

Stories of the Patriarchs

Genesis 12 - 50

For history and tradition, these are "ancestor stories" - the beginnings of Israel. Theologically, it is the account of how God prepared to fulfil his promise, first made to Abraham and repeated to Isaac and Jacob, (Genesis 12:1-3; 26:1-5; 35:9-12; Exodus 2:23-25; 3:16-17; Romans 4:13-16).

The stories would have been preserved and retold at the main shrines of Israel, especially those associated with the patriarchs themselves, Hebron with Abraham, Beersheba with Isaac and Bethel with Jacob. They would not have become a connected narrative until the work of Solomon's scribes in the 900s.

Although God promised the land of Canaan to the patriarchs, they never actually possessed more than a few square miles of it. In fact, at the end of Genesis Israel is in Egypt, from where they will later be rescued in the exodus.

Our God is still the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," that is, the God who chose them, whom they worshipped, and who revealed himself to them. (see Mark 12:26-27)

Approximate date: Abraham, 1750 B.C.

Day 7. Psalm 112; Genesis 14 - 17

The Promise to Abraham

Psalm 112

The Lord blesses those who are just and righteous man and trust in him and they become a blessing to others.

Genesis 14 - 17

Abraham is the lineal ancestor of the people of Israel (as well as a number of other peoples) and the descendants of Abraham (through Isaac) see themselves as the chosen people of God. In Romans 4 Paul applies this promise to the Christian Church. In a different but important way, he claims, we are the children of Abraham, because we put right with God by faith, and it was because of his faith that Abraham was righteous (Genesis 15:6). Abraham is our "father in the faith," (Romans 4:16). The story of Abraham demonstrates much of what it means to have faith in God.

1. He was chosen (Genesis 12:1-3). Faith not a latent capacity of human beings but a possibility offered to us in response to God's choice.
2. Faith requires obedience. Abraham had to respond to a definite command; without obedience, faith is worthless (James 2:20-24).
3. Although God promised him the land of Israel, Abraham had to avoid taking it prematurely. He allowed Lot the first choice of the land, then gave up the spoils of battle. Trusting God to fulfil his promise at the right time he refused to accept what was to be his at the wrong time and from the wrong hands.
4. God tested Abraham's faith with a long wait. He had to dwell in the land as a sojourner all his life, and he had to wait until past the time when he could reasonably have expected to have a son before Isaac was conceived.
5. Abraham was far from perfect. He went to Egypt when he should have stayed and relied on God, and later he tried to anticipate God by begetting a son through Hagar. Even so, God remained faithful to him, for the sake of his promise.

Apart from the fact that Chedorlaomer is definitely an Elamite name, nothing can be said for certain about the ancient kings named in chapter 14. It suggests that Sodom and Gomorrah were vassals of the Elamite king, based in Mesopotamia

(where Abraham's family came from) and that an attempt at rebellion was crushed.

Genesis 15 and 17 present two accounts of the covenant or agreement between God and Abraham, the first from "J", the second from "P". In both, the initiative is with God who chooses him; Abraham is not asked whether he wants to make a covenant. Chapter 15 records a very ancient covenant ceremony in which an animal is killed and cut in two and the partners pass between the pieces.

The story of Hagar is a concrete example of God's special care for the downtrodden. Through his attempt to anticipate God's promise, Abraham acted unjustly toward Hagar and put her life in danger. But God, who is both just and compassionate, not only rescues her but treats her as equal in value to the couple he has specially chosen.

Chapter 17 records the origin of circumcision as the sign of the covenant, setting the children of Abraham apart from the nations (Ishmael the ancestor of the Arabs also receives circumcision). Later, the Jews put great emphasis on circumcision as the sign of being included in God's covenant and Paul had to argue (chiefly in Galatians and Romans) that it is not circumcision but faith which puts people right with God.

Day 8. Psalm 17; Genesis 18 – 20

Promise and Judgement

Psalm 17

The psalmist prays to be defended by God's just judgement and for the overthrow of his enemies.

