

THE
COMPLETE GUIDE



TO
THE B I B L E



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STEPHEN M. MILLER

BARBOUR BOOKS

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Our mission is to publish and distribute inspirational products offering exceptional value and biblical encouragement to the masses.



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I spent a year working full-time on this book—with occasional workday breaks to look out the window.

No, I wasn't bird-watching, goofing off, or giving my mind a place to wander. Just the opposite. I was trying to keep my head focused.

How does looking out the window do that?

Well, sometimes I get stumped over what words to type. I've been a Christian since I was a little boy. I'm used to church jargon, pulpit clichés, and Bible scholar lingo—which I call *academese* (ACK-uh-duh-MEEZE). Rhymes with *sneeze*.

So it's easy for me to use the Christian tech talk I grew up with. Trouble is, it's a foreign language to the people I want to see reading this book.

I didn't write this for folks who understand Christian jargon. I wrote it for curious people who have more questions about the Bible than answers.

That's a tough crowd.

But I figure if I can get them to read this book, maybe the Bible old-timers will read it, too. Who knows, maybe both groups will enjoy seeing ancient ideas all dressed up in fresh words that make sense today.

So when I was writing, I looked out the window to remind myself who I was writing for.

I work out of a home office. When I look out the window, I see a cul-de-sac of neighbors—most of whom I know, and most of whom are not Christians. When I back my car down the driveway on Sunday mornings to go to church, there's no rush hour going on. More like a hush hour. Dead silence. No movement but me and my family disturbing the peace while my neighbors obey at least one Sabbath Day commandment: rest.

I write for people in bed on Sunday mornings.

I'm hoping that once they get vertical they'll come across this book somewhere. Maybe as a curiosity that catches their eye while they're trolling aisles in a store. Or surfing Web sites. Or maybe it'll come in the mail as a gift.

I'm hoping they'll take a peek inside to discover an easy-reading Bible reference book that

- looks like a magazine,
- treats the Bible with the respect due a 2,000-year-old, and
- explores different opinions about what the Bible is saying.

If you're one of those Sunday morning, sleepy-eyed readers curious about the Bible and the God behind it, I have a confession. I thought I was donating a year of my life to you—a sacrifice of sorts. Boy, was I wrong. No one spends a year in the Bible only to come out on the short end of the deal.

If this book I've written leads you into the Bible—and I sure hope it does—you'll see what I mean.

A word of thanks

Lots of people helped bring this book to daylight. From midnight to dawn, here are a few.

Steve Laube, my agent. He believed in the idea enough to risk his time and money pitching it to publishers.

Paul K. Muckley, Barbour editor. He liked the idea enough to pitch it to his publishing board committee.

Linda A. Miller, my wife and first-round proofreader. She catches most of my mistakes and happily tells me about them. I smile and thank her. Well, usually.

Jason Rovenstine, design director. He envisioned this book as something colorful and gorgeous—then he found the folks to bring his vision to life.

Catherine Thompson, book designer. She created a fresh canvas of art with each turn of the page. With such a design-intensive book, she and her colleague (below) had to pull some overtime. So I'd like to thank them both at time and a half.

Ashley Schrock, design associate and map czar. Okay, I made up that second title because she worked so hard refining the maps. She did the same with other art in the book, too.

George Knight, Kelly Williams, Connie Troyer, and Annie Tipton, who all contributed to the editing and production process.

Shalyn Hooker, marketing manager. She spread the word that this is a book worth reading.

God bless each one of these people.

And God bless you as you read this book, and more importantly as you read *his* Book.



Stephen M. Miller

stephenmillerbooks.com

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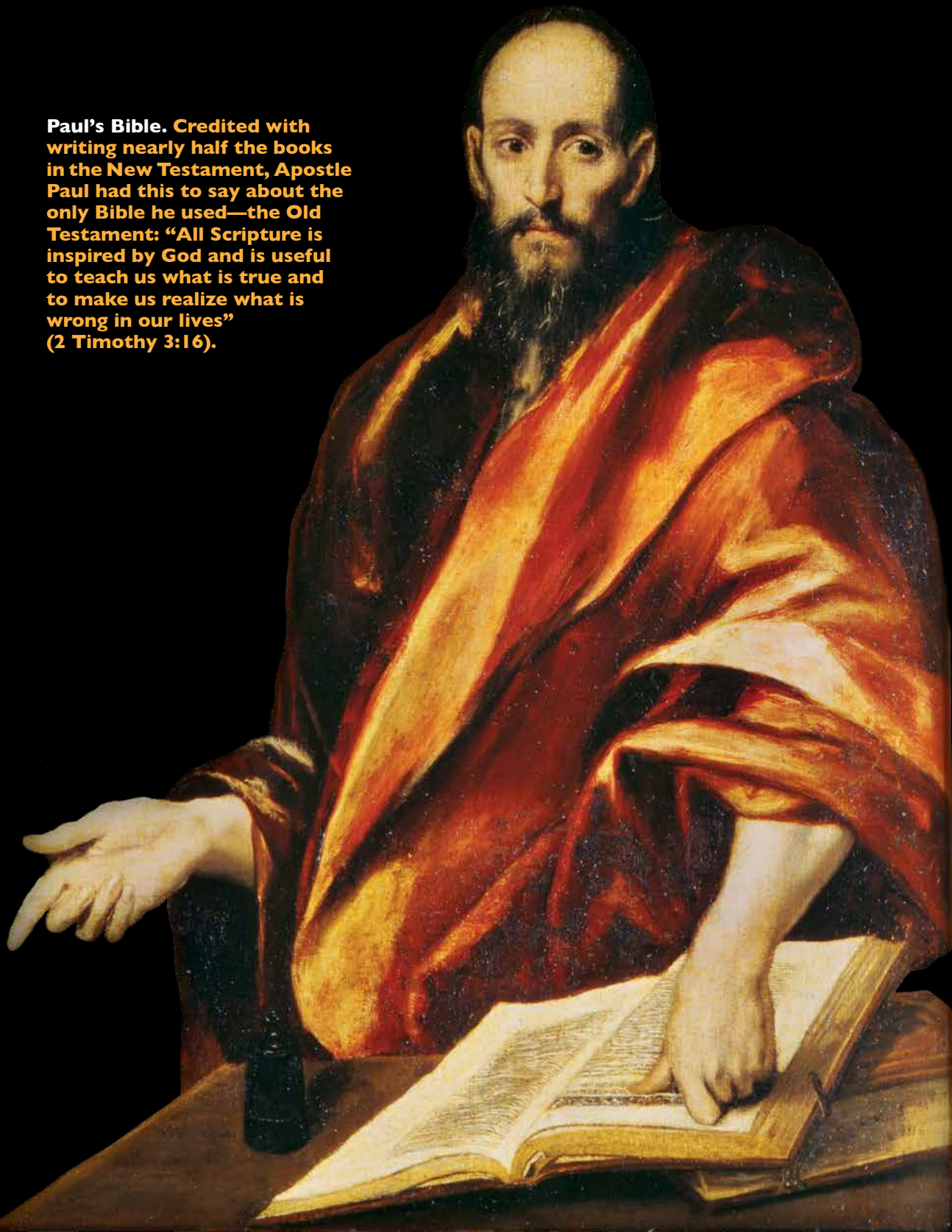
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Paul's Bible. Credited with writing nearly half the books in the New Testament, Apostle Paul had this to say about the only Bible he used—the Old Testament: “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives” (2 Timothy 3:16).



