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FIRST FAMILIES ; THE GENESIS ACCOUNT

William Paul Haas

ABSTRACT

The Book of Genesis is principally a description of the emergence of interconnected families with specific relationships such as husband and wife, husband and wife-surrogate (distinct from prostitutes and harlots) sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, fathers-sons-daughters-in-law.

Love, loyalty, fidelity and affection appear often and in many forms, but no family portrayed in Genesis appears as immune to exploitation, manipulation, trickery, treachery, lust, hatred or murder. Both men and women are seen as active forces in the destiny of these troubled families, for good and ill. We ourselves still bear a likeness to these ancient portraits and many bear their names, Adam, Eve, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Rachel and Joseph, to cite only a few familiar names.

This essay is not a formal exegesis. It marks a stage in an ongoing personal enquiry. Also, it is offered as an invitation to those interested in the evolution of family life to look where they might not expect to find anything worth while. What I found is hardly final - for me or for anyone else. Those religious and political leaders who are currently concerned with the plight of families might take a close look at the families which are portrayed in the Book of Genesis.

FIRST FAMILIES ; THE GENESIS ACCOUNT

William Paul Haas, 2015

The Book of Genesis can be read in many ways. Thus, it has attracted the attention of linguists, anthropologists, archeologists, historians, theologians, philosophers and psychologists. Genesis can also be read as one would read the daily newspaper, looking for some hints as to who says what, about what is really going on, the difference between fact and fantasy and what it means, if anything. This is a superficial approach, admittedly, but it is not thoughtless. The surface has a truth of its own, well worth testing. In the

beginning one does not have to settle every argument or comprehend every claim in order to form some initial and adequate picture of what is worth pursuing.

In this essay I am taking this deliberately casual approach to see what the Book of Genesis has to say about some very ancient and important families, without knowing exactly what the word meant thousands of years ago. The narrative from Adam and Eve to the reuniting of Joseph and his brothers both reveals and conceals the human struggle to find something beyond definition. A careful reading of Genesis makes it clear that as much is unsaid as said, much is left out intentionally perhaps, much is detailed yet much is impossible to figure out. Quite often the simple questions are ignored: Why? What really happened? What difference does it make? Readers must invent their own questions.

It would not be irreverent or frivolous to see God as the author of the Sacred Scripture, especially Genesis, as a parent playing peek-a-boo (das Versteckspiel) with a child. Taking the suggestion of Jean Piaget, such games can have a profound influence on the cognitive development of children as they enjoy discovering the human world outside themselves in the company of a loving voice and face that appears and disappears. One can imagine God teasing us readers and the original narrators, saying “ Now you see it, now you don't ” . Paradoxically, the hiding and concealing some elements of the family portraits in Genesis energizes the revelation. Such a strategy can draw readers over the centuries to discover the truth they are capable of.

The concealment takes the form of an invitation to keep looking. The bits and pieces, the empty spaces, the stumbling and grasping, the unfinished reflections can be taken as evidence of the authenticity of the search itself. Behind all the family portraits appears the possibility that some ineffable, inscrutable, incomprehensible power of love is nudging the human race, including you and me, to keep looking for some truth unfolding. It may well be that we readers of Genesis are being played with, being teased with just enough narrative to keep us searching for the author behind the tale. With this said, however awkwardly, there is much to learn about how these ancient folks thought of their own families and to discover how familiar some of these insights might be.

Adam and Eve

We get the first peek into the family life of mankind in the Garden of Eden where a man and a woman, created or put together in some mysterious way, faced a baffling challenge. They could stay naked and happy or they could dare to find out what was missing without knowing what it was they might be looking for. Eve, not Adam, took the initiative, the serpent notwithstanding, to test the tester, God. The couple was ashamed of their nakedness before God, adding the temporary fig leaf, but it was Yahweh who made clothes for them out of skins. God mused: "See, the man has become like one of us, with the knowledge of good and evil." Note the unveiling and concealing, the scolding and the complement "like one of us." For provoking Adam and forcing God to show what the deity was really up to, Eve was punished by God thus; "you shall give birth to your children in pain. Your yearning shall be for your husband and he will lord it over you." Adam, too, was punished "Accursed be the soil because of you. With suffering you will get your food from it, for dust you are and to dust you shall return."

