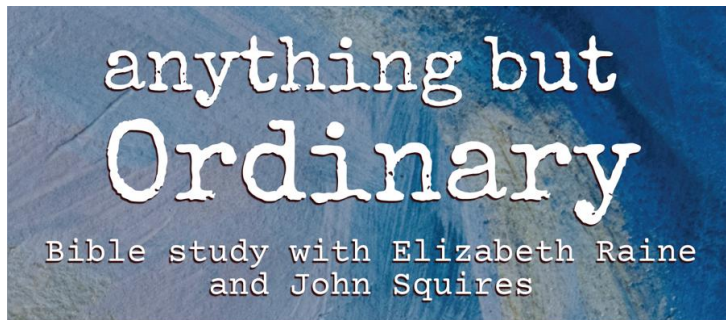




25 June

Pentecost 13
Gen. 22:1-14

A command out of the ordinary
(Abraham is ordered to kill his son)

With deep gratitude, O God,
we receive the Scriptures
in which your Word is proclaimed.
**May we read them seriously,
preach from them diligently,
and share in the life of faith;**
may we be signs of the Gospel,
through our obedience
to the Christ who is proclaimed
in these words. **Amen.**

Please read these three passages before the study, if you are able:

Genesis 22:1–14; Judges 11:1–40; 1 Samuel 14:24–46

The questions we may discuss are listed on the following pages.

Genesis 22 After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ² He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.” ⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. ⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” ⁸ Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

⁹ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ¹² He said, “Do not lay

your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, “The Lord will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

¹⁵ And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶ and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” ¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

²⁰ Now after these things it was told to Abraham, “Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor: ²¹ Uz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, ²² Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel.” ²³ (Bethuel fathered Rebekah.) These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. ²⁴ Moreover, his concubine, whose name was Reumah, bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

Judges 11 Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute. 2 Gilead's wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. "You are not going to get any inheritance in our family," they said, "because you are the son of another woman." 3 So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a gang of scoundrels gathered around him and followed him.

4 Some time later, when the Ammonites were fighting against Israel, 5 the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. 6 "Come," they said, "be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites."

7 Jephthah said to them, "Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now, when you're in trouble?"

8 The elders of Gilead said to him, "Nevertheless, we are turning to you now; come with us to fight the Ammonites, and you will be head over all of us who live in Gilead."

9 Jephthah answered, "Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the Lord gives them to me—will I really be your head?"

10 The elders of Gilead replied, "The Lord is our witness; we will certainly do as you say."

11 So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them. And he repeated all his words before the Lord in Mizpah.

12 Then Jephthah sent messengers to the Ammonite king with the question: "What do you have against me that you have attacked my country?"

13 The king of the Ammonites answered Jephthah's messengers, "When Israel came up out of Egypt, they took away my land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, all the way to the Jordan. Now give it back peaceably."

29 Then the Spirit of the Lord came on Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites. 30 And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, 31 whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

32 Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into his hands. 33 He devastated twenty towns from Aroer to the vicinity of Minnith, as far as Abel Keramim. Thus Israel subdued Ammon.

34 When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. 35 When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break."

36 "My father," she replied, "you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you promised, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. 37 But grant me this one request," she said. "Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry."

38 "You may go," he said. And he let her go for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never marry. 39 After the two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin.

From this comes the Israelite tradition 40 that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

1 Samuel 14 24 Now Saul committed a very rash act on that day. He had laid an oath on the troops, saying, "Cursed be anyone who eats food before it is evening and I have been avenged on my enemies." So none of the troops tasted food. 25 All the troops came upon a honeycomb; and there was honey on the ground. 26 When the troops came upon the honeycomb, the honey was dripping out; but they did not put their hands to their mouths, for they feared the oath.

27 But Jonathan had not heard his father charge the troops with the oath; so he extended the staff that was in his hand, and dipped the tip of it in the honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth; and his eyes brightened. 28 Then one of the soldiers said, "Your father strictly charged the troops with an oath, saying, 'Cursed be anyone who eats food this day.' And so the troops are faint."

29 Then Jonathan said, "My father has troubled the land; see how my eyes have brightened because I tasted a little of this honey. 30 How much better if today the troops had eaten freely of the spoil taken from their enemies; for now the slaughter among the Philistines has not been great."

31 After they had struck down the Philistines that day from Michmash to Aijalon, the troops were very faint; 32 so the troops flew upon the spoil, and took sheep and oxen and calves, and slaughtered them on the ground; and the troops ate them with the blood.

33 Then it was reported to Saul, "Look, the troops are sinning against the LORD by eating with the blood." And he said, "You have dealt treacherously; roll a large stone before me here." 34 Saul said, "Disperse yourselves among the troops, and say to them, 'Let all bring their oxen or their sheep, and slaughter them here, and eat; and do not sin against the LORD by eating with the blood.'" So all of the troops brought their oxen with them that night, and slaughtered them there. 35 And Saul built an altar to the LORD; it was the first altar that he built to the LORD.

36 Then Saul said, "Let us go down after the Philistines by night and despoil them until the morning light; let us not leave one of them." They said, "Do whatever seems good to you." But the priest said, "Let us draw near to God here." 37 So Saul inquired of God, "Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will you give them into the hand of Israel?" But he did not answer him that day. 38 Saul said, "Come here, all you leaders of the people; and let us find out how this sin has arisen today. 39 For as the LORD lives who saves Israel, even if it is in my son Jonathan, he shall surely die!" But there was no one among all the people who answered him.

40 He said to all Israel, "You shall be on one side, and I and my son Jonathan will be on the other side." The people said to Saul, "Do what seems good to you." 41 Then Saul said, "O LORD God of Israel, why have you not answered your servant today? If this guilt is in me or in my son Jonathan, O LORD God of Israel, give Urim; but if this guilt is in your people Israel, give Thummim." And Jonathan and Saul were indicated by the lot, but the people were cleared. 42 Then Saul said, "Cast the lot between me and my son Jonathan." And Jonathan was taken.

43 Then Saul said to Jonathan, "Tell me what you have done." Jonathan told him, "I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff that was in my hand; here I am, I will die." 44 Saul said, "God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die, Jonathan!" 45 Then the people said to Saul, "Shall Jonathan die, who has accomplished this great victory in Israel? Far from it! As the LORD lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground; for he has worked with God today." So the people ransomed Jonathan, and he did not die.

46 Then Saul withdrew from pursuing the Philistines; and the Philistines went to their own place.

Genesis 22:1–24

Do you think that faith is the main point of the story? why?? or why not??

How might this have affected Isaac?

How might he have felt when bound by his own father to a sacrificial bier?

What might he have thought when he saw the knife about to plunge into his throat?

How could he ever trust his father again?

What sort of a God demands such a terrible test of faith?

How would you judge such an action today?

Judges 11:1–40

Where was God when this child was about to be sacrificed?

Why did no angel call out, and why was no substitute sacrifice found for her?

Why do you think this story is not celebrated in our churches today?

1 Samuel 14:24–46

Isaac is saved by divine intervention; Jonathon is saved by human intervention, and the daughter of Jephthah is saved by no one.

Why is it we retell only one of these stories in our churches?

