SACRED – *simply a chapter read each day*

This month we will spend the first three weeks completing our reading of Genesis, the opening book of the Old Testament. We then study four further psalms, before considering our first book of prophecy, Habakkuk. The month concludes with another three psalms.

A reminder that before you begin each day, pray that God will speak to you. Then read the passage, read the notes, and reflect quietly for a short time. And may you continue to grow spiritually, day by day.

Days	*Readings*
1 - 20	Genesis 31 to 50
21 – 24	Psalms 7 to 10
25 – 27	Habakkuk
28 - 30	Psalms 11 to 13

These three chapters which describe Jacob's time in Paddan Aram have been very carefully structured.

- 29:1-14 an arrival and a kiss
- 29: 15-20 a meeting with Laban and an agreement
- 29: 21-30 Jacob is tricked by Laban
- 29:31-30:24 Jacob's children
- 30:25-43 Laban is tricked by Jacob
- 31:1-54 a meeting with Laban and an agreement
- 31:55 a departure and a kiss

There's a symmetry to the unfolding drama, at the centre of which stands the birth of Jacob's eleven sons and one daughter. 20 years have passed – 20 years of rivalry between Leah and Rachel, and 20 years of rivalry between Jacob and Laban, both of whom are wily and not always totally honest operators, but both of whom gain from their time together.

As well as being a carefully structured discourse, it is also a carefully worded one. There is plenty of humour – all the business with the streaks and speckles and spots, and Rachel sitting on her camel to hide the household gods she had stolen (v.34). There is a good dose of folk-lore too: for instance, the idea that peeling the bark off branches to make white stripes and then placing them in watering troughs, will lead to the offspring of animals that drink there being born with stripes (30:37-43). And, of course, it's also a love story: Jacob was devoted to Rachel (although not always faithful sexually). It is surely no coincidence that it was only after *she* had borne him a son, Joseph, that he was ready to return home - the family line was assured. God's blessing was upon him.

As we look back over extended periods of our lives, we too can see God at work; sometimes clearly, sometimes not; through us and often despite us. God does bless all his children.

Jacob's thoughts once more turn towards his older brother. It may have been 20 years, but Esau's threat to kill Jacob (27:41) still looms large in his mind. He sends word to Esau that he is coming to meet him, and his messengers return with the news that Esau is bringing 400 men with him (v.6). Jacob is frightened. He divides his party into two, hoping at least one group might escape Esau's wrath

And then he prays. Jacob finally acknowledges that not everything can be solved by his own strength and guile. He turns to God. His prayer is penitent ("I am unworthy", v.10) and honest (he doesn't hide the fear that is his motivation for seeking God, v.11). He also demonstrates his faith: he claims God's promise to bless him and his descendants (v.12). At some level he is confident that God will be faithful and deliver him from this impending disaster. There are lessons for us to learn from this.

Prayer is the place where burdens change shoulders. Jacob is spiritually renewed. In his rediscovered vigour, he prepares a substantial peace offering for Esau: over 500 assorted goats, sheep, camels, cows and donkeys, in strategically separated groups. If the goats don't win him over, he thinks, then by the time the donkeys arrive his brother will at least have mellowed a little. The Reformation theologian, Martin Luther, once wrote: "pray as if everything depends on God, then work as if everything depends on you." Jacob's actions are an early example of this.

All is ready for the big meeting. But first another encounter needs to take place. At night "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak" (v.24). Who is this man? If merely a man why is his blessing so important? But if he is God, how is it that Jacob manages to force a draw (almost)? As we read on we see it *is* God. Jacob had prayed for protection and sought a blessing, but God sought a turning point in their relationship. It required a duel between Jacob living for God and living for himself. The upshot was a new name and a new identity (v.28).

Despite last night's encounter, Jacob remains apprehensive. Esau still has to be faced. Jacob himself goes on ahead, carefully arranging his family behind him, Rachel and Joseph noticeably at the rear (v.2), the place of least danger. What would happen next?

Of all the scenarios playing through his mind, Jacob couldn't in his wildest dreams have expected Esau to react in the way he did. He "ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept" (v.4). Jacob expected conflict. He received grace.

The table below sets out the relationship between how we have behaved and how we are treated by others in response. The top left and bottom right-hand boxes represent the normal expectations in society. Good behaviour is rewarded, bad behaviour is punished. Sometimes we are judged harshly which can lead to resentment (bottom left) that is difficult to shake off. Nothing, though, prepares us for grace. We deserve to be treated badly but instead we find ourselves welcomed and accepted.

		How we are treated by others	
		badly	*well*
How we have behaved	*badly*	CRIME & PUNISHMENT	GRACE
	well	RESENTMENT	SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE

Jesus personified grace, yet it is so elusive. In his wonderful book *What's So Amazing about Grace?* Philip Yancey shares "I rejected the church for a time because I found so little grace there. I returned because I found grace nowhere else." How different the world would be if all we said and did was seasoned with grace.

Apart from the mention of her birth, this is virtually the only place in the Bible we hear of Dinah, Jacob's daughter by Leah (the only other reference is in Genesis 46:15 and there it's more of an after-thought). Jewish history tends to follow the male line.

What we learn of her in chapter 34 doesn't make happy reading. She is raped by the powerful Shechem (v.2). He loves her, speaks tenderly to her (v.3), even wishes to marry her, but this does not excuse his actions. Notice the tone of his words in verse 4 – it's a command rather than a request. This is someone used to giving orders and getting whatever they want. One suspects this was true of his treatment of Dinah. There would be a reckoning.

Hamor and Shechem arrive to negotiate his marriage to Dinah with Jacob, but it is the sons who take over the discussions. And so a plot is hatched. The townsmen all agree to be circumcised, attracted by the thought of obtaining a share of Jacob's property. But what attracts Simeon and Levi is the thought of revenge. Defending their sister's honour leads them to deception, murder, kidnapping and robbery. Circumcision has been used not for furthering the faith but for ruthless exploitation. Yesterday's window into the world of grace has given way to the sadly too familiar universe of 'ungrace'.