Genesis 18:1-15

Each time God confirms his promise to Abraham, it is becoming more and more impossible and unbelievable. By now, the promise of a son is nothing less than life from the dead (18:11; Romans 4:19-24). But God's decision to give Abraham a son does not depend either on human possibility (18:15).

Genesis 18:16-end

Many commentators have found a hint of the Trinity in "the Lord" appearing to Abraham as "three men." But note in 18:22 "the men" go on and "the Lord" remains and in 19:1 "two angels" arrive in Sodom.

Here and in 20:7, Abraham is presented as a prophet. One characteristic of a prophet is that he is admitted into God's counsels. Another is that, knowing the will of God, he has the task of intercession (18:17-19). In Isaiah 41:8 Abraham is called by God "my friend", someone whom God trusted with the knowledge of his purpose.

Abraham's prayer illustrates two important principles of intercession. First, it is firmly based on what he knows about God's character - "the Judge of all the earth" (18:25). Secondly his request reflects the extent of his faith, which gradually increases as his prayer is heard.

Genesis 19:1-29

Hospitality and the lack of it is a theme which runs through these chapters (18:3-5; 19:1-3, 4-5). Abraham's hospitality to his divine visitors and Lot's in Sodom mark them out as upright men. Exactly what the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was is not stated, though the angels were there to investigate it; homosexuality and lack of hospitality are probably side-effects of a deeper sinfulness. Sodom and Gomorrah became a byword for divine judgement (see Deuteronomy 29:23; Isaiah 1:9)

Jesus accepts and teaches God's character as Judge and Lord of both life and death (Matthew 10:15; 11:23-24; 25:31-end). Since the whole world lies under God's judgement, his personal decision is involved in particular acts of judgement such as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But note that such acts of judgement fall at the right time (see 15:16; 2 Peter 2:9).

Genesis 19:30-end

Again God shows mercy in judgement (19:16). Abraham did not save the whole city by his prayer, but he did save Lot (19:29). Lot is a picture of the "scarcely saved". His response to God's offer of mercy is only half-hearted (19:20,26,30) and although delivered, he is ultimately ruined. This story gives a far from flattering picture of the origins of Israel's neighbours, Moab and Ammon.

Genesis 20

The theme of the ancestress in danger appears again. Abraham makes the same mistake as he had previously made in Egypt. In contrast to the men of Sodom, Abimelech provides an example of someone with a well-developed sense of goodness and justice. Abraham had thought there was no fear of God among his hosts (20:11), but he was wrong.

Day 9. Psalm 90; Genesis 21 - 23

The Lord our Provider

Psalm 90

Although the psalm is attributed to Moses, it is equally appropriate for Abraham, a man who lived under God's care and for whom God was "The Lord, the Eternal God." (Genesis 21:33). Our days, our destiny and our achievements are all in his hands.

Genesis 21:1-21

Isaac's name means, "he laughs." Sarah had laughed at the promise of his birth (18:11-15). Now she laughs at his birth (21:6-7). Isaac is God's joke on those who don't believe, a son provided in the face of everyone's expectations - a picture of our salvation, another of God's impossibilities.

Despite Sarah's jealousy, God is faithful to his earlier promise to Hagar (16:11-12). With no one to provide for her Hagar would be destitute and at the mercy of everyone until her son grew up. So God, who cares for the powerless and the underdog, protects and provides for them.

Genesis 21:22-end

This is the first of two stories explaining the origin of the name "Beersheba" (see also 26:26-33). In calling Abimelech and Phicol Philistines, the writer is being anachronistic. The Philistines did not arrive in southern Palestine until about the 1400's B.C. "El Olam", like "El Elyon" (14:18-23) is a patriarchal title, emphasising the universal sovereignty of the Lord.

