

# LEARNING BIBLE TODAY

## From Creation to the Conquest of Canaan

by Michael J. Prival

Copyright © 1995, 1996, 2007 by Michael J. Prival

*To Rabbi Sherwin Wine,  
who, by personal example and by the power of his words,  
teaches us to live the life of courage.*

I would like to thank Henrietta Wexler, Laura Prival, and Donna Bassin for making many helpful suggestions on the manuscript.

*This work is copyrighted by Michael J. Prival. Permission is hereby given for use of any portion or all of this book, with acknowledgment of the source, for educational purposes only. This work cannot be reproduced, in whole or in part, for any commercial purpose without permission of the author. Send a note to [Bible@machar.org](mailto:Bible@machar.org) with "Bible book" in the subject line to contact the author.*

***Learning Bible Today: From Creation to the Conquest of Canaan***  
**by Michael J. Prival**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b><u>Note to Parents, Teachers, and Other Readers</u></b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b><u>Introduction: What Is Religion? What Is the Bible?</u></b> .....	<b>7</b>
<u>How Did Religion Get Started?</u> .....	7
<u>Where Did the Bible Come From?</u> .....	9
<u>What Is the Hebrew Bible?</u> .....	11
<u>What Is the Difference Between the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible?</u> ...	12
<u>Why Do We Study the Bible?</u> .....	13
<u>Time Line Overview of the Bible and Jewish History</u> .....	14
<b><u>Chapter I. Origins – Earth and People</u></b> .....	<b>16</b>
<u>I - 1. The Story of Creation</u> .....	16
<u>I - 2. Adam and Eve, the First People</u> .....	21
<u>I - 3. Cain, the Jealous Brother of Abel</u> .....	26
<u>I - 4. The Time When There Were Giants on the Earth</u> .....	28
<u>I - 5. Noah and the Great Flood</u> .....	30
<u>I - 6. The Tower of Babel</u> .....	35
<b><u>Chapter II. The First Israelites</u></b> .....	<b>38</b>
<u>II - 1. Abraham and Sarah, the Promise from God</u> .....	38
<u>II - 2. Abraham Smashes the Idols</u> .....	40
<u>II - 3. Abraham Avoids an Argument with Lot</u> .....	44
<u>II - 4. Abraham Argues with Yahweh</u> .....	45
<u>II - 5. Isaac Is Born to the Sound of Laughter</u> .....	48
<u>II - 6. Ishmael and Hagar Are Cast out of Abraham’s House</u> .....	50
<u>II - 7. God Tells Abraham to Kill His Son, Isaac</u> .....	53
<u>II - 8. Isaac Marries Rebekah</u> .....	56
<u>II - 9. Esau Sells His Birthright to His Brother, Jacob</u> .....	59
<u>II - 10. Jacob Tricks His Brother, Esau, and His Father, Isaac</u> .....	61
<u>II - 11. Jacob’s Ladder</u> .....	63
<u>II - 12. Jacob Gets Married – Twice</u> .....	65
<u>II - 13. Jacob Leaves Haran</u> .....	66
<u>II - 14. Jacob Wrestles with an Angel, Gets a New Name, and Meets his Brother Esau</u> .....	68

<b>Chapter III. Joseph in Egypt</b> .....	<b>72</b>
III - 1. Joseph and His Brothers .....	72
III - 2. Joseph and Potiphar – and Potiphar’s Wife .....	76
III - 3. Joseph Explains Some Dreams .....	78
III - 4. Pharaoh Dreams and Joseph Becomes Ruler of Egypt .....	79
III - 5. Joseph Sees His Brothers Once Again .....	82
III - 6. Israel (Jacob) and His Sons All Settle in Egypt .....	83
<b>Chapter IV. Freedom</b> .....	<b>87</b>
IV - 1. Moses – from a Basket to Pharaoh’s House .....	87
IV - 2. Moses Burns Himself .....	90
IV - 3. Moses Rescues a Hebrew Man and Leaves Egypt .....	91
IV - 4. Yahweh Speaks to Moses from a Burning Bush .....	92
IV - 5. The Israelites Gain Their Freedom .....	94
IV - 6. The Waters Part! The Israelites Escape! .....	100
<b>Chapter V. Wandering in the Wilderness</b> .....	<b>102</b>
V - 1. Complaints and Miracles – Food, Water, and a Battle .....	102
V - 2. The Israelites Receive Ten Commandments .....	104
V - 3. Commandments, Commandments, and More Commandments .....	112
V - 4. Yahweh Prescribes Religious Rituals .....	113
V-4-i. Sacrifices at the Temple .....	113
V-4-ii. Some Laws and Rituals .....	114
V-4-iii. Food Rules .....	114
V-4-iv. Do Not Oppress the Stranger, Except Sometimes .....	117
V-4-v. Crime and Punishment .....	121
V-4-vi. Yahweh Will Reward the Israelites for Following His Commandments .....	124
V - 5. Moses Is Criticized for Marrying a Cushite .....	126
V - 6. The Israelites Anger Yahweh and He Announces Their Punishment ..	128
V - 7. The Rebellion of Korah the Levite .....	132
V - 8. Moses and Aaron Are Punished for Disobeying Yahweh .....	134
<b>Chapter VI. Return to Canaan</b> .....	<b>137</b>
VI - 1. Along the Road to Canaan, the Conquest Begins .....	137
VI - 2. From Moses to Joshua .....	139
VI - 3. Joshua Sends out Two Spies .....	141
VI - 4. Crossing over the Jordan and Conquering Jericho .....	143
VI - 5. The Israelites Settle in the Land of Canaan .....	146

## **NOTE TO PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND OTHER READERS**

The primary purpose of this book is to help parents and teachers who want to discuss the Bible with children, but who are not comfortable with traditional religious views on this subject. It is also intended for interested readers from about 6<sup>th</sup> grade to adult who would like to obtain some basic information about the Bible from a modern, scientific, critical perspective without having to study scholarly works in this field.

This book originated when my own children were young and I took on the task of teaching them about the Bible, even though, at the time, I had almost no Biblical knowledge myself. I had to read through the Bible texts and then try to glean from both scholarly and religious sources what these texts may mean. This research enabled me to teach my children's Bible class at Machar, The Washington Congregation for Secular Humanistic Judaism, and the notes I made at that time helped me get started in writing this book.

Many adults find themselves in the situation I was in. They would like to be able to convey the aesthetic, ethical, and historical content of the Bible and, at the same time, understand contemporary scientific and critical thinking about its origins and purposes. This book was written to assist them in achieving these goals.

The Introduction on the general subjects of religion and the Bible is written on an elementary level so that it can be read to or by children. Following the Introduction are the stories in the first six books of the Bible (*Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua*), covering the period from Creation to the Israelite conquest of Canaan. After each story is a discussion designed to provide information that will be useful in talking about the story with children. The discussion may focus on such subjects as the ethical lesson that can be derived from the story, the reasons why the story may have been written and by whom, how the story may explain some natural phenomenon that is today explained scientifically, how the story has been interpreted by religious leaders through the centuries, and what some difficult words or concepts in the story may mean.

These discussions are written in an uncomplicated fashion using a somewhat limited vocabulary to facilitate their intended use. They contain questions that will be useful in preparing for discussions of the stories with children. Parents or teachers can select those portions of the discussion that are most appropriate to the age and interest of

the children involved. Older children, from about grade 6 and up, might be interested in reading some or all of this book by themselves.

Although this book was written with children in mind, it will also be useful to teens and adults who want to familiarize themselves with the Bible from a modern, scientific point of view.

While it may seem that the most obvious way to learn about the Bible would be to read it, this is, in reality, not a simple task. Even in modern translations, the Bible is difficult to read. It is not a single, flowing narrative like a novel, but rather a series of stories and fragments of stories that sometimes seem to have been thrown together haphazardly, interspersed with genealogies, arcane laws, and various other types of lists that lose our attention rapidly. Without the aid of either a teacher or detailed notes, it is almost impossible to follow what is going on in most of the books of the Bible.

There are, of course, thousands of books *about* the Bible. But these are generally for those with a scholarly interest who are already familiar with the texts, or else they are written from a religious point of view that may not be consistent with the outlook of many who would like to learn more about the Bible. Most books that retell the Bible stories in a readable way are written for young children and fail to convey any sense of the historical context of the stories, the origins of the texts, or the possible purposes of the authors in writing the texts in the way that they did. The benefit of over a century of Biblical scholarship is completely absent from such children's Bible books.

It is hoped that this book will fill the void in the currently available literature on the Bible by presenting the stories themselves in a readable, but accurate way; discussing the stories from a modern, scientific point of view; and giving parents and teachers the information they need to explain and discuss the Bible stories with children.

Michael J. Prival  
February 10, 1996

**Note on sources:**

The discussions in this book concerning the authors and editors of the Bible are based largely on Richard Elliot Friedman's "Who Wrote the Bible" (Summit Books, New York, 1987). Friedman's book, summarizing and extending over a century of scholarship on Biblical authorship, is recommended to all who are interested in this subject.

**Note on spelling of names:**

Throughout this book either an underlined "h" or the letters "kh" are used to signify the hard "ch" sound, as in Hanukah or as in Bach (which we would spell *Bakh*) or as in the Scottish word loch (*lokh*). This is done to prevent readers from thinking that the pronunciation is the usual sound of "ch" (e.g. *chair*). Technically, the underlined "h," representing the Hebrew letter *het* (ח), has a somewhat softer sound than "kh," which represents the Hebrew letter *khaf* (כ).

When names are commonly known in their English form, we have used this form rather than the original (e.g. Eve rather than Hawah, Moses rather than Mosheh). Names that are generally unfamiliar are spelled to reflect the Hebrew pronunciation, recognizing that this creates some inconsistencies and unusual spellings.

**Tip: How to copy portions of this or any other PDF file:**

To copy and paste a portion of the text from a PDF file using Adobe Reader, you need to get rid of the "hand" cursor and activate the "select tool." Click on the "select tool" icon, which is probably to the right of the "hand" icon at the top of the screen. (The "select tool" icon looks like a capital "I" with a little triangle next to it). Then you can "select" text with the cursor. Select the text you want to copy and then click on "Edit/Copy" (or press "Ctrl+C"). Then paste the text into your word processing file for editing, reformatting, or printing..

**To Table of Contents**

# **INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS RELIGION? WHAT IS THE BIBLE?**

## **HOW DID RELIGION GET STARTED?**

### **QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS...**

Everyone growing up has a lot of questions to ask. “Why does it rain?” “How does a tree grow?” “Where did everything come from?”

How do we answer questions like this? To answer questions about nature, we use science. Some scientists study the world as it exists now – for example, how the weather works, or how fish live. Other scientists study the past; they try to answer questions such as, “What was the world like before people lived in houses?” or “What was the world like before there were people?” or “Where did the earth come from?” There are still many questions that scientists cannot answer, but they keep studying nature and doing experiments so that more and more of these questions can be answered.

How did people answer questions about nature before there were scientists? Scientists and the scientific method of experimenting and observing and formulating theories haven’t been around for very long – only for a few hundred years. For thousands of years before that, people had to rely on their own experiences and feelings to answer all important questions.

### **THE WONDER OF NATURE...**

How did people answer questions about nature thousands of years ago? Imagine people who lived at that time out in the forest, without houses. When they looked up at the sky at night, they would see thousands of stars, some bright, some faint, most flickering, a few shining steadily. To these people, the stars seemed to form patterns and shapes. When they looked at the moon, they noticed that sometimes it was big and round, at other times it was just a tiny sliver, and sometimes it looked like it had a face.

Since these people had no scientific understanding of what they saw, they might have begun to wonder – What are these stars? Is the moon really the face of a person? How far away are all those wonderful things in the sky? Did someone put them all there? They might have also thought about other aspects of nature – Who put the plants and animals there for people to eat? How come there is cool water to drink in the springs?

The only explanation for all of these wonderful things that they could think of was that there must be some great and powerful person who made the world such a magnificent place. They would have strong feelings of wonder at the marvels of nature.

### THE FEAR OF NATURE...

In the same way, imagine people thousands of years ago who were trying to sleep outdoors when a terrible storm began. The rain was pouring down, the lightning flashed across the sky, and the thunder was so loud that they were scared half to death. They would begin to wonder why this was happening. It seemed to them as if someone was trying to hurt them. Why, they would think, do these scary things happen? Is there some superhuman being who is doing all these things? Now they were afraid of nature.

### PEOPLE BELIEVED IN MANY GODS

The feelings of wonder and of fear about things they could not explain caused people to try to answer many questions about nature. These feelings led people to imagine that there were super-human beings, the gods and goddesses, who caused everything to happen. These gods usually looked and behaved like super-strong people, or sometimes like animals.

People imagined that one god made the sun travel across the sky each day by pulling it in his chariot; another was in charge of the moon. One god made the rain fall; another made the thunder and lightning by hurling the lightning bolts to earth with his super-human strength.

Every time there was an important question to answer, people could use a god or goddess as the explanation. Why did hunters sometimes find it difficult to find animals for food? Because the goddess of hunting was angry. Why were people sometimes very sick? Because a god was punishing them for something bad that they did. Where did the world come from? It must have been made by a great god.

So people believed in many gods because it helped them answer the questions caused by their wonder about nature and their fear of nature. Each group of people also thought that it had special gods who would protect them, and this gave them a sense of security in the earliest periods of human history, when they might die from hunger or accidents or attacks by animals or other people at any time.

Since people believed that the gods could help them or hurt them, they wanted the gods to be good to them. So they began to think up ways of keeping the gods happy – in



the same way that they might want to keep powerful people happy. The people would give presents to the gods by leaving them at a special holy place, hoping that the god would see the presents and protect them. They would try to talk directly to a god or goddess, asking for help or just telling the god how great he or she was. This is *prayer* or *worship*.

Gods are thought of as powerful beings who are supposed to have some *control over nature*. They are *not part of nature*, as we are. They can do things that ordinary people cannot do. They live forever. They are above or beyond nature. The word for this is “*supernatural* .” Religion is usually based on the belief in a supernatural god or gods that have some influence on our world. Most religions also teach people how to communicate with the gods, to keep them happy, and to ask them for help through prayer or worship.

So religion developed because people could not answer important questions about nature, and they didn’t want to live without the answers. They imagined that there were powerful gods in charge of everything. They wanted to make their lives easier, so they began to *worship* the gods to win their friendship.

## **WHERE DID THE BIBLE COME FROM?**

People in many parts of the world developed a belief in many gods. Different groups of people worshipped different gods with different names. For example, near the Mediterranean Sea, the Greeks and then the Romans built temples to many different gods. Today, some people still like to read Greek myths, which are the stories of the gods and goddesses, such as Zeus and Athena, that many of the Greek people believed in more than 2000 years ago. No one believes any longer that these gods and goddesses are real.

See if you can learn the names of some of the gods that people have believed in. What did these gods do? What questions were the people able to answer because of their belief in the gods? (For example: Why does it rain? Why does the sun move across the sky each day?) Get a book on Greek or Roman mythology from the library to answer these questions. Remember that many people used to believe that the many gods of Greece and Rome were real. Can you give the modern, scientific explanation for a question that people used to answer by saying that “A god did it”?

One group of people who lived on the land that is east of the Mediterranean Sea, in the area we now call the Middle East, were the Israelites, also called the Hebrews, who later became the Jews. This is a part of the world where the Greeks and the Romans, with their belief in many gods, were very powerful.

Originally, the Israelites had their own special god but they believed that this god was just one of many gods. They believed that this god was the god who protected the Israelite people, while other gods protected other people. Later on, they came to believe that their god was the *only* god that actually existed. This belief that there is only one real god is called *monotheism*.

According to the stories in the Bible, there was a period of about 100 years (which is a short period of time in all of Jewish history), during which the Israelites were united in a single kingdom. They then became divided into two separate kingdoms, Judah in the south and Israel in the north (see the time line that follows in the Introduction). The people of Judah prayed to Yahweh; but it seems that the Israelites in the northern kingdom called their god “El” or “Elohim.” The fact that the people the two different kingdoms used different names for their god is very helpful to us today because some portions of the Bible were written in Judah, others in Israel. Knowing the names that each group used for its god helps us to tell which parts of the Bible were written in the south (Judah) and which in the north (Israel).

The people who put the written Bible together thought of *Elohim* and *Yahweh* as the same god. Even to this day, religious Jews consider “Yahweh” to be the actual *name* of their god, while they think of “Elohim” as simply meaning “God.” Since, to them, the actual word “Yahweh” is never supposed to be said out loud, many translations of the Bible insert “The LORD” wherever the name “Yahweh” appears in the original Hebrew text. In this book, we follow the tradition of translating the name “Elohim” as “God,” but we have retained the name “Yahweh” in the text of the stories. (Interestingly, the word “Elohim” is actually plural, and its literal meaning is closer to “Gods” than it is to “God.” No one knows why this plural word was used to describe the single god of Israel, but it may have been left over from an earlier time in which many gods were worshipped.)

The Israelites told stories about their god in order to answer many important questions. Their stories about Elohim and Yahweh explained where the world came from, where the Israelites came from, and why everything seemed to go well sometimes and very badly at other times.

In some of these stories, the god of the Israelites gives instructions to the people about how to behave in their daily lives – how they should worship their god to get favors from him; how they should treat each other. These rules about how to behave are called the *commandments*. You have probably heard of the Ten Commandments, but the Bible contains many hundreds of commandments in addition to these ten.

For many centuries these stories and rules were told from generation to generation, but were apparently not written down. Eventually, the stories about Elohim and Yahweh

and the Israelites, along with the hundreds of commandments, were put into one big book, which we call the Hebrew *Bible*.

## WHAT IS THE HEBREW BIBLE?

The stories in the book you are reading are taken from the Hebrew Bible, a very big book that was written in the Hebrew language. The Hebrew word for this Bible is the *Tanakh*.

The Bible contains many sections, which are called the books of the Bible. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible are named *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers*, and *Deuteronomy*. These five books taken together are called the *Torah*. The Torah contains stories about the god of the Israelites. It includes many stories about people who probably never really existed, but whose stories are still very important and interesting, such as Adam and Eve, who were the first people according to the Bible; Abraham and Sarah, the Biblical parents of the family that became Israelites; and Moses, who, in the Bible story, led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.

We know today many of the stories in the Torah did not really happen. Other stories may have some historical facts in them, but in many cases archaeologists have been unable figure out how accurate they are.

The Torah also contains the hundreds of commandments from Yahweh telling the Israelites how to behave. Some Jews, called Orthodox Jews, still try to follow many of these rules even today.

The Torah is often written on a *scroll* rather than in a book with pages. Have you ever seen a Torah scroll? Weekly worship services at a synagogue include reading from a Torah scroll.

The first part of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, tells the story of the world as the Israelites knew it and what they thought to be their own history up to the time of Moses. The rest of the Hebrew Bible tells us about the history of the Israelites after the time of Moses.

There are two kinds of writings in the Hebrew Bible: (1) stories about Elohim and Yahweh and about the history of the Israelites – where they came from and what they did a long time ago; and (2) rules, or commandments, telling the Israelites how they were supposed to behave.

The Hebrew Bible was first written in the Hebrew language. Have you ever seen Hebrew writing? It looks very different from English writing. One interesting difference is that Hebrew writing is read starting from the right side of the page and moving to the left side, while in English we read from left to right. Hebrew was the language of the Jewish people thousands of years ago. Then the Jews began speaking other languages and only used Hebrew for prayers and the study of their religion. In the 20th century, for the first time in thousands of years, Hebrew again became a daily spoken language in modern Israel.

Look at a Bible translated into English. Find the Table of Contents near the beginning of the Bible. You can see that the Bible is made up of many different parts called the Books of the Bible. The first five books of the Bible make up the Torah. What are the names of the five books of the Torah?

## **WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE HEBREW BIBLE AND THE CHRISTIAN BIBLE?**

The Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, contains writings that are central for understanding the history of the Jewish people and the Jewish religion. How does this relate to the Christian Bible?

Since the people who started the Christian religion were Jews, they made the *Tanakh* part of their own Bible. They thought of Christianity as growing out from the monotheistic outlook of the Jewish religion.

The Christian Bible has two parts. Christians call the first part of their Bible the “*Old Testament*.” It is the same as the Hebrew Bible of the Jews except that the order of the books has been changed somewhat. Also, some versions of the Christian Old Testament contain a few books that are not found in the Hebrew Bible.

The second part of the Christian Bible is called the “*New Testament*.” The New Testament is found only in the Christian Bible.

The word “testament” means “covenant” or “agreement.” The term “Old Testament” means that the Hebrew Bible describes the original agreement that the writers believed was made between the Israelites and their god. This agreement was that the people would obey God and, in exchange, God would take care of them. Christians believe that God has made a *new* agreement with people who accept the Christian religion. They believe that God did this by sending a man named Jesus into the world. This “new agreement” or “new covenant” can be understood by reading the “New Testament.”

The Christian religion started about 2000 years ago with the story of a Jewish man named Jesus. Those people who accept Jesus as their religious leader are called Christians. Christians, in general, believe that Jesus was the son of God, and was sent to earth to bring knowledge of God to all people. Most Jews did not accept Jesus as their leader, and so they kept the Jewish religion, but many people who were not Jewish accepted this new religion and became Christians.

The New Testament begins with stories about the life of Jesus and then tells stories written by and about his followers, who were the first Christians. Since the Hebrew Bible is part of the Christian Bible, Christians throughout the centuries have also learned and believed the ancient stories of the Jewish people and of their god. In fact, Christian religious leaders have interpreted the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible) as containing many elements that actually predicted and paved the way for the coming of Jesus and the establishment of Christianity.

So if you want to read a story from the *Tanakh*, you can read about it in either a Hebrew (Jewish) Bible or a Christian Bible. If you want to read about Jesus and the other people who started the Christian religion, you have to read that in the New Testament, which is a part of the Christian Bible, but is not found in the Hebrew Bible.

## **WHY DO WE STUDY THE BIBLE?**

Both Jews and Christians have read and talked about the stories in the Bible for many centuries, and for most of that time they believed that these stories were all true. Today we know that many of these stories are not based on historical facts, especially those at the very beginning of the Bible. We learn about these stories ourselves because they are basic texts needed to understand the Jewish people and the Christian religion. These texts have been an important part of European and American life and culture for many centuries. Many of the great paintings and sculptures by European artists show scenes and characters from the Bible. Similarly, many books can only be understood if we know the stories in the Bible. Whether we are Jews or Christians, religious or nonreligious, it is not possible to understand the world and the culture that made us what we are without knowing what is in the Bible.

### **To Table of Contents**

## **TIME LINE OVERVIEW OF THE BIBLE AND JEWISH HISTORY**

The time line that follows shows some of the major events described in the Bible and in later Jewish history. Notice that the earliest events are “Bible myths,” as indicated by the words on the left side of the page. There may be some truth to some of these stories, but they are mostly just the legends of the Jewish people.

The Hebrew Bible describes the events in the time line beginning with the story of the creation of the world and ending at the time of the return to Jerusalem from Babylonia by some Jews who then come under the leadership of Ezra. The next two events shown on the time line, involving the Maccabees and Jesus, are described in Christian Bibles. (Actually, the story of the Maccabees is found in the Bible of only one group of Christians, the Catholics; it is not in the Bible of other Christians, the Protestants). The events shown on the time line after the time of Jesus are neither in the Hebrew Bible nor in the Christian Bible because the books of the Bible were completed shortly after the time when Jesus lived. Two Jewish holidays, Passover and Hanukkah, are noted on the time line because these holidays are, in part, celebrations of the events mentioned.

# TIME LINE OF THE BIBLE AND JEWISH HISTORY

	DATE	YEARS- AGO	
. B I B L E M Y T H S O R Y .	4000 BC	-6000	God creates the world. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.
	3000 BC	-5000	Noah and the Flood.
	2000 BC	-4000	Abraham and Sarah--beginning of the Israelites. Joseph and his brothers move to Egypt.
	1000 BC	-3000	Moses leads the Israelites to Canaan (Passover). Time of the Judges in Israel. Kings Saul, David, and Solomon. Israel splits into 2 kingdoms (Judah & Israel). Assyrians conquer and destroy Israel. Babylonians conquer Judah--Exile in Babylonia. Some Jews return to Jerusalem; are led by Ezra.
	1 AD	-2000	Maccabees lead Jews against Syrians (Hanukkah). Time of Jesus--Beginning of Christianity. Jews rebel against Romans; Jerusalem Temple destroyed. Jewish life is now centered in the Diaspora.
			Muhammad; writing of Koran--Beginning of Islam.
	1000 AD	-1000	
	2000 AD	-NOW	Many Jews move from Europe to the USA (1880-1920). World War II--The Holocaust (1939-1945). Modern Israel founded as Jewish homeland (1948).

**To Chapter 1**

## **CHAPTER I. ORIGINS – EARTH AND PEOPLE**

### **I - 1. THE STORY OF CREATION**

*[Genesis 1:1 - 2:3]*

In the beginning, God created the sky and the earth. The earth was without form and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep water, and the breath of God hovered over the face of the water.

Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. Then God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was an evening and there was a morning – a first day.

Then God said, “Let there be a dome in the middle of the water to separate water from water.” And God made the dome to separate the water that was below it from the water that was above it. And God called the dome Sky. And there was an evening and there was a morning – a second day.

Then God said, “Let the water under the Sky be collected in one place, and let dry land appear.” And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the collected water he called the Sea. Then God saw that this was good. Then God said, “Let the Earth sprout with grass, herbs sowing seed, and fruit trees carrying fruit of their own kind with seeds in it.” And the earth sprouted with grass, herbs sowing seed of their own kind, and trees carrying fruit of their own kind with seeds in it. Then God saw that this was good. And there was an evening and there was a morning – a third day.

Then God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night, and they shall be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and they shall serve as lights in the sky to shine upon the earth.” And it was so. And God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day and the smaller light to rule the night, and the stars also. And God put them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. Then God saw that this was good. And there was an evening and there was a morning – a fourth day.

Then God said, “Let the water teem with swarming living creatures, and flying creatures that can fly above the earth in the face of the dome of the sky.” Then God created great sea monsters, and every living creature that creeps, which the waters brought forth teeming, according to their kind, and every winged flying creature, according to their kind. God saw that this was good. Then God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the waters in the seas, and let



the flying creatures multiply on the earth.” And there was an evening and there was a morning – a fifth day.

Then God said, “Let the earth bring forth the living creatures, according to their kind – cattle, creeping things, and animals on the land, according to their kind.” And it was so. And God made animals on the land according to their kind and cattle according to their kind and every creeping thing upon the earth according to its own kind. Then God saw that this was good.

Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, according to our likeness. And let them rule over the fish of the sea, and over the flying creatures of the sky, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” Then God created human beings in his image, in the image of God he created them, a male and a female he created them. Then God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea, and over the flying creatures of the sky, and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth.”

Then God said, “Behold, I have given you every herb sowing seed that is upon the face of the earth, and every tree on which there is fruit sowing seed; to you they shall be for food. And to every animal on the land, and to every flying creature of the sky, and to everything that creeps upon the earth, I give every green plant for food.” And it was so. Then God saw all that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And there was an evening and there was a morning – the sixth day.

And the sky and the earth were finished, and all their host. And by the seventh day, God completed the work that he had been doing, and he ceased on the seventh day the work that he had been doing. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because it was when he ceased from the work of creation.

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. This is the story of Creation. It is the first story in the Bible. There are many questions about the world that this story is supposed to answer. Two of these questions are: “Where did the Earth come from?” and “Where did people come from?” What other questions does this story answer? How does science answer some of these same questions today?
2. One of the questions that is not answered in the story of Creation is: “Where did God come from?” How do you think that this question was answered by people who believed

in the Bible's story of Creation? One answer that was often given to this question was that "God always existed." This, of course, really does not help to solve the problem of where everything came from. It is just as easy to think that the universe always existed as it is to think that it was created by a god who always existed.

If the stories in the Bible are traced carefully from the beginning, it can be calculated that the six days of Biblical creation would have occurred about 6000 years ago. In reality, the universe and the earth are much, much older than that. The best scientific evidence available today has led scientists to conclude that the universe was started with a great explosion 10 to 20 *billion* (that's 20,000,000,000) years ago. This explosion is called the "big bang." Before the big bang, all of the matter and energy in the universe was concentrated in a tiny ball. After the explosion, some of the matter gathered together into clumps, such as the stars and the planets, including our sun and our earth.

**3.** In this story, on the first day God created light. But he did not create the sun until the fourth day. Since the light that fills the sky and the earth during the day comes from the sun, how can this be? Maybe the ancient Israelites who wrote this story did not realize that light comes from the sun. Maybe they just weren't thinking about such details when they wrote it. While these are possible explanations, maybe you can think of more interesting ones.

**4.** The ancient Israelites and most other people at that time believed that the earth was flat like a plate, not round like a ball. We now know, of course, that the earth is round, not flat. But people who believed the earth was flat were not stupid; they believed that the earth was flat because that is how it seems to be when we look at it. The writers of the Bible story of Creation lived at a time when people could not travel long distances, certainly not all the way around the world. Each person only knew about the area close to where he or she lived. If we had lived then, we certainly would have agreed with everyone else that the earth really is flat.

The Israelites of that time thought that there was a solid barrier up in the air, holding up the "waters" above it. This barrier appeared to them like a big curved ceiling – the dome of the sky. They thought this because the sky looks like a dome. It seemed to the ancient Israelites that the sun and the moon and the stars were placed in the barrier. This barrier is sometimes called the "arch of heaven" or the "firmament." The Hebrew word for it in the Bible is "*ra-kee-a*." Have you ever been to a planetarium? To people a long time ago, the sky seemed like the ceiling of a huge planetarium.

At the beginning of this story, everything was water. On the second day of Creation, God made the *ra-kee-a*, the solid dome of the sky, which was a barrier separating the water into two parts. The waters below the dome became the earth. The waters above were held up by the dome. If the writers of the Creation story believed that the sky was made of water held up by a barrier, what question about nature would this answer? To better understand the whole creation story, you might want to sketch some pictures to show what the writers of the Bible story thought Creation looked like after one day, after two days, after three days, and so on.

5. According to the Bible story, all of the plants and animals on earth were made by God in a few days. Today we know that the plants and animals (including people) actually developed slowly, over a period of millions of years, by the process of evolution. We know this now because by studying fossils in the earth, scientists have found that the plants and animals living today are the descendants of simpler plants and animals that lived a long time ago.

The most interesting of the animals that lived a long time ago but no longer exist were probably the dinosaurs. The dinosaurs lived about 100 million years ago.

6. There are still some people today, called religious fundamentalists, who believe that everything that the Bible says is historically true, exactly as it is written. Therefore, these people believe that the earth was really created in six days only about 6000 years ago, and they do not believe the scientific evidence that all living things developed through evolution.

What would you say to someone who told you that the Bible story of creation is historically accurate? You might say that dinosaur bones and other fossils that are many millions of years old prove that the earth is much older than the Bible says it is. The other person might say that God put those bones in the earth to fool us, or that the scientists are wrong when they say that the fossils are so old. It is almost always impossible to get other people to change their minds about their religious beliefs. While we should respect the right of all people to believe what they want to believe, it is still important to understand that the fundamentalist belief in the Bible creation story is contradicted by an overwhelming amount of scientific evidence.

7. The Bible says that God made people on the sixth day. According to the Creation story, people were made “in the image of God,” meaning that they looked like God. Of course, this is because the people who wrote the story thought of God as someone who looked like a person. Much later on, the Israelites began to think that God had no real



**10.** The story of creation takes place over seven days. This answers an important question, not about the world of nature, but about the calendar. According to Jewish tradition, the reason there are seven days in the week is that the story of Creation takes place over seven days. Today, there is really no way for us to know which one came first, the seven-day week or the seven-day Creation story.

At the end of each day, the story says: “And there was an evening and there was a morning – a first day” or “And there was an evening and there was a morning – a second day” and so on. According to Jewish tradition, this is why each day of the Jewish calendar begins in the evening, at sunset – because the Bible mentions evening first, and then morning, for each day of Creation. Did you know that all Jewish holidays begin in the evening, at sunset, and end at sunset? At what time does the day begin and end on the more widely used non-Jewish calendar?

On the seventh day, God rested from his work. The tradition of the Jewish religion says that this is why the last day of the week is a day of rest, when people do not go to work. This day is called the Sabbath, or, in Hebrew, *Sha-bat’*. In fact the word *Sha-bat* is the word used in the Bible passage that says that God “ceased” his work on the seventh day. The Jewish Sha-bat begins at sunset on Friday and ends at sunset on Saturday. Saturday, or Sha-bat, is the last day of the week. When Christianity came along, the Christians decided to celebrate their Sabbath on Sunday. The two Sabbaths together are now called the “weekend,” even though Sunday is actually the first day of the week.

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **I - 2. ADAM AND EVE, THE FIRST PEOPLE**

*[Genesis 2:4 - 3:24]*

When Yahweh, who is God, made the earth and the sky, when no plant of the field was yet on the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprouted, Yahweh formed a man from dry earth taken from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

Yahweh planted a garden to the east, in Eden, and there he put the man, Adam, whom he had formed. And Yahweh caused trees to grow there that were beautiful and produced good food. In the middle of the garden were the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

And Yahweh gave orders to Adam, “You may eat from any tree in the garden, but you shall not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, for if you do eat from it, you will die.”

Then, out of earth, Yahweh formed every animal of the field and every flying creature of the sky. But Adam had no one to help him. So Yahweh caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and while he slept, Yahweh took out one of his ribs. And Yahweh formed the rib into a woman.

Adam and the woman were both naked, but they were not ashamed. And the serpent said to the woman, "If you eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden you will not die, but you will become like God, knowing good and evil." So the woman took fruit from the tree and ate it, and also gave some to her husband, and he ate it. The eyes of both of them were opened and they realized that they were naked, and they sewed together fig leaves to cover their nakedness.

Yahweh came and asked, "Did you eat from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" And Adam said, "The woman gave me the fruit of the tree, and I did eat."