The Christian faith is meant to be lived, celebrated, and shared with others. It's not meant to be used for purposes of manipulation and control. Yet this remains a common objection. People hear stories, for example, of tele-evangelists who promise all sorts of blessings on God's behalf, just so long as you dial the number at the bottom of the screen to make your donation. It's not surprising people can become cynical. We need to be on our guard that the religious practice we model in our churches is free from such criticism – it's open not closed, honest not deceptive, and seeks to uplift people rather than leave them downtrodden.

When I was studying at theological college in Oxford, I lived on the Cutteslowe estate just inside the inner ring-road. The area has considerable socio-historic interest as it was the location of the famous Cutteslowe walls. Following construction of the Council estate in the 1930s, the walls were built to prevent council house tenants from entering a development of private houses between the estate and the Banbury Road. They had to make a much longer journey, therefore, to reach the main road. Residents of the private houses had been concerned about the negative influence of slum-clearance families coming to live so near. When protestors demolished the walls, they were rebuilt the next day! They were then knocked-down once more – this time permanently.

Nowadays, most houses on the estate are privately owned – and you'd be lucky to see much change from half-a-million pounds if you wanted to purchase one. Nonetheless, there is still some deprivation and hardship. For some, it is a struggle to survive. One family we knew a little had seven children, several of whom had been involved with drugs, one had set fire to himself when high, and at least two had been in trouble with the police. The youngest suffered from attention deficit disorder. And then you learn that the seven children had been fathered by five different men most of whom offered minimal financial assistance. It leaves you wondering, what chance did those children have?

We expect great things of Jacob's offspring. They were after all the children of the promise, and they enjoyed great prosperity. Then we pause to reflect a moment. Leah, the mother of seven, was unloved by their father, four others were the illegitimate product of sleeping with the servants, while Joseph lost his mum, Rachel, when the youngest Benjamin was born. These children will not grow up without issues, and we begin to see its fruits. We've already witnessed Simeon and Levi in action (ch.34), now Reuben sleeps with his father's concubine, Bilhah, mother to two of his brothers. It's a warning that further problems may ensue.

At the time of writing, the football team I support has won its last two away league games one-nil. Both times, although they gained the three points, my team did not play well. They were lucky to win (arguably). Afterwards, in these circumstances, the television interviewer will ask the manager: "Were you disappointed with the performance?" You then hear one of two replies. The first goes: "I'm just delighted with the victory. If we can gain three points when we're not playing well, it's a good sign for the rest of the season." The second reply is a little more belligerent: "The performance doesn't matter. When you look back in the record books years from now all they'll show is who won and who lost." Generally, they won't comment on anything else.

The story of the patriarchs that begins with Abraham and Isaac, continues with Jacob. It is Jacob's line that will be followed, not Esau's. The record books show that Jacob was the 'winner' and in that sense, the older did indeed serve the younger (25:23). On this occasion, though, the text will not allow us easily to forget the 'loser' and his story. This chapter sets out the many descendants of Esau, so documenting the fulfillment of the first part of God's promise to Rebekah, that "two nations are in your womb" (25:23).

The record books also have something to say about performance. Esau despised his birthright all those years ago; he married three Canaanite women – one as a willfully provocative gesture – and he chose to settle amongst the Canaanites (v.7), a far-reaching decision that echoes Lot's separation from Abram. We've noted, however, the grace with which he received his brother twenty years on (33:4), and both he and Jacob were at their father's burial (35:29) – with Esau mentioned first. They parted friends. There are consequences for our actions, good and bad, but Esau's story shows us there can always be a future. That said, it is now time to revert to the patriarchal line. Jacob's tenure centre-stage has also run its course – we move on now to the affairs of his offspring.

For many people, Joseph is one of their favourite Old Testament characters. This is due in part, no doubt, to the success of the Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice musical which follows (broadly) the text of these later chapters in Genesis. But as we soon see, Joseph is not one of his brothers' favourite characters. They are jealous that his father loves him the most (v.4). They are not impressed with the "ornamented robe." Worse are the dreams after which they "hated him all the more" (v.5). These dreams are central to the Joseph cycle, so I'll repeat them here using the musical version. Do sing along as you read if you know the tune!

I dreamed that in the fields one day the corn gave me a sign.
Your eleven sheaves of corn all turned and bowed to mine.
My sheaf was quite a sight to see, a golden sheaf and tall,
Yours were green and second-rate and really rather small.
I dreamed I saw eleven stars, the sun, the moon and sky
Bowing down before my star - it made me wonder why.

It's a double prophecy that the 11 brothers will be subservient to Joseph: a warning that societal norms are going to be overthrown once more, in that a 'younger' will be served by an 'older'. Immediately it leads to conflict. The brothers take the opportunity that soon presents itself to harm him, Judah persuading them not to kill him but to sell him into slavery (vv.26-27). Joseph is last heard of in Egypt working for the captain of the guard (v.36).

Where is God in all this? He is not mentioned explicitly at all anywhere in this narrative. Yet he has promised to bless Jacob's descendants, so we must assume that he is there watching over Joseph and his brothers, and that he will yet shape events with his guiding hand. We must wait and see how all this will turn out.

We can learn from this in our own lives, especially at those times when God's will seems hidden. At such times, we can only try and trust that he is still watching over us.

There was a monk who joined a very austere monastery where you were only allowed to speak once every five years. Even then it had to be restricted to a few words.
After the first five years, the monk said, "Bed hard!"
After ten years, he added, "Food cold!"
On his fifteenth anniversary, the monk announced to the abbot in charge, "I'm leaving."
"Thank goodness for that," replied the abbot, "You've done nothing but complain since you got here!"

The saga of Judah and Tamar in chapter 38 seems oddly out of place. It interrupts the flow of the story of Joseph and his dreams and leaves us wondering what is happening to him in captivity in Egypt. Perhaps this is a deliberate ploy to keep the reader in suspense. At the same time, it does point to the passing of several years, without much seeming to happen to the main characters (as in that monastery). Judah is now married and has three sons. The first two we are told behave wickedly and the Lord put them to death (vv.7,10). This sits uneasily with us and raises questions about how and why, which are not easily answered. Running through the chapter, however, is the theme of childlessness. They don't know it, but it is through Judah's family that the key ancestral line will run. How will it be preserved?