So, the first marriage began with the uninvited guests, the tension between need and exploitation, between desire and frustration, between expectation and emptiness. Not to disparage or dismiss the appropriate theological understanding of these events, theology has its place, but the simple human pathos should not be overlooked. The first portrait is pathetic. With the gift of the knowledge of good and evil, the first parents have the responsibility to bring up their two sons, Cain and Abel. And with them came the first family tragedy. Why? Because God favored the offerings of Abel from his flocks, which enflamed the jealousy of Cain, the tiller of the soil. Cain was "angry and downcast" and God warned him about his moodiness. "Is not sin at the door like a crouching beast hungering for you?" Undeterred by the warning, Cain took his brother out in the country and killed him. When God asked Cain where his brother was, Cain gave an answer that has haunted families ever since: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

God listened to Cain's cries for mercy and let him off more easily than the Code of Hammurabi would have, No eye for an eye or tooth for a tooth, God protected Cain from anyone who would punish him by marking him and making him a wanderer, separated from family to "east of Eden" Yet, Genesis bothers to complete the tragic story by claiming that Cain's descendents became the men of affairs for the future, becoming the tentmakers, the owners of live stock, the players of the flute and the lyre and

the metal workers in bronze and iron. Good fortune and misfortune followed families from then on. Not only the good prosper and the bad suffer.

The Flood: Starting Over

From the time of Adam until the great flood many patriarchs “walked with God,” and “the sons of God looking in the daughters of man, saw that they were very pleasing, so they married as many as they chose.” (Ch. 6) However, over the generations things went from bad to worse until God decided to start all over with new families drawn from Noah, his sons and their wives.

After the flood came and subsided, (Ch. 9) the first and only glimpse of Noah’s family life appears at the end of the flood narrative. “Noah, a tiller of the earth, was the first to plant the vine. He drank some of the wine and, while drunk, uncovered himself inside his tent. Ham, his youngest son [a married man], Canaan’s ancestor, saw his father’s nakedness and told his brothers [who] took a cloak and they both put it over their shoulders and walked backwards, covered their father’s nakedness: they kept their faces away and did not see their father’s nakedness. When Noah awoke from his stupor he learned what his youngest son had done to him and said : “Accursed be Canaan. He shall be his brothers meanest slave.”

The family portrait is rich in some details but surprisingly sparse in the most important matter: What did Ham do to his father that deserved such a severe condemnation? Was he pruriently curious? Insultingly irreverent? Or was Noah embarrassed to be found in a drunken “stupor” and so blamed his son for embarrassing him? The text leaves the reader confused, perhaps because such embarrassments in families are rarely admitted to and personal vulnerabilities are left unchallenged. Then, sometimes parents punish their children for their own faults. In any event, the second first family did not get off to an auspicious beginning.

Abraham and His Family

After Noah’s survival and family fragmentation, we encounter Abraham (Ch. 16) and family, whose journey dominates much that follows. At the call of God and of his father, Abraham (Abram) left Ur of the Chaldees (Bagdad) with his wife, Sarah (Sarai), his nephew, Lot and his wife. They traveled to Canaan with the promise from God that he would have

innumerable offspring and much land. However, his wife, Sarah, was barren, so she offered Abraham her Egyptian servant girl, Hagar, to bear him a child and satisfy his yearning for posterity. To keep the focus on family portraits, I will not follow that actual narrative of the biblical text, but rather cluster certain incidents together for reason to be given.

When Hagar became pregnant she offended Sarah by her disdainful attitude, so Sarah had her expelled into the wilderness to die. Just in time Yahweh rescued Hagar and promised “ I will make your descendants too numerous to be counted. You will name your son Ishmael [God heard] ” God predicted that Ishmael would be like a “ wild ass” ...” against every man and every man against him, setting himself to defy all his brothers.”

Hagar’s parting comment to God was to give God a new name , El Roi , [God sees] saying :”Surely this is the place where in my turn I have seen the one who sees me.” A singularly profound vision of the presence of God Indeed Hagar and Ishmael would see God seeing them again.