And Yahweh said to the woman, "What have you done?" And the woman answered, "The serpent deceived me, and I did eat."

And Yahweh said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, you are cursed; you shall crawl on your belly and eat dry earth all the days of your life."

To the woman he said, "In pain shall you bring forth children, and your husband shall rule over you."

Then to Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree, you shall have to work for your food all the days of your life."

And Adam named his wife Eve because she is the mother of all who live.

And Yahweh said, "Behold, Adam has become like one of us, knowing good from evil. If he eats from the Tree of Life, he will live forever." Therefore, Yahweh sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken.

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. This story tells how the first two people were made. It also attempts to explain many other things about life. These explanations are found in the punishments that Yahweh gave out. For example, he made the serpent crawl on its belly – this is supposed to explain why there are snakes with no legs.

The punishments of Eve and Adam are supposed to explain some of the hardships of human life. The lesson of the story seems to be that the difficulties that people have in life are the result of Yahweh's punishment of all of us because Eve and Adam, our most distant ancestors, disobeyed Yahweh's order not to eat the fruit. Remember that for many hundreds of years, Christians and Jews believed that the story of Adam and Eve had actually occurred just as it is described in the Bible. Why do you think that people accepted the idea that they should suffer with difficult lives because of something Adam and Eve did long ago?

Of course, today we understand that people can get sick or have other hardships even though they didn't do anything wrong. Sickness and poverty and other difficulties are not punishments for anything that we or anyone else did. Sometimes bad things just happen, and we have to accept the fact that there is no good reason for them. But the Bible writers seemed to believe that human problems had to be deserved, either because of something we did or something our ancestors did. The story of Adam and Eve was one way to make it seem as if these problems are deserved even though the suffering person did nothing wrong.

2. Some people say that the "punishments" of Adam and Eve were really good things because life in the Garden of Eden was really not a good life at all. These people say that life in the Garden of Eden was not only boring, but also very much like the lives of little children who don't know anything. Others say that such a life, free of cares, is the best kind of life. Do you think that Adam and Eve were better off or worse off because they ate the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? Would you rather have the kind of life that we all have now, with all of its problems and difficulties, or would you like to live in a Garden of Eden like Adam and Eve?

3. Do you think that Adam and Eve deserved to be punished for what they did? What did they do wrong? According to the story, their sin was to disobey Yahweh by eating the fruit. The punishment seems pretty severe for eating a piece of fruit. If we choose to, we might look at the story another way and say that it was not the eating of the fruit that got Yahweh ticked off at Adam and Eve, but rather the fact that they each tried to blame someone else for what they had done – Adam points to Eve and Eve accuses the serpent.

Maybe we could see this story as one whose purpose is to teach us to take personal responsibility for our actions, rather than being a story about how important it is to obey God. This would be a more modern interpretation, and one that was certainly not intended by the authors many centuries ago; the story makes it clear that Adam and Eve were punished for disobeying Yahweh. What do you think about trying to put modern interpretations on such old stories?

4. The name of the first man is Adam. In the Hebrew language, “*adam*” (pronounced “ah-dahm’,” with the stress on the second syllable) is the word for “man.” In this story, in most places where the Hebrew word “adam” appears, we have written “Adam,” but it could just as correctly have been translated simply as “the man.”

Eve’s name in Hebrew is “*Ha-wah*,” meaning “life-giver.” Remember that, according to the Bible story, all human life that followed came from Eve, whose name sounds like the Hebrew word for “life” – “*Hai*.” The explanation given why Adam named his wife “Eve” doesn’t make sense in English, but it does in Hebrew when we recognize that the Hebrew words for “Eve” and “life” are related.

5. The story of Adam and Eve and the story of Creation were written by different people living in different places. In the story of Creation, the first woman and the first man were created at the same time, on the sixth day. This may mean that the writer of the story thought that women and men were equally important.

In the Adam and Eve story, however, the first woman was made from the rib of the first man. Not only this, she was made so that she could be Adam’s helper. The author of this story thought that women were created to serve men.

In ancient times, people often thought of women as just helpers of men, and they often quoted the story of how Eve was made from Adam’s rib to prove that this was true. For some reason, they never mentioned that the Creation story had a different idea about how Adam and Eve were formed. Since people have now come to understand that both women and men can be leaders and helpers, there has been more attention paid to the first Biblical description of the equal creation of man and woman.

Because the Bible was written over a long period of time by different authors, it is usually possible to find a passage in it that can be used to support different points of view, even when these points of view contradict each other.



6. There are many other differences between the story of Adam and Eve and the story of Creation. Compare the two stories. Was the first man created before or after the plants in these two stories? What about the first woman? Were the people created before or after the animals and birds? The two stories give different answers to all these questions.

This is because they were written in different places by different people. Scholars have, in fact, concluded that the story of Creation was written later than the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. Eventually, both of these stories, complete with their contradictions, were included in the Bible.

7. We now know that there were at least four authors of the part of the Bible that Jews refer to as the Torah or the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). As discussed in the Introduction to this book in the section called “Where Did the Bible Come From,” one way we can try to figure out which parts of the Bible were written by which authors is to see what word is used for the name of the god of the Israelites. Sometimes this god is called by the name “Elohim,” which we translate as “God.” This is the way the story of Creation was written. The author of the story of Adam and Eve uses a different name for the God of the Israelites: “Yahweh.”

The two different names of God, Elohim and Yahweh, were used by different groups of Israelites. These groups lived in different places, and therefore told different stories. The legends of both of these groups were later put into the Bible, so both names for the Israelite god appear in the Bible. The story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden was written by one of the earliest Bible authors, called the “Yahwist” because he used the name “Yahweh” for God.

There was another early Bible author called the “Elohist,” who used the name “Elohim” for God. In this book, we translate the name “Elohim” simply as “God” with a capital “G.” The Elohist did not write a Creation story that appears in the Bible, so we have not read anything by this author yet. We will read stories by the Elohist later on.

Even though the first Creation story uses the name Elohim (God) for God, the author of this story is not the Elohist. The author of this Creation story is called the “Priestly author.” The Priestly author sometimes called God by the name “Elohim” and at other times used the name “Yahweh.” The “Priestly author” lived after the Yahwist and the Elohist did, and rewrote many of the stories in the Bible that had been written by them.

We will see other cases in which two versions of the same story are included in the Bible because they were written by different Bible authors.

We have now learned something about three of the principal authors of the Torah: the Yahwist, the Elohist, and the Priestly author. Toward the end of this book, we will learn about the fourth author, the Deuteronomist.

8. One of the practices of traditional Judaism is that religious Jews do not say this name of God, “Yahweh,” out loud. When this name appears in the Bible or in a prayer, they say in Hebrew “adonai,” which in English means “the lord.” As was mentioned earlier, in the section of the Introduction called “Where did the Bible come from?” many English translations of the Bible use the words “the LORD” instead of the name “Yahweh.” Some Christians call God by the name “Jehovah,” which is just a different way of pronouncing the name of the God, “Yahweh.”

### To Table of Contents

## **I - 3. CAIN, THE JEALOUS BROTHER OF ABEL**

*[Genesis 4:1 - 4:25]*

Adam and Eve had two sons. Cain, the firstborn, was a farmer. Abel, his brother, was a shepherd.

Cain brought some crops from his field as a gift-offering to Yahweh. Abel brought an offering from among the firstborn sheep of his flock. Yahweh noticed Abel and the gift he offered, but did not look upon Cain and his gift.

Cain was very angry. When he and Abel were in the field, Cain attacked Abel, his brother, and killed him.

Yahweh said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”

And Cain said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Then Yahweh said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood calls out to me from the ground. You are cursed from the earth which has opened her mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you till the soil, it will no longer grow crops for you. You will wander around on the earth forever.”

And Cain was frightened that someone might kill him as he wandered around the earth. So Yahweh said that he would punish anyone who killed Cain. And Yahweh put a mark on Cain so that no one would kill him. And Cain departed from the face of Yahweh and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

And Adam and Eve had another son named Set.

## DISCUSSION:

1. Different stories in the Bible have different purposes. Some stories, such as the story of Creation, explain nature and the world around us. Other stories have a *moral lesson* – their purpose seems to be to teach us how to treat other people. The story of Cain and Abel is one story in the Bible that can easily be used to teach a moral lesson.

One of the subjects of this story is *jealousy*. Cain was a farmer, so he brought Yahweh a gift of his crops, which was the best thing that he had to offer because he had worked hard to grow them. But Yahweh pays attention to Abel's gift of a sheep and ignores Cain's gift. Does Cain have a good reason to be jealous and angry? Whose fault is it that Cain got angry?

2. Most people, especially children, feel jealous of a brother or sister sometimes, especially when a parent seems to like the brother or sister more. Yahweh was like a parent to Cain and Abel, so Cain was very jealous and angry when Yahweh paid attention to Abel's gift but ignored Cain's.

It is easy to see how this story could be used as an ethical lesson about jealousy, especially with young children. The lesson might go something like this:

“Everyone sometimes gets so angry that they can't help thinking about hurting someone. It is natural to want to hurt the person who has made you angry. There is nothing wrong with this because you can't actually hurt someone just by *thinking* about hurting them. But it is very wrong to actually try to hurt the person we are angry at. If everyone went around hurting other people every time they got mad at them, the world would be a very unpleasant place to live in. So the message of the story of Cain and Abel is that we shouldn't harm others. In the story, Cain doesn't just *think* about harming his brother, he actually kills him. In the end Cain suffers greatly as a result of his action.

“Did you ever feel jealous of your brother or sister or someone at school? Did you think about hurting them? Did you actually do it? Why or why not?”

3. The key to this story is Cain's question: “Am I my brother's keeper?” The word “keeper” in this story means someone who looks out for and takes care of someone else. How do you think Yahweh would have answered Cain's question?

The Israelites who wrote this story, and the Jews and Christians who have read it and discussed it for thousands of years, understood that the answer to Cain's question was “Yes – you must be concerned about your brother and try to take care of him when he

needs help.” Also, they understood that the word “brother” meant more than a person’s actual brother. It meant your whole family and perhaps your friends or even those in a larger group, such as your tribe or those who shared your religious views. In recent times, this story might have been thought of as including all the people of your nation, or even the whole world, in this lesson that we should all try to help other people, and certainly not hurt them.

**4.** Cain and Abel gave gifts to Yahweh. These gifts to a god are called “sacrifices” because they require a person to give up something that is valuable. The sacrifice or gift was meant to thank the god for good things in the past or to try to persuade the god to make your life better in the future. People sometimes give gifts to other people for the same reasons. Since food was usually the most valuable thing that ancient people had, it was common to sacrifice food to God, as Cain and Abel did. One way to sacrifice food to a god was to burn it in a fire, because it seemed that the burned food would rise up to the god in the sky as smoke.

Is any reason given in the story to explain why Yahweh liked Abel’s gift more than Cain’s? Can you think of any possible reasons?

### To Table of Contents

## **I - 4. THE TIME WHEN THERE WERE GIANTS ON THE EARTH**

*[Genesis 6:1 - 6:4]*

When the number of people began to increase on the face of the earth, the sons of God saw the daughters of men and found them pleasing and married them. Yahweh said, “People shall not live forever; their lives shall be 120 years.”

In those days there were giants on the earth when the sons of God and their human wives had children. They were the famous heroes of those times.

### **DISCUSSION**

**1.** This is a really strange story to find in the Hebrew Bible. It talks about “sons of God” marrying human women and about giants. This sounds like something from some polytheistic religion in which gods sometimes did marry humans and have children who had special powers. It may be that this story is really a piece of a story from some religion that did have many gods that somehow found its way into the Bible.

2. What is meant by “sons of God” in this story? The writer of the story probably meant that the “sons of God” were other, less important and less powerful gods. This means that the writer believed in many gods. The belief in many gods was common in the early days of the Israelites. Later on, however, they came to believe that Yahweh was the only real god. The rabbis then decided that the “sons of God” must have been just very important men because they could not accept the idea that the early Israelites believed in gods other than Yahweh.

3. What is the lesson being taught by this story? Remember how God punished Adam and Eve for eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (chapter I-2)? By eating this fruit, Adam and Eve were trying to become more like God, because until that time only God understood what was good and what was evil.

In this story, people try to become like God by marrying gods. God again punishes them. He does this by saying that people will not live for more than 120 years.

4. This passage also says that the heroes and famous people of ancient times were Giants. These Giants were the children of the human women and the gods they married.

Why did the ancient Israelites think that there were once Giant people on the earth? Scholars think that the Israelites were surprised when in their travels they saw the very large stone structures that other people had built.

Some people of the Middle East made very large stone structures. These may have been something like the ones at Stonehenge in England or like those on Easter Island. Have you ever seen pictures of these? They were so large that the Israelites could not believe that ordinary people had built them. So they imagined that Giants must have done it. This may be why they included a story about Giants in their Bible. Now we know that ordinary people moved and lifted the huge stones with pulleys and levers. The ancient Israelites did not know about these things, so they wrote that Giants had once walked on earth.

**To Table of Contents**

## **I - 5. NOAH AND THE GREAT FLOOD**

*[Genesis 5:4 - 5:32, 6:5 - 9:19]*

Nine generations after Adam and Eve, there arose from the line of their third son, Set, a man named Noah. Noah and his wife had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Yaphet.

Yahweh saw that the people of the earth were evil, and he was sorry that he had created them. But Noah was a righteous man. God said to Noah, "Make yourself an ark of gopher wood. I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy everything that breathes. But with you I establish my covenant. You and your family shall live on the ark. And you shall take two animals of each kind, male and female, to keep alive on the ark. And Noah did what God commanded him to do.

Then Yahweh said to Noah, "Go with your family onto the ark, for I have seen that you are righteous. Take seven pairs, male and female, of every kind of clean animal onto the ark with you. Also take one male and one female of every animal that is not clean. Starting seven days from now, I will make it rain for forty days and forty nights, and all living things will be destroyed." And Noah did what Yahweh commanded him to do.

Noah was six hundred years old when the flood waters covered the earth. All the fountains of the great sea broke open, and the windows of the sky were opened.

The rain fell upon the earth for forty days and forty nights. The mountains were covered. And every living thing that moved upon the earth died, except for Noah and those that were with him on the ark.

After 40 days, Noah opened the window of the ark and sent out a raven, and it flew back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth. Then Noah sent out a dove to see whether the water had decreased, but the dove found no place to rest because the water still covered the earth, so she returned to the ark. After seven more days, Noah again sent out the dove from the ark. The dove came back to him with an olive leaf in its mouth, and Noah knew that the water had decreased on the earth. After seven more days, he sent the dove out again, and she did not return to him any more. Noah removed the covering of the ark and saw that the face of the ground had dried.

And Noah went out from the ark, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives went with him. And all the animals went out from the ark. And Noah made burnt offerings of every kind of clean animal and bird. And Yahweh smelled the

soothing odor and said in his heart, “I will not ever again curse the ground because of humankind, and I will not again kill every living thing. For all the days of the earth, there will be planting time and harvest time, summer and winter, day and night.”

And God said to Noah and his sons, “Be fruitful and increase greatly in number, and fill the earth. I make my covenant with you and your descendants and with every living creature that is with you. Never again will there be a flood to destroy all living things. I will put a rainbow in the clouds as a sign of this covenant. And when I make a cloud appear over the earth, and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant, and the water will not become a flood to destroy all living things.

And the three sons of Noah were Shem, Ham, and Yaphet, and from them came all the people of the earth.

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. Why did the ancient Israelites tell a story about a flood that covered the whole earth? This story *may* have come from an experience with a real flood in a place called Sumer, where this story is thought to have started. Sumer is not far from the city of Ur, where, as we will see later, Abraham, the father of the Israelites, is supposed to have come from. Many of the stories and legends of the Hebrew Bible may also have come from the region around Sumer. Archaeologists have found evidence that a flood in Sumer actually did occur in ancient times – the flood was, however, only in the local area . The people who lived there may have thought that the flood covered the whole world because they did not know anything about the world outside of the small area they lived in. They must have been very frightened, and the story of Noah and the flood – with God’s promise at the end – helped them to believe that it wouldn’t happen again.

2. There are many other people besides the Israelites who told stories about a great flood that covered the whole earth. Most of these stories are very different from the story about Noah. But the Sumerian story *Gilgamesh* is similar to the Israelite story about Noah. For example, both stories tell about how birds were sent out to see if any land had yet appeared above the water. The Israelites probably learned the story from people who learned it from the Sumerians.

Thousands of miles away, American Indians, who could not possibly have had any contact with the Israelites or the Sumerians, told stories of how the world began with a

flood. Here, for example, is the story told by the Havasupai Indians who live near the Grand Canyon in Arizona:

Before there were any people on Earth there were two gods, Tochopa of goodness and Hokomata of evil. Tochopa had a daughter named Pu-keh-eh, whom he hoped would become the mother of all living. Hokomata the evil was determined that no such thing should take place, and he covered the world with a great flood. Tochopa the good felled a great tree and hollowed out the trunk. He placed Pu-keh-eh in the hollow trunk, and when the water rose and flooded the Earth she was secure in her improvised boat.

Finally the flood waters fell and mountain peaks emerged. Rivers were created; and one of them cut the great gushing fissure which became the Grand Canyon.

Pu-keh-eh in her log came to rest on the new Earth. She stepped forth and beheld an empty world.

When the land became dry, a great golden sun rose in the east and warmed the Earth and caused her to conceive. In time, she gave birth to a male child. Later a waterfall caused her to conceive and she gave birth to a girl. From the union of these two mortal children came all the people on the Earth. The first were the Havasupai, and the voice of Tochopa spoke to them and told them to live forever in peace in their canyon of good earth and pure water where there would always be plenty for all!

The ancient Greeks also told a story about a great flood. Can you find the story of Deucalion and Pyrrha in a book of Greek myths? Do you see any similarities between the Greek flood story and the Hebrew one?

**3.** Was there ever really a great flood that killed most of the animals and people in the world? Scientists called paleontologists dig into the ground to find fossils of things that lived a long time ago. If a great flood had occurred and killed most of the animals and people on earth, then the paleontologists would have found the fossil bones of these dead animals and people all in the same layer in the earth, because they would have become buried all at the same time. We know that the worldwide flood described in the story of Noah and the ark never really happened since there have been people on the earth because there is no single layer containing fossils from almost all of the living animals and people on earth, as there would be if there had ever been such a flood.



Even today, some people believe that the story of Noah and the ark is a true story. These people are called “fundamentalists.” As we have discussed before, these people also believe that God created the world in six days. Most other people understand that many of the stories in the Bible, such as the stories about Creation and the Flood, are “myths” and not actual historical events.

4. One question that this story answers is: Why are there rainbows? Today we know that rainbows appear when sunlight travels through many water droplets in the air and is separated into its colors. But in ancient times, there were no scientific explanations, so stories like this one helped explain mysterious things about nature.

5. What do you think about God’s decision to kill all of the people in the story except Noah and his family? What about the animals that were also killed? The people who wrote this story do not seem concerned about showing God as a kind and friendly character. Why do you think that is?

The Jews and Christians who, for many centuries, believed this story to be true, were monotheists – they believed that there is only one god. Since things often happen in the world that seem to be bad – for example, young people dying of diseases – monotheists have a difficult problem. They cannot blame the bad things on some evil god, since they believe in only one god, who is good. On the other hand, saying that the one true god is responsible for bad things happening would seem to say that this god is not really so good after all. One argument that is sometimes used to get around this problem is to say that whatever appears to be bad to us is really good in some unknown, mysterious way that only the one true god can understand. Thus, the flooding of the earth and the killing of all the people and land animals in the process, might seem bad to us, but is presented in the Bible story as a good and necessary event to eliminate evil people from the world. What do you think about this way of explaining why bad things happen?

Remember the American Indian story in discussion item #2, above. The Havasupai Indians believed in more than one god, so they could explain the flood as being the work of an evil god. This enables them to explain why bad things happen in life. We will discuss some of the differences between monotheism (the belief in one god) and polytheism (belief in many gods) later on, after the story of “Abraham Smashes the Idols” ([II-2](#)).

6. Did you notice when reading the story of Noah that there were some things that really didn’t make sense? For example, God first tells Noah about the coming flood, and orders him to take two animals of each kind onto the ark to save them. Immediately after

that, Yahweh comes along and tells Noah to take not two animals of each kind, but *seven* pairs of each “clean” animal and one pair of each kind of animal that is “not clean.” How can we explain this contradiction?

As you may have guessed, the explanation is that there were two different people writing this story. These are the same two people who wrote the two different stories about how the things on the earth were created (see “Adam and Eve, the First People,” [chapter I-2](#), discussion points #5, 6, and 7) In that case, the two different versions of creation appear in two different parts of the Bible. In the story of Noah, the two different versions are mixed together into the same story, contradictions and all.

The story of Noah was first written by the early author that we call the “Yahwist” – the one who always used the name “Yahweh” for the Israelite god. This author has Yahweh telling Noah to save seven pairs of each “clean” animal and only one pair of each animal that is “not clean.” Now, a “clean” animal is one that can be sacrificed as an offering to God, according to ancient Jewish religious law. Near the end of the story, we see why it was important for Noah to bring on extra “clean” animals beyond the one pair needed to keep the species alive. Noah sacrifices these extra clean animals to God, and the smell of the smoke is so soothing to God that he agrees not to destroy the living things of the world again.

The second author didn’t like this original version, and rewrote it in a different way – with Noah bringing only one pair of each type of animal onto the ark. Why did he do this?

The answer is that the second author was a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem. He probably lived between the time of the conquest of the northern kingdom (Israel) by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and the conquest of the southern kingdom (Judah) in 586 B.C. (see the [time line](#) in the Introduction). The priests in the Temple had convinced the people of Judah that only they, the priests, could talk to God. When ordinary people needed God to do something for them, they would bring some money or some animals and give it to the priests as a sacrifice to God; then the priests would relay their message up to God.

Of course, this made the priests very rich and powerful. It was important to them for everyone to believe that the sacrifice of animals was the only way of getting God to listen to you – and that only they, the priests, could make a sacrifice that God would pay attention to. So when the “Priestly author,” read the story of Noah that the “Yahwist” had written, he wasn’t at all happy. He didn’t like it because in this story Noah himself makes a sacrifice that God likes, and Noah was not a priest.

As a result, the “Priestly author” wrote a new version of the Noah story, in which Noah saves only two animals of each kind, and no animal sacrifice takes place. This

author would have been very unhappy to learn that his story was eventually mixed together with the original “Yahwist” version and included in the Bible that people are still reading thousands of years later.

It seems very strange that the editor who put the Bible together did not try to eliminate the contradictions between the two stories. Perhaps this editor thought that the stories were so traditional or so sacred that he had no right to change them, so he just joined them together as best he could and assumed that no one would notice.

There are many other reasons that have led scholars to conclude that the Noah story in the Bible was woven together from two different versions. For example, one author wrote that Noah sent out a raven and the other said that a dove was sent out. These two versions were both included by the final editor of the story in the Bible, which explains why the raven flies around until the waters had all dried up and *then* the dove goes out and still cannot land because of all the water. (The author who wrote about the raven most likely got the idea from the ancient Sumerian flood story in the legend of *Gilgamesh*, which was mentioned in discussion item number 2, above.)

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **I - 6. THE TOWER OF BABEL**

*[Genesis 10:1 - 11:9]*

The many nations of the world came from the families of Shem, Ham, and Yaphet. And the whole earth had one language.

Some people travelled to the land of Shinar and settled there. They said, “Let us build a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves so that we will not be scattered all over the face of the earth.”

Yahweh came down to look at the city and the tower that the people had built, and Yahweh said, “The people have one language, and this is what they have done; now nothing will keep them from doing whatever they imagine. I will go down and mix up their language, so that they cannot understand each other.” Thus, Yahweh scattered the people over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. Therefore, the city is called Babel, because it is there that Yahweh mixed up the language of the whole earth.

## DISCUSSION:

1. This story answers an important question about human life: “Why do people speak so many different languages, so that people from different countries cannot understand each other?” Of course, the story of the Tower of Babel is not the real answer to this question.

Linguists who study the development of languages have found that the languages of different people develop from other languages over very long periods of time. As people who speak the same language move around and become separated from each other, new words start to arise among one group, and other new words begin to be used by other groups, which are then far away. These new words eventually become whole new languages, which can only be understood by one group of people.

2. In the story of the Tower of Babel, why did God make the people speak different languages? What did he accomplish by doing that? If people all spoke different languages, then it would be more difficult for them to get together to do something that God wouldn't like, such as building another tower. This is one possible explanation for God's punishment. Can you think of any others?

3. Why did Yahweh punish the people for building the Tower in Babel? The story doesn't really tell us the answer to this question. Maybe Yahweh was angry because the people were trying to reach the sky; only Yahweh could reach the sky, not people. Do you remember stories that we have already read that tell how God punishes people for trying to be like gods?

We have read many stories about how Yahweh, the god of the Israelites, punished people who made him angry. He punished Adam and Eve for eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil – Do you remember how they were punished ([chapter I-2](#))? Cain angered God by killing his brother, Abel – What was Cain's punishment ([chapter I-3](#))? When human women married gods, all people were punished by not being able to live for more than 120 years ([chapter I-4](#)). God made a flood to kill all the people and animals in the world except for those who were with Noah on the ark – The people had made God angry by breaking his laws ([chapter I-5](#)). And now, in the story of the Tower of Babel, God punishes people by making many languages so people cannot understand each other. The people who wrote these stories were using them to teach people how to behave. One message contained in all of these stories is that if you do not behave properly, God will punish you.

4. In addition to the “scientific” issue of where languages come from, the story of the Tower of Babel also has a moral point. When people were able to work together, they could reach for the sky itself, challenging even God who dwelled there. The writers and

religious interpreters of the story over the centuries have seen it as showing the necessity of people not to challenge God. But a more modern interpretation might be that people can achieve anything if they will only speak to each other and understand each other.

Do you think that there is value in trying to find moral lessons in the stories of the Bible? Some would argue against this, saying that these stories, like the one about the Tower of Babel, are fictional anyway, so why try to draw meaning from them? Others will say that, whether or not they are fictional, people have learned them and even believed them to be factual for so many centuries that they have become an important part of our culture, whether they are true or not, and therefore have value in learning and teaching about moral behavior.

5. This is one of many stories in the Bible that tries to explain why a particular place has the name that it has. The Hebrew word for the capital city of Babylonia was *Bavel*, though in the story we have used the word *Babel* as is done in most Bibles in English. (The Hebrew letter for “b” is very similar to the letter for “v”). In English this city is called Babylon. The story says that the name of the city is Babel (or Bavel) because it is where Yahweh mixed up the languages of people. The Hebrew word that is translated here as “mixed up” is *Balel*, which is something like Babel (or Bavel), but not really the same.

Scholars tell us that the Babylonians called their city *Bab-ilu* meaning “gate of god” in their own language, and so the word really has nothing to do with “mixed up.” As we go through the stories in the Bible, we will be learning about other places, and even people, who are said to have gotten their names as the result of a particular thing that happened. These stories will often be leaving us with the impression that one reason that the story was told simply to explain the name.

6. While the story of the Tower of Babel is not the real explanation for why there are so many different languages, it is interesting to know that there really was a tower in the city we call Babylon. The tower in Babylonia was actually a *ziggurat*, which is a four-sided pyramid with steps going up each side.

The ancient ziggurat in Babylonia was left unfinished for many centuries. In addition to explaining why people speak so many different languages, the story of the Tower of Babel may also have developed as an explanation of why there was such a large, unfinished ziggurat in Babylon. The real reason the ziggurat was not finished is not known today. Maybe it was because the country was invaded or because the king ran out of money to complete it.

**Next - To Chapter II**  
**To Table of Contents**

## **CHAPTER II. THE FIRST ISRAELITES**

### **II - 1. ABRAHAM AND SARAH, THE PROMISE FROM GOD**

*[Genesis 11:24 - 13:3]*

Noah and his wife had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Yaphet. Now, one of the descendants of Shem, after eight generations, was a man named Terah.

Terah lived in the city of Ur of the Kasdeem. He had a son named Abraham, who married Sarah. The other sons of Terah were Haran and Nahor. Haran had a son named Lot.

And Terah took Abraham his son, Lot his grandson, and Sarah the wife of Abraham and they went forth together out of Ur of the Kasdeem to go to the land of Canaan. They went as far as Haran and they stopped and settled there. The length of the life of Terah was 205 years, and Terah died in Haran.

And Yahweh said to Abraham, "Go out from your father's house and move to the land that I will show you. I will make your family a great nation there, and bless you, and make your name great. I will bless those that bless you, and curse those that curse you." So Abraham left Haran, as Yahweh had told him to do. Abraham was 75 years old when he left Haran. He took with him his wife Sarah, his nephew Lot, and all of the wealth and the people that he had acquired in Haran and went to the land of Canaan. And Yahweh said to Abraham, "I will give this land to your descendants."

There was a famine in Canaan. The crops would not grow and there was not enough food to eat. So Abraham and Sarah went down to Egypt.

When they came near to Egypt, Abraham said to Sarah, "I know that you are beautiful to look at. When the Egyptians see you, they will kill me so that they can have you for themselves. Please tell them that you are my sister so that I may live."

And the Pharaoh in Egypt saw how beautiful Sarah was and took her into his house. And Pharaoh treated Abraham well because of her, and Abraham acquired many sheep and oxen and slaves and camels.

But Yahweh brought down plagues upon Pharaoh's house. Pharaoh sent for Abraham and said, "What have you done to me? Why did you tell me that Sarah was your sister so that I would take her to be my wife? Now, take your wife and leave this land." So Abraham returned to Canaan with Sarah and all of his possessions.

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. This is the story of the beginning of the Israelites. According to the Bible, Abraham and Sarah were the people who started the family that became the Israelites. They are given this privilege because Yahweh made an agreement with Abraham. Yahweh said that he would give Abraham many descendants (the Israelites), and these descendants would own the land of Canaan if Abraham would follow Yahweh's rules. This agreement between Abraham and Yahweh is called a "covenant," or, in Hebrew, a "*b'reet*."

2. It must have been very difficult for Abraham and Sarah to move from Haran to Canaan. They were already old and enjoyed a good life in Haran. Remember, they had to travel by walking or by riding for many days on animals; there were no cars or trains or airplanes at that time. Why do you think they agreed to move? Do you think it was a good idea? Why do you think Abraham believed that he was really talking directly with God?

3. Do you think that Abraham was right to tell the Egyptians that Sarah was his sister rather than his wife? What else could he have done? Why do you think the Bible writers would include a story like this in which Abraham tells the Egyptians that Sarah is his sister so she then became the wife of Pharaoh even though she was already Abraham's wife?

Yahweh brings down plagues upon Pharaoh's house. Has Pharaoh done anything wrong?

4. The Bible contains many interesting stories about Abraham and Sarah. Some of them are given in the next few chapters of this book. It is unlikely that there ever really were people named Abraham and Sarah who did any of the things in these stories. The only information we have about them is contained in the Bible stories and in some other legends passed down originally by word of mouth through many generations.

Although the Israelite legends about Abraham and Sarah seem to be fictional, there may be some facts contained in them. For example, the story says that Abraham and Sarah came from a place called Ur. Now Ur was a real city near the areas that were once called Babylonia and Sumer. (The "Kasdeem" mentioned in the story were, in English, the "Chaldeans" – the people who ruled Babylonia when this story was written). The whole region is now in the country of Iraq. The original people who became the Israelites, and many of the stories that became the legends of the Israelites, probably really come from that area. For example, the story of Noah and the Flood, which we read earlier in chapter I-5, is very similar to the story of the flood in the Sumerian legend

known as the epic of Gilgamesh. The story of the Tower of Babel is about a real ziggurat in Babylonia. So by saying that Abraham and Sarah came from Ur, the Bible may really mean that the Israelites and the stories they told came from Ur and places near Ur.

Some people have suggested another possible explanation for why Abraham is said to have come from Ur in Babylonia and why so many of the stories seem to come from that region. They say that all the stories in this book that you are reading were actually all made up by Jews under Ezra, who became their religious leader after they returned to Jerusalem from Babylonia where they had been exiled (see [time line](#) in the Introduction). According to this idea, the Jewish leaders wrote these stories so that the people would believe that they had had a great and glorious past. There is, unfortunately, no way for us to tell with certainty when these stories were really written, though at least some parts of them must have been told or written long before Ezra's time.

**[To Table of Contents](#)**

## **II - 2. ABRAHAM SMASHES THE IDOLS**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

According to the Bible story, Abraham and Sarah are the first members of the family that become the whole Israelite people, which later became the Jewish people. The early Israelites, like Abraham, worshipped Yahweh. But, there is nothing in the Bible that says that Abraham believed that Yahweh was the only real god. The early Israelites worshipped Yahweh because he was the special god that protected them, but they also believed that the gods of other people were real. Many of them even worshipped these other gods in addition to Yahweh.

Many centuries after the Bible stories about Abraham and Sarah became well known, the religion of the Israelites changed. The Israelites developed the idea that their special god, Yahweh, was the only real god. In other words, they believed that the gods that other people worshipped did not even exist. As discussed earlier, this belief that there is only one real god is called "monotheism."

Since the well-known legends said that Abraham was the father of the Israelites, the monotheistic Jewish religious leaders decided that Abraham must have also believed that Yahweh was the only real god. Although the Bible never says this, the religious leaders began to tell stories about Abraham to show that he also believed in monotheism. These stories about Abraham do not appear in the Bible, but they were written down centuries after the Bible stories were first told.



These legends are like the stories we make up about some of our own leaders, such as George Washington, the first President of the United States. We tell the story about George Washington and the cherry tree to show that it is important not to lie. Of course, George Washington never cut down his father's cherry tree, but the story teaches an important lesson. In the same way, Jewish religious leaders told stories about Abraham in order to teach lessons to the people.

The Bible doesn't say anything about Abraham's early life. Here is a legend, not from the Bible, that the rabbis told about an incident in Abraham's childhood. The point of the story is that Abraham was a monotheist who believed only in Yahweh, the one invisible god of the Israelites.

