

Married with Children: dysfunctional families in Genesis

Genealogy

Genesis is a book with some large and important themes;

- Where did the world come from?
- Why can't human beings be "good" all the time?
- Why do we find it difficult to get on with people?
- Why do people have different customs and speak different languages?

And it mostly answers these questions through looking at the story of one family – Abraham's family.

The genealogies in Genesis summarise the history of that family, lead us from one part of the story to the next, and remind us of the story we have read so far – much like the synopsis at the beginning of a new episode of a TV serial.

Genealogies can appear to be boring. But they do not need to be. We probably find our own interesting. One of my friends recently sent me a portion of her family tree which started with William Lash marrying Mary Dessiou. Since my surname is Lash my friend asked if we are related. Both William and Dessiou are names still used in my family and I knew that Dessiou was the surname of a woman who had married into the Lash family. So my friend and I are related. We are still excited about that discovery.

Mostly I think we find genealogies boring because we read them, but they are meant to be recited. They were learnt and recited in cultures with strong oral traditions. The elders passed them on because it was important to know who you are, and where you come from. I'm sure that at least some of the young people learning them, and possibly getting whacked on the knuckles by Grandpa when they made a mistake, found learning them a tedious chore. But probably grew up to appreciate their usefulness, and passed them on to their own grandchildren.

Knowing who you are may establish your right to do certain things, your right to land, and your relationship to people who you didn't see very often because visiting requires a long journey. We use documents like birth certificates to do this, but in oral cultures, genealogies were used. We see this in some of the stories in Genesis. Isaac claims the right to re-dig his father's wells. Abraham's servant is able to prove his master's relationship to Rebekah's father, and Jacob proves his relationship to his uncle Laban. Knowing the genealogy must have helped with that. Later in the Bible, it was important to know if you were a Levite, or could trace your line back to Aaron and so had the right to be a priest.

I have some CDs of someone reading the whole Bible and when I listen to them I experience the genealogies as oral tradition. I was really surprised how different it is listening to the genealogies rather than reading them. I noticed things like:

- the same family names occur in different generations¹,
- there are variations on the family names²,
- there are little details that are sometimes added about a person³,

¹ Enoch son of Cain in Genesis 4:17 and Enoch son of Jared in Genesis 5:18.

² Enosh and Enoch in Genesis 5:6 and 5:18.

- there are some places where woman are mentioned⁴,
- there are some lines that are not pursued⁵,
- there are famous names whose stories we know⁶.

The genealogies in Genesis have been recorded from an oral tradition. They are of two kinds. Some of them are incomplete. I get the impression that the writer came across these fragments and preserved them so they didn't get lost. Sometimes one feels that they are not that 100% accurate and bits are missing, or have been added. But they have been preserved, because that is a very Jewish thing to do – include everything, even if it looks as if it has been superseded, or bits are missing.

The other genealogies are ones which in some scholars' opinion are the structure around which Genesis is written. Genesis tends to pull together stories that were probably from oral histories and the genealogies connect these stories. We know where the person in the story fits in the overall story. We know Noah's story, and we know Adam's story, but we also know that Noah is descended from Adam.

These genealogies are each associated with one person who is important in the Genesis story and are sometimes embedded in the stories. Sometimes a person's genealogy comes before that person's story, and sometimes the genealogy comes after their story, or even in the middle. The writer of Genesis has not tidily placed all of the genealogies before the story or all after the story of the main person in the genealogy, but in the place where the genealogy seems to fit best.

I wondered why this was so, so I went through an exercise of trying to neatly place all of the genealogies before a person's story, or after. I could not do it for two reasons. Firstly, I needed to answer the question "is a person's genealogy the one with their ancestors, or the one with their descendants?" The answer in Genesis seems to be either, depending on what is appropriate. For most it is a list of descendants, but sometimes (for example, Isaac) it is an ancestor. Secondly, when we get to the story of Abraham and his sons, one person's story does not end when another person's begins. Abraham's story continues after the births of Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael's story continues after the birth of Isaac, as does Abraham's. So it is difficult to decide where stories about a person begin and end and therefore where the genealogies fit using a neat rule. After this exercise I appreciated in a new way how well the author of Genesis has placed the genealogies.

The genealogies in Genesis that start with the Hebrew word "Toledoth" which can be translated "these are the generations of.." are the most important, and the most complete, as they trace the line from Adam, through Noah to Abraham, then to Jacob and his sons – the basis of the twelve tribes of Israel.