Abraham was eighty years old when Hagar bore Ishmael, who held the distinction of being Abraham’s first born son, named personally by Yahweh and promised prosperity. Moreover, Ishmael was made party to the covenant, being circumcised on the same day with Abraham himself, thirteen years before Isaac was born.

When God promised Abraham and Sarah that “ Nations will come out of her” (Ch. 17) Abraham “ fell on his face and laughed, thinking to himself “ Is a child to be born to a man 100 years old and will Sarah have a child at the age of ninety?” Most significantly, at that moment, Abraham begged God not to forget Ishmael, and God promised for a second time “ I will bless him and will make him fruitful and greatly increased in numbers.”

In short order (Ch. 18) God appeared to Abraham and Sarah to announce that she would bear a son by year’s end. Sarah heard the news and laughed to herself, thinking “ Now that I am passed the age of childbearing and my husband is an old man, is pleasure to come my way again?” It is no wonder that at that moment God gave the child the name Isaac, which means “ he laughs”. Perhaps the God behind the narrator’s God was playing peek-a-boo, enjoying the present human befuddlement, being amused by their reluctance to take the generosity of the gift seriously, and waiting for them to discover what they could never have imagined. God was not making fools of the couple, so much as leading them to discover their own folly, thus, the

beginning of wisdom. This clear evocation of laughter by all parties, including God, suggests that families that can laugh at their own confusion can become wise indeed. See The Mother of All Laughter: Sarah and the Genesis of Comedy by Terrence Lindvall.

Years later the light-heartedness turned to cruelty when Sarah became furious with Hagar and Ishmael and demanded that they be expelled again into the wilderness. “ This greatly distressed Abraham”, but God, siding with Sarah, told Abraham “ Grant Sarah all that she asks of you, for it is of Isaac that your name will be carried on”. This divine advice was surprisingly overlooked later on when it might have made a difference to Isaac’s life. Yet the God seemed to reverse itself by promising at that moment for the third time that “ The slave girl’s son, Ishmael, will also be a great nation.” Hagar and Ishmael were actually cast out into the wilderness where they almost perished until God rescued them, this for the second time. Few texts in scripture are more baffling than this, but I suspect that it is expressed in this tantalizing way to provoke the reader to seek what is beneath the surface. God is often found on both sides of a pending family catastrophe. urging the participants to find their own way. The question lingers, Did Abraham’s genuine love for Hagar and Ishmael persuaded God to change his mind? Too bad Abraham did not recall this exchange later on when he thought God asked him to kill Isaac.

Three strange events

From the text it is impossible to tell whether there was one episode, told in three different versions, or three different and distinct events, each told for some specific reason. The first event occurred when Abraham and Sarah went to Egypt where the Pharaoh saw the beautiful Sarah and desired her for his household. Abraham, afraid that he might be killed as an obstacle to the Pharaoh’s designs, convinced Sarah to say that she was his sister. However, after giving Abraham abundant presents and being punished by God for taking another man’s wife, the Pharaoh realized that he had been deceived, so he sent the two of them away, unharmed. (Ch. 12) Some time later on an apparent different occasion, Sarah and Abraham were in the country of Gerar where King Abimelech was attracted to Sarah as the Pharaoh had been. The couple used the same subterfuge to avoid Abraham being killed. And again Sarah seemed to accept the situation without complaint and Abraham did not concern himself with God’s promises and did not seek God’s protection. The third episode took place many years later when Isaac

and his wife Rebekah were also coincidentally in Gerar (Ch. 26) and Isaac told the local people that she was his sister “ for he was afraid to say ‘She is my wife’ in case they killed him on Rebekah’s account, for she was beautiful.” When King Abimelech (the same?) happened to see Isaac “ fondling his wife” the king exclaimed “ Surely she must be your wife. How could you say that she was your sister?” No answer was given to the King but the reader is told that Rebekah was both wife and sister , the couple having the same father. The upshot? They were allowed to stay and prosper in the land.

In each episode, Abraham and Isaac were afraid for themselves, with no evidence that they were in any real danger and with little regard for their spouses or for God’s promises. The text does not offer any justification for the deception, but both the Pharaoh and the King condemned the injustice to them and their people. Moreover, Abimelech confronted God for permitting such deception and defended his right to follow his honest conscience. The connections among these three incidents or these three stories suggest that the emerging family portraits did not disguise the effects of deception and cowardice on the fragile family unity. These were not the minor vices of insignificant personages: these were the moral failings that characterized the forefathers of mankind.