Why do we laud one father as having great faith and great wisdom and not the other two fathers? What is the difference between them?

What message do these biblical texts send to our society today?

Have the Christian and Jewish religions contributed to ongoing violence against women in contemporary society?

Is Christianity a religion that condones violence and oppression against women?

Does this help to perpetuate the suffering and the abuse of power in our society?

John's blog on Genesis 22:

<https://johntsquires.com/2023/06/28/on-the-mount-of-the-lord-it-shall-be-provided-gen-22-pentecost-5a/>

John's blog on the nature of the stories in Genesis

<https://johntsquires.com/2021/05/27/how-can-we-preach-on-passages-in-the-bible-that-are-myths/>

PRAYER of LAMENT BY THE YOUNG WOMEN

And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned to her father, who sacrificed her according to the vow he had made; and she had not known a man. And it was a custom in Israel, that the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year – Judges 11:38-39.

Into a clearing from the forest of our lives, every year it is a wild high climb.
The presence of God is in the rocky ridge
the ghostly wind the stunted pines, the wildflowers.
Light stands on the mountain almost too bright
like a truth from which we hide our eyes.

Today we do not remember the angel, the ram, the thicket
today we remember the vow and the death of our sister.
Into the clearing lightning rapes the mountaintop
violent, like the truths of which we only dream
forgetting the ancient screaming of God
answers our scream.

She has no name, has neither face nor eyes
they were drowned in blood, they were burnt by sacrificial fire.

Her father will die at a good old age
but where was the angel to stop his hand?
where was the sacred messenger?
who is this God of stone and knife and fire
why does he hide, what can he see?
When a woman prays will he ever hear?

From the forest of our lives into the clearing
rain falls on the mountaintop soaking the wordless stone
year after year like the truth of tears.

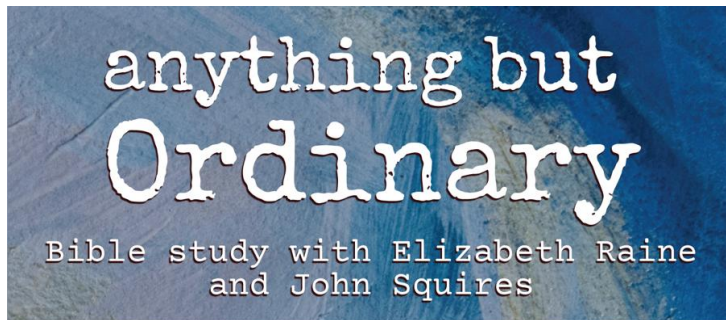
From the forest of our lives into the clearing
weeds grow on the mountaintop between the stones.
Birdcalls fly from shrub to shrub
the spirit of God is in their twittering like a truth that is sweet.

Wind increases, shiver and listen:
is it the wind? is it a voice?

You who lament me, will you be my angel?
Will you be my messenger?
Will you stop the hand that seeks to sacrifice and harm me?

it will take all your strength
it will appear to take forever but it can begin today.

Remember me, remember all of us,
remember, and tell out our stories.



2 July

Pentecost 14
Gen. 24:34-38,
42-49, 58-67

A marriage arrangement out of the ordinary
(Isaac marries Rebekah)

With deep gratitude, O God,
we receive the Scriptures
in which your Word is proclaimed.
**May we read them seriously,
preach from them diligently,
and share in the life of faith;**
may we be signs of the Gospel,
through our obedience
to the Christ who is proclaimed
in these words. **Amen.**

Please read these Genesis 24 before the study, if you are able:
The questions we may discuss are listed on the following pages.

Genesis 24 34 So he said, "I am Abraham's servant. 35 The Lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. 36 And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old, and he has given him all that he has. 37 My master made me swear, saying, 'You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites in whose land I live, 38 but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.'

42 "I came today to the spring and said, 'O Lord, God of my master Abraham, if now you will only make successful the way I am going! 43 I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, "Please give me a little water from your jar to drink," 44 and who will say to me, "Drink, and I will draw for your camels also"—let her be the woman whom the Lord has appointed for my master's son.'

45 "Before I had finished speaking in my heart, there was Rebekah coming out with her water jar on her shoulder, and she went down to the spring and drew. I said to her, 'Please let me drink.' 46 She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder and said, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels.' So I drank, and she also watered the camels. 47 Then I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?' She said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bore to him.' So I put the ring on her nose and the bracelets on her arms.

48 Then I bowed my head and worshiped the Lord and blessed the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son. 49 Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left."

58 And they called Rebekah and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will." 59 So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men. 60 And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes."

61 Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man, and the servant took Rebekah and went his way.

62 Now Isaac had come from[a] Beer-lahai-roi and was settled in the Negeb. 63 Isaac went out in the evening to walk[b] in the field, and, looking up, he saw camels coming. 64 And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel 65 and said to the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. 66 And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. 67 Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Questions on Genesis 24:34–67 (selected verses)

I Attitudes towards “others”

Why was Abraham so concerned that his son not marry a Canaanite?

How might Abraham’s attitude towards the Canaanites be reflected in contemporary situations and debates?

What do we do with the “biblical model” provided by Abraham?

II The past

For Abraham and his family, the decision has been made (Gen 12:4–5) and the journey completed (Gen 13:12). They now reside in the land promised by the Lord, and there could be no turning back to the past. *What is your attitude to the past?*

Are you learning to release the traditions of the past, like Abraham, and beginning to actively negotiate what the future might look like, like the servant?

Are you being invited to consider a new future, like Rebekah, and recognising new opportunities that may be presenting themselves like Laban did?

Are we all about to enter a new phase in the church’s life where we are prepared to lose one thing in order to gain another, like Isaac?

III Wealth and status

When she sees the man with ten treasure-laden camels behind him, Rebekah shows the servant attention and hospitality and gives him and the camels a drink (vv.15–20; vv.45–46). Her brother Laban also demonstrates the same attitude when he sees the jewelry carried by the servant (vv.29–33).

What does this say about their attitude to wealth and status?

How might the attitude of Rebekah and Laban toward the servant and his riches be reflected in contemporary situations and debates?

What do we do with the “biblical model” provided by Rebekah and Laban?

IV Rebekah and Isaac

Rebekah is far more dynamic and proactive than Isaac in this story. She is prominent throughout the narrative. No independent episode is reported about Isaac. A number of the verbs used in the passage highlight her active character and proactive role.

What contrasts do you notice between Rebekah and Isaac in this narrative?

Why do you think the narrator is making these contrasts?

V Where are you in the story?

Reaching the end of the story, where do you now find yourself in this story??

Are you Abraham, someone who began the journey, but must now entrust your hopes for the continuation of God's promise to other people of the next generation?

Are you the trusted servant, who trusts God and who is prepared to journey into an unknown land; someone who has faith that God's purpose will somehow reveal itself.

Are you perhaps Rebekah, suddenly finding yourself unexpectedly invited to be a central character in a story that you didn't even know existed?

Are you Laban, impressed by wealth and status, and prepared to make a bargain that involves a lot of trust in ideas and people unknown to you?