Deuteronomy 25:5-10 sets out the 'levirate' marriage obligation whereby if a man dies without a son, his brother should marry the widow, with any subsequent son bearing the name of the dead brother, and so maintaining it. Although this law is much later, it may well be reflecting earlier custom. We are not told Er's sin, but Onan's behaviour (v.9) shows a disregard for such brotherly duties. Judah too renaged on these expectations regarding his third son, Shelah. So it is left to the slighted, resourceful Tamar. Later laws would condemn her for incest (*Leviticus 20:12*), but Genesis seems to see her behaviour as justified in the circumstances. And it is Perez meaning 'breaking out' whose name will in time lead us to Jesus.

We return to Joseph and find he is prospering in the house of Potiphar, his Egyptian master. The text makes it clear why this is: "the Lord was with Joseph" (v.2), "the Lord gave him success in everything he did" (v.3) and "the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph" (v.5). Through all his hardships, God had not deserted him. With great success, though, can come great danger. In addition to his managerial prowess, Joseph was "well-built and handsome" (v.6). Potiphar's wife tried repeatedly to seduce him. Joseph resisted. Then came her accusation of attempted rape and he was flung in prison. Not for the first time, just when things were going well, Joseph finds himself in captivity, the victim of the envy of others. Re-read the chapter, pausing midway through verse 20, and try to imagine Joseph's likely state of mind. He'd already climbed back from the depths once: would he ever have the opportunity and the strength to do so a second time? The musical I mentioned two days ago picks this up well with a hauntingly melancholic refrain:

> Close every door to me, hide all the world from me,
> bar all the windows, and shut out the light …

And yet sometimes, paradoxically, it is when God is apparently absent that his presence can be felt most acutely. When a situation seems hopeless, the faintest ray of hope can sustain us. Joseph had hope for himself - God would not desert him this time either: after all, he'd rescued him before. He also had hope for his people - God would not forget the covenant with his father.

So to the second half of verse 20 and the "but" with which it begins. For while Joseph was confined in prison, "the Lord was with him" still (v.21), granting him favour with the warder (vv.22-23). Joseph's story may yet take a different direction and all those dreams may yet find their fulfilment.

Our own lives can sometimes take an unexpected turn that leaves us feeling lost and alone. But as Christians we too hold on to God's promise, that however tough things may be, he is with us always.

Yesterday's chapter closed with Joseph continuing to prosper, albeit in his prison cell. Why? Because the Lord was with him. Enter now two new inmates who had "offended their master, the king of Egypt" (v.1).

Being confined was bad enough, but then on the same night each had a strange dream which left them both "dejected" (v.6), as they did not understand their meaning. Gordon Wenham explains: "the Egyptians shared a belief, widespread in antiquity, that sleep puts us in direct contact with the other world where not only the dead but also the gods dwell. Dreams therefore are a gift from the gods. Their interpretation, however, was a complex science entrusted to learned specialists; while a dreamer might have a hunch whether a dream was auspicious or not, he had to rely on experts for a detailed explanation. In prison they had no access to such expertise; yet being prisoners they were most anxious to know their fate – hence their despondency." Joseph corrects this view. It is not a matter of learning or expertise but divine discernment: "Do not interpretations belong to God?" he asks (v.8).

So the cupbearer shares his dream with Joseph, who then explains its meaning. What is striking is the confidence Joseph has in the accuracy of the interpretation. "When all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness" (v.14). It is one thing to believe you can discern God's word, it is quite another to speak it out so boldly. This is even more true in the case of the baker, to whom Joseph brings news that is rather less good.

Both dreams proved prophetic (vv.20-22). "The chief cupbearer, however, did *not* remember Joseph" (v.23). Jacob's favourite son remains in prison, a righteous victim suffering alone. It's a central biblical motif. Jesus too was a righteous victim suffering alone. He rose to new life, though, and through him, many would be blessed, including us. Will Joseph's story also end with widespread blessing?

The action switches to Pharaoh and the strange dreams he'd been having. He summoned all the wise men and magicians in the land, but no-one could interpret them for him (v.8). At last, the chief cupbearer remembers the young Hebrew who'd interpreted his dream in prison (vv.9-13).

There are bigger matters at stake here than one person's introspection. One of the key symbols of the nation's well-being, the river Nile, and all that it represented in terms of longevity and fertility, was somehow implicated in the impending disaster (v.3). There is a noticeable sense of urgency in Pharaoh – Joseph was "quickly" (v.14) brought from the dungeon, and there was minimal delay before he came before Pharaoh. Just enough time to shave and change his clothes! The mighty ruler informs Joseph he's going to ask him to interpret his dreams. Notice Joseph's first response? It's to announce, "I cannot do it, but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires" (v.16).

The Egyptian empire prided itself on all its achievements, all its success, and it's wisdom. But it was powerless to compete with the wisdom of God. There are some interesting parallels with the gospels. In *Matthew 2*, we have the mighty King Herod unable to discover the whereabouts of the true king – the baby in a manger. And in *John 19*, when he is before Pilate, Jesus says to him, "you would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above" (v.11). Again, there is a contrast between the apparent wisdom of those in authority and the real wisdom of God.

Of course, God's wisdom still must be communicated and Joseph shows great faith in his confident proclamation that God will answer. As former President of the United States, Jimmy Carter, once said, "to me, faith is not just a noun but a verb."

God does answer, the dreams are interpreted and appropriate action is taken. Joseph is put in charge (v.41) – he has risen to new life.

Thanks to Joseph's shrewd management, when the famine spread throughout the lands, Egypt's storehouses were full. People came from far and wide to buy grain, and it isn't long before Jacob sends ten of his sons to do the same. Many years have passed and although the brothers do not recognise him, Joseph knows them straight away. They bow down to him (v.6) and he remembers his dreams about them (v.9). The dreams are being fulfilled. But not quite: there are only ten brothers. Joseph's first dream about the sheaves of corn needs all eleven of them to bow down. His second dream involved eleven stars, the sun and moon (his parents). Two people remained absent, the two he most wanted to see: his father, Jacob (Israel), and his blood-brother, Benjamin.