³ "Tubal-Cain who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron." Genesis 4:22.

⁴ Adah and Zillah, the two wives of Lamech. Genesis 4:19-24.

⁵ Abraham's children with Keturah. Genesis 25:1-4.

⁶ Noah and his sons end the genealogy in Genesis 5

The genealogies using the phrase “these are the generations of..” are:

1. Genesis 5:1 – 32 these are the generations of Adam (Adam to Noah.)
2. Genesis 10:1 – 32 These are the generations of the sons of Noah (especially Shem – the Semitic line which leads to Abraham.)
3. Genesis 11:10 – 26 These are the generations of Shem (leads to Terah)
4. Genesis 11:27 - 30 These are the generations of Terah (follows straight on from Shem and leads to Abraham and Lot.)
5. Genesis 25:12 - 18 These are the generations of Ishmael.
6. Genesis 25:19 – 20. These are the generations of Isaac. (follows immediately after Ishmael.)
7. Genesis 36:1 - 43 These are the generations of Esau (the last mention before Esau disappears from the story.)
8. Genesis 37:2 These are the generations of Jacob (The phrase has become disconnected from the genealogies which are in 46:8 onwards.)

What do we notice:

- Abraham doesn't get his own genealogy, but he is there – included in the others.
- Some lines stop being recorded. The genealogies focus on those the story is interested in. Adam had other descendants, but it is Noah who is singled out. Noah had other sons, but it is Shem's line we follow. Abraham's son Ishmael is mentioned before the details of his descendants disappear from the story. Esau is mentioned before his details disappear as well.
- Mothers are not always wives, but the children are still recognised, and the facts are not covered up. There are concubines, surrogate mothers, incest, and one strange situation where a daughter-in-law sleeps with her late husbands' father.

Why does this matter?

It is still important for us today to know who we are, to know where we fit in our family. What are the good things we have inherited? (In my family two strong traits are being intelligent, and being blond.) What are the bad things we might try and avoid? We are not an oral culture, so the ritual learning of genealogies is no longer part of what we do. However, in the last 40 years there has been a huge growth in the number of people in New Zealand who are interested in tracing their family line. TV programmes like “Who do you think you are” are very popular.

As I read the genealogies of Genesis I appreciate that I am part of the human family of Adam. Although I don't belong to the family of Abraham that becomes the focus of the story, I see the very human ways the family behaves, the good stuff and the bad. I think God loved and cared for these people, and was prepared to work with them to make them better. I believe He will do that for me.

Barb Lash

Family Systems

Tolstoy famously said, 'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.'⁷ If that is true, the exception is with the families in Genesis. They are all unhappy, or dysfunctional, in strikingly similar ways. Throughout the book the same patterns keep recurring: a man passes his wife off as his sister, women have difficulty conceiving and some go to extraordinary lengths to avoid remaining childless; brothers fight with each other, and one of them is sent away eastwards; fathers are passive and mothers take the initiative. And as the book focuses on one particular family saga, let's not forget how lying and cheating are part of their DNA.

Genesis tells the story of how an individual became a family and a family became the people of God. We know that births, and birth stories, will be important – but what we might not expect is that the process of conception and birth will prove so difficult. And yet so many of the key women, the matriarchs, have difficulty becoming pregnant. God has promised Abraham that he will become the father of a great nation (Gen 12:2, 15:5) but Abraham's wife Sarah is barren.⁸ Sarah suggests a solution, that Abraham 'go in to my slave girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' (16:2, NRSV). The slave girl, Hagar, conceives quickly, and Ishmael is born. Much later, and when Sarah was 'advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women' she gives birth to Isaac: a birth promised by God and announced to Abraham by divine messengers. In the next generation, Isaac's wife Rebekah is likewise for a long time unable to conceive.⁹ We are told that Isaac 'prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren, and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived.' (25:21) The pregnancy was a difficult one, until Rebekah eventually gives birth to twins, Esau and Jacob. The pattern continues in the following generation: of Jacob's two wives the one he loves, Rachel, is infertile for many years, while the unloved wife, Leah, bears children easily. Jacob also has sons (at his wives' initiative) by Leah's maid Zilpah and Rachel's maid Bilhah. In the next generation Judah's first son dies childless, the second son, Onan, refuses to do his duty and raise up offspring for his dead brother, and Judah delays giving the third son to the widow, Tamar, for so long that she tricks him (her father-in-law) into conceiving children with her. The daughters of Abraham's nephew Lot go to huge lengths to avoid being childless: after fleeing to the hill country and hiding in a cave they were so worried about the lack of men whom they could marry that they get Lot drunk so that he impregnates them himself.

