Rivalry in Genesis
A New Reading

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Introduction

As a student of Bible, I have wondered why stories of rivalries fill the chapters of Genesis: rivalry between brothers, of course, but also rivalry between wives, sisters, cousins, and spouses. I have wrestled with what such a terse text as the Bible could be conveying by seeming to repeat these family conflicts in every possible variation. Many modern scholars have written about aspects of the rivalry in Genesis, dealing with the ideas of chosenness and ultimo-geniture, selection of the younger over the elder son.[1] But I have not been satisfied with their readings. Nowhere have I seen my concerns addressed: Why are there so many, and why they are reiterated in so many different family configurations?

Here I present a reading of the rivalries in Genesis that addresses these concerns. Earlier scholarly and homiletical studies have focused on the similarities of the rivalry stories to each other and have ignored their subtle differences. However, it is in these differences from generation to generation that the key to the significance of Genesis may be found.

Examined in sequence, from the introduction of the theme of rivalry in the story of Cain and Abel to the resolution of rivalry between Joseph and his brothers at the end of Genesis, these stories reveal a pattern of progressive improvement in the way families in Genesis deal with the rivalry engendered by favoritism. Although the incremental improvements are small, over the long term these changes make for progress in the biblical narrative that eventually makes possible the nationhood of Israel. I believe that these changes can also be understood on a personal level as a process of individual growth and evolution that can be interpreted theologically as an expression of what God wants from us.

Setting the Stage: Cain and Abel

I begin by reviewing the stories of rivalry and favoritism in Genesis, looking at them in the order in which they occur in the text. The first case of rivalry in Genesis occurs in Genesis 4 between Cain and Abel, which turns not on why God chooses Abel's offering over Cain's, nor even on the issue of the first fratricide. This first story of rivalry focuses firmly on Cain's reaction to God's favoritism, establishing the theme that only we can control our human response to chosenness.

In Genesis 4, Eve gives birth first to Cain and then to Abel, who grow up to be farmer and shepherd respectively. It is Cain's idea to bring a sacrifice to God from his crops, and Abel follows suit from his herd (Genesis 4:3–4). God prefers Abel's offering, although the Hebrew text does not tell us why. As they do in the case of Abraham's chosenness, the Rabbis preserve a midrash explaining the superiority of Abel's offering over Cain's, even though no distinction is made between them in the biblical text.[2] The desire of the Rabbis to see the principle of "reward and punishment" at work here leads them to interpret the received text to suggest that Cain's offering is in some way inferior to Abel's. Traditional exegesis focuses on the description of Abel's offering as "choice" and "fat," מבכרות צאנו ומחלבהן, and on the absence of any descriptive adjectives for Cain's offering:

ויהי מקץ ימים ויבא קין מפרי
האדמה מנחה ל"י׃
והבל הביא גם-הוא מבכרות צאנו
ומחלבהן וישע " אל-הבל ואל-מנחתו׃

> At the end of the season, Cain brought from the fruit of the ground an offering to God.
> And Abel, he also brought of the choice of his flock and of their fat portions; God had regard for Abel and his offering;

However, the plain meaning of the biblical text yields another interpretation. In Hebrew Bible syntax, each verse contains one major idea. Here, 4:3 may suggest Cain's expression of gratitude at the bounty evident at the end of a growing season, the very first harvest in the history of the created universe. Cain had never known the lush Eden environment, and, to him, the abundance of the harvest must have truly seemed a gift from God. Ramban sees in this gratitude the origin of the sacrificial impulse and the root of the Israelite cultus.[3] The following verse notes Abel's similar impulse, but focuses on the nature of the gift brought to God.[4] In fact, the Hebrew text equates the two offerings. An analysis of the language of the text demonstrates that the substance of 4:3–4 applies equally to *both* Cain and Abel.

In Genesis 4, the text reads that Abel brought גם הוא., literally, "he also," from the first of his sheep. Strictly speaking, the world for "also," גם, would be enough on its own to express the idea. But the word גם, "also," occurs here in conjunction with the pleonastic pronoun הוא, "he," a pronoun that appears to be wholly superfluous. It has been shown, however, that this par-

ticular pleonastic construction in biblical Hebrew adds emphasis to the word גם, highlighting both its meaning and its importance.[5] This emphatic phrase, situated like a fulcrum between Cain's impulse to bring an offering and the description of the offering Abel brings *too,* sets up an equivalence in the text between the two verses: both Cain and Abel experience the impulse to bring an offering to God, described in 4:3; both Cain and Abel bring from the choicest and fattest of their abundance, described in 4:4. Read this way, the text gives no reason for God to choose Abel's offering over Cain's. Although this point is troubling to the medieval rabbinic commentators who wish to believe that God does not act with apparent randomness, this apparent randomness is essential to the exegetical point that I believe the text is making: that human beings have no control over whether they are favored by God or by other people; human beings can only control their own responses to the conditions in which they find themselves, whether fair or not, explicable or not, random or not.

This is the earliest case in the Bible where God, for no apparent reason, chooses one over the other. Cain is upset, outraged—the text tells us his face falls. Then God speaks to Cain. This divine statement articulates the theme underlying each of the rivalry stories in Genesis: that human beings must take responsibility for their own reactions to the inevitable, inexplicable, fact of apparent divine favoritism. In Genesis 4:7 God tells Cain that it is in Cain's own hands how he reacts to the circumstances pressed upon him by God's action:

הלוא אם-תיטיב שאת ואם לא
תיטיב לפתח חטאת רבץ ואליך תשוקתו ואתה תמשל-בו׃

> If you do well, won't you be lifted up? And if you don't do well, at that opening sin is a crouching demon; although towards you is its desire, yet you shall dominate it."[6]

Cain is punished by God, but not with the capital consequences that might be expected to follow an act of murder. Why does God not take Cain's life? The text yields an answer: God has not yet prohibited murder, nor specified its punishment.[7] The only caution God gives to Cain before he acts in his rage is to urge Cain not to give an opening to the sin crouching in wait, but instead to master his impulses. Cain fails to do so, and merits punishment for this disobedience. God punishes Cain for his lack of control, and dooms Cain to wander rootless over the face of the earth.

