

The Allegory of the Opposites

An Exploration of Metaphorical Pairs in the Old Testament

By

Robert Baiocco, Ruth Bodeen, and John Cuffe

Table of Contents

<i>Chapter 1- Allegory of the Sexes</i>	3
The Rise of Patriarchalism	3
Symbolism of the Sexes	10
Getting Rid of the Lower Nature	17
Redeeming the Lower Nature	32
<i>Chapter 2- Allegory of the Older and Younger</i>	64
Cain and Abel	64
Isaac and Ishmael	69
Esau and Jacob	73
Zerah and Perez & Ephraim and Manasseh	82
The Death of the Firstborn	84
<i>Chapter 3- Allegory of Light and Darkness</i>	86
Symbolism of Light and Darkness	86
The Light is hidden in the Darkness	87
The Light emerges from the Darkness	89
Israel and Egypt	97

Chapter 1- Allegory of the Sexes

The Rise of Patriarchalism

Though for millennia it has generally been a man's world with women playing a subservient and inferior role to the stronger and dominant gender, it was not always this way. Stretching back thousands of years, we find civilizations that if they did not tend to elevate the female slightly above the male, they at least regarded the two as equals. Perhaps we might find it strange that primitive people could be so enlightened to regard the sexes in this way when the modern world is only now evolving toward that position. After all, in relatively advanced nations like the U.S., it was only within the last hundred years that women were allowed to vote and move away from being the mere property of their husbands.

That the ancients had such a high regard for women was naturally a good thing, but being careful not to give undue praise to otherwise barbaric peoples, in truth it was through ignorance that such cultures treated their females with great respect. In primitive times, mankind was primarily preoccupied with its own survival, something that we in the West often take for granted. The main concern was that there should be a good harvest in the field and an abundance of animals to hunt in the woods. Our ancestors were essentially absorbed in what we could generally label as fertility whether it be of the soil, the animal world, or of the tribe itself and this concept they exclusively attributed to the woman.

Evidence for this belief is found through the artwork of Stone Age societies spanning from Europe to the Middle East. What have been regarded as "Venus" sculptures have been excavated throughout this wide region depicting a common theme of a heavily pregnant woman about ready to give birth. For our distant forebears, it was the female of the species that held the key to the mystery of life, and for this she was held in high respect. Not understanding the male role in reproduction, primitive man only observed that babies came from the womb of their mothers in some strange way. But as unsophisticated as they were, they were nonetheless savvy enough to perceive that the feminine gender only began to produce offspring after it started menstruating at the time of puberty. For this reason, they concluded that babies were made from blood, and this belief became the basis of blood as the symbol of life which has persisted as a religious image even until contemporary times. The sacred color of red had a prominent place in the ancient world as a result, remnants of which are still found in some cultures like those of India in which a bride stills wears a red garment at her wedding.

Through what we may consider a fortuitous state of ignorance, early humanity began in a matriarchal oriented culture and religion, but as the sands of time have shown us, this was not to last. Originally our ancestors began as simple hunter-gatherers subsisting in a tenuous hand to mouth existence until several thousand years ago they progressed enough to become a little more systematic in their approach to survival. Perhaps some had noticed that a few left over seeds discarded on a patch of ground in the tribal encampment had begun to take root and grew up into a plant from which they could pick vegetables or

fruit. Such a discovery led to the dawn of agriculture with whole civilizations built on farming and leaving foraging behind forever.

But while some of the hunter-gatherers went in this direction, others were to take another path. In a likely scenario, some tribal hunters came back from the woods having captured some prey still alive and very pregnant. Domesticating the young within their camp, it wasn't a big step to eventually observe that one ram for example could sire many sheep. And so the age of the nomadic herdsmen began. Travelling from place to place with a large flock that they learned to domesticate and breed, these ancient cattlemen quickly veered away from the traditional lofty view of the woman. With their discovery of the prolific role of the male in fertility suddenly the stronger sex became all important and women took on an inferior status. The tribal head of the herdsmen following his new found knowledge from the animal world would take as many wives as possible to ensure that he could sire many children for himself and ensure his position of dominance. The time of the patriarch had dawned and with it the custom of polygamy born out of a better understanding of fertility.