Or are you Isaac, content to let everyone else do most of the work for you, but prepared to accept the results and move forward?

VI Your church community

Where does your church community find itself in this story?

Are you a community that is creating networks with others across cultures, places and even faiths? What networks can you describe?

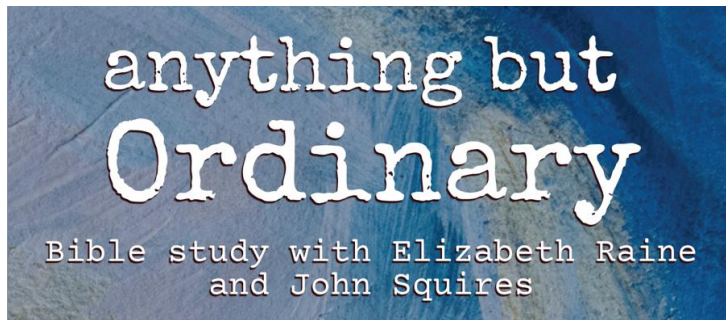
How might this story encourage you to understand better the kind of role or roles you may have in continuing to embody God's promise in your community today?

John's blog on Genesis 24:

<https://johntsquires.com/2023/07/04/a-ring-on-her-nose-and-bracelets-on-her-arms-gen-24-pentecost-6a/>

John's blog on the nature of the stories in Genesis

<https://johntsquires.com/2021/05/27/how-can-we-preach-on-passages-in-the-bible-that-are-myths/>



Bible study with Elizabeth Raine
and John Squires

9 July

Pentecost 15
Gen. 25:19-34

A betrayal out of the ordinary
(Jacob steals the birthright of Esau)

With deep gratitude, O God,
we receive the Scriptures
in which your Word is proclaimed.
**May we read them seriously,
preach from them diligently,
and share in the life of faith;**
may we be signs of the Gospel,
through our obedience
to the Christ who is proclaimed
in these words. **Amen.**

Please read Genesis 25 before the study, if you are able:

The questions we may discuss are listed on the following pages.

(for context) 23:2 Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah. 24: 67 Isaac ... took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

25:1 Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. 2 She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. 11 After the death of Abraham God blessed his son Isaac. Isaac settled at Beer-lahai-roi.

25:12 These are the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's slave-girl, bore to Abraham. 13 These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, named in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael; and Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, 14 Mishma, Dumah, Massa, 15 Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah.

25:19 These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, 20 and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.

21 Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. 22 The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. 23 And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other,

the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."

24 When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. 25 The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. 26 Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

27 When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. 28 Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

29 Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. 30 Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) 31 Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." 32 Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" 33 Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. 34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Esau (v.25) means "hairy" or "rough"

Jacob (v.26) means "he supplants"
or "he takes by the heel"

Edom (v.30) means "red"

Israel (later, at 32:28) means

"the one who strives with God"

Questions on Genesis 25

1 Barren women in the Hebrew Bible

The rabbis note that there are seven significant “barren women” in the Hebrew Bible. Can you name them?

How do people today view “a woman who has not borne a child”? Is there a stigma involved? Or not?

2 Twins in the Bible

Where else in the Bible do we find twins?

3 Names in this story

Names are important – see explanations above; and note that both Jacob and Esau later have their names changed.

What do you think the names allocated to Jacob and Esau have to say to later generations of Israelites? Why might these names have been important?

4 A later change of name (we will come back to this when we look at Genesis 32)

5 Gender stereotypes: Rebekah in a patriarchal world

Last week we saw the leading role that Rebekah took in her marriage to Isaac. This week, in the final scene in which Rebekah appears, we see her at work in relation to her twin sons. She works it so that Isaac blesses Jacob rather than Esau. Esau was the first to emerge from the womb and thus the expected recipient of the paternal blessing. But Jacob is designated as heir to the ancestral lineage, which will mean his becoming progenitor of all Israel. This is orchestrated by Rebekah. Through clever manipulation, whereby Isaac is deceived, she achieves her purpose and controls the family destiny.

Thinking more about the prominent role of Rebekah, and remembering that the ancient world was a strongly patriarchal society: what do you think it means, that stories such as this were included in the ancient saga of Israel?

6 Gender stereotypes: Jacob and Esau

When the children are born, there is a clear difference in their characters (vv.25–27). Esau assumes the traits perceived to be normative for males; he was “a hairy man” (or “a rough fellow”) who hunted in the fields, while Jacob is described as a quiet man “living in tents”; tents (the indoors of the day) were traditionally associated more with women than men. Esau the outdoorsman was his father’s favourite; Jacob the indoor boy was his mother’s favourite (v.28).

What kinds of stereotypical behaviours are attached to these two different personalities? How do we operate by gender stereotypes today? What harms can this cause? What role does the church have in addressing this area in society?

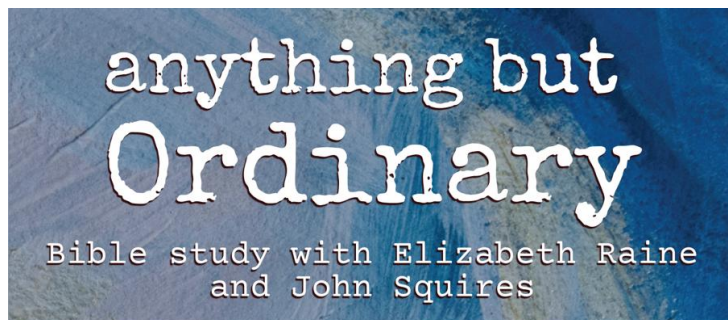
How does the church express the wide variety of humanity that we are? What are the blessings that this brings? What are the problems that this can lead to?

John’s blog on Genesis 25:

<https://johntsquires.com/2023/07/10/twins-gen-25-pentecost-7a/>

John’s blog on the nature of the stories in Genesis

<https://johntsquires.com/2021/05/27/how-can-we-preach-on-passages-in-the-bible-that-are-myths/>



16 July

Pentecost 16
Gen. 28:10-19a

Encountering the divine out of the ordinary
(Jacob and the ladder)

God of story and saga, as we read the stories of ancient Israel,
help us to understand how you were at work shaping a people to be a light to the world.

God of challenge and drama, as we enter into the stories of old and consider the ways that people have responded to you,
may we sense how the life of faith requires commitment, openness, and discovery.

God of faith and new ventures, from our engagement in these stories from an age-old saga, **may we be enriched and encouraged to engage in our own times, as your people, serving in your world. Amen.**

Please read Genesis 28 before the study, if you are able:

The questions we may discuss are listed on the following pages.

(for context) 41 Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob." 42 But the words of her elder son Esau were told to Rebekah; so she sent and called her younger son Jacob and said to him, "Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. 43 Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran, 44 and stay with him a while, until your brother's fury turns away."

28:1 Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and charged him, "You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women. 2 Go at once to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father; and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother..

6 Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there ... 9 Esau went to Ishmael and took Mahalath daughter of Abraham's son Ishmael, and sister of Nebaioth, to be his wife in addition to the wives he had.

10 Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 11 He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. 12 And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

13 And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; 14 and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.