The Sacrifice of Isaac: the Akedah

It is important to acknowledge that Abraham came from a Sumerian culture in which the many gods were “ capricious and immoral ”, demanding the sacrifice of the first born son in order to bring forth abundant offspring. Abraham did not begin his journey with a perfectly developed theology, devoid of other influences. After several chapters of dialogue and argument between Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and Yahweh, perhaps Abraham became convinced that his God demanded no less than the other gods he knew of, that is, that he sacrifice his son Isaac so that he would have the promised posterity. At his age it was not likely that he would have many more children. It is my hypothesis that God allowed Abraham to act out the sacrifice of Isaac up to the critical gesture so that he would finally realize what a fool he was not to realize that God’s gift was absolutely generous, with no strings attached, no quid pro quo. For a more complete development of this thesis and for the evidence that this hypothesis is not completely gratuitous see Abraham’s Folly, by W.P.Haas , digital commons @ providence.

The most perplexing omission in this account is the total absence of any participation of Sarah, who throughout Genesis was hardly the silent witness to anything that would affect her son Isaac. One cannot avoid imagining that had Sarah known about the sacrifice of Isaac, or been consulted, she would have disabused her husband of any such foolishness. This silence of the biblical narrative about Sarah's role in the family is as meaningful as any word in the Book. Something very meaningful is being said by what is not being said. In the absence of Sarah's common sense, we are left to figure out Abraham's foolish misperception of the God who was so good to him and to her. Sarah's silence urges one to ask why a mother who would kill her husband's other son, Ishmael, with the concurrence of God, for the sake of Isaac, would stand idly by while Abraham planned to sacrifice her only son because he thought that was what God wanted. She was not afraid to confront God any more than Abraham was on more than one occasion

Several contemporary authors, from various perspectives, wonder about this haunting puzzle. Stupidity, by Avital Ronell: Whose Bible is it Anyway? by Philip Davies: Hagar, Sarah and Their Children by Phyllis Trible and Letty Russell: Abraham! Abraham! Kiekegaard and the Hassidim on the Binding of Isaac by Jerome Gellman and Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of Biblical Myth by Carol Delaney. Some of these authors see the Sacrifice of Isaac as a "pernicious" myth. In my view the Genesis narrative portrays God as a masterful teacher who leads Abraham to discover the truth for himself by acting out his own folly up to the moment of realization that there is a single, unique reality at play. Love is not capricious, it only asks for acceptance. God tested Abraham, not to find out something God needed to know, but for Abraham to find a truth about himself, and about his son, Isaac, and his wife, Sarah, and his "other" spouse, Hagar, and son, Ishmael. The failure to take love as offered, with no price attached, no artificial tests, no pleading or pretending, is a very deep problem for many families. Maybe Abraham realized this, too, at the last moment.

After Sarah's death, and the incomplete sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham married Ketura who, according to some rabbis, was actually Hagar by another name. She bore several children. When Abraham died, both of his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, attended his burial at the same site as Sarah's burial, the family together at last.

Lot's Family in Trouble

As part of Abraham's entourage, his nephew Lot and Lot's wife had a most unsettling experience of family life (Ch. 19) Lot lived in the infamous town of Sodom, after having split with Abraham who told his cousin " If you go right I will go left, and if you go left I will go right." Despite Abraham's effort to dissuade God from destroying Sodom, God sent two messengers to Lot to warn him of the impending catastrophe. The messengers were spotted by the local men and boys who desired them so passionately that they attacked Lot's house. To fend them off, Lot offered them his two virginal daughters " to treat as it pleases you." " Out of the way " they shouted and tried to break down the door to get at what they really wanted. The divine messengers saved themselves and the daughters by making the intruders blind. Then the messengers hurried Lot, his wife and daughters away from the disaster. Lot's future sons-in-law refused to leave because " they thought he was joking." According to the biblical concordance, "joking" never appears in the Scriptures, yet someone wanted to remember the young men who were left behind, not sure of what was coming. Lot's wife turned back to see the fireworks and was struck dead and that was no joking matter either.