### **THE STORY:**

Abraham's father, Terah, sold idols in his shop. These idols were wooden statues of the many gods that people worshipped and prayed to. One day, Terah was ill and asked Abraham to take care of the shop.

Abraham looked at the idols and wondered, "Why do people pray to these wooden statues? They cannot move, or speak, or do anything. Don't the people realize that the only real god is Yahweh?"

So Abraham took a hammer and smashed all of the wooden idols except for the largest one. Then he put the hammer in the hand of the one idol that remained.

When Terah, his father, returned to the shop he was very angry. All of the idols that he wanted to sell, except for one, had been destroyed. He demanded to know what had happened.

And Abraham said to his father, "The large idol smashed all of the smaller ones with the hammer."

Terah replied, "That cannot be. The idols are just wood. They cannot move!"

And Abraham said, "If they cannot move, then why do you worship them as gods?"

## DISCUSSION:

1. Why does Abraham insist that there is only one true god? The story explains why he does not believe in idols or statues of gods, but it does not tell us where the idea of only one god came from. What is the difference between the way monotheists (people who believe in only one god) and polytheists (people who believe in many gods) look at the world?

One difference is that the belief in one god seems to go along with the idea that there is *order* in the world. That is, things happen with regularity because the one true and good god set down the rules that govern how the world works – the sun goes down, the sun comes up; the seasons change in the same way each year. If there were many gods, including good and evil ones who were fighting with each other, then the world would be *unpredictable* – there would be sudden earthquakes and violent storms killing people because a god became angry; crops would sometimes fail and people would go hungry. Of course, in the real world, there is *both order and unpredictable catastrophe*. The monotheistic point of view easily explains the order as the universe following the laws set down by the one true god; polytheists can more easily explain sudden disaster as the result of an action taken by some evil or angry god.

Remember from the discussion of “Noah and the Great Flood” ([chapter I-5](#), discussion point #2), that the polytheistic Havasupai Indians explained the sudden destructive worldwide flood as the work of an evil god? The monotheistic Bible writers had to say that the flood was a good thing, since they only had one god to work with, and they believed that their one god was good.

Can you think of any other solutions to this problem faced by the Bible authors – to reconcile the simple fact that the world is filled with both good and evil with their belief that there is only one god and that god is good? This is a difficult problem which philosophers and theologians (people who study religion) have been trying to answer for a very long time. Sometimes people who believe that the god of the Bible is only good will blame the problems of the world on an independent evil being called Satan or the Devil. The problem with this idea is that it requires belief in an independent supernatural power other than the one good god, and is, therefore, a form of polytheism. In order to avoid this problem, you would have to say, as some rabbis did, that God, himself, is the source of evil as well as good. What problems does this create?

Of course, today we explain both the orderly and the chaotic events in the world scientifically. We now understand that the sun comes up each morning and sets each evening because the earth is steadily spinning around on its axis at the same speed. We also now understand that the seasons change in the same way each year because the earth’s axis is tilted, so that when the earth revolves around the sun each year the northern

and the southern hemispheres get different amounts of sunlight in a regular and predictable way. The chaotic things that we see like furious storms and earthquakes are caused by movements of the atmosphere and the earth that are so complicated that even the biggest and fastest computers have difficulty keeping track of them. This is why big storms can be predicted only a short time before they occur and why it is not yet possible to predict earthquakes. As scientific understanding of the atmosphere and the movements of the earth's crust has improved, our ability to understand and predict these seemingly unpredictable events has gotten better, and it will continue to get better as more research is done in these fields.

**2.** This story was told to show that when Abraham was a boy, he believed only in Yahweh, the one god of the Israelites. He stands up for his beliefs by smashing all of the statues that his father wanted to sell. Then he lies to his father about how it happened. Do you think Abraham was being brave and doing the right thing? Why or why not? How could Abraham have expressed his beliefs without destroying his father's property and lying to him?

Today, we try very hard to respect the religious beliefs of others, even if they are very different from our own. When people of one religion try to force others to accept their beliefs, people often begin fighting with each other, and even killing each other. We call the respect for the beliefs of others "tolerance." Tolerance means that we accept the fact that other people are different from us and we do not make fun of them or try to make them become like us. In return, we expect others to treat us the same way. Tolerance is especially important in a country like the United States where there are people with so many different religions.

**3.** While Abraham's intolerance in this story may indicate that he was not a very considerate young person, we will see that in later stories from the Bible he shows many wonderful character traits as an adult. Do you think that a child who is as strong-willed and inconsiderate of others as Abraham seems to be can grow up to be a friendly, generous, warm-hearted person?

**4.** Abraham would not worship the idols because they were unable to move or speak. He thought that other people believed that the wooden statues were gods. Actually, most of the people who worshipped idols did not really believe that they were gods. They believed that they were just statues that looked like the gods. They thought that the gods themselves lived in the sky, or on a mountain, or even under the earth. They prayed while looking at the statue because they thought this was a good way of talking to the real god.

Jews, even today, do a similar thing. When religious Jews pray in a synagogue, they often look at the Torah scroll as they say their prayers. They do not think that the Torah scroll is God, only that looking at the Torah helps them to concentrate on their god. Christians may pray while looking at a cross or at a statue of Jesus; they know that these objects are not the god they are praying to, but just symbols that represent their god.

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **II - 3. ABRAHAM AVOIDS AN ARGUMENT WITH LOT**

*[Genesis 13:5 - 13:17]*

Abraham and his nephew Lot both owned many flocks of birds, herds of animals, and tents, all on the same land in Canaan. They owned so much that the land could not support them both. So there was arguing between the herdsmen who took care of Abraham's cattle and those who took care of Lot's cattle.

Abraham said to Lot, "Let there be no arguing between me and you, between my herdsmen and yours. We are of the same family. We should separate rather than get into arguments. Choose the land that you would like, and I will take what land you don't want."

Lot looked around and saw that there was a great deal of water in the land near the Jordan River. This water would be good for his cattle and his crops. Lot chose for himself the land near the Jordan River, and so he moved eastward. Abraham stayed in Canaan. Lot went to live near the Jordan River, as far as Sodom. And the people of Sodom were wicked, and great sinners before Yahweh.

And Yahweh said to Abraham, "I will give to your descendants all of the land that you can see, from north to south, from east to west. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth – only a person who could count the pieces of dust of the earth could count your offspring."

### **DISCUSSION:**

**1.** This story shows what a generous person Abraham was. Abraham gives his nephew Lot the first choice of where he wants to live. Lot picks the best land, and Abraham does not complain.

What do you think about Abraham giving Lot the first choice of land? What would have happened if Abraham had taken the first choice of land for himself? Would that have solved the problem of the arguing that was going on? Sometimes, the best way to stop an argument is to give something to the person you are arguing with. This can prevent people from becoming jealous and arguing even more.

2. Remember what happened when Cain became jealous of his brother Abel (chapter I-3). He killed Abel and was punished by God. Now Abraham is very different from Cain. Abraham is not jealous. Instead, he stops an argument with his nephew Lot by being generous with Lot. How does God reward Abraham for this?

3. The writers of these Bible stories were trying to teach people that it is good to be generous and bad to hurt others. They teach this by having God reward the generous person, Abraham, and by having God punish Cain for killing his brother. In real life, we can see that people who do good things are often not rewarded; a good and generous person may still have many sorrows and a difficult life. But even though a generous person may have many problems, he or she will still have the good feeling that comes from helping others. What experiences have you had that help you understand the point being made here?

We also know that sometimes a person who hurts others may never get caught and punished. But this person will suffer simply by knowing that he hurt someone else. Often such a person is very unhappy and afraid because he is always thinking about being found out. Can you think of something that you did even though you weren't supposed to, and nobody found out? How did it make you feel?

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **II - 4. ABRAHAM ARGUES WITH YAHWEH**

*[Genesis 18:16 - 19:30]*

Yahweh called out to Abraham, "The people of Sodom and Gomorrah have committed such great sins. They must be punished."

Abraham said, "Will you destroy the righteous along with the wicked? There may be fifty righteous people within the city. Will you not forgive the city for their sake? Certainly you would not want to kill the righteous along with the wicked! Will not the Judge of all the earth act justly?"

And Yahweh said, “If I find fifty righteous people in Sodom, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.”

And Abraham answered and said, “I have dared to speak to Yahweh, though I am only dust and ashes. Perhaps there are only forty-five righteous people in Sodom? Will you destroy the whole city because it has only forty-five rather than fifty?”

And Yahweh answered, “I will not destroy Sodom if I find forty-five righteous people there.”

And Abraham spoke to Yahweh again, saying “There may be forty righteous people there.”

And Yahweh answered, “I will not do it for the sake of the forty.”

Abraham said, “Please do not be angry with me. But there may be only thirty righteous people there.”

And Yahweh said, “I will not destroy Sodom if I find thirty righteous people there.”

Abraham said, “Again I dare to speak to the Lord. There may be twenty righteous people found there?”

And Yahweh said, “I will not destroy Sodom for the sake of the twenty.”

And Abraham said, “Please do not be angry with me if I speak up one more time. There may be ten righteous people found there.”

And Yahweh said, “I will not destroy Sodom for the sake of the ten.”

And Yahweh went away when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his tent.

Lot, the nephew of Abraham, lived in Sodom. Two angels, appearing as men, came to Sodom, and Lot insisted that they stay as guests at his house. They told him, “We are going to destroy the whole city of Sodom. Take your wife and your family and get out so you will not also be destroyed.”

The angels led Lot with his wife and their two daughters out of the city and said, “Escape now and save your lives! Do not look back.”

And Lot and his wife and their two daughters ran away from Sodom. And Yahweh destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with a great fire from the sky. Lot's wife looked back at Sodom, and she turned into a pillar of salt.

And God remembered Abraham, and so he removed Lot from the cities before they were destroyed. Only Lot and his two daughters escaped when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed.

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. This story seems to be teaching a moral lesson – that a person should speak out against injustice even when the injustice is being done by someone very powerful. Abraham tells Yahweh not to be unjust, even though Yahweh could easily kill Abraham if he wanted to. This story has often been taken to mean that we should not just accept it when innocent people are being harmed.
2. This story may also have been an explanation of something that actually happened. The story talks about fire coming down from the sky. It may be that there was a volcano, an earthquake, or even a large meteorite that destroyed some cities. The story may have been written to explain why these cities were destroyed. The Bible writers seem to believe that only evil people ever get killed, so they thought that the destruction of a city must mean that the people who lived in it were bad people. Sodom and Gomorrah may have been real places, but archaeologists have not found any traces of either of them.
3. In this story, Abraham argues with Yahweh to try to get him to be fair to the people of Sodom. Why does Abraham think that Yahweh is about to do something wrong? Do you think it took great courage for Abraham to argue with Yahweh? Does Abraham seem afraid or does he seem fearless? Why do you think Abraham stops arguing when he gets to ten righteous people? Do you think he should be concerned about even one righteous person?
4. Why is Abraham so concerned about saving Sodom? Do you think it is because his nephew Lot is there, or because he really wants to make sure that no righteous people are killed along with the wicked?

5. Does Abraham succeed in his argument with Yahweh? Does Yahweh save any righteous people? The way the story is written, it seems to say that Lot's family was saved only because they were related to Abraham. On the other hand, Lot does go out of his way to invite the visitors, who turn out to be angels, to stay at his house; this may be taken to mean that Lot is a generous person, like Abraham, and therefore rewarded by being saved. His wife isn't so lucky. Why would the story be written to say that she is turned into a pillar of salt?

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **II - 5. ISAAC IS BORN TO THE SOUND OF LAUGHTER**

*[Genesis 16:1 - 16:3, 16:15, 17:1 - 17:19, 18:1 - 18:15, 21:1 - 21:7]*

The years passed, and Abraham and Sarah still did not have any children. Sarah said to Abraham, "Yahweh has prevented me from bearing children. Go to my Egyptian maidservant, Hagar, so that I can have a child through her. So Abraham and Hagar the maidservant had a son, Ishmael.

When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, God said to Abraham, "You and Sarah shall soon have a son, whose descendants shall be nations and rulers of people." Abraham threw himself down on his face and laughed, saying to himself, "Can a child be born to a 100 year-old man and a 90 year-old woman?" And God said, "You and Sarah shall have a son, and I shall keep my covenant with him and his descendants. You shall name him Isaac."

And Yahweh appeared to Abraham as he sat at the door of his tent. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing near him. He ran out to greet them and said to them, "Please do not go any further. Stay here and drink some water, eat some bread, wash your feet, and rest under the tree."

Then Abraham ran into the tent and called to Sarah, "Hurry up and make some bread for my guests." And he gave the visitors some milk and butter and meat and they ate it under the tree.

One of the visitors said to Abraham, "Sarah, your wife, shall have a son." Sarah, who was listening at the tent door, heard him and laughed to herself, saying, "Shall I really bear a child when I am so old?" And Yahweh said to Abraham, "Why is Sarah laughing? Nothing is too difficult for me. When I return next year, Sarah shall have a son." Then Sarah lied, saying "I did not laugh," because she was afraid. But Yahweh said, "No, but you did laugh."

And Yahweh did what he had promised, and Sarah had a son, whose name was Isaac. And Sarah said, "God has made me laugh."



## DISCUSSION:

1. In this story Abraham has two sons. Hagar the Egyptian maidservant, or slave, is the mother of Ishmael; Sarah, the wife of Abraham, is the mother of Abraham's second son, Isaac. As we will see later, some of the descendants of Isaac become the Hebrew people, or Israelites, who later become the Jews.
2. Since Isaac was the only son needed to explain the origins of the Jewish people, why did the authors of this Bible story write about Ishmael, another son of Abraham? The reason is that the story of Ishmael is used to explain the beginnings of a group of tribes who lived near the Israelites. The people of these tribes were called the Ishmaelites by the Bible authors. We will learn more about them in the next story.
3. This story shows what a generous person Abraham was. When he sees the three strangers outside his tent, he insists that they stay and have something to eat and drink. We have already read about Abraham's generosity in the story of how he avoided an argument with his nephew, Lot ([chapter II-3](#)).

The story about Abraham and the three strangers has been pointed to for many centuries to teach that it is important to be generous, even toward strangers. Abraham is rewarded for his generosity by hearing the happy message from the strangers. When people read this story in the Bible, they would think, "Am I a generous person like Abraham?" and "How can I become more generous towards others?" and "Does it matter if I am not actually rewarded for being generous?" How would you answer these questions?

4. The first story about Abraham and Sarah showed that they were very willing to obey God; they moved all the way from Haran to Canaan just because God told them to. In this story we see that they did not always believe what God said – in fact, they even laugh at God's words!

Abraham laughed when God told him that he and Sarah would have a son. He laughed because he and Sarah were much too old to have children. Sarah laughed when she heard the visitor say that she would have a son. What do you think Sarah would have done if she had known that the visitors were messengers from God?

At the end of the story, Sarah laughs because she is so happy to have a son. The son is named "Isaac," which is pronounced "*Yitz-hak*" in Hebrew. In the Hebrew

language, “*Yitz-hak*” comes from the word for “laugh.” This name reminds us that Abraham and Sarah laughed at God’s promise that they would have a son and also that Sarah laughed with joy when the promise came true and Isaac was born.

5. When God tells Abraham that he and Sarah will have a son, Isaac, God also says that he will keep his “covenant” with that son. Remember that this “covenant” is the agreement God has made with Abraham to protect his descendants if they will follow God’s rules. We have already discussed this covenant in the story “Abraham and Sarah, the Promise from God” ([chapter II-1](#)). As we will see in the next story, it is important that this promise applies to Isaac and his descendants, not to Ishmael and his.

6. Most of the people who live in the lands near Israel are Arabs. Most Arabs follow the religion called Islam. According to the beliefs of both traditional Judaism and Islam, the Arab people are the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham’s first son, and the Jewish people are the descendants of Abraham’s second son, Isaac. This means that they believe that the Arabs and the Jews are all the “children” of Abraham, who was the father of both Ishmael and Isaac.

There is no historical or scientific reason to believe that either the Jews or the Arabs are the descendants of any one person. But the story of Ishmael and Isaac helps us to remember that the Jews and the Arabs are, in reality, closely related to each other, like cousins.

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **II - 6. ISHMAEL AND HAGAR ARE CAST OUT OF ABRAHAM’S HOUSE**

*[Genesis 21:9 - 21:21, 25:12 - 25:18]*

Sarah saw Ishmael, the son of Hagar, playing. She said to Abraham, “Cast out that slave woman and her son, for Ishmael shall not share the inheritance with my son Isaac.” Her words upset Abraham greatly because Ishmael was his son. God said to Abraham, “Don’t be upset over the boy Ishmael and his mother. Do what Sarah says, for the descendants of *Isaac* will be known as yours. But I will also make a great nation from Ishmael, for he is your son, too.”

The next morning, Abraham sent Hagar and her son Ishmael away, with only some bread and water. They wandered in the wilderness. When they ran

out of water, Hagar put her son under a bush, and sat some distance away, thinking, "I cannot bear to watch my child die." And she began to cry.

God heard the voice of Ishmael. An angel of God called to Hagar and said, "Fear not, for God will make a great nation of the descendants of your son Ishmael." God opened her eyes and she saw a well with water, and Hagar gave some of the water to Ishmael. God protected the boy as he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an archer.

Ishmael's mother found a wife for him in the land of Egypt. Ishmael had twelve sons, and they became heads of twelve tribes that lived in the lands stretching from Havelah to Shur, which is near Egypt.

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. In the story before this one (chapter II-5), we learned that it was Sarah's idea for Abraham to have a son with Hagar, since Sarah herself seemed to be unable to have children. Now Sarah is very jealous. She is afraid that Ishmael, the son of Hagar and Abraham, will share the inheritance with Isaac, her own son. So she gets Abraham to throw Ishmael and his mother out of the house even though they have done nothing wrong.

Some people would say that Sarah is just helping God to fulfill his promise to keep his covenant with Isaac, and not with Ishmael. Others would say that Sarah is just a selfish person, concerned only about her own son, with no feelings for other people. What would you say?

2. Abraham agrees to send Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness with only some bread and water. Abraham agrees to do this because God assures him that Ishmael will be okay. Abraham is upset, but he does not argue with God, as he did for the people of Sodom. Why do you think that he is now acting differently from the generous, thoughtful, concerned person we have read about in some of the earlier stories about Abraham?

3. The story of Ishmael is usually not considered to be very important to Jews, but it is of great significance to the Arab people who follow the religion called Islam. Islam is the main religion among the Arabs. The people who follow this religion are called Muslims. Islam today is one of the most important religions in the world. It began almost 1400 years ago with a man named Muhammad (see the time line in the

Introduction). Muhammad lived in the area now known as Saudi Arabia. The teachings of Muhammad were written down in a book called the Koran, which is the holy book of Islam, just as the Hebrew Bible is the holy book of Judaism.

Originally most of the followers of Muhammad were Arabs, but today Islam has spread far beyond the Arab lands. The followers of Islam believe in one God, just as religious Jews do. They also believe that the Arabs are the descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar.

**4.** Do you remember the legend about Abraham smashing the idols (chapter II-2)? This is a story that the rabbis told to make it seem that Abraham believed that Yahweh was the only real god. The Bible itself never says that Abraham believed that there was only one real god.

There is another Jewish legend not found in the Bible that tells how Abraham went to visit the home of Hagar and Ishmael after he threw them out of his own home. Abraham meets the wife of Ishmael, who is not at all a nice person. Abraham tells Ishmael to get a new wife, which he does. This legend is supposed to show that Abraham was really concerned about his son Ishmael. The rabbis could not change the Bible story, which says that Abraham threw the innocent Ishmael out of the house, so they told this legend to show that Abraham was not such a cold-hearted person after all.

**5.** Islamic religious leaders also told legends about the Bible characters to fit their own religious point of view. For example, there is an Islamic legend that tells how Abraham visits with Ishmael and Hagar after throwing them out of his home. In the Islamic version of this story, Abraham and Ishmael work together to build the Temple in the city of Mecca. They also decide that this Temple will be a place for pilgrims to come to. (A pilgrim is a person who makes a special trip, called a pilgrimage, for a religious purpose). Since making a pilgrimage to the Temple at Mecca is one of the most important religious acts in Islam, this legend is meant to show that the ideas of Islam began with Abraham. Even if Abraham and Ishmael had been real people, there is nothing in the Bible that even hints that they ever went to Mecca.

**6.** Many of the characters in the Hebrew Bible are accepted by the religion of Islam as “prophets” who received messages from God and tell other people about them. These include Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. In this way, Judaism and the stories in the Bible of the Jews contributed greatly to the establishment of another religion, Islam. Islam also accepts Jesus (the main character in the story of Christianity) as a prophet and, of course, Muhammad (the central person in Islam).

As discussed in the Introduction to this book, Christianity is also based in many ways on Judaism, and Christians accept the complete Hebrew Bible as part of their own Bible. Thus, Judaism provided both Christianity and Islam with many of the stories that became part of these newer religions.

The Jewish religion accepted monotheism (the idea that there is only one god) long before Christianity and Islam existed; then these two religions also accepted monotheism. The number of Jews in the world is now very small compared to the number of Muslims or Christians, but the religions of the Muslims and the Christians took some very important ideas from the Hebrew Bible and Judaism.

### To Table of Contents

## **II - 7. GOD TELLS ABRAHAM TO KILL HIS SON, ISAAC**

*[Genesis 22:1 - 22:18]*

And God tested Abraham. He called to him, "Abraham," and Abraham answered, "Here I am."

And God said, "Take your son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Mo-ree-ah, and sacrifice him in a fire on one of the mountains that I will show you."

So early the next morning, Abraham gathered some wood to make the fire and took his son Isaac to the hill in the land of Mo-ree-ah.

On the third day of walking, Isaac said to Abraham, "Father." And Abraham answered, "Yes, my son." And Isaac said, "I have the wood and I see that you have the fire, but where is the sheep that you are going to sacrifice?" And Abraham said, "God will make sure that there is a sheep for the sacrifice, my son." And they walked on together.

When they arrived at the place for the sacrifice, Abraham arranged the wood and tied up his son Isaac on an altar over the wood. And Abraham reached with his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

And an angel from Yahweh called to him, "Abraham! Abraham!" And Abraham answered, "Here I am." And the angel said, "Do not harm the boy. Now I know that you fear God, since you would even kill your son for me."

When Abraham looked up, he saw a ram whose horns were caught in some thick bushes. So he sacrificed the ram instead of his son.

Then the angel of Yahweh called to Abraham a second time from the sky, “Because you were willing to sacrifice your son Isaac, Yahweh will give you as many descendants as there are stars in the sky or grains of sand on the seashore. And your descendants shall conquer their enemies.”

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. This story starts when God decides to test Abraham. What was the test? Did Abraham pass it? What do you think about Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son?
2. How do you think Isaac felt about his father’s willingness to sacrifice him?
3. What is this story trying to teach? The lesson that religious Jews have learned from this story for many centuries is that the most important thing in life is to obey the commands of God. Abraham was rewarded because he was willing to obey God, even though it meant killing his own son. What do you think about this way of teaching such a lesson?
4. In ancient times, people would make sacrifices to their gods in order to keep the gods happy. Usually the sacrifice would be some food or some plants or animals that could be used for food. They would often make this sacrifice by burning the food, which is what happens in this story. Some people believed, however, that their gods required more than food for sacrifices. They thought that their gods sometimes wanted them to sacrifice children.

In recent years, some modern rabbis who could not accept the use of this story to teach unquestioning obedience to God have developed a newer interpretation of its meaning. They said that this story taught the ancient Israelites that their god would never ask them to sacrifice children to him. However, there is no reason to believe that the Israelites ever thought of this story as having this meaning or that anyone, either Jews or Christians, interpreted the story this way before the 20th century.

5. Why do you think that Abraham agrees to kill Isaac? We have already learned that Abraham was willing to argue with Yahweh when Yahweh said that he was going to destroy Sodom ([chapter II-4](#)). Why didn’t Abraham argue with God about killing his son Isaac, who had done nothing wrong?

One answer to this question is that the different stories about Abraham were written by different people, and these authors had very different ideas about what kind of person Abraham was. Do you remember when we learned that the story of Adam and Eve and the story of Creation were written by two different people? (See chapter I-2, “Adam and Eve, the First People,” discussion points #5, 6, and 7). This explained why the two stories in the Bible don’t agree about how the world was made. The story of Adam and Eve was written by someone who always used the word “Yahweh” for the name of the god of the Israelites; this Bible author is called the “Yahwist,” or “J.” The author of the story of Creation was written by the “Priestly author,” nicknamed “P.” These two authors, J and P, also wrote the two different versions that were woven together to create the Biblical story of Noah and the Flood, complete with all their contradictions. We have also learned about a third author, the “Elohist” (“E”), who always calls his god by the name “Elohim,” which we translate as “God.” The authors J and E were the earliest of the Bible authors.

Bible scholars tell us that the story that tells how Abraham argued with God not to destroy Sodom was written by J, the Yahwist and that the story we just read about Isaac was written by E, the Elohist. This explains why in one story Abraham tries to protect the people of Sodom, but in another story he does nothing to defend the life of his own innocent son Isaac. Author J thought of Abraham as a courageous person who would even argue with Yahweh himself to protect innocent people; author E was more concerned about showing Abraham’s blind obedience to God, even to the point of killing his innocent son Isaac.

**6.** The use of the name “Yahweh” was a tradition of the people who settled in the South (Judah); the name “Elohim” was used in the North (Israel). When these two different traditions, along with the writings of P (the “Priestly author”) were merged into one Bible, the editor who did this tried to blend together the stories from the different traditions. However, we can still usually tell one author’s writing from that of the other authors.

We said that the story we just read was written by the Elohist, who calls the god of the Israelites by the name “Elohim” (which we translate as “God”). But look at the end of this story. You can see that the angel who tells Abraham not to kill his son is an angel from “Yahweh” rather than from “Elohim” (God). The story up to that point uses the name “Elohim” (God). This fact has led some scholars to conclude that in the original version of the story, written by the Elohist, Abraham actually kills Isaac. Then a different, and happier, ending was put on by an editor, who used the name “Yahweh” for the god of the Israelites.

7. There are many different ways that we can try to answer the question of why Abraham agrees with God to sacrifice his son Isaac. For example, suppose we ignore the fact that different stories in the Bible were written by different people. We have already learned that Abraham is someone who does not automatically obey God or believe everything that God says. We know this because Abraham argued with God to try to save the people of Sodom (chapter II-4), then he fell on his face and laughed because he didn't believe it when God told him that he and Sarah would have a son (chapter II-5).

So if Abraham did not always believe or obey God, how can we explain the fact that he takes Isaac up the hill and prepares to kill him? If we wanted to give Abraham a good reason, we *could* say that Abraham really did not intend to kill Isaac at all – he just wanted to see whether God would stop him before he did it. In other words, while God was testing Abraham, Abraham was also testing God to see if he was a God worthy of following. According to this way of looking at the story, Abraham would never have actually killed Isaac anyway, even if he hadn't been stopped by the angel. But God passed Abraham's test by sending an angel to tell him not to kill Isaac, so Abraham's faith in this God was renewed. What do you think of this explanation?

You can see that there are many different ways of looking at the stories in the Bible. None of them is "right" or "wrong." It is interesting to try to figure out what the authors of the Bible meant to say with these stories. It is also important to know how religious leaders have interpreted them throughout the centuries. But it is really much more fun to try to find different ways of thinking about these stories for ourselves. We have already discussed the use of modern interpretations in the stories "Adam and Eve, the First People" (chapter I-2, discussion point #3) and "The Tower of Babel" (chapter I-6, discussion point #4).

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **II - 8. ISAAC MARRIES REBEKAH**

*[Genesis 23:1 - 23:2, 23:19, 24:1 - 24:67]*

Sarah lived for one hundred and twenty-seven years. When Sarah died, Abraham buried her in the cave of the field of Makhpelah, facing Mamreh – now Hebron – in the land of Canaan.

When Abraham was old, advanced in years, Yahweh had blessed him in all things. And Abraham said to the oldest servant of his household, who was in charge of all that Abraham owned, "Swear by Yahweh, god of the sky and god of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell. Instead, you will go to the land where my



relatives live to get a wife for my son Isaac. Yahweh will send his angel to you, and you will get a wife for my son from there.” So the servant swore to do what he was told.

Then Abraham’s servant travelled to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor, Abraham’s brother. And he said, “O Yahweh, God of my master Abraham, here I stand by the well as the girls from the town come out to draw water. I will say to one of the maidens, ‘Please, tip your pitcher so I may drink from it.’ Let the one whom you have chosen to marry Isaac reply to me ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels.’”

He had not even finished speaking when Rebekah came out with her pitcher on her shoulder. Rebekah was the daughter of Betuel, the son of Abraham’s brother Nahor. The maiden Rebekah was very beautiful. Abraham’s servant ran toward her and said, “Please, let me sip a little water from your pitcher.” “Drink, my lord,” she said. “I will also draw water for your camels.” Then she ran back to the well to draw water, and she drew enough for all of his camels.

The servant wondered whether this was the girl that Yahweh had chosen to marry Isaac. He asked her if he could stay the night at her father’s house. She said “There is room to spend the night.” He asked her who her parents were. When she told him that her father was the son of Nahor, the brother of Abraham, Abraham’s servant said, “Blessed be Yahweh who has led me to the house of the family of my master, Abraham.”

So Abraham’s servant went to the house of Betuel, Rebekah’s father. He told his story to Rebekah’s father, Betuel, and to her brother, Laban. He asked them if Rebekah could return with him to marry Abraham’s son, Isaac.

Then Laban and Betuel answered, “This is what Yahweh wants. Take Rebekah and let her be the wife of Isaac.” Rebekah and her maids, riding on camels, followed Abraham’s servant.

Isaac was out walking in the fields toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching. Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac. When the servant told her who he was, she took her veil and covered herself.

Isaac brought Rebekah into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife, and he loved her. And thus Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. This is another story about *generosity*. We have seen what a generous person Abraham was. Now Rebekah is chosen as Isaac's wife because she shows such generosity when asked for water by a stranger, Abraham's servant. Not only does she give him some water to drink, but she runs off to get more water for his camels without even being asked. As a result, she becomes one of the mothers of all the Israelites and, therefore, of the Jewish people.

So far we have met two of these mothers, Sarah and Rebekah, and two of the fathers, Abraham and Isaac. In the next chapter we will meet the third father of the Jewish people, Jacob, and later on his two wives, Leah and Rachel.

Since Rebekah is rewarded for her generosity by becoming one of the revered mothers of the Israelites, the story teaches the importance of being generous, even with strangers.

2. In this story, Abraham decides that he cannot allow his son Isaac to marry a Canaanite, even though they are living among the Canaanite people. Why is this? The Bible presents the Canaanites as great enemies of the Israelites because the Israelites will eventually take the land of the Canaanites for their own. We will see in later stories that Yahweh tells the Israelites that they should completely destroy the Canaanites. Since the Israelites saw themselves as the descendants of Isaac and his wife, they didn't want to have a story that said that Isaac's wife was a Canaanite. So the story was written to make sure that no Canaanites are presented as ancestors of the Israelites.

3. Isaac marries Rebekah, who is actually the daughter of his cousin Betuel. Today we know that it is not a good idea for people to marry close relatives because it makes it likely that their children will inherit genes that can cause serious diseases. In fact, in the United States and many other countries there are laws prohibiting close relatives from marrying. But marrying of cousins and other family members was not uncommon among Jews and some other people in the past.

A later story tells how Isaac's son, Jacob, also marries within the family of Abraham.

**To Table of Contents**

## **II - 9. ESAU SELLS HIS BIRTHRIGHT TO HIS BROTHER, JACOB**

[Genesis 25:7 - 25:11, 25:21 - 25:34]

Abraham lived for one hundred and seventy-five years. He was buried with his wife Sarah in the cave of Makhpelah, facing Mamreh. After the death of Abraham, God blessed his son Isaac.

Isaac and Rebekah had no children. So Isaac pleaded with Yahweh, and Yahweh responded. Rebekah became pregnant with two sons. And the children struggled within her. She asked Yahweh why this was happening, and Yahweh answered her, "Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall come from your body. One people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger."

The first of the twins to be born was red all over, like a hairy robe. He was named Esau. The second was born holding onto Esau's heel. This was Jacob.

When they grew up, Esau became a skilled hunter and a man of the outdoors. Jacob was a plain man who lived in tents. Their father, Isaac, loved Esau because he liked to eat the game that Esau hunted. Their mother, Rebekah, loved Jacob.

One day, Jacob was cooking some soup. Esau came in from the fields and was very hungry. Esau said "Give me some of that red, red soup, for I am faint." This is why his name was Edom. And Jacob replied, "Sell me your birthright." Esau said, "I am going to die, so what use is the birthright to me?" So Esau sold his birthright to his brother Jacob, and Jacob gave him some bread and lentil soup.

### **DISCUSSION:**

1. This is a story about which son will inherit the *birthright* from Isaac. The birthright was the right to inherit most of the father's possessions – the son who had the birthright would inherit twice as much money and property as his brother when the father died.

In ancient times, the birthright was always given to the oldest son. Since Esau was born first, the birthright belonged to him. In this story he foolishly gives his rights to his younger brother Jacob in exchange for some bread and soup.

2. One way to look at this story is that perhaps Jacob deserved the birthright more than Esau. It really wasn't fair that Esau should get more than Jacob simply because Esau happened to be born a few seconds before his twin brother. In this story, Esau doesn't seem to think that the birthright is very important, he is thinking only of his hunger. Jacob seems smarter than Esau, so maybe he deserves the birthright more; he certainly wants it more than Esau does.

But Jacob also seems selfish and even mean – after all, he refuses to give his hungry brother a little food without getting something extremely valuable in return. In the next story we will see how Jacob really plays a nasty trick on Esau to ensure his inheritance from Isaac. Which brother do you think deserves the birthright? Why?