OLD TESTAMENT

Some Christians hate this title almost as much as Jews do. They prefer First Testament.

Old Testament suggests “out of date.” Yet many of the New Testament’s favorite teachings come from the Old Testament—the first two-thirds of the Bible.

Take Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. He quoted that from Leviticus 19:18, a law written in Moses’ time.

HOW WE GOT THE OLD TESTAMENT

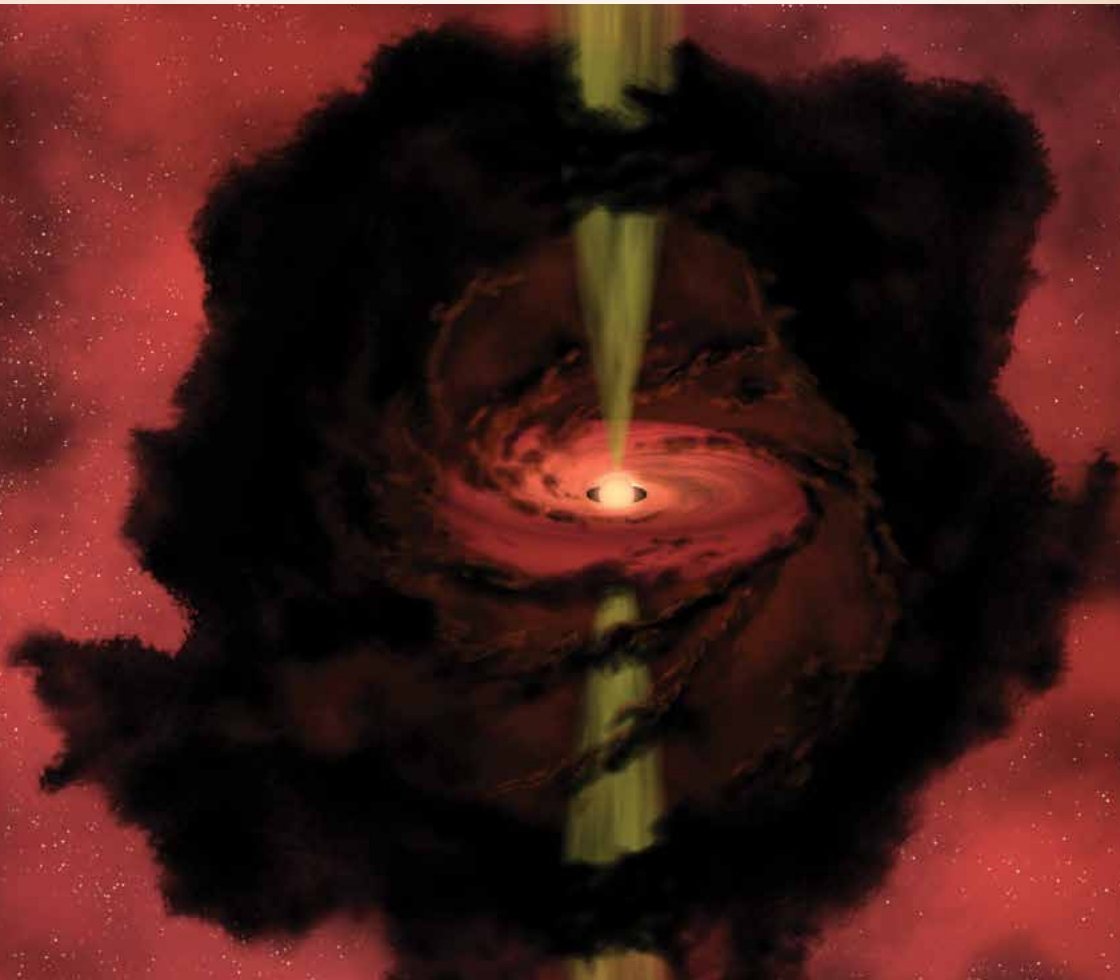
Many of the oldest and most memorable stories—like those about Moses and Abraham—were passed along by word of mouth from one generation to the next. At least that’s what Bible experts guess. The Hebrews didn’t develop an alphabet until later, when they settled in Israel after Moses led them out of Egypt. Before that, Jews would have written with other alphabets, such as those from Egypt or Phoenicia, in modern-day Lebanon.

In King David’s day, about a thousand years before Jesus, Jewish writers and editors started compiling the stories. They did it to preserve a record of their people and the new nation they started. As the centuries rolled on, this cherished library grew, adding stories, genealogies, laws, prophecy, poetry, and songs. Some books were lost, and survive only as titles that Bible writers mention in passing, such as “*The Record of Samuel the Seer*, *The Record of Nathan the Prophet*, and *The Record of Gad the Seer*” (1 Chronicles 29:29).

In time, Jews began to cherish certain books—treating them as sacred. First, the laws and stories of Moses in the first five books of the Bible. Then the books of the prophets. And finally the rest of the books in Old Testament—a diverse assortment of writings such as Psalms, Proverbs, and Job.

It’s unclear when the Jews settled on the 39 books we now have. But many guess that Jewish leaders finalized their Bible shortly after Romans destroyed the last Jewish temple in AD 70. That’s when Jewish faith started to spin around sacred words instead of a sacred place—since the Jerusalem temple was gone.

GENESIS



A star is born. Astronomers theorize that a star develops inside a dense cloud of gas and dust. Gravity from the newborn star draws in the dust, which forms a swirling disk. Jets of some kind of material seem to spray out at both poles, based on evidence gathered from peering into these clouds with NASA's Spitzer Space Telescope. Genesis doesn't answer questions about exactly how the universe was created. Instead, it answers the question of *who* created it.