What are we to make of this new Joseph? He had risen to great power in Egypt –governor of the land (v.6). He wouldn't have sustained so privileged a position without being competent. This suggests he was cool, calculating and self-controlled. He is also well-versed in interrogation techniques: three times he accuses them of being spies (vv.9,12,14), not because he believed it but to try to glean more information from them. What would they say about Jacob and Benjamin? Or about Joseph, the lost brother? Was there any evidence that they were repentant in any way?

Then come the first glimmers of guilt and confession. "Surely we are being punished because of our brother" (v.21) they say to one another, and Reuben replies, "Now we must give an accounting for his blood" (v.22). It is at this point that Joseph begins to soften – he turns away and begins to weep (v.24). But he devises another plan. Simeon is kept imprisoned, while the others are sent back with grain and their silver intact, to fetch Benjamin. Would they return to Egypt as they said, or would they abandon Simeon for a bag of silver as they had done him? It's not clear yet whether they were genuinely sorry for what they'd done. Nor is it clear whether Joseph is ready to forgive yet. Neither comes easy for any of us.

The poet Elizabeth Barrett married Robert Browning in 1846. The wedding was held in secret because of her father's disapproval. After the wedding, they travelled to Italy where they stayed for the rest of their lives. Her parents disowned her, but Elizabeth never gave up on them. She regularly wrote to them, but they never replied. Ten years later, she received a large box in the post. Inside the box were all her letters, all unopened. Today they are a treasured part of classical English literature. Their memory lives on. But if only her parents had read some of them, maybe their relationship with Elizabeth would have been restored. It's so sad.

For Joseph and his family, the possibility of restoration is nearing, and it's an emotionally charged atmosphere for all concerned. Jacob himself agrees to the plan, reluctantly, apprehensive about what "the man" (vv.13,14) might do. In actions reminiscent of those prior to meeting Esau again (ch.32), he sends them on their way, laden with gifts to try to appease this potential adversary.

When they arrive, to their great surprise they are treated well. Simeon is released (v.23), setting the stage for all eleven brothers to bow down to Joseph (v.26). Twice (v.28). Joseph is overcome. "Deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep. He went into his private room and wept there" (v.30). The coldness has gone (at least for a while). He is ready to forgive. But Joseph is still not sure the brothers have changed. Reconciliation hangs precariously in the balance.

The brothers sit down to eat, and realise with astonishment they have been seated in order of their ages. This was no coincidence. The chance of it happening randomly is nearly 20 million to 1 (½ x 11 factorial to be precise). Benjamin is singled out for special treatment. Was this a mark of Joseph's affection or a ploy to see whether the others would react jealously as they had once before? Either way, they were at their ease. They feast and drink freely.

Joseph has recognised his brothers, but they do not know him yet. Are they really changed? He sets one more test for them, planting the silver cup in Benjamin's sack. On its discovery their response was immediate – they "tore their clothes" in shame and "returned to the city" (v.13) where "they threw themselves to the ground" before Joseph (v.14). Years before they'd all gladly sold Joseph into slavery: now any of them would have gladly traded places with Benjamin and had the cup in their sack rather than his.

The scene is well captured in the New Bible Commentary: "The hard-hearted Judah, who had proposed the sale of Joseph into slavery and demanded that his daughter-in-law be burnt, showed himself a changed man. In the longest speech in Genesis, he pleaded eloquently for Benjamin's release, touchingly describing the effects that Benjamin's non-return would have on their aged father, and finally offering to take his brother's place himself. Now at last it was clear that the age-old animosity between the sons of Leah (e.g. Judah) and the sons of Rachel (Joseph and Benjamin) was over. Even though Jacob might regard only Rachel and her sons as his real family, his other sons would have preferred Egyptian slavery to breaking their father's heart."

Like many a good television series, the chapter ends on a moment of high drama. Counsel for the defence has spoken well, but will it be enough to gain a pardon? How will Joseph respond?

A while ago, a parishioner who'd been ill for several years died. His family were upset that, as a believing man, he hadn't received communion when he'd been particularly poorly. I had visited him once, eighteen months before, but somehow he'd slipped off my radar. I offer no excuse, this was pastoral failure on my part. Worse, I was on holiday at the time of the funeral. I did write to express my condolences, but confess to being anxious how it would turn out when I met with them for a burial of ashes service. In the event it went well. The point, though, is that part of saying sorry is accepting that we don't know how the 'sorry' will be received.

Yesterday's episode ended in great suspense. How would Joseph respond? We do not have to wait long to find out. He "could no longer control himself" (v.1), sends out all the hangers-on, and makes himself known to his brothers. There is much weeping and embracing. Forgiveness and reconciliation are emotional things.

Gordon Wilson was the father of Marie Wilson, one of the twelve victims of the Remembrance Day bombing by the Provisional IRA at Enniskillen in 1987. He was a man of great Christian faith, who came to national and international prominence through a television interview in which he described his last conversation with his daughter, a nurse, as they both lay buried in rubble earlier that evening. This is what he said:

"She held my hand tightly, and gripped me as hard as she could. She said, 'Daddy, I love you very much.' Those were her exact words to me, and those were the last words I ever heard her say." To the astonishment of all, he then added, "But I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to life. She was a great wee lassie. She loved her profession. She was a pet. She's dead. She's in heaven and we shall meet again. I will pray for these men tonight and every night." Few words in the whole history of the conflict in Northern Ireland would have had such a powerful impact. Forgiveness is an emotional thing.

It was Gordon Wilson's faith that gave him both the inspiration and the strength to forgive. The same is true for Joseph. He tells his brothers four times (vv.5,7,8,9) that God was at work through it all. As we look back on our lives, we can often see the hidden hand of God at work, though we're not always as open as Joseph was in speaking about it. The brothers return with the message "Joseph is still alive" (v.26). At first, Jacob doesn't believe them, but soon his spirits are uplifted. Centuries later, it reminds us of the disciples' first reaction to the news that "Jesus is still alive."