While red was the sacred color of matriarchal societies, it would be replaced by white in patriarchal cultures because of its link with male reproductive fluid. The white color of semen would go on to become the symbol of purity and sanctity, a legacy that has descended to us here in the West ever since. As history would bear out, the Semitic tribes of Mesopotamia would come on the scene as bands of nomadic herdsmen dominating the whole Middle East for the past 4000 years. It is their ultimate influence on the culture and religion of the West that has ensured that the new sacred color remain in a prominent place in everything from the shade of bridal gowns to the tone of living room walls.

For good or for bad, the way of patriarchal civilization is our heritage as it has descended to us from the ancient Babylonians and then through the Jewish nation until finally Christendom was set in motion with the notion of male dominance. The earliest written records of civilization that reflect female inferiority come to us from Old-Babylonian Empire around the 18th century B.C. in what has been known as the Code of Hammurabi. The sixth king of that people, Hammurabi enacted nearly 300 laws covering contractual situations to family and social matters. It is the latter which illustrates basic patriarchal sentiment toward women.

The recognition of polygamy as an acceptable practice is reflected in a number of laws from the Code, particularly those reflecting the societal importance of procuring offspring. They make provision for a man to take a second wife or even to sleep with his maid-servant should his first wife bear him no children. But the purpose of the statutes was to establish a pecking order, and in all cases, the second wife, maid-servant, or concubine was not to be regarded as the equal of the first wife even if she were to bear the husband children while the first wife could not.¹ But though the second spouse was not regarded with equality, the laws of Hammurabi ensured that her children would be

¹ Code of Hammurabi – Statutes 145, 146

treated as legitimate sons with the same claim to inheritance as the sons of the first wife.² Later in the life of the Semite Abraham we see these principles played out in his relations to his wife Sarah and maid-servant Hagar.³

The Old-Babylonian codex also made provision for another ancient custom among the Middle Eastern people pertaining to the Bride-Price. Just the opposite of a dowry, it was the material gift the father-of-the-bride would pay to the groom to essentially turn her over to his care and responsibility. A financial transaction very much like selling a piece of property, funds were exchanged to shift the burden of the woman from one man to another. In many cases though, the Bride-price amounted to leverage on the part of the woman's family to force her to stay in an unhappy marriage. The Code of Hammurabi outlined statutes to deal with the return of the funds to the woman's father in the circumstance that she could bear no children and the husband desired to put her away.⁴ And so we see a woman's value as little more than that of a vehicle for the dominant male to obtain offspring. However, in all fairness, the Babylonian Law also allowed for the reverse situation, and a woman was free to leave her husband and return to her father's house with the bride-price in hand.⁵

Another interesting feature of the Babylonian Law was what can be called "trial by water." In this primitive society, when an accusation of a crime was made with little to no evidence to back it up, it was believed that the guilt or innocence of the accused could be determined by subjecting the party to an ordeal and then observing how they fared. Particularly, in ancient Mesopotamia, the defendant would be required to jump into the river (Euphrates) and it was understood that if the accused sank it was an indication of guilt while if the one under suspicion floated and consequently made it to shore, it was a sign of innocence. Perhaps the conviction that this would be the case stems from a consideration of water as a pure and spiritual element representing life. Consequently it was thought to have the power to divinely reveal who was innocent and who had offended against it.