WHEN A PERFECTLY GOOD WORLD GOES BAD

God creates a wonderful universe, with the perfect world for humans. But it doesn't stay perfect for long.

If God's to blame, it's for giving humans the freedom to make their own decisions. The Bible, however, teaches that humans are the ones responsible because they misused that freedom.

God creates the first couple, Adam and Eve. He gives them the run of the planet and only one rule to obey. It's one rule too many. They aren't supposed to eat fruit from a particular tree. But they eat it anyway.

This sin not only hurts their intimate relationship with God. It somehow contaminates the entire world—like a spiritual toxin that breaks into the physical dimension. Paradise is lost.

The rest of the Bible is the story of God working to rebuild his relationship with humanity, to get rid of sin, and to restore his perfect creation.

Genesis tells about the beginning of God's restoration plan. God starts with one man who trusts him completely: Abraham. God promises to produce from Abraham a race of descendants who will be devoted to the Lord—a chosen people who will teach the world the value of choosing obedience to God over disobedience.

Abraham has two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. But only Isaac will continue the family line that produces the chosen people. Isaac also has two sons, Esau and Jacob. But only Jacob's family grows into the nation devoted to God. Jacob has 12 sons, and they become the founding fathers of Israel's 12 tribes.

By the end of Genesis, Jacob's extended family has fled a drought in what is now Israel. They are living as welcome refugees in Egypt. Unfortunately, they will wear out their welcome. But that's the story of Moses and the Exodus.

MAIN POINT:

God created and sustains everything that exists. Though sin damaged God's creation and his relationship with humanity, God is at work in the world restoring both.

WRITER:

The book doesn't name the writer. An old Jewish tradition says Moses wrote the first five books in the Bible—

Genesis through Deuteronomy. But Abraham, the book's starring character, lived at least 700 years before Moses, and perhaps almost 1,000 years. Many Bible experts say Genesis is a collection of stories passed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next. They say Jewish scholars assembled these stories into a book hundreds of years after Moses, during the time when kings ruled Israel.

DATE:

Genesis begins at the beginning of time and continues into the lifetime of Abraham's great-grandson, Joseph, who lived in about 1800 BC.

LOCATION:

The stories cover a lot of Middle Eastern territory, including what are now the countries of Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt.



LOTS OF BEGINNINGS

There are plenty of good reasons to call this book *Genesis*. That name comes from a Greek word. It means "origin," "birth," or "beginning." And this is a book full of beginnings:

- the universe
- humanity
- sin
- civilization
- the Jewish nation

CREATOR at work

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.

GENESIS 1:1–2

God creates the physical universe, from the most distant stars to the starlight reflected in human eyes. In the creation story, God's work extends over seven days.

Day one. "Let there be light," God commands.

Day two. God separates the sky from water on the earth.

Day three. God separates the land from the water. Then he creates plants.

Day four. God creates the sun, moon, and stars.

Day five. Fish and birds fill the oceans and sky.

Day six. God creates land animals and human beings.

Day seven. God rests and declares Creation excellent.

BIBLE BOOKS OUT OF ORDER

Creation starts the Bible, in the book of Genesis. The end of the world finishes it, in Revelation. That could lead us to think the Bible is printed in chronological order. But it's not.

If it were, Job would likely come after Genesis. That's because Job seems to have lived in about the time of Abraham, whose story appears in Genesis. Instead, Job's story comes after Esther, though this Persian queen wasn't born for at least 1,500 years after Abraham and Job.

The Bible is a library of 66 books written in many genres and over a span of more than a thousand years. How the books ended up in the order we find them in our Bibles today is complicated—so complicated that it leaves Bible experts guessing.

In Old Testament times, the books in the Jewish Bible were divided into several sections: Law, Prophets, and Writings. And the first section—the first five books in the Bible—seems to have been the earliest material the Jews considered sacred. Next came the Prophets. And then the Writings, which include books like Psalms, Job, and Esther.

The New Testament also falls into several categories. There are the four Gospels about Jesus. Next comes the story of how the church got started (Acts). Then there's a stack of letters, generally arranged from the longest to the shortest. That's why Paul's 16-chapter letter to the Romans comes first and Jude's one-chapter letter comes last. The prophecy in Revelation wraps up the Bible, turning all eyes to the future that God has in store for his people.

Some people read this creation story as a myth. Others read it like a science book, searching for clues about how the universe unfolded—some insisting that the story took place over seven 24-hour days.

Many Bible experts say both approaches are too extreme. The story is no more a myth than God is, because the point of the story is to show that God created everything. In ancient times, there were many creation stories and many gods who got the credit. But the Bible writer wants to make sure the credit goes to where the credit belongs.

Many experts say there's also a problem reading this story like science. It was, after all, written some 2,500 years before Galileo launched the scientific revolution. That happened in the 1500s, when Galileo and others declared that the earth revolves around the sun. Scientists reading Genesis today might wonder how plants could grow (day three) before the sun was created (day four). They might also wonder why some Christians insist that the story took place over seven 24-hour days when the sun that is used to measure 24 hours wasn't created until day four.

In the Hebrew language, as in English, *day* can mean 24 hours, or something much longer: "In Abraham's day." That's part of

the reason many Christians have no trouble with the idea that God may have taken eons to create the universe.

Yet Christians who prefer the literal six-day approach to creation offer a few questions of their own. If God created the world over a period of eons instead of 24-hour days, how could fruit trees have survived that long? Genesis says God created trees with seed-bearing fruit on day three. Yet it wasn't until the next day—or eon as some Christians would argue—that he created the insects necessary to pollinate those fruit trees.

The creation story has a finale—humanity: “Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us” (Genesis 1:26). Earlier, God had declared his work “good.” But after creating humans, he upped his evaluation: “He saw that it was very good!” (Genesis 1:31).

ONE RULE too many

“You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die.”

GENESIS 2:16–17

Before there are 10 Commandments, there's just one. Adam and Eve aren't supposed to eat fruit from a particular tree in the Garden of Eden.

Why the fruit is off-limits is anyone's guess. Perhaps Adam and Eve aren't mature enough to eat fruit that gives insight about good and evil. Maybe God intends to give them that knowledge later.

A talking snake, described later in the Bible as “the ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan” (Revelation 12:9), convinces Eve to eat the fruit.

“You won't die!” the serpent tells her. “Your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil” (Genesis 3:4–5).

Eve eats. She convinces Adam to do the same.

That single act of disobedience somehow changes life on this planet—for the worse. The rest of the Bible is the story of God working to correct the damage and to defeat sin.

