

# MARRIAGE AND FAMILY: VISION AND REALITY IN GENESIS

## Introduction

In this paper I examine the family relationships set on display in the book of Genesis. It is my contention that the earliest generations exuding from father Abraham typify God's interception of human pain. Observations are drawn in a brief conclusion. The selections are remarkably transparent. The premier Jewish family is openly vulnerable in the text; bordering at times on the comedic, they put the fun in dysfunction. Their struggles become the template of struggle that all persons can relate to in one way or another. In the paper I review the family from Abraham to Joseph. The most amount of attention is devoted to generation three because the scriptures devote inordinate space to this most interesting family. These nuclear families make up the content of the bulk of Genesis. John Goldingay sees Genesis 1-11 as the Old Testament of the Old Testament. Therefore the story of family beginning in chapter 12 starts a new section.<sup>1</sup> The focus upon these four generations also follows the subtle suggestion of scripture, "to the third or fourth generation." Goldingay has suggested this delimitation would comprise those alive within the scope of one's lifetime, the ones who would have meaningful influence upon one's existence.

## Generation One – Abraham and Sarah

The biblical introduction to Abram is an injunction to start the family all over again. "Go from your kindred and your country and your father's house to the land that I will show you." (Gen 12:1). From the start we have a mysterious deception that hovers like an omen owl over the family tree. Abram tells Pharaoh that his wife Sarai is his sister. It's only later in the narrative that we are told she actually is his step-sister, the daughter of his father but not the same mother. V. H.

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<sup>1</sup> John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel* Vol. 1, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 147.

Matthews says their union was not appropriate even though it predated the levitical prohibitions.

“Abram married his half-sister Sarai (Gen 20:2, 12), a match that was ‘incorrect’ and was marked by a long period of barrenness.”<sup>2</sup> Abram’s motives are clear from the first episode on two counts.

“That it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account” (Gen 12:13). There are translations that interpret the word “because” as “for”. On this reading Abram convinces Sarai, *You wash my hands and I’ll wash yours. It will be good for you that I am treated well because we will prosper materially. And it will be good for me. Namely, I get to stay alive.* This maneuver was utilized twice in the lifetime of Abraham and is handed down as an inheritance to Isaac. Millard Erickson calls it a “lack of integrity” on Abraham’s part.<sup>3</sup>

Not having children is a sore spot for the couple. Their union had been meaningful on every other count. Sarai is an attractive woman to Abram, even well past menopause. Their harmony is seen in their cooperation accommodating their divine dinner guests. And in a way the couple is seen working together in cohort in their deception of town leaders. This becomes a trademark of the family.

The tension of having no children intercepts all interaction with the outside world. It seemed to be a test of faith for the couple by God. Irony manifests in the encounter with Abimelech. Abraham and Sarah are not able to produce any children on their own, so the judgment by God against the city is barrenness. Here is Abraham, childless, while Abimelech’s community is growing. Yet, when Abimelech takes Sarah into his court, suddenly the barrenness leapfrogs to his family. His wife and concubines suddenly stop producing children. The text is mysterious and we aren’t quite sure if it affected all families in his kingdom, or only his household, though the latter seems most plausible from the wording. The ancient king’s success depended largely in part upon his

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<sup>2</sup> V. H. Matthews, “Family Relationships” *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, gen eds T. Desmond Alexander, David W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 298.

<sup>3</sup> Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 639.

ability to father many children. It was a safety net. Oded Borowski observes, “From a biblical viewpoint, the main purpose of sexual activity was procreation.”<sup>4</sup> And not only is the breeding stopped, but there is counter-infertility, reverse action, as well. New life is blocked and existing life will be snubbed out. The dream from the Lord indicates a total annihilation of Abimelech’s kingship in Gerar. He would die, and all associated with him.

Interestingly, it is entirely possible that when a man lusts after a woman he is not only lusting after her flesh, but all that comprises her total being. The link between body, mind, and spirit is so intricately linked as to be indissoluble. In other words, sometimes it is impossible to love the body without also receiving its psychological imperfections, and emotional make-up. It’s a package deal. This holds true for both sexes, and is also true heterosexually and homosexually. When Abimelech takes Sarah into his court, suddenly the barrenness leapfrogs to his family. A spiritual judgment took place. Abimelech lusted after Sarai and received her barrenness in his whole kingdom.