Chapter 46 opens with God speaking to Israel in a vision at night. This is the only report in the entire Joseph cycle where God speaks so directly, and where the promise to make his people into a great nation is reiterated. And it is Jacob to whom God speaks now, not Joseph. There may be two reasons for this. First, it could reflect different sources. God often speaks directly in the Abraham, Isaac and Jacob cycles (perhaps a 'J' source), but more obscurely via dreams and events in the Joseph cycle (perhaps an 'E' source).

A second reason may simply be they are different kinds of people. Jacob is hot-blooded and passionate - remember him wrestling with God? – while Joseph is calm and calculating. Any religious fervour Joseph may have is much more hidden.

As we look back over our past, how has God spoken to us? Does it correlate in any way to our own spiritual zest at the time?

The narrative moves on to consider genealogical matters. As someone who used to study mathematics, I find chapters like this mildly frustrating. The numbers don't quite add-up. The sons and daughters of Jacob through Leah are 33 (v.15) only if Dinah, his daughter, is excluded, though there is no obvious reason why she should be. After all, a grand-daughter, Serah, is included in Zilpah's list (v.17). We then learn that those who went to Egypt with Jacob numbered 66 (v.26). Assuming we exclude Joseph and his two sons (already in Egypt) as well as Er and Onan (who had died), this time we need to include Dinah! Then to arrive at the 70 in the next verse we would need to add back Joseph, Manasseh, Ephraim and Jacob himself. This, however, is to labour the point. The fact is, out of that delicate promise to Abraham there are now 70 descendants, a number symbolising totality and completeness. In the introduction to Genesis, I mentioned that the central theme of chapters 12 through 50 was the affirmation that God calls a special group of people to be faithfully his. The large number of descendants witnesses that truly much has been achieved.

In 1887 Lord Acton, famously wrote in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." It remains a common belief. Since 1995 a Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) has been published annually ranking the countries of the world according to the degree to which corruption is perceived to exist among politicians and public officials. Data is derived from canvassing many inhabitants of each country, with scores ranging from 1 to 10, a higher score corresponding to less perceived corruption. The 2007 survey covered 180 countries with Denmark, New Zealand and Sweden coming equal top with a score of 9.3. The UK was 16th (7.7). Sadly, less than 30% of countries scored more than 5, while 40% scored less than 3.

Joseph has risen to a position of power and privilege in the land. He has regular audiences with Pharaoh. But has this power been used well? The stockpiled grain is sold to those in need. When their money has gone it is exchanged for their livestock, then their land, and finally their own selves. Wenham defends his actions, noting the people happily said: "You have saved our lives" (v.25). He argues "memories of the African slave trade colour our view of slavery, so that we cannot understand this expression of gratitude. But in ancient society slavery was the accepted way of bailing out the destitute, and under a benevolent master could be quite a comfortable status (Joseph with Potiphar for instance)."

Brueggemann is less convinced: "Joseph's shrewdness shows that entering the world of the empire brings dangers with it. The Egyptian empire offers food and therefore life. But it is never far from exploitation, oppression and slavery. As though to set the stage for the Exodus, the result of Joseph's tax reform is that citizens sell their persons to the throne. They forfeit their freedom. Joseph may be credited with shrewdness. But for a tradition looking to the Exodus, it is a doubtful credit."

Which conclusion do *you* think is right?

Rites of passage are important the world over. Birth, the transition to adulthood, marriage, parenthood and death are all marked out as special occasions in most cultures, although their relative emphasis and precise expression will be very different. In Hebrew culture the deathbed blessing from a father to the next generations was, as we've already seen, a highly significant event. In chapter 49 Jacob will address each of his twelve sons, but first Joseph brings before him his own two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

It's a moving scene. The loss of his beloved Rachel was still raw. Now he confides in the son she bore him whom he had thought lost, "I never expected to see your face again, and now God has allowed me to see your children too" (v.11). But then something goes wrong. Joseph had positioned them so that Manasseh, the older, would be on Jacob's right – to receive the blessing of his grandfather's right hand (v.13). Throughout Scripture the right-hand side is regarded as the place of honour. But Jacob crosses arms, putting Ephraim first. Why did he do this? Was it in error? Was he in some way projecting his own guilt about the blessing that he'd received? Or had he discerned God's will, which once again preferred the younger to the elder? We simply do not know.

The first person I had the privilege of baptizing was a baby boy. His first name was James, his second name Alexander. The trouble was I find it difficult to say James Alexander without wanting to add 'Gordon.' This is a consequence of too many Saturday afternoons listening to the football results on the radio – which, for the last 40 years or so at the time of writing, had been read by one James Alexander Gordon! On the day, I managed not to give the child a third name. Had I got it wrong, doubtless we'd have laughed it off in a typically Anglican way, and started again. That option was not open to the Hebrew world. Once given, the blessing could not be rescinded. Even the deceived Isaac wasn't able to reverse his blessing of Jacob. As we have noted before, the blessing has a life of its own.

Jacob calls his sons around him to give them his blessing: twelve sons that represent "the twelve tribes of Israel" (v.28). Apart from final instructions about his burial wishes, they are his last recorded words.

I've never experienced this kind of scene. Despite the belief in resurrection through Christ, death and dying are taboo subjects in our Western culture: 'we'd rather not talk about it, thank you very much.' The nearest I've come to it was my father-in-law, Derek. An eightieth birthday celebration had been arranged for him at a local restaurant to which the extended family were invited. Derek hadn't been well for a while, but no-one realised quite how ill he was. At the restaurant, he gave a moving speech without notes, in which I remember him looking back over his life and concluding, "it's all been wonderful." It felt like an invitation for his children and grandchildren to embrace for themselves how wonderful life is. Derek died two months later, adding poignancy to his words.

Jacob has specific words for each of his sons. Three things stand out. First, he's not afraid to be blunt. He prophesies consequences in the future for actions in the past. Reuben's defilement of his father's bed, and Simeon and Levi's excessive, bloodthirsty vengeance for their sister's rape will lead to the former ceasing to excel (v.4), and the latter to be scattered (v.7). Second, Joseph receives special blessing. The blessings of the heavens above, the deep below, the breast and womb – "let all these rest on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the prince among his brothers" (v.26). The favouritism for Rachel's first-born so openly demonstrated by Jacob during his life, was still in evidence at his death.