Infertility is part of the repeated pain of this family. While the text (in Genesis as elsewhere in the Bible) typically portrays God as the giver of fertility, the narrator does not ignore the anguish caused, to women in particular, by their inability to bear children: the first words uttered by Rachel are her words to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I shall die!' (30:1) The story of this family is one of recurrent barrenness, and recurrent initiatives by the women to turn this around.

Family systems theory points to the way in which family interactions and relationships tend to be 'highly reciprocal, patterned and repetitive.' 'Families repeat themselves. What happens in one generation will often repeat itself in the next, i.e. the same issues tend to be played out from generation to generation, though the actual behaviour may take a variety of

⁷ *Anna Karenina*, trans Constance Garnett (Heinemann: London, 1901), 7.

⁸ 16:1. If a couple were unable to conceive in ancient Israel the assumption was that the problem lay with the woman. See Sharon Pace Jeanson, *The Woman of Genesis: from Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1990), 62.

⁹ Isaac was 40 when he married Rebekah and 60 when the twins were born (25:20, 25).

forms.’¹⁰ One can inherit more than blond hair and blue eyes: patterns of behaving and ways of responding to situations are also passed down in families, even when (especially when) the individuals are unaware of what is going on. We can see this happening in the family system which traces its descent from Abraham.

There are repeated patterns which threaten harm to the family relationships and to the fulfilment of God’s promise to Abraham of many descendants. While travelling in foreign territory a man passes his attractive wife off as his sister: ‘when the Egyptians see you, they will say, “This is his wife”, then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account.’ (12:12-13) Abraham does this with Sarah not once but twice (12, 20), and Isaac does the same with Rebekah (26). This places the women at risk – in the first instance Sarah is taken into Pharaoh’s house and taken by Pharaoh as a wife (12:19) – and it also imperils the succession. This is particularly so with the second incident involving Sarah, as it comes just after the divine visitors have promised that Sarah will have a child within the year. So that it is clear that Isaac, when he is born, is the son of Sarah by Abraham and not by someone else the narrator has God reveal to Abimelech in a dream that he is not to touch her as she is a married woman. God is looking after Sarah and after the promise, even if Abraham is not.

Sarah and Rebekah’s seemingly docile acceptance of their husbands’ behaviour in these wife/sister incidents is what one would expect in a patriarchal society. What is not, however, is the extent to which these women – and in fact all the women in Genesis – seize the initiative at significant points in the plot, and the parallel extent to which their male relatives can be surprisingly passive. As we have seen, it is at Sarah’s instigation that Abraham takes Hagar as a concubine in order to conceive a child. During her pregnancy Hagar at first runs away (into the desert, where she has a crucial encounter with God), and then returns. Rebekah consents to go with Abraham’s servant to marry Isaac (a man she has never seen), and agrees to leave immediately when her family want her to remain for a while. Rebekah also acts to secure Isaac’s blessing for her favourite son Jacob, coaching him in what to say and do. In the next generation, Rachel and Leah bargain with each other over the use of mandrake roots and determine which one of them Jacob will sleep with that night (Jacob simply follows instructions), and later it is their agreement to leave their father’s house that sets Jacob on the path of returning to the land of Canaan. Rachel steals Laban’s household gods, making the breach permanent. As we have seen, Lot’s daughters act to stop their family line from dying out, and Tamar takes a risky route to claiming her rights under the laws of levirate marriage. Jacob responds passively to both his daughter’s rape (it is Dinah’s brothers who take revenge) and to his eldest son laying with his concubine Bilhal; Abraham goes along with Sarah’s instructions and sends Hagar and Ishmael away against his own inclination. Sometimes it is the women who are driving the action.

Genesis 12-50 is an account of Israel’s origins, but these are not merely the stories of the patriarchs. The women are hugely important actors in the human drama over how the emerging nation is shaped. They determine their family’s destiny, receive revelations from God, struggle to ensure that the blessing is passed on to the next generation.¹¹ It is the matriarchs (Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel) and other women like Hagar and Tamar who speak to us as much as the men do (perhaps more so) about what it is to be a family.