Genesis 22

Abraham's experience as a man of faith foreshadows that of the Christian. Here, his faith is tested, as he is asked to give back to God the son he had only received as the result of God's promise.

Abraham had given up his home, country and relations in order to obey God and receive what he had promised. Now he was to be asked to give up the object of God's promise. It is possible for the gifts God gives us and the areas of service to which he calls us to become idols and distractions, and they must be yielded to him, not once but continually. Even those who bear fruit in God's service are pruned, to bear more fruit (John 15:1).

Abraham's sacrifice is also a picture of that of the Father, who did not spare his own only Son (Romans 8:32), and of the Lord who provides himself for an offering, (John 1:29). Mount Moriah became the site of the altar in the Temple at Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 3:1) so it was on "a mountain in the land of Moriah" that Jesus met his death.

Both Romans 4:18-25 and Hebrews 11:17-19 find in this passage a foreshadowing of the resurrection, which is at the heart of Christian faith. Since God's promise could only come as a result of life from the dead, Abraham had to believe in God as the One who raises the dead. Thus, seen in the light of the New Testament, the resurrection is an essential part of the faith of Israel right from the start.

Genesis 23

Despite the polite forms of the bargain, the price Abraham paid for his and Sarah's grave was exorbitant.

Despite being the one to whom the promise had been made, Abraham was only a stranger and sojourner in the land. The only part of the promised land which he actually owned was his grave. In order to inherit the promise, he had to die, just as the Christian must lose her life in order to inherit eternal life (Matthew 16:24-25).

Day 10. Psalm 91; Genesis 24 - 26

Isaac: The Shelter of the Most High

Psalm 91

Special protection surrounds those who "make the Most High their dwelling."

Genesis 24

This story is a wonderful example of the way God's providence caring for the people he has chosen and also working with and through human actions and decisions. Arriving at the well, the servant devises a rough and ready test of character by which he will discern God's choice, and in fact God has already anticipated his request (24:15). Even so, he still tests the answer he has received to be sure it is the right one (24:21-27). Meanwhile, Laban is attracted by the ring and bracelets! Knowing for sure that God has blessed his quest, the servant seizes the moment (24:33). Even so, success is not pre-determined. The woman may not come (24:5-8,39-41). The fate of God's chosen people lies in Rebecca's hands until she chooses to go.

In that society it was assumed that a woman would submit to the will of her male protectors (24:50-51). But this need not mean she is treated without consideration or denied the dignity of choice (24:57-58,60,64-65). The last verse also affirms the ideal of love in marriage, which is assumed in the Old Testament.

Genesis 25

The descendants of Abraham through Keturah and of Ishmael put the history of Israel in the context of the surrounding tribes and nations. Then comes the birth of Jacob, "the supplanter," ancestor of the tribes of Israel. His character and destiny are shown by the prophecy (25:23), his birth, holding his brother's heel (25:26), his name (25:26) and his action in depriving his brother of the birthright.

Genesis 26

Isaac is the inheritor, who follows in his father's footsteps, enjoying all the things for which Abraham trusted, endured and was tested. Everything is provided for him - his wife (24); his sons (25:19-26); his wealth; and God's protection (26:1-6). He inherits the Lord's promise made to his father (26:3-5); he makes the same mistake as his father (26:7); he is now the one "blessed by the Lord," (26:12,29);

and he dug again the wells his father had dug, giving them the same names (28:18).

Isaac illustrates another aspect of the Christian life: as adopted members of God's family all we have from God comes to us as a free gift through the work of Jesus.

Day 11. Psalm 130; Genesis 27:1 - 30:24

Jacob: The Supplanter

Psalm 130

This is one of the penitential psalms. There is no specific request in the psalm at all. It simply describes the approach to the Lord in penitence and patience. Because of our sinfulness, the only hope for mankind lies in the mercy of God.