Cain is exiled from the land he knows, a heavy burden for the farmer he has been all his life. Yet, the text tells us (Genesis 4:17) that Cain's life work is to build a city and name it after his son. There is great poignancy to this detail—Cain, originally a tiller of the soil and then condemned to wander without roots, dedicates himself to constructing the ultimate expression of rootedness, a city. What's more, Cain, who may not dwell in any fixed place, names the city for his son Enoch, perhaps embodying in that gesture the hope that his descendants would find their established place and dwell there as Cain himself could not. In some ways the Judeans, and later Jews, are in the same situation. They build an edifice, not from mortar and brick but

from stories and traditions and sacred texts, and they pass this sacred heritage on to their children. Rootless, they create roots.

Thinking about Cain as a paradigm for the exiled Judeans raises the radical question of who is chosen in this story, Cain or Abel? Most people would say that Abel is chosen, or at least Abel's offering. But for Abel, having his offering favored is not sufficient in the long run. For Abel, there is no long run—he does not live to see another season. Thus, it may not always be so easy to identify who is chosen, or even why. The idea of chosenness may be more nuanced and subtle than it initially appears. Other criteria demand consideration. To whom does God speak, not once but twice, Cain or Abel? Whom does God caution ahead of time, Cain or Abel? Whom does God protect after punishing, Cain or Abel? Who survives to see the fruit of his hands and the fruit of his loins, Cain or Abel? According to these criteria of chosenness—divine attention and protection, fruitful survival—Abel does not score at all.[8]

It seems to me that this story tells of Cain's chosenness as well as of Abel's. The story suggests strongly that being chosen is not safe, secure, comfortable, or even obvious. Sometimes the apparent loser may be the chosen one. Being chosen does not mean more privilege, but, rather, more responsibility. As has been noted often, the prophet Amos makes this explicit:

רק אתכם ידעתי מכל משפחות האדמה
על-כן אפקד עליכם את כל-עונתיכם׃

You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth; that is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities (Amos 3:2).[9]

These two ideas are important throughout the stories of Genesis: first, that it is not always obvious who is chosen; and, second, that chosenness is not an easy lot to bear. As a result, biblical characters who feel that another is more favored, whether by God or by another human being, most often react with jealousy, rage and destructiveness. It is rare that a biblical character understands that he or she may also be favored in some way that is less apparent, or reflects that the coveted chosenness may prove to be a difficult burden to carry.

A related element of chosenness in Genesis is that the chosen one may be a vehicle for passing the blessings of God's favor to others who may not perceive themselves as chosen. Certainly this is the case with Abraham, progenitor of Isaac and the Children of Israel. In Genesis 12:2–3, God tells Abraham:

ואעשך לגוי גדול ואברכך
ואגדלה שמך והיה ברכה׃
ואברכה מברכיך ומקללך אאר
ונברכו בך כל משפחת האדמה׃

I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you;
I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you;
all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you.

By the end of Genesis, this idea of the favored one as a vehicle for God's blessing is restated in a context that changes Israelite sacred history.

From Murder to Coexistence: Three Mid-Book Rivalries

The rivalry episodes in Genesis succeed one another closely and involve a variety of family relationships, including co-wives, spouses and siblings. The favoritism that marks the chosen one may be of either divine or human origin, and rivalry and chosenness seem to go together, because very often the person who does not feel chosen feels competitive with, even antagonistic to, the person perceived as favored. The outcomes of family rivalry in Genesis evolve over the course of narrative time, moving from murder to negotiation in discrete stages.

Sarah and Hagar

In the heart of Abraham's household there is rivalry between Sarah and Hagar. Sarah is barren, and offers Abraham her maid, Hagar, as a concubine. Sarah's initial intention is to adopt Hagar's child as her own (Genesis 16:1–2). Hagar conceives, surely a sign of divine favor.[10] Very soon, however, Hagar's arrogance at being pregnant while her mistress is barren proves unbearable to Sarah; Hagar flees to the wilderness to escape Sarah's cruel treatment, where she is blessed by an angel of God and told to return to Abraham's household. Hagar names the place Be'er-laḥai-roi, possibly "Well of the Living One Who Sees Me" (Genesis 16:4–15). Immediately afterward, Ishmael is born (Genesis 16:16–17).

Hagar flees a second time to the wilderness some years later, when she is banished at Sarah's insistence after an enigmatic episode at Isaac's weaning feast in Genesis 21. Sarah sees Ishmael מצחק, "playing" or "sporting" (21:9), and insists that Hagar and her son be cast out so as not to share in Isaac's inheritance.

This time, Abraham sends Hagar away with few provisions—some bread and a skin of water. I find this a troubling detail—surely the patriarch could have provided his son and his concubine with adequate supplies for a wilderness trek! Eventually, however, Hagar and Ishmael are rescued from a parched demise by an angel of God and Ishmael grows up and establishes a great nation, dwelling with his clan in the wilderness of Paran (Genesis 21:9–21).