Third, Judah is also accorded special treatment. "The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet" (v.10). It prophesies the rise of a kingdom through Judah, with a greater fulfillment in the coming of Christ, his distant descendant.

We have reached the end of Genesis, the end of the 'beginning.' We have seen God call the world into being to be his faithful world, and call a special people to be faithfully his people. It has been a powerful saga of sin and redemption, hardship and hope, held together by the hand of God, sometimes hidden, sometimes not, but always there, actively involved in his creation.

God has made a covenant with the three patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – to bless their descendants and give them a land of their own. We can be sure God is true to his word, always. Although the book ends with the death of one of Abraham's great grandchildren, his descendants have already become numerous. Yet we leave them in Goshen, part of Egypt. The promise has not come fully to fruition. As its name implies, Genesis has been about beginnings, but God's newly formed people are not yet home. It's far from the end of their story.

So as we bring to a close our study of the first book of the Bible, we look forward to the exodus from Egypt into the promised land. And we look forward as well to that fuller redemption in the distant future. Joseph said to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (v.20). The authorities harmed God's own Son, Jesus, nailing him to the cross. But God intended it for good to accomplish the salvation of very many lives indeed.

As you finish Genesis and reflect on all you've read, I wonder which parts have inspired you the most? Which people have you warmed to? Which have you not? Has God spoken to you in some way or challenged you through the readings? I do hope you are encouraged by the fact that these great 'heroes' of the Bible were all flawed characters. Yet God worked with them and through them to achieve great things. He does the same with us, today. We too have a part to play in God's ongoing story.

Once again we find David crying out to God from the heart" "O Lord my God, I take refuge in you; save and deliver me from all who pursue me" (v.1). It seems he has been falsely accused of some significant act of treachery (vv.3-4) presumably by a man named Cush from the tribe of Benjamin (see the initial inscription of the psalm). The precise details are uncertain as the incident is not referred to elsewhere in the Bible but David often experienced opposition from the Benjaminites, both during Saul's reign and afterwards when he himself was king. If the latter, slander would be especially significant – the king's reputation was at stake.

What do you do when people make false accusations against you? There are several possible responses. The first is to give back as good as you get. While this may offer some initial satisfaction, it rarely lasts. It merely brings us down to the level of our accusers. The second response is to try and ignore it. This is difficult to do, partly because we usually want to protect our reputation and to answer any implied criticisms of us, and partly because silence might be seen as an acknowledgement of guilt. On the other hand, if you are too overly enthusiastic in your denials, people may become suspicious – as Shakespeare expressed it, 'methinks he doth protest too much'.

There's a fourth way: the way David chooses. He takes the matter to God, appealing to him to judge, and accepting punishment at the hands of his enemy if he's found wanting (v.5).

Being in the right on some specific issue doesn't mean you're a 'righteous' person in general, of course. David knows this too, so it's probably best to see his plea - "judge me according to my righteousness, according to my integrity" (v.8)- as referring to the false accusation in question, rather than as reflecting an inflated opinion of himself in general. Fittingly, the psalm closes with thanksgiving and praise, as David's focus returns to the Lord most high (v.17).

This is a wonderful, short psalm. It begins with God, moves on to consider the role of humankind, and then returns again to God, the last verse repeating the opening declaration of praise: "O Lord our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth" (vv.1,9).

Some years ago, I went on an organized four-wheel-drive camping tour of the Australian Red Centre. It started from Alice Springs and finished at Uluru or Ayers Rock, visiting several landmarks along the way. Camp was made the first night in what seemed like the middle of nowhere, about halfway between Alice Springs and King's Canyon. Because it was the 'middle of nowhere' there were no streetlights, no smog and none of the background noise we're so used to in the city - just one vast emptiness. It meant that at night, the sky was breathtaking, lit with more stars than I'd ever seen before. As I gazed into this celestial paradise, my thoughts turned inevitably from the physical to the spiritual. How big is this God who lies behind the whole of creation, I thought, and how small are we. As the psalmist muses, "when I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?" (vv.3-4).

Yet he *is* mindful of us. He made his covenant with the patriarchs to create a people of his own. And now we too are counted as part of that family through the coming of Christ, as prophesied here: "the son of man (will be) crowned with glory and honour" (v.5).

Jesus himself quotes from this psalm. He had been healing the blind and lame in the temple area, to the excitement of all – the children were shouting out. The chief priests and teachers of the law were indignant at the commotion and complained to Jesus. "Have you never read?" he replied, "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise" (*Matthew 21:16*, v.2 here). He endorses their praise and, by implication, the authorities are numbered amongst the "foes" and the "avengers" (also v.2).

This is the first psalm that might be classified as a 'praise' psalm. So David proclaims, "I will praise you, O Lord; I will tell of your wonders; I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High" (vv.1-2). It's a four-fold insistence that despite the actions and attitudes of his enemies that he sets out in what follows, David will sing praises to his God.

Praising God, though, is not something that always comes easily to us. James Montgomery Boice offers the following spiritual exercise to help remedy this. He writes, "recognizing that they (the Psalms) are open in their praise of God, I decided to make a point every day of acknowledging God's goodness in some area to some person. That does not seem like very much. But when I began to think along these lines, I realized how much time frequently went by without my having praised God for anything.

"And I discovered something else. Once I had begun to make a point of acknowledging God's goodness, I began to think of his goodness more often, and I actually developed a more positive and spiritual frame of mind." Perhaps this might be a personal challenge for you. Why not try it in the week ahead?

We note the catalyst for David's song of praise here. His enemies have been defeated (v.3), their name and reputation destined to fade away (vv.5-6). God has upheld his cause and vindicated him (v.4). His model of praise in response is instructive for us. He declares that his God "reigns forever" (v.7), rules with "justice" and "righteousness" (v.8), is a "refuge for the oppressed" (v.9) - he's on the side of the poor, the downtrodden and the maligned - and doesn't forsake those who seek him (v.10) or ignore the cry of the afflicted (v.12). In other words, David praises God because of his nature and his character – he is worthy of our worship. He is also consistent. The fact he has delivered him in the past makes David confident that he will do so again in the future (vv.13,19).