15 Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

16 Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place — and I did not know it!" 17 And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

18 So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. 19 He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. 20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, 21 so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, 22 and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you."

Questions on Genesis 28

1 Dreaming in the Bible *Who are “the dreamers” in the Bible?*

2 The context *Where is Jacob?* [you might like to refer to the map below]

3 The angels in this story

“He dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (Gen 28:12)

To whom do angels appear elsewhere in the Bible?

How many types of angels are there in the Old Testament?

What forms do these angels take??

4 The ladder

Rabbi Haim of Volozhin [an 18th century Lithuanian sage] views Torah learning as a Sinaitic event, since Torah is what connects the heavens and the earth. “With Torah, one can ascend and descend between the two spheres. The people who do so are angel-like.”

In other words: we human beings are not spiritual beings, trapped in the prison of the material world (as Plato imagined, and as many writers, including Paul, who were influenced by his philosophy, wrote). Rather, we are fully *nephesh*, creatures of God containing both material and spiritual characteristics. We belong both to earth and to heaven.

What do you think of what the Rabbi says? Do you see yourself in this way?

5 Nephesh

In the Hebrew Bible, *nephesh* (נֶפֶשׁ) is used to describe the essence of life in both humans and animals. It is used in the Bible of all living creatures—human beings, as well as “the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle [domesticated animals], the wild animals of the earth, and every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (Gen 1:26).

How does the biblical use of nephesh illuminate our nature as God’s creatures?

6 Thin places

Jacob is travelling in the wilderness, heading away from Canaan and back to Haran, the place that his grandparents Abram and Sarai had left years before. In a sense, the journey of Jacob symbolically reverses the journey made by Abram and Sarai into the land promised by God. Jacob is travelling away, through the desert. This encounter takes place in the wilderness, between the places of civilisation. It becomes “a thin place” (as the Celts name such places) where he has an encounter with God.

Have you had the experience of finding yourself in “a thin place”?

If so, what happened during this experience?

7 Relationship with God

Accompanying the dream of Jacob is a sense of the presence of God; the divine speaks to Jacob, assuring him that God will never leave him. Jacob could never go beyond God’s keeping; angels accompany him on his onward journey to northern Mesopotamia, which was his destination (Gen 29:1). These angels keep going up and coming down on the ladder during this journey; more than this, they continue to accompany him for the twenty years he spends in Haran and then travel with him on his return to the land of Canaan (Gen 31:11; 32:1). The story has a strong sense of the enduring, faithful nature of God’s accompaniment of people of faith throughout their lives.

Can we have a relationship with God without Jesus? Can we express our spirituality in ways other than through Jesus? Church? Christianity?

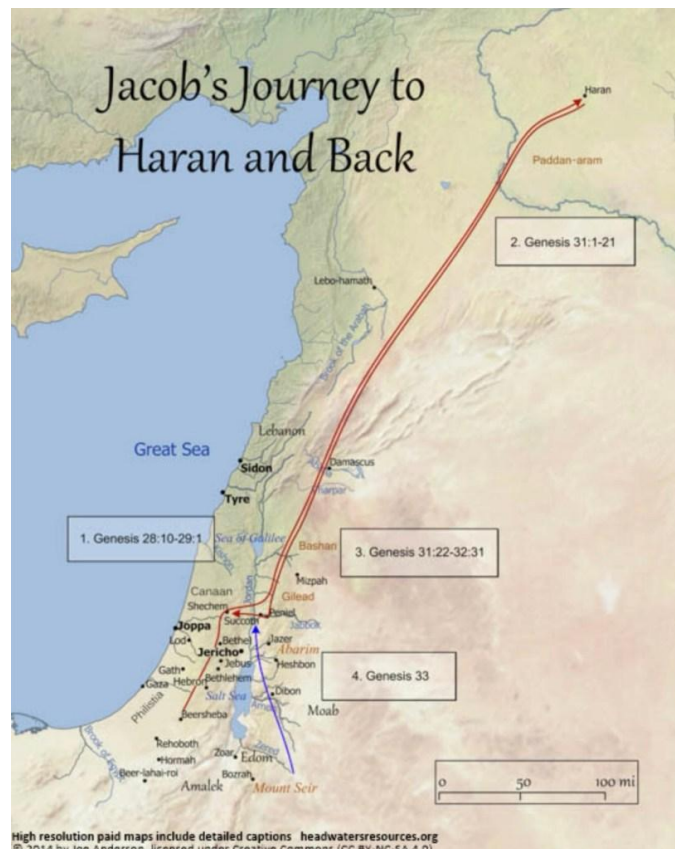
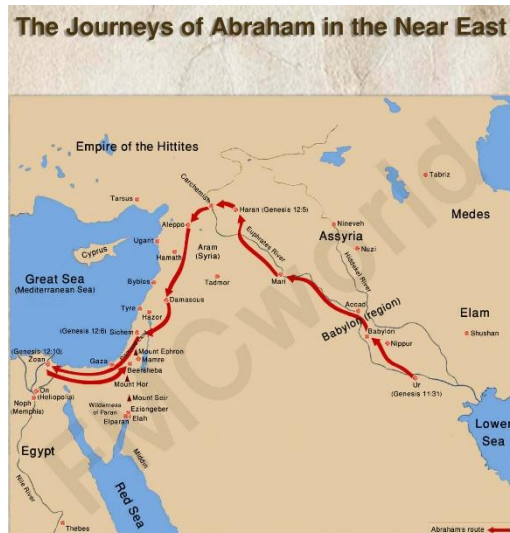
There are two blogs to read, if you like, in relation to this passage.

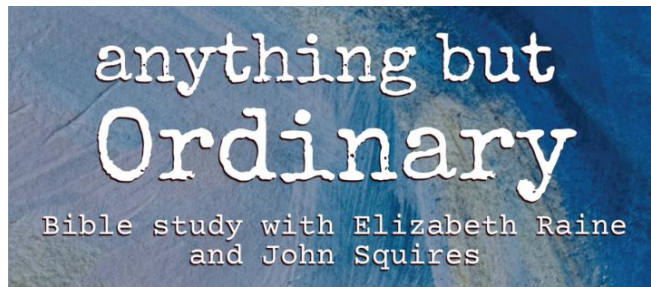
One by Elizabeth:

<https://ruralreverend.blogspot.com/2014/10/transforming-heart-stardust-in-thin-and.html>

One by John:

<https://johntsquires.com/2025/09/16/i-had-a-dream-genesis-27-28-narrative-lectionary-for-pentecost-15/>





In the beginning, God, you created humanity: male and female, in your image; **and you saw that this was very good.**

Yet over the years, we have fallen into the trap of ignoring one half of your creation, imagining that one group is of lesser value than the other. **We ask for forgiveness for the discrimination, oppression, violence, and murder that has been inflicted on women.**

As we reflect on the stories of Rachel and Leah, Zilpah and Bilhah, **may we remember that every human being is made in your image; we all deserve respect and equality. Amen.**

Please read Genesis 29 before the study, if you are able:

The questions we may discuss are listed on the following pages.

(for context) 29:1 Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the people of the east. 2 As he looked, he saw a well in the field and three flocks of sheep lying there beside it; for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well's mouth was large, 3 and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well, and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well.

