua and moved north to the area of Laish (Judg. 18. Later Laish was renamed Dan). That northern move placed the tribe of Dan as the first tribe to be attacked when armies came from the north, and come they did. The Syrians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans all came into Israel from the north. It is possible that over time every living descendant of Dan was killed off. That might explain why there are no representatives from the tribe of Dan listed among the 144,000 people of Israel sealed as servants of God in Revelation (Rev. 7:5-8. In that list “Joseph” represents Ephraim).

Gen 49:18

**“your salvation.”** This exclamation is in the midst of a host of future prophecies, so it is most likely that the salvation Jacob has in mind is eschatological salvation; salvation to everlasting life.

Gen 49:19

**“Gad.”** The name “Gad” refers to good fortune (see commentary on Gen. 30:11). However, there are closely related words that refer to a raiding troop or a military troop.[[165]](#footnote-29166) Jacob uses a wordplay to associate “Gad” with “raiding band,” which is the appropriate comparison in this prophecy.

Because of the revelation that Jacob receives from Yahweh about the future of the tribe of Gad, Jacob disassociated the meaning of “Gad,” “good fortune,” from the name that the boy was given at birth. Thus, instead of “Good Fortune,” Jacob uses a play on words and associates the name “Gad” with a closely related word that refers to a raiding band or troop. Kenneth Matthews writes: “He [Jacob] reverses the favorable meaning of Gad received at birth (‘What good fortune!’...) to the misfortune brought on by a ‘band’...of invading marauders. But he [Gad] is resilient, ‘attacking’...those who ‘attack’ him. That Gad strikes at the heel...shows that the enemy is in flight, vulnerable from the rear. Gad, located in the region of Gilead,...was vulnerable to encroaching forces. ...Along with Reuben and the half-tribe of Manasseh, Gad was sandwiched between the Moabites to the south, the Ammonites to the east, and the Arameans to the northeast. As a consequence of their wars for survival, the Gadites became renowned warriors (e.g., 1 Chron. 5:18; 12:8, 12).[[166]](#footnote-13810)

So, because of Jacob’s wordplay, “Gad” (“Good Fortune”) becomes associated with “raiding band,” a meaning that fits the prophecy of the future of the tribe of Gad.

Gen 49:20

**“Asher’s food will be rich.”** The tribe of Asher was assigned one of the most fertile areas in Israel, so this prophecy certainly came to pass. The word translated as “rich” in the REV is more literally “fat,” but “fat” has a positive connotation in ancient culture. However, in modern times “fat” has come to have a derogatory meaning so most English translations avoid it.

Gen 49:21

**“Naphtali is a doe set free.”** The prophecy about Naphtali is difficult to interpret since so little is known about that tribe. However, it has much flat land and thus horses and chariots could run free for miles, which is how King Jabin who reined in Hazor oppressed Israel for 20 years (Judg. 4, 5).

The meaning of the Hebrew vocabulary in Genesis 49:21 is not clear, mostly due to the fact that the vocabulary used can have more than one meaning. This has resulted in a couple of different endings of the verse appearing in the English versions. The NET text note reads, “Almost every word in this verse is difficult.” While the REV and other versions have “who bears beautiful fawns,” other translations have something like “he gives beautiful words” (NASB), and “he puts forth antlers of beauty” (Rotherham).

Gen 49:22

**“son...son”** The word “son” is *ben* in the Hebrew text. Similarly, the word translated as “daughters” is *bat* in the Hebrew text. Some scholars have assumed that Joseph is being illustrated as a vine with branches, but there is no need to translate the text that way.

Gen 49:24

**“by the name of.”** The Hebrew verb needs to be reverbalized, as the NET text note points out. The Hebrew text is “‘from there,’ but the phrase should be revocalized and read ‘from [i.e., because of] the name of.’”

Gen 49:25

**“*El* Shaddai.”** The Masoretic Hebrew text only has “Shaddai” without the “El,” but that seems to be a scribal omission. Some Hebrew texts, along with the Samaritan Pentateuch, Septuagint, and Syriac, all have “El Shaddai,” and that fits with the name for God that Jacob had used before.

[For more on the title of El Shaddai and its meaning, see commentary on Gen. 17:1.]

Gen 49:28

**“All these are the twelve tribes of Israel.”** This is the first mention of “the twelve tribes of Israel,” and it points to the national unity that was developing: “Israel” as a distinct group or nation among the nations. All twelve sons are individually mentioned in this blessing, and Joseph instead of Ephraim and Manasseh.

**“He blessed each according to his *own* blessing.”** Each of Jacob’s twelve sons received their own blessing appropriate to them.

Gen 49:29

**“about to be gathered to my people.”** An idiom for dying, and a reason that in the culture, people had family burial plots—people wanted to be buried with their family. The participle indicates the proximity of the event, hence the translation “about to be.”