The 2nd of the 282 laws of the Codex introduces the subject almost immediately, and we are told generically that if anyone brings an accusation against a man, the accused must jump in the river, and if he should sink, his accuser may take possession of his house. But if the river prove the innocence of the indicted man and he escape unharmed, then the accuser will be put to death and the alleged criminal will take possession of the accuser's home.⁶

Not surprisingly, the female gender was enumerated a number of times in such laws. In the event a woman was accused of adultery but without any hard evidence, she was inevitably required to jump into the river to prove her innocence.⁷ Additionally if a

² Code of Hammurabi – Statute 170

³ Genesis 16

⁴ Code of Hammurabi – Statute 138

⁵ Code of Hammurabi – Statute 149

⁶ Code of Hammurabi – Statute 2

⁷ Code of Hammurabi – Statute 132

woman was indicted of cheating in business matters, abandoning her husband while he was a prisoner of war, or falsely accusing her husband of abuse, she was in all cases thrown into the water.⁸

What is particularly interesting about Babylonian trial by water is that its legacy has survived almost into modern times. In Christian and pre-Christian Medieval Europe the technique was utilized in varying forms to decide those cases lacking much evidence. Though it could be said that the accused would require a much greater miracle to pass the test than that prescribed by Hammurabi, for the one indicted might be cast into the river with a millstone tied around his neck. Consequently with the exception of one of two saints who miraculously survived, almost all perished innocent and guilty alike. The Middle Ages also produced other brutal trials by water including subjecting the accused thief to plunging his hand into a pot of boiling water to retrieve a stone. In such a test, the subjective determination of innocence was whether the hand had healed or was healing after three days. The festering wounds were considered signs of guilt.

Women were once again the subjects of trial by water a little later in time during the 16th and 17th centuries when the witch-hunt craze ran through Europe and into America. In that scenario, the accused female would be cast in the water tethered with a rope to one conducting the trial in a boat. Though unlike the earlier precedent, guilt and innocence were determined just the opposite of the ancient criteria. If the woman floated she was judged guilty presumably because she had been rejected by the waters of baptism in which case she was sure to be executed anyway. If she sank, it was deemed that the waters were receiving her because of purity and with any luck she could be pulled into the boat before drowning altogether. Critics have suggested it was a trial doomed to kill the woman whatever the result, for the chances of resuscitation were clearly slim.

Now while the Code of Hammurabi clearly demonstrated an attitude toward women that was inferior to men in a patriarchal society, it must be said that it was more charitable toward the weaker sex in comparison to some later Semitic tribes. Several hundred years after the Babylonian codices emerged, there arose another legal system far to the southwest. In the deserts of the Sinai Peninsula, the Law of Moses began to take form, and it was considerably harsher to the dignity of the woman than its predecessor.

Such disregard for women is evident beginning in Genesis in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Recalling the story of Lot and his family before the cities were destroyed, two angels had come to warn the man about the impending doom. Lot brought them into his house, and according to the text, the townspeople gathered outside and pounded on his door to give them up into the square so that they could be sexually molested by the inhabitants of the city. Rather than do such a despicable thing to his male guests, Lot did the unthinkable to mollify his neighbors. As a substitute for his two visitors, he offered his own two virgin daughters to be seized by the crowds to satisfy their perversions.⁹ Undoubtedly he understood this would mean repeated rape and defilement through the night and likely their death by the morning. But such was the value of women in that

⁸ Code of Hammurabi – Statute 108, 133, 143

⁹ Genesis 19:1-8

primitive culture! Thankfully even in our still male dominated Western culture, we would be revolted at such behavior, for at least in our day and age the weaker sex if not treated as a full equal is at the minimum standard to be protected at all costs. And by today's societal standards, it is required of the stronger male to compromise his own safety for the women and children.

Though we have made some progress in several thousand years toward this standard and increasing equality for women, unfortunately just a few hundred years after the story of Lot another similar episode took place in the territory of Benjamin. A Levite and his concubine were travelling through the countryside when they came to the town of Gibeah near evening. A hospitable resident of the place offered to put them up for the night, but the activity didn't go unnoticed by the other neighbors. Surrounding the house where the visitors were staying, wicked men from the city pounded on the door demanding the host to send out the Levite so that they could have sex with him. But with the almost identical sentiments to Lot, the host refused, and to the evildoers he responded, "Since this man is my guest, don't do this disgraceful thing. Look, here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine. I will bring them out to you now, and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But to this man, don't do such a disgraceful thing."¹⁰ Indeed, this narrative more than any other in the Old Testament scriptures betrays the low view of the weaker sex held by the near barbarous nation of Israel.