4 Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where do you come from?" They said, "We are from Haran." 5 He said to them, "Do you know Laban son of Nahor?" They said, "We do." 6 He said to them, "Is it well with him?" "Yes," they replied, "and here is his daughter Rachel, coming with the sheep." 7 He said, "Look, it is still broad daylight; it is not time for the animals to be gathered together. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them." 8 But they said, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together, and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep."

9 While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep; for she kept them. 10 Now when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother Laban, and the sheep of his mother's brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of his mother's brother Laban. 11 Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud. 12 And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father.

13 When Laban heard the news about his sister's son Jacob, he ran to meet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things, 14 and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" And he stayed with him a month.

15 Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" 16 Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. 17 Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. 18 Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." 19 Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." 20 So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

21 Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." 22 So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. 23 But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. 24 (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) 25 When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" 26 Laban said, "This is not done in our country — giving the younger before the firstborn. 27 Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." 28 Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. 29 (Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her maid.) 30 So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years.

1 "Biblical marriage"

This passage tells the story of two marriages: Jacob and Leah, Jacob and Rachel. It also includes mention Zilpah, Leah's servant, and Bilhah, Rachel's servant, with whom Jacob later had relationships. Some people today talk loudly about "biblical marriage".

How would you define "biblical marriage"? What does this passage contribute to that understanding? What other marriages of biblical characters are relevant?

2 Leah

Jacob had been instructed by Isaac “not marry one of the Canaanite women” but rather to take a wife from “one of the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother” (28:2). Jacob he needs to work with Laban. On arrival at Haran, or Paddan-Aram, in “the land of the people of the east” (29:1), Jacob early on indicates his interest in Laban’s daughter Rachel. Laban manipulates matters so that Jacob marries Leah—but only after seven years have passed.

How might Leah have felt, being the one rejected? How might she have felt, being pressured by her father to take part in his scheme and hide her identity from Jacob?

3 Rachel

After seven years, Laban had craftily provided Leah as the woman with whom Jacob slept (29:21–22). Laban has always been intent on deceiving Jacob. So there is an ironic twist to the story: the deceiver is deceived, the supplanter has his desire supplanted by a more powerful one. Through all of this, Rachel is the powerless pawn who must obey her father.

*How might Rachel have felt, knowing that she was “the chosen one”?
How might she have felt when she learnt that she would not be able to marry,
as she wished, because of her father’s ruling?*

4 Bilhah and Zilpah

Zilpah and Bilhah; no more than names. Zilpah and Bilhah, slaves in another man’s household. Zilpah and Bilhah, given as possessions to Leah and Rachel. Zilpah and Bilhah, whose fate is determined solely by men.

*How might Zilpah and Bilhah have felt when they were handed over as servants?
when they became enmeshed in a complicated web of emotional relationships?
when they were unable to choose their own future?*

5 Jacob

The production of an heir was an important focus in ancient societies, and an heir for Jacob was necessary to fulfil “the promise that the Lord made on oath ... to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (Deut 9:5; Exod 32:13). Jacob was under pressure to produce the heir. Over time, twelve boys—and one girl that we know of—are born.

How might Jacob have felt, having his marriage plans turned upside-down? How might he have felt, having his father-in-law trick him? How might he have felt as he worked for Laban for a second long period of seven years??

6 Laban

The older male protagonist in this story, Laban, appears to have very dubious ethical standards. He does not seem to act with the propriety that we, today, would expect.

*How might Laban have felt, tricking his potential son-in-law?
How might he have dealt with one daughter being chosen, one being rejected?
How might he have spoken to each daughter about his plan?*

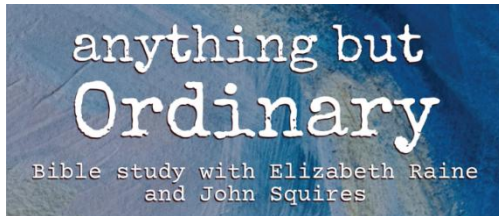
7 People of faith in the 21st century

The behaviours and customs in this story are, at many points, alien to us in the 21st century. When we read it, it may well cause all sorts of objections and emotions to arise.

*How does this story feed into our contemporary understanding of marriage?
Does it have anything to say to us? If so, what? How would you preach on this story
so that it stands as “the word of God” to those gathered for worship?*

John’s blog on this passage is at

<https://johntsquires.com/2023/07/27/leahs-eyes-were-lovely-and-rachel-was-graceful-and-beautiful-gen-29-pentecost-9a/>



But you encourage us to stand strong;
to seek the blessings that you have provided for us;
**to recognize the many ways you are with us,
giving us strength and courage.**

As we consider the story of Jacob as he wrestled with the angel,
how he asked for the angel to bless him,
we, too, come to you, God, for blessing.

There are times in our lives in which we have felt
alienated, downtrodden, alone.

**It is easy for us to wallow in our misery,
to complain about all the perceived injustices
that have been heaped upon us.**

Be with us again, O God; **ble**ss our lives,
bless the lives of those near and dear to us,
those far from us in situations of need,
those who wrestle and struggle in life. **Amen**

Please read Genesis 31–32 before the study, if you are able:

The questions we may discuss are listed on the following pages.

31:1 Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, "Jacob has taken all that was our father's; he has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father." 2 And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him as favourably as he did before. 3 Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you." 4 So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was, 5 and said to them, "I see that your father does not regard me as favourably as he did before. But the God of my father has been with me. 6 You know that I have served your father with all my strength;

7 yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not permit him to harm me. 8 If he said, 'The speckled shall be your wages,' then all the flock bore speckled; and if he said, 'The striped shall be your wages,' then all the flock bore striped. 9 Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me.

10 During the mating of the flock I once had a dream in which I looked up and saw that the male goats that leaped upon the flock were striped, speckled, and mottled. 11 Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am!' 12 And he said, 'Look up and see that all the goats that leap on the flock are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. 13 I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and return to the land of your birth.'" 14 Then Rachel and Leah answered him, "Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house? 15 Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has been using up the money given for us. 16 All the property that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children; now then, do whatever God has said to you."

17 So Jacob arose and set his children and his wives on camels; 18 and he drove away all his livestock, all the property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.

22 On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled. 23 So he took his kinsfolk with him and pursued him for seven days until he caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead. 24 But God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night, and said to him, "Take heed that you say not a word to Jacob, either good or bad." 25 Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsfolk camped in the hill country of Gilead. 26 Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done? You have deceived me and carried away my daughters like captives of the sword. 27 Why did you flee secretly and deceive me and not tell me? I would have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre. 28 And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? What you have done is foolish. 29 It is in my power to do you harm; but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Take heed that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.' 30 Even though you had to go because you longed greatly for your father's house, why did you steal my gods?"

31 Jacob answered Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. 32 But anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsfolk, point out what I have that is yours, and take it." Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods.

33 So Laban went into Jacob's tent, and into Leah's tent, and into the tent of the two maids, but he did not find them. And he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's. 34 Now Rachel

had taken the household gods and put them in the camel's saddle and sat on them. Laban felt all about in the tent but did not find them. 35 And she said to her father, "Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me." So, he searched but did not find the household gods.

