



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES II

THE PENTATEUCH

Lesson 10 Commentary Genesis 46 - 50

Lesson 11 Questions Exodus 1 - 4:17

THE TWELVE TRIBES IN EGYPT

Genesis 46-50

INTRODUCTION

Joseph's story continues and becomes the story of his father, Jacob, and his eleven brothers and their families. These are people whom God called through Abraham, who now settle in Egypt under the protection of Joseph, once the ousted son, but now the one in whom the family is saved and continued. Joseph is a pre-figure of Jesus who is rejected, sold to His enemies, and yet becomes the Savior of His people and of those of the whole world.

In these last four chapters, we see the four hundred years of Israel's Egyptian life begin, as Pharaoh offers Joseph the land of Goshen for Jacob and his family, a fertile country south and west of Canaan, then under Egypt.

However, true to God's plan, Jacob, as he approaches death, insists that he be buried in the land of Canaan, where Abraham had bought the field and cave for Sarah's and his tomb and for his descendants. Even Joseph, so blessed in the land of his exile, requests of his brothers that when God takes them back to the land promised to Abraham and his descendants, they take his bones with them. The Promised Land was their link to

the one true God through the first father of all, both Jews and Christians—Abraham.

I. MIGRATION TO EGYPT (Genesis 46:1 - 50:26)

A. Beer-Sheba (Genesis 46:1-4). On the way south, Jacob stopped to offer sacrifice to the "God of his father Isaac," where Abraham had settled for some time. God had renewed His promises to Abraham there, and here also God spoke by night to Jacob (in these chapters Jacob is at one time called by that given name, and at another by the name given by God, Israel, "El rules," which later and today is the name of all his descendants).

God's message here to Jacob was an encouragement to go on to Egypt where he would become a great nation, but where his descendants would be called and led back to the land given to Abraham. God also promised, "Not only will I go with you; I will also bring you back here" (Genesis 46:4).

The personal presence of God is also part of our lives, if we could only realize it. He is with us as we travel, or change our destinations, when it is

all to carry out His will, or His directions through His Church. Do we trust ourselves to God?

B. A Family Migration (Genesis 46:5-27 - 47:26). Israel's sons brought him back to Egypt, along with their wives and descendants, seventy in all, the author says. But scholars tell us that the list seems to be inserted by some redactor who based it on lists in the book of Numbers, some of whom could hardly have been born then. This is an example of long-told and retold family tales; in the telling they change here and there. God did not, as we saw in the opening lesson to this Scripture Study, write the Bible Himself, but He inspired it and guarded theological truths from error. Given that all the family history that Genesis tries to record was told without being in writing for many generations, we still marvel at the fact of the book of Genesis and the other wonderful accounts of God's intervention with our race.

Joseph went to meet his father near the border and wept in joy as he took him in his arms (Genesis 46:29-30). He had already spoken to Pharaoh, who had assigned the land of Goshen, good land for shepherds, for Jacob and his family. The famine that had come to the whole of those lands was so severe that all the Egyptians had given their farm lands over to "government" (Joseph the governor) except for the priests' land. Then the government distributed fairly the seed, and asked for a fifth of the harvest for Pharaoh and the government.

II. JACOB'S LAST TESTAMENT AND DEATH (Genesis 47:27-50:26)

In memory of his beloved Rachel, Jacob adopted Joseph's two sons, as though they were his own, since Rachel died too early to have more sons. In this occasion, Jacob showed preference for the youngest of the two sons, Ephraim, who became a leader of a northern tribe.

An important text for Christian faith is given in Jacob's last testament: "The scepter shall never

depart from Judah (Jacob's fourth son)... while he receives his people's homage." And "You, Judah, shall your brothers praise, and the sons of your father shall bow down to you" (Genesis 49:8-12). This prophecy found its fulfillment in David's kingdom and ultimately, in the Messiah, the Son of David, Jesus Christ.

Joseph buried his father in the cave in Canaan, where Abraham and Sarah were buried. Then Joseph returned to Egypt. Fearful that Joseph might now show his anger, his brothers apologized for their earlier treatment of Joseph and asked for forgiveness. We can learn from his answer: "Even though you meant harm to me, God meant it for good..." And certainly Joseph was the means of saving His people in Egypt. So when adversity comes to us, let us remember this lesson from Joseph—his forgiving spirit, and his ability to see God's hand in his life. One of Jacob's future descendants, the King of Kings, and Savior of the world, also taught the world that He saved upon the Cross to have this loving forgiveness:

"Father forgive them, for they know not what to do" (Luke 23:34)

COMMENTARY ON GENESIS

The editors of Genesis had a God who had revealed Himself to them. They had the story of the exodus: the passage of a group of ex-slaves through the wilderness, utterly dependent on God. They knew about their ancestors crossing the Jordan into the land promised them. This gave them three basic requirements for founding a nation:

1. a unifying experience
2. the establishment of a form of government
3. and possession of a homeland

They now needed a group consciousness of being the first of God's kingdom and call to preserve His revelation.