Genesis 27:1 - 28:9

"My thoughts are not your thoughts
neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord.
'For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my thoughts than your thoughts.'" (Isaiah 55:11)

If Abraham was the one who inherited God's promises through faith and obedience, Isaac the one who inherited them because of the righteousness of another, Jacob represents someone whose character is moulded by the power of God's promise and purpose.

Before they were born God had told Rebecca that the younger of her sons would be stronger and the older serve the younger. But God did not choose Jacob because of the quality of his life. Instead he chose a crafty weakling in preference to his honest, gifted and conscientious brother and then set to work on what appears particularly intractable material to teach Jacob holiness.

God's purpose is achieved by trickery and his blessing goes to the most unworthy of the two brothers. As Jesus himself demonstrated, God is often content to open himself to the censure of the morally correct. His goals are higher: the reclamation of sinners (compare Jacob and Esau with the parable of the Lost Son, Luke 15:11-32).

Genesis 28:10-22

Jacob's dream is often taken as an archetypal experience of "the numinous", the experience of awe at the presence of God. But the biblical writer has a very precise and particular interpretation of it. It is not only the reaffirmation to Jacob of the promise made to Abraham and Isaac (28:13-15) but the first step in his reclamation as Jacob recognises that the Lord might meet him in unexpected

places and under unexpected circumstances. At this stage Jacob had no faith in God; even after his dream and God's promise he tried to bargain (28:20-22). At least he recognises the Lord, his family's God, as his source of protection and prosperity.

Genesis 29:1-30

Jacob's love for Rachel fulfils the ideal of married love portrayed in the Bible (see 24:67). But it is also the instrument God uses to begin to break down Jacob's reliance on his own ability. His love for Rachel makes him dependant on his uncle, Laban, whose own scheming nature will help to drive Jacob into dependence on God.

Genesis 29:31 - 30:24

The stories of the births of the sons of Jacob explain the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. It is amazing to see how unflattering it is: a story of bitter family rivalry and lack of love. God's people do not start off specially holy; on the contrary, they are just like us with all our problems.

Mandrakes were supposed to ensure fertility, and would have been specially prized by the barren Rachel. Yet it is the unloved Leah who benefits from the exchange. Only later, when God heeds her, does Rachel bear a son.

Day 12. Psalm 120; Genesis 30:25 - 33:20

Israel: The One who Strives with God

Psalm 120

The "Psalms of Ascent" were those sung on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This one describes the reason which leads to the family setting off for God's holy city: weariness of strife and deceit.

Genesis 30:25 - 32:21

Jacob continues to struggle against his fellow human beings (32:28) but in Laban and Esau he meets his match. Laban is craftier than Jacob and although Jacob thinks he succeeds by his own efforts, in fact it is only because God is with him for the sake of his promise (31:42). God is the God of Bethel (31:13), the one who promised to bless him and bring him safely back to Canaan and fulfils his promise even though Jacob scarcely deserves it (31:24,29).

Jacob succeeds with difficulty in leaving Laban with his family and flock intact only to have to meet a potentially more powerful and deadlier enemy in his brother Esau. His prayer and stratagem (32:9-12) show that he still does not trust God to fulfil his promise.

Genesis 32:22-32

In striving with others, Jacob was really striving with God. His distrust of men was a reflection of his failure to trust in God. "Jacob" is the name of one who strives with men, "Israel" of one who strives with God.

The ancient and mysterious story of Jacob's wrestling is rather like a dream with many symbolic features. Jacob has sent on his family and possessions on ahead and is now left alone, separated by the river from his wealth and status. The whole of his life up to now has been one of struggle, not only against his brother, his father and his uncle, but in a deeper way against God. He has been trying to achieve by his own efforts what God wanted to give him freely. Now he struggles with God literally as he has metaphorically been struggling with him up to now. It is not even clear whether he has won or not. He forces a blessing from God, but emerges literally crippled and also spiritually broken.

Any passage in the Old Testament where humans and God come "face to face" is shrouded in mystery. To know someone's name gave one power over them

(32:29-30). The "name" of God is not known at this stage (see Exodus 3) and God does not reveal it, yet blesses Jacob.

