# "NOW YOU SEE HIM, NOW YOU DON'T": GOD AND HIS WORD IN GENESIS*

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I want to take us on a journey through the book of Genesis. As we go I particularly want to examine what the book has to say about God, God's word, God's presence, and the relation of these to human activity and word. I will read the book in its present form, in spite of it being more of a collage than a uniform canvas. I will endeavour not to answer hastily the questions posed by the book itself. Most discussions on God in Genesis focus on historical matters – origins, historical and cultic links with the worship of other peoples in the West Semitic region etc. Space dictates that these matters are left aside for the moment, although they do bear on this discussion in other ways.

Genesis is structured around 10 headings, each containing the word *tôlĕdôt*, variously translated "descendants, generations, story." These headings are found in Gen 2:4a (heavens and earth); 5:1 (Adam); 6:9 (Noah); 10:1 (sons of Noah [Shem, Ham, Japheth]); 11:10 (Shem); 11:27 (Terah); 25:12 (Ishmael); 25:19 (Isaac); 36:1 (Esau; cf. 36:9 where there is a duplicate tradition for Esau: and 37:2 (Jacob).[1] I will follow these *tôlĕdôt* headings below.

## FROM ADAM TO SHEM

Over all 10 *tôlĕdôt* sections stands the magnificent, orderly account of creation in Gen 1:1-2:3. Here the sovereignty of God, who is at rest in his world, is stamped over all that follows. Beginning with a process of separation in the heavenly spheres, God brings order to an earth initially de-

*The Presidential Address delivered to the Fellowship for Biblical Studies, Melbourne, 2002.

[1] The headings follow the line of descent from Adam to the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. The only exceptions are the headings for Ishmael and Esau. An additional *tôlĕdôt* heading for the priestly lineage of Aaron and Moses is found in Num 3:1.

scribed as *tōhû wābōhû* and over whose deeps darkness lay.[2] God blesses creation, especially in terms of the fertility (1:22, 28), grants humans dominion over other creatures (v. 26), gives them food (v. 29-30), and declares not only each day's work 'good' but creation in its totality to be exceptionally good (v. 31).[3]

In the remainder of this section from Gen 2:4-11:26, which covers five *tôlĕdôt* sections, the nature of God, and of humanity, is developed. In these chapters, the images and statements of Gen 1:1-2:3 are modified, questioned, undermined, and some even reversed. First, this happens through certain human activities and propensities to which God responds. The Eden narrative (Gen 2:4-3:24) and the story of Babel (11:1-9), both arguably about acts of hybris, are examples, alongside the prime example of the flood (6:5-9:17).

Humankind also commits crimes against its own in the murder of Abel (Gen 4:17) and in the indeterminate crime against a parent in Gen 9:20-27. By means of the punishments and curses associated with these acts, God sets in place the hardships and limitations of human life (pain in childbirth; toil to produce food; experience of vengeance; and ethnic slavery). By means of other divine acts, additional restrictions on human life are instigated (clothing; diversity of language and location). Some of the punishments set by God undermine the intentions and actions of Gen 1:1-2:3. The pain the woman is to suffer in childbirth and the statement that the man will rule over her (3:16), respectively run counter to God's own blessing of fertility in 1:28, and the order implied in the statement that God created male and female in his image.[4] These crimes and their punishments test and establish the boundaries between the human and the divine.[5] In the process, however, the "exceptionally good" creation is

[2] This initial chaotic state is not totally eliminated in the process but through separation it is removed to the boundaries. See J.D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988) 14-26.

[3] This sovereign god is not as yet clearly identified as Israel's god, YHWH, the more general term *ʾĕlōhîm* being used in Gen 1:1-2:3. The identification of *ʾĕlōhîm* with YHWH will be suggested in Gen 2:4bff and clarified as the text moves on. Cf. M. G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000) 25.