Decimated. That's a fair word to describe what happens to the intimate relationship between God and humanity. Once upon a time, Adam and Eve had recognized the sound of God's footsteps, apparently because he spent time “walking in the garden” (Genesis 3:10). But now God orders the couple out of his garden, forever.

Some Bible readers speculate that:

- Adam and Eve were created to live forever;
- animals were vegetarians living in peace with each other; and
- crops grew in the wild.

If so, all that changes. Adam and Eve will eventually die. In the meantime, their survival will depend on Adam's hard work at battling weeds, weather, and critters to grow enough food to survive. Humanity will survive only through painful childbirth.

WHY ARE WE HERE?

That's the big question. Why in the world did God create human beings?

Was he lonely? Did he have the same desire for children that many adults have today? Did he want someone to love—and to love him back?

Though Genesis doesn't directly answer those questions, it does provide at least one line of a job description for humans—a purpose for life: “They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground” (Genesis 1:26).

There may be many reasons why God put human beings on this planet. But one of the reasons is to take care of his creation—to “tend and watch over it” (Genesis 2:15).

THE ORIGINAL SIN

Some Bible experts, especially in past centuries, have speculated that the world's first sin somehow changed God's creation in a physical way—even to the point of genetically altering humans. In other words, those experts are speculating that it's like Eden's forbidden fruit contained a chemical that tripped our DNA sin switch—and that ever since, humans have suffered from the effects of what theologians call “original sin” or the “sinful nature.”

The effects are this: Given the choice of taking a walk on the sinfully wild side or the righteously mild side, we'll generally go wild.

Most Bible experts today reject this physics-bound theory about original sin, as though the idea is a few loony birds shy of a flock. They argue—with what certainly seems like solid logic—that if sin's a physical problem, we'll one day find a cure. And once we do, future generations can spend their free time debating whose sins Jesus died for. That,

of course, doesn't track with the New Testament, which teaches that it's Jesus who saves us.

This much is clear, both in Bible teaching and in the personal observations of most people: “Everyone has sinned” (Romans 3:23).

How sin got a grip on people remains a mystery. But the Bible does tell us *when* it started: “When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned” (Romans 5:12).

The Bible also tells us how to break sin's grip: “Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. . . because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death” (Romans 7:24–25; 8:2). (See also “Sinful Nature: The Short Course,” page 382.)

WHAT “SONS OF GOD” married human women?

The sons of God saw the beautiful women and took any they wanted as their wives.

GENESIS 6:2

The Bible adds that children of these matches became the heroes and famous warriors of ancient times.

This puzzles Bible experts. They offer three theories about who the “sons of God” were.

- **Angels or some other kind of spirit beings.** In Job's ancient story, “sons of God” refers to angels. Yet Jesus said, “When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage. In this respect they will be like the angels in heaven” (Matthew 22:30).
- **Kings, princes, or other rulers.** The Bible sometimes calls kings and other leaders “sons of God.” “You are gods,” one writer said of court judges, “children of the Most High” (Psalm 82:6).
- **Godly men.** These sons of God are the descendants of Seth instead of the murderer Cain, who

killed his brother, Abel. Abraham and the Jews came from Seth's family. And the Bible calls the Jewish people “God's children”: “This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son” (Exodus 4:22).

An angel of a husband.

Angels were the “sons of God” that Genesis says married human women. That's the oldest theory about who those mysterious figures were. But other theories point to national leaders and to holy men.



NOAH and the flood

“I am about to cover the earth with a flood that will destroy every living thing that breathes.”

GENESIS 6:17

Within 10 generations, people have become so sinful that “the LORD was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth. It broke his heart” (Genesis 6:6).

He decides to start over. He starts with the family of the only good human on earth: Noah. God decides to wash away the sin—and the sinners—with a massive flood. At God’s instruction, Noah and his three sons build a floating warehouse that’s longer than a football field, half as wide, and about four stories high.

The boat has the storage capacity of about 370 railroad boxcars, minus whatever interior space is used for support beams and walls. Noah loads the boat with supplies and with pairs of land animals, male and female.

For 40 days—perhaps a round number that simply means a long time—rain thunders down and geysers spray up from wells deep underground. By then, even the mountain peaks are entertaining curious fish.

Five months later, Noah’s boat scrapes to a halt, running aground on a mountain in the Ararat range. That’s somewhere on the border of what is now Turkey, Iran, and Armenia. But Noah and his passengers have to wait inside a little over a year. That’s how long it takes for the land to dry out enough for Noah’s family and the animals to leave the boat and begin repopulating the region.

God fills the sky with a rainbow. It’s the seal on a promise he makes: “Never again will the floodwaters destroy all life” (Genesis 9:15).

ABRAHAM: Iraqi father of the Jews

“I am giving all this land, as far as you can see, to you and your descendants as a permanent possession. And I will give you so many descendants that, like the dust of the earth, they cannot be counted.”

GENESIS 13:15–16

Abraham grows up in the Euphrates River town of Ur, in what is now southern Iraq. It’s the New York City of its day—busy, wealthy, and bursting with culture: art, crafts, and the oldest written language on record, called cuneiform. Instead of using an alphabet, ink, and paper, writers use reed

A WORLDWIDE FLOOD?

Bible experts debate whether the flood covered the entire world as we know it, or the entire world as the ancients knew it—perhaps just the region where civilization started.

The first known Middle Eastern cities sprang up in the fertile river valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in what is now Iraq and Iran. These rivers provided water for the people, animals, and crops. And they served as riverboat highways. Archaeologists have found evidence of massive floods that wiped out cities along the rivers.

But there was another flood farther north in about 4500 BC, geologists estimate. This flood took place about 200 miles north of Mount Ararat—the highest peak in the Ararat range. A whopper of a deluge, this flood turned the Black Sea from a freshwater lake to an ocean. It happened when the ocean broke through a narrow strip of land at what became the Bosphorus Strait. Salt water rushed into the lake basin with the force of many Niagara Falls, pushing back the shoreline many miles.

Whether or not Noah’s flood covered the entire earth, flood stories certainly do. They’re woven into about 70 cultures—from Middle Easterners, to the American Indians, to the Chinese, to the South Pacific islanders.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, an ancient story from what is now Iraq, even tells of a Babylonian man who survived a flood by building a huge boat for his family and animals. Like Noah, he released a dove after the flood to see if it would find a resting place. The dove came back, just as it did for Noah.

sticks to press pictures into soft clay.

For reasons unknown, Abraham's father, Terah, decides to move his entire extended family to the boonies of Canaan. That's a bit like a New Yorker moving to the cornfields of Des Moines—both in distance and in culture shock. Perhaps Terah has a feeling in the 2100s BC that Ur is ripe for invasion. In fact, invaders arrive about a century later.