**“Bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite.”** The fact that Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah were all buried in the cave of Machpelah emphasizes the fact that the promise of God about inheriting the land was firmly believed by them.

Gen 49:30

**“facing Mamre.”** The Hebrew text has the word for “face,” and “facing Mamre” is a good translation (e.g. JPS, The Schocken Bible). The idea is that Mamre (likely “Hebron”) was close to the cave Abraham bought.

**“which Abraham bought.”** The record of Abraham’s purchase of the field and cave is in Genesis 23:2-20.

Gen 49:32

**“*our* property.”** The cave and the field that Abraham bought would have been passed down to Isaac, and then Jacob would have inherited the field and cave from Isaac; Esau apparently gave up his interest in it and moved southeast. Now that Jacob is on his deathbed, the ownership of the property would have been sorted out once Jacob was dead. As it turned out, when Joshua divided up the land, the area that the field and cave were in was in the tribal allotment of Judah.

Gen 49:33

**“gathered up...was gathered.”** The Hebrew verb is the same, but the first is active voice and the second is passive voice. Jacob acted and gathered his feet, but he “was gathered” to his people. His life ran its course and he died.

**“breathed his last.”** The Hebrew verb translated “breathed his last” is *gava* (#01478 גָּוַע), and it refers to dying (see commentary on Gen. 25:8, “breathed his last”).

**Genesis Chapter 50**

Gen 50:1

**“Joseph fell on his father’s face.”** This is idiomatic. What likely happened is that Joseph lay on Jacob’s body and hugged it.

Gen 50:9

**“It was a very great company.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “camp,” not “company,” but in this case “camp” is not the best translation and “company” makes good sense. The word “camp” has a military overtone, and that is purposeful. The chariots and horsemen went for security reasons.

Gen 50:10

**“the threshing floor of Atad that is beyond the Jordan.”** The threshing floor of Atad has not been located. The Bible does not give a reason why the company would travel to east of the Jordan River when a straight march up the Way of the Patriarchs through Beersheba and northward would have been much shorter. Perhaps it was for security reasons. We just do not know.

Gen 50:11

**“Abel Mizraim.”** Meaning, the “mourning of Egypt.”

Gen 50:15

**“saw that their father was dead.”** Now that Jacob was dead, the reality of the situation struck Joseph’s brothers, who were not the most godly people, and they misread Joseph’s character and thought that he might take revenge on him.

**“What if.”** The brothers have a fear based on their false read of Joseph’s character, and so they come up with a plot to save themselves.

**“repays, yes, repays.”** The word “repay” is repeated twice for emphasis in the Hebrew text making the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

Gen 50:17

**“forgive.”** The word here means “to carry away.” The brothers ask to be released from the burden and debt of their sin.

**“Joseph wept when they spoke to him.”** The brothers “speak” through the messenger.

Gen 50:18

**“His brothers themselves went.”** They sent a messenger earlier (Gen. 50:16).

Gen 50:20

**“planned.”** The Hebrew word is *chashab* (#02803 חָשַׁב). The *TWOT* says: “The basic idea of the word is the employment of the mind in thinking activity. Reference is not so much to ‘understanding’ (cf. bi^n), but to the creating of new ideas. …Six clear variations of the basic thought of this root can be distinguished in the OT. The most frequently used is that of ‘planning,’ ‘devising.’ This variation is employed in reference to both man and God…. In one verse, Gen. 50:20, there is reference to both man and God, as Joseph uses the word twice; first in saying that his brothers ‘meant’ (planned) evil in their earlier treatment of him, but that God ‘meant’ (planned) it for good.”[[167]](#footnote-15571) The translation “planned” occurs in some other modern versions besides the REV (HCSB, GW, NJB, Rotherham, Schocken Bible). Many versions use the word “intended,” such that the verse reads his brothers “intended” to do harm but God “intended it” for good, and others read “meant” and read “meant evil” and “God meant it for good.” To us those readings make it seem like God had a hand in the brothers’ evil planning, which He didn’t. God did not plan for Joseph’s brothers to do evil. They did that on their own by their own free will, and then God planned around their evil plans.

What we see in Genesis 50:20 is people planning to do harm, and God working with the situation to bring good out of it. Although some people read into this verse that God plans for people to do evil so He can make good come from it, that is not what the verse says. It simply says that people planned evil, but God planned for good. God gives us free will, and we have the ability to make good or bad choices. If we make bad choices, sometimes God can work with those choices and still bring about a good result. Thus, as people plan to do evil, God counter-plans ways to redeem the situation. Sadly, God has to respect some of the bad choices humans make, even though they end up being to their detriment. For example, if a person chooses not to be saved and have everlasting life, God has to honor that choice and allow them to die in the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:11-15).