In Sarah's perception, Hagar and Ishmael are divinely favored—she, by her easy pregnancy resulting in her robust son, and he, as Abraham's first born and apparent heir. Sarah responds to this perception by insisting on an enforced separation, a kind of exile from Abraham's household for Hagar and Ishmael. As a human response to divine favor, enforced separation has its drawbacks, particularly as a model for a nation, as I propose, or even as a family model. However, it certainly represents an incremental improvement over murder, which had been Cain's response.

Isaac and Ishmael?

Traditionally, the myth of rivalry between Isaac and Ishmael has been one of the metaphors for the strained relations between Arabs and Jews. However, I believe that the text hints at a different relationship between these boys.

The place name Be'er-laḥai-roi is unusual and is initially associated in Genesis 16 with Hagar, when she is pregnant with Ishmael. The name only occurs twice more in the Bible, both times associated with Sarah's son Isaac: once at Genesis 24:62, and again in Genesis 25:11. In Genesis 24:62, the text notes that Isaac comes up from where he had settled near Be'er-laḥai-roi in the region of the Negeb in order to meet Rebecca, his bride to be, upon her arrival with Abraham's servant from the house of Laban. In the following chapter, the Bible tells of Abraham's death and burial by his two sons, Isaac and Ishmael together. Immediately after this account the text notes a second time that Isaac settled near Be'er-laḥai-roi.

It is only after his binding in Genesis 22 that Isaac is said to dwell there. Perhaps after that episode Isaac no longer wishes to dwell in his father's tents. Perhaps Isaac seeks companionship from his older brother who also knows what it is to have his life threatened by his father's actions, and he therefore chooses to dwell with Ishmael in his territory near Be'er-laḥai-roi. The relationship between the boys is never hostile or difficult, according to the Hebrew text; the two do come together to bury their father in Genesis 25:8–10. Since this place name is initially associated with Hagar in Genesis 16, and since it is such an unusual name and only mentioned in the context of Ishmael and Isaac, its occurrence might suggest that the relationship between Ishmael and Isaac was more amiable than was the relationship between their mothers.

Another clue to Isaac's fondness for his brother might be found in Isaac's preference for his elder son Esau over the younger Jacob (Genesis 25:27–28). The text tells us that Isaac's bias is due to the fact that "[the taste for] game was in his mouth," ויאהב יצחק את-עשו כי-ציד בפיו. Esau the hunter, the outdoorsman, is surely more like Isaac's brother Ishmael than is Jacob.

So far, we have noted incremental changes in the responses of rivals to the chosenness of their counterparts. The rivalry between Cain and Abel ends in outright murder. This is the one and only time that sibling rivalry is carried to such an extreme. The rivalry between Sarah and Hagar results in the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael and their certain death in the wilderness except for divine intervention (Genesis 21:9–19). Isaac and Ishmael, victims of the rivalry between their mothers, spend their childhood and youth in geographic isolation from one another (Genesis 21:20–21), coming together only later, as adults. This isolation preserves both families alive. The human response to chosenness has evolved beyond murder, but is still a long way from an ideal of brothers dwelling in harmony.

Jacob and Esau

Another incremental improvement occurs in the relationship between Jacob and Esau. This story begins when Rebecca seeks an oracle to find out why she is experiencing so much difficulty during her pregnancy. The oracle tells her that she is carrying twins and that the older will serve the younger (Genesis 25:22–23). The brothers grow up together in a household divided by human

favoritism (Genesis 25:28), and Jacob actually receives a blessing invoking God to give him dominance over his older brother (Genesis 27:28–29). These episodes culminate in Esau's murderous rage at Jacob's theft of their father's blessing (Genesis 27:41). However, unlike Cain, Esau is able to control his murderous impulse. He resolves to wait for his revenge until their father's death (Genesis 27:41), which he believes will be soon, in that Isaac had planned to bless his sons in anticipation of his own demise (Genesis 27:2–4).

At his mother's urging, Jacob flees to her brother Laban at Haran, frustrating Esau's murderous impulses in the hope that separation and delay will cool him down (Genesis 27:43–45). Jacob remains with Laban for more than twenty years, marries, fathers children and begins his journey back to Canaan. As Rebecca foresaw, isolating the brothers from one another preserves them both alive (Genesis 27:42–44).

Unlike Sarah and Hagar, Jacob and Esau do meet again (Genesis 32:4–30), although their meeting is uneasy and they soon separate (Genesis 33:1–17). When Esau comes to meet Jacob on his way home from his sojourn with Laban, Jacob hears a report that Esau has 400 men with him (Genesis 32:7). Jacob is terrified, and divides his camp into two, thinking that this will at least preserve one half of his family from attack (Genesis 32:8).

Jacob prays to God to preserve him from Esau and sends a series of lavish gifts to Esau in an effort to placate his brother (Genesis 32:10–22). Jacob sends his wives, children, herds and possessions across the Jabbok, while he remains behind. That night, Jacob wrestles with the angel and comes away changed, spiritually as well as physically. Not only is he limping (Genesis 32:23–32), but now, when he goes forward to meet his brother, Jacob is in the vanguard of his family, not at the rear (Genesis 33:3). This change is symbolized by the name change he has wrested from his angelic opponent. Jacob has become the eponymous ancestor of the people Israel, reminding readers once again that the deeds of the ancestors do not only tell of an individual or family, but are paradigmatic for the nation as a whole.[11]

Esau presses Jacob to bring his family and accompany him as far as Se'ir, Esau's territory, although Jacob repeatedly declines and ultimately settles his family elsewhere (Genesis 33:12–17). The brothers dwell apart, but civil relations have been established, at least nominally. This is still not an ideal model, but represents some small improvement in the outcome of rivalries in Genesis so far: an advance over the total isolation between Sarah and Hagar, and certainly better than the murderous reaction of Cain against Abel. Slow, painful progress is being made in the human response to divine favoritism.