[4] See the argument on the relation of male and female in Genesis 1 by P. A. Bird, "Male and Female He Created Them": Gen 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," *HTR* 74 (1981) 129-59.

[5] Although note the opinion of R. di Vito, "The Demarcation of Divine and Human Realms in Genesis 2–11," in R. J. Clifford and J. J. Collins (eds) *Creation*

tainted. S. Niditch remarks: "Reading Gen 1-11 in order and as a whole, one cannot but conclude that a good and bounteous earth contains a creature, the human, who has the potential by his choices to make life on that earth less good."[6]

Secondly, the creation of Gen 1:1-2:3 is marred by God's own acts. Some of God's activities serve as catalysts for further human crimes or acts of resistance. In this sense, God actively contributes to the marring of creation.[7] This is true in Eden where God does not explain the consequences of eating from the tree of knowledge either correctly or clearly (Gen 3:1-7).[8] The same can be said for God's unexplained preference for Abel's offering in Gen 4:5-6.

A third way the good creation is marred is via the incursion of other divine creatures into the created order (Gen 6:1-4). We will not deal with this complex text here, except to note that God seems to have no control over this event.

While both God and human are caught in a web of the undoing of a good creation, some signs of hope emerge. This is particularly true in relation to God.[9] It is most vividly displayed in the flood by the change of response within God's heart to the continuing wickedness of the human heart (6:5-8 and 8:20-22), and by God's establishing a covenant never to destroy creation again by flood (9:8-17). Thus the means of redemption of the creation lie chiefly in God's own action, and judgment on and concern over creation are brought into tension. God's sovereignty is maintained, but only with some compromise and at a cost.

A second sign of hope lies with the human response to God, especially in Noah.[10] But even with this, humanity emerges from the ark still with a heart with an evil inclination. Righteousness, it seems, is not without its qualification.

*in the Biblical Traditions* (CBQMS 24; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical association, 1992) 39-56.

[6] S. Niditch, *Chaos to Cosmos: Studies in Biblical Patterns of Creation* (Studies in the Humanities 6. Chico: Scholars Press, 1985) 60-61.

[7] See R.E. Friedman, "Sacred History and Theology: The Redaction of Torah," *The Creation of Sacred Literature* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1981) 25-34, esp. p. 26.

[8] The case is debated whether God does not tell the truth or he means something other than literal death in Gen 2:17. The serpent's argument seems to be confirmed within the text (3:4-7).

[9] Further on this see Levenson, *Persistence of Evil*, 14.

[10] See especially 5:29. He is described as "a righteous man, blameless in his generation" who "walks with God." (Gen 6:9; cf. 7:1).

Within Genesis 1-11, there is a movement from a description of creation as extremely good to a world in which human disobedience and resistance invoke punishment and limitation, i.e. to a world which is less than 'good.' There is movement from a world in which God's sovereignty is primary, to one in which God weighs the balance between his own sovereignty in terms of power, and the continuance of creation. There is movement toward the world which humans inhabit and experience as God's response to human activity leads to closer definition of life as it is experienced by humans. This movement is consistent with the aim of the *tôlĕdôt* headings as they take the reader from the cosmic realm in 2:4a with the *tôlĕdôt* of the heavens and the earth, toward the *tôlĕdôt* of Jacob in 37:2 and the story of his twelve sons, the ancestors of the tribes of Israel. In Genesis 1-11, God remains very much the central character in the drama. God interacts with humans on an individual and community basis. We hear clearly the decisive, sovereign word over the events of the cosmos. However, there is already a hint that things are changing. God's sovereignty is no longer understood in terms of a will and work that is unchangeable. The decisive word in the cosmos is not always heard directly from the lips of God as human blessing (and curse) begin to play a role (Gen 9:25-27; cf. later Gen 27; 48:15-16; 49:2-27). Human activity is becoming more influential in shaping the story and its events, but it is not yet fully determinative. Hope for a good creation still lies with God and in the divine decree in the first instance, but it is not totally independent of human response. God preserves order in the world, but now through judgment on the disordering of the world, and response to human initiative.