55 Early in the morning Laban rose up and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them; then he departed and returned home. 32:1 Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him; 2 and when Jacob saw them, he said, "This is God's camp!" So, he called that place Mahanaim.

3 Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, 4 instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; 5 and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favour in your sight.'"

6 The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."

7 Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, 8 thinking, "If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape."

9 And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,' 10 I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. 11 Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. 12 Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.'"

13 So he spent that night there, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother

Esau, 14 two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, 15 thirty milch camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. 16 These he delivered into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on ahead of me, and put a space between drove and drove." 17 He instructed the foremost, "When Esau my brother meets you, and asks you, 'To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?' 18 then you shall say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to my lord Esau; and moreover, he is behind us.'" 19 He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, "You shall say the same thing to Esau when you meet him, 20 and you shall say, 'Moreover your servant Jacob is behind us.'" For he thought, "I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me." 21 So the present passed on ahead of him; and he himself spent that night in the camp.

22 The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."

28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." 29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. 32 Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

Rachel, Jacob, and wrestling in the night (Genesis 31–32)

1 Starting with last week's question

In chapter 29, Jacob goes to Haran in search of a wife. He desires Rachel, but Laban manipulates things so that he works for seven years and then marries Leah. Laban then controls things so that Jacob works for another seven years before he finally marries Rachel. Leah, Zilpah, and Bildad all produce children; Rachel remains barren. Eventually, Rachel bears two children, but dies in giving birth to the second.

Does this story of cunning, deceit, and tragedy have anything to say to us today? If so, what? How would you preach on this story so that it stands as “the word of God” to those gathered for worship?

2 The Context for the dream: Jacob, Laban, and Esau

In chapter 31, Jacob has taken his family and left Laban and the homeland of his two wives, Haran in Mesopotamia (today, it is near the south-eastern border of Türkiye). They are travelling south, back to Canaan, the homeland for Jacob (today where Israelis and Palestinians live). Jacob is concerned about possible revenge from Esau; he prays to God, asking to be saved from Esau's murderous wrath.



A significant part of the story is wrapped up in handling conflict. This is never easy and living in constant conflict is not a good situation. Jacob decides to leave the conflict with Laban in Haran. But he is heading towards conflict with Esau.

How should Jacob have left Laban's house to minimise any conflict?

In the story of Jacob, how is God involved in managing conflict?

Where do you see conflict in your local community or church?

How is God involved in such conflict situations? What does that tell you about God?

3 Leaving behind, heading to an encounter

Jacob takes his family across the Yabbok stream to move them out of harm's way; he remained behind alone. He is in an uncivilised area, in the wilderness— a “thin place”. We have already thought about these “thin places” before, and how an experience of being in a liminal space might contribute to effecting a change in our lives.

A brief opportunity for any further thoughts about “liminal spaces” or “thin spaces”?

One interesting feature is that, whilst Jacob takes all his flocks and property on the journey south (vv.17–18), Rachel took the household deities with her on this journey (v.19). These were small figurines, commonly found in many ancient near eastern households, often associated with domestic work, divination, or inheritance rights.

These were the traditional deities of Laban, not an Israelite, but an Aramean living far north in Haran. Yet Rachel, we presume, wants this memento of her upbringing and heritage to be with her in Canaan. *(We hear a reflection from Rachel's point of view)*

What does it mean for Rachel to bring these household goddesses into Israel? What implications might that have had for ordinary Israelites in the years following, seeing such figurines in her household?

4 Household deities

However, we do know from archaeological finds that there were many such figurines in ordinary Israelite houses over the centuries (see examples at right). They were not out of the ordinary, even though we might think of them as anything but ordinary. The Hebrew Bible calls them *terafim*, usually translated as “household gods” or “idols”. We find such references in Genesis, Judges, 1 Samuel, 2 Kings, Ezekiel, Hosea, and Zechariah. They were everywhere, in all the ordinary households.



What do you think is the significance of the fact that such figurines were common in Israelite houses for centuries? What does this mean when we think about how the ancient Israelites related to the spiritual realm?

5 Who is the man in the dream?

So, who is this mysterious man or divine being whom Jacob wrestled?

The wilderness—away from all the securities of familiar life—is the place where real struggles take place. It requires being vulnerable. It requires self-reflection. It requires honesty. It is the place where we encounter God and begin to know ourselves. It is the place of blessing and discerning. The ancient Hebrews understood liminal, in between spaces. They understand it is precisely when you feel lost and in the wilderness that the divine can emerge.

Have you experienced a “wrestling in the dark” like Jacob did? What happened for you in such an experience?

6 Wrestling with God; taking a new name

At daybreak, Jacob's combatant pleads with him to let him go. Jacob says: "I will not let you until you bless me." The man accedes and confers upon him the name Israel, "for you have striven with divine and human beings, and you have prevailed." The name Israel, *Yisrael* in the Hebrew, means "he who prevails over the divine."

The struggle is conducted on two planes: "with the divine and with humanity." The struggle with humanity includes the nearly 4000 years of exile that Israel wrestled with the Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Romans, the Spanish Inquisition, Nazi Germany and in more recent times, threats of terrorist strike. Despite these many attempts to overcome Israel, they have managed to survive.

This history does not, however, excuse what the current State of Israel is perpetuating. It is a tragic fact that, in an effort to strengthen their self-identity and protect their citizens against terrorist groups, the policies of Israel have been excessive and damaging. The military aggression, expanding settlements in the West Bank displacing more Palestinians, the mass devastation in Gaza, and now the genocide that is occurring, are indeed a modern tragedy. Israel itself has become a terrorist state.

How might this history of the Jews over the centuries help us to understand the way that they see themselves in the world today?

7 Emerging from our struggles

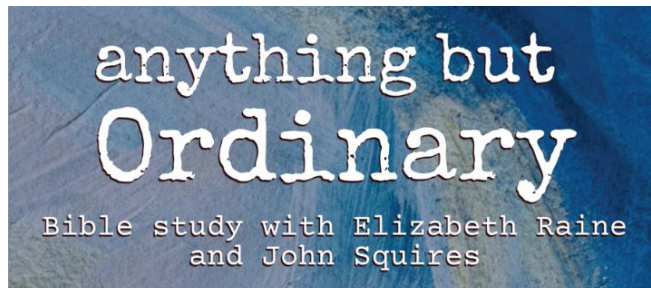
Long dark nights are always followed by sunrise. The stranger being in the story is afraid of being exposed to daylight. This story is one of a number that shows that this community of ancient people had faith enough to trust God with their raw feelings of anger, grief and palpable nastiness. The story of Jacob recognises destructive emotions such as fear, cowardice and desire for vengeance are part of every human life. Imagine how life might change if we, like Jacob in this passage, spent more time wrestling with our fear and anger in prayer to God. How many of us can be so brave as to face the divine with all our human flaws intact?

How do you bring your flaws and inadequacies before God?

How do such encounters work out?