Genesis 33

Strong, self-sufficient Jacob becomes weak, dependent Israel (see 34:30, 37:35). But on his return to the promised land he now wholeheartedly worships God, (33:20, 35:2,9-15).

We can only see God in other people when we give up struggling with them, trying to use them to get our own way, or to bolster our own ego. Meeting a more powerful Esau, Jacob discovers in his forgiveness "the face of God" which he encountered the previous night in solitary conflict. Yet even now he cannot trust completely; he still separates himself from his more powerful brother (33:12-17).

Day 13. Psalm 78:1-8; Genesis 34 - 36, 38

The Story of God's People

Psalm 78:1-8

The stories of God's mighty deeds and his laws are passed on from generation to generation, so that the community will learn from its history.

Genesis 34

Behind this story is the issue of the distinctiveness of Israel. Small tribes of nomadic pastoralists were in danger of being swallowed up in the richer, more settled, city-dwelling Canaanite population. But Israel is conscious of a distinction between itself and its neighbours. The rape of Dinah had much greater significance for the sons of Israel than for the Shechemites as a grave violation of their laws and customs (34:7). The brothers then use the distinctiveness of circumcision as a pretext for their act of revenge.

This act of violence is remembered in an ancient curse of Simeon and Levi, used to explain why these tribes were scattered in Israel (49:5-7).

Genesis 35

Jacob, now in harmony with God and under his protection, returns to Bethel and settles there. Bethel was one of the most important places of worship in later Israelite history.

Reuben's act of incest is also remembered against him, as the reason why this tribe lost the privilege of the eldest son (49:3-4).

Genesis 36

Everything from 25:19 to 35:29, including the story of fear, division and estrangement between Jacob and Esau, is the "book of Isaac", because Isaac is the oldest living male. The arrangement throughout Genesis is that the older line is dealt with first (see 4:17-24, Cain; 10:2-20, Japheth, Ham; 25:12-18, Ishmael; and 36, Esau). This chapter consists of a list of the descendants of Esau and kings of Edom. This leaves the younger line, which is usually the inheritor of the promise, until afterwards.

Genesis 38

Every so often, in the biblical history, special attention is given to the women who occur in the ancestral line of King David. Since Christ was descended from David, they are his ancestors also. Examples are the story of Rahab in Joshua 2 and Ruth in the book named after her.

Despite her trickery and incest, Judah pronounces Tamar "righteous" (38:26). The meaning of "righteousness" is faithfulness to covenant or social obligations. Judah had neglected his promise, and so Tamar, with no legal protection at all as a woman, went to extraordinary lengths, risking guilt and shame, to remind him of it. Her determination to keep Judah to his covenant obligation results in this Canaanite woman taking her place in the family tree not only of the covenant people, but of the Messiah (Matthew 1:3).

Day 14. Psalm 13; Genesis 37, 39:1 - 41:16

Joseph: The Suffering Servant

Psalm 13

The psalmist is depressed because of the enmity of others. But in the closing verses lament turns to praise as he remembers and gives thanks for God's faithfulness.

Genesis 37, 39:1 - 41:16

Jacob had been his mother's favourite son and Esau his father's, but despite the family strife which had resulted, Jacob made the same mistake as his parents. Joseph's dreams set the scene for the story to come, in which God will use Joseph to save his whole family from ruin, but Joseph is not yet ready for the responsibility the dreams suggest will fall on him. Instead, they expose the ruthlessness of his brothers and lead to bitter conflict. Reuben, who had already sinned against his father and been found out (35:22), is the one who now tries to soften the blow to his father of Joseph's death.

The next part of the story shows how God uses the experience of unjust suffering to change Joseph from an immature, insensitive youth, brash, cocky and workshy with ideas above his station, to a mature man of God. Only now are we told that God is with him (39:2). As a slave, Joseph learns to be a servant, reliable, honest and responsible.