3. Near the beginning of this story, Rebekah is worried about the fighting of her two children, who have not yet been born. Yahweh tells her that there are “two nations” fighting within her, and that the younger one will rule over the older one. This is called a “prophecy.” A “prophecy” is a prediction about the future, and the Bible is full of them. When a Bible prophecy comes true, that means that the story was probably written after the event which is predicted; that is how the author of the story knew to put the prophecy into it. Looking for prophecies is one way that Bible scholars can figure out when the different parts of the Bible were written.

What does it mean when Yahweh calls Jacob and Esau “two nations”? Well, according to the Bible, Jacob is the father of all the people of Israel, who later will become the Jewish people. Esau is presented in the Bible as the father of the people called the Edomites, who lived in the land south of Israel. He is presented in the story as the twin brother of Jacob because the Edomites were closely related to the people of Israel, and spoke a language similar to theirs. Later on, beginning at the time of King David, the Israelites really did rule over the Edomites. Of course, having a story claiming that Yahweh himself predicted that Israel would rule over Edom was very useful in justifying the conquest of the Edomites by the Israelites. Rather than saying that they were conquering in order to increase their power, or to take money or other valuable things from the Edomites, they could say that they were simply obeying their god. This explains the “prophecy” that Jacob will rule over his older brother Esau. Since this prophecy “came true,” we can be pretty sure that this passage was written after the time of King David, when the Israelites became rulers over the Edomites (see the [time line](#) in the Introduction).

It is very common in the Bible for one man to be presented as the father of a whole nation. The nations at that time were more like tribes, with a common language and customs. They seemed like very large families. So the writers of the Bible imagined that

the people of any one nation were actually a single family that descended from one person.

4. Why did the writers say that Esau was very red in color? This was probably to help confirm the prophecy connecting Esau and the people of Edom. The word “Edom” is very similar to the Hebrew word “*adom*,” which means “red.” When Esau asks Jacob for some of the “red, red” soup, the Bible even says that is why he was named Edom – because the word for “red” is so similar to the word “Edom.” The problem is, of course, that he wasn’t named Edom at all; his name was Esau. But such details never seem to bother the Bible authors. If they wanted Esau to be the father of the Edomite people, they just said that his name was Edom. When you read in the story that his name was Edom, rather than Esau, did you think that this was a mistake? As we will see later, Jacob gets the same treatment; his name later becomes “Israel” to prove that he is really the father of the people of Israel.

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **II - 10. JACOB TRICKS HIS BROTHER, ESAU, AND HIS FATHER, ISAAC**

*[Genesis 27:1 - 27:40]*

When Isaac was old, his eyes became dim and he could not see. He called to his older son Esau and said “I am old. I do not know when I might die. Go out and hunt some game and prepare a delicious meal for me so I may give you my blessing before I die.”

Rebekah heard what Isaac said. She told her son Jacob about it. She instructed Jacob to bring her two young goats. He did this and she cooked a delicious meal for her husband Isaac.

Rebekah told Jacob to take the food to Isaac so that he could receive the blessing that Isaac wanted to give to Esau. She put Esau’s clothes on Jacob and covered his smooth hands and neck with the skins of the young goats, so that he would feel hairy like his brother Esau.

Jacob brought to Isaac the food his mother had prepared. Isaac asked, “Who are you.” Jacob replied, “I am Esau, your firstborn son. I have done what you have told me. Now eat some of the game I have hunted and give me your blessing.”

Isaac said, "Come closer so I may feel you, so I will know whether or not you are Esau." Jacob came closer. Isaac felt his hands, which were covered with goat skins. Isaac thought to himself, "The voice is Jacob's, but the hands are Esau's." Isaac did not recognize Jacob because his hands were hairy, like those of his brother Esau.

So Isaac ate the meal that Jacob had brought for him and gave to Jacob the blessing that he meant to give to Esau: "May God give you abundant crops and rain so they may grow. Other nations will work for you and bow down to you. Be a master over your brothers, and your mother's sons will bow down to you. Cursed be those who curse you, and blessed be those who bless you."

As Isaac finished blessing Jacob, Jacob left and his brother Esau came back from hunting. He said "Bless me father, for I am your first-born son Esau." Isaac began to tremble, saying, "Your brother has taken away your blessing." Esau cried out bitterly "Bless me too, father. First Jacob took away my birthright, and now he has taken my blessing." And Isaac answered, "I have made him your master with my blessing. But I will say to you that you will serve him, but then you will break free of him."

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. This story is like the last one in which Jacob takes his brother's birthright. In this story, Jacob completes the job by stealing Esau's blessing.

As Isaac lay dying, the old man wanted to make sure that Esau, his favorite and oldest son, would be successful and rule over Jacob. As we discussed before, this did not really mean that Esau the person would be the master of Jacob himself; rather it meant that the descendants of Esau (the Edomites) would rule over the descendants of Jacob (the Israelites). But Isaac tricks his blind father, so the Israelites become the masters and the Edomites are conquered by them.

2. Why in the world did the Israelites tell this story about themselves? This story says that their power comes only from the trickery of their ancestor Jacob. While it makes for an interesting story, it seems to say that the Israelites got their power only because of an act of great injustice. After all, Jacob was certainly not being honest when he tricked both his brother and his old, blind father.

Some people say that Jacob was only obeying his mother, Rebekah, by fooling his father and stealing the blessing. What do you think about this? Do you think it was okay that Jacob lied to his father and stole his brother's blessing because his mother told him

to? Or should each person take responsibility for his or her own actions? Can Jacob, who is no longer a child, blame his mother for something that he, himself, did?

3. This is the third story we have read in which the younger brother is favored over the older brother – the first two were about Cain and Abel (chapter I-3) and about Ishmael and Isaac (chapter II-6). Remember how God notices the sacrifice of Abel, but ignores the sacrifice of Cain, his older brother? Cain gets very angry because of this. In some ways the story of Jacob and Esau is similar to the story of Cain and Abel. God favors Abel by noticing his sacrifice. In the same way, Isaac favors Jacob by blessing him instead of his older brother Esau, although Isaac has to be tricked into doing this. In the earlier story, Cain responds to God’s favoring of Abel by killing Abel out of jealousy. As we will see in the next story, Esau also becomes very jealous of his younger brother, and decides to kill him.

This story is also similar to the story of Ishmael and Isaac. In that story the younger brother Isaac gets the inheritance from his father Abraham. The older brother Ishmael gets nothing from his father.

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **II - 11. JACOB’S LADDER**

*[Genesis 27:41 - 28:21]*

And Esau hated his brother Jacob because of his father’s blessing, and vowed to kill him. When Rebekah heard what her son Esau was planning to do, she told Jacob to flee to Haran, to the home of her brother Laban. Isaac also told Jacob to go to Haran to find a wife from among the daughters of Laban, rather than marry a Canaanite woman.

Jacob set out for Haran. When he came near the city of Luz, he stopped for the night. He used a stone for a pillow, and lay down. He had a dream that he saw a ladder that reached from the ground to the sky. Angels of God were going up and down the ladder. And Yahweh, who was standing above the ladder, said, “I am Yahweh, the god of Abraham and Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the ground on which you are lying – the land of Canaan. Your descendants will be as numerous as the pieces of dust of the earth, and they shall spread out to the west, to the east, to the north, and to the south. I will protect them everywhere, and I will bring them back to this land.”

Jacob woke up and said, “Surely, Yahweh is in this place. This is the house of God and the gate of the heavens.” So he named the place Beth-El, which means “House of God.” Before that, the city was called Luz. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God protects me on my journey, and if I return safely to the house of my father, then Yahweh will be my god.”

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. Once again, one of the fathers of the Jewish people is told to marry a relative from Haran rather than a Canaanite woman. Remember when Abraham told Isaac to do this (chapter II-8, “Isaac Married Rebekah”)? Now Isaac tells the same thing to his son, Jacob.

2. The story of Jacob’s ladder is another story about the “covenant” or agreement (*b’reet* in Hebrew) between Yahweh and the Jewish people. In Jacob’s dream, Yahweh repeats the promise that he made to Abraham – that his descendants will be very numerous and come to rule the land of Canaan. In exchange, Abraham agreed to follow Yahweh and accept Yahweh as his god. In this story we learn that Jacob has not yet accepted Yahweh, the god of his father and grandfather, Isaac and Abraham. Jacob says he will only accept Yahweh as his god if everything works out for him. The story makes it clear that Jacob may still decide to worship and follow another god if Yahweh does not fulfill his promise to protect him.

3. As with some of the earlier stories, this one may have an additional, purely practical purpose. It may explain why there is a town called Beth-El, which means “House of God.” We might imagine that some child living in Beth-El asked one of her parents one day how their town got its name. The parent might have told the well-known story of Jacob’s ladder, adding on the part about Jacob’s giving the name “Beth-El” to the place where the ladder was. Then, when the child grew up, she told the story to all her friends and her own children. This is how stories like this one can get started. It is interesting to think about how such stories are invented, but there is no way to know how it really happened, since it was so long ago.

What about those Bible authors that we have mentioned several times already? One of them would have had a particular interest in Beth-El, since this was one of the main religious centers in the northern kingdom of Israel. The Israelite author E wanted to show that God was at Beth-El, so that the people would not think that they had to go to Jerusalem in the southern kingdom (Judah) to worship properly. Bible scholars tell us that the story of Jacob’s ladder is a mixture of passages from the two earliest Bible



authors, E and J. The use of the name “Yahweh” is one indication of the passages written by J. The name “El” (as in “Beth-El”), and the similar name “Elohim” (translated in these stories as “God”) shows the influence of author E.

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **II - 12. JACOB GETS MARRIED – TWICE**

*[Genesis 29:1 - 29:30]*

Jacob continued on his journey. He came to a well that was covered by a large stone, so that no one could get to the water. He said to some shepherds waiting at the well “My brothers, where are you from?” And they said, “We are from Haran.” Jacob asked them if they knew Laban, the brother of his mother. They answered that they did, and that Laban’s daughter Rachel was coming to the well with her flock.

Jacob told the shepherds that they should give their sheep water from the well. But they said that they could not give water to their sheep until all of the shepherds arrived. Only then would there be enough of them to roll the heavy stone away from the opening of the well.

While they were talking, Rachel arrived with her father’s flock. When Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Laban, and the sheep of Laban, he rolled the great stone away from the mouth of the well all by himself. Then he kissed Rachel, and told her that he was her cousin.

Laban, Rachel’s father, welcomed Jacob into his house. Jacob worked on Laban’s farm. After one month, Laban said to Jacob, “Even though you are my relative, I want to pay you for your work. How much should I pay you?” Now, Laban had two daughters. The older one was Leah and the younger one was Rachel, who was very beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel, so he said to Laban, “I will work for you for seven years, then I want to marry Rachel.” Laban agreed, and Jacob worked for seven years for Rachel, but it seemed like only a few days because he loved her so much.

When it came time for Jacob to marry Rachel, Laban made a great feast. But that evening, instead of giving Rachel to Jacob as he had promised, Laban gave him Leah, his older daughter. When morning came, Jacob realized that he had been tricked. Laban told him that he had given Leah to Jacob because it was the custom for the older daughter to marry first. But Laban agreed to let Jacob marry Rachel also if Jacob would work for him for seven more years. So

Jacob married Rachel, whom he loved, and worked for his uncle Laban for another seven years.

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. This story reminds us of the story of how Isaac, the father of Jacob, finds a wife. Abraham's servant found Isaac's wife Rebekah at a well near Haran. Now Jacob also finds his wife at a well near Haran, but he has a much harder time before he can marry her. His uncle, Laban, tricks him into marrying Leah, Rachel's older sister, after Jacob has worked seven years to marry Rachel. Then Laban lets Jacob marry Rachel, but only after he agrees to work another seven years.
2. Were you surprised that Jacob could have two wives at the same time? This is not permitted any more in most places, but men can still have more than one wife in some countries in the Middle East and Africa. Jacob also marries his first cousins. As we have already learned in the discussion of the story "Isaac Marries Rebekah" (chapter II-8), the marriage of such close relatives is not permitted any more in many countries. It is interesting that the Bible stories, even those that are about people who probably never existed, show what the customs of people were in the time and place in which they are set.
3. In this story, Jacob is tricked by his uncle Laban. Do you feel sorry for Jacob because he has to work *fourteen years* to marry Rachel? (Remember how Jacob tricked his brother Esau out of his blessing, in chapter II-10, before you feel too sorry for him!)

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **II - 13. JACOB LEAVES HARAN**

[*Genesis 30:25 - 30:42, 31:3 - 31:35*]

Jacob had twelve sons and one daughter. Leah was the mother of Reuben, Shimone, Levi, Judah, Yissakhar, and Zeboolone and of Jacob's daughter, Deenah. And Zilpah, who was Leah's maidservant was the mother of Gad and Asher. And Bilhah, the maidservant of Rachel was the mother of Dan and Naphtalee. And, finally, Rachel had two sons, first Joseph and then Benjamin.

Jacob told Laban that he wanted to go back to his own homeland. Laban said, "Let me pay you the wages that I owe you for all the years that you have worked here." Jacob told Laban "Do not pay me any money. Just let me feed and watch your animals and take every speckled and spotted sheep and dark-colored sheep and every speckled and spotted goat from your flock. These shall be my wages."

Laban agreed to this. Then Laban removed all of the dark-colored sheep and the speckled and spotted goats from his flocks and gave them to his sons to take care of.

Jacob saw that Laban had taken away the animals that Jacob was supposed to get. So he took some branches and peeled the bark so that the branches appeared speckled and spotted. He held these branches in front of the goats as they mated. As a result, the offspring of the goats were streaked and speckled and spotted.

Then Jacob turned the sheep so that they were looking at streaked and dark-colored animals when they mated. And the offspring of these sheep were streaked or dark in color.

So most of the animals in Laban's flocks came to belong to Jacob. Thus, Jacob became very rich.

Yahweh said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers, where you came from, and I will be with you." So, without telling Laban that they were leaving, Jacob set out for Canaan with his wives and all their children and animals and possessions.

Rachel stole the household idols of her father Laban. These were the statues of the gods that Laban worshipped.

Laban came riding after them. He asked Jacob who had taken his idols. Jacob did not know that Rachel had them, and he told Laban to search for them. Laban searched everywhere. Rachel hid the idols in a camel's saddlepack, and sat on it. When Laban came to search for his idols, she told him that she was ill, so he would not make her get up. For this reason, Laban never found his idols, and he went home without them.

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. This is another story about people tricking each other. First Laban tricks Jacob by taking those animals that he has agreed to give to Jacob. Then Jacob tricks Laban by making the animals give birth to offspring that will belong to Jacob.

Can you really make a baby animal come out spotted by making its parents look at something spotted when they are mating? Of course not! But many hundreds of years ago, when the Bible stories were being written, people did not understand that the color of an animal is inherited through the genes of its parents, which cannot be easily changed. They thought that the activities of the parents could affect the color or size of the babies.

2. Rachel steals her father's idols. These statues of gods were very important to Laban because he worshipped these gods. Rachel probably worshipped the same gods as she grew up in Laban's house, so she wanted to take them with her. This probably means that she has not accepted Yahweh as her god.

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **II - 14. JACOB WRESTLES WITH AN ANGEL, GETS A NEW NAME, AND MEETS HIS BROTHER ESAU**

*[Genesis 32:1 - 33:20, 35:1 - 35:12]*

As Jacob got close to Edom, the land of his brother Esau, he became very frightened. Jacob remembered that Esau wanted to kill him for cheating Esau out of his blessing. So he sent messengers ahead with many gifts for Esau, hoping that Esau would not harm him. He sent his brother many animals: goats and sheep, camels and cattle, and donkeys as well.

That night, Jacob was alone. A man appeared, and wrestled with Jacob until the dawn. When the stranger saw that he had not beaten Jacob, he struck Jacob's thigh and it came out of its joint. Then the stranger said, "Let me go, for the dawn has come." And Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." So the other one said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God and also with men and have overcome them." Then he left Jacob.

Jacob was limping because his thigh was out of joint. This is why the children of Israel do not eat the sinew in the hollow of the thigh of an animal.

Jacob looked up and saw his brother Esau coming with four hundred men. Although he was afraid, he went to Esau bowing his head to the ground seven times as he approached him.

Esau ran up to him and kissed him. They were so happy to see each other that they wept. Esau said, "I have enough things. Please keep the gifts you have sent me." But Jacob said, "Please keep them. I am so happy that you are pleased to see me. Please do me the favor of keeping the gifts." So Esau accepted the gifts from Jacob.

Jacob and his family set up their tents in Shekhem, in the land of Canaan. One day, God said to Jacob, go and stay in Beth-El and build an altar to the god that appeared to you there when you were running away from your brother Esau. So Jacob and all those in his household went to Beth-El and built an altar. And God appeared to Jacob in Beth-El and blessed him. God said, "You shall be called Jacob no more. Now Israel shall be your name. And your descendants shall be a great nation. You and your descendants shall have the land I promised to Abraham and Isaac."

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. Jacob really has some weird things happen to him. A few chapters ago, he dreamed about a ladder with angels climbing up and down it. Now he wrestles with someone who dislocates his thigh and then gives him a new name.

Who is Jacob wrestling with? Even though the story says it is a man, the wrestler is usually thought to be an angel of God, or it may be God himself. This is because he says, after they stop fighting, "You have struggled with God and also with men." The struggle with men probably means his struggles with Esau and Laban.

2. Why does Jacob get the new name "Israel"? By giving the Israelite people an ancestor named Israel, the Bible authors were explaining their name and the name of their land, "Israel." The Jewish people are sometimes called the "Children of Israel" (*B'nai Yisrael* in Hebrew), or Israelites, referring to Jacob's new name, because the Bible says that they are the descendants of Israel (Jacob).

What does the word "Israel" mean? Notice the ending "-el." As we have seen, this means "God." (Remember "Beth-El," which means "House of God"?) The word "Israel" (*Yisra-el* in Hebrew) means something like "may God contend" (where "contend" means struggle, or strive, or fight). In the story about the wrestling, the word "*Yisra-el*" is thought of as meaning "he strives (*yisra*) with God (*el*)."

3. Jacob seems to be really happy to see his brother Esau. He is especially happy that Esau is no longer mad at him. Why do you think that Esau is happy to see Jacob after all the problems they have had?

We see that this is another story about generosity. Unlike the stories about Abraham's generosity, though, Jacob is only generous with Esau because he is afraid that Esau wants to kill him. Even so, one lesson that can be taught from this story is that bad feelings between people may be reduced if one person gives the other a gift to show that he or she is not angry.

4. What is this business about the children of Israel not eating the sinew in the hollow of the thigh of an animal? This is an explanation for one of the many dietary laws that some religious Jews follow. We will learn more about these laws when we read about Moses in later chapters of this book.

There are many different kinds of food that certain religious Jews will not eat because they are not "kosher." A kosher food is a food that is permitted to be eaten according to Jewish religious rules. This story about Jacob wrestling is supposed to be an explanation for why a certain part of the thigh of an animal is not kosher.

5. At the end of this story, God tells Jacob that his new name is Israel. But the wrestling angel has already told him this. Why is the renaming of Jacob repeated?

Many of the stories in the Bible are repeated, with the two versions usually differing in some important ways. We have already read about several stories that were written by two different authors with different points of view – the story of how life on earth began in the Creation story ([chapter I-1](#)) and in the story of Adam and Eve ([chapter I-2](#)); the two intertwined and contradictory tales of Noah and the Flood ([chapter I-5](#)); and some of the stories about Abraham. Remember the three Bible authors J, E, and P? Well, here they are again. This time it is E (the "Elohist") and P (the "Priestly author") who wrote the two versions of the story about how Jacob's name gets changed to Israel.

The author called E wrote the story about how Jacob got his name changed by the wrestler. Why did P think it was necessary to write another version of this story?

As we have learned, P was a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem (see the discussion of [chapter I-5](#), "Noah and the Great Flood"). Now, the priests in the Temple wanted

everyone to believe that only they, the priests, could act as messengers from the people to God. Because of this, the priests did not like any stories that included angels or any other messengers (except for priests) between God and people. So when the Priestly author, P, rewrote many of the stories that the Yahwist and the Elohist had already written, he made sure that no angels appeared in these stories. This could explain why P wrote a version of the story about the renaming of Jacob in which God talks directly to Jacob, rather than through an angel or some other messenger. Unfortunately for P, stories by J and E eventually got included in the Bible along with his own “P” versions. The two stories of how Jacob’s name was changed to Israel is only one of many examples in which two different versions of the same story appear in the Bible because two different Bible authors, with two different points of view, wrote such stories.

**Next - To Chapter III**  
**To Table of Contents**

## **CHAPTER III. JOSEPH IN EGYPT**

### **III - 1. JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS**

*[Genesis 37:1 - 37:36]*

Jacob and his family settled down in the land of Canaan. His son, Joseph, who was seventeen years old, helped some of his brothers take care of the sheep. Joseph would say bad things about his brothers to Jacob, their father. Now, Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons because Joseph was a child of his old age, and he made a long robe for him. When the brothers saw that Jacob loved Joseph most of all, they hated him so much that they could not speak to him in a friendly way.

Once Joseph had a dream and told his brothers about it. He said to them, "I dreamed that we were binding bundles of grain in the field, and all of your bundles bowed down low to my bundle of grain." His brothers replied, "Does this mean that you intend to rule over us?" And they hated him more than ever.

One day Joseph's brothers pulled his long robe off him and threw him into a pit with no water in it. They left him there to die. Then they sat down to eat. When they saw a band of Ishmaelites coming by, Judah suggested that they take Joseph out of the pit and sell him to the Ishmaelites instead, so they would not be responsible for killing their brother. His brothers agreed. Then some Midianites came along. They pulled Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites, who took him with them to Egypt.

When Joseph's brothers found that he was no longer in the pit, they took his long robe and dipped it in the blood of a goat. When they gave the blood-soaked robe to their father Jacob, he cried out "This is my son's robe! An evil animal has eaten Joseph!" Jacob tore his clothes and mourned for his son for many days, and his children were unable to comfort him.

Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph to Potiphar, a high official in the court of the Pharaoh in Egypt.



## DISCUSSION:

1. As we will see in later chapters, the twelve sons of Jacob (whose other name, you remember, is Israel), are presented in the Bible as the founders of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. What do you think of their behavior so far? Do they seem to be kind and friendly people, always thinking of others?

One of the most interesting things about the “heroes” in the Hebrew Bible is that none of them is all good. In fact, some of them do pretty nasty things. In this way they resemble real people, although the Bible heroes are often even less likeable than most real people.

This story shows how Jacob and his sons treat each other. Jacob lets his sons know clearly that Joseph is his favorite, something a good father would never do. Joseph tells his father bad stories about his brothers and lets his brothers know about his dream, which clearly indicates to them that he wants to rule over them. And the brothers first decide to kill Joseph, then to sell him into slavery. Then they let their father, Jacob, think that Joseph is dead. The kindest act in the whole story occurs when the brothers decide to sell Joseph rather than leaving him in the pit to die – and selling your brother as a slave can hardly be considered a great kindness!

Why is everyone in this story so rotten? Remember the earlier stories about Jacob, how he cheated *his* brother, Esau, and lied to *his* father, Isaac ([chapter II-9](#) and [chapter II-10](#)). Do you think this may have something to do with the behavior of Jacob’s sons?

Traditional religious interpreters have read these same stories and concluded that both Jacob and Joseph were wonderful, virtuous people. According to the traditions of the ancient rabbis, for example, Joseph was considered to be a great scholar, who spent most of his time in his early years studying religious laws and principles, and even teaching them to his brothers. Although there is no mention of these acts in the Bible itself, the rabbis developed stories that add to the Biblical text and make the behavior of the characters seem more acceptable. Recall the rabbinic legend of “Abraham Smashes the Idols” ([chapter II-2](#)) and the legend about how Abraham visits Ishmael and Hagar mentioned in the discussion of “Ishmael and Hagar are Cast Out of Abraham’s House” ([chapter II-6](#)). These legends were designed to explain the actions of some of the Bible’s “heroes” in a way that was more acceptable ethically to the rabbis who developed them.

One point of view expressed in the legends about Joseph and his brothers is that their actions, which may seem nasty and unacceptable to us, were really designed to carry out God’s will. And what was God’s will? God’s will, according to the rabbis, was that the sons of Jacob (Israel) should travel to Egypt and live there, so that they could

eventually be enslaved and, after many generations, then be freed – a set of experiences that will prepare the “children of Israel” to receive God’s laws and to establish their own nation in the land of Canaan. This story and the coming stories tell how Joseph and his brothers accomplish these goals. So far, Joseph has been brought to Egypt. In a later story, his brothers and father will follow him.

2. What is this “long robe” that Jacob gave to Joseph? The Hebrew in the Bible for this robe is “*k’toh-net pah-seem*.” The first word, “*k’toh-net*” means tunic. A tunic is a loose article of clothing, like a gown, that was worn in ancient times. We call it a “robe” in this story because this is a more commonly understood word than “tunic.”

Different people have different ideas about what the second word, “*pah-seem*” means. Some say it means “ornamented”; others think that it means that the garment was a “fine woolen tunic.” Other traditional translations include “embroidered robe” and a “long-sleeved garment.” The best-known English translation is “coat of many colors” but the word “coat” would mean that it was worn over other clothes to keep warm, and this would not usually be needed in the hot climate of the Middle East. The word “*pah-seem*” seems to actually mean the flat part of a hand or foot, that is, the palm or the sole. So a “*k’toh-net pah-seem*” probably was a tunic that was so long that it reached the hands or, perhaps, the feet. That is why we use the term “long robe” in this story.

How can there be words in the Hebrew Bible that no one really understands? Don’t the Jewish people know their own language? Well, in reality, Hebrew has been a language spoken by many Jewish people for only relatively short periods of history. After the Bible was written, the Jews stopped using Hebrew for everyday conversation, and for many centuries Hebrew was only used for Bible reading and prayer. Hebrew was not used again as a spoken language by large numbers of Jews until the 20th century, when it again became the language of the Jews who live in Israel. During the many centuries in which Hebrew was not generally used, the meaning of many Hebrew words was forgotten. Sometimes, especially when words appear more than once in the Bible, their meaning can be figured out from the surrounding words. But some words appear only once in the whole Bible, so their meaning has to be guessed at from other words that are spelled something like them. The word *pah-seem* which we are discussing, does appear elsewhere in the Bible to describe the clothes worn by the children of King David. Some have concluded from this fact that the word refers to a very fine piece of clothing suitable for the royal family.

While it may not be very important what the particular words describing Joseph’s tunic mean exactly, you can see from this discussion how difficult it is at times to translate the Bible into English and how different people can come up with different meanings for the same Hebrew words.

3. What about Joseph's dream? Does it mean, as his brothers said, that Joseph wanted to rule over them? Was Joseph somehow to "blame" for having such a dream? Can you control what you dream about? Once he had this dream, should he have told his brothers about it?

We will see, in a later chapter, that the day actually does come when Joseph's brothers *do* bow down to him as a result of his high position, just as the dream said they would. In this sense, the dream actually comes true. In the traditional religious viewpoint, therefore, the dream was a "prophecy," a vision from God that enabled Joseph to predict the future. From this same viewpoint, the telling of the brothers about the dream caused them to hate him and helped lead to the events that brought him to Egypt. Thus, a religious explanation for why Joseph angered his brothers might be that he was helping to fulfill God's will that Jacob's sons move to Egypt. What do you think of this explanation?

4. Who are these various groups of people who come wandering by in the story? The Ishmaelites were people who lived in an area south and east of Canaan. Presumably the Israelites thought of them as close relatives, which is why they told the story in which Ishmael, like Isaac, is the son of Abraham. Just as the Israelites were thought of as the descendants of Isaac (and his son Jacob – "Israel"), so the Ishmaelites were thought of as the descendants of Ishmael. As was discussed previously ([chapter II-6](#), "Ishmael and Hagar are Cast out of Abraham's House"), many centuries after the time of these stories, the Arab Muslims (followers of the religion of Islam – see "Muhammad" on the [time line](#) in the Introduction) adopted the idea that they, the Arabs, are the descendants of Ishmael.

The Midianites were another group of people who lived not far from the Ishmaelites. They were also people to whom the Israelites must have felt related, since their ancestor, Midian, is also presented in the Bible as a son of Abraham. Midian was born to Abraham and his wife, Keturah, whom Abraham married after his wife Sarah died.

It is interesting to see how the writers of the Bible stories were able to express their feelings about different groups of people by writing stories about individuals who are supposed to be the founders of these groups.

5. It's really not clear from the story what these different groups, the Ishmaelites and the Midianites, actually did. First it says that Joseph's brothers agreed to sell Joseph into slavery to the Ishmaelites. Then, however, it seems that the brothers didn't actually sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites. The Midianites apparently took Joseph from the pit and sold him. As with many of the stories we have discussed, this is probably a case in which two

different stories were combined – one in which the brothers agreed to sell Joseph and another in which the Midianites captured him from the pit and sold him. The story is confused even more where it says, in the final sentence, that the Midianites, not the Ishmaelites, sold Joseph to Potiphar in Egypt. Earlier it had said that the Midianites had sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites. In a later story (chapter III-6), Joseph will say that it was his brothers who sold him into slavery. All these contradictions are probably the result of two, or maybe more, stories by different authors being mixed together in the Bible text.

### To Table of Contents

## **III - 2. JOSEPH AND POTIPHAR – AND POTIPHAR’S WIFE**

*[Genesis 39:1 - 39:23]*

After the Ishmaelites sold Joseph to Potiphar, who was a high official in the court of the Pharaoh, everything seemed to go well for Joseph. Yahweh made sure that he was successful in everything he did, and when Potiphar saw this, he put Joseph in charge of his whole house, trusting him with all that he owned. So Yahweh blessed Potiphar’s house and saw to it that everything in it went well, so that Joseph would look good in the eyes of his master.

Now, Joseph had a beautiful body and a handsome face. Potiphar’s wife tried to get him to lie with her, but he refused. One day when he came into the house to work, she grabbed his robe and tried to get him to stay with her. He ran away, but she held on to his robe and it stayed in her hand. She showed his robe to the servants of the house and to Potiphar, her husband, saying, “Look, the Hebrew slave wanted to lie with me, but I screamed and he ran away, leaving his robe behind.”

Potiphar was so angry that he had Joseph put into prison. This was the place where the prisoners of the Pharaoh himself were kept. But Yahweh was with Joseph, and soon he was put in charge of all the other prisoners.

### **DISCUSSION:**

**1.** Joseph finds himself in the household of a high officer who serves the Pharaoh. “Pharaoh” was the title given to the ruler of Egypt, similar to a king.

Egypt is a nation in North Africa. It is important to understand that the Egyptians were one of the first people in the world to achieve a high level of civilization. Egypt became unified under a single king and its people were able to read and write as early as

about 3000 B.C. (5000 years ago). This was a time that the writers of the Hebrew Bible thought of as being long before Noah's flood which destroyed the whole world (see the [time line](#) in the Introduction). Egyptian civilization was centered around one river, the Nile. The water in this river would flood over its banks each year and make the surrounding soil rich and fertile. Most of the rest of Egypt was desert, which protected the Egyptians from other people who otherwise might have invaded.

Do you know the names of any Egyptian Pharaohs? One of the most famous ones today is sometimes called "King Tut," but that was not his real name. Can you find out what his real name was and why he became so well known in the 20th century? He ruled Egypt in the 1300's B.C. (about 3300 years ago).

Egypt is on the continent of Africa. Do you know what continent Israel is on? Look it up; you will probably be surprised. It is interesting that most of the major religions of the modern world – Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Baha'i, and Judaism – had their origins on the same continent – the one on which Israel is located.

**2.** In the previous story ([chapter III-1](#), "Joseph and his Brothers") Joseph seems to be having a very hard time of it. Even though he is his father's favorite son, he ends up getting shipped off to Egypt as a slave. But now we find that, even when things seem to be going badly for him, Joseph rises to the top. Potiphar puts him in charge of his house with no restrictions, and even in jail he is put in charge of the other prisoners. These stories show that Joseph is a natural leader. The Bible text makes it clear, however, that Joseph's successes come about only because he has a very important friend – Yahweh – watching out for him.

In the last story, Joseph was an immature boy, telling lies about his brothers to their father, angering his brothers with his dream, and being generally obnoxious. Now we have seen him develop into a mature young man, capable of thinking for himself, leading others, and resisting the advances of his master's wife. How do you think this change came about? Could it be that the hard conditions of life he had to face, first as a slave and then as a prisoner, helped him to grow up quickly?

Do you think that Joseph was better off when he was living with his family or after he was taken to Egypt? Can a slave or a prisoner have a better life than a free person? Can a slave or a prisoner be a better person than one who is free?

How much freedom did Joseph really have in either of the two stories we have read about him? Remember that, although he was free in Canaan, he lost his freedom simply by making his brothers angry at him. As a slave, everything seemed to be going fine until his master got mad at him (through no fault of his own). As a prisoner, he is put

in charge of the others, but he is still at the mercy of the warden of the prison. Do you think that Joseph will ever be free to do just do what he wants to, without fear of being punished?

[To Table of Contents](#)

### **III - 3. JOSEPH EXPLAINS SOME DREAMS**

*[Genesis 40:1 - 40:23]*

And it came to pass that the chief cupbearer and the chief baker of Pharaoh offended their ruler and he had them sent to the prison where Joseph was kept. One night each of these two prisoners had dreams that they could not understand. In the morning, Joseph said to them, "Tell me your dreams and God will interpret them."

The cupbearer told Joseph, "In my dream I saw a grapevine with three branches. The vine suddenly blossomed and was covered with grapes. I pressed the grapes into Pharaoh's cup and gave the cup to Pharaoh." Joseph said, "The three branches in your dream represent three days. The dream means that in three days Pharaoh will take you from this prison and you will return to your position as his cupbearer. When this happens, please ask Pharaoh to free me, because I have done nothing wrong."