John's blog on this passage is at

<https://johntsquires.com/2023/08/03/limping-priests-and-the-counsel-of-perfection-gen-32-pentecost-10a/>



We pray for those who, like Rachel, live lives of frustration and fulfilment, love and despair, scheming and intrigue, who can be overwhelmed by the turns of fortune. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for those who, like Isaac, are born in transit and live as aliens in lands foreign to them, those who are struggling to belong. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for those who, like Joseph, find themselves deeply wounded by people they love—people they thought they knew and trusted—those who are struggling to know how to respond. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

Please read Genesis 35 and 37 before the study, if you are able:

The questions we may discuss are listed on the following pages.

35:16 Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labour. 17 When she was in her hard labour, the midwife said to her, "Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son."

18 As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. 19 So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), 20 and Jacob set up a pillar at her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. 21 Israel journeyed on, and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.

22 While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard of it.

Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. 23 The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. 24 The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. 25 The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid: Dan and Naphtali. 26 The sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.

27 Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had resided as aliens.

28 Now the days of Isaac were one hundred eighty years. 29 And Isaac breathed his last; he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

37:1 Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. 2 This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. 3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. 4 But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

5 Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. 6 He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. 7 There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." 8 His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

9 He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." 10 But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" 11 So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

12 Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. 13 And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." 14 So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, 15 and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" 16 "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." 17 The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan.

18 They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. 19 They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. 20 Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." 21 But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life."

22 Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him" — that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. 23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; 24 and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

25 Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. 26 Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27 Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed.

28 When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

29 When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. 30 He returned to his brothers, and said, "The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?" 31 Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood.

32 They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." 33 He recognized it, and said, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces."

34 Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father bewailed him.

36 Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

1 Aliens in the land

This passage tells the story of two marriages: Jacob and Leah, Jacob and Rachel. It also includes mention Zilpah, Leah's servant, and Bilhah, Rachel's servant, with whom Jacob later had relationships. Some people today talk loudly about "biblical marriage".

Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, are "aliens in the land" of Canaan? Jacob spent much of his life in the Aramean land of Haran, where he married two Aramean women. How does this change the way we read the stories of the great patriarchs and matriarchs?

2 The story moves on

This week we leave behind the stories of the three patriarchs of Israel, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their wives, the four matriarchs Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel. Jacob is still alive, and he will return for some of the final scenes of Genesis in chapters 46 and 48—50. But now we turn our attention to Joseph, who had been born to Jacob's wife Rachel, after years of waiting.

Here's the way that Saddleback portrays the scene in the video of "Joseph, his dreams, and his coat"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnlqKPIZQzI>

How did Jacob's open favoritism toward Joseph affect the attitudes and actions of his other sons?

Have you ever seen or experienced similar favoritism in a family? Or in a group or church you belonged to?

What were the consequences of such favoritism being shown?

Joseph shared his dreams of greatness with his family even though it made his brothers angry. Was sharing the dreams a sign of youthful bragging or a faithful report of what God showed him?

3 The brothers

What were those brothers thinking with what they did? Again, the text notes that, after Joseph explained his dream to them, "they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words" (37:8). A second dream didn't help the situation. After the brothers went off to pasture their sheep elsewhere, Joseph ran after them, "and before he came near to them", the text notes "they conspired to kill him" (37:18). Ahh, such brotherly love!

Do you think that the ethical standards and cultural practices of our time have become more developed over time, and are different from what held sway in past eras? Or do we still have poor, inadequate, imperfect moral standards?

4 Dysfunctional over generations

Let's return to the family situation and explore that a little more. Today we talk about intergenerational trauma: when bad events in the past hurt a person, and somehow those negative consequences get passed on to their children, and grandchildren, and more. Perhaps the Genesis stories offer ancient evidence for what we are discovering today?

The family had a long history of lying, trickery, and rivalry. How do you see generational bad habits passed down through Joseph's family? Do you think that such ethics are inherited, or taught?

Why weren't these stories excised from the long saga of the ancestors? What was the value in retelling them over and over?

5 How do we see Jews; or, the seeds of antisemitism?

Perhaps we need also to note that this particular incident, selling Joseph for twenty pieces of silver, resonates with the later story of Judas betraying Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. This element of betrayal for money, of course, has fed into the unhelpful stereotype of the Jews who are always and in every way concerned about money. It's a stereotype that has fed the burgeoning antisemitic attitude and actions of people throughout the Middle Ages, though the Enlightenment on into the modern age—culminating, of course, in the horrors of the Shoah (Holocaust) in Nazi Germany. And even today, we have a Royal Commission into Antisemitism and Social Cohesion at work in Australia.

Have you experienced negative stereotypes about Jews? How do you deal with that when you encounter it?

6 The aftermath

Judah convinced the brothers to sell Joseph into slavery instead of killing him, presenting it as a practical choice. They chose the better option, even though it was not a good thing they were doing.

How do you think the brothers lived with the secret and the guilt of deceiving their father Jacob for over twenty years?

How do people today talk themselves into thinking that they are being reasonable or kind, when they are actually doing the wrong thing? Can you think of an example?

7 Egypt

People hearing the story when it was written into the scrolls, after their return from Exile, would know of the time of slavery spent by their ancestors in Egypt, when “the Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service” (Exod 1:13–14). They would know the potential threat that lies over Joseph at the end of this week's story: “they took Joseph to Egypt” (Gen 37:28). The question remains: what fate awaits Joseph?

How would Israelites in exile in Babylon have heard the story of Joseph? What would it be telling them? Does this explain why it gets so much space in Genesis (14 of 50 chapters; almost 30%)?

Again: Why weren't these stories excised from the long saga of the ancestors? What was the value in retelling them over and over?

John's blog on this passage is at

<https://johnsquires.com/2023/08/11/here-comes-this-dreamer-let-us-kill-him-gen-37-pentecost-11a/>



God, we come to the final session of this series, we give thanks for the times of conversation we have enjoyed with each other.

**O God, we give you thanks
for existing commitments strengthened,
for new insights gained,
for challenges encountered
and for questions raised.**

We pray for those who teach biblical studies in theological colleges and university departments;
we pray for ministers who share the fruits of biblical research with their people in sermons and studies.

**May the enrichment in understanding
that comes from these activities
strengthen all who seek to follow the
way of Jesus. Amen.**

Please read these excerpts from Genesis 37—45 before the study, if you are able:
The questions we may discuss are listed on the following pages.

37:36 Meanwhile the Midianites had sold [Joseph] in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

39:1 Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. 2 The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master.

3 His master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. 4 So Joseph found favour in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. 5 From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field. 6 So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and, with him there, he had no concern for anything but the food that he ate.

Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. 7 And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." 8 But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. 9 He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" 10 And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her.

11 One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house, 12 she caught hold of his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran

outside. 13 When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, 14 she called out to the members of her household and said to them, "See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; 15 and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside."

16 Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, 17 and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; 18 but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside."

19 When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, "This is the way your servant treated me," he became enraged. 20 And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison. 21 But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favour in the sight of the chief jailer. 22 The chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. 23 The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.

41:46 Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went through all the land of Egypt. 47 During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly. 48 He gathered up all the food of the seven years when there was plenty in the land of Egypt, and stored up food in the cities; he stored up in every city the food from the fields around it. 49 So Joseph stored up grain in such abundance — like the sand of

the sea — that he stopped measuring it; it was beyond measure.