¹⁰ Monica McGoldrick & Randy Gerson, *Genograms in Family Assessment* (WW Norton & Co: New York, 1985), 5.

¹¹ Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis*, 117.

Families repeat themselves, and one thing that repeats in this family is ‘the forsaken first-born’. The dignity of the first-born sons of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph is disregarded in favour of a younger brother.¹² It is Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau, Judah or Joseph or Benjamin not Reuben, Ephraim not Manasseh.¹³ Looking back to the very beginning of Genesis, we recall that it is likewise Abel not Cain; looking forward to the New Testament, it is Jesus not John the Baptist. While on the surface this could be merely a version of the common motif in secular folklore of the clever youngest son (a sort of biblical Puss-in-boots) there is a crucial difference: the younger son does not triumph because he is particularly brave, clever, heroic or morally preferable. The elder is displaced because of the initiative of somebody else. That somebody else is frequently God, or someone acting with the benefit of knowledge given by God.

The oracle given by God to Rebekah during her pregnancy overshadows the story of Jacob, and indeed, the family saga as a whole:

Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.’ (25:23)

Joseph’s dream, of his older brothers bowing down to him – a dream which comes true – is in the same vein: the elder will serve the younger, the right of primogeniture is undermined. What are we to make of this subversion of the existing order? There are two ways to look at it – two very different ways – and both contain truth. The first is that God is naturally subversive. The accident of birth is not a title to privilege, and God is working a basic inversion of what usually happens, challenging ‘every societally sanctioned arrangement’.¹⁴ Brueggemann has noted that in the Bible the ‘younger ones’ are those without right on their side: widows, orphans, sojourners in the land and, in the New Testament, publicans and sinners. The ‘first shall be last, and the last first.’¹⁵ Whether one finds this hopeful or not depends on where one starts from.

The other way of looking at all the forsaken first-borns is to try to explain God’s choice. Most of them blot their copy-books somewhere along the line, often by marrying foreign women (consistently depicted negatively for this family saga). Esau in addition despises his birthright, selling it to Jacob in exchange for a stew of bread and lentil, to satisfy his hunger. Did God see something in these first-born to justify deposing them in favour of the younger brothers? Perhaps – after all, God clearly saw something in Abraham, some potential for faith or for righteousness that makes God’s choice of Abraham explicable, long before the reader has any inkling why this should be so.

Whatever the reason, these other sons may be forsaken but they are not forgotten. They also have their descendants: Ishmael, Esau, and Lot (through his daughters) are the ancestors of other nations. God’s choice of Israel as a special people is not challenged but supplemented; God reassures both Abraham and Hagar that Ishmael will also become a great nation. This adds the idea of ‘also-peoples’ to that of ‘also-sons’ in these narratives, and we are reminded that ‘also-peoples’ have a place in God’s plans.¹⁶

¹² Roger Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born: A Study of a Recurrent Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 133: 1993) 11.

¹³ From Jacob’s perspective is it very much Rachel not Leah.

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation Commentary (John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1982), 216.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born*, 144-45.

Another recurrent motif, linked to the disregarding of the first-born, is conflict between brothers. God promises Abraham two things: ‘You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations ... And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding’. (17:4,8) The promise is descendants and the land – but which son will inherit the land and continue the line? There is a pattern of conflict between the competing sons (sometimes expressed by competition between their mothers), at the end of which the ‘unsuccessful’ sons are sent away to the east. Not only is Ishmael sent away, but after Abraham designates Isaac as his heir he sends his other sons, ‘the sons of his concubines’, away to the east. (25:6) This recalls an earlier episode in which Abraham and Lot (whom Abraham here calls ‘brother’) divide possessions and Lot goes eastwards. (13:5-11). Conflict between brothers is endemic in Genesis: the first murder was fratricide, and after killing Abel Cain goes away to settle ‘east of Eden’. (4:16)