We can be sure that in biblical history many people were unjustly kidnapped and sold into slavery who then lived miserable lives and died lonely deaths. In Joseph’s case, God worked powerfully to position him to be able to save the nation of Israel. Man planned evil, but God planned for good, although man’s evil still meant people had to pay a price for that evil: Joseph was enslaved and imprisoned and separated from his family; Jacob was heartbroken for years; and Joseph’s brothers lived with the daily guilt of seeing their father and family suffer. Sin has a price, even when God can redeem the situation.

Gen 50:23

**“were born on Joseph’s knees.”** This phrase implies formal adoption (see [Sarna](https://archive.org/details/genesisbereshitt0000sarn_v3u6/page/351/mode/2up) and [NET text note](https://classic.net.bible.org/verse.php?book=Gen&chapter=50&verse=23&tab=commentaries)).

Gen 50:24

**“brothers.”** This is not all his literal brothers. He was the second youngest son of Jacob and he lived 110 years. So in this case, “brothers” refers to the wider family of Jacob, the grandsons, etc., of Jacob.

**“visit, yes, visit you.”** In this context, God’s visit was to bless Israel. The phrase “visit, yes, visit” is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

[For more on “visit,” see commentary on Exod. 20:5.]

Gen 50:26

**“a coffin.”** This is the only place in the Old Testament where a coffin is mentioned.

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4. Victor P. Hamilton, Genesis: Chapters 1-17 [NICOT], 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-23614)
5. Heiser, Unseen Realm, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-21067)
6. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, HALOT Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-25701)
7. John Goldingay, The First Testament: A New Translation, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-11472)
8. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-23429)
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15. S. R. Driver, The Book of Genesis, Westminster Commentaries, 2nd ed., 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-30183)
16. Cf. Bullinger, Companion Bible, Appendix 19, “The ‘Serpent’ of Genesis 3.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15725)
17. Fox, The Schocken Bible: The Five Books of Moses. [↑](#footnote-ref-24830)
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20. Keil and Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch, 103 (emphasis original). [↑](#footnote-ref-22776)
21. Susan T. Foh, “What is the Woman’s Desire?” Westminster Theological Journal 37 (1975): 376-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-18301)
22. Bullinger, Companion Bible, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-21240)
23. BDB, s.v. “יָטַב” [↑](#footnote-ref-12742)
24. Everett Fox, The Schocken Bible: The Five Books of Moses. [↑](#footnote-ref-28141)
25. Bullinger, Companion Bible, 9n13. [↑](#footnote-ref-12274)
26. Lamsa, The Holy Bible from Ancient Eastern Manuscripts. [↑](#footnote-ref-16174)
27. Lancelot L. Brenton, The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament, Gen. 4:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-10294)
28. The Holy Bible: 1611 Edition, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN. [↑](#footnote-ref-28966)
29. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-21995)
30. Nahum M. Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-31575)
31. Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon. [↑](#footnote-ref-11304)
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33. Freeman, Manners and Customs of the Bible, #1. [↑](#footnote-ref-23620)
34. Victor Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17 [NICOT], 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-19514)
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36. Kenneth Matthews, Genesis 1:1-11:26 [NAC], 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-24873)
37. Gordon Wenham, Genesis 1-15 [WBC], 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-28522)
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40. Henry Morris, The Genesis Record, 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-15400)
41. Bullinger, Companion Bible, Deuteronomy 2:20n, “noisy ones.” [↑](#footnote-ref-25193)
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43. Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1-15 [WBC], 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-19085)
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59. E. A. Speiser, Genesis [AB], 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-29869)
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62. Nelson Glueck, Rivers in the Desert, [JPS], 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-21970)
63. Victor Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17 [NICOT], 397. [↑](#footnote-ref-31929)
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65. E. A. Speiser, Genesis [AB], 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-28196)
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73. C. F. Keil, Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament, 1:138. [↑](#footnote-ref-13441)
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87. Clifford, The Cosmic Mountain, 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-23770)
88. Clifford, The Cosmic Mountain, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-16651)
89. Clifford, The Cosmic Mountain, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-23449)
90. See Bullinger, Figures of Speech, 189, 491, “epizeuxis.” [↑](#footnote-ref-28909)
91. Victor Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-7 [NICOT], 465. [↑](#footnote-ref-27240)
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93. Everett Fox, The Schocken Bible. [↑](#footnote-ref-29655)
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100. Victor Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50 [NICOT], 76, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-21659)
101. Everett Fox, The Five Books of Moses, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-21848)
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103. Soren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, xi-xii, 7-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-23791)
104. Cf. David H. Stern, The Complete Jewish Bible. [↑](#footnote-ref-29480)
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155. Henry Morris, The Genesis Record, 629. [↑](#footnote-ref-27888)
156. Cf. Keil and Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-11417)
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