Whereas the enmity of his brothers came about because of his previous behaviour, his imprisonment came about because of his righteousness (another example of the difference in standards of sexual behaviour between Israel and the surrounding nations as at 34:7). Now he has to learn to put up with injustice as well as humiliation. But God continues to be with him (39:21). His grace and power is not limited or dictated by circumstances (Romans 8:28-29).

In prison, self-confidence turns to confidence in God. His facility with dreams remains, but now it is brought under God's control (40:8; 41:16).

The chance to appeal to the chief butler offered what appeared to be a God-given opportunity to get out of prison. But in fact, this was not God's plan. Joseph had to endure a further frustrating delay (41:1), which turns out to his greater good. Instead of being released into obscurity, Joseph has to wait for the day God wants to use him. Because of his faithfulness under trial ultimately Joseph was

able to see a purpose in everything which had happened, not only for himself but for his family (Genesis 50:20)

Joseph is a "type of Christ", someone whose experience foreshadows that of Jesus. He was rejected by his brothers, unjustly betrayed and suffered on their behalf in order to rescue them when they were in danger of death. Jesus suffers with all who suffer in this way. His power, like that of Joseph, lies in acceptance (Luke 22:42; Isaiah 53:7-12).

Day 15. Psalm 142; Genesis 41:17 - 44:17

Joseph's Dreams Fulfilled

Psalm 142

When human friendship and support dries up, God is a strength and support to those in trouble.

Genesis 41:17 - 44:17

The story now begins to reveal its links with the "wisdom tradition", represented in the Bible by the books of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The power of suffering to mould character is an important part of this tradition. So is the position of "wise men" as interpreters of dreams and the counsellors of kings. Recognising in him a divine gift of wisdom, Pharaoh promotes Joseph to become his most trusted adviser. Later, in the story of Daniel, Daniel and his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego occupy a similar position at another foreign court (Daniel 1:17-19; 2:27-28; 5:13-14).

Writers in the wisdom tradition were international in outlook and would see nothing wrong in Joseph marrying a foreign wife, unlike his father and grandfather. Joseph came to his position through faithfulness in suffering, through which he learned lessons of character which enabled him remain faithful. In contrast, King Solomon, who was also given the gift of wisdom, but did not have to undergo the trial of suffering, failed to live up to God's calling (1 Kings 11:1-6).

When Joseph recognises his brothers he remembers his dreams (42:8-9) but although these are now fulfilled he does not immediately reveal himself to his brothers. Instead, he acts with the subtlety of the man of wisdom, to find out whether they are really sorry for what they did to their father when they sold him into slavery. First, he makes them share his experience of prison, and they immediately take this as punishment for their treatment of him (42:17-23). Next he puts them all in his power by replacing the money in their sacks, so that they owe him for the provisions they have taken with them. Finally he manoeuvres them into a situation where they have the choice of leaving Benjamin as a slave and saving their own skins. By feeding them royally and making them feel at home with him, Joseph adds to the power of the temptation and prepares the ground for treating them as thieves rather than spies.

Throughout the story, Joseph betrays very strong feelings, the characteristic of an "all-round man" (42:24; 43:29-31; 45:1-2). However, he is not ruled by his feelings, but controls them in favour of a more far-reaching purpose. The Lord's servant is to be ruled by will, rather than by emotions, through submission to the will of God.

Day 16. Psalm 30; Genesis 44:18 - 47:end

Israel Comes to Egypt

Psalm 30

A prayer of thanks to God, who rescues his people.

Genesis 44:18-end

Joseph had manoeuvred his brothers into a situation in which they had a choice of metaphorically selling another brother into slavery in order to save their own skins. Already, the brothers have been reminded of their sin, when they sold Joseph into slavery (42:21-22). On that occasion it was Reuben, who had already sinned against his father and been found out (35:22) who has rescued Joseph from being killed outright and Judah who suggested selling Joseph (37:26-27). Since then, Judah has been exposed in hypocrisy and double-dealing and had to repent (38:24-26). Now it is Judah who stands forward to intercede for Benjamin in order to save his father's grief, offering to suffer the penalty in Benjamin's place.