The problem was not only with the outside world. The pain had fingers that reached into the couple’s personal world as well. The greatest tension in the lives of Abraham and Sarah is rooted in the attempt to overcome their infertility through their own methodology and timing. Sarah resents Hagar and her son, Ishmael, even though it had been Sarah’s idea. Sarah lashed out at her husband, “May the wrong done to me be on *you*” (Gen 16:5). Abraham retorts, “*Your* slave girl is in *your* power; do to her as *you* please” (Gen 16:6 italics added). When Abraham and Sarah receive the news of their coming son, in separate incidents, they both laugh. Abraham is open about his disbelief and it seems God laughs it off (Gen 17:17ff). Sarah hides her laughter, lies about it, and is called on the carpet for it (Gen 18:12ff). In the end Isaac gets the last laugh, for that is what his name means.

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<sup>4</sup> Oded Barowski, *Daily Life in Biblical Times* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 81.

## Generation Two – Isaac and Rebekah

Significant things happened between Isaac and Rebekah. It is no coincidence that Rebekah chooses the marriage issue as the catapult for her son Jacob's escape. She knew her request would not be denied by Isaac. This same request, forty years earlier, became the lynchpin of their married life. And just as the word lynchpin has two connotations, both positive and negative, so Isaac and Rebekah experience pros and cons within their marriage. When the aging Isaac heard the plea of his wife his mind raced back through the years to the events of his own marriage to her. Rebekah's request jolted his memory. His father Abraham had made it his deathbed wish to insure the marriage for his son would be godly and preferable. The emphatic tone was unmistakable. The servant was to secure a wife from among the family of his home country, and not in Canaan. "See to it that you do not take my son back there" (Gen 24:6). The miraculous provision of Rebekah for his wife rivaled the mountaintop intervention in which a ram was provided in Isaac's stead. He heard the voice of God stop his father's actions. If there was one other moment that competes for pride of place in his life it must be when he looked in the distance and saw the caravan arriving that carried his new bride. Rebekah inquired from the servant and covered her face with the veil. And the scripture is specific to say, "Isaac was comforted after his mother's death" (Gen 24:67). Now the tables are turned. His son, Jacob, is the one who is forty years old. Jacob is the one who is the blessed child.

Added to the mix is the notion of Esau's failure. It is part and parcel to the story. One has to feel sorry for Esau to a degree. His is the classic case of "missed it by that much." He comes in from the hunt having succeeded quickly. If his mother and brother had not been deceptive he would've received the blessing. And after he realized his parents were displeased with his selection of wives he chose another wife from among his cousins. "Marrying one [cousin] would have been acceptable" in contrast to Jacob's marrying two cousins who were sisters (so V. H. Matthews, Family

Relationships, 298 – Matthews states this is why Rachel was barren). This must be interpreted as an effort to please his parents, whatever the motives may have been. But it is certain Esau's indiscretion in women had become a tension point in the family, a point which Rebekah exploited and leveraged against Esau in favor of Jacob. "I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living" (Gen 27:46). It is inconceivable that Isaac could refuse such a pious request. After all, the same luxury had been accorded him by father Abraham. Rebekah comes off as a concerned, religious mother. Jacob is exonerated of all improprieties. For, he is now submissive to his father's command. And Esau is viewed as in-discretionary. But the dysfunctional nature of it all is glaring.

### **Generation Three – Jacob and Rachel**

The antics of Jacob and his wives and concubines are terse with apprehension while at times bordering on the comedic. Leah is unloved, or at least, less loved. She's birthing children en masse, but is more notorious for the production of tension. Rachel is loved with unscrupulous bias; yet her yearning to have children lingers for quite a while. They both, in time, incorporate their handmaids in the tradition of Grandma Rebekah. All of this presents a tug of war with Jacob as the rope.

Leah provides a telescoped view of family pain. She plays second-fiddle and continually struggles to come out from under the shadow of her younger sister. She names her children for the wrestling. Reuben is to signify God sees. Simeon implies God hears. Levi indicates her desire to be attached to her husband. And with the fourth she intentionally turns the attention to God, Judah is synonymous with praise. It is informative that the text indicates the Lord heard her cry and seems to show his favor to her, while the closing of Rachel's womb is provided as a literary aid to show

God's disapproval of the unfair situation (Gen 29:31). However, though God favors Leah, Jacob does not. The pain continues unabated.

But the pain of having no children weighs heavily upon Rachel until it erupts in the otherwise storied romance with her husband Jacob. Like his mother had done to his father, she points blame to him. "Give me children or I'll die" (Gen 30:1). Jacob resists the temptation to state the obvious: the problem is not with him. But he directs her argument to God. So Bilhah is given to Jacob. Rachel retains the right of naming the children and in so doing reveals the depth of her anger towards her sister. For she calls the two sons Dan (Judged, Vindication) and Naphtali (I win). This also shows her pride and inability to come to terms with her God.