Terah stops halfway to Canaan. He settles some 600 miles upriver in the busy caravan town of Haran, on Turkey's side of the border with Syria. After Terah dies, God tells Abraham to finish the trip to Canaan. That's when God promises to grow Abraham's family into a great nation.

Quite a promise for a childless 75-year-old man with a 66-year-old wife.

But Abraham obeys God. So he packs up and moves his household entourage and his herds south to what is now Israel.

A decade later—and still no kids—Abraham's wife, Sarah, decides it's time to call in a surrogate mother. Ancient Middle Eastern custom allows it. By law, this child will belong to Sarah and Abraham. Sarah chooses her Egyptian-born servant, Hagar, as the substitute mother. Hagar gives birth to Abraham's first son, Ishmael.

But God says the son he has in mind for Abraham will come from Sarah. God actually shows up as a traveler in Abraham's camp and says so. Sarah overhears this. She's 91 at the time—way too old to have kids, she thinks, but not too old to laugh. God hears the laugh and assures her, in his gentle way, that he'll get the last laugh.

Within the year, Sarah gives birth to a boy. She names him Isaac, Hebrew for "laughter." Seems appropriate given the history, as well as the future. Isaac would fill the tent of his parents with joy.

Sarah doesn't want Isaac to grow up having to split Abraham's wealth with Ishmael. In these days, the oldest son usually gets a double share of the inheritance and becomes leader of the extended family. So Sarah convinces Abraham to send Hagar and her son away. God approves, promising to

DID PEOPLE REALLY LIVE HUNDREDS OF YEARS?



Before the devastating flood, people generally lived for centuries, according to the Bible. Some lived almost 1,000 years.

Methuselah lived longest: 969 years. If people lived that long today, Richard the Lionheart might still be telling his war stories—from the Crusades.

As high as these numbers are, they're dwarfed by those in other ancient records. A clay prism from the world's first known civilization, Sumer, in what is now Iraq, says only eight kings ruled the land up until the flood—and those eight ruled for a total of 241,200 years. That's an average of 30,000 years per king. The shortest reign was 18,600 years.

Maybe the ancients measured time differently than we do, some history experts guess. Or maybe these are polite exaggerations, a way of honoring beloved leaders—perhaps a bit like giving some folks today honorary doctorates even though they didn't spend a day in college.

Others wonder if the numbers might be accurate. Perhaps the flood somehow changed the world in a way that drastically cut life spans. Maybe constant cloud cover before the flood gave way to blue skies and harmful sun rays. Or maybe the geysers released toxins previously buried deep in the earth.

Quarter-million empire. Inscribed almost 4,000 years ago, this Sumerian clay prism says eight kings ruled the empire before the flood.

take care of both sons and to make them each into great nations.

Isaac's descendants become the Jewish people. Ishmael is considered father of the Arab people. Ishmael has a dozen sons who start a dozen tribes scattered from Egypt to Saudi Arabia.

THEORIES on the toasting of Sodom

The LORD rained down fire and burning sulfur from the sky on Sodom and Gomorrah. He utterly destroyed them, along with the other cities and villages of the plain, wiping out all the people and every bit of vegetation.

GENESIS 19:24-25

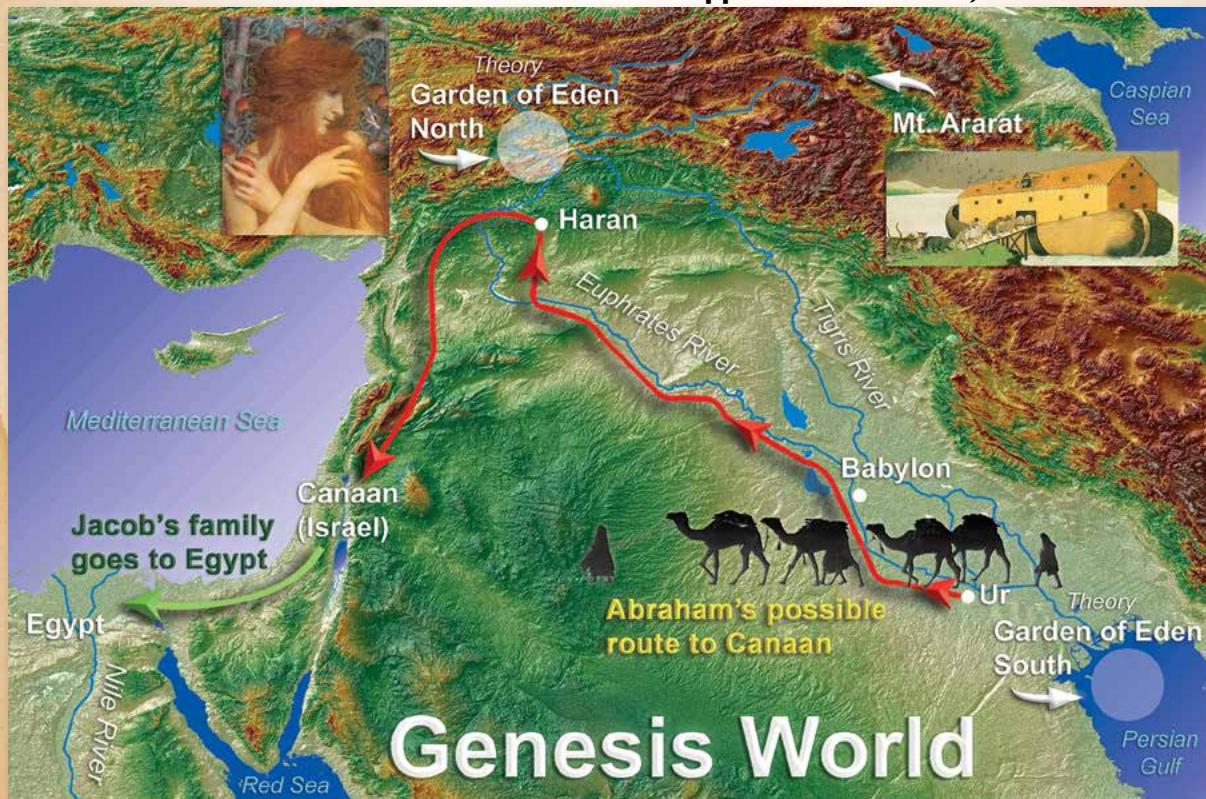
The twin sin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, along with their satellite villages, were notorious in Bible times for “pride, gluttony, and laziness, while the poor and needy suffered outside her door” (Ezekiel 16:49). And because some men in Sodom tried to gang-rape angels sent to escort Lot out of town, this city also earned a reputation for rape and homosexuality. *Sodomy*, which is homosexual sex, takes its name from the city.