Pretty much throughout the Law of Moses we see such general disregard for a woman's sexuality and personal dignity and this is reflected in various marriage laws in the Pentateuch. Much unlike our modern society, rape of an unmarried woman was not even a crime. Should it be discovered that a man forced a virgin to have sex with him, the only obligation on the part of the rapist was to pay a penalty of fifty shekels to the girl's father, much like a dowry. Then she would become his wife, and all would be well as if no atrocity was ever committed.¹¹

But we will continue to round out the picture of the role of women in Jewish culture by digressing some from sexual matters and examining some more elements of the Law of Moses. We wouldn't be surprised to know that property ownership was the prerogative of men, and the Law of Moses made provision for only sons to inherit their father's estates. But when the five daughters of a certain man complained to Moses that they could not inherit their father's property as he had no son, the prophet took the matter to the Lord who championed the cause of daughters awarding them what belonged to their father, a situation that was without precedent among the Israelites. It took a divine intervention to make this exception for the female children of a deceased man, but nevertheless the Law of Moses still held the patriarchal pecking order, and if a man had both sons and daughters, the male offspring would receive the inheritance to the exclusion of the females.¹²

¹⁰ Judges 19

¹¹ Deuteronomy 22:28, 29; Exodus 22:16,17

¹² Numbers 27:1-11

Rather than owning property, women were generally treated as property which is exemplified by the practice of slavery in ancient Israel. It was the case that both men and women could be sold as servants, but after six years it was the custom to set the bondsman free. Only this policy was true for male slaves and not female who were not permitted to go out on their own. Rather, a woman's place was deemed under the supervision of some male, and so the slave owner could opt to take the female slave for a wife or concubine, give her to his son, or worst case give her back to the family or relatives who sold her to begin with.¹³

We may ask again at this point what the driving force was in this kind of patriarchal culture to oppress women to such a degree. Clearly one of the reasons was to ensure paternity as men were acutely aware by this time of their role in procreation. However there is a deeper reason for the subjugation of women and regulation of their life activities. More than just an expression of power on the part of the stronger sex, patriarchal bias against women was actually born of fear, perhaps subconscious but fear nonetheless of the power of a woman. Let us remember that in the earlier ages, the female gender was very much revered and humanity stood in awe of her mysterious ability to procreate holding the keys to the survival of the human race.

Particularly the magical belief in the power of her menstrual blood was part of the racial consciousness, for early man saw it as a token of healing, longevity, fertility, and immortality. The blood was thought to have the ability to heal incurable diseases and was used in various rituals to that end. Offered upon the early altars of humanity to their deities, it was utilized in rituals to enhance the fertility of crops. In fact menstruating women were thought to have the magical power to protect the fields from whatever should threaten them.

Because the superstitious beliefs of patriarchal man were so strong, to protect himself from the possibility of enchantment he needed to control the woman as best as he could. And specifically this meant keeping her secluded from the community in the time of menstruation when her perceived powers were at their peak. We understand such regulations from the Book of Leviticus which dictates that a woman be considered unclean for seven days during her monthly period. Whoever she touched during that period would also become unclean, and anyone who even touched her bed, clothing, or anything she was in contact with during her menstruation would likewise become contaminated.¹⁴

Sex with a woman who was menstruating was considered very dangerous as evidenced by the penalty for doing so. Should her menstrual flow touch him during intercourse he would become unclean for seven days. In no uncertain terms, another passage says, "Do not approach a woman to have sexual relations during the uncleanness of her monthly period."¹⁵ And yet an additional law expresses the injunction with the superstitious rationale behind it warning, "If a man lies with a woman during her monthly period and

¹³ Exodus 21:1-11

¹⁴ Leviticus 15:19-24

¹⁵ Leviticus 18:19

has sexual relations with her, he has exposed the source of her flow, and she has also uncovered it. Both of them must be cut off from their people.”¹⁶

Indeed sex was something that needed to be regulated especially during a woman’s monthly cycle but also in general for man feared that he was greatly vulnerable to the wiles of woman. For this reason any sexual encounters necessitated that both parties would be unclean until evening.¹⁷ And so sex became something more suppressed and controlled under patriarchal society than it had been in earlier times.

