

## ***FAMILY LIFE IN GENESIS***

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There are actually two creation myths in Genesis, but the first is too good to be ours.

Version one (King James edition): God creates the world, then makes man “in our image, after our likeness” (1:26), “male and female created he them” (1:27). “Man” in 1:26 can be taken as generic, so male *and* female are made in God’s image. But that’s too sane, so Chapter 2 adds a second creation. God creates man all over again from “the dust of the ground” (2:7), then creates Eden and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (2:9), which “thou shalt not eat of (2:17.” Next verse: “And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet.” Two stories, two different gods. The first god creates Earth and gives it without qualification to a man and a woman. The second creates Eden; makes a man out of mud (saying nothing about “in his own image”); gives Eden to the man “to dress it and to keep it” (2:15); calls the man Adam (in version one he’s nameless); then makes a woman from Adam’s rib, to help him -- she’s less than he. And the god of version two puts limits on what may be done: Eat not of the Tree.

Chapter 1’s unlimited and unqualified Creation is quickly forgotten in Chapter 3 as the serpent coaxes “the woman” (not yet named) to eat forbidden fruit. We blame her for seducing the man into doing the same, but there’s no such drama in 2:6: “she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.” The serpent talked to the woman but Adam was “with her,” right there, mum. She had to be coaxed; uncoaxed, he chomps away. All Hell breaks loose. God tells the woman (3:16-17), “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow” and her husband “shall rule over thee”; to Adam, “Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow thou shalt eat of it.” In this creation story, *the roots of family enmity – and of all pain – come straight from God.*

Long before TV and relativistic morality, we needed to explain why family life was so difficult. The story we conceived is that God wants it that way. God being God, he doesn’t need much reason. In fact, the less reason the better. For only a crazy story can justify why we’re so crazy. If family craziness comes from God there’s nothing to do but endure it -- a point Genesis reinforces for 48 more chapters, a veritable catalogue of severe dysfunction. An irrational species cannot have a rational God (nor gods -- as Greeks, Celts, etc., confirm); people who behave as we do cannot have rational progenitors. Genesis must be our mirror, or it can’t be Genesis.

In 4:1, Eve (now named) “bare Cain,” a farmer, and Abel, a shepherd. Cain brings the Lord an offering of fruit; Abel offers sheep. “And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering: but unto Cain and to his offering had not respect. And Cain was very wroth.” Cain can’t understand what he’s done wrong or why Abel now gets “to rule over him” (4:7). Seems like the Lord is just making trouble for two boys who’ve done him no harm. In 4:8 “Cain talked with Abel his brother” (their conversation goes unreported) and “rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.” Right off, for this First Family of all, family life is inexplicably crazy and murderous -- with the Lord as chief instigator.

In Chapter 5 there is much begatting. By Chapter 6:5, God sees “that the wickedness of man was great in the earth.” Then comes Noah, the ark, and the flood. Finally in 8:21 God calms down, saying “in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for

man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done." They're just kids, after all -- let's give them a break. Covenants are then established. Everything's fine until Noah has one too many in 9:21-25.

In his tent, nude Noah "drank of the wine, and was drunken." Young Ham enters the tent, sees Pop's condition, leaves, tells his brothers. His brothers take a garment, walk backwards into the tent so they won't see their father naked, cover him. When Pop awakes, he knows "what his younger son had done unto him." Done?! The kid did nothing. But the penalty for Ham is that *his* son Canaan -- who's *really* done nothing -- will be cursed. Noah's rage is inexplicable but *familiar*. Family feuds come out of nowhere and go on forever. Our ancestors took these stories to heart because they were about people as crazy as they were. As crazy as we are.

Chapter 10, lots more begatting. Chapter 11, the Tower of Babel -- a story neatly explaining why nations misunderstand each other. That, too, comes from God.