50 Before the years of famine came, Joseph had two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Potiphra, priest of On, bore to him.

51 Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house."

52 The second he named Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes."

53 The seven years of plenty that prevailed in the land of Egypt came to an end; 54 and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in every country, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. *[the sons of Jacob twice go to Egypt to obtain grain from Pharaoh; on neither occasion do they recognise Joseph]*

42:3 So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. 4 But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he feared that harm might come to him. 5 Thus the sons of Israel were among the other people who came to buy grain, for the famine had reached the land of Canaan.

45:1 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. 2 And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. 3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. 7 God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

9 Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. 10 You shall settle in the land

of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. 11 I will provide for you there — since there are five more years of famine to come — so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' 12 And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. 13 You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here."

14 Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

16 When the report was heard in Pharaoh's house, "Joseph's brothers have come," Pharaoh and his servants were pleased. 17 Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Say to your brothers, 'Do this: load your animals and go back to the land of Canaan. 18 Take your father and your households and come to me, so that I may give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you may enjoy the fat of the land.' 19 You are further charged to say, 'Do this: take wagons from the land of Egypt for your little ones and for your wives, and bring your father, and come. 20 Give no thought to your possessions, for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours.'"

21 The sons of Israel did so. Joseph gave them wagons according to the instruction of Pharaoh, and he gave them provisions for the journey. 22 To each one of them he gave a set of garments; but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver and five sets of garments. 23 To his father he sent the following: ten donkeys loaded with the good things of Egypt, and ten female donkeys loaded with grain, bread, and provision for his father on the journey. 24 Then he sent his brothers on their way, and as they were leaving he said to them, "Do not quarrel along the way."

25 So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan.

26 And they told him, "Joseph is still alive! He is even ruler over all the land of Egypt." He was stunned; he could not believe them.

27 But when they told him all the words of Joseph that he had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived.

28 Israel said, "Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die."

The lectionary, in characteristic style, picks and chooses select passages that it offers, week by week, as we move through the ancestral narratives that have been collected and consolidated in Genesis. As we have noted before, these stories have been told and retold, collected and written down, because they have shaped the self-understanding and identity of the ancient nation of Israel. Woven together into a narrative thread, the whole story stands as a foundational saga for the ancient nation. So this week we jump from last Sunday's tale of young Joseph, sold off to the Egyptians (Gen 37), to the account of his encounter with his brothers, suffering under famine in their land (Gen 43–45).

1 The chapters we jump over

First, however, we need to note what has happened in between these two stories.

Why do the brothers not recognise Joseph as one of their own, rather than as one of "those Egyptians"? What does that tell us, today, about putting people in ethnic boxes?

2 Joseph and his master's wife

Potiphar's wife—like many women in the patriarchal stories—does not have a name. And yet, her presence, and the interaction between her and Joseph, are crucial in the story.

How does this interpretation change the way you understand this story?

Do you agree that that Potiphar's wife has been misrepresented?

Do you agree that Joseph is not as pure as we might have thought?

3 Life in Egypt

Psalm 105 tells of a time when "Israel came to Egypt; Jacob lived as an alien in the land of Ham" (v.23). Of that period, the psalmist sings that "the Lord made his people very fruitful" (v.24). This presumably reflects the time after the severe famine in Canaan (Gen 43:1), when, after various machinations, Jacob and his family relocate to Egypt, and Joseph, having revealed his true identity to his family (Gen 45:1–5), "settled his father and his brothers, and granted them a holding in the land of Egypt, in the best part of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had instructed; and Joseph provided his father, his brothers, and all his father's household with food, according to the number of their dependents" (Gen 47:11–12).

Of course, soon after this, famine hit Egypt as well (Gen 47:13). Joseph's scheme for surviving the famine works (Gen 47:14–26), the country survives, and "Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; and they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly" (Gen 47:27). This bounty is reiterated in the opening chapter of Exodus, which declares that "the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them" (Exod 1:7). So Egypt ended up as a good place, for quite some time, for the Israelites.

4 Joseph and his brothers

The lectionary takes up the story (Gen 45:1) as Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers. The brothers have been in Egypt before, but did not ever recognise Joseph.

When the brothers finally stood before Joseph in Egypt without knowing who he was, how did their past actions come back to haunt them?

Joseph put his brothers through several tests when they came to Egypt for food.

Was he acting out of a desire for revenge, or was he testing to see if their character had truly changed?

Finally, the narrator tells us that Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers (Gen 45:4).

How is true forgiveness different from just pretending a hurt never happened?

What can we learn from Joseph about letting go of bitterness?

5 Honouring Joseph

The irony of the stories about Joseph is that Israel as a whole is identified with reference to Joseph at a number of places in the Hebrew Scriptures. Both narrative texts and prophets refer to the whole nation as “the house of Joseph” (Josh 17:17; 18:5; Judg 1:22–23, 35; 2 Sam 19:20; 1 Ki 11:28; Amos 5:6; Obad 1:18; Zech 10:6; and see Ps 77:15; 80:1; 81:4–5). The name of Joseph was revered in the ongoing traditions of Israel.

There are suggestions that the detail of these chapters of Genesis means that Joseph may well have been an actual historical person, in contrast to the patriarchs and matriarchs before him, who are offered as “characters” in a narrative developed before and during the Exile as the foundational story (the grounding “myth”) of Israel. His ultimate character is one of redeeming goodness, in contrast to the schemers and deceivers who have gone before him.

What do you make of this interpretation?

In what ways does this add weight to the suggestion that Joseph was more certain as an historical figure than those who go before?

6 To conclude this series

What have you learnt from discussing the narrative about the patriarchs and matriarchs running through Genesis?

How has your discipleship in 2026 been encouraged or challenged?

See also John’s blog on this passage at

<https://johntsquires.com/2023/08/14/benjamin-wept-upon-josephs-neck-gen-45-pentecost-12a/>

If you would like to do further reading about the Genesis narratives, you could look at John’s blogs on “who have we missed?”

<https://johntsquires.com/2023/08/11/who-have-we-missed-women-in-genesis-in-the-season-of-pentecost-year-a/>

<https://johntsquires.com/2023/08/17/who-else-have-we-missed-more-women-in-genesis-in-the-season-of-pentecost-year-a/>

and also on the passages earlier in Genesis before we started these studies

<https://johntsquires.com/2023/06/05/in-you-all-the-families-of-the-earth-shall-be-blessed-gen-12-pentecost-2a/>

<https://johntsquires.com/2023/06/12/visiting-abraham-and-sarah-by-the-oaks-at-mamre-gen-18-pentecost-3a/>

<https://johntsquires.com/2023/06/22/come-lift-up-the-boy-and-hold-him-fast-the-other-son-ishmael-gen-21-pentecost-4a/>

If you would like to do further reading about the Exodus narratives which come in following weeks in the lectionary, you could look at: John’s blogs on “how do we read the Exodus story?”, that are listed at <https://johntsquires.com/2023/10/27/never-since-has-there-arisen-a-prophet-like-moses-pentecost-13a-to-22a/>