Leah would not be outdone, though. She gives her servant Zilpah to Jacob as well. She bears two more sons, Gad (Good fortune) and Asher (I'm so happy). When tensions are heightened the smallest things can become larger than life. The story apexes with tempers flaring because of mandrake plants secured from the field. Mandrakes were believed to have had properties of fertility and were used in the ancient world as aphrodisiacs. Leah is dripping with sarcasm in her response to Rachel's requests for some of her mandrakes. "Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?" (Gen 30:15). When Rachel concedes and lets her sleep with Jacob, Leah remarks with uncharacteristic boldness for a female in the culture, even for literature of the time, and says to her husband, "I have hired you with my son's mandrakes" (Gen 30:16). He is either wearied by the hard work under his father-in-law Laban, or else he is wearied by the battle at home. Jacob simply puppets along. And Leah receives more children: Issachar (reward) and Zebulun (gift).

That producing males was paramount is demonstrated by the casual mention of Dinah's birth, probably only because she becomes important to the story line later on, because she is not mentioned in later genealogies. Her birth announcement is less than glamorous, and merely

transitional. It says simply, “Some time later she gave birth to a daughter and named her Dinah” (Gen 30:21). It is a sad indictment on the mistreatment of females in the era.

Rachel is finally “remembered” by the Lord. He opens her womb. She conceives a son and names him Joseph (disgrace removed) but speaks for the entire family’s continual lust for more, “May the Lord add to me another son” (Gen 30:24). Rachel’s quest is humanity’s quest, I want something more. Something is missing.

### **Generation Four – Joseph and His Brothers**

The fourth generation does not focus on marriage nearly as much as the previous ones, but does speak expressly about family relations. We are told that Joseph married Asenath, daughter of Potiphara. But the emphasis is not on their relationship, rather, Joseph’s tumultuous sibling rivalries that find expression in God’s ultimate deliverance. The tug of war has worn Jacob to a frazzle. It was passed from his generation to his sons. They jockeyed for position and favor. When Joseph emerged as the clear frontrunner they sold him into slavery and pretended that he had been killed by a wild animal. Joseph endured bitter years of pain because of their action. Yet God promoted him in spite of them. In the end he responds characteristically, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good” (Gen 50:20).

All that was bad about the previous generations is brought to bear upon this generation and even accelerated. Whereas Laban had been a deceptive father-in-law to Jacob, changing his wages ten times, and tricking him into marrying his older daughter too; Judah deceives his daughter-in-law Tamar about his intentions only to have her turn the tables on him with a deception of her own. Judah fathers a child, albeit conspicuously, with his daughter-in-law. Whereas Abraham and Isaac had both been deceptive about the true nature of their respective relationships with their wives, and Abraham and Jacob had fathered children through their servant girls; Reuben deceptively has sexual

relations with his father's concubine. Whereas Jacob knew tension in the relationship with his brother, Esau; it is heightened and exacerbated in the strain of his sons' dealings with one another. Whereas Jacob deceived his father Isaac; his sons deceived an entire community in the episode with Dinah, and it brought great fear and grief to Jacob.

The irony of it all comes to roost as Joseph's brothers all bow down to him prophetically in fulfillment of his childhood dreams. True to the family values, he plays it for all its worth. He can't resist deceiving them throughout two expensive trips during time of famine; though he does take pains to reimburse all their expenses. Yet they are all left laughing at the faithfulness of God through it all. In the end they do not yet possess the land God promised father Abraham, but they do have the reality of relationship with him, and an underlying sense that everything is going to be okay.

### **Conclusion**

The story unfolding from these families informs the intervention of God upon earth. The escapades of the premier Jewish family speak to the dysfunction of God's chosen people. This serves as an inset on the map of humanity. God's selection of Israel as his chosen people continues the theme of Yahweh siding with the "hevels", or the underdogs, of the earth.<sup>5</sup> In the larger picture, what is happening to Israel mirrors the plight of humanity. God chooses them because of his love, not because of their exemplary status. The family difficulties are merely demonstrative of God's acceptance of all people. That there is hope for their common difficulties shows the potential for God's intervention of all human woe.

Upon an accurate reading of the story one walks away, not impressed by the heroics of the family, but amazed at the persistent love of God. One may take confidence in the furious love of

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<sup>5</sup> Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, *Making Wise the Simple: The Torah in Christian Faith and Practice* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 87.

God who will not quit his pursuit of humanity. There is a vision for hopefulness when one picks up the Bible to read. In truth this hopefulness may come from the anticipation based on the reputation alone. But the reality quickly disparages any false belief in a super family. The pages of Genesis read like a bad soap opera. Why would you record this kind of history? It is not the kind of thing one writes if wishing to impress the reader. But the fact that it is included in the record of Israel is encouraging. The emphasis is not on the ability of the proponents of faith, but the ability of their God.

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