Having escaped , (Ch. 19) Lot lived in a cave with his two daughters " The elder daughter said to the younger, " Our father is an old man, and there is not a man in the land to marry us in the way they do in the world. Come, let us ply our father with wine and sleep with him. In that way we shall have children by our father. " That night they made their father drunk and the elder slept with her father and he was unaware of her coming to bed or of her leaving." The younger daughter did the same the next night. They became pregnant and bore sons, one named Moab and the other Ben-ammi.

Even if one takes this crude story to be a literary device to discredit the Moabites and Ammonites, the narrative itself depicts a family of radically conflicting values. Lot values the security of his guests and his own hospitality more than he does his daughters. There is a suggestion of cruelty in Lot's indifference to them.

The daughters plied their father with wine so that he might impregnate them unconsciously and without guilt, so that the family would not disappear from human history. Their moral reasoning is so simple and unpretentious that the

prospect appears that the story would not be too altered if Lot might have gotten his daughters drunk for the same reason. The text offers no moral justification or disapproval: it simply described the desperation families can be put to by circumstance they cannot comprehend. Moral confusion is not unknown to parents and children when the world seems upside down and inside out. Genesis says more about families by its silence here than by any moral elaboration. Desperation is desperation and Genesis offers no pious antidote.

Isaac and Rebekah

(Ch. 24) Abraham sent his son ,Isaac, away to find a suitable wife among his kinfolk, not among the Canaanites. There Isaac found a wife, Rebekah, a girl “very beautiful and a virgin: no man had touched her.” At last, the reader thinks, “Love at first sight“. Rebekah was barren for some time but eventually became pregnant with twins, which she could sense in her womb. “ The children struggled with one another inside her and she said “ if this is the way of it why go on living.” motherhood was not going to be trouble free. Yahweh consoled her with the prediction that the elder twin, Esau, would serve the younger, Jacob.

Isaac preferred Esau because Isaac had a taste for wild game and Esau was a hunter. Rebekah preferred Jacob because he was “ a quiet man.” The future conflict is set in motion. Forthwith the story portrays how Esau gave up his birth right to Jacob in exchange for a cup of soup, commenting “This was all that Esau cared about his birth right.” (Ch. 25). Later in life the rivalry led to deeper animosity and hatred (Ch. 27) The story is well known about how Rebekah coached Jacob to deceive his father, Isaac, into giving him his final paternal blessing. Twice Isaac, not able to see clearly and thus being manipulated by Rebekah, explicitly asked Jacob “ are you Esau?” to which Jacob answered “Yes,” lying unequivocally just as his mother taught him to. The narrative unfolds without moral assessment leaving the question unaddressed: Is this what God wanted her to do? Rebekah’s love for her younger son seems to justify whatever is necessary., but not without regrets later on.

Esau’s hatred for Jacob grew to the point where he planned to kill him. When Rebekah heard of Esau’s determination to murder his brother, she sent Jacob away to her brother, Laban, lamenting “Why should I lose you both on the same day?” Desperate, Rebekah told Isaac “ I am tired to death with the

daughters of Heth. If Jacob marries one of them... what meaning in life is left for me?" This is the second time Rebekah's melancholy, petulance or helplessness becomes apparent. The burden of her own conduct within the family was apparently difficult for her to bear: deceiving her husband and cheating her son, Esau, left its scars.

Jacob arrived at Laban's home and agreed to work for him for seven years in order to win the hand of his daughter, Rachel, who was "Shapely and beautiful and Jacob had fallen in love with Rachel." As far as I can tell this is the only time "fallen in love" appears in Genesis. Laban's older daughter, Leah, had "no sparkle in her eye." At the wedding celebration, when night came, Laban "took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob and he slept with her. When morning came, there was Leah. [!!] So Jacob said to Laban "What is this you have done to me? ... Why then you have tricked me." Generous to a fault, Laban allowed Jacob to work another seven years so he might eventually marry Rachel, his first love.