Rachel and Leah

The story of Jacob and Esau brackets yet another story of sibling rivalry, this one between Rachel and Leah. Rachel is Jacob's favorite, the object of human chosenness (Genesis 29:30). One verse after we read that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, we read that God sees that Leah is unloved and opens her womb, while Rachel remains barren: וירא יי כי-שנואה לאה ויפתח

את-רחמה ורחל עקרה׃ (Genesis 29:31). God's way of showing preference, here an expression of compassion, is through fertility. Throughout the Bible, fertility is seen as a gift from God and evidence of divine approbation and blessing. When Rachel, beloved by her husband, pleads with Jacob in Genesis 30:1 to give her children or she will be as one dead, Jacob responds in anger that he is not God to give or withhold the fruit of the womb (30:2).[12] In Genesis 38:26, Tamar bears twin boys sired by a deceived Judah. Their birth follows Judah's acknowledgment that Tamar is more righteous than he since he sought to withhold his youngest son, Shelah, from her, thereby constricting opportunities for continuing his own lineage. The birth of two sons to Tamar, one of whom is the ancestor of King David, may be seen as emphatic approbation of Tamar's bold and unorthodox action in securing her pregnancy, and hence as a blessing from God.

These are just two of many biblical examples of fertility as a sign of divine approbation. The inverse is also the case, when fruit of the womb is withheld as a sign of divine displeasure. Genesis 20:17–18 describes Abraham praying for Abimelech after the second wife-sister episode. Abimelech has restored Sarah to Abraham at God's urging and given Abraham wealth and many gifts. Abraham prays that Abimelech and his household might be healed of the barrenness that God had imposed on them while Sarah was in his court. Abraham's prayer works, and his wife and maidservants bear children:

ויתפלל אברהם אל-האלהים וירפא אלהים
את-אבימלך ואת-אשתו ואמהתיו וילדו׃
כי-עצר עצר ״ בעד כל-דחם לבית
אבימלך על-דבר שרה אשת אברהם׃

In this context, Leah's fertility suggests that God is seeking to comfort her with the birth of a son, while withholding the blessing of a child from Rachel. God is acknowledging the imbalance that human favoritism generates and is attempting to balance the scales. This development raises the issue of whether the one favored is selected as such by divine or human choice, a consideration that clouds even further the task of identifying who is chosen in any biblical context.

Although it may seem obvious on an initial reading who is the chosen one in a particular episode, the surface narrative line may be misleading, lulling the reader into a complacence about who is the focus of favor and deflecting further inquiry on deeper textual levels. As in the Cain and Abel story, where most readers initially identify Abel's offering as the only object of favor, so too, in the episode of Rachel and Leah, where Jacob's overwhelming preference for Rachel overshadows God's choice of Leah in the minds of most readers. Digging deeper, however, different levels and qualities of chosenness emerge.

Given these subtleties, the chosen one is not always easy to identify, either from within the narrative, by the characters themselves, or from outside the narrative, by the reader. Further, being chosen by one party, or being granted one blessing, may not suffice in the mind of the one favored. Leah, favored by God, is fruitful. Rachel, favored by Jacob, is adored by her hus-

band. Leah ultimately bears six of the twelve sons of Jacob, more than any other of Jacob's women. Rachel, beloved of Jacob, only bears two, and each of their handmaidens bears only two. But being chosen by God to bear half the ancestors of Israel is not enough for Leah; at the birth of her sixth son she acknowledges God's gift and immediately follows it with the hope that now her husband will exalt her, since she has borne him six sons (Genesis 30:19–20). And the love of her husband is not enough for Rachel; she begs Jacob for children or else she is as one dead (Genesis 30:1). Both sisters are chosen, one by God and one by man, but neither is fulfilled. Each wants what the other has.

Even so, the rivalry between the sisters never reaches murderous proportions, and they are never completely separated from one another until Rachel's death. This rivalry represents another stage in the evolution of humanity's ability to master their reaction to apparent favoritism. This had been, after all, God's primary demand of Cain. Like Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah grow up in the same household, and like Sarah and Hagar, they are married to the same man. Unlike the brothers, they continue to dwell in proximity to one another, and unlike Abraham's rival wives, they raise their families together. Their competition for Jacob's favor is bitter (Genesis 30:1, 15), but their jealousy (Genesis 30:1) never reaches murderous proportions.

Instead, their struggle is expressed in a bargaining metaphor, made explicit in an anecdote describing the disposition of Reuben's mandrakes (Genesis 30:14–18). Reuben, Leah's oldest son, comes upon some mandrakes in the field and brings them to his mother. Perhaps because of the anthropomorphic shape of the root, in ancient times mandrakes were considered a fertility herb.[13] Rachel hears about Reuben's find and strikes a bargain with her sister to trade the mandrakes for a night with Jacob. Not recognizing God's role in Leah's fertility and in her own barrenness, Rachel mistakenly hopes the mandrakes will be her chance to become pregnant. Rachel is willing to postpone her night with Jacob because she knows there will be many more. Leah, who knows that their husband will not come to her unless Rachel sends him, wishes to spend the night with Jacob. Their deal is really about who gets Jacob now and who will have him later.

The barter relationship between the sisters represents another small step away from the ultimate act of enmity and toward an ideal of cooperation. So far the steps have been from murder to exile to uneasy separation to barter. This is still not a model we would like our families to emulate, but it is a sign of improvability, a sign of progress in human response to favoritism even if, in the Bible, these increments occur over many generations.