Then the baker told Joseph about *his* dream. He said, "In my dream there were three baskets of bread on my head. In the basket on top there was food for the Pharaoh, and the birds were eating the food." Joseph said, "The three baskets in your dream represent three days. The dream means that in three days Pharaoh will cut off your head and hang you from a tree. The birds will eat your flesh."

Three days later, the Pharaoh had a feast to celebrate his birthday. He returned the chief cupbearer to his old job, and he had the chief baker hanged from a tree, just as Joseph had told them he would.

And the chief cupbearer forgot about Joseph, and did not tell the Pharaoh about him.

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. In this story, dreams really do come true – although the baker’s dream is really more of a nightmare. Remember Joseph’s dream in an earlier story (chapter III-1, “Joseph and his Brothers”)? – that too will come true later.

What do dreams really mean? Can dreams really predict the future? Can we sometimes get a message from dreams about something we already know about, but cannot admit even to ourselves? Have you ever had a dream that later came true? How come this seems to happen so often in these stories?

2. Who is it that interprets the dreams in these stories? Remember what Joseph says before the cupbearer tells him his dream. God seems to be helping Joseph, but so far it has done him no good. He is still in prison and the cupbearer forgot to tell Pharaoh about him. But hold on. Things start looking up for Joseph in the next story.

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **III - 4. PHARAOH DREAMS AND JOSEPH BECOMES RULER OF EGYPT**

*[Genesis 41:1 - 41:57]*

Two years later, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the River Nile and out of the river came seven fat and healthy cows, and they ate among the reeds. Then there came seven thin and ugly cows who ate the seven fat and healthy cows right up. Then Pharaoh woke up.

When he fell asleep again he dreamed that seven thick and healthy ears of grain were growing on one single stalk. Then seven thin and sickly ears of grain came and ate the thick and healthy ears right up. Then Pharaoh woke up.

The Pharaoh could find no one who could tell him what these dreams meant. So the chief cupbearer told him about the Hebrew slave in prison who had the gift of interpreting dreams. Joseph was brought out from his prison cell. The Pharaoh told him about the cows and about the grain and Joseph said, “Both dreams have the same meaning. God is telling you what he is going to do. The dreams mean that Egypt is going to have seven years of great plenty and good harvests. These will be followed by seven years of famine, when the crops will not grow. This is what God is telling you by these dreams. So you should find

someone to put in charge of the whole land of Egypt so that during the seven years of plenty food will be saved and stored. Then during the seven years of famine, the food can be distributed to the people so they will not go hungry.”

Pharaoh saw how the spirit of God was with Joseph and how God had made him wise, so he put Joseph in charge of the whole land of Egypt. He told Joseph, “I shall still hold the title of Pharaoh, but you shall rule over the land.” He gave Joseph his seal-ring, robes of fine linen, and a gold chain to put around his neck. And he gave Joseph a wife, whose name was Asenat. Joseph was thirty years old when this happened.

So Joseph travelled around the land of Egypt. During the seven years of plenty and good harvests, he stored up so much grain that it could not be measured. Joseph and Asenat had two sons, Menasheh and Ephraim. During the seven years of famine Joseph gave out the stored up grain to the people so they could all have enough to eat.

The famine spread throughout the world. And people from other lands came to buy grain from Joseph in Egypt because the famine was so severe.

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. The situation has really turned around quickly for Joseph. One day he is a slave in prison, with no release date in sight; the next day he is put in charge of all of Egypt by the Pharaoh. Do you think that it is possible for someone’s life to change so quickly and completely? When Joseph told the Pharaoh what his dreams meant, why did Pharaoh believe him? Do you think he would have believed anyone who said the same thing that Joseph said? Was there something special about Joseph that made him more believable than others might be? What was that “something special”?

2. Is it possible that someone who was not an Egyptian could have been put in charge of all of Egypt? The answer to this question is very interesting. The historical fact is that Egypt *was* ruled by non-Egyptians for over 100 years at a time close to that of the story of Joseph. These foreigners, called Hyksos, were mostly from the general area where the families of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob travelled and lived, in the stories we have read about. Of course there were many other groups living in these areas also.

Some scholars have tried to find historical truth in the story of Joseph by linking it with the period of Hyksos rule. One idea has been that Joseph was himself a Hyksos leader. A more reasonable possibility is that, while Joseph himself was not a Hyksos leader, the Pharaoh in his story was. This might explain why the Pharaoh was willing to



appoint a Hebrew to actually rule over Egypt. It seems unlikely that a Pharaoh who was an Egyptian himself would appoint a non-Egyptian to such an important position. However, if the Pharaoh was not an Egyptian, but a foreigner whose home was near the land where Joseph's family was from, then the story becomes somewhat easier to believe.

There is, in fact, no historical or scientific reason to believe that the Israelites were part of the Hyksos people who ruled over Egypt, or that Joseph was made a ruler by a Hyksos Pharaoh. Actually, there is no historical or scientific reason to believe that the Israelites even existed as a group so early in history, or that Joseph was a real person. The Bible stories about Joseph are thought by some scholars to have been written during the time of Solomon, over 500 years after the time in which the stories are set (see the time line in the Introduction). Others say that the writers of the story were "J," "E," and "P" (the "Yahwist," the "Elohist," and the "Priestly" writer whom we have discussed in earlier stories as the writers of most of the early stories in the Hebrew Bible). These writers lived even later in history than the time of King Solomon. Thus, the story of Joseph seems to contain some relation to historical facts (namely the idea that foreigners ruled Egypt), but these stories were probably written so long after the events they talk about that we have no reason to accept any of the details in them as historically accurate.

Most of the ideas that people have about the historical accuracy of the early Bible stories are difficult or impossible to prove one way or another. Archaeologists and Bible scholars try to come up with the best ideas they can at any given time. But we should always remember that new scientific findings can, and often do, cause scholars to throw out older ideas that they had accepted as true. So if we read that "Joseph was a Hyksos leader" or "Joseph's Pharaoh was a Hyksos" or "the stories about Joseph were made up by writers in King Solomon's court," we should try to examine the reasons why people believe these ideas. We should also remember that there are so few real scientific facts known about this period in history that any ideas that scholars have now are likely to be changed in the future.

When we are talking about events that happened so long ago, and for which there are no good written documents from the time explaining what really was happening, there is no way to tell what actually happened. Even many of the statements about the Bible made in the Discussion sections of this book, while they are based on the best information available now, may become discarded when new scientific information is obtained.

### **To Table of Contents**

### **III - 5. JOSEPH SEES HIS BROTHERS ONCE AGAIN**

*[Genesis 42:1 - 42:38]*

Jacob and his family, who were living in Canaan, were suffering from the famine, which had spread throughout the world. So Jacob said to his sons, "There is food in Egypt. Go down there and bring some back so that we may live, and not die." So ten of the brothers went down to Egypt to obtain food, but Jacob kept Benjamin, the youngest, at home so that no harm would come to him.

When the brothers wanted to buy food, they went to see Joseph, but they did not recognize him. They bowed down very low to him, and he did not tell them who he was. He remembered his dream about them and said to them sternly, "You are not here to buy food. You are spies!" And they replied, "Oh no, we are not spies. We are brothers. Our father Jacob and our youngest brother are still in the land of Canaan."

Joseph said to them, "To show that you are telling the truth, you will return to Canaan and bring your youngest brother to me. I will keep one of you here in prison while you are gone." And the brothers said to each other, "This is our punishment for how we treated our brother, Joseph." They did not know that Joseph could understand their words because he was speaking only the language of the Egyptians and using an interpreter to speak with them.

So they bought grain from Joseph. But Joseph ordered that the money that they used to buy the grain be put in the bags with their grain. The brothers departed from Egypt, leaving their brother Shimone behind, as Joseph had ordered them to do. When they discovered that their money was in the bags of grain, they were very afraid.

They reached Canaan and told Jacob what had happened to them in Egypt. When they said that they wanted to bring Benjamin with them back to Egypt so that their brother Shimone would be freed, Jacob said, "Joseph is gone. Shimone is gone. Now you want to take Benjamin away from me! You cannot have him."

#### **DISCUSSION**

1. When Joseph sees his brothers, he lets them think that he is an Egyptian. He was such a powerful person in Egypt that he could have punished them for what they did to him many years earlier, but he doesn't do this. If he wanted to forgive them, he could have done this right away, but he doesn't do this either. Why doesn't he tell them who he is? What is the dream he remembers before accusing them of being spies? What does the

dream have to do with what he does in this story? Remember that dreams in the Bible are often seen as “prophecies,” or predictions of the future, and Joseph would want to act so as to make the prediction come true. Why can’t it come true without sending the brothers back to Canaan?

2. Joseph neither punishes nor forgives his brothers at this point in the story. Instead, he seems to be testing them. He learns something about their feelings toward him when they speak to each other, thinking that he cannot understand them. Do you think that he is glad to hear what they say?

When Joseph has the money returned to the brothers in their sacks of grain this also seems like a test of their character. Why do you think that the brothers are so afraid when they find that their money has been returned to them?

3. When Joseph was young, he was his father’s favorite son. Now that Joseph is gone, Jacob’s favorite son is Benjamin. Why is this? Joseph and Benjamin are not only the two youngest sons, but they are also the only sons of Rachel. Remember that Rachel was the woman that Jacob really loved and wanted to marry in the story “Jacob gets Married – Twice” ([chapter II -12](#)).

The other brothers were very mean to Joseph, but they do not seem to dislike Benjamin at all, even though he is now their father’s favorite. Can you think of any reasons why they would treat Benjamin better than they treated Joseph?

[To Table of Contents](#)

### **III - 6. ISRAEL (JACOB) AND HIS SONS ALL SETTLE IN EGYPT**

*[Genesis 43, 45, 46, 47, 50:12 - 50:26]*

The famine was so severe that it was necessary for Israel to send his sons back to Egypt for more food. Israel agreed to let Benjamin go with them because Joseph had warned them not to return to Egypt without their youngest brother. Israel told them to give back to the Egyptians the money that had been put in their bags of grain.

When Joseph saw that Benjamin was with them, he told the man in charge of his house to invite them to his house. They were afraid that Joseph would accuse them of stealing the money they had found in their bags of grain and make slaves of them.

They went to Joseph's house and told the man in charge of the house that they had found the money in their grain sacks, and they now wanted to return it. But he said, "Do not be afraid. Keep the money. Your God has put it in your sacks. I already received your payment for the grain." Then he brought their brother Shimone out to them.

When Joseph arrived, they gave him presents that they had brought for him. They bowed down low to him, all the way to the ground. When Joseph saw his brother Benjamin, he had such strong feelings toward him that he had to leave to room to weep. When their meal was served, Benjamin was given five times as much as the others.

Finally, Joseph could no longer control his emotions before his brothers. He ordered all of the Egyptians to leave the room, and began to cry. He called out to his brothers, "I am Joseph." His brothers were so stunned that they could not speak. He said, "Do not be angry with yourselves because of what you did to me by selling me as a slave. This was part of God's plan to save your lives. It was not you, but God who sent me to Egypt so that I could make sure that you had enough food during this great famine. Now go back to Canaan and get our father, Jacob, and bring him here to Egypt.

All of the brothers embraced Joseph and wept with him. Then they returned to Canaan and told their father that Joseph was alive and that he ruled over the whole land of Egypt. Jacob could not believe that Joseph was still alive. But the brothers told him what Joseph had said and showed him the gifts that Joseph had sent, and Israel cried out, "I must go to Egypt to see Joseph before I die!"

So they all went to Egypt, and when Israel saw his son Joseph he said, "Now that I have seen you, I can die." And Pharaoh gave Joseph's father and Joseph's brothers the best land in all of Egypt, in the region called Goshen, to settle on and raise their sheep and cattle.

When Israel was about to die, he made Joseph promise to bury him in the land of his fathers, in Canaan. So Joseph took his father's body to Canaan, and buried him in the cave where Abraham was buried, in the field of Makhpelah, facing Mamreh.

Joseph and his brothers continued to live in the land of Egypt. Many years later, when Joseph was ready to die, he made the Israelites swear that when they left Egypt they would take his body with them and bury him in Canaan. Now Joseph was one hundred and ten years old when he died.

## DISCUSSION

1. Did you notice that in this story the prediction of Joseph's dream about the bowing sheaves of grain finally comes true?
2. Remember in the discussion to the last story (chapter III-5, "Joseph Sees His Brothers Once Again") we said that Joseph seemed to be *testing* his brothers by giving them back the money they paid to buy the grain. What was the purpose of this test? Do they seem to pass the test in this story?
3. Joseph waits a long time before telling his brothers who he is. Remember that when he last saw his brothers they were very mean to him. What does he learn about his brothers before he tells them that he is Joseph? He learns some things about them in the last story (chapter III-5, "Joseph Sees his Brothers Once Again") as well as in this one.
4. Joseph forgives his brothers. Maybe he does this because of what he has learned about them from what they do and say (discussion point #3, above). But he says that he forgives them because they were not responsible for what they did to him – he says that God was responsible.

And why did God have Joseph sent to Egypt? Joseph says that it was to make sure that his family survived when the famine came. Does this really make sense? If God can do this, couldn't he have just prevented the famine in the first place? What do you think?

5. Notice that this section often uses the name "Israel" for Jacob. Remember that Jacob was given the name "Israel" by the angel he wrestled with in an earlier story (chapter II-14). Why does the Bible now use the name "Israel" while it has been using the name "Jacob" up till now? The answer to this question, like the answer to so many questions we have about the Bible, is: No one knows. We cannot ask the Bible authors why they wrote the way they did, and they left us no other books explaining what they wrote in the Bible. So we have to try to guess or figure it out ourselves. Some possible reasons for using different names might be: (1) different authors, who liked different names, wrote the different sections; (2) the author wanted to remind us in the part about "Israel" that Jacob and his sons were the founders of the nation of Israel; (3) the author just felt like it. None of these possible explanations can be proven to be true or false; we can only try to develop arguments for and against them and then see which arguments

seem to make the most sense. Can you think of any other possible reasons why the names “Jacob” and “Israel” are used for the same person in different parts of this story?

6. This story ends with the death of Joseph. We have now finished discussing the stories that are contained in the first book of the Bible. This first book is called *Genesis* in English. “Genesis” means the beginning, the origin, or the way something is created. What has been created in these stories in the book of *Genesis*? Many things have been created – the world and everything in it, including people; also the sky, the stars, the sun, and the moon. But the most important thing from the point of view of the Bible authors was probably that the nation of “Israel” has been created through “Israel’s” (Jacob’s) twelve sons. We will see in later stories how their descendants become the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel, who eventually become the Jewish people.

The book you are reading summarizes and discusses the stories that are written in the first six books of the Hebrew Bible. We have only finished the first one of the six books so far, but with five more books to go we are already more than half-way through the stories. This is because most of the interesting stories are contained in this first book, *Genesis*.

Remember in the Introduction of this book we talked about how one of the main purposes for which the Hebrew Bible was written was to explain things about the world. The one most important thing that is explained in all of these stories is: “Where did the Jewish people (the Israelites, the Hebrews) come from?”

The children of Israel are now in Egypt. At this point, we begin the second book of the Bible, the book called *Exodus* in English. “Exodus” means a going out, and the book of *Exodus* tells how the descendants of Israel went out from Egypt. The rest of the stories will tell how they became an independent nation in the land of Canaan.

**Next - To Chapter IV**  
**To Table of Contents**

## **CHAPTER IV. FREEDOM**

### **IV - 1. MOSES – FROM A BASKET TO PHARAOH’S HOUSE**

*[Exodus 1:1 - 2:10]*

Joseph and his brothers had many children, and they, in turn, had many more. After several generations, there were so many Israelites that the land of Egypt was full of them.

A new king arose in Egypt who did not know about Joseph. He said to his people, “The Israelites in our land are more numerous and powerful than we are. If a war comes, they may join with our enemy.” So they forced the children of Israel to work at heavy labor, in building the cities of Pitome and Ra-amses for Pharaoh. And the Egyptians made them work hard with bricks and mortar and also work in the fields. But the more the Egyptians oppressed the Israelites, the faster they increased their numbers and spread around the land of Egypt.

Finally, Pharaoh sent out an order that all sons born to the Israelites must be thrown into the river; only the daughters would be allowed to live.

One Israelite mother in the family of Levi hid her newborn son for three months, so he would not be killed. When she could hide him no longer, she put him in a basket made of reeds sealed with asphalt and pitch. She set the basket where the reeds grew near the edge of the Nile river. Her husband’s sister waited nearby to see what would happen.

The daughter of the Pharaoh came along to bathe in the river. She saw the baby boy. She felt sorry for him, saying, “This is one of the children of the Hebrews.” The Hebrew woman waiting nearby saw what was happening and said to the Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I find a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby for you?” Pharaoh’s daughter agreed, and the mother of the baby came to nurse him. Pharaoh’s daughter told the woman that she would pay her to take the baby away and care for it. When the baby grew up, his mother brought him back to Pharaoh’s daughter, who made him her son and named him Moses.

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. This is the first of many stories in the Bible about Moses. In many ways, Moses is the most important person in the Hebrew Bible. Abraham and Sarah are very important because they are presented in the Bible as the “father” and “mother” of the Israelite people; they are the ones who begin the worship of Yahweh, the god of the Israelites. But, as we will see in later stories, Moses leads the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt so that they can claim a land of their own, and, more importantly, he provides them with the religious rules and procedures that they will follow for many centuries. Thus Moses is presented in the Bible as both the liberator of the Israelites from slavery and the founder of the religion that plays a very important part in their lives and their history.

2. In view of the importance of Moses in the Biblical story of Jewish history, it is not surprising that the Bible writers give him an almost miraculous early childhood. The story about his rescue from the Pharaoh’s death sentence allows the Bible writer to show that Moses was a special person whose life was saved for a great purpose. The story also lets the writer describe the terrible conditions of life that the Hebrew slaves suffered.

3. Many different groups told stories about how important people in their history were abandoned by their mothers at birth and then rescued. Other groups tell stories about people who were put in the water as babies. For example, there is the story of a Babylonian king who lived about 1000 years before the time of Moses. In this story the king, named Sargon of Agade, says:

“My mother...bore me secretly. She put me in a basket of rushes and sealed me in with asphalt. Then she put me into the river.... The river held me up, and carried me to Akki, a man who drew water from the river for the people. As he dipped his jug into the river, Akki carried me out. He raised me as his own son.”

This story is, of course, very much like the one of Moses. It is possible that the writer of the Moses story knew the earlier legend of the king Sargon of Agade, and based his writings on it. There is now no way of knowing what the source was for the story of Moses in the basket.

4. The Bible story tells of the hard work that the Israelites were forced to perform as slaves in Egypt. Egypt was a very powerful nation at the time of this story. The story does give an accurate idea of what life may have been like for people from foreign nations that were conquered by Egypt. We have no way of knowing whether the



Israelites were really among those who built Egyptian cities. The Egyptians of the time left many written records which have survived to this day, but there is no mention of Israelite slaves in these records. The only ancient writings that tell about the Israelites in Egypt are found in the Hebrew Bible itself.

If the Israelites really were slaves in Egypt, they may well have helped build the Egyptian cities of Pitome and Ra-amses mentioned in the story. Sometimes people say that the Israelites helped build the famous pyramids of Egypt, but the truth is that the pyramids were built a thousand years earlier than the time of the story of Joseph and his brothers moving to Egypt.

**5.** If there really were Israelite slaves in Egypt, then the Bible story is simply telling us the historical facts. In some ways, it is more interesting to think that the story is made up. After all, if the Israelites were never really slaves, then why did their descendants say that they were? Many different groups tell stories about how their ancestors were great heroes, warriors, or even gods. The Israelites tell the story of how their ancestors were slaves. Can you think of any reasons why they might have done this? Do you think that people who believe that they are descended from slaves might think or behave differently from people who trace their ancestry to heroes and gods? Do you think they might treat others differently?

We will see later that the story of Moses and the Israelites in Egypt, and especially their escape from Egypt, is one of the most important stories ever told. It is a story that had a great effect, not only on the Israelite people (who later became the Jews), but also on others who were inspired by it. In some ways, it is really not important whether or not it is a true story, or even whether or not there ever was a real person named Moses who did the things described in the Bible. The story had a great effect for many, many centuries because people thought it was true.

**[To Table of Contents](#)**

## IV - 2. MOSES BURNS HIMSELF

### INTRODUCTION:

In the last story, Moses was a small baby rescued by Pharaoh's daughter. The Bible goes right from this story directly to the time in which Moses is grown up. There is nothing said in the Bible about Moses' childhood.

Because of this, Jewish religious leaders developed stories about the early years of Moses' life. These stories became the legends of the ancient rabbis. Such a legend is called a *midrash* in Hebrew. The *midrash* we are going to read here is designed to show what kind of person Moses really was, and how God favored him as a child.

We have already read a *midrash* about Abraham: "Abraham Smashes the Idols" ([chapter II-2](#)). We also discussed the *midrash* about Abraham's visit to Ishmael in discussion point #4 after "Ishmael and Hagar are Cast Out of Abraham's House" ([chapter II-6](#)). These stories, like the one below about Moses, are not found in the Bible. They were composed much later than the Bible stories.

### THE STORY:

One day, Pharaoh was having dinner with his queen, his children, and all of the princes of Egypt. Pharaoh's daughter was sitting at the table next to Pharaoh, with Moses on her lap. Now Moses was three years old at this time. He reached up to Pharaoh's head and took the crown off it. Moses put the crown on his own head.

And Pharaoh said, "Perhaps this Hebrew child means to rule over all of Egypt one day." So he called the wise men of Egypt to advise him what to do about Moses. The angel Gabriel was among them, disguised as one of the Pharaoh's advisors. Gabriel said, "We must test this Hebrew child to see if he knew what he was doing when he took the Pharaoh's crown. The Pharaoh should place a precious jewel and a hot coal in front of the child. If he picks up the jewel, then he must be killed. But if he grabs the hot coal, then we will know that he did not understand what the crown was, and he shall be allowed to live."

The Pharaoh took this advice, and placed a jewel and a hot coal before Moses. Moses reached out for the jewel, but the angel Gabriel caused his hand to move toward the coal. Moses picked up the hot coal and put it to his mouth, burning his lips and tongue. For the rest of his life, Moses found it difficult to speak, and always spoke slowly. But he was allowed to live because he had shown that he did not know the difference between a jewel and a hot coal.

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. One message in this *midrash* is that God, acting through his angel Gabriel, was protecting Moses. But what does this *midrash* say about the character of Moses? Why did Moses grab the crown from Pharaoh's head? Was he just attracted by the shiny crown, as any young child might be? Do you think he was giving a sign that he would, later in life, defeat an Egyptian Pharaoh?
2. Were you surprised that Moses burned his mouth so badly that it affected his ability to speak for the rest of his life? If a young child really touched a hot coal, would he pick it up and put it to his mouth or would he drop it right away? Why would the rabbis say that Moses injured himself by putting a hot coal to his mouth? Remember that Moses is the great leader and liberator of his people. You would think that he would be a wonderful speaker as well to help him accomplish his great deeds later in life.

We will see in later Bible stories that the grown-up Moses often relies on his brother Aaron to speak for him because Moses could not speak well himself. One possible reason for composing the *midrash* about the hot coal is to explain why Moses had to depend on Aaron in this way.

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **IV - 3. MOSES RESCUES A HEBREW MAN AND LEAVES EGYPT**

[*Exodus 2:11 - 2:21*]

When Moses was grown up, he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. Moses saw no one else around and struck the Egyptian, killing him. He buried the Egyptian in the sand.

The next day, Moses found two Israelites fighting with each other. When he tried to get them to stop fighting, one of the men said, "Who made you a ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?"

Moses was frightened because he now realized that others knew that he had killed the Egyptian. He fled from Egypt. When the Pharaoh heard that Moses had killed an Egyptian, he decided to kill Moses, but Moses had already fled to Midian.

Moses was standing near a well when the seven daughters of Jethro, the priest of Midian, arrived with their father's sheep. Some shepherds tried to send the daughters of Jethro away, but Moses helped them and watered their animals for them. When Jethro found out what Moses had done for his daughters, he gave one of them, Tsiporah, to Moses to be his wife.

## **DISCUSSION:**

This story tells us something about what kind of person Moses was as an adult. What kind of person was he? Very brave? Too violent? Trying to do what was right and just? Getting too involved in other people's business? What do you think?

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **IV - 4. YAHWEH SPEAKS TO MOSES FROM A BURNING BUSH**

*[Exodus 2:23 - 4:31]*

When Moses had lived in Midian for many years, the Pharaoh in Egypt died. God heard the groaning of the Israelites as they worked at heavy labor in Egypt. Then God remembered his promise to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Moses was at Mount Horev, caring for the sheep of Jethro, his wife's father. An angel of Yahweh appeared to Moses from a fire inside a bush, although the bush did not burn up. And God called out from the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am!" Then the voice from the bush said to Moses, "I am the god of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I have come to rescue my people from the Egyptians. I will bring them to the land I promised to your fathers. Go to Pharaoh and set my people free! Go and tell the leaders of the Israelites that I have told you to do this."

And Moses said, "What if the Israelites do not believe me?"

Yahweh told Moses to throw his rod onto the ground. Moses did this and the rod became a snake. And Yahweh said, "If the Israelites do not believe you, then show them this sign from me."

But Moses still objected. He said, "I find it difficult to speak, and I speak slowly. Who will listen to me?" And Yahweh became angry, saying, "Tell your brother Aaron what to say, and he will speak for you."

So Moses returned to Egypt. The Pharaoh who wanted him killed was now dead. Moses and Aaron went before the Israelites and Aaron told them what Yahweh had said to Moses. He convinced them to believe him by showing them how the rod became a snake when he threw it to the ground, and with other signs from Yahweh as well. And the people believed him. When the Israelites heard that Yahweh had taken notice of their misery, they bowed down low.

## **DISCUSSION:**

**1.** In this story Yahweh talks to Moses from a burning bush. Moses does not want to do what Yahweh tells him to do. Why is this? Do you think that Moses does not believe that Yahweh is powerful enough to make sure that he succeeds?

Perhaps Moses is not sure that it is really Yahweh talking to him. After all, no one in the Bible has talked directly with Yahweh since the time that the children of Israel settled in Egypt, which is supposed to be about 400 years before the time of Moses.

When Yahweh talked with Adam and Eve, or Noah, or Abraham, they had no doubt about who they were talking to. Why do you think Yahweh appears as an angel's voice coming from a burning bush that does not get burned up? Could this be to convince Moses that he is really talking with someone who is "supernatural" (that is, outside the usual laws of nature)? Do you think that the "miracle" of the rod and the snake is designed only to convince the Israelite leaders? Could it be to convince Moses himself that the message of freedom comes from Yahweh?

Remember that up until now, Moses has no reason to believe that he is in any way a special person. How would you react if something like this happened to you?

**2.** In this story, Yahweh tells Moses that Aaron should speak for him, since Moses is not able to speak well. Is there some lesson here about what kind of person makes a good leader? Suppose that Moses had to be elected rather than being picked by Yahweh to lead the people. Do you think he could have won an election? What if there had been television in those days? Would Moses have been able to lead the people effectively?

**3.** Aaron is a very important person. According to the religious tradition of the Bible, Aaron is the ancestor of the priests in the Temple of Jerusalem. Therefore, whatever is said about Aaron in the Bible was very important to these priests. The more power Aaron is given in the Bible, the more power the priests, who were thought to be Aaron's descendants, could claim for themselves.

Scholars who study the Bible have concluded that much of what is written about Aaron was put in for the purpose of increasing the power of those priests who were in charge of the Temple in Jerusalem. Remember the Bible authors J and E? Now J was from the southern kingdom of Judah, where Jerusalem was. J was always trying to show that the religious practices at the Jerusalem Temple represented the true religion called for by Yahweh. Thus, it is thought that the sections of the Bible, such as the one above, in which Aaron is given power, were written by the J author. Later on, we will read some sections in which Aaron is said to do things against the laws and wishes of God. These sections are thought to have been written by the E author, who was from the northern kingdom, Israel, which had its own religious centers, such as Beth-El (which has been mentioned in the stories of “Jacob’s Ladder” in [chapter II-11](#), as well as “Jacob Wrestles with an Angel, Gets a New Name, and Meets his Brother Esau,” [chapter II-14](#)).

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **IV - 5. THE ISRAELITES GAIN THEIR FREEDOM**

*[Exodus 5:1 - 12:41]*

Moses and Aaron did what Yahweh had instructed them to do. They went before Pharaoh and told him, “Yahweh, the god of Israel says: Let my people go so they may celebrate with a special feast for me in the wilderness.” But Pharaoh replied, “Who is this Yahweh? I do not know Yahweh. I will not let the Israelites go.” And Pharaoh ordered that the amount of hard labor for the Israelites be greatly increased. And the Israelites were very angry at Moses and Aaron for causing the Pharaoh to increase their work.

Moses cried out to Yahweh, “Why have you harmed my people in this way?” And Yahweh said, “Go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Show him how your rod turns into a snake. I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, so he will not listen to you. Then I will bring many signs and punish the people of Egypt. They will then know that I am Yahweh and they will let the Israelites go.”

So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and told him to let the Israelites leave Egypt. And Aaron threw the rod onto the ground, and it became a snake. The magicians of Egypt then threw down their rods, and they also became snakes. But the snake of Aaron’s rod swallowed all the other snakes. In spite of this, Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he did not do what Moses and Aaron asked.

Yahweh gave Moses and Aaron new instructions. So the next morning, they met Pharaoh near the Nile River. Again they told Pharaoh that Yahweh

wanted him to let the Israelites go into the wilderness to worship Yahweh. Again Pharaoh refused. So Moses told Aaron, “Strike the waters of the Nile with the rod.” And when Aaron did this, the waters of the Nile turned to blood, and all of the fish in the Nile died. This was the first plague upon Egypt. But the Egyptian magicians were also able to make the water turn to blood. So Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he did not let the Israelites leave Egypt.

Moses told Aaron to hold the rod over all the waters of Egypt. When Aaron did this, all the frogs came out of the waters and covered the land of Egypt, going into all the houses and kitchens and bedrooms. This was the second plague. But the Egyptian magicians also brought up frogs out of the waters. Pharaoh told Moses and Aaron that if Yahweh took the frogs off the land, he would let the Israelites go into the wilderness to worship. So Yahweh killed all the frogs. But when Pharaoh saw there were no more frogs on the land, his heart was hardened, and he would not let the Israelites go.

Moses told Aaron to strike the ground with the rod. When Aaron did this, the dust of the earth turned to gnats all through the land of Egypt. And the people and the animals of Egypt were covered with gnats. This was the third plague. When the Egyptian magicians tried to make gnats from the ground, they could not. They told Pharaoh that the god of the Israelites had made the gnats, but Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not let the Israelites go.

The fourth plague was swarms of flies that covered all the people and the houses of Egypt. But Yahweh said that the region called Goshen would be free from this plague because the Israelites lived in Goshen. Pharaoh told Moses and Aaron that if Yahweh took away the swarms of flies, he would let the Israelites go into the wilderness to worship. So Yahweh removed all of the flies. When Pharaoh saw there were no more flies, his heart was hardened, and he would not let the people go.

The fifth plague was a disease that killed the animals of the Egyptians – the horses, the asses, the camels, the cattle, and the sheep. The animals of the Israelites were not touched by this plague. But Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not let the people go.

Then Moses and Aaron threw soot into the air, and when the dust settled, all of the people and animals of Egypt had boils and blisters on their skin. This was the sixth plague. But Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let the Israelites go.

Moses told Pharaoh that Yahweh would cause a terribly heavy hail to fall upon the land of Egypt. This was the seventh plague. The hail, with fire mixed in

it, fell everywhere in Egypt except in the region of Goshen, where the Israelites lived. And where it fell, it killed all the people and animals that were out in the open, and the trees and growing grain as well. Pharaoh told Moses and Aaron that if Yahweh stopped the hail from falling, he would let the Israelites go into the wilderness to worship. So Yahweh stopped the hail. But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not let the people go.

And Yahweh said to Moses, "I have hardened Pharaoh's heart so that I can show you the signs of my power over the Egyptians. I do this so that you may tell your children about what I did to Egypt and the people will know that I am Yahweh."

The eighth plague was locusts. The locusts ate all of the grain in the fields and the fruit and leaves on the trees – all that were left after the hail. So Pharaoh begged Moses and Aaron to ask Yahweh to forgive him and to take away the locusts. But when the locusts were gone, Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go.

Then Yahweh brought a terrible darkness upon Egypt – the ninth plague. For three days the darkness was so thick that people could not see each other. Only in the houses of the Israelites was there light. But Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go.

And Yahweh said to Moses, "I will bring one more plague upon Egypt, and then Pharaoh will let you go. First I want every Israelite to go to their Egyptian neighbors and borrow their silver and gold." Yahweh caused the people of Egypt to like the Israelites, so they lent the Israelites much of their silver and gold.

Then Yahweh told Moses, "This month you will have a special celebration. On the fourteenth day of the month, you will kill a lamb. You will smear the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and over the door of the houses of every Israelite. You will roast the lamb and eat it, along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, in your houses that night. You will have this special celebration every year, forever, to remember that Yahweh led you out of Egypt. For seven days you will eat no bread except for unleavened bread."

And Moses and the Israelites did as Yahweh had commanded. And at midnight on that night, while the Israelites were in their houses eating the lamb, Yahweh brought the tenth and last plague upon the Egyptians – the killing of the first-born. The first-born children of all of the Egyptians, from the Pharaoh to the poorest slave, died that night. But when Yahweh saw blood smeared on the doorposts of a house, he passed over it without killing anyone. Thus, the Israelites were saved from the plague.



And there was a loud cry coming from all of the people of Egypt. Pharaoh woke up and found that in every Egyptian house the oldest child had died. He called for Moses and Aaron and told them, "Take your animals and leave. Go and worship Yahweh as you desire."

The Egyptians wanted the Israelites to leave immediately. They rushed them out, so that the Israelites did not have time to wait for their dough to rise. And they took all the gold and the silver and the clothes that the Egyptians had lent to them.