## THE *tôlĕdôt* OF TERAH

The *tôlĕdôt* formula for Terah covers the story of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 11:27-25:11). The linking of the *tôlĕdôt* formulae implies that the story of Israel's ancestors in Gen 12-50 is not only about the development of a later people and nation, but is also about the past and the fulfilment of God's exceptional good work in creation. W. Brueggemann makes a similar point: "The call to Sarah and Abraham has to do not simply with the forming of Israel but with the re-forming of creation, the transforming of the nations."[11]

This section has an episodic quality to it as it follows the life of Abraham and Sarah. At the head of the section is the divine promise in Gen 12:1-3. God will make Abraham a great nation, will bless him, and will make his name great. Abraham will be a source of blessing for the nations. In v. 7 God extends the promise to include the land which Abra-

[11] W. Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 105.

ham will be shown. However, these initial promises are imprecise and vague at best.[12]

The fulfilment of these promises is incomplete at best. The promise of land is not fulfilled in the lifetime of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham will only ever own the field of Machpelah, where he buries Sarah (Gen 23). The promise of becoming a great nation fares little better with the promise focused on the birth of a single son (15:2; 18:9-15; 21:1) and that not without its difficulties. The promise of blessing is also mixed. Abraham certainly becomes prosperous in his lifetime if that is to be understood as blessing (Gen 12:16; 13:6; 20:14; 24:1, 35). If, however, blessing means fertility, as in Genesis 1-11, the story is a different one. Finally, Abraham is surely a mixed blessing on the nations with whom he comes in contact. Thus, tension surrounds the promises of Gen 12:1-3 throughout the lifetime of Abraham and Sarah.

In the midst of this, God's action is sometimes opposed to the very promises he has made. They are imprecise and vague and the nature of their fulfilment is left unexplained. Sarah is barren (11:30; 16:2), contra the blessing of fertility in Gen 1:28 and even contra the curse upon the woman in 3:16, and Abraham and Sarah are unprepared for the delays involved (15:2; 16:2). The presence of the Canaanites (and the Perizzites) in the land (12:6; 13:7) goes unexplained. In addition, there is a tension in the promises themselves. They are promised to become a great nation and to be given a land, but only after being called from their own land and their own kindred (12:1). They become a barren group, landless, and without status, but bearing a promise that they might be otherwise.

Other matters also leave one wondering about God's consistency in all this. There is a famine in the land immediately upon Abraham's arrival (12:10), the first of a few. Set against God's granting food for the creatures in 1:29 and 9:3-4, and God's post-flood declaration of the continuing cycle of nature (8:22), there is the implication of possible complicity by God in the problems faced by the human characters, generating fear (15:1) and plotting (16:2).

However, more positive activities and aspects of God do emerge. The making of a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 and 17 is particularly important. In both cases the covenant is associated with Abraham's fear at the lack of fulfilment of the promises. But in neither case is he given unambiguous assurance in this matter, only a continued promise. The eventual birth of Isaac (21:1-2) validates part of the promise in the end, and undergirds the rhetorical question put to Sarah in 18:14, "Is anything too

[12] L.A. Turner (*Announcements of Plot in Genesis* [JSOTSup 96; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990] 111) notes: "Abraham and the reader are fed just one piece of information at a time as the plot unfolds".

wonderful for YHWH?", but it only throws the slowness of the process and God's complicity into sharper focus.