In some versions of the Bible – notably the early Greek version known as the Septuagint – psalms 9 and 10 are joined together to form a single psalm. There are some plausible linguistic reasons supporting this, though they won't be explored in these notes. The themes of the two, however, are very different. Psalm 9 was a hymn of praise, heralding God's glorious actions in the past, whereas here the psalmist is lamenting God's apparent inaction. "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (v.1). Why, that is, does God seem to do nothing while evildoers prosper without any reference to any need for holiness or righteousness: "in his pride the wicked (person) does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God" (v.4).

It's a sentiment that remains equally valid in our increasingly secular, modern society. Consider these words: "we have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. And we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace." They were spoken by Abraham Lincoln in his 1863 Thanksgiving Proclamation. The sad truth is they could have been spoken today. Compare them with the take on the Beatitudes in *The Message*, Eugene Peterson's contemporary Bible translation: "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule" (*Matthew 5:3*). Reflect on this awhile.

The psalmist was clearly at the end of *his* rope. Acknowledging his helplessness before God, though, marked the first step in his recovery. For he comes to realise that the Lord does hear him, encourage him and defend him (vv.17-18), and his lament turns again to praise (v.16).

Habbakuk – an Introduction

As he declares in the opening verse, Habakkuk was a 'prophet'. When we think of prophets we tend to think of those who predict the future. This is indeed part of what the Old Testament prophets did. Some prophecies were messages of hope, including those that spoke of the anointed one who would come – these are messianic prophecies which Christians believe were fulfilled by the coming of Jesus. Other prophecies warned about the consequences of continuing to ignore God's laws and his ways of living.

However, prophecies were not restricted to thinking about the future. More generally, a prophet was simply someone called by God to speak out to the people so that they might respond to his word.

Habakkuk is one of the minor prophets – not because he wasn't important, but because the book named after him is fairly short. Little is known about him. There are no other Biblical references to him. There *is* a prophet named Habakkuk mentioned in the story of Bel and the Dragon in the *Apocrypha*. He is taken by an angel to provide food for Daniel in the lion's den. We cannot be certain, though, that this is the same person. Other rabbinic traditions claim that Habakkuk was the son of the Shunammite woman restored to life by Elisha (*2 Kings 4*), while some scholars suggest he was a worship leader in the temple, given the liturgical instructions of 3:19. Whoever Habakkuk actually was, we can make a calculated guess as to when he was writing. His words prophesy the imminent fall of the southern kingdom of Judah to the Babylonians. We know that they ransacked Jerusalem in 587BC, so Habakkuk probably can be dated to around 600BC.

So what is the book about? Habakkuk begins by complaining to God that the wicked among his chosen people continued to escape any punishment – a theme we have just visited in Psalm 10. Injustice was rife. But God reveals his divine plan to his prophet, who responds (eventually) with the hymn of praise in chapter 3 – struggle and doubt are superseded by faith and hope.

You'll have probably experienced driving down the motorway at 70 mph, when you see the sign 'Road Works 3 miles ahead.' Your heart sinks. It sinks even further when a short distance later the traffic slows to a virtual standstill. After an hour or so, the three lanes become two and you finally snail past the road-works. Frustration turns to anger as you observe a dozen men 'at work', none of whom actually seem to be doing anything! Then, a few weeks on, you pass the same stretch of road again with no delays this time – the repairs have been completed. Clearly the men *were* actually doing something, it's just our viewpoint was incomplete.

Habakkuk voices his plea: "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" (v.2); "why do you tolerate wrong?" (v.3). He sees the oppression and injustice around him and cannot fathom how God can tolerate it. God responds by asserting that he is not standing by idle. He tells Habakkuk, "Look at the nations and watch … for I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe" (v.5). It's true. Habakkuk could scarcely believe it. God's remedy was to raise up the Babylonians to bring judgement on his people. The Babylonians!

This leads to the prophet's second complaint. The Babylonians were certainly powerful. Around Habakkuk's time they had conquered both the Assyrians and the Egyptians to become the superpower of the region. The problem was their standards of behaviour were even worse! They plunder nations with hooks as though they were fish in the sea (vv.14-15) and then idolatrously worship their nets (v.16). Habakkuk reminds God of his holiness (v.13) and asks him in the light of this how he can tolerate this kind of treachery and sin, while being so severe on the lesser evils within Judah.

We await God's second response tomorrow. Meanwhile we can learn from Habakkuk's boldness in so openly expressing his doubts to God, and also his expectation that God *will* answer him.

Living in a free democratic society, it is difficult for us to imagine what it is like to live in a country occupied by an oppressive regime. It must be a frightening and disturbing prospect. So God's way of dealing with Judah's sin, by raising up the Babylonians, left Habakkuk perplexed. He sought out God once more, and now stationed himself "on the ramparts" (v.1) awaiting a response.

God answers him not in the way that Habakkuk had probably hoped – that is, by preserving his people from the threat of this hostile occupation – but by announcing (implicitly) that the Babylonians too would face judgement in the future. Their overthrow wouldn't happen immediately, but it *would* happen: "Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come" (v.3).

In the Richard Attenborough film *Gandhi*, the closing sequence is memorably accompanied by the Mahatma speaking the following profound words: "when I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible but, in the end, they always fall. Think on it. Always!"

Even the mighty Babylonians would fall … in time. Five woes are directed towards them. They have made themselves wealthy by extortion (v.6), built a realm by unjust gain (v.9), established a city with bloodshed and crime (v.12), shamed their neighbours (v.15), and adopted pagan worship practices (v.19). For each there would be a reckoning.

In contrast to the arrogance and greed of the wicked, the righteous will live by faith (v.4). This verse is quoted by Paul in *Romans* (1:17) as part of his unfolding argument about how we are justified before God. It's the central message of Habakkuk. In the midst of personal or national circumstances that threaten to swamp us, our true hope comes from God alone.