The Culmination of Genesis and the Transformation of Rivalry

So far, the families of Genesis have made slow and painful progress in moving toward the ideal conveyed by God to Cain, the goal of controlling sinful impulses and jealousy of those bearing apparent favor, whether human or divine. At the conclusion of Genesis, a major breakthrough occurs that makes

possible the nationhood of Israel in the next biblical book. But first, the tortured history of the evolution of humanity's response to chosenness must be recapitulated.

Joseph and his Brothers

The book of Genesis culminates with the story of Joseph and his brothers, recapitulating within itself all of the human responses exhibited in the preceding rivalries in order to resolve them. Scholars have noticed that the Joseph saga contains within it all of the impulses exhibited in earlier stories, but they have focused on the repetition of themes rather than upon the significance of the progression.[14]

As with Jacob and Esau, the brothers grow up in a household beset by favoritism (Genesis 37:3), a situation aggravated by the behavior of father and favored son (Genesis 37:3–11). As with Rachel and Leah, the brothers are jealous of Joseph (again, as in Genesis 30, the Hebrew root קנא, "to be jealous," occurs here in Genesis 37:11). As with Cain and, later, Esau, their initial impulse is to kill Joseph (Genesis 37:20). Instead they throw him into an empty pit. Like Sarah and Hagar, the brothers are geographically isolated from each other for many years, and, like Jacob and Esau, they meet again under the shadow of disaster.

The barter metaphor of Rachel and Leah is recapitulated several times: in the decision to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites (Genesis 37:27), in the sale of Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar by the Midianites (Genesis 37:28, 36) and in the sale of grain to the brothers (Genesis 42:1–26). Later, after his revelation to them in Genesis 45, Joseph invites his brothers to dwell with him in Egypt as Esau invites Jacob to do in Se'ir. Unlike Jacob with Esau, however, Joseph's brothers do join him, and they dwell in uneasy civility with Joseph after he reveals his identity to them (Genesis 45:5–8). This uneasiness is expressed, perhaps, in their isolation in Goshen from contact with the mainstream of Egyptian life (Genesis 46:31–34) and in their expressed fear of reprisal from Joseph when their father Jacob dies (Genesis 50:15–18).

Genesis 45 is a pivotal chapter in this saga. By Genesis 45, the brothers have come to Egypt once, obtained food, gone away and come back again. Joseph has recognized them, but they do not recognize their younger brother in the intimidating figure of the Egyptian vizier. Between the brothers' first trip and their second, Joseph has insisted on holding Simeon hostage to insure that on their return they will bring the youngest brother Benjamin (Genesis 42:18–20). Back in Canaan, Jacob refuses to allow this second son of his beloved Rachel to accompany the brothers on the risky journey to Egypt for food. As far as Jacob knows, Joseph, Rachel's older son, is no more, and Jacob will not risk the loss of Benjamin as well (Genesis 42:36–37 and Genesis 43:1–7).

When the famine persists and food has run out again, Judah makes an impassioned plea to Jacob, invoking the generations to come whose lives would be saved by the purchase of food in Egypt. Judah persuades Jacob to

let Benjamin accompany his brothers to Egypt (Genesis 43:8–14). Later, when Joseph has framed Benjamin by placing his divining cup in the younger man's sack of grain (Genesis 44:1–17), Judah makes another impassioned plea to Joseph to release Benjamin out of compassion for his bereaved father (Genesis 44:18–33). Joseph understands from this speech that his brothers, who had no concern about killing him or selling him into slavery so many years ago, now do not want their father's heart broken by Benjamin's detention. Joseph realizes that this represents a real shift for his brothers, and he matches it with a real shift of his own.

Judah's speech so moves Joseph that he tearfully reveals himself to his incredulous brothers (Genesis 45:1–3). The brothers are dumbfounded, and Joseph reassures them in a statement that has crucial significance for the nationhood of biblical Israel (Genesis 45:5–8):

ועתה אל-תעצבו ואל-יחר בעניכם כי-מכרתם אתי
הנה כי למחיה שלחני אלהים לפניכם׃
כי-זה שנתים הרעב בקרב הארץ ועוד חמש שנים אשר אין-חריש וקציר׃
וישלחני אלהים לפניכם לשום לכם שארית בארץ ולהחיות לכם לפליטה גדלה׃
ועתה לא-אתם שלחתם אתי הנה כי האלהים וישימני
לאב לפרעה ולאדון לכל-ביתו ומשל בכל-ארץ מצרים׃

> Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you. . . . God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So it was not you who sent me here, but God.[15]

Here is the first articulation of the concept of *Heilsgeschichte,* of the theological idea that God works within history to achieve salvation, that is so central to the Israelite self-definition.[16] The recognition of this role of God makes possible a pivotal shift in the human response to rivalry. For the first time, a party to rivalry, jealousy and favoritism is not preoccupied with securing his or her advantage. For the first time in the book of Genesis, the human response to rivalry is forgiveness and compassion. Joseph is able to forgive his brothers their treachery because he understands that there is a higher purpose at work in all their lives.

The Joseph story contains all the seeds of the earlier rivalries in Genesis. Each of the incremental steps toward improved family relationships is present: murderous jealousy, deception, geographic isolation, uneasy civility and barter. However, this closing section of the book of Genesis introduces a giant step on the continuum of family relationships. First stated in Genesis 45:5–8 and reiterated in Genesis 50:19–21, the Joseph saga introduces the idea that negative human responses to selective chosenness must be sublimated to faith in God.