In Chapter 12 the Lord commands Abram to leave his kin and lead a caravan to the land of Canaan. A famine takes them to Egypt, where wife Sarah's beauty makes Abram fear for his life. He tells her to pretend to be his sister. "And [after Pharaoh pays Abram handsomely] the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house" (12:15), and we all know what that means. The Lord sends plagues to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh understandably says to Abram, "Why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife?" (12:18). Because Abram was chicken is why. Chicken and greedy.

Chapters 13 and 14, lots of arguing between within the clan (Abram and Lot), lots of smiting, and reconciling. Chapter 16 finds Sarah barren, so she offers Abram her Egyptian slave Hagar. He accepts, Hagar conceives. Sarah gets mad. Abram says Sarah may do what she wants with Hagar. Sarah deals "hardly" with her (16:6). Hagar bears Ishmael, whom the Lord promises will be "a wild man" (16:12). Hagar had no choice. Ishmael certainly doesn't. This is a family project gone very wrong. The Lord's response? He changes Abram's name to Abraham and promises him a special covenant, the sign of which is circumcision. So Abraham circumcises all his male slaves and relatives (Chapter 17). One can only imagine their surprise.

Sarah, now old, is promised a son by the Lord. She laughs (18:12). The Lord doesn't like that. She denies she laughed. God knows better. But he's more concerned with the sins of Sodom. He wants to destroy it, but Abraham argues, "Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" (18:23). Abraham barter bravely and well for the lives of Sodom's righteous. Lot (citizen of Sodom) is made of lesser stuff. Visited by angels, his house surrounded by angry neighbors who want to know what's what, Lot offers the mob his two virgin daughters to "do ye to them as is good in your eyes" (19:8). The angels tell Lot to get out of town while the getting is good, with his wife and daughters, and to not look back. Lot gits. The Lord blasts Sodom and Gomorrah. But Lot's wife looks back. Zap. She's a pillar of salt. Perhaps she thought this a better fate than remaining with a husband who'd offer her daughters to be raped. With Mom gone, her daughters have ideas of their own. They get Lot drunk to sleep with him, so as to preserve his seed. Family life has always been really, really weird.

Then Abraham gives Sarah (his "sister" again) to another king! This guy's just as baffled as Pharaoh at Abraham's weirdness. Abraham lamely says Sarah is his *half*-sister. Then Sarah, with good reason to laugh, births Isaac -- whom Abraham (at God's request)

is all too willing to kill, until God says, in effect, “*Willingness to kill one’s children is enough for me. Sheath that knife.*”

Isaac marries Rebecca. Isaac loves their son Esau; Rebecca loves son Jacob. Jacob blackmails Esau out of his inheritance for a mess of pottage. Then in 26:7-11 Isaac, a chip off the old block, does the wife-sister bit with Rebecca! (“Lest I die for her.” 26:9) And it seems never to end! Chapter 27: Rebecca and son Jacob cruelly deceive the dying Isaac into leaving Jacob, not Esau, his holdings. Family life is a snake-pit. Nobody can trust anybody. Chapter 29: Jacob loves his cousin Rachel, but when the time comes Rachel’s father sends her sister, Leah, to Jacob’s bed, and Jacob somehow doesn’t know the difference (somebody’s lying here). Jacob marries both gals. Leah conceives often but Rachel is barren and full of envy (Chapter 30). Rachel does a Sarah and gives him her maid to screw, then Leah gives him *her* maid, and there’s divine intervention and lots of (as the King James has it) opening of wombs. Genesis goes on for another twenty chapters with pretty much more of the same.

One might wonder how this unremittingly cruel and crazy behavior could become holy writ. But, like the Greek myths, Genesis is holy writ not in spite of but *because of* its familial insanity. Here is behavior that mirrors the worst in anyone’s family. That behavior feels real, so the metaphysics also feels real. Here are progenitors worthy of us. Here are stories that say *the craziness is built-in, even the devout can’t escape it. Therefore turn to God.* God’s is arguably a mightier craziness, but at least God can control it, set limits, make judgments. When any day’s headlines show that setting such limits is beyond our capacity and always has been, well, Genesis starts to make sense.

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