Genesis 45

Like the story of the choice of Rebecca, the Joseph story is one in which God works behind the scenes, bringing about his purpose through the actions of human beings. As a wise man who has learned patience through suffering, Joseph is able to see God's hand at work and submit to his purpose (45:4-8).

Although Joseph had already forgiven his brothers, they could not receive forgiveness until convicted of sin. Only then could the relationship be restored on a true footing. This offers a picture of the way God deals with us. He forgave us in Christ long before we knew him, but we cannot receive and experience his forgiveness without conviction and repentance. Only in the light of repentance from sin is Christ made known to us for all he is, the one way to the Father.

Genesis 46 - 47

46:1-7 is very important in the context of the biblical narrative as a whole. It affirms God's purpose in allowing Israel to go to Egypt. Their subsequent slavery was not outside his control (15:13-14).

Seventy is the traditional number of the Israelites who went down into Egypt (46:27; Exodus 1:5)

In the earlier part of the story, Joseph foreshadows Jesus in his suffering. Here, he foreshadows him in his glory. Raised from prison to become the king's right hand man and ruler of all Egypt, he now offers salvation to all who turn to him in faith and obedience. He is the one rejected by his brothers who nevertheless goes before them to prepare a way of salvation (45:6) and in chapter 47 the Egyptians have to give him all they have and even themselves in order to save their lives.

Day 17. Psalm 68:24-35; Genesis 48 - 50

Israel's Blessing

Psalm 68:24-35

The tribes of Israel gather to praise God in Jerusalem.

Genesis 48

Jacob, himself a younger son, who stole the blessing from his elder brother, blesses the younger of Joseph's sons above the elder. In fact, Ephraim became by far the stronger tribe and the name "Ephraim" became a synonym for Israel in the days of the divided monarchy (Hosea 11:1-3; Isaiah 7:2; 11:13; 28:1,3).

Genesis 49

There are two traditions in the Old Testament as to which were the twelve tribes of Israel. Some lists include both Ephraim and Manasseh but not Levi. These are mainly from the priestly tradition, where the tribe of Levi is made up exclusively of Temple servants (see Numbers 7, for example). In others, Joseph is taken as a single tribe. Genesis 48:5 explains how Manasseh and Ephraim came to be included as separate tribes, but chapter 49 reckons Joseph as one.

Chapter 49 was probably not written as a continuous poem but is a collection of sayings about the twelve tribes, put into the form of a prophesy. They probably have different dates, but their fulfilment reflects the situation in the early monarchy. The curse on Reuben (49:3-4) is traced back to the events of Genesis 35:22. The scattering of Simeon and Levi is traced back to the events of chapter 34, without mentioning the special status of Levi. The tribe of Simeon disappeared very early and was absorbed in Judah in the south of Palestine. Deuteronomy 33:8-11 gives a different tradition about Levi. 49:8-12 is the origin of Jesus' title, the "Lion of Judah" (Revelation 5:5). It refers to the Davidic kingship, David being a member of the tribe of Judah, and thus ultimately to Jesus. 49:25-26 preserves a very ancient form of blessing for fertility.

Genesis 50

When the material was first collected together there was no division between the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus. The last part of chapter 50 forms the prelude to the book of Exodus, the story of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

These two stories remind us of the purpose of God in bringing Israel to Egypt and his promise to take them back again to the land of Canaan.

50:15-21 reminds us that forgiveness needs to be received. Although Joseph forgave his brothers freely they could not receive it. As a result they lived in fear of punishment and this lack of faith imperilled the family unity. This shows us how important it is actually to receive our forgiveness from God and live in the light of it.