The writers of Genesis assembled as many oral and written traditions of their people as they could. Some of these memories differed in some details, according to the tribes and their experiences. Some had different names, juggled locations, dates inexact. So in many cases these were ignored or changed—a thing horrifying to a modern historian. But a well-known scripture scholar, Walter Breuggeman, reminds us:

“Biblical faith is about joining another history. It is the story of having memories other people cannot remember. It is the story of having promises other people cannot envision. It is about having a very different identity and vocation which others do not have or take seriously.”

III. THE PATRIARCHS

The means which the priestly editors of Genesis chose to reinforce Israel's group consciousness was through linking the sagas of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph together. These stories are not history in the scientific sense, and they have characteristics sometimes of legend: exploits and virtues of heroes are exaggerated to seem larger than life. Scholars today believe that the first five books of the Bible, called the Pentateuch (“five books” in Greek), were written about the tenth century B.C.

A. Hebrew Heroes. The heroes of the first book of the Bible are unique among all the cultures of the ancient world. They are not stories of individual valor and glory; neither are they family histories primarily, although family is an important concept. The patriarchs are shown, however, as models of courage, resourcefulness, and shrewdness, but it seems almost incidental. Perhaps these qualities were exaggerated somewhat in the re-telling of their lives around later campfires: their goodness became almost too good, while their human weaknesses glare much more brightly in the light of their importance in salvation history. Weren't you shocked at Jacob's connivance with his mother to cheat his older brother

out of his inheritance? And what of Abraham haggling with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah? Would you expect such dickering between a man and God?

B. Their Uniqueness. The unique characteristic of the Hebrews' stories in Genesis is that they show their heroes not as individuals so much as bridges between man and God. Abraham is shown as important because God selected him as the agent by whom He would first reveal to mankind the grand design which He has for all of them, for us! It is a design which will in turn reveal God not only as Creator but as loving protector of the human race. God did not give glory to Abraham personally as He will to David or to Solomon later, but He gives him the vision of multitudes of descendants, inheritors of a great homeland and of blessings and promises to him.

Abraham will be blessed by all those descendants because he becomes the model of the most important virtue of the Hebrew people, and of all believers: Faith in God. This becomes the motif, the dominant idea of all the patriarchs and the group identity of all the Israelites, which they will pass to all other people.

IV. THE MEANING OF GENESIS FOR US

We have just read the end of the sagas of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with his son Joseph. What does it mean to us Christians?

At this point we note another theme in Genesis: God's choice of the unexpected, of the illogical inheritors of His promises. Some scholars insist that this is an example of God's free choices of those on whom He gives His graces, and if this is so, it will have much to say to us, as Christians, for we too, like Jacob, are younger sons and daughters.

1. Jacob's Legacy. We read the story of Jacob's dying message to his sons: he seems to predict their future lives. Scholars tell us that

these are summaries of the history of the tribes descended from each of the twelve sons, inserted into the text by the later editors, who drew on the historical traditions.

2. Covenant History. The priestly editor of the Genesis stories considered it a history of the covenants with God. These events were based on events which happened sometime, somewhere, to someone. They are used as a framework on which to model a doctrinal edifice—the relationship between the human race and God.

This scholarly opinion is just that—it may be accurate or somewhat so, but there are some exciting historical points to be made here.

V. HISTORICAL MIGRATIONS

Anthropologists tell us that around 2000 B.C. tribes of central Asia began to migrate, similar to the one of Siberian tribes which wandered across Alaska and down to the Americas—ancestors of our native Americans. The Asian tribes of Central Asia migrated into India, then into Mesopotamia, and finally, into what became Kuwait and lands west of that, where there were already Semites. It is interesting that Abraham's father, grandfather, and brothers all have names which are the same as watering-stops on the caravan routes through the area. Some scholars believe that these names were what is called eponymous names, denoting their dwelling areas.

Again, archaeologists tell us that their discoveries found a movement of Semitic people in Mesopotamia, called the Amorites, who came down into what is now Syria and south of it. These Amorites migrated, probably, for they apparently disappeared. But in Egypt around that time a Semitic people called the Hyksos (foreign rulers) settled there and conquered it for about four hundred years.

Both these scholarly findings seem to corroborate the stories of Abraham and his descendants.

God could have and may have set in motion an almost world-wide sequence of events into which believers read the story of His power and love for mankind.

VI. THE TRUTH IN GENESIS

A. For the Israelites. The truth in the book first given to the Israelites, is in the great themes of the book: the promise; the free choice which God makes of those whom He will call to fulfill His promises, the way of their fulfillment: through the covenants. It is the promises which give the people of Israel their group identity.