Bible experts don't know exactly where Sodom and the other cities were, or how God seared them off the planet.

As for the location, one of the most persistent theories puts them in or near the shallow water on the Dead Sea's south end. The idea is that in Bible times, this area was a fertile plain—not flooded as it is today.



Snow-capped Mount Ararat, with Little Ararat be-





Dead Sea chemical mining. Floating on nature's abstract canvas, chemicals await collection by miners. The chemicals rise from the water and dry in evaporation beds of the Dead Sea's southern shallows. Some Bible experts say Sodom and Gomorrah once thrived here—until an earthquake set off a chain of disasters: explosions, chemical fires, and the flooding of a once-fertile plain now covered by the southern Dead Sea.

At the moment, there are a couple of intriguing theories about *how* God destroyed the cities. Both depend on two facts. First, the entire area sits on a massive rip in the earth's crust, called the Great Rift Valley. Second, the region is rich in natural gas and minerals such as sulfur and salt. Israel and Jordan mine these resources today.

- **Big boom theory.** An earthquake ripped apart pockets of natural gas, which were ignited by pre-dawn lamps in the cities. Explosions propelled ground minerals high into the air, and they rained back down in a firestorm.
- **Surfing turf theory.** Built on sand beside the sea, the cities were shaken by an earthquake. For a moment, the landscape floated on the groundwater beneath, like quicksand. Then pulled by gravity, the entire area slid down into the sea, the cities aflame from natural gas fires. This theory was suggested by a retired geologist, Graham H. Harris, writing in the *Quarterly Journal of Engineering Geology and Hydrogeology*, November 1995.

GOD TO ABRAHAM: “Kill your son”

“Take your son, your only son—yes, Isaac, whom you love so much. . . . Go and sacrifice him as a burnt offering.”

GENESIS 22:2

God orders Abraham to slaughter Isaac, hack his corpse into manageable pieces, and burn it to ashes. That’s Abraham’s son—the son God had promised would produce a nation of descendants who would inherit Israel.

What sense could that possibly make? Yet Abraham agrees. Some wonder if Abraham is expecting God to raise Isaac from the dead, piece by piece.

The Bible doesn’t say how old Isaac is at the time. But Jewish legend says he’s 37—and that the news of Abraham’s plan shocks Sarah to death at age 127.

Father and son walk about three days north to Mount Moriah, the hill where Jews a thousand years later will build the Jerusalem temple. There, Abraham piles up stones to make a simple altar. He arranges wood on top. Then he ties up his son, lays him on the altar, and picks up a knife to slice his boy’s throat for a quick death.

“Don’t lay a hand on the boy!” says an angel—who may actually be the Lord himself. “Now I know that you truly fear God. You have not withheld from me even your son, your only son” (Genesis 22:12).

As if an all-knowing God needed to test Abraham’s faith.

New Testament writers will later see in this story a foreshadowing of another Father-Son sacrifice. What Abraham was willing to do—sacrifice his son—God did.

Perhaps Abraham’s story is to help people understand how much God suffered because of humanity’s sin. Though it seems impossible for us to understand why Jesus had to die for the sins of human beings, the Bible teaches this is what happened. And it was God who sent Jesus to die. When the Roman soldier raised his hammer to drive in the nails on that Friday morning, no angel came to stop him.

But angels were there at dawn on Sunday.

JACOB AND ESAU, twins at war

Rebekah became pregnant with twins. But the two children struggled with each other in her womb.

GENESIS 25:21–22

Isaac marries Rebekah, who becomes pregnant with twin sons: Jacob and Esau. They wrestle so much in the uterus that Rebekah asks God, “Why is this happening to me?”

“The sons in your womb will become two nations,” God answers. “From the very beginning, the two nations will be rivals. One nation will be stronger than the other; and your older son will serve your younger son.”

Perhaps that’s why the number two son, Jacob—who was born one moment after Esau—becomes her favorite. Papa Isaac prefers Esau, the red-haired hunter who brings home savory meat.

Jacob cheats Esau out of two of the most valuable things in ancient life:

- an inheritance; and
- the deathbed blessing of the father.

Esau, in what reads like one of the dumbest acts in the Bible, willingly trades his rich inheritance for a bowl of hot soup. As the oldest son, he gets a double share of the family estate. So perhaps what he trades is only his rights as the oldest son, while retaining a single share. In either case, the soup is overpriced. And the story reads like a set-up—as though Jacob waited for just the right time, when Esau came home from a hunt exhausted and starving.