The portrait of Abraham is complex. At times he is a faithful character in the face of the promise, on others there is a seeming lack of trust. Even at his most trustful, Abraham can put the promise at risk, or complicate its fulfilment.[13] However, there are strong parallels between Abraham and Noah, suggesting that there is still hope in the righteous individual in the ancestral story but that righteousness, as in Genesis 1-11, is qualified.[14]

Near the end of the *tôlĕdôt* of Terah is the terrifying story of Genesis 22, the *Aqedah* or "binding of Isaac".[15] While the reader is told this is a test that should neither detract from the horror of the story, nor suggest that the story will simply end in the binding of Isaac and not his sacrifice. As Levenson notes:

> Nothing in the verb used (*nissâ*) implies that the act commanded will not be carried to completion, that Isaac will be only bound and not sacrificed on the altar. ... This being the case, Abraham's willingness to heed the frightful command may or may not demonstrate faith in the promise that

[13] Ibid., 112-3. In terms of Abraham's trust see e.g. Gen 12:4-9 where he exhibits a certain piety in terms of worship, building altars (12:7; cf.13:18), and later calls on the name of YHWH (13:4). His lack of trust can be seen in e.g. 12:10-20; and 20, or in an inability to see the effect of his actions on the promise (13:9), or in an uncertainty as to the way of fulfilment (15:2), or in a desire to accomplish the divine promise on his own terms (16:2).

[14] Just as Noah was the one through whom the recreated order was peopled, and embodied to some extent hope for creation, so Abraham and his line function in the ancestral narratives. Both stand in the same genealogical position, (5:1-32; 11:10-26). Both are said to be "righteous, blameless" and to "walk before God" (6:9; cf. 15:6; 17:1). Both are specifically designated as doing all that God/YHWH commands (Noah: 6:22; 7:5,9,16; and Abraham: 12:4; 17:23; 21:4). This last theme is a common one in the so-called Priestly material and is carried further with Moses. Finally, both are associated with covenants which themselves have similarities. See T. D. Alexander, "Genesis 22 and the Covenant of Circumcision," *JSOT* 25 (1983) 17-22 for details. Briefly, both covenants are eternal (9:16; 17:7,13,19); each is accompanied by a sign (9:12-14; 17:11); the same formula *hēqîm bĕrît* (9:9,11,17; 17:?,19,21) and *nātan bĕrît* (9:12, 17:2); the covenant is described by God as "between me and you" (9:12,15; 17:2,7) yet it also includes the descendants of each (9:9,12; 17:7,9); the benefit is one which will not be cut off (9:11; 17:14); and the word *tāmîm* is only used in Genesis in 6:9 and 17:1. It is noteworthy that in Jubilees 5-6 Noah is noted as righteous, but his sons transgress. Only Abraham is righteous thereafter.

[15] It is referred to as the *Aqedah* in Jewish tradition, while in Christian circles it is often called "the testing of Abraham" or something similar. Note G. von Rad (*Genesis* [rev. ed.; London: SCM, 1972] 237-45) calls it "the great temptation".

> is invested in Isaac, but it surely and abundantly demonstrates his putting obedience to God ahead of every possibly competitor. ... The aqedah, in short, tests whether Abraham is prepared to surrender his son to the God who gave him. To say, with Kierkegaard and von Rad, that he is prepared so to do because through faith he expects to receive Isaac anew (as indeed happens) is to minimalize the frightfulness of what Abraham is commanded to do.[16]

But neither is the test a heartless exercise. Contra Levenson, I would argue Abraham's unswerving obedience to God is built on a position of trust, although it is not simply trust that God will intervene. In this story Abraham experiences (*nissâ*)[17] the dark consequences of his call and righteousness, being in places of seeming God forsakenness, even ones where obedience is a struggle against God. However, we should not forget the ending of the story. God does step in at the last moment. Without compromising the dark experience of the people called, the story does affirm that in the end the sovereign God makes a decisive choice for life and the promise.

In the *tôlĕdôt* of Terah both God and the humans continue in the same vein as in Genesis 1-11. God calls forth a people whose destiny is inextricably bound to that of creation. He promises them land, that they will become a great nation, and blessing, and desires commitment from them. He commits himself in covenant to them. At times, however, he himself acts counter to that promise and commitment, just as the actions of the humans, either in disobedience or through uncertainty, are a mixture of righteousness and rebellion. God takes interminable time over the fulfilment of the promise, although in the end, there is a suggestion that it will be fulfilled against all odds. In this a similar point is made as that in the flood narrative.