So the Israelites left Egypt along with their animals and with a great mixture of people. The Israelite men alone numbered six hundred thousand. And they baked unleavened bread because there had been no time to allow the dough to rise. And on the day that they left, it was exactly four hundred thirty years to the day since the Israelites had arrived in Egypt.

## **DISCUSSION:**

**1.** This long and complicated story is one of the most important in the whole Bible. It is the story of freedom! It has been told over and over again throughout the ages as an example of how a group of slaves became a free people. It has been a great inspiration to many different people who lost their own freedom. Jewish people have discussed this story at least once every year for hundreds of years during the festival of "Passover." Since Jews have often in history suffered greatly under the rule of others, remembering this story of the escape from slavery in Egypt has helped them to keep alive the belief that they would eventually be freed from their oppression.

Up until about 140 years ago, Black people from Africa were kept as slaves in the United States. These African slaves were taught to be Christians after they were brought here. Since the books of the Hebrew Bible (the "Old Testament") are part of the Christian Bible (as discussed in the Introduction of this book) these slaves knew about the story of Moses and the escape of the Israelites from Egypt. They looked upon this story as a sign that they, too, would one day be free. One of the best known songs that black African slaves in America used to sing is, in fact, called "Go Down Moses":

When Israel was in Egypt land,  
Let my people go!  
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,  
Let my people go!

(Chorus:)  
Go down, Moses,  
    Way down in Egypt land,  
Tell old Pharaoh  
    To let my people go!

Thus spake the Lord, bold Moses said,  
    Let my people go!  
If not I'll strike your first-born dead,  
    Let my people go!

(Repeat chorus)

When the Black slaves in the United States sang this song, they often thought of their own leaders who were trying to bring about freedom for their people as Moses did for the Israelites. Harriet Tubman, one of the most important and courageous of these leaders, and who was born a slave herself, spent much of her life helping slaves escape from the South to freedom in the North. Because of this, she was often called “Moses.” This shows how powerful the effect of the story of Moses has been through the many centuries that it has been told and retold.

**2.** Why did Yahweh bring the ten plagues down upon the Egyptians? Why did Pharaoh wait for *ten* plagues before he let the Israelites go? Couldn't he have prevented a lot of destruction if he had changed his mind sooner? What prevented Pharaoh from doing this? Why? The story gives the answers to these questions. What do you think about this? Was it a good thing – a necessary thing?

**3.** Just before the tenth and final plague, Yahweh gives Moses some special instructions. The Israelites must smear lamb's blood on their doorposts and have a special feast of lamb and unleavened bread and bitter herbs. The smearing of the lamb's blood is so that Yahweh will know which houses to *pass over* when he brings the tenth plague – the killing of the first born. The name of this special celebration in English is “*Passover*,” which Jews around the world still celebrate every year with special foods including unleavened bread (*matsah*) and bitter herbs – although you won't find anyone smearing blood on their doorposts any more.

This Bible story tells us the religious meaning of the holiday of Passover (*Pay-sah* in Hebrew). Like most Jewish holidays, Passover began as a nature festival or agricultural celebration long before it was given a religious meaning. *Pay-sah* began with

a celebration of the time of the birth of the lambs in the spring and the harvest of the barley at the same time of year. To celebrate the birth of the lambs, the shepherds would eat one lamb at the time of the full moon during the month in which they were born (Passover is always at the time of the full moon). The farmers would throw out all their old “sour” dough as the harvest season began with the harvest of the barley. As a result, newly baked bread at this time of year would not rise since there was no yeasty old dough to add to it. This unrisen (unleavened) bread (*matsah*) later became the basis for the story of how the Israelites had to leave Egypt so quickly that their bread did not have time to rise. This is just one example of how a nature festival was given a religious meaning. There are many such examples among the holidays of Judaism and of other religions as well.

4. One interesting thing about this story is mentioned in its last paragraph. It says that the Israelites and “a great mixture of people” left Egypt together. If there really was such a “great mixture of people” (often called the “mixed multitude”), then the people who left included many who were not descendants of Jacob and his sons. The Egyptians were a powerful nation at that time, and had numerous slaves from many areas of Africa and the Middle East. Perhaps many non-Israelite slaves saw an opportunity to escape from slavery in Egypt along with Moses and the Israelites. How could the Israelites have been kept separate from all other people for 430 years in Egypt so that they still knew who was and who was not a descendant of Jacob?

The process of mixing of the Jewish people with others as they have moved around the world has been going on for centuries and is still going on today as Jews and non-Jews get married and have children. Do you think it is a good thing for people in one “group” to marry those of another “group”? Why or why not? Some people say that the Jewish people will disappear if they keep on marrying non-Jews. Others say that when Jews marry non-Jews, another person may be brought into the Jewish community. Still others say that it doesn’t matter who is Jewish and who is not – the important thing is to marry the person who is right for you. What do you think about this?

**To Table of Contents**

## **IV - 6. THE WATERS PART! THE ISRAELITES ESCAPE!**

*[Exodus 13:17 - 14:31]*

After Pharaoh let the Israelites go, God led them on their journey. During the day, he went before them as a column of a cloud, and at night as a column of fire. Rather than leading them directly to the land of Canaan, which was their final destination, he led them through the wilderness near the Sea of Reeds. God said, "If these people see war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt."

When they reached the sea, Yahweh said, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will follow the Israelites, thinking that they cannot escape from the wilderness. In this way, the Pharaoh and all the Egyptians will come to honor me and to know that I am Yahweh."

So Pharaoh and his army, with all of their chariots, followed the Israelites into the wilderness. As they grew near, the Israelites cried out to Moses, "Let us go back to Egypt and serve the Pharaoh. It is better for us to go back than to die here in the wilderness."

And Moses said to them, "Do not be afraid. Yahweh will protect us." And he lifted his rod up, and raised his hand over the sea, and the waters separated. The sea turned to dry ground before the Israelites. They walked across this dry land with a wall of water on their right and a wall of water on their left.

And the Egyptian army followed them through the dry sea. But when the Israelites had crossed, Moses held out his arm over the sea again, and the water went back to where it had been. It fell over the Egyptians, and not one of them survived.

When the Israelites saw the power of Yahweh, they once again had faith in him and in his servant, Moses.

### **DISCUSSION:**

1. At the beginning of this story, we learn that the Israelites will have to make a long journey through the wilderness before reaching the "promised land" of Canaan. God explains this by saying that the people will have to fight a war when they get to Canaan, and when they see how terrible war is, they might decide that they would rather return to Egypt. We will see later that they will have to wander for 40 years around the Sinai wilderness before reaching Canaan. By that time, almost all of the Israelites who left Egypt will be dead, and it will be their children who will have to fight the Canaanites.

These children, born to a life of wandering, and not knowing the peaceful, if difficult, life in Egypt, will be willing to fight a war to obtain a homeland of their own.

2. We see in this story that God was right in thinking that the Israelites would easily be persuaded that they were better off as slaves in Egypt. When the Egyptians approach, the first thought of the Israelites is to return to Egypt to avoid a conflict with the Egyptian army. What do you think of this attitude? The Israelites couldn't know that they would be able to escape through the dry sea. Do you think they were right in wanting to go back to a life of slavery and hardship rather than face the Egyptian soldiers in battle?

3. Do you think that it is possible for the waters of a great sea to separate as they did in this story? Over the years, scholars have tried to think up possible "natural" explanations for this story. One theory, for example, is that the waters parted as a result of the eruption of a volcano on an island named Thera in the Mediterranean sea. Do you think that it is a good idea for people to try to explain the "miracles" in the Bible by natural events? Why or why not?

4. This story is often told as if the Israelites escaped through the parted waters of the Red Sea. However, the Bible only tells us that they escaped through the *yahm soof*, which is generally thought to mean "Sea of Reeds" in Hebrew. No one is sure where this "Sea of Reeds" was. In fact, no one is really sure what the Hebrew words *yahm soof* mean. Some scholars say that *yahm soof* means "Sea of the End." Generally experts who study the Bible think that the *yahm soof* was *not* the Red Sea, but some think it was. How can it be that people today do not know what some of the Hebrew words in the Bible mean? Remember the difficulties that we already learned about in the translation of the Hebrew word *pah-seem* to describe the piece of clothing that Jacob gave to his son Joseph? (See discussion point #2 for [chapter III-1](#), "Joseph and his Brothers".) These are just two examples of the many problems that scholars have in trying to understand the words of the Bible.

**Next - To Chapter V**  
**To Table of Contents**

## **CHAPTER V. WANDERING IN THE WILDERNESS**

### **V - 1. COMPLAINTS AND MIRACLES – FOOD, WATER, AND A BATTLE**

*[Exodus 16:1 - 17:16]*

After six weeks of wandering, the Israelites came to the Wilderness of Seen. They had no food and they began to grumble about Moses and Aaron. “It would have been better if Yahweh had killed us in Egypt where we had enough bread to eat. Now you have brought us here to starve to death!”

Yahweh appeared in a cloud and said to Moses, “I have heard the Israelites complaining. Between the evenings you shall have meat, and in the morning you shall have bread. Then you will know that I am Yahweh, your God.” That evening, birds appeared for the Israelites to eat. And the next morning, a fine, flake-like substance covered the ground. Moses said, “This is the bread that Yahweh has given you to eat.” He told them to gather as much as they needed each day, but that on the sixth day of the week they should gather enough for two days. This way they would have enough to eat on the seventh day, the Sabbath.

And the Israelites named this sweet food “manna.” And they ate the manna every day for 40 years, until they came to the land of Canaan.

The Israelites left the Wilderness of Seen and came to Repheedeem, where there was no water for them to drink. The people quarrelled with Moses, saying, “Give us water to drink.” Moses called out to Yahweh. And Yahweh said, “Take your rod and strike the rock at Mount Horev, and water will come out from it.” Moses did this while the elders among the Israelites watched him, and the people had enough to drink. And the name of that place was then called Massah, meaning trial, and Mereebah, meaning quarrel, because the Israelites quarrelled there and because at that place they tried Yahweh, saying, “Is Yahweh with us or not?”

Then Amalek came to fight with the Israelites at Repheedeem. And Moses told Joshua to choose some men and go out to fight against Amalek. Moses watched the battle from the top of the hill. He held the rod in his hand. Whenever he lifted his hand, the Israelites grew stronger than Amalek. When he could no longer keep his hand up, Aaron and Hur held his hand up until the sun set. And Joshua defeated Amalek. And Yahweh said to Moses, “Write of this as a memorial in a book. I will completely wipe away all memory of Amalek from under the sky.” And Moses said, “Yahweh will be at war with Amalek throughout the generations.”

## DISCUSSION:

1. This story tells us about more of the complaints that the Israelites had. As in the previous story ([chapter IV-6](#), “The Waters Part! The Israelites Escape!”), Yahweh answers their complaints with miracles that restore their faith in him, at least for a while. The fact that Yahweh led the Israelites out of Egypt and helped them along their way with miracles is very important to the religion of traditional Judaism. Many times in the Bible, Yahweh explains to the people that they should have faith in him and do what he says because *he* is the one who led them out of Egypt. Thus, according to the Bible, the principal reason why the Israelites (and their descendants, the Jews) should have faith in Yahweh, their god, is because of the miracles that he performed for them in these stories.

Today, most Jews, even many religious ones, no longer believe that the miracles described in these two stories actually happened. But religious Jews continue to have faith in Yahweh, the god described in these stories. How can that be? Do you think that most religious people today think of god in the way he is described in these ancient stories – a god who talks directly to people and takes direct actions to change things for people?

As we discussed earlier ([chapter I-1](#), “The Story of Creation,” discussion point #6; and [chapter I-5](#), “Noah and the Great Flood,” discussion point #3) there are still some people called “fundamentalists” who believe that each of the stories in the Bible is absolutely true. Fundamentalist Jews and Christians believe that the waters of the sea parted for Moses, just as described in the Bible story.

2. What is this flaky stuff, manna (*mahn* in Hebrew), that Yahweh brings to the Israelites instead of bread? Why doesn’t he just send bread, as he said he would? The answer to this question may be one of those “natural” explanations that we talked about in discussion point #3 of the story before this one. In some parts of the Sinai, which is where the Israelites wandered, the tamarisk bush grows. Insects that feed on the sap of this bush drop a sweet sticky substance on the ground, which a person can eat and live on. Even today, this substance is called “*mahn*” by the Arab people living in the Sinai.

3. Moses uses his rod to produce water from a rock and then to win the battle against Amalek. We have already learned that the rod of Moses can perform miracles. What miracles did the rod perform in Egypt? The rod is a sign of the leadership of Moses and his ability to call on the power of Yahweh.

4. In this story, the Israelites are led by Joshua in their battle against Amalek. This is the first mention of Joshua in the Bible. Joshua is a very important person. He is the one

who will take over leadership of the Israelites after Moses dies. It is Joshua who will lead the people to victory in conquering the land that God promised them.

In this story, Joshua goes out to battle Amalek. Who is Amalek? Remember Esau, the brother of Jacob? Well, Amalek is one of Esau's grandsons. Of course, the story we are reading now occurred hundreds of years after the time of Esau and even of his grandson, Amalek. Amalek in this story means the Amalekites, the descendants of Amalek. The Bible often presents single individuals, such as Esau and Amalek and Israel (Jacob), who are supposed to have been the original ancestors of whole nations (see, for example, discussion point #3 in the story "Esau Sells his Birthright to his Brother, Jacob," [chapter II-9](#)).

Amalek is presented in the Bible as one of the groups of people living in the land that Yahweh promised to the Israelites, though archaeologists have not found any evidence that this group ever existed. The battle in this story is just the first of many that the Israelites fight with the Amalekites. Although the Israelites fight many battles against many different people in the Bible, the Amalekites somehow seem to be their most evil and constant enemies. In this story, for example, they seem to suddenly appear and to attack the Israelites for no reason at all. We will come across the Amalekites again later on.

Yahweh says he wants to wipe away all memory of the Amalekites. Then why does he insist that Moses write the story of the battle down as a memorial in a book? Why does the story appear in the Bible?

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **V - 2. THE ISRAELITES RECEIVE TEN COMMANDMENTS**

*[Exodus 19, 20, 31, 32; Deuteronomy 5, 9, 10]*

In the third month after they left Egypt, the Israelites entered the wilderness of Sinai. They set up their camp in front of the mountain. Yahweh called to Moses from the mountain, saying, "Tell the Israelites, 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you out on eagles' wings. So if you will obey me and keep my covenant, then you will be my special treasure, more than all the other peoples of the world.'" Moses told the people what Yahweh had said to him.

Three days later, Mount Sinai began to shake, and smoke poured forth from it, as Yahweh came down upon it in fire. And the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder.



And God spoke out of the fire, saying:

(1) “I am Yahweh, your god, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

(2) “You shall have no gods other than me. You shall not make any sculptured image or any likeness of anything that is in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I am a jealous god, who brings punishment for the wickedness of the parents upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but shows mercy to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

(3) “You shall not take the name of Yahweh, your god, in vain.”

(4) “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. You shall labor for six days and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of Yahweh, your god. On the seventh day you shall not do any work – neither you nor your son or daughter, nor your slave, nor your cattle, nor any stranger that is visiting you. For in six days, Yahweh made the sky and the earth and the sea and all that is within them, and he rested on the seventh day. That is why Yahweh blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

(5) “Honor your father and your mother, so you may live for a long time and you may do well on the land that Yahweh, your god, gives to you.”

(6) “You shall not commit murder.”

(7) “You shall not commit adultery.”

(8) “You shall not steal.”

(9) “You shall not be a false witness against your neighbor.”

(10) “You shall not desire your neighbor’s house. You shall not desire your neighbor’s wife, or his slave, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”

All the people saw the thunder and lightning, and heard the sound of the trumpet, and saw the smoke pouring forth from the mountain. They heard the words that Yahweh spoke with a great voice out of the fire. And Moses said to

the people, "God has come before you so that the fear of him will be with you, so you will not sin."

And Yahweh said to Moses, "Say to the children of Israel: You saw for yourselves that I spoke to you from the sky. You shall not make any gods of silver or gold."

And Moses climbed up the mountain to receive the Tablets of the Covenant. For forty days and forty nights he stayed on the mountain, eating no food and drinking no water. And Yahweh gave him two tablets of stone on which the finger of God had written the words he had spoken out of the fire to the children of Israel.

But Moses had been up on the mountain so long that the people waiting below wanted a god to worship. So Aaron had made for them a calf of gold. And when the people saw the golden calf, they called out, "This is your god that led us out of the land of Egypt!" When Moses came down the mountain to bring the Tablets of the Covenant to the people, he saw them worshipping the golden calf. He became so angry that he threw the tablets down and broke them in front of the Israelites. Then he burned the calf that they had been worshipping, and ground it into a fine powder which he threw into the water, and then he made the Israelites drink it.

Moses saw that the people were out of control, and he called, "Whoever is on the side of Yahweh, come to me." And all the men of the tribe of Levi gathered around him. He said to them, "Yahweh, the god of Israel, says: Take your swords and kill your brothers, your friends, and your relatives." And the Levites killed three thousand on that day. And Yahweh did strike the people because of the golden calf that Aaron had made.

Moses pleaded with Yahweh not to destroy the Israelites. Moses said to Yahweh, "Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Overlook the wickedness of the people. If you destroy the Israelites, then the people of Egypt will say that you were not able to bring the Israelites to the land that you promised to them. They will say that that is why you took them out into the wilderness to die."

Then Yahweh told Moses to carve two new tablets of stone like the first ones, and to make an ark of wood to keep them in. Again he went up Mount Sinai and Yahweh inscribed the same Ten Commandments on the new tablets. Moses put them in the ark and then took the tablets and the ark down the mountain.

## DISCUSSION:

1. This story contains two very important ideas: (1) the repeating of the covenant between Yahweh and the Israelites and (2) the well-known “Ten Commandments.”

You should remember the “covenant” from earlier stories. In the story we call “Abraham and Sarah, The Promise from God” ([chapter II-1](#)), Yahweh first establishes the covenant with Abraham. This covenant is the “deal” that he makes with Abraham and his descendants that if they follow Yahweh and obey his rules, then he will give them land to live on and take care of them. This covenant is later established again with Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, in the story of “Jacob’s Ladder,” ([chapter II-11](#)). Now Yahweh once again repeats this covenant with the descendants of Abraham – who are now led by Moses.

What are the rules that Yahweh requires the Israelites to follow? There are many hundreds of them – ten are given in this story. These are called the “Ten Commandments.” These Ten Commandments have been very important both to Judaism and to Christianity.

Over the centuries, Jews and Christians have taken the text of the Ten Commandments and divided it up in several different ways to get ten statements. The division shown in the text above is the most common way that Jewish commentators have divided the Ten Commandments, but even among Jewish scholars there have been different views on how to do this.

2. The first commandment says simply that Yahweh is the god of the Israelites. The purpose of this statement is, presumably, to tell the Israelites that they should be worshipping Yahweh. And why should they worship Yahweh? The answer to this question is also given: Yahweh is the one who led the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, where they had been enslaved.

You might think from the first two stories in this book ([chapter I-1](#) and [chapter I-2](#)) that the god of the Israelites is more important than other gods. Why is this? Why do you think that God doesn’t remind the Israelites about what he did in these two stories to convince them that they should worship only him? Instead, he reminds them of what he did especially for *them* in order to convince them to worship him alone; what is this special thing he did for them? Why do you think that Yahweh takes this approach in trying to gain the loyalty of the Israelites?

3. In the second commandment, Yahweh says that the Israelites shouldn't worship any god other than him. Perhaps surprisingly, he doesn't say that he is the only *real* god, or that other gods do not exist. As we discussed earlier (Introduction to the story "Abraham Smashes the Idols," [chapter II-2](#)), the early Israelites believed that Yahweh was their own special god, and that other people had different gods who were special to them and would protect them. In fact, in another Bible passage [*Deuteronomy* 4:19 - 4:20] Moses explains that Yahweh gave the sun, the moon, and the stars, everything in the sky, to other people to worship, but that the Israelites must worship only Yahweh. Later on, the idea of "monotheism" developed, meaning that this god of the Israelites, Yahweh, was the only real god – other gods did not exist. The early books of the Bible (the Torah) however, do not clearly express the monotheistic point of view that Yahweh is the only real god.

The second commandment goes on to say that the Israelites should not make sculptured images or worship them. This is also to prevent them from worshipping any gods other than Yahweh. In the religions of most people of the time, the gods were thought of as looking like people, or animals, or some combination of the two. Sculptures were often made showing what these gods looked like, and the people would pray to the gods while looking at these sculptures, or idols (as has been discussed in the story "Abraham Smashes the Idols," [chapter II-2](#)).

Yahweh was completely different from these other gods in this one very important way: no statue or picture could be made of Yahweh. Why is this so important? What is so different about worshipping a god that cannot be shown as a statue or in a picture as compared to worshipping one that *is*?

The second commandment goes much further than preventing the Israelites from sculpting or drawing an image of Yahweh. It prevents them from making a sculpture or picture of *anything* in the sky, on earth, or in the sea. Thus, according to Jewish religious law, it was not permitted to make a picture of Yahweh or a person or a tree or a bird or a fish or even a rock. Even today, some Orthodox Jews (now a small minority among the Jewish people) still do not draw pictures of real things. Why do you think that the Israelites included this prohibition in the commandment? How would your life be different if you lived in a place where no one could make pictures of anything?

4. The third commandment is a little hard to understand in its English translation. It is also not easy to understand in the original Hebrew! What does it mean to "take the name of Yahweh, your god, in vain"? One thing that it seems to mean is to make a false statement in Yahweh's name. Thus, one of the basic commandments of the Jewish religion, and Christianity as well, is that any statement sworn to in the name of God should be the truth. This commandment may also mean that a person shouldn't call out to

God in order to perform some trick of magic. Another possible meaning is that a person shouldn't say "God" as part of any curse or statement of anger. Perhaps it means all of these things.

5. The fourth commandment requires the Israelites to observe the Sabbath, and not to do any work on that day. The Sabbath (*sha-baht'* in Hebrew) is the seventh day of the week – from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday. (Remember that each day in the Hebrew calendar goes from sunset to sunset – see discussion point #10 following [chapter I-1](#), "The Story of Creation.") In fact, *sha-baht* is the name of this day in Hebrew. According to the commandment, even the slaves and animals of the Israelites were required to take the day off!

Later on, when Christianity and Islam developed, they also adopted the idea of a holy Sabbath which came once a week. But the Christians decided that the Sabbath would fall on Sunday, and Islam selected Friday as its day of special community prayer. Why do you think that these later religions selected days other than the Saturday Sabbath of Judaism? Today, most societies have adopted the ancient Israelite idea of a day (or two) of rest each week. This has occurred even in those societies, such as China, in which the religions observing a weekly Sabbath have not had very much influence.

6. The fifth commandment, to honor your father and mother, includes a specific reward for obeying it – "so you may live for a long time and you may do well on the land that Yahweh, your god, gives to you." Why do you think that this commandment and the second commandment are the only ones that gives specific reasons – threats or promises – for obedience?

7. Commandments numbered 6, 7, 8, and 9 are very brief. They are different from the other commandments in that these four are still part of the system of laws in most places.

The sixth commandment is interesting because many English translations use the word "kill" rather than "murder." The use of the Hebrew word *rah-tseh'* in this commandment was meant to prevent one person from murdering another, but not meant, for example, to prevent a person from killing another in self-defense or in a war, and it was also not meant to prevent the Israelites from using capital punishment to enforce the laws. As we will see later, there are other specific laws *requiring* the Israelites to kill people in wars and as punishment for violating certain laws.

The seventh commandment is a requirement for married people to be faithful to their wives and husbands. The eighth and ninth are meant to prevent people from stealing or from accusing others of doing things that they did not do.

**8.** The tenth commandment is different from all of the others. The other nine tell the Israelites what they should and should not *do*. The tenth commandment tells them what they should not *think* or *feel*. This commandment tells the Israelites that they should not desire to have anything that belongs to someone else. Of course, no one can help feeling that they would like to have something that others have. Jewish laws almost always tell people how to behave – not how to think. That is why this commandment is so strange. It is the only one that is really impossible to obey completely. It seems to express an *ideal* that cannot always be reached.

Later in Jewish history, the rabbis who wrote about this commandment recognized that it was not literally possible to keep people from desiring what other people have. So they said that this law was not meant to prevent people from simply *desiring* something. They said that the law could only be violated when a person actually made plans or took real steps to take something away from someone else. In this way, the rabbis made it possible for all people to actually obey this commandment even if they had a desire for something that belonged to someone else. This later law developed by the rabbis made sure that people would not be breaking the law simply by their thoughts.

While it is very difficult to make general statements about differences between Judaism and Christianity, it can be said that the Christian religious view of the tenth commandment has often been different from the Jewish view. Christian religious leaders would generally say that the tenth commandment means just what it says, in spite of the fact that it is usually not possible for people to control their desires. This is not unusual for Christianity. There are many examples in which Christian principles would be expressed as saying that people should try to follow *ideal* standards of behavior, which is often not possible for most people.

One example may be found in the sixth commandment. As was mentioned before, the original Hebrew means “You shall not murder” but many translations say “You shall not kill.” It is the translations found in Christian Bibles that usually use the word “kill” – establishing an ideal that would be wonderful to achieve – a world in which no one kills anyone else even in war, or in self-defense, or as punishment by the government for committing crimes. Jewish Bibles state the more practical rule against “murder,” which means killing someone in ways that are not permitted by the laws, since in the real world killing is sometimes considered to be acceptable or even necessary.

Jewish religious laws are usually *practical* and possible to follow because they were actually enforced in Jewish communities for many centuries of Jewish history. The *ideal* standards that Christianity has often set up, and which may be impossible for most people to follow, were never actually enforced by society. They were designed more as a way of showing people what a more perfect life would be like – something to strive for, but perhaps never reach. The ideal standards that we often find in Christianity were also meant to show people that they could not achieve the type of life that God meant for them to have and so they needed to be forgiven by God even if they were good and honest people in their daily lives. Traditionally, Christian religious thought has taught that this forgiveness from God can be obtained through belief in the principles of Christianity.

What do you think about this? What are some advantages of having a *practical* set of rules that can actually be followed in real life? What are some advantages of setting up *ideal* principles of behavior as goals to work towards, even though these ideal principles are above the ability of most people to reach?

**9.** It sure didn't take long for the Israelites to begin violating the new commandments from Yahweh! Before Moses could even get down the mountain with the stone tablets containing these commandment, the Israelites had made a calf of metal to worship as a god – thus violating at least the first two commandments.

Yahweh is so angry that he wants to destroy the Israelites, but Moses argues with him to protect his people. Does this remind you of a story we read earlier? Remember “Abraham Argues with Yahweh” ([chapter II-4](#))? Both Abraham and Moses seem to trick Yahweh by their arguments. Do you think that the authors of these stories meant that Abraham and Moses were more clever than Yahweh because they could get him to change his mind by arguing with him? What is the difference between the argument that Abraham uses to save the people of Sodom and the one Moses uses to save the Israelites? Which one actually succeeds in convincing Yahweh not to kill the people?

**10.** The “ark” mentioned at the end of the story is not a boat like Noah's ark. It is a special box with carvings on it. According to the Bible stories, the Israelites put the Tablets containing the Ten Commandments inside this ark. They carried the ark around with them for many years, until it was lost during a battle. No one knows if the stone tablets ever really existed, but the Ten Commandments themselves have been a very important part of Judaism and Christianity for many centuries.

**[To Table of Contents](#)**

## V - 3. COMMANDMENTS, COMMANDMENTS, AND MORE COMMANDMENTS

### INTRODUCTION:

You may have noticed that after the title of each chapter in this book, we have shown the place in the Bible where the story comes from. Most of the stories we have read are from the first book in the Bible, the book that in English is called *Genesis*. The second Biblical book, *Exodus*, contains the stories about Moses. With the story of the Ten Commandments, we are now about halfway through the book called *Exodus*. At this point, the Bible changes greatly. Instead of being a series of stories about the development of humankind and the Israelites, the Bible now goes into a very long section in which many hundreds of religious laws, or commandments, are stated. This “legal” section includes the rest of the book of *Exodus*, as well as most of the next three books of the Bible: *Leviticus*, *Numbers*, and *Deuteronomy*. There are relatively few stories contained in these three books – almost the whole content of these books is devoted to setting out the ancient laws of the Jewish religion.

In this chapter we will read some of these laws, or commandments (*mits-voht’* in Hebrew). Only a few could be selected from the many hundreds in the Bible. The laws that were selected for this chapter show the wide range of religious laws contained in the Biblical books of *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers*, and *Deuteronomy*. They range from commandments requiring ethical behavior to those requiring the following of seemingly minute details of ritual behavior.

But first, a few words about a special book in the Bible, the book of *Deuteronomy*. This is the fifth Biblical book and is different from the first four in several important ways. First, in many cases it repeats stories or laws that have already been given in the earlier books. For example, the last story we read (chapter V-2), “The Israelites Receive Ten Commandments,” is found in the Bible in the book of *Exodus* and again in the book of *Deuteronomy*. You may have noticed that both of these Biblical books are listed after the title of that chapter. One problem is, however, that the book of *Deuteronomy* often tells stories in a somewhat different way than they are told in earlier books. The story about the golden calf, for example, is told differently in *Exodus* from the way it is told in *Deuteronomy* – the way it is presented in the book you are reading is a combination of the two. Even the Ten Commandments themselves are slightly different as written in *Exodus* as compared to how they are stated in *Deuteronomy*.

Scholars of the Bible believe that the book of *Deuteronomy* was written by a different person than the people who wrote the earlier Bible books. Do you remember J (the Yahwist), E (the Elohist), and P (the Priestly author) that we have discussed earlier (for example, in Discussion point #7 of chapter I-2, “Adam and Eve, the First People”)?



Scholars think that these three authors wrote most or all of the first four books of the Bible, *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, and *Numbers*. However, the book of *Deuteronomy* seems to have been written by a different author, who is called “D,” the “Deuteronomist.”

The first five books of the Bible are particularly special in traditional Judaism. Together these five books make up the “Torah,” which is considered by the traditional, “Orthodox” Jewish religion to be the most important part of the Bible. According to traditional Judaism (and traditional Christian thinking as well), all five books of the Torah are said to have been written by Moses himself, following direct instructions from Yahweh about what to write. Thus, these books are often called “The Books of Moses.”

In the next few chapters, we will read a few of the many hundreds of commandments that appear in the books of *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers*, and *Deuteronomy*. Many of these are repeated, either with the same words or with different words in different parts of these books. We have shown more than one source for such commandments in brackets after the texts.

In the Bible itself, the commandments often appear to be presented in a completely haphazard order – with some strong ethical point sandwiched between now-obscure points of ritual. To make reading easier, the sampling of the commandments given below is divided thematically into sections.

### To Table of Contents

## **V - 4. YAHWEH PRESCRIBES RELIGIOUS RITUALS**

### **V - 4 - i. SACRIFICES AT THE TEMPLE**

**A.** Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, “Tell the Israelites to bring me gifts; every person whose heart is willing to do so should make an offering to me. These offerings shall be of gold and silver and copper, and fine linen, and skins of rams dyed red, and acacia wood, and oil for light, and onyx stones.

“Tell the Israelites to build for me a special holy place, so that I can live among them. I will explain to you exactly how to make the holy tent and everything that goes within it. And inside the holy tent, a special curtain shall be hung. And behind this curtain will be the Holy of Holies. And the ark with the tablets of the commandments will be kept in this Holy of Holies.” [*Exodus 25:1 - 25:9, 26:31 - 26:34*]

**B.** And Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the Israelites, and say to them: ‘If any of the people violates one of Yahweh’s commandments without knowing it, and then becomes aware of it, that person shall bring a perfect female goat as an offering for the sin. He shall bring the goat to the entrance of the Tent of Congregation and kill it. The priest shall take some of the blood of the goat with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar, and he shall pour out all of the goat’s blood at the bottom of the altar. Then he shall remove all of the fat that covers the internal parts, and the priest shall burn the fat to make smoke that is sweet-smelling to Yahweh. The priest shall atone for the person who sinned against Yahweh’s commandment, and he shall be forgiven.’” [*Leviticus 4:1, 4:27 - 4:31*]

#### **V - 4 - ii. SOME LAWS AND RITUALS**

**C.** “On the tenth day of the seventh month of the year is the Day of Atonement. On that day you shall humble yourselves and you shall do no work. Anyone who does not humble himself throughout the day will be cut off from his people. Whoever does work on that day will be destroyed. On that day, you shall present to Yahweh a burnt sacrifice of one bull, one ram, and seven lambs. In addition, you will sacrifice a goat as a sin-offering.” [*Leviticus 23:27 - 23:30; Numbers 29:7 - 29:11*]

**D.** Hear, O Israel. Yahweh is our God – only Yahweh. You shall love Yahweh, your god, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And the words of my commandments shall be in your heart. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. [*Deuteronomy 6:4 - 6:9*]

#### **V - 4 - iii. FOOD RULES**

**E.** You may eat meat as you desire, but you may not consume the blood of the animal. You shall pour the blood on the ground like water. [*Deuteronomy 12:15 - 12:16*]

**F.** And Yahweh said to Moses and Aaron, “Tell the Israelites: You shall eat animals whose hooves are split open and that chew their cud. But you shall not eat of the camel, which chews its cud but whose hooves are not split open; it is unclean to you. Nor may you eat of the pig, whose hooves are divided, but which do not chew their cud; it is unclean to you. Anything that lives in the water and

which has fins and scales you shall eat. But anything from the water that has no fins and scales you may not eat; they are unclean things to you. [*Leviticus 11:1 - 11:12; Deuteronomy 14:3 - 14:10*]

**G.** “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” [*Exodus 23:19; Deuteronomy 14:21*]

## **DISCUSSION:**

**1.** In the first law or commandment in this section, listed as “**A**,” Yahweh tells the Israelites to build a special tent, called the Tent of Congregation or the Tent of Meeting. Inside this tent is the “Holy of Holies,” the special place where the ark containing the tablets of the Ten Commandments are to be kept. Remember the ark from the previous story, “The Israelites Receive the Ten Commandments” (chapter V-2, discussion point #10).