Jacob dies in Genesis 49:33. In Genesis 50, Jacob is mourned and buried in Canaan by all his sons, who then return to Egypt. Now that their father is

dead, Joseph's brothers fear his reprisal. After all, Esau had planned to take his revenge on Jacob after the death of their father Isaac (Genesis 27:41). The brothers' reaction after Jacob's death is a clue that they have been uneasy in their relationship with Joseph during their sojourn in Egypt, that they have not really trusted him. The brothers go to Joseph after their father's death and tell him that their father's wish was for Joseph to forgive his brothers' harsh treatment of him (Genesis 50:15–17). Joseph weeps, for he understands now that his brothers did not believe him when he forgave them in Genesis 45. So Joseph reiterates his forgiveness and reiterates in the closing verses of Genesis the significant idea of God's responsibility for all that occurs.

Joseph is God's chosen instrument for the salvation of all of Jacob's children, and they all participate in the good fortune that follows. Jealousy, rivalry and barter, are all irrelevant human responses to individual chosenness when held up against the divine desire to preserve and protect the entire chosen family. Joseph's articulation of God acting in human history allows him to forgive his brothers and move beyond petty human schisms in view of his belief in God's larger plan. This model closes the book of Genesis: the book that began the story of human rivalry with murder closes with forgiveness, setting the stage for the next act in the drama of the formation of the Israelite nation. The progression from murder to forgiveness is a major theme of Genesis, anchored as it is at the beginning and at the closing of the book.[17]

Moses and Aaron

The significance of this evolution can be seen in the continuation of the history of the Children of Israel as the next chapter unfolds in the book of Exodus under the leadership of the brothers Moses and Aaron. The closing of the book of Genesis with forgiveness suggests that people have learned that their rivalries are a deluded human response to a divine blessing that will ultimately benefit them all. Now God must determine that human beings have indeed learned this lesson well.

In Exodus chapters 3 and 4, at the burning bush, Moses is chosen by God as God's agent to lead the Children of Israel out of Egypt. Moses' response to being chosen is to raise objection after objection to the divine call, unlike Abraham who silently demonstrates his faith in God's word when he is called (Genesis 22:1). Five times Moses raises objections to God's mission for him, and five times God overrules them. Finally, by the fifth time, in Exodus 4:14, the text tells us that God is angry with Moses:

ויחר-אף יי במשה ויאמר הלא אהרן אחיך הלוי
ידעתי כי-דבר ידבר הוא וגם הנה-הוא יצא לקראתך
וראך ושמח בלבו׃

> God's anger flared against Moses; [God] said, 'What about Aaron, your brother, a Levite? I know that he shall surely speak! Here, he comes out to meet you, and when he sees you he will rejoice in his heart.'

In anger, God suggests that Moses work with his brother Aaron, as if to say, "Oh, you won't accept my call? Just for that, not only must you take

leadership of this mission, but I'll show you, I'll make you work with your brother!" In an act that anticipates the Pharaoh's punitive worsening of the Israelites' working conditions when Moses asks him to let the people go (Exodus 5:1–9), not only does God not select someone else to spearhead the divine mission—Moses himself is still the designated leader—but, worse, God sets the additional task for Moses and his brother to work together in a divinely established hierarchy that places the unwilling Moses firmly in the dominant position over Aaron (Exodus 4:16). God tells Moses of Aaron: ודבר-הוא לך אל-העם והיה הוא יהיה-לך לפה ואתה תהיה-לו לאלהים, "He shall speak for you to the people, he will be a mouthpiece for you and you will be as a god to him." God knows that the weight of evidence in Genesis makes this fraternal solution a punishment for the chosen one, in this case, for Moses. However, Moses and Aaron demonstrate that the hard-won lessons of the book of Genesis have been internalized by the brothers of Exodus: they accept this working relationship, even embrace it, as they embrace each other in Exodus 4:27.

The paradigmatic literary expression of this transformation occurs upon Moses' return to Egypt. God sends Aaron to meet his brother in the wilderness as Moses sets out. The two meet at the mountain of God and embrace, and Moses tells Aaron all that God has commanded him (Exodus 4:27–28). Aaron kisses Moses: the text uses the phrase וישק-לו, "he kissed him," employing the Hebrew verbal root נשק a third time between sibling rivals. This time, as with Joseph and his brothers, it appears to be wholehearted and without ambivalence.

Moses, the younger sibling, is chosen by God, and Aaron, the elder, is designated to assist him. However, unlike the relationships among the families of Genesis, the relationship between Moses and Aaron during the Exodus from Egypt is characterized by cooperation and mutual support. Twice this subordinate relationship is made explicit, and still the brothers work cooperatively together. First, in Exodus 4:16, God tells Moses, referring to Aaron: "He shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him." Again, in Exodus 7:1–2, God answers Moses: "See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet."[18]

The extraordinary character of this human response to divine selection, in view of the history of such relationships in Genesis, is underlined by the verses that follow the wilderness meeting of Moses and Aaron in Exodus 4:27. Together, Moses and Aaron assemble the elders of Israel. Aaron repeats the words that God has told Moses, and demonstrates the signs. The people are immediately convinced and bow low in homage (Exodus 4:29–31). Never again in the history of the Exodus and wilderness wandering will the people be so easily moved to faith! This episode stands out as a literary punctuation of the theological message that when brothers work in harmony, when divine chosenness is viewed as benefitting all, then the divine liberation of Israel in preparation for nationhood is at hand.

The continued cooperation between Moses and Aaron has its ultimate reward in theophany at Sinai (Exodus 19–23), the formative moment of the

covenant of peoplehood between God and Israel. Never again would Israel reach such a peak. The rest of the Pentateuch is filled with such strife as the golden calf, the wilderness murmurings, challenges to the authority of God, of Moses and of Aaron. Petty factionalism characterizes the internal relationships of the Israelites just as jealousy and rivalry characterize the family relationships in Genesis.