In this *tôlĕdôt* section the activity and words of God play an important role. God is regularly seen in conversation with Abraham, Sarah, and other characters, even meeting them physically. God remains one of the main characters within the narrative. However, the story now focuses very much on the humans, especially Abraham and Sarah. Their life is of central concern, not only for them, but also for the narrator, and for God.

[16] J. D. Levenson, "Isaac Unbound", *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University, 1993) 125-142, esp. p. 126.

[17] See BDB 650a. The verb does not just mean to "test" in the sense of "to examine" if something is true. It can also mean "to give experience to, train, exercise" as in Deut 8:16 where Israel is led in the wilderness to be afflicted and tested, "to do good to them".

THE *tôlĕdôt* OF ISAAC

The next major section of Genesis is the *tôlĕdôt* of Isaac (Gen 25:19 – 35:29) covering the story of the twins, Esau and Jacob. It contrasts sharply with Genesis 1-11 and the *tôlĕdôt* of Terah. Human activity is much more the fore here. The divine promise to Abraham moves slowly toward fulfilment, but is now enveloped within human plotting, planning, and deception, with only the occasional glimpse of direct divine activity. YHWH, or a character identified closely with YHWH, enters the narrative but occasionally, and then often only in a dream, or some mysterious night encounter. Only in the initial oracle to Rebekah (25:23) and once later to Jacob (31:3) does God speak directly to a character as he did to Abraham and others before. Occasionally the narrator gives us some guidance as to what God is doing. We know most of God's will and activity through the actions of the human characters. These make their own decisions in the story and live by them.

As in the previous *tôlĕdôt* section, God speaks right at the start. Like Sarah, Rebekah is barren (25:21), but by contrast, God opens Rebekah's womb in response to Isaac's prayer. Without explanation the blessing of fertility comes quickly and abundantly to her. In his oracle about the twins struggling within her, God sets a course for the events to follow. The elder shall serve the younger. But the way this will be worked out will be partly in the hands of the characters. God's word does not negate the struggle, nor the actions or motives of the characters involved, but works within the struggle. Thus, the oracle in 25:23 is and is not like the promise in 12:1-3. Both have their end stated, although both are unclear as to how it will be achieved. However, the promise required acceptance by the one to whom it was made. The oracle to Rebekah does not. The tension in this narrative is focused much more on how the human characters interact, than on fulfilment of divine word.[18]

The divine oracle to Rebekah would seem to be headed for fulfilment in Genesis 27, when Jacob steals Isaac's deathbed blessing from the elder Esau. The 'correctness' of what transpires is underlined in Isaac's second blessing of Jacob early in chapter 28. Isaac uses words reminiscent of the promise to Abraham. God confirms this in Jacob's dream at Bethel (28:10-17) promising possession of the land, many offspring, and the blessing of the families of the earth through Jacob. The additional promise of God's presence on the journey afar signals the direct involvement of God in what is to come.

God is not mentioned in the story again until after Jacob has married Leah and Rachel. We find him once again opening and closing wombs,

[18] Cf. however, the opinion of H. C. White, *Narration and Discourse in the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991) 207.

playing tricks on a family of tricksters, initially favouring Leah, the elder sister, over the younger Rachel (29:31), a reversal of the usual reversal. In naming their sons, the wives of Jacob reveal the extent, and the partiality, of God's role in family affairs (29:32-35; 30:1-13, 22-24).