This Tent of Congregation is the place where the Israelites are to go to worship Yahweh, their god. The worship of Yahweh involves *sacrifice* – the giving up of something of value. Religions in ancient times often required people to make sacrifices to their gods so that these gods would help them out. Some religions still do this even today. We have already learned about sacrifices in the stories of “Cain, the Jealous Brother of Abel” (chapter I-3, discussion point #4), “Noah and the Great Flood” (chapter I-5, discussion point #6), and “God Tells Abraham to Kill his Son, Isaac” (chapter II-7, discussion point #4, for example). The Bible describes many reasons for bringing sacrifices to the Tent of Congregation, and exactly how the sacrifice is to be offered at different times. Item “**B**” above shows only one example of these – an animal sacrifice to be made when one of Yahweh’s commandments is violated without the person knowing it, but later the person realizes that the commandment has been violated.

The religious view at the time these commandments were written was that sacrifices to Yahweh would cause Yahweh to do certain things that people wanted, such as forgiving them for their sins. The sacrifices also provided food and other valuable things for the priests who ran the Temple, since they were the ones who actually collected the sacrifices in the name of Yahweh.

**2.** Many of the laws contained in the first five books of the Bible (the Torah) tell the Israelites how to worship Yahweh at their Temple, which was first built in Jerusalem by King Solomon. This was about 200 years after the time of Moses (see the time line in the Introduction). The biblical commandments do not mention the Temple directly, but only

the “Tent of Congregation,” since the Temple did not exist during the time being written about. One possibility is that the early Israelites did carry out their worship ceremonies in a tent, and then moved them into the Temple after they settled in Canaan. Another possibility is that these portions of the books were written or edited by priests in the Temple in Jerusalem who wanted the people to believe that the rituals they used in the Temple were directly commanded by Yahweh through Moses, centuries earlier. Scholars have concluded that those sections of these books that describe the Temple sacrifices were, indeed, written by “P,” a priest of the Temple in Jerusalem. Whether the Tent of Congregation ever really existed isn’t known. One theory is that the tent really did exist and that it was put inside the Temple when it was built, so that when the commandments of the Bible told the Israelites to sacrifice at the Tent, they did so by going to the Temple.

**3.** There are a number of commandments in the Bible that tell when special holidays are to be observed. For example, the holiday of Passover was discussed in the story “The Israelites Gain their Freedom” ([chapter IV-5](#), see discussion points #1 and #3). In section “C” above, Yahweh tells the Israelites about another holiday, called the Day of Atonement or, in Hebrew, *Yom Kippur*. On this special day, the Israelites would sacrifice animals at the Temple to try to make up, or “atone,” for the sins they committed during the previous year. A special goat, the scape-goat, was also killed. A special ritual was believed to put the sins of the whole community on the back of this goat which was then pushed off a cliff outside of Jerusalem so that the people would not be punished for their sins.

On Yom Kippur, the High Priest of the Temple would go into the Holy of Holies, where the ark was, and recite prayers in which he said out loud the name of the god of the Israelites, “Yahweh.” Saying the name of God was strictly forbidden for all the Israelites except the High Priest – and he could only say the name on this one day each year. What effect do you think hearing the name of their god spoken out loud had on the ordinary Israelites? How do you think that this ritual affected the way the Israelites looked upon the High Priest?

**4.** Commandment “D” gives rituals that are to be followed by the Israelites and which are still followed by some Jews. It required the Israelites to put the words of Yahweh on their hand, between their eyes, and on their doorposts. Even today, when Orthodox Jewish men say their morning prayers, they tie a small black leather box to their arm, and another onto their forehead. These boxes, called “tefillin” in Hebrew, contain certain passages from the Bible. Many Jews also attach to the doorframes of their houses a small box called a “mezuzah” which contains certain Biblical passages. Have you ever seen “tefillin” or a “mezuzah”?

5. The commandments in the Torah told the Israelites what they could and could not eat. A few of these commandments are listed under “Food Rules.” Those things that are permitted as food are called “kosher.” Those that are not permitted are “non-kosher.”

Commandment “E” says that blood is not kosher. As a result, when an animal is killed to make kosher meat, it is killed by cutting its throat in such a way as to make as much blood as possible come out, so there is as little blood as possible left in the meat. Commandment “F” says that meat from certain animals can never be kosher – such as camels, pigs, and shellfish (shrimp, lobster, clams, etc.). Commandment “G” sounds very simple, but has turned out to be much more complicated than it seems. It says not to boil a kid (a baby goat) in its mother’s milk. However, the rabbis have decided that in order to follow this commandment, Jews must never eat meat at the same meal with milk or foods made with milk. This means that a cheeseburger can never be kosher. Even today, Jews who follow the religious dietary laws will never have milk or cheese or butter at the same meal with meat.

As we go through the commandments in the Torah, you will see that some are impossible to follow today, such as the ones about sacrificing animals in the Temple, since the Temple no longer exists. Other commandments, such as punishing people for violating religious laws, could only be followed in a place where the Jewish religious leaders were also the leaders of the government. Such a place would be a “theocracy” – a place where religion and government are the same.

Some of the commandments in the Torah can be followed, even today. The laws concerning kosher food would be an example.

### To Table of Contents

#### **V - 4 - iv. DO NOT OPPRESS THE STRANGER, EXCEPT SOMETIMES**

A. Yahweh said to Moses, “These are the laws that you will bring to the Israelites:

“If you buy a Hebrew slave, you shall free him after six years.” [*Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:12*]

B. “You shall not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” [*Exodus 22:21*]

**C.** “You shall not mistreat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will hear their cries and my anger will burn. And I will kill you with the sword, so your wives will be widows, and your children will be orphans.” *[Exodus 22:22 - 22:24]*

**D.** “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the spirit of the stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” *[Exodus 23:9]*

**E.** “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not completely reap the corners of your field. Also, you shall leave the gleanings that fall to the ground. You shall not take every grape from your vineyard. You shall leave these things for the poor and the stranger. I am Yahweh, your god.” *[Leviticus 19:9 - 19:10, 23:22]*

**F.** “You shall not ridicule a deaf person, or put a stumbling block before a blind person. You shall fear your God: I am *Yahweh*.” *[Leviticus 19:14]*

**G.** “If a stranger is living in your land, you shall not do him any wrong. The stranger that lives with you shall be treated like one born among you. You shall love him as you love yourself. For you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am Yahweh, your God.” *[Leviticus 19:33 - 19:34]*

**H.** You shall appoint judges and officers for each of your tribes. You shall judge righteously, and with true justice. You shall not take bribes. Righteousness, righteousness you shall pursue, so that you may live and possess the land that Yahweh your god gives to you. *[Deuteronomy 16:18 - 16:20]*.

**I.** When you come to fight against a city that is far away, call upon it to surrender in peace. If it surrenders in peace, then its people shall become forced laborers for you. If it does not surrender in peace, then when you conquer the city, you shall kill every man in it by the sword, and you shall take for yourselves the women, the children, and the cattle.

When you conquer a city that is part of the land that Yahweh your god gives to you, then you shall kill every thing in it that breathes. You shall completely destroy it, so that you may not learn from the people the wicked things they do in the worship of their gods, and thus sin against Yahweh, your god. *[Deuteronomy 20:10 - 20:18]*

**J.** If a man has a stubborn and disobedient son, who will not listen to his father or mother, and they punish him, but he still does not heed them, then they shall bring him to the elders of the city. And the men of the city shall stone him to

death. Thus you shall eliminate evil. All Israel shall hear of this and be afraid. *[Deuteronomy 21:18 - 21:21]*

**K.** If you come upon a bird's nest with the mother sitting on eggs or baby birds, take only the eggs or baby birds for yourself and leave the mother behind, so that all may be well with you and your life may be long. *[Deuteronomy 22:6 - 22:7]*

**L.** If a slave who has escaped comes to you, you shall not return him to his master. He shall live in your city wherever he chooses. You shall not oppress him. *[Deuteronomy 23:16 - 23:17]*

**M.** If any man is afraid to fight in battle, then he shall be sent home, so that his fear will not cause others to be afraid *[Deuteronomy 20:8]*. When a man gets married, he shall not go into the army for one year, so that he may bring joy to his wife. *[Deuteronomy 24:5]*

**N.** When you are gathering the crops in your field, and you have left some grain there, you shall not go back to take it. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again to get the remaining olives. When you gather grapes from your vineyard, you shall not pick over the vines again. You shall leave what remains for the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. You shall remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt, and that is why I command you to do these things. *[Deuteronomy 24:19 - 24:22]*

## **DISCUSSION:**

**1.** People often cite the Bible as an important source of ethical principles. The Ten Commandments are usually considered to be the most important ethical statements in the Bible (see [chapter V-2](#), "The Israelites receive the Ten Commandments"). Beyond the Ten Commandments, however, there are many rules that directly encourage ethical behavior. There are also some that, at least by the standards of today's world, would not be considered to be ethical. This chapter shows a representative sampling of the commandments of the Torah that require ethical – and, in some cases, possibly unethical – behavior. They are presented in the order in which they appear in the Torah. As you read through these commandments, it is important to remember that some types of behavior that we would not consider to be proper were accepted in ancient times. The laws written into the Torah were written for a society that existed over 2000 years ago.

**2.** Commandment "A" is an example of a rule that would be considered to be unacceptable today, but was probably helped to bring about more humane behavior than

was generally practiced at the time. Today, we cannot accept the idea of one person actually owning another person as a slave. However, slavery was very common in the ancient world, and was generally considered to be acceptable. The requirement that a Hebrew, or Israelite, slave be freed after six years was most probably a humane advance over the way most slave owners behaved. Even more surprising is commandment “L,” which says that slaves who escape from their owners should not be returned to them. What do you think these commandments indicate about the attitude of the ancient Israelites toward slavery?

3. One of the most well-known and widely quoted commandments is the one listed as “B.” The requirement not to oppress strangers is repeated several times in the Torah, and is given in different words in “D” and “G.” In modern times, these commandments are often quoted as showing the importance of treating other people well. However, over the centuries, most rabbis have said that the word “stranger” (*gehr* in Hebrew) in these commandments did not actually include many people. It was meant to refer only to non-Jews who had adopted the Jewish religion and way of life. Do you think it is a good idea to quote the Bible to make an ethical point if the original meaning was somewhat different than the point we are trying to make? Why do people find it useful to use quotations from the Bible (even if somewhat inaccurately) rather than just saying what they believe in their own words?

4. The commandments listed as “C,” “E,” “F” and “N” also require that the Israelites treat other people kindly. Commandment “C” includes a specific punishment for those who fail to be kind to widows and orphans. “E” and “N” require that farmers leave some of their crops behind in their fields for those who need it to survive. And “F” tells the Israelites not to be mean to deaf or blind people. These are some of the best examples of the ethical teachings in the Bible.

5. More of the ethical code of the Israelites is shown in the commandments listed as “H,” “K,” and “M.” The one about birds (“K”) is particularly interesting, since it is one of very few places in the whole Bible in which either Yahweh or anyone else shows any concern for animals. Why do you think the Hebrew Bible says so little about treating animals well? One possibility may be that the writers of the Bible were trying to keep the Israelites away from the practices of other religions. Many of the other religions at the time were actually forms of nature worship, in which the various gods represented different aspects of the natural world. Some people think that this is why the Bible is so focused on people and Yahweh, with little attention paid to the world of nature, including animals. What do you think of the idea, listed under “M,” that anyone who is afraid to fight in a battle will be sent home?



6. Some of the commandments in the Torah seem to us today not to be very ethical. For example, item “I” presents some rules for warfare that, if carried out, would not be acceptable to people in today’s world. There are two cases given in which Yahweh commands the Israelites to kill every living man in a city that they conquer, and, in one of these cases, they must also kill all the women, the children, and the animals.

You may have read that the religion of Islam has within it the concept of a “holy war” (*jihad* in Arabic). We see here the Biblical version of a “holy war” (*herem* in Hebrew), written many centuries before Islam existed. The Bible tells stories in which Israelite leaders were actually punished by Yahweh because they failed to kill everyone in a conquered city. Why does Yahweh require that every person and animal be killed? Once again, we see that the Bible is written to convince the people not to accept any other religion. Yahweh appears to be very worried that they will find other religions more attractive than the one he wants the Israelites to follow. Why should he be so worried? Why is he afraid that leaving some of the people, or even the animals, alive will cause the Israelites to begin worshipping the gods of the conquered people of Canaan?

7. Commandment “J” says that children who disobey their parents should be killed by having stones thrown at them. It would be nice to believe that this commandment was never really carried out, but that it was included in the Torah only for parents to use as a threat against children who were very bad. The earliest records of the sayings of the rabbis certainly tells us that disobedient children were not to be killed. However, we must remember that the instructions in the Torah were written during the time of the Temple priests, before Judaism was led by rabbis. We have no way of knowing whether disobedient children may have been killed during this priestly period in Jewish history. Looking over all of the commandments we have read about so far, do you think that the type of people who wrote and tried to live by these rules would have killed children who did not obey their parents?

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **V - 4 - v. CRIME AND PUNISHMENT**

A. There was a man whose mother was an Israelite and whose father was an Egyptian. This man cursed the name of God. And Yahweh said to Moses, “The whole community shall stone him. Anyone who curses the name of Yahweh shall be stoned to death. If anyone kills someone else, he shall be killed himself. If anyone harms another, he shall have the same harm done to him: broken bone

for broken bone, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The law shall be the same for strangers and for those born among you.” Moses told this to the Israelites, and the man who cursed the name of God was stoned to death. [*Leviticus 24:10 - 24:23*]

**B.** “A person who strikes or curses his father or mother shall be put to death.” [*Exodus 21:15, 21:17; Leviticus 20:9*]

**C.** If a prophet calls upon you to worship gods other than Yahweh, you shall put him to death. If your own brother, or your son, or your daughter, or your wife or your close friend tries to get you to worship another god, you shall stone that person to death. [*Deuteronomy 13:2 - 13:12*]

**D.** If a man or a woman among you has worshipped other gods or the sun or the moon or any heavenly body, then you shall stone that person to death. The statements of two or three witnesses is needed before putting a person to death. The statement of one witness is not enough. The hand of the witness shall be the first to put him to death; the rest of the people shall follow. [*Deuteronomy 17:2 - 17:7*]

**E.** Fathers shall not be put to death for the sins of his children, nor shall a child be put to death for the sins of the father. People shall be put to death only for their own sins. [*Deuteronomy 24:16*]

## **DISCUSSION**

**1.** Commandment “**A**” is one example of the criminal laws given in the Torah. In this case, the crime being discussed is cursing God. As with many of the crimes discussed in the Torah, these crimes are punished by death. Do you think that saying something against God should be considered to be a crime? Americans may find this strange because in the United States we have the right of freedom of speech, which means that we can say or write pretty much anything we want to. But in many countries freedom of speech is limited, and saying something against the main religion of the country is considered to be a crime, even today.

The commandment goes on to say that if a person harms someone else, then that person shall be harmed in a similar way. This is the very well known Biblical principle of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” This may seem very harsh and primitive to us today. In our society, a person who harms someone may have to pay money to the person who was harmed, and may even go to prison if the harm was serious and avoidable. But at the time this section of the Bible was written, the idea of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” may have been a real step forward compared to the way other groups punished

those who injured others. It may be that without this “eye for an eye...” statement, someone who hurt someone else would be killed, or even have his whole family or village killed. Which do you think is better, the idea of “an eye for an eye...” or the more modern idea that a person who harms someone else has to pay money to that person?

It is important to understand that the commandments listed in the Torah were written or edited by priests in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Since the Temple was destroyed, about 2000 years ago, the Jewish religion has been led by rabbis rather than temple priests. The rabbis often interpreted the priestly laws of the Torah in such a way as to change their meaning a great deal. For example, the rabbis did not accept the idea of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” even 2000 years ago. They said the same thing that our own laws say today – that a person would have to give money to someone who was injured; the guilty person would not be physically injured himself.

The rabbis often could not accept the simple meaning of the commandments of the Torah and therefore they gave interpretations that changed the meaning greatly. However, they always said that they were following the Torah. Why do you think they said this? Why didn't they just say that they disagreed with the Torah, and they now wanted to now put out more practical and humane laws?

**2.** In commandment “**A**” we learned that cursing God is punishable by death. In “**B**,” “**C**,” and “**D**” we see that a person should also be executed for hitting or cursing a parent, worshipping any god other than Yahweh, or trying to get others to worship gods other than Yahweh. As with the commandment concerning disobedient children (“**J**” under “Do Not Oppress the Strange, Except Sometimes,” chapter V-4-iv), we have no way of knowing whether or not people were actually killed for disobeying commandments “**B**,” “**C**,” and “**D**” during the period when the Temple priests were the Jewish religious leaders. Why do you think that “**D**” requires more than one witness to prove that someone has worshipped a foreign god? Why do you think that it is the witness who is required to throw the first stone in “**D**”?

**3.** The commandment listed as “**E**” seems rather strange to us today. It seems only logical that no person should be punished for a crime committed by someone else. Why do you think it was necessary to write this down, even though it seems obvious to us today?

[To Table of Contents](#)

## V - 4 - vi. YAHWEH WILL REWARD THE ISRAELITES FOR FOLLOWING HIS COMMANDMENTS

**A.** Yahweh said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites that I said this. If you obey me, I will make sure that none of you get sick. I will send fear to your enemies, and they will run away from you. In this way, you will slowly take over the land that I will give you, from the Sea of Reeds to the sea of the Philistines, from the wilderness to the River.” *[Exodus 23:20 - 23:31]*

**B.** “You shall follow all of the laws I have given to you and not the laws of the nations that I will defeat for you. I have told you that I will give their land to you, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am Yahweh, your god, who has separated you from all other nations.” *[Leviticus 20:22 - 20:24]*

**C.** “If you follow my laws and commandments, I will give you rain in the proper season, so that your crops will grow and the trees will give their fruit. I will give you peace, and your enemies will fall before your swords. I will give you many children and keep my covenant with you. And I will stay with you and you shall be my people. I am Yahweh, your god, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.

“But if you do not follow my laws and commandments, and you break my covenant, I will afflict you with sickness. Your enemies will conquer you. Your crops shall not grow and the trees will not bear fruit. I will destroy your cities. And if those among you who survive will humble themselves before me and accept punishment for their guilt, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and with Isaac, and with Abraham, and I will remember the land.” *[Leviticus 26:3 - 26:42]*

**D.** Moses said to the Israelites, “And if you follow these rules, then Yahweh, your god, will keep the covenant that he made with your fathers, and he will love you, and bless you, and your numbers will increase. You shall be blessed above all other people. Yahweh will keep all sickness away from you. He will deliver all of your enemies to you, and you shall destroy them and you shall destroy the sculptured images of their gods in fire.” *[Deuteronomy 7:12 - 7:25]*

**E.** “If you follow all of the commandments that I give to you, then Yahweh will remove all the nations from your path, even those that are much larger and stronger than you are. Your land will extend from the wilderness to the Lebanon, from the Euphrates River to the sea in the West.” *[Deuteronomy 11:22 - 11:24]*

**F.** And Moses said to the people:

“If you follow all of the commandments that I have given to you, then Yahweh your god will raise you above all other nations. He will defeat all enemies who attack you. And all the people of the earth shall see that you are the people of Yahweh, and they shall fear you. You shall have many children, and fruitful cattle, and bountiful crops.” *[Deuteronomy 28:1 - 28:11]*

**G.** “But if you fail to follow all of the commandments I have given to you, then Yahweh will destroy you. He will afflict you with many terrible diseases. Instead of rain, he will send you dust from the sky. He will defeat you when your enemies attack. Your crops will be consumed by locusts; your grapes will be eaten by worms; and your olives shall drop off the olive trees so that you will have none with which to make oil. You will have nothing to eat, until you are forced to eat your own babies. You shall be left few in number, after having been as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you shall be scattered among all the people of the earth.” *[Deuteronomy 28:15 - 28:64]*

## **DISCUSSION:**

This chapter lists some of the statements in the Torah in which Yahweh promises to reward the Israelites if they will follow his commandments. He also says that he will punish them if they do not obey him (“C” and “G”). We can see that the rewards include defeating their enemies, success in conquering the land of Canaan (which is “flowing with milk and honey”), good health, many children, and good harvests.

Are you surprised about the types of rewards and punishments that Yahweh promises? In the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh never says that he will reward good people after they die – by allowing them to enter Heaven, for example. All the rewards and punishments are to occur during life here on earth. During the time of the Temple and the priests, people were told to follow Yahweh’s commandments so that they would have a good life. Later on, after the Temple was destroyed and the rabbis became the religious leaders, the Jewish religious idea changed to say that people who behaved properly would be rewarded after they died. Why do you think that this change occurred? Do you think that people who are good are rewarded by never getting sick or by always having enough to eat? Do you think that it is a sign that people are bad if they do get very sick or die when they are young or are so poor that they do not have enough to eat? Do you think that promising people that they will be rewarded with good health or successful wars is a good way to get people to behave properly?

Christianity, which first developed among some Jews during the earliest time of the rabbis, adopted the view that the rabbis held, that rewards and punishments for good or bad behavior would occur after death. Do you think that promising people that they will be rewarded after death for good behavior is a good way to get people to behave properly?

### To Table of Contents

## **V - 5. MOSES IS CRITICIZED FOR MARRYING A CUSHITE**

*[Numbers 12:1 - 12:15]*

Miriam and Aaron, the sister and the brother of Moses, spoke out against Moses because he had married a Cushite woman. They said, “Has Yahweh spoken only with Moses? Has he not spoken also with us?” Now, Moses was more humble than any other person on the earth. Yahweh called Moses and Aaron and Miriam to the Tent of Congregation. Yahweh came down in a pillar of cloud to the entrance of the Tent. He called to Aaron and Miriam and said, “When there is a prophet among you, I speak to the prophet in a dream. But Moses is different. With Moses I speak mouth to mouth, I appear personally before him, he sees my form, and I speak to him plainly, not in riddles. So why were you not afraid to speak against Moses?” And the anger of Yahweh burned against Aaron and Miriam.

And when the cloud of Yahweh left the Tent, Miriam’s skin was snowy white with leprosy. And Aaron said to Moses, “Oh, my lord, do not blame us for our foolish sin.” And Moses called out to Yahweh, saying, “I beg you to heal her.” But Yahweh said to Moses, “Put her out of your camp for seven days. Then you may take her back.” So Miriam was put out of the Israelite camp for seven days. And the people had to wait until she was allowed to return before they could continue on their journey.

### **DISCUSSION:**

1. Moses has a lot of problems. We have already read about how the Israelites were constantly complaining about the lack of food and water in the wilderness (chapter V-1, “Complaints and Miracles – Food, Water, and a Battle”) and how Aaron had made a golden calf for the people to worship (chapter V-2, “The Israelites Receive Ten Commandments”). Now, in this story, he finds himself being attacked directly by Miriam and Aaron, his sister and brother. Why do you think that they criticize him? Do you think the only reason was that his wife was a Cushite?

2. What is a Cushite? We have already learned that Tsiporah, Moses' wife, was a Midianite, the daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian (see "Moses Rescues a Hebrew Man and Leaves Egypt," [chapter IV-3](#)). The word Cushite means a person from Cush, the Hebrew word in the Bible used for Ethiopia. Thus, Moses apparently married someone in addition to Tsiporah, and this other wife was a Black African woman. It is also possible that the word Cushite in this story may mean a person from Cushan, which was a part of Midian, where Tsiporah was from. If this is what was meant, then the "Cushite" wife of this story is just Tsiporah, the Midianite.

It is interesting to think that the type of disease that Miriam gets has something to do with the nature of her criticism of Moses' wife. Why would this make more sense if the Cushite wife were a Black woman from Cush rather than a Midianite woman from Cushan? One possibility is that Yahweh gives Miriam a disease in which her skin turns flaky and white as if to say to her: "You criticized Moses for marrying a Black woman, so you must think that it is better to have white skin. Because of this, I'll make your skin so white that you'll see that you were wrong to think that someone with dark skin is not as good as you are."

3. Miriam gets a disease called *tsah-rah-at* in Hebrew. Although this disease is usually translated as "leprosy," we are not sure exactly what this disease was. We do know, however, that it resulted in the skin being covered with white spots or scabs. This disease makes a person "unclean" according to the commandments of Yahweh set out in the Bible. This is why Miriam had to be put outside of the Israelite camp for seven days. Why do you think that Aaron isn't also punished? Remember, he wasn't punished for making the golden calf either (in [chapter V-2](#), "The Israelites Receive the Ten Commandments").

4. Why does the Bible have stories in which Aaron goes against the words of Yahweh? After all, Aaron was supposed to be the ancestor of all the priests in the Temple in Jerusalem. Wouldn't you think that the Bible authors would present Aaron as a loyal follower of Yahweh's rules? The answer to this question is, of course, that there was more than one Bible author.

As we have already discussed, one of the Bible authors, the one called "J," who was from the southern kingdom of Judah where Jerusalem is, presents Aaron as a good and powerful person who is granted many special powers by Yahweh (see "Yahweh speaks to Moses from a Burning Bush," [chapter IV-4](#), discussion point #3). However, the Bible author "E," from the northern kingdom of Israel, was apparently trying to convince people that the only true religion is not to be found in Jerusalem, where the Temple was run by the priests who were supposed to have been descended from Aaron. The northern

kingdom, where “E” is from, had its own religious centers, and some of the priests in the north may have thought of themselves as descendants of Moses. Therefore, author “E” usually says very nice things about Moses and includes some stories that show Aaron not to be such a fine, God-fearing person. Two of the stories thought to have been written by author “E” are the one about Aaron building the golden calf and the part of this story in which Aaron angers Yahweh by criticizing Moses.

We have talked many times about the four authors “J,” “E,” “P,” and “D” who, it is thought, wrote the first five books of the Bible. The idea that these four authors wrote these books is the best scientific explanation available today to explain where these books came from. It helps us to understand many of the points in the Bible, particularly when one passage tends to contradict another. It also explains why the writing style in some passages differs from that in others. However, it is important for us to remember that no one is really sure who “J,” “E,” “P,” and “D” really were, if they were each only one person, or if further research won’t result in some better scientific explanation for why the Bible is written the way that it is.

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **V - 6. THE ISRAELITES ANGER YAHWEH AND HE ANNOUNCES THEIR PUNISHMENT**

*[Numbers 13:1 - 14:45]*

Yahweh said to Moses, “Send out men, one from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, as spies into the land of Canaan.” So twelve spies were sent out, and among them were Caleb from the tribe of Judah and Hoshea from the tribe of Ephraim. And Moses called Hoshea, “Joshua.”

The spies spent forty days exploring Canaan. When they returned, they said to Moses, “The land you sent us to surely flows with milk and honey. But the people in that land are very fierce. Their cities are large and have strong walls.” Caleb, one of the spies who had seen the land of Canaan, said, “Let us go now into the land, for we can surely take it from the people who are there.”

But the others did not agree with him. They said, “We cannot go up against the people in the land of Canaan, for they are stronger than we are. We saw Giants there, the sons of Anak. We seemed like grasshoppers compared to them.”



Upon hearing this, the Israelites spoke against Moses and Aaron. “Better we had died in Egypt or in this wilderness. Why did you lead us here to be killed by the swords of the people of Canaan? Let us return to Egypt now!”

Then Moses and Aaron and Caleb and Joshua, who had also been one of the spies in Canaan, pleaded with the people, “Yahweh will defeat the people of the land of Canaan for us, as long as we do not go against his instructions.” But the people said that they would kill the four of them – Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and Joshua – with stones.

Then the glory of Yahweh appeared to all of the Israelites. And Yahweh said to Moses, “How long will the people not believe in me, after all the signs and miracles that I have shown them? I will strike the people with a plague. Then I will make from you a nation much greater than they are, to live in the land of Canaan.” But Moses said to Yahweh, “The Egyptians know that you have led the people through the wilderness. If you kill them now, the Egyptians will say that it was because you did not have the power to bring them into the land that you had promised to them. So I pray you to forgive the people, as you have forgiven them many times before since we left the land of Egypt.”

And Yahweh said, “I forgive the people, as you have asked me to. But let them know this, that before they enter the land I have promised to them, they and their children shall wander in the wilderness for forty years. And none who is now older than twenty years shall survive to enter the land of Canaan, except for Caleb and Joshua. Those who spoke against me shall not live to enter the land – only their children shall do so.” And Yahweh sent a plague upon the Israelites, which killed all of those who spoke against him. Of the spies sent into Canaan, only Caleb and Joshua survived this plague.

The people were sorry that they had gone against the word of Yahweh. But they decided that they would now enter the land of Canaan, even though Yahweh had decreed that they must wait for forty years. Moses tried to stop them, saying, “Yahweh is not with you.” But they went out anyway, and were beaten down at Hormah by the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in the land that Yahweh had promised them.

## **DISCUSSION:**

**1.** This is one of many stories in the Bible about how the Israelites lost faith in Yahweh, their god. In the story “Complaints and Miracles – Food, Water, and a Battle” (chapter V-1), Yahweh hears the complaints of the Israelites and gives them what they are asking for. Now he is getting tired of their constant complaining and punishes them for

it. There are other stories in the Bible, which we have not included in this book, that have the same general theme: Yahweh punishes the Israelites for their complaints and lack of faith in him. For example, in chapter 11 of the book of *Numbers*, Yahweh inflicts a plague on the Israelites for complaining that they do not have meat to eat. We will read in the next section about the rebellion of Korah, in which Yahweh kills 250 Israelite leaders who question the authority of Moses over them. Then when the Israelites complain that Moses and Aaron have killed their leaders, Yahweh sends a new plague and another 14,700 people die.

Why does the Bible tell so many stories showing how the Israelites have lost faith in Yahweh, their god? What would readers learn about the way Yahweh will treat them by reading these stories? How is this likely to affect the behavior of people? What do these stories say about the personality of Yahweh? Of Moses?

In this story, the Israelites are beaten in battle by the Canaanites and the Amalekites. The Amalekites are the constant enemy of the Israelites. Do you remember them from the story “Complaints and Miracles – Food, Water, and a Battle,” [chapter V-1](#)?

2. It is interesting that the Israelites, who gained their freedom only by leaving Egypt, keep on saying that they want to return to Egypt. It seems to them that the hardships they must endure are worse than what they remember of their suffering in Egypt (see [chapter IV-1](#), “Moses – From a Basket to Pharaoh’s House”). Does it seem that way to you? Do you think that sometimes people would want to give up their freedom in order to have a more secure life? Do these stories about the Israelites wanting to return to Egypt seem realistic?

3. When Yahweh threatens to punish the Israelites with a plague, Moses argues with him and Yahweh changes his mind. Moses has used the same argument with Yahweh before (see “The Israelites Receive the Ten Commandments,” [chapter V-2](#)). How are the arguments raised by Abraham in “Abraham Argues with Yahweh” ([chapter II-4](#)) and those used by Moses in this story similar? What does Yahweh’s response to the arguments tell us about him? What do these stories tell us about the kind of people Abraham and Moses are?

4. In this story, the spies report having seen Giants in the land of Canaan. Does it seem from this story that the spies really saw Giants? What would Giants be doing in Canaan, anyway?

Remember the story “The Time When there were Giants on the Earth” (chapter I-4)? In that story the Giants were the children of the “sons of God” and human women. Although there are several different Hebrew words in the Bible that are translated into the English word “giants,” the Hebrew word used for Giants in these two stories is the same: *Ne-pee-leem*. In fact, these two stories are the only places in the whole Bible that the word “Nepheeleem” is used. But here the Nepheeleem are not the children of the sons of God, but are rather the sons of “Anak.” Now, “anak” actually means “neck” in Hebrew. The word as used in this story is thought to refer to some tall (long-necked) group of people who are said to have lived in part of Canaan.

5. After being punished with a plague, the people are sorry that they had lost their faith in Yahweh, but they disobey him again by entering Canaan. Why do you think they did this?

6. One of the characters in this story is Joshua. We have already learned about Joshua, and seen him act as a military leader (chapter V-1, “Complaints and Miracles – Food, Water, and a Battle”). Later on Joshua will lead the Israelites into the promised land of Canaan.

It is interesting that this story first says that Caleb was the only spy to say that the Israelites could conquer the land, but later on in the story Joshua’s name is also included with Caleb’s. It is as if some editor realized that, in stories that follow this one, Joshua leads the people into Canaan, and so the editor added Joshua’s name to Caleb’s in this story so that Joshua would not be killed off before he could lead the Israelites. This story first says that Hoshea, rather than Joshua, was the spy from the tribe of Ephraim. The statement that Moses called Hoshea by the name “Joshua” could also have been added by the editor who saw the need to make Joshua one of the spies who would survive the forty years in the wilderness. The idea that this story was changed to include Joshua is also indicated by the fact that Joshua is mentioned by the name “Joshua” (rather than Hoshea) in earlier stories in the Bible (see chapter V-1, “Complaints and Miracles – Food, Water and a Battle”). So Joshua’s name already was Joshua before the story of the spies occurred.

There is now no way to know for sure if the story was actually changed by an editor to add the name of Joshua. Can you think of something that archaeologists might find that could prove that Joshua’s name was added after the story was written? Whether it was added later or not, the type of reasoning used to conclude that this is a likely possibility helps us to remember how the Bible was written and changed by different authors and editors. It also points out the difficulty in trying to figure out how the Bible came to be written and which parts of it are factual.

**To Table of Contents**

## **V - 7. THE REBELLION OF KORAHh THE LEVITE**

*[Numbers 16, 17, 18]*

Now Korahh of the tribe of Levi, and also Datan and Abeeram of the tribe of Reuben, along with 250 of the leading men among the Israelites, rose up against Moses and Aaron. "We have had enough of you," they said. "Why do you put yourselves above the rest of the people? All of the Israelites are holy before Yahweh."