Furthermore, the female gender was believed to have a great deal of psycho-sexual power, far exceeding any ability of man. She was also thought to be possessed of an insatiable libido which the patriarch felt obliged to control if he could not satisfy. And this he did by taking several wives or concubines within his sphere of influence.

We may be inclined to think that the respect given to female virgins in a nation like ancient Israel is praiseworthy and of noble origin, but unfortunately this is not necessarily so. The premium placed on virginity among young women was among other less than spiritual reasons namely to provide an indication that this fabulous insatiable libido had been controlled and effectively suppressed. Naturally of course virginity was valued in any male-dominated society as it gratified the desire of each patriarch to ensure that his women were his and his alone so that he could be sure that they produced his offspring and nobody else’s. So obsessed was the culture to secure an undefiled class of eligible young women that it introduced a custom that still survives to this day in the Middle East. A young woman knew that it was in her best interests to remain pure until her wedding day as it was traditional for her parents to collect the blood stained sheets from the first evening with her husband and safeguard it as a token of virginity. In the event that this sign was not produced, the girl would be brought to the door of her father’s home and stoned to death by the community. For in the words of Deuteronomy, “she has done a disgraceful thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father’s house.”¹⁸ Leviticus enjoins men (particularly the Levitical priests) to marry virgin women, but of course there was no such equivalent requirement about the virginity of men throughout the Old Testament, and so we understand the double-standard for the reasons that have been laid out.¹⁹

The attempt to control a woman’s sexuality and consequently protect men from perceived dangers also exhibited itself in other regulations of the Mosaic Law. Prostitution which has been known as the “oldest profession” in the world was summarily forbidden under Israelite statutes. Of course we are sympathetic on moral grounds to the Levitical warning, “Do not degrade your daughter by making her a prostitute, or the land will turn to prostitution and be filled with wickedness.”²⁰ However the motivation for such an ordinance is clearly beyond the scope of simply curbing promiscuity. Fearing the spell

¹⁶ Leviticus 20:18

¹⁷ Leviticus 15:16-18

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 22:13-21

¹⁹ Leviticus 21:13-15

²⁰ Leviticus 19:29

that the opposite sex could cast upon them, men sought to ban this ancient institution especially what was long considered the noble form of harlotry. The surrounding nations had long praised the shrine prostitute who was valued as a worthy and religious figure in the fertility cults of Mesopotamia. As representing the female deities that were worshipped, she would minister to male devotees who came to the various temples throughout the Middle East. The respectability of such women in the ancient world is reflected in the story of the patriarch Judah who slept with his daughter-in-law Tamar thinking she was a prostitute.²¹ But the Genesis narrative subtly attempts to “whitewash” the account by referring to Tamar as a “shrine prostitute” (*qadeshah*) as opposed to a purely mercenary “woman of the night” (*zanah*.) But whatever merit a temple prostitute might have had in Canaan in the time of the twelve patriarchs, it became clearly taboo under the Law of Moses who forbade any Israelite from becoming a shrine prostitute as well as their earnings from entering the house of the Lord.²²

Further regulations on a woman’s sexuality can be seen in various forms like the ordinance against cross-dressing which stated that it is detestable for a man to wear woman’s clothes and vice versa.²³ Indeed oppression of woman took its greatest form in the area of reproduction and physical intimacy. However, the scope of control on a woman’s behavior manifested in other ways including the prohibition of mediums and spiritists from the land. From the earliest days of humanity, there were always those with psychic ability