The role of God during Jacob's stay with Laban is summarized in Gen 31:1-16. In spite of human anguish and struggle, we are told that God who promised to be with Jacob directs all the events in the human drama. God directs Jacob's return to the land (v. 3, 13-16) and as Jacob tells his plans to Leah and Rachel, he mentions how God has been with him, prevented Laban from harming him, given Laban's property to him, and appeared to him again in a dream (31:5-12). God's warning to Laban in a dream not to harm Jacob (31:24, 29), shows that divine sovereignty is at work and is stronger than the human characters can reckon with. The God of the dream at Bethel is clearly with Jacob.

Toward the end of the *tôlĕdôt* of Isaac, there is another episode in which God opposes the patriarch. It is the story of Jacob wrestling with the mysterious figure by the Jabbok (Gen 32:22-32). The statements at the end of the episode, Jacob has "striven with God and humans and prevailed" (v. 28) and has "seen God face to face" (v. 30), make it clear that the figure is God (v. 30). The episode is related to the encounter with Esau in the next chapter (33:10). The parallel between meeting Esau and meeting God builds on the struggle with God in the wrestling match. Both meetings entail a contradictory aspect involving favour and opposition. Both end with favourable reception and 'blessing' but there is struggle along the way. This aspect of the end of the *tôlĕdôt* of Isaac parallels the end of the *tôlĕdôt* of Terah with the *Aqedah*. Inherent in the patriarchal encounter with God is some level of enmity or opposition, complete with its own incomprehensibility.[19]

There is little advancement in the promises made by God in the *tôlĕdôt* of Isaac. The promise of becoming a great nation advances slightly with the birth of Jacob's sons, the promise of land is hardly advanced at all. The additional promise of God's presence with the patriarch while away from the land does not encourage the sense of possession of the land in the near future.

The fulfilment of the oracle at the start of the section fares little better than the promise. The announcement that the elder would serve the younger is not strictly fulfilled. The elder certainly is cheated out of the blessing and birthright by the younger, and there is some level of reconciliation at the end, but it is not subservience. In fact, in preparation for the reunion of the brothers, Jacob places himself in the more subservient

[19] Cf. S. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: The Heart of Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978) 92-93.

role. God's oracles seem to achieve no more than his promises. They may set agendas but human actions both define and qualify the agenda considerably. In this context we see God portrayed as one who exercises his sovereignty to be with his people and protect them, but within a world which is freely tainted by deception and partisanship.

## THE *tôlĕdôt* OF JACOB

The *tôlĕdôt* of Jacob tells the story of Joseph (Gen 37:2-50:26). It is stylistically distinct in Genesis, consisting mostly of a continuous narrative. It is essentially a human drama, where the "secondary plots become increasingly long and complex ...".[20] There is only one instance of a main character having direct communication from God in this section, and that comes late in the story (46:2-4). It is a nightly vision to Israel (Jacob) similar to the divine communications in the *tôlĕdôt* of Isaac. This same vision is the only place where the promise is directly mentioned. In order to consider the portrayal of God in the Joseph story we are reliant not so much on what God does and says in the narrative but on what other characters and the narrator say. We have, if you like, a God who is slipping from view as a character in the story. This process began in the preceding *tôlĕdôt* sections.

Dreams play an important role in this story. In the preceding *tôlĕdôt* sections a divine promise or oracle set the course of the story. The Joseph story begins with Joseph having two dreams (37:5-11). To date in Genesis, dreams have been an important means of divine revelation from God (20:3; 28:12; 31:11, 24), although in each case the narrator clearly indicated God's role in the dream. Are we to read Joseph's dreams in Genesis 37, which indicate some future ascendancy of Joseph over his brothers and parents, in the same way? Do these dreams, over which Jacob ponders (37:11), indicate some level of divine direction of the story which follows? The fact that Joseph's dreams are about the ascendancy of the younger over the older is consistent with God's intention on other occasions.

The fact is, at the start of the *tôlĕdôt* of Jacob we are not sure.[21] The dreams of Genesis 37 are certainly important. Much is made of them in the story. The brothers plan to do away with Joseph in order to see what will become of his dreams (37:20). However, much of the evidence for

[20] H. C. White, *Narration and Discourse*, 237.