The rivalry between the two wives of Jacob grew more intense, since Leah had children but Rachel, for a long time, did not. (Ch. 30) Rachel complained to Jacob "Give me children or I shall die." This made Jacob very angry. Rachel relented and gave Jacob her slave girl, Bilah, "so that she might give birth on my knees: through her then, I shall have children." The motherhood competition found expression in a perplexing encounter when Leah's son brought back from the fields some mandrakes, a plant with narcotic and fertility enhancing qualities. Rachel asked Leah for some of the mandrakes, to which Leah replied: "It is not enough that you have taken my husband, that you should want to take my son's mandrakes, too." Rachel so desired the mandrakes and whatever good they might do, that she agreed to allow Leah to sleep with her husband in exchange. Through several encounters with Jacob, Leah bore six sons and one daughter, Dinah. "Then God remembered Rachel: he heard her and opened her womb." (v. 22) She gave birth to her son Joseph.

The relationship between Jacob and his uncle, Laban, did not improve either. Each accused the other of trickery and theft until, in desperation, Jacob took his two wives and his family and attempted to leave Laban's land. But, Laban caught up with him, and, threatening him, complained: "What have you done, tricking me and driving my sons and daughters off like prisoners of war?... you did not even let me kiss my sons and daughters. You have behaved like a fool." After Rebekah tricked Isaac and Laban

tricked Jacob, Laban complains about trickery again. Such intense animosity continued until the two men finally gave up and agreed to part company, making a formal treaty with oaths, sacrifices and a monument to mark their separation.

Jacob's family endured one last test (Ch. 34) when his daughter by Leah, Dinah, was raped by Shechem, the son of a local ruler. Shechem wanted to marry Dinah, and Jacob agreed to the marriage in order to avoid a dangerous conflict. Two of Jacob's sons, however, demanded that their sister's disgrace be avenged, so they rejected Jacob's position and killed the offenders, destroyed their villages and carried off their " little children and wives." Jacob condemned their unwise attack because it endangered the family. The sons replied " Is our sister to be treated like a whore?" The text does not reflect on the plight of the innocent " little children and wives" of the other family involved.

With the last family crisis, the marriage of Jacob and Rachel, so full of promise, ended when Rachel died giving birth to a second son, Benjamin. (Ch, 35) Finally, Jacob and his brother, Esau, became reconciled and came together to bury their father, Isaac, who was one hundred eighty years old.

Jacob, Joseph and Sons

The last family portrayed in Genesis is that of Jacob and his sons, which serves as a fitting conclusion to these early reflections on family life. (Ch. 37-50) For the purpose of concentrating on the essential characteristics of the families at this point, certain details will be overlooked.

Joseph was much loved by his father and sensed his special destiny in dreams, for which his brothers detested him. Again, the long shadow of Cain's fraternal jealousy reappeared to gnaw at the fabric of the family. " But his brothers seeing how their father loved him more than all the other sons, came to hate him so much that they could not say a civil word to him. And they hated him more on account of his dreams." When Jacob sent Joseph out to the country side to see how his brothers were doing shepherding the flocks, they saw him at a distance and plotted: " Come, let us kill him and thrown his body into some well. We can say that a wild beast devoured him. Then we shall see what comes of his dreams." A caravan of Ishmaelites, the descendants of Abraham's first son, passed by on their way to Egypt, which gave Judah, one of the brothers, the opportunity to convince

the others that it would be better to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites than to kill him outright. Upon hearing the false report that Joseph was devoured by beasts, Jacob was distraught.

Judah's family life

Within the larger saga of Joseph's adventures, a significant drama took place which sheds a unique light on the family portrait. (Ch. 38) Judah, Joseph's half-brother, became the father of three sons. After the death of his first son, who had been married to Tamar but without children, Judah told his second son, Onan, to " Take your brother's wife and do your duty as her brother-in-law to produce a child for your brother." But, Onan, knowing the child would not be his, spilt his seed on the ground to avoid providing a child for his brother." This so offended Yahweh that God " brought about his death." The ancient tradition was that the individual lived in the ongoing life of the whole family. Thus, Onan's act showed how profoundly he despised, not only his brother, but the family's honor as well.