Toward Messianic Redemption: Rivalry Transcended

In spite of Israel's history of internal division and discord, the national longing for harmony remains strong. Over time, the power of this longing came to focus on the brief moments in the historiography of Israel when it appeared that factionalism was defeated, and that unity of purpose seemed to characterize the people. These moments coalesced into a powerful myth that became a national goal.

The most powerful biblical expression of this myth, after the revelation at Sinai, is the brief history of the united monarchy under David and Solomon: Israel's golden days as an autonomous nation, led by God's most loyal subjects. Although this period lasted less than seventy years even by biblical accounts, the normative myth is of the unity of Israel under an heir to the throne of David, even though this "norm" appears in the Bible to be an anomaly. In the Deuteronomic history, the fragmentation of the period of the judges is succeeded by a monarchy marked by sedition. Saul is chosen and rejected. David is chosen in perpetuity, but his moment of glory is fleeting. The united monarchy of David and Solomon endures for but a fraction of time. Too soon, the kingdom is divided North and South. Too soon, first the North and then the South are conquered and exiled. It must have seemed to those exiles that the kingdom of a united Judah and Israel dwelling on its own land was irretrievably lost and that a future restoration was an unlikely pipedream. Nevertheless, the symbol of Joseph embracing his brothers, of North and South together under one leader, retained and even enhanced its power.

When Ezekiel, in exile in Babylon, envisions a future time when Israel shall be united, he seizes upon the image of brothers reconciled. In Ezekiel 37:15–28, the prophet holds aloft two staffs. Upon one is inscribed the name of Joseph. Upon the other is inscribed the name of Judah. In the prophet's vision, the two staffs merge into one, symbolizing the unity of the nation, and the harmony of brothers, the son of Rachel and the son of Leah united again at the last. And in the midst of this united Israel shall dwell the presence of the Lord in the divine sanctuary.

This vision of unity in Ezekiel is immediately followed by a messianic promise of redemption and restoration (Ezekiel 37:24–25):[19]

ועבדי דוד מלך עליהם ורועה
אחד יהיה לכלם ובמשפטי ילכו וחקתי ישמרו ועשו אותם׃
וישבו על-הארץ אשר נתתי לעבדי ליעקב אשר ישבו-בה
אבותיכם וישבו עליה המה ובניהם ובני בניהם עד-עולם ודוד
עבדי נשיא להם לעולם׃

> My servant David shall be king over them; there shall be one shepherd for all of them. They shall follow My rules and faithfully obey My laws. Thus they shall remain in the land which I gave to My servant Jacob and in which your fathers dwelt; they and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, with My servant David as their prince for all time.[20]

Thus we see how the sibling rivalry in the Israelite myths of origin in the book of Genesis come to represent a metaphor for the fragmented conditions in Judah and Israel during pre-exilic times and of the dispersed exiles during exilic and post-exilic times. This metaphoric relationship is graphically expressed by the symbolic vision in Ezekiel 37, in the merging of the two staffs of Judah and Joseph, whose reconciliation is expressed in the reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 45. This merging makes possible the restoration of the throne of David, just as the reconciliation between Joseph and Judah saved the children of Israel from starvation during the famine and just as cooperation between Moses and Aaron made possible the Exodus and Sinai revelation.[21]

Indeed, Ezekiel understands that Judah is the ultimate demonstration of the lessons of Cain and Abel, Sarah and Hagar, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, and Joseph and his brothers. When Judah bows to Joseph, enacting Joseph's dreams from Genesis 37:5–10, Judah demonstrates that he embraces the lesson of Genesis, that he understands that all are blessed in the blessing of one. Judah recognizes that the one who appears chosen may not ultimately be favored and that the one who submits may ultimately become the chosen leader. In fact, Judah's act of obeisance to his younger brother may be the qualifying action that makes him worthy to lead his brothers later on; Judah, is, after all, the tribe of Jesse, the tribe of David and, ultimately, the tribe of the son of David who will rule in the days to come. The one who submits ultimately becomes the one who leads. The one who appears to be less favored ultimately proves to be the one chosen by God. But leadership cannot come until divisiveness is abandoned, until families dwell in harmony together, recognizing God's hand in the circumstances of their lives. The uniting of Judah with Joseph in Ezekiel's vision represents the acknowledgement of each tribe, of each family, of each Israelite, that the blessings of one become the blessings of each.

The progression, by slow stages, of an improving human response to chosenness and implied rejection, the movement from murder to forgiveness and ultimately to cooperation, is a model for the hope that Israel will reconcile and become one. The lesson of Genesis is the recognition that the election of one may benefit all and that God's will is expressed in the history of the people. The evolution of sibling relationships in Genesis is a paradigm for the people, pointing to an ideal of unity and cooperation, however fleeting in the past, however unrealized in the present, however unlikely in the future. The stories of Genesis, in the order they occur, in the progress they demonstrate, point ultimately to the messianic promise of unity among all Israel.

NOTES

1. For example, see Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 55–169; Roger Syren, *The Forsaken First-Born: A Study of a Recurrent Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives,* Journal for the study of the Old Testament 133 (Sheffield: Sheffield/JSOT, 1993); Ronald S. Hendel, *The Epic of the Patriarch: The Jacob Cycle and the Narrative Traditions of Canaan and Israel,* Harvard Semitic Monographs 42 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987); and Isaac Mendelsohn, "On the Preferential Status of the Eldest Son," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research,* no. 156 (December 1959), pp. 38–40.