[21] So too C. Westermann, *Genesis 37-50* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 45: "Nothing is yet said in the introductory part about how the God of the fathers is at work in all this; it can emerge only in the course of events that follow."

the divine status of the dreams is dependent on statements by Joseph.[22] Chief among these:

- 40:8 where Joseph tells the royal cup-bearer and baker to reveal their dreams to him, because the interpretation of dreams belongs to God; Joseph later makes a similar remark to Pharaoh (41:16);
- 41:25 where Joseph tells Pharaoh that God has revealed what he is about to do in Pharaoh's dreams;
- and 41:32 where Joseph states that the doubling of Pharaoh's dreams means that God will surely bring them about.

However, these statements may be compromised by Joseph's own statements, namely in 40:8 where, having told Pharaoh's officials that God interprets dreams he then says "tell them to *me*" (italics mine) and in 41:16 where even before hearing Pharaoh's dreams Joseph promises a favourable hearing. There is no doubt Joseph is a character whose words and actions have more than a measure of self interest. With the dreams of the officials he is seeking release from prison (40:14-15), and with Pharaoh Joseph's credentials of wisdom and access to divine revelation make him the natural candidate to direct the disaster relief he himself recommends to Pharaoh (41:33-36). On the other hand, the interpretation of the dreams in Genesis 39 and 41 does not focus on Joseph, and there is no hint in the story that we should distrust his interpretation of the dreams, even if he seeks to gain advantage from it.

Support for the latter situation also comes from the narrator's statements in Genesis 39, which relate God's presence with and favour toward Joseph in both Potiphar's house and prison. These statements underscore those made by Joseph himself in Genesis 45 after he has disclosed his identity to his brothers. He tells his brothers that God has been active in the events that have transpired in order to preserve life (vv. 5-8), even when the brothers thought they were controlling affairs. God, who is hidden, has determined the outcome of events.

The divine vision granted to Israel (Jacob) in Gen 46:2-4 also lends support to what Joseph says.[23] After Joseph's rise to power and the fraternal reunion, this brings the focus back to the question of the divine promise. The final chapters focus on the promise. Blessing abounds in these

[22] See Brett, *Genesis*, 109-36, and Yiu-Wing Fung, *Victim and Victimizer: Joseph's Interpretation of His Destiny* (JSOTSup 308; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

[23] The context bears similarities to Jacob's earlier dream at Bethel (Gen 28:10-17).

chapters as Jacob blesses Joseph's sons (48:15-16)[24] and then his own (Gen 49:2-27). In the former, the blessing is that the children, in whom the names of the patriarchs might be perpetuated, may grow into a multitude in the earth. Three times God is mentioned as the source of blessing. The fulfilment of the promise of becoming a great nation has risen in potential as the listing of seventy descendants in Gen 46:8-27 testifies. Israel is not yet a nation, but it is on the way to becoming one. God's blessing of Gen 1:28, is now coming to fruition for this once barren family.

The promise of land, however, remains distant. The only land this family has at the end of the book is the same parcel Abraham purchased in Genesis 23: the field of Machpelah. At the end of Genesis this field is still named after its former owner, Ephron the Hittite (49:29-32). Throughout these stories the land has been called "the land of Canaan" (e.g. 11:31; 12:5; 23:19; 37:1; 50:13). The Canaanites were in the land as Abraham arrived (12:6) and they are there as Jacob's funeral procession makes its way up from Egypt (50:11). In what sense will Abraham's descendants possess the land (cf. 15:7-8), especially as the inhabitants are not seen in hostile terms?[25] In Joseph's last words, the land is still only a promise (50:24) and the final word in the book is 'Egypt'.