The complications in Judah's family life compounded when his daughter-in-law, Tamar, twice widowed, went home to her father's house to wait for Judah's third son, Shelah, to be old enough to marry her. In the mean time, Judah's wife died and this gave Tamar the opportunity to set a trap to beget a child by Judah without him realizing what she was doing. She disguised herself as a prostitute and sat by the side of the road which she knew Judah would be traveling, to entrap him. Seeing the prostitute and not knowing who she really was, Judah engaged her for sex and gave her his seal, his cord and his stick as a pledge of payment later on. Three months later, Tamar was found to be pregnant and Judah unknowingly condemned her, his daughter-in-law, to be burnt as a harlot. When Tamar produced the evidence that it was Judah who made her pregnant, he admitted: " She is in the right, rather than I. This comes of my not giving her my son, Shelah, to be her husband. He had no further intercourse with her." The strange mixture of virtue and vice, of desperation, lust, cruelty, repentance, honesty and resignation all converge in this stark family description. Genesis does not try to disguise the moral chaos emerging. The details of Judah's involvement would be negligible if it were not for the fact that Judah, his twin sons, Perez and Zerah, and their mother Tamar are listed by name in the genealogy of Jesus Christ, (Matthew's Gospel) giving these events the seal of reality

Joseph in Egypt

(Ch. 39-40) In Egypt as a slave, Joseph worked diligently, rejected the attempted seduction of his master's wife and went to jail for his virtue, and gained a reputation for interpreting dreams which eventually came to the attention of the Pharaoh. This brought him freedom and the responsibilities of high rank. In due course Joseph's brothers, without Benjamin, came to Egypt to buy provisions. " Joseph recognized his brothers but they did not recognize him" Joseph demanded that , to get the provisions, they would have to go back home and return with their youngest brother. After painful pleadings and pledges, the brothers convinced their father, Jacob, to allow Benjamin to go with them to Egypt. Joseph , by a trick, accused Benjamin of stealing a valuable cup and said that he would have to remain in Egypt as a slave. Judah offered himself as a slave in exchange for Benjamin so as to spare his father the agony of losing another son. Having saved Joseph's life earlier, now he offers to save Benjamin's life. At that demonstration of generosity and respect for his father, Joseph " could not control his feelings" He told his brothers " I am your brother Joseph whom you sold into Egypt. But now, do not grieve, do not reproach yourselves for having sold me since God sent me before you to preserve your lives." With the Pharaoh's encouragement, Joseph sent his brothers back home to bring their father to Egypt.

The most dramatic portrait in Genesis occurred when Jacob finally saw Joseph. " He threw his arms around his neck and for a long time wept in his shoulders. Jacob said to his son " Now I can die, now that I have seen you again and seen you alive." Through all the pain, cruelty and scheming a force as powerful as love and forgiveness, heroic generosity and compassion, emerges more fully only in the final chapters of Genesis, as if by contrast with all the families' struggles that preceded it.

(Ch. 49) As death approached Jacob gathered all his sons before him and said: "Gather together that I may declare to you what lies before you in the time to come." Jacob reprimanded Reuben, his first born because he "mounted your father's bed and defiled his coach ", by sleeping with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine. (Ch. 35). However, Jacob saved his highest praise for Joseph and for Judah. Benjamin he scolded as a " ravening wolf." Later his brothers came to Joseph, quoting their father: " You must say to Joseph, ' Oh forgive your brothers' crimes and their sins and all the wrong they did to you." Joseph's elegant response was simply: "Be not afraid: is it

for me to put myself in God's place? The evil you planned to do to me has by God's design been turned into the good that he might bring about, as indeed he has, the deliverance of a numerous people." As evil can be "turned into good" by God's design, this essay presumes that the silence, the unasked and unanswered question planted in the Genesis portraits can be turned into wisdom by God's design.

Conclusion

Dismal as the family portraits in Genesis are for the most part, the family struggles there seemed to be destined to some heroic endurance, some hopeful resolution. As families contain within themselves the seeds of their own disintegration, they also contain the seeds of their survival. If love and hope, forgiveness and understanding can survive they must take root where they are most endangered, in families such as those so candidly portrayed in Genesis. Genesis does a profound service to believers and nonbelievers alike for portraying family life in every imaginable predicament, as the reality in which God brings about the transformation of human beings, whether they know it or not. The role of God in these family affairs is overshadowed by the tragic conduct of people looking for something they cannot grasp. It might well be that this is ultimately the purpose of the revelation: not to give a perfect portrait of God but for God to force humankind to examine its own portrait.