The American evangelist Dwight L. Moody tells the story of a Christian woman who was always cheerful and optimistic, despite being confined to her room through illness. She lived in an attic apartment on the fifth floor of an old, rundown building. A friend decided to visit her one day and brought along another woman - a person of great wealth. As there was no lift, the two ladies began the long climb up the stairs. On reaching the second floor, the well-to-do woman commented, "What a dark and filthy place!" Her friend replied, "It's better higher up." When they arrived at the third-floor landing, she said, "Things look even worse here!" Again came the reply: "It's better higher up." Finally, they reached the attic and found the bedridden woman. She was smiling.

Although the room was clean and there were fresh flowers on the windowsill, the wealthy visitor felt uncomfortable in the stark surroundings. "It must be very difficult for you to be here like this," she said. Without hesitation the bedridden lady responded: "It will be better higher up." With her eyes of faith fixed on the eternal, she had discovered the secret of true contentment. Even when life is hard, the presence of God with us can bring us joy.

The role of faith set out in God's words in 2:4 is given expression now in Habakkuk's prayer of chapter 3. For me, verses 17-18 represent one of the most beautiful passages in the whole Old Testament. I invite you to meditate on these words in terms of what they might mean for you today.

"Though the fig-tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
Though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
Though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
Yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Saviour."

The psalmist asks: "when the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (v.3). It has quite a modern ring to it. Christianity is increasingly marginalized in our society as having nothing positive to contribute to debates on moral issues. In such a hostile climate, to stand up for your faith is not so easy.

Nadia Eweida is one lady who did. In October 2006, Nadia, a check-in clerk at British Airways, was asked to cover up the cross she wore around her neck as it contravened their uniform policy. This stated that, while on duty, staff should not wear visible jewellery or other 'adornments' without the permission of company management. When she refused to do so, she was suspended, and placed on unpaid leave. Nadia then sued the airline for religious discrimination. She pointed out that the company made exceptions for Sikh employees who could wear turbans and even the traditional iron bangle which would usually be classed as jewellery. British Airways eventually caved to public pressure, and removed the ban, though Nadia has (so far) repeatedly failed in her attempts to recover the lost earnings during her suspension. Some have argued that her wearing the cross went beyond being a mark of her faith and that her real intention was evangelistic – indeed the BBC quoted her as saying "it is important that I wear it so that other people will know that Jesus loves them." Whatever the rights and wrongs of this particular case, Nadia certainly adopted the advice here, for rather than "fleeing like a bird" (v.1) at the first sign of trouble, Psalm 11 urges us to "take refuge" in the Lord, to stand firm in our convictions.

The psalm then points out a significant contrast: "the Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord is on his heavenly throne" (v.4). While the earthly temple can be destroyed, the heavenly one cannot. The foundations of wealth or success on which we build our lives may one day crumble, but God never will. In the words of the chorus, 'Jesus you're my firm foundation; I know I can stand secure.'

Another spiritually challenging psalm. I would like to see myself as someone who aims to speak truthfully always. There are times, however, when speaking the truth can be pastorally awkward as to do so might be hurtful or discouraging for the recipient.

You may have come across articles that set out statements that people have actually written when invited to give a reference on another person's suitability for employment. The statements fall short of direct criticism (which could be seen as libelous) but carry a very definite hidden meaning. Consider these, for example:

'You will be very fortunate to get this person to work with you.' In other words, I never succeeded!
'He's definitely a young man to watch. One day he'll forge a name for himself.' This really means, he's a dishonest worker!
'I am pleased to say this candidate is a former colleague of mine.' This one really means, we didn't get on!
And the self-explanatory, 'No salary would be too much for her!'

Psalm 12 brooks no compromise. For the words of the Lord are "flawless" writes David (v.6), unlike the words of his people. Our tongues can lead us into trouble in at least four different ways. We can flatter (v.2) – exaggerating the truth in the interests of currying favour with the influential. We can deceive (v.2) – saying one thing when really we mean another, as in the case of the carefully worded job references above. We can boast (v.3) – overly talking up our own achievements in order to impress other people. And we can downright lie (v.2) – deliberately bearing false witness usually as a means of self-protection.

Are you susceptible to any of these pitfalls? Try monitoring the things you say over an extended period of time. How 'flawless' are *your* words?

I remember watching a televised concert from Wembley Stadium to mark the 70th birthday of Nelson Mandela, then still imprisoned on Robben Island where he had been for 25 years. One of the speakers at the concert denounced at length the injustice of the South African regime of the time and closed by demanding in a slow, clear voice: "How … Much … Longer?"

Our psalm begins with an equally heartfelt cry. "How long, Lord? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts? How long will my enemy triumph over me?" (vv.1-2). It's a fourfold cry: How much longer? We don't know the precise circumstances surrounding these pleas, but the psalmist (David) feels abandoned by God. There is no justice.

The 16th century mystic St. John of the Cross described something similar in his 'dark night of the soul'. He was referring to a period of spiritual dryness marked by a deeply troubled mind, trials and temptations, inner pains and a sense that God had forsaken him. Yet he was also aware that God brought him through the darkness into a new light and an even closer communion with him than before. Indeed, St. John realised that it was precisely *because* of the sufferings he underwent that he grew in spiritual enlightenment.

This too is evident in the psalm, for protest gives way to prayer (vv.3-4), and this time God is referred to more intimately – "O Lord *my* God" (v.3). And then there is further movement. It's not clear if David's prayer has been answered, or if the act of praying itself has caused a change of attitude – a revised perspective on his troubles. But it is clear that prayer turns to praise (vv.5-6) and a renewed determination to trust, rejoice and sing. It's a good model for us in times of trouble. To pour out our hearts to God as honestly and openly as we can, to trust that he is there, and has not abandoned us, and to allow this knowledge gradually to turn our thoughts from despair to hope, from darkness to light.

Bibliography

Boice, J.M., *Psalms, Volume 1* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1994).

Brueggemann, W., *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1982).

New Bible Commentary ... eds. Carson, D., France, R., Motyer, J. & Wenham, G. (IVP, Leicester, 1994).

Peterson, Eugene R., *The Message* (Navpress, New York, 1993).

Wenham, G., *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Word Books, Waco, Texas, 1994).

Yancey, P., *What's so Amazing about Grace?* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1997).

Unless otherwise specified, all Bible quotations used in these notes are taken from the New International Version, 1979.