The blessing of the nations seems to move ahead in the *tôlĕdôt* of Jacob, as Jacob blesses Pharaoh in Gen 47:7. Earlier we read that "YHWH blessed [Potiphar's] house for Joseph's sake...." (39:5). Whether the enslavement of the Egyptians by Joseph (47:13-26) is itself a blessing is questionable for in this same context Israel gained great possession and multiplied (v. 27) in spite of the severe famine.

In the penultimate conversation between Joseph and his brothers (50:15-21), the brothers' earlier treatment of Joseph is considered. Echoing Joseph's initial dreams, the brothers fall down before him but Joseph states that God has worked for the good in the midst of their harmful act. As in the other *tôlĕdôt* sections, the initial oracle/promise is not literally fulfilled. In this case, it is not fulfilled in relation to Joseph's parents and could never have been.[26] In the cases of the oracle to Rebekah (Gen 25:23) and Joseph's dreams (Genesis 37), neither of which is fulfilled, we have passages that set the story moving, but which do not unchangeably

[24] In this case there is a parallel to Genesis 27 when Joseph's younger son is blessed ahead of the elder.

[25] See e.g. N. C. Habel, "Land as Host Country: An Immigrant Ideology" in *The Land Is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 115-33.

[26] In fact, Joseph's mother has already died when he has the dream (see Gen 35:19). There is therefore a clear problem for fulfilment. Also there is a question of whether his father ever really bows to him.

govern the outcome. Divine direction given in the story is not unchangeable, nor is it completely transparent within the story. There is a hiddenness about God's intentions and influence on human action in events, and more so in the *tôlĕdôt* of Jacob than in the previous sections. This hidden God is present, but the word of his presence is there in the dreams and interpretations of Joseph, one who has his own agendas to pursue. God's care and preservation of the people of Israel persist alongside and in spite of their dealings and other interests. Joseph may not be a model of personal and social ethics, nor are his brothers, but God is still with them.

In this *tôlĕdôt* section, hindsight becomes the key to understanding the divine presence. And even then, what is understood may not be finally determinative for the course of events. At times what is understood as the divine promise can depend on the most fragile of links: a group of passing Midianites or Ishmaelites with an eye for profit, or a cup-bearer's poor memory. As in other sections, there is a level of compromise, prejudice, and seeming inaction on God's part in dealing with his people. All that contributes to the response by the humans involved who develop their own plans of action. At the same time God's prejudice is also hope for the preservation of his people. This produces a strange juxtaposition, where the recipients of the promise see it as a threat and struggle against it. We have moved even closer to the world of human experience, with its uncertainty and complexity. Yet these stories would want to affirm the sovereignty of Israel's God, and the movement toward life, even in a foreign land, and even when God is hidden behind the not disinterested dreams of one of his people, or is embroiled in the murderous plots of others. This is the backdrop for the working out of the promise to the ancestors.

## CONCLUSION

What then can we make of this portrayal of God and his word? I suspect a significant point of faith is explored here. At the start of the book the sovereignty and word of God lie unchallenged. But in the course of the collection of tales, in a balance between judgment and the future life of a good creation, there develops a complex interplay between the sovereignty of God and the freedom of humans. At points even the future of the people God has called, or the word of promise is put at risk. At points enmity seems to reign.

The story does not want to foster a superficial understanding of God in any form, be it in a God whose sovereignty is everything, or a more sceptical one which sees history under the control of humans. Rather it understands God to be intricately bound to human agendas, yet at same time free to express his sovereignty within self-imposed bounds for the sake of a world created exceptionally good.

The type of understanding of God established in Genesis would seem to me to be similar to what J. Haroutonian describes as:

> "as endless struggle with and questioning of reality on the part of human beings who are subject to its vicissitudes and must suffer its blows and be, they know not when, overwhelmed by them. The believer's trust in this God cannot be separated from his permanent restiveness in this world."[27]

[27] J. Haroutonian, "Theology as a Critique of Expostulation," in *The Future of Empirical Theology* (ed. B. Meland; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969) 329.