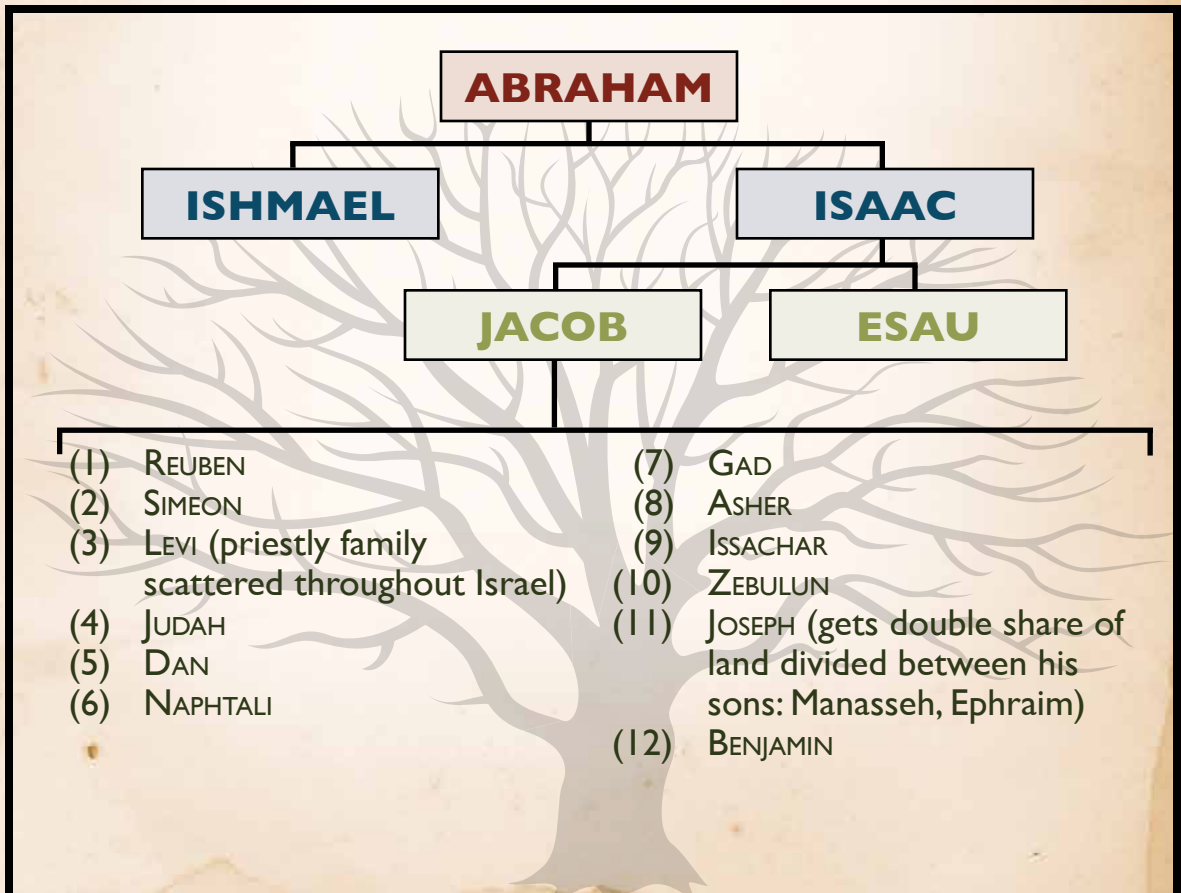
Later, Isaac intends to give his deathbed blessing to Esau. This blessing will put Esau in charge of the family. And it will call on God to bless Esau with power, prestige, and wealth. Isaac thinks of this blessing as more than a prayer. It's a promise that he expects God to bring to life for Esau.

It's not to happen.

Rebekah helps Jacob trick the blind, old Isaac into thinking Jacob is Esau. Convinced, Isaac blesses the wrong son with words he can't take back. When Esau shows up later, the only words left for him sound more like a curse than a blessing. "You will live away from the richness of the earth, and away from the dew of the heaven above" (Genesis 27:39).

Esau vows to kill Jacob as soon as their father dies. So Jacob leaves the country and heads north to the home of his mother's brother, Laban. Uncle Laban lives along the border of what is now Turkey and Syria.

THE FAMILY TREE OF THE BIBLICAL PATRIARCHS



JACOB'S surprise wife

There was no sparkle in Leah's eyes, but Rachel had a beautiful figure and a lovely face. Since Jacob was in love with Rachel, he told her father, "I'll work for you for seven years if you'll give me Rachel, your younger daughter, as my wife."

GENESIS 29:17–18

Women are property in Jacob's world. They pass from father to husband in a business transaction. The father loses a household worker, so he expects some compensation for his loss.

Jacob falls in love with the gorgeous Rachel. She's his first cousin and Laban's number two daughter. Unfortunately, Jacob had left home in a hurry without any of his father's substantial assets—most of which had four legs and ate grass. So Jacob offers to work seven years for Laban, as payment for Rachel.

It's a deal.

Seven years later Jacob gets the surprise of his life—the surprise of his wife. On the morning of the first day of the rest of his life as a married man, Jacob wakes up in bed with the wrong woman: Leah.

How Jacob manages to get through the wedding ceremony, the dinner party, and the night of lovemaking without taking a look at his surprise bride is a wonder. This might suggest a nighttime ceremony, a thick veil over the bride, and a lot of wine inside the groom.

Sober by sunrise, Jacob storms off to Laban, the cheat who cheated a cheater. Laban simply explains it's the custom to marry off the oldest daughter first. But apparently it's not the custom to mention the custom ahead of time.

Jacob agrees to finish out the traditional week of wedding celebrations. It's out of respect for Leah, who must have felt horribly used. At week's end, Jacob marries Rachel, but only after committing to another seven years of labor for Laban—the only winner in this deal.

Mrs. Beauty and Mrs. Beast. Jacob works seven years for the privilege of marrying Rachel, a “beautiful” young woman. But Rachel's father pulls a wedding-day switcheroo. Jacob wakes up the next morning with Rachel's older sister, Leah. She has “weak” or “glazed-over” eyes, though scholars aren't sure what to make of that. Whatever it means, it seems intended as the flip side of Rachel's description. If Rachel's the beauty, Leah's the beast.



GOOD-BYE LABAN, hello Esau

Jacob put his wives and children on camels, and he drove all his livestock in front of him. He packed all the belongings he had acquired. . . and set out for the land of Canaan, where his father, Isaac, lived.

GENESIS 31:17-18

Working as a shepherd, Jacob not only manages to make Laban rich. Jacob gets rich, too. Not only in herds, but in children—13 of them. Wealth in ancient times is measured partly by the size of the family. The bigger the family, the more workers you have. And when they grow up, the more security you have in your old age.

Jacob ends up with this many children because of his dueling wives. They compete for his affection by trying to give him sons. God takes pity on Leah because Jacob doesn't love her like he does Rachel. So God allows her to have six sons and a daughter. Leah also gives Jacob her maid as a surrogate mother, who provides two more sons. Rachel, infertile for years, offers her maid, as well—and gets two sons. In time, Rachel has two sons of her own—Jacob's favorite boys: Joseph first and then Benjamin, who is born on the road trip back to Canaan.

With his 14 years served and another six used to build his own flocks, Jacob heads for home. But he's terrified of Esau. The night before crossing into Canaan, he sends his family ahead, intending to spend some time alone. A mysterious man arrives. Somehow Jacob seems to recognize this man as a being with the power to influence the future.

Jacob grabs hold of the man, whom many Bible experts say is either an angel or God in human form. Jacob says, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Genesis 32:26).

After an all-night struggle, the man finally blesses Jacob and gives him a new name: Israel. It means "God struggles" or "one who struggles with God." Centuries later, Jacob's descendants will take this name for their nation.

With Esau ahead, Jacob sends wave after wave of gifts for his brother: hundreds of prime livestock delivered by a corps of herders. The herders return with news that Esau is coming—with an army of 400 men. Jacob arranges his family in a column, putting his beloved Rachel and young Joseph at the very back. Benjamin isn't born yet.

Jacob walks ahead of his entire family and bows to his brother. "Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him. And they both wept" (Genesis 33:4).

Jacob settles in Canaan, where he had grown up. Esau moves into what is now Jordan. And the land takes his nickname: Edom, which means "red."