And Moses said to Korahh, "You, the tribe of Levi, are you not satisfied that Yahweh has separated you from the other tribes of Israel and brought you close to himself so that you may serve in his dwelling-place and minister to the whole congregation of Israel? Do you now want to be priests also?"

Korahh brought all the Israelites out before the Tent of Congregation against Moses and Aaron. And the glory of Yahweh appeared before them. And Yahweh said to Moses, "Tell the people to move away from the tents of Korahh and Datan and Abeeram. They should touch nothing that belongs to these wicked men, or they will be destroyed."

Moses warned the people as Yahweh had told him to. Then Moses said, "If these men who have rebelled against me and Aaron die as ordinary people die, then you will know that Yahweh has not sent me to you. But if Yahweh causes them to die in a new way, by the ground opening its mouth and swallowing them so they go down to Sh'-ohl alive, then you will know that Yahweh is with me and not with them." And then the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and all the members of their households. So they went down alive into Sh'-ohl, and the earth covered them over. And fire from Yahweh then destroyed 250 men who had been part of the rebellion against Moses and Aaron.

On the next day, all of the Israelites spoke out against Moses and Aaron, saying, "You have killed the people of Yahweh." And Yahweh appeared, and out of anger started a plague among the Israelites. Aaron went out with incense to atone for the Israelites and stopped the spread of the plague, but 14,700 people died from it.

And Yahweh said to Aaron, "Bring the tribe of Levi, which is the tribe of your father, near to yourself so that they may serve you. The Levites shall attend to the care of the Tent of Congregation. But only you and your sons will be priests at the altar and behind the curtain within the Tent. Only Levites will perform the needed services for the other parts of the Tent. But the Levites will have no land of their own among the tribes of Israel. The Israelites will pay a tithe to support the Levites so that they can perform their duties."

## DISCUSSION:

1. Once again, Yahweh saves Moses from rebellion by the Israelites. This time, Moses and his brother Aaron are on the same side. Remember that sometimes it was Aaron who went against Moses (for example, in chapter V-5, “Moses is Criticized for Marrying a Cushite”). Clearly the purpose of this story is to establish the role of Aaron and his descendants as the holy priests in the Temple, and to make sure that the Levites recognize that they are not as important as the priests of the line of Aaron.

Which of the authors of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) likes Aaron? Which author writes bad things about Aaron? See, for example, discussion point #4 after the story “Moses is Criticized for Marrying a Cushite” (chapter V-5). You can guess from that discussion that Bible author E was certainly not the writer of the story about Korah’s rebellion. After analyzing the themes and the language of this story, Bible scholars have concluded that the story of the rebellion of Korah and his followers was written in part by author J and in part by author P. Remember that J represented the southern kingdom, Judah, where Jerusalem and the Temple were, so that J was always trying to show that those who ran the Temple were the true representatives of Yahweh. And who ran the Temple? Why, the priests who were thought of as the descendants of Aaron, of course.

The other author of the Korah story in addition to J is thought to have been P, whom we have learned about in several stories, such as “Noah and the Great Flood” (chapter I-5, discussion point #6), “Jacob Wrestles with an Angel, Gets a New Name, and Meets his Brother Esau” (chapter II-14, discussion point #5). Author P, it is thought, was a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem, himself, and was therefore considered to be a descendent of Aaron. Obviously, he would be anxious to say that Yahweh gave these temple priests, thought to be Aaron’s descendants, the right to perform the rituals in the Temple. So, in this story, Yahweh says that only Aaron and his descendants will be permitted to perform services at the altar behind the curtain in the Tent of Congregation. Remember (chapter V-4-i, section A and discussion point #1) that this would be the most special area where the Ark and the Ten Commandments were kept. This gave the priests who were considered to be the descendants of Aaron the right to receive the sacrifices which people left for Yahweh at the Temple in Jerusalem. The other Levites would have a less important role, but they would still be more important than the members of the other tribes.

This distinction between the Jews thought to be descendants of Aaron, the rest of the tribe of Levi, and the members of other tribes has lasted right up to today in certain rules and rituals observed by Orthodox Jews. For example, at one point in the weekly

service in the synagogue, members of the congregation are called up to read aloud from the scroll of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). The first to be called to read are the “priests” or “*kohaneem*” (who are often understood to be those with names like “Cohen” or “Kahane”). After the *kohaneem* come the Levites (with names like “Levi”), and then comes everyone else.

2. One interesting point in this story is the mention of an underground place called “*Sh’-ohl*.” This word is used a number of times in the Hebrew Bible as the name of a place that people go to after death. In many cases, it may simply mean “the grave,” and is often translated that way into English. Sometimes, however, it seems to mean a place where a person actually continues his or her existence after death. Since it is underground, *Sh’-ohl* is sometimes translated as “hell.” But in the Hebrew Bible, this certainly does not mean a hot, foul-smelling place where people are punished for their bad deeds in life. The Hebrew Bible, and the Torah in particular, make no reference to reward and punishment in “heaven” and “hell.” Rather, *Sh’-ohl* is not a particularly painful place to be; in fact, it is not described at all in the Hebrew Bible. It is just where you go after you die.

Much later, after the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Bible were written, the idea developed among the Jewish religious leaders, the early rabbis, that people must be rewarded and punished after death. After all, there is no reason to believe, if we look at the world around us, that good people are always rewarded, or the evil ones always punished, when they are still alive. The idea of reward and punishment after death was adopted by Christianity and also became an important part of the Christian religious outlook. But the early Israelites who wrote the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Bible did not believe in rewards and punishments after death.

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **V - 8. MOSES AND AARON ARE PUNISHED FOR DISOBEYING YAHWEH**

*[Numbers 20:1 - 20:29]*

So the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. They arrived at the wilderness of Tseen and remained at Kadesh. The people joined together against Moses and Aaron because there was no water to be found in that place. They said to Moses, “Why have you brought us here to die in this wilderness? Why did you make us leave Egypt? There is nothing to eat here, nor even any water to drink.”

Moses and Aaron went to the Tent of Congregation and fell on their faces. The glory of Yahweh then appeared to them. Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, “Take the rod, and assemble the people, you and your brother Aaron. Then speak to the rock in front of all the people. And water shall come forth from the rock.”

So Moses took the rod and went with Aaron to the rock. With all of the people there, Moses struck the rock with his rod two times. And water came out of the rock for all the people to drink, and their cattle also.

But Yahweh said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not believe in me to sanctify me in the eyes of the Israelites, you shall not bring the people to the land I have given to them. These shall be called the Waters of Mereebah, meaning quarrel, because the Israelites quarrelled with Yahweh and he was sanctified to them here.”

The Israelites moved on to Mount Hor. And Yahweh said, “Bring Aaron and his son Eleazar up to Mount Hor, and put Aaron’s garments on his son. Aaron shall die there – he shall not go into the land that I have given the Israelites because you rebelled against my words at the waters of Mereebah.” And Moses did as Yahweh had commanded. Aaron died on Mount Hor, and the people wept for him for thirty days.

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. This story is very similar to one we have already read. In chapter V-1, “Complaints and Miracles – Food, Water, and a Battle,” we read how Moses at an earlier time struck a rock with his rod to get water for the Israelites.

What are the similarities between the two stories? Even some of the names of the places are the same or similar, but the actual place is different. One story takes place at Mount Horev (also called Mount Sinai) and the Wilderness of Seen, the other, closer to Canaan, is at Mount Hor and the Wilderness of Tseen.

2. One difference between this story and the earlier one is that this time Moses gets into big trouble for hitting the rock. Why is Yahweh so angry about that? Maybe by hitting the rock to get the water, Moses seemed to be trying to show that it was *his* power rather than the power of Yahweh that was able to get water from a rock. Yahweh wanted him to *speak* to the rock, not hit it. How would Moses speaking to the rock have shown the Israelites that it was the power of Yahweh, not of Moses, that brought forth the water?

Yahweh complains that by hitting the rock, rather than speaking to it, Moses did not “sanctify” Yahweh before the Israelites. Sanctify means to separate something out from other things as holy or sacred – to give it religious significance. Why do you think that Yahweh is so concerned about this? It is interesting that the Hebrew word for “sanctify,” “*kadash*,” is so similar to the name of the place where this story occurs, “Kadesh,” which is from the same Hebrew word meaning “sacred.” Do you think this tells us anything about Yahweh’s reason for bringing the Israelites to this place, where there was no water to drink? We have already had many examples of the importance of the meaning of names of people and places. This is just one more example of this.

3. After forgiving the Israelites so many times for acting against his wishes, why does Yahweh now act so harshly against Moses and Aaron? Does the striking of the rock seem like such a terrible thing? Aaron actually dies in this story, and Yahweh says that it is because Moses struck the rock. We will see in a later story that Moses also dies before the Israelites enter Canaan. Again, the reason why Yahweh denies him the honor of leading the Israelites into Canaan seems to be the one given in this story – that he *struck* the rock to get water, rather than talking to it.

4. Why are Aaron’s garments put on his son Eleazar, before Aaron dies? The garments referred to are presumably those that show that Aaron is the high priest of Israel.

**Next - To Chapter VI**  
**To Table of Contents**



## **CHAPTER VI. RETURN TO CANAAN**

### **VI - 1. ALONG THE ROAD TO CANAAN, THE CONQUEST BEGINS**

*[Numbers 21, 32:33; Deuteronomy 2:24 - 3:16]*

And the Canaanite king Arad, who lived in the South, fought against the Israelites and took some of them as prisoners. The Israelites made a vow to Yahweh saying, "If you give these enemies to us, we will completely destroy their cities." And Yahweh heard them and gave the Canaanites to them. The Israelites completely destroyed their cities. And they named the place Hormah.

And when the Israelites came to the land of the Amorites, they sent messengers to Seehone, the Amorite king of the Heshbon, saying, "Let us pass peacefully through your land on our way." Seehone attacked the Israelites. But the sword of the Israelites beat down the army of Seehone, and the Israelites took possession of all the cities of Seehone the Amorite, Heshbon and all its villages.

The Israelites turned toward Bashan, and Ohg the Amorite King of Bashan met them in battle. Yahweh said to Moses, "Do not fear him, for I have given him and all his people to you. You shall do to him as you have to the Amorite king Seehone." And the Israelites defeated them and left for Ohg no remnant of the people of Bashan alive. And they took possession of his land.

So Moses divided up the two Amorite kingdoms, the kingdom of Seehone, king of Heshbon, and the kingdom of Ohg, king of Bashan, and gave the land to the tribes of Gad and Reuben and to the half-tribe of Menasheh.

#### **DISCUSSION:**

**1.** Here we see the beginnings of the conquest by the Israelites of the land that will eventually become their home. First the battle against the Canaanite king Arad occurs. Arad was in the Negev, in the southern part of the land of Canaan.

The Bible story says that the kingdom of Arad was completely destroyed. Remember the commandment about how the Israelites are supposed to completely destroy any people they defeat in battle in the land that God had promised them? This is the second paragraph of item "I" under "Do Not Oppress the Stranger, Except Sometimes" in chapter V-4-iv). In this commandment, Yahweh requires that the Israelites kill every

person and even the cattle in a conquered territory. This is called the law of “herem” (see discussion point number 6 under “Do Not Oppress the Stranger, Except Sometimes” in chapter V-4-iv).

It is interesting that the place where this “herem” takes place is named “Hormah.” The similarity between these two words is no coincidence. The Bible story implies that the place got the name “Hormah” because that is where the “herem” took place. There are Bible scholars and archaeologists who believe that what took place was actually the other way around, namely, that there was a place called “Hormah” and the story of the herem was invented to explain the name. Do you remember other stories that we have read that might have developed in this way – to explain the name of a place?

2. We have already read a story about a battle that occurred Hormah. Do you remember which one? What was the outcome of that battle? What lesson do you think that the Bible authors were trying to convey by telling these two stories that occur at the same location? Take a look at “The Israelites Anger Yahweh and He Announces Their Punishment,” chapter V-6.

3. As the Israelites moved north on the east side of the Jordan River and the land of Canaan, they also met opposition from two Amorite kings, Seehone and Ohg. Thus the two Amorite kingdoms are also completely destroyed by herem, except that King Ohg himself is apparently not killed.

These conquests lead Moses to begin assigning land to the various tribes. Gad and Reuben and half of the tribe of Menasheh are given land that was in the kingdoms of Seehone and Ohg. This land is on the east side of the Jordan River. Although the Israelites have not yet crossed over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, they are beginning to settle the land anyway. Eventually, the other tribes will be given land in Canaan itself, west of the Jordan River, as these lands are conquered. Remember that Moses will not be permitted to cross over the Jordan into Canaan. (Why not? See chapter V-8, “Moses and Aaron Are Punished for Disobeying Yahweh”). So these lands on the east side of the Jordan are the only ones that he will live to see settled by the Israelites.

4. Do you remember where the tribes come from? Each tribe is supposed to represent the descendants of one of the sons of Jacob. But Jacob had no son named Menasheh. Menasheh and Ephraim are the two sons of Joseph and his wife Asenat, as mentioned in the story “Pharaoh Dreams and Joseph Becomes ruler of Egypt” (chapter III-4).

Why isn't there a single tribe of Joseph's descendants? Of course, no one knows. But one explanation that makes sense would be as follows: The Israelites were a confederation of independent tribes who often banded together to defend themselves against their enemies. In order to bind the tribes together, stories were told that presented them all as the descendants of a single man, Jacob. We remember the story of how Jacob's name was changed to "Israel" so that members of all the tribes could be called "the children of Israel" ([chapter II-14](#)). One problem may have been that the story of Jacob and his sons was well known, particularly the many stories about the son named Joseph. The story tellers could give the names of the existing tribes to each of the less important sons of Jacob, but they could not change Joseph's name because everyone knew it already. They may have gotten around this problem by simply saying that two of the tribes – Menasheh and Ephraim – did not represent sons of Jacob, but rather sons of Joseph.

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **VI - 2. FROM MOSES TO JOSHUA**

*[Deuteronomy 31, 32, 33, 34]*

And Moses said to the people, "I am now 120 years old. And Yahweh has said to me that I shall not go with you over the Jordan. Joshua will lead you to the promised land of Canaan, as Yahweh has said. And Yahweh will do to them what he has done to the Amorite kings Seehone and Ohg and to their land, which he destroyed.

And Yahweh appeared in a pillar of cloud at the Tent of Congregation and said to Moses, "Soon you will lie down with your fathers. Then the people will begin to worship other gods, forgetting about me, and breaking the Covenant between me and them. And then I shall hide my face from them, and terrible things will befall them."

And Yahweh told Moses to climb up Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, across from Jericho. "From there you can see the land of Canaan. It is on that mountain that you will die, because you were not faithful to me at the waters in the Wilderness of Tseen – you did not sanctify me before the Israelites. So you will see the land that I promised, but you shall not enter it. It is the land I am giving to the Israelites."

And, before he died, Moses said his blessing upon Reuben, Judah, Levi, Benjamin, Joseph, Zevuloon, Gad, Dan, Naphtalee, and Asher.

Moses climbed up Mount Nebo, and Yahweh showed him all the land that he had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And when Moses died upon the mountain, he was 120 years old and his eyes were not dim and his vigor was undiminished.

The people mourned Moses for 30 days, and then Joshua was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. And the Israelites followed the words of Joshua.

Never since then has there been a prophet like Moses, with whom Yahweh spoke face-to-face.

## **DISCUSSION:**

1. This is the story of the death of Moses, the final story in the Torah, or “Pentateuch.” The “Pentateuch” means the first five books of the Bible. These are considered to be a unified set of books because religious tradition, among both Jews and Christians, says that they were written by Moses himself, with direct inspiration from God. Remember that for religious Jews the Pentateuch is known as the Torah, which means instruction or guidance, and is taken as the basis for Jewish religious law. One question that Jewish religious scholars have asked themselves over the centuries is: if the purpose of the Torah is to transmit the Law or the Commandments to the people, then why did Moses (and God) write into it so many stories that contain no laws or commandments within them? How do you think they might have answered this question?

Of course, the five books of the Torah were written many centuries after the time of Moses, by at least four different authors, as we have discussed many times. If you believed that Moses wrote the complete Torah, how would you explain that he was able to write about the details of his own death?

2. In the traditional religious view of Jewish history, Moses is the great founder of the Jewish religion, which is said to be based on the commandments in the five Books of Moses, the Torah. He is not permitted, however, to live long enough to see the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promise that the Israelites will establish their home in the land of Canaan. Yahweh reminds Moses, in this story, that he will not live to see the Israelites conquer Canaan because he was unfaithful to Yahweh in the Wilderness of Tseen. Do you remember what Moses did to get Yahweh angry? If not, look back at the story “Moses and Aaron are Punished for Disobeying Yahweh” ([chapter V-8](#)). Why do you think the story was written so that the person who gave the Law to the Israelites and the person who led them to the conquest of Canaan were two different people?

3. When Moses dies, Joshua takes over as the leader of the people. Although the story says that Joshua was filled with the spirit of wisdom, his accomplishments will be very different from those of Moses. As we will see, Joshua becomes a military leader and conqueror. Do you remember in what way Joshua was different from almost all the other Israelites who lived to see the conquest of the land of Canaan? If not, then reread the story “The Israelites Anger Yahweh and He Announces Their Punishment” (chapter V-6) especially discussion point 6.

So, now we will begin the sixth book of the Bible, the book of Joshua.

### To Table of Contents

## **VI - 3. JOSHUA SENDS OUT TWO SPIES**

*[Joshua 1:1 - 2:24]*

After the death of Moses, servant of Yahweh, Yahweh spoke to Joshua, son of Noon and minister of Moses, saying, “Moses, my servant, is dead. Now go over the Jordan River with the Israelites. I have given you all the land that your foot will tread upon, as I said to Moses. Only, be strong and courageous to follow all the commandments that Moses, my servant, has given to you.”

So Joshua told the people, “Prepare your supplies, for within three days you will pass over the Jordan to take possession of the land that Yahweh, your god, is giving to you.”

And he sent two men to spy upon Jericho. The spies went to the house of Rahab, a prostitute. And the king of Jericho sent word to Rahab to turn over the spies. But Rahab hid the two of them on her roof, under some stalks of flax.

Rahab told the two spies, “I know that Yahweh has given this land to you. Our people are in terror of you because we have heard how Yahweh dried up the water of the Sea of Reeds for you as you left Egypt and how you destroyed the Amorite kings Seehone and Ohg. When we heard these things, our hearts melted and our courage left us. Now swear to me that, because I have treated you with kindness, you will spare the lives of me and my family – my father, and my mother, and my brothers, and my sisters.”

The two spies agreed and told Rahab to tie a scarlet thread in her window, so that the Israelites would know which house was hers. And Rahab helped the spies escape from Jericho.

They went to Joshua and said to him, “Surely Yahweh has given this land to us. All its people are faint with fear because of us.”

## DISCUSSION:

1. At the beginning of this story, Yahweh tells Joshua that the Israelites will obtain the land he has promised them *if* they follow all the commandments that he has given to them through Moses. We have heard this several times before. To what other individuals did Yahweh promise that the Israelites would have the land of Canaan if they would follow his commandments? As we have discussed before, this agreement is the “covenant” or, in Hebrew, “*b’reet*” between the Israelites and their god Yahweh (chapter II-1 and chapter II-11).

2. This story begins with Yahweh speaking to Joshua. Notice how Moses is described and how Joshua is described in the first sentence of this story. Why do you think the two of them are described this way?

At the end of the last story, “From Moses to Joshua,” chapter VI-2, it says that no one since Moses has spoken with Yahweh face-to-face. But we see here that Yahweh speaks directly to Joshua. Maybe the difference is that Joshua doesn’t speak back to Yahweh, so Moses is the last person to converse with Yahweh. The point here is that Moses is thought of by the Bible authors as far more important than Joshua. Moses brought the laws to the Israelites from Yahweh; Joshua will soon lead the Israelites in the conquest of the land that Yahweh promised to them. Why do you think that Moses is considered more important? Do you agree that he is?

3. We have already read a story about Israelite spies (chapter V-6, “The Israelites Anger Yahweh and He Announces Their Punishment.”) How does that story differ from this one? How are the two stories similar? What person is vitally important in both stories, but has a different role in each?

4. Rahab tells the two spies that the people of Jericho are terrified of the Israelites, and the spies report this fact to Joshua. Why are the spies so happy to obtain this information?

[To Table of Contents](#)

## **VI - 4. CROSSING OVER THE JORDAN AND CONQUERING JERICHO**

*[Joshua 3:1 - 6:27]*

Joshua and the Israelites went to the Jordan River. And Yahweh said to Joshua, "Today I will begin to make you great in the eyes of the Israelites, so that they will know that I am with you as I was with Moses."

And Joshua said to the Israelites, "When the feet of the priests who are carrying the Ark of Yahweh, lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan will be cut off, and will stand in a heap." And when the waters stopped, as Joshua had said they would, all the people crossed over the dry river bed. They set up camp at Gilgal, on the eastern edge of Jericho and observed the Passover. The next day they ate unleavened bread and grain from the land of Canaan. And they received no more manna, but ate the products of the land of Canaan that year.

And Yahweh said to Joshua, "You and your men of battle shall march silently, without speaking, around the city one time each day for six days. Have seven priests blowing seven trumpets go before the ark, circling the city with you. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times with the priests blowing the trumpets. When the long blast of the trumpets is heard, have all the people shout. With their great shout, the wall of the city shall fall and all of you will enter it."

And they did all these things that Yahweh had told them. And on the seventh day, on the seventh time they circled the city, the priests blew the trumpets and Joshua said to the people, "Now shout, for Yahweh has given you the city."

And the Israelites shouted and the wall of Jericho fell down. The Israelites entered the city and captured it. And with their swords they killed every man and woman, both young and old, and every ox and sheep and ass. Only Rahab and her family were saved, because she had hidden the spies that Joshua had sent. Then they burned down the city and everything in it. They saved only the silver and gold and copper and iron, which they put in the treasury of the house of Yahweh.

And Joshua said, "Cursed be the man who rebuilds this city." And Yahweh was with Joshua, and his fame spread through all the land.

## DISCUSSION:

1. This story begins with a familiar theme: the parting of the waters so the Israelites can pass. What purpose is served by having Joshua lead the Israelites across the dry river bed in the same manner that Moses led them across the Sea of Reeds?

When they got across, the story says that they observed the festival of Passover and ate unleavened bread. What is the significance of Passover and unleavened bread? Look back at the story “The Israelites Gain their Freedom” (chapter IV-5) and discussion points #1 and #3 of that story. Why do you think that Passover and unleavened bread are mentioned here again in the story of the crossing of the Jordan?

2. After the Israelites cross the Jordan into Canaan, Yahweh stops providing them with manna to eat. If you think about the reason why Yahweh sent the manna in the first place (see the story “Complaints and Miracles – Food, Water and a Battle,” chapter V-1), why does it seem right that he should cut off the supply of this food now?

3. The Israelites, on instructions from Yahweh and Joshua, seem to have a very strange battle plan for conquering Jericho. For six days they circle the city one time each day silently, except for the blowing of the trumpets (which are actually rams’ horns). Then on the seventh day they circle the city seven times. Upon a signal from Joshua, the Israelites all begin to shout, and the walls of Jericho fall down.

How could that be? Could shouting make the walls of a city fall down? There are many different ways of looking at this story. First, we can try to imagine what it was like to be inside Jericho during this time. We know from what Rahab said in the previous story (chapter VI-3, “Joshua Sends out Two Spies”) that the people of Jericho were already scared to death of the Israelites because of the stories they had heard about their conquests. What would they have felt like in seeing the Israelites participating in this strange ritual of circling the city each day? They may have been so confused that their fear only became greater. Maybe the statement that the walls fell down simply means that the people of Jericho became so frightened that they opened the gates to let the Israelites in when they heard the Israelites shouting. If we think of the Bible simply as literature, which can be interpreted in any way our imaginations lead us, then this might be one way of looking at this story. Can you think of any other ways of interpreting this story?

Another approach, very different from interpretation as literature, is to try to examine the best scientific evidence and then try to explain why the story might have been written in the way it was. When scientists try to understand the story of Jericho, they conclude that it is a very ancient city, probably the oldest in the world, having been settled about 10,000 years ago. However, when the archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon led a team to examine Jericho in the 1950's, she concluded that the walls of Jericho had fallen



down long before the time of the story of Joshua. By Joshua's time, Jericho was just a little village – not a very important place at all – with no walls to protect it. Some archaeologists now disagree with Kenyon's conclusions, but most seem to agree that there was no great battle of Jericho during the Israelite takeover of Canaan.

In fact, there seems to be general agreement that the Israelites moved slowly and gradually to become the dominant people of Canaan over a long period of time. The book of Joshua in the Bible, however, tells stories of many battles and conquests by the Israelites, occurring over a short period of time. Why is this? Maybe the stories are simply meant to prove that the Israelites are the rightful rulers of this land, even though it was inhabited by other people before the Israelites arrived. How does it show the right of the Israelites to take over the land of Canaan? Well, since the stories say that Yahweh himself was helping the Israelites win their battles of conquest, this, presumably, means that what they were doing must be right.

In trying to explain how the story of the battle of Jericho came about, we should remember that there actually were walls around the city at one time. If the conclusion is correct that the walls had fallen down before the Israelites arrived, then perhaps the story is designed to explain the ruins of the walls that would have been visible around the city. We discussed some cases in which stories may have been developed to explain things that really did exist, such as the names of places.

Some Bible scholars have concluded that the story about the circling of Jericho with the Ark and the blowing of trumpets once each day and then seven times on the seventh day was developed in order to explain some ritual ceremony that existed at a later time, when the story was being created. Obviously, there are many different ways of looking at Bible stories such as this one. Even with archaeological studies, great uncertainty remains about what happened or what might have happened.

4. In this story, Joshua and the Israelites kill every person, young and old, and even all the cattle in Jericho except for Rahab, who had helped them, and her family. Why do they behave so brutally? Remember, back in [chapter VI-1](#), “Along the Road to Canaan, the Conquest Begins,” the Israelites did the same thing to the kingdoms ruled by Seehone and Ohg? We see here again, the carrying out of the law of “*herem*.” (The commandment in the second paragraph of item “I” in [chapter V-4-iv](#).)

There is really no way to know today whether or not the Israelites really ever did anything like this. It would, perhaps, be nice to think that these stories were spread by them just to impress other people with their power, and the power of their god, rather than actually being true.

**[To Table of Contents](#)**

## VI - 5. THE ISRAELITES SETTLE IN THE LAND OF CANAAN

*[Joshua 8 - 24]*

And Joshua and the Israelites conquered the city of Ay, and killed all of its people as they had done at Jericho. When the people of the city of Gihon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ay, they went to Joshua and said to him, "We are from a far off land. We have heard of your god, Yahweh, and what he has done for you in Egypt, and what he has done to the Amorite kingdoms of Sehon and Og. Make a covenant with us and we will be your servants." So Joshua spared their lives and the Gihonites became the servants of the Israelites. Three days later the Israelites found out that the Gihonites were their neighbors, and did not come from far away. But they had made a covenant with them, so the Israelites did not harm them. So the Gihonites became cutters of wood and drawers of water for the Israelites, as they are to this day.

And the king of Jerusalem heard about what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ay, and that the people of Gihon had made peace with the Israelites, and he was very fearful. So he sent messages asking for help from the kings of Hebron, Yarmoth, Lakheesh, and Eglon, and the five kings attacked Gihon because it had made peace with the Israelites. The people of Gihon sent to Joshua for help. And Joshua came with his warriors and Yahweh crushed the attackers, who fled from Gihon. And Yahweh cast great stones upon them from the sky, killing most of them. And the Israelites killed more of those who fled, and Joshua had the five kings put to death.

And Joshua conquered and destroyed Hebron and Lakheesh and Eglon and many other cities also. Joshua and the Israelites defeated thirty-one kings west of the Jordan.

Yahweh said to Joshua, "You have become old, and there is much land left to take possession of. I myself will drive out the people on this land and it will become yours. You must only divide the land among the nine tribes and the half-tribe of Manasseh.

The conquered land was given to the tribes of Israel. The land of the tribe of Judah was in the south. They could not remove the Jebusites, who lived in Jerusalem, and so the Judahites and the Jebusites live there together to this day.

The tribe of Levi was given no portion of the land, except for some cities to live in and some areas outside the cities for their cattle, for Yahweh, god of Israel, himself is their inheritance.

And land was given to the tribes of Ephraim and Menasheh, the two sons of Joseph. The land of Ephraim was west of the Jordan, but they did not remove the Canaanites who lived in Gezer, as they still do today, serving at forced labor. Menasheh had lands east of the Jordan and also on the west. They could not push the Canaanites out of cities in their land, but when the Israelites have been strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor.

And the tribe of Benjamin received land between Judah in the south and the tribes of Joseph in the north. The land given to the tribe of Shimone lay within the land of Judah. And the tribes of Yissakhar, Asher, Naphtalee, and Dan also received their portions in the land.

After Yahweh had given the Israelites time to rest from their enemies, Joshua called the people together and said, "I have grown old. You have seen what Yahweh has done to the other nations for you. And you have taken their land, as Yahweh your god has said you would. So be strong and do what is written in the book of the Law of Moses. Do not bow down to other gods. And if you marry those of other nations, know that Yahweh your god will no longer take the land from these nations for you. Today I am going the way of all the earth. When you break the covenant with Yahweh your god, and serve other gods and bow to them, then the anger of Yahweh will burn against you, and you shall perish quickly from off the good land that he has given to you. Now choose today either to serve Yahweh or other gods."

And the people answered by saying, "We will not forsake Yahweh to serve other gods, for Yahweh is our god who brought us and our fathers out of the land of Egypt and he drove out the people from the lands we now possess."

But Joshua said to the people, "You are not capable of serving Yahweh, for he is a most holy god and a jealous god. If you do not follow Yahweh, and if you serve other gods, then Yahweh will destroy you."

But the people replied, "No, we will serve only Yahweh."

And Joshua said to them, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve Yahweh. Cast out the gods of the stranger that you have among you, and follow Yahweh, the god of Israel."

And the people said, "Yahweh, our god, is the god we serve. It is his voice that we listen to." And Joshua sent the people back to their land.

And Joshua, the son of Noon, servant of Yahweh, died at the age of one hundred and ten years. And they buried him in the hill country of Ephraim.

## DISCUSSION

1. This story begins with the destruction of the city of Ay. The best scientific evidence, based on archaeological explorations, indicates that, like Jericho, Ay was once a great city that had become only a small village by the time the Israelites arrived. There is no evidence at all for any destruction during the time that Joshua would have lived.

Whether the destruction by the Israelites of the other cities mentioned in this story actually occurred is not known. It is possible that these stories were designed to explain the situation that existed when they were developed. We see that the original non-Israelite people still lived in some cities, such as Jerusalem, Gezer, and cities in the land of the Menashehites when these stories were written. It is possible that stories of complete destruction were told about cities inhabited only by Israelites in order to explain why some areas had mixed populations while others were solely Israelite.

2. What is the story of the Gihonites all about? Why do they go to the trouble of convincing Joshua that they are from far away and not from the land that the Israelites are in the process of conquering? The reason is found in the law of *herem*, which we have discussed several times. (See the commandment describing this law, which is the second paragraph of item “I” in the story “Do Not Oppress the Stranger, Except Sometimes” in [chapter V-4-iv.](#))

3. As Joshua’s life is ending, he gets the Israelites to declare their loyalty to their god, Yahweh. It seems that he doesn’t quite believe that they will be willing to stick to their resolution to follow the laws of Yahweh, as given to the Israelites by Moses. Why is this? Through much of later Jewish history, the religious leaders have said that whenever things were going badly for the people, it was because they had strayed from the path required by Yahweh, as described in the laws given by Moses. It is possible that the words of doubt expressed by Joshua were put in the text by an author who lived at a later time who knew that the Israelites would not be able to hold onto their land forever.

4. As we leave the Israelites following the death of Joshua, they have settled on the land that Yahweh had promised them several times, starting with his covenant with Abraham. We know that they have not completely conquered the land because there are still Canaanites and others living in their cities. Twelve tribes have settled on the land and one tribe, the Levites, have been given the responsibility, as the priests, for taking care of the holy sites of Yahweh.

The tribes will now enter a period in which they are quite independent of each other, only working together at times to fight against common enemies. This is the period of the Judges (see the time line in the Introduction).

Eventually, the tribes will become united in a single kingdom under king Saul, who is followed by kings David and Solomon. It is during this period that the Bible stories are generally thought of as moving from “myths” to “history.” That is, although there is no conclusive evidence from outside the Bible that Kings David and Solomon actually existed, it seems reasonable from the way the stories were written to conclude that they were probably real people (although the Bible stories about their importance and wealth were probably greatly exaggerated).

This brief period of a united kingdom under Saul, David, and Solomon is followed, upon the death of King Solomon, by the splitting of the tribes into two separate kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The northern kingdom, Israel, containing ten of the tribes, was destroyed by Assyrian invaders in 721 B.C. The people of the surviving southern kingdom of Judah are the people who became known as Judahites or, more simply, Jews. They, too, were eventually conquered. Their Babylonian conquerors sent many of them, including their leaders, into exile in about 586 B.C., but they were permitted to return to Jerusalem after about 70 years.

The homeland of the Jews eventually became part of the Roman Empire, taking on the name Judea. The Judeans rose up in armed rebellion against the Romans in the first century A.D., and the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 as they put down the rebellion. The Jews again rebelled in the second century and were again crushed by the mighty Roman Empire. This defeat resulted in the final dispersion of the Jews from Judea. The Jewish people lived in many lands, all around the world, for many centuries. After about 1800 years, in the year 1948, the modern state of Israel was created as a homeland for the Jewish people near the ancient land of Judea. Many of the Jews who had lived in countries around the world have now moved to Israel. However, repeated wars with its Arab neighbors and continuing conflicts with Palestinians in lands it has conquered seem to make modern Israel similar in some ways to the ancient land of the Israelites that we have read about in these Bible stories.

### To Table of Contents