B. For the Church. But there is a fuller meaning in all Scripture, a sense which the Church accepts when she accepts the Old Testament and incorporates it into the Canon of Scripture. This is the sense in which all Scripture is ultimately about Jesus Christ and through Him about us and our relationship with God. We are accustomed to think about Jesus as the “Suffering Servant” of Isaiah, but is He not the “Logos” (the Word of God) of the book of Wisdom, and so on all through the Old Testament?

Is He not visible in Abraham? Consider his call: in order to follow it, Abraham had to leave his homeland, all the familiar aspects of his life and relocate in an alien place. Only his faith in God enabled him to do that. And didn't Jesus do that for us?

In this lesson, we see Jacob taking his faith-step. He, too, must leave the land of his forefathers, to risk losing God's blessings for his descendants: for Jacob senses that the land and the blessings go together.

Both Abraham and Jacob made 180-degree turns, out of obedience to their call, with only faith in God as their “insurance.” And there are others: Moses, the Israelites of the Exodus, the Apostles, Paul... Finally, there is Jesus Himself, taking leave, first of all, of heaven beside His Fa-

ther, and then Galilee, His home, to turn His face toward Jerusalem and the final confrontation with evil. Jesus' first step toward Jerusalem was the turning point in the history of our faith.

VII. OUR FAITH

And do we not have the same call to leave the secure and familiar, with only our faith to reassure us? We choose a career, we marry, we enter religious life, we change professions, and I think just not of the Sisters of St. Mary, one of whom has written our Scripture Study, and of those young girls who left Ireland to come into the "wilder-ness" of North America, helping my own religious community to grow.

A. God's Promise. What an extraordinary event we have been considering: through one small group of people, God, who created the universe, chooses to reveal His great love and protection forever. Such a God does not make promises easily, nor does He break them. He does not say, "I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you, but only if you are perfect!" And when we do not measure up to our responsibilities, He does not say, "You broke your promise, therefore I can break mine." Nor does He punish us with cruel and unusual punishments; He only lets us take the consequences of our actions—and that is not really punishment.

B. God's Ways. We have seen God select a person who is not the logical inheritor of His promise. We see Isaac, a second son, and Jacob, a second son, inherit, while Ishmael and Esau, the eldest, are eliminated from the story. We see a gradual disappearance of all Jacob's descendants except the tribe of Judah. And when the message of Jesus the Christ is rejected by Judah's descendants, and accepted by the Gentiles, we inherit the promises.

We inherit the covenant, with its promises and responsibilities. God will be our God, assist and deliver us, while we obligate ourselves to worship no other God and to observe all that He has revealed. The covenant establishes a relationship between us and God. And the bond of blood comes with Jesus, our brother in human nature. We, too, are children of Abraham, children of the Covenant, children of Faith.

APPLICATION

God has renewed his covenant with the human race again and again, while our race has again and again broken faith with Him. Ask yourself if you keep His covenant, are faithful to what the Faith teaches us, to what our responsibilities are toward God, toward the Church which is more glorious each time a member is holy, and lives a life which is worthy of our God, of our Savior.

* * * * *

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 11
Exodus 1-4:17

Day 1 Read the Notes.

- a. Share a thought that challenged you.

- b. Share a thought that furthered your love for God or awareness of who He is for you; who you want Him to become for you.

Day 2 Read Exodus 1.

- a. In the end chapters of Genesis, the writer tells of the deaths of Jacob and Joseph. How does he relate the beginning of Exodus with the Genesis story?

- b. How do Exodus 1:5, 7, and 12 recall the promises to Abraham?

- c. What does it cause in Egypt's court?

Day 3

- a. What does Exodus 1:17 teach us about birth control?

- b. Read Exodus 2:1-10.
 1. What other women further the plan of God?

 2. What advantages could Moses' growing up in Pharaoh's court later give to the Hebrews?

- c. Read Exodus 2:11-22
 - 1. What attempt does Moses try on his own to save his people?

 - 2. What traits of character do we learn of Moses here?

Day 4 Read Exodus 2:23-25 and Exodus 3:1-15.

- a. How does the voice Moses heard identify Himself in Exodus 3:6? In 3:14?

- b. Read John 18:1-8. What do you learn from these Old Testament and New Testament names for God?

Day 5 Read Exodus 3:15-22, Psalm 135:13.

- a. What do we learn about God in these verses?

- b. In the last line of verse 18, what is mentioned that the Church does at our Eucharist? What do we call this offering?

Day 6 Read Exodus 4:1-17.

- a. What three confirmations did God give Moses to convince the people of God's message?

- b. At Moses' next objection, what did God answer?