SELLING little brother Joseph

When Joseph arrived, his brothers ripped off the beautiful robe he was wearing. Then they grabbed him and threw him into the cistern.

GENESIS 37:23–24

Jacob plays favorites with his dozen sons. Normally, it's the oldest son who gets special attention—and that would be Reuben, son of Leah. But Jacob preferred the oldest son of his dear Rachel: Joseph—number 11 in line of the dozen boys. Rachel had died en route to Canaan while giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. So these two boys are all Jacob has to remember the only woman he truly loved.

Joseph grows into a spoiled, braggadocious, tattletale teen. And his big brothers grow to hate him for it.

A dream is what turns his brothers violent. Joseph, age 17, tells his family he had a dream that the sun, moon, and 11 stars bowed before him. Even old Jacob gets upset about that because he sees the symbolism.

“Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow to the ground before you?” Jacob scolded (Genesis 37:10).

Soon afterward, perhaps within a few weeks, Jacob's 10 oldest sons are out grazing the sheep about 60 miles north of the Hebron home. That's about a hard three-day walk. Jacob sends Joseph to check on them. So Joseph puts on the beautiful robe his father had given him, and he heads out.

“Here comes the dreamer!” one of his brothers says. They rip off Joseph's robe and throw him into a dry cistern, which is a deep pit that's built to store water. While they argue over whether or not to kill him, a traders' caravan stops. The caravan is headed to Egypt, and one of the merchants agrees to buy Joseph and sell him in Egypt as a slave. Selling price: eight ounces of silver. On today's market, that's about \$80 when silver sells for \$10 an ounce.

With Joseph gone, the brothers smear his torn robe in goat's blood. Then they take it

DADDY IS MY GRANDPA

Judah, one of Jacob's dozen sons, fathered twin boys—with his daughter-in-law. In fairness to Judah, he thought she was a prostitute.

The woman's name was Tamar. She married Judah's son, Er, but he died before the couple had any children. Custom called for Er's brother to marry the widow. That way, Tamar could have a son in Er's name, to inherit Er's property. (Women couldn't inherit property—since they were property.) Younger brother Onan married Tamar and had sex with her, but he refused to release semen inside her. He wanted his children to inherit all the property. For that, God killed him.

With two sons down, Judah refused to give

Tamar his next son, Shelah.

So Tamar dressed as a prostitute, covered her face with a veil, and put herself in Judah's path. He propositioned her, had sex with her, and gave her his walking stick as collateral for payment. She kept the stick—which turned out to be a good thing for her.

When Judah found out Tamar was pregnant, he ordered her burned to death. That's when she brought out the walking stick. Humiliated, Judah replied, “She is more righteous than I am because I didn't arrange for her to marry my son Shelah.” (Genesis 38:26).

Tamar's twins, Perez and Zerah, became the legal sons of Er. Judah never slept with Tamar again.

home and tell their father they found it, convincing old Jacob that a wild animal ate his son. There's no consoling Jacob. The love of his life is gone, and so is her first son.

BOWING to Joseph

Since Joseph was governor of all Egypt and in charge of selling grain to all the people, it was to him that his brothers came. When they arrived, they bowed before him with their faces to the ground.

GENESIS 42:6

From a slave to a ruler—Joseph's step up into high society is one that his brothers never anticipate.

Joseph begins his life in Egypt as a household slave for Potiphar, captain of the palace guard. Potiphar takes a liking to the hardworking boy and eventually puts him in charge of all his household affairs. Potiphar's wife takes a liking to the handsome boy, as well. And she wants to become one of those household affairs.

Sexual harassment continues day after day. It finally ends when Potiphar's wife grabs Joseph's cloak one day and says, "Come and sleep with me" (Genesis 39:7). Joseph sprints away, leaving her holding the cloak. Furious, she screams rape. This acts like a trumpet call that rallies all the servants in range of her blast.

Potiphar apparently doubts her story about a good-looking, well-built teenager who wants her body. Law allows the slave owner to instantly execute a violent slave. Instead, Potiphar just sends Joseph to prison.



Governor Joseph. Promoted from slave to governor of Egypt, Joseph hears a report about the grain reserves the king assigned him to manage during a seven-year drought.

That's a good thing for Joseph. There, he interprets dreams for two of the king's recently jailed servants, correctly predicting what will happen to the men. The baker is executed. The wine server gets his job back.

Two years later the king has some troubling dreams, and the wine server tells him about Joseph. In one dream, seven starving cows eat seven fat cows. And in another, seven withered heads of grain gobble up seven plump grain heads.

"The next seven years will be a period of great prosperity throughout the land of Egypt," Joseph tells the king, interpreting the dream. "But afterward there will be seven years of famine so great that all the prosperity will be forgotten in Egypt. Famine will destroy the land" (Genesis 41:29–30).

The king not only believes Joseph's interpretation, he believes God has given Joseph special insight and wisdom. So he puts Joseph in charge of managing the grain reserves to get the nation through the coming famine.

Drought spreads at least as far north as modern-day Israel. There, elderly Jacob hears about the grain reserves in Egypt. So he sends his 10 oldest sons to buy some. He keeps with him Benjamin, which is all he has left to remind him of Rachel.

The men bow before their brother, who's about 20 years older than when they saw him last. They don't recognize him. But he recognizes them. And he hatches a scheme to see if they regret what they did to him.

"You are spies!" he tells them. And he orders them to bring their younger brother, Benjamin, before him to prove they're not lying about who they are. In the meantime, Joseph holds one of his brothers hostage. It's Simeon, the second oldest. Perhaps Joseph skips Reuben, the oldest, because it was Reuben who talked the others out of killing Joseph on the day slave traders bought him.

With Joseph listening, the brothers admit they're getting what they deserve. "Clearly we are being punished because of what we did to Joseph long ago," they say. "We saw his anguish when he pleaded for his life, but we wouldn't listen. That's why we're in this trouble" (Genesis 42:21). Joseph weeps, realizing they're sorry for what they had done to him.

The men return to Canaan. But old Jacob refuses to let Benjamin go. He holds out as long as he can, until the family needs more grain. Then he reluctantly sends all of his sons to Egypt, Benjamin included.

JOSEPH'S family reunion

"Hurry back to my father and tell him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me master over all the land of Egypt. So come down to me immediately! You can live in the region of Goshen, where you can be near me with all your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and everything you own.'"

GENESIS 45:9–10

With his brothers again at his mercy, Joseph concocts one more test. He loads them up with grain. Then he has a servant stuff one of his silver cups into Benjamin's sack. Later Joseph