After Jacob has secured his father’s blessing that should have gone to Esau it is impossible for them both to live together in the land, and Jacob goes away, coming ‘to the land of the people of the east’. (29:1) There he meets Rachel, marries her and her sister Leah, and raises a large family. After Joseph is born they travel back to the land of Jacob’s ancestors, but before they can settle there he must make peace with his brother. Even after the reconciliation with Esau the brothers cannot live together in the land; Esau moves (eastwards, of course) to ‘a land some distance from his brother Jacob’. (36:7-8)¹⁷ As Jacob has a greater number of sons, the conflict between them is more diffuse but just as pointed: they compete, and Joseph becomes the brother who is sent away, supposedly killed. When next we meet the rest of the brothers, after the story of Joseph’s fall and rise in Egypt, they are still at loggerheads (‘why do you keep looking at one another?’ Jacob says to them, 42:1). It is only when all the brothers arrive in Egypt that they protect one another, especially the youngest, Benjamin. When Jacob, now in Egypt with the others, is about to die he blesses all his sons, refusing to designate one above the others as the heir. The book of Genesis ends with the brothers living peacefully with one another, but significantly they are in exile. The promise of descendants is being fulfilled: each of Jacob’s sons is the ancestor of a tribe; a nation is being born out of this family, but they are a nation in exile. At this stage in the family’s history they can have a peaceful life together or they can live in the land – they cannot have both.

There is another recurring pattern in the Genesis stories, and we must name the elephant in the family tent: they are all a bunch of cheats and liars. Jacob is the star performer in this regard, but the trait did not start with him. Abraham’s passing Sarah off as his sister not once but twice, and Isaac doing the same has already been acknowledged. Sarah lies and says that she did not laugh at the idea of becoming a mother in her old age. Rebecca and Jacob work together to trick Isaac into giving Jacob the elder son’s blessing meant for Esau (though in Rebekah’s defence she was acting to ensure the fulfilment of the birth oracle revealed to her by God). Jacob is tricked into marrying Leah by Laban (Rebekah’s brother), and in turn manages to work some cunning sheep and goat breeding to prosper at Laban’s expense. Rachel deceives her father over the theft of his household gods. The other brothers lie to Jacob, making him believe that Joseph has been killed by a wild beast; Joseph deceives his brothers over an alleged theft. Tamar (who comes into the family by marriage) uses a clever trick to force Judah into fulfilling his obligations towards her. (Tamar’s actions are presented positively while Potiphar’s wife, who makes a false accusation, is viewed negatively – except

¹⁷ See Devora Steinmetz, *From Father to Son: Kinship, Conflict and Continuity in Genesis* (Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky, 1991), chapter 4 for a discussion of the conflicts, and the eastward movements of the rejected brothers.

that her action ultimately leads to Joseph's rise to power.) None of the major characters (like many of the minor ones) in this whole series of stories comes out lily-white. What we have is a dysfunctional family, ridden with conflict and with a tendency to be rather more economical with the truth than we might like to find in Scripture.

So why does this matter?

We might wince at the honesty of Scripture, and the way in which the lying and cheating and trickery is laid bare for all to see, but this at least gives us the courage to be similarly honest about ourselves, and the extent to which we fall short of how we would wish to be. These stories are about the struggle of a family – ‘a specific, concrete family’¹⁸ with its own particular circumstances – but they illuminate issues that are faced by all families. How are men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children to relate to one another? How can the wish of each child to be ‘the special one’ be set alongside the claims of the other siblings? How is the family, or the nation, to deal with outsiders? How do we divide the family property or negotiate issues of power? Each family will have its own ways of dealing with these questions, and each family will have its own patterns of functional and dysfunctional behaviour. One of the insights of family systems theory is that these patterns can hold a family in thrall until they are brought into the open and acknowledged. Only then can new ways of behaving be developed: as Jesus said, ‘you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.’ (Jn 8:32)

These stories are about a family, a family which becomes a nation, a nation which becomes the people of God. We too, as the Church, know ourselves as the people of God, but we also recognise in ourselves – as individuals and as members of a community – similar tendencies towards failing ‘to support one another, and to be what we claim to be’. Does it help to realise that we don't have to be perfect before God can use us and work through us? It helps me, and I suspect that others may feel the same way. For surely this is one of the lessons of the family saga we find in Genesis, that God calls imperfect men and women to become the people of God, and continues to bless them and make of them a blessing to others even while they are still imperfect.

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October 2010

¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 294.

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Questions

- 1 What is the difference between a wife and a concubine? Does it matter for the children? Does it matter for the woman?
- 2 When do we need to prove who we are? And how do we do it?
- 3 What do you think of a person who appears to prosper through cheating? What do you think of Rebekah or of Jacob?
- 4 What would you say to someone who wants to 'get back to a biblical view of the family'?
- 5 (to think about later) What are some of the patterns of behaving that have been passed down in your family?