2. Ibn Ezra, *loc. cit.* (*Mikra'ot Gedolot,* Genesis 4:3).

3. Ramban (Nachmanides) *loc cit.* (*Mikra'ot Gedolot,* Genesis 4:3–4). Ramban suggests that Cain, Abel and even Noah understood the great mystery of sacrifice in their impulse to come closer to God long before there existed Israelites, Temple sacrifice or the opportunity for idolatry. Ramban's comment seems to be in response to those commentators who suggest that the practice of animal sacrifice originated as a bulwark against idolatry, which Ramban (Maimonides), for example, does in his *The Guide for the Perplexed* (המורה נבוחים) III, 46.

4. The Hebrew can be read either as the simple past, "he brought," as it is often translated, or as the pluperfect, "he had brought," in which case there is the suggestion that Abel may have brought his offering first. Whichever way this ambiguity is resolved, the discussion that follows focuses on another aspect of the syntax of this verse.

5. Stephen A. Geller, "Cleft Sentences with Pleonastic Pronoun: A Syntactic Construction of Biblical Hebrew and Some of Its Literary Uses," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* (1992), pp. 15–33.

6. The Hebrew verb רבץ here translated "crouch" is in the masculine. As E. A. Speiser points out in *Genesis: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1963), pp. 32–33, the noun that is the subject of the verb חטאת is feminine, and ought to take a feminine form of this verb. Instead, the verb form is masculine in the text. As Speiser notes (p. 33), "The only way that the present reading can be grammatically correct is in a predicative phrase: 'sin is a *rbṣ,*' with the following [masculine] possessives referring to *rbṣ,* a masculine form." Although there is no noun-form for this root in Hebrew, in Akkadian the noun *rābiṣum* signified a kind of demon that could be both benevolent and malevolent, often depicted at thresholds to protect or undermine the occupants. The Akkadian noun is cognate to the Hebrew verb. Thus the grammatical meaning of this verse is that, like the Akkadian *rābiṣum,* Cain can choose to behave benevolently or malevolently. His choice will determine whether he thwarts the demon crouching in wait or falls into its clutches.

7. The first prohibition of murder occurs in Genesis 9:5.

8. This reading is consistent with the literary device of *Nomen Omen,* explicated initially by Andrzej Strus in *Nomen-Omen: La Stylistique Sonore Des Noms Propres dans le Pentateuque,* Analectica Biblica 80 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), and later expanded by Moshe Garsiel in "Puns Upon Names: Subtle Colophons in the Bible," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (1995), pp. 182–87. According to this idea, the name of a biblical character foreshadows his or her fate and/or character. The principle of Nomen Omen appears to function for Cain's name, from the Hebrew root "to fashion, to make, to create" [See *Hal* under קנה] and for Abel's name, from the root signifying "breath" and, by extension, "futility" [See *HAL* under הבל].

9. Translation from Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

10. See Seth Daniel Kunin, *The Logic of Incest: A Structuralist Analysis of Hebrew Mythology* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1995), especially pp. 105–106, where Kunin notes (correctly, in my view) that the biblical cultural context appears to view the fact of bearing twins to be a sign of divine blessing expressed through fecundity. See also my discussion below of Leah's fecundity.

11. See Stephen A. Geller, "The Struggle at the Jabbok: The Uses of Enigma in Biblical

Narrative," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 14 (1984), pp. 37–60, and the commentary of Naḥmanides to this verse.

12. Compare the interaction between Hannah and her husband in 1 Samuel 1:4–8, and especially the analogy drawn by Robert Polzin in *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History, Part Two: I Samuel* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), pp. 18–30.

13. A mandrake has forked roots that can be viewed as resembling the human figure, suggestive of limbs, including the male member. Hence, by analogy, it was thought to be a potent aphrodisiac as well as an aid to conception.

14. See, for example, James S. Ackerman, "Joseph, Judah, and Jacob," in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives,* Volume II, edited by Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis and James S. Ackerman, *The Bible in Literature Courses* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), pp. 85–113.

15. Translation from JPS *Tanakh.*

16. Scholars use the German term *Heilsgeschichte* to describe the theological idea of God acting in history to effect salvation. It was first articulated by the German scholar Gerhard von Rad. See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, Volume I:* The theology of Israel's historical traditions, translated by D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 483 especially Part Two, "The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions," pp. 105–305. Many scholars have commented on the role of the Joseph novella within the Jacob saga. On the completion of a "measure for measure" cycle, see, for example, Richard Elliot Friedman, "Deception for Deception," *Bible Review* 2, no. 1 (1986), pp. 22–31, 68.

17. See Isaac B. Gottlieb, *"Sof Davar:* Biblical Endings," *Prooftexts* 11 (1991), pp. 213–24.

18. JPS *Tanakh* translation.

19. Most scholars of the Hebrew Bible believe that in the time of the literary prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, prophetic visions of an heir of David seated upon the throne of Israel's reflect the understanding of a human descendant, seated upon a physical throne, ruling over a political entity. Not until the rabbinic period does the idea of a messiah coming at the end of days reach its full flower, and these earlier passages are then reinterpreted to fit this new eschatalogical understanding.

20. JPS *Tanakh* translation.

21. The rabbis recognized the significance of this allusion. They designate this portion of Ezekiel as the prophetic reading or *haftarah* to accompany the regular weekly Torah reading that includes the reconciliation of Judah and Joseph in Genesis 45, *Parashat Vayyigash.* I am grateful to Chancellor Ismar Schorsch of the Jewish Theological Seminary whose on-line discussion of "Parashat Vayigash," December 6, 1994 (on the list PARASHAH@JTSA.EDU) triggered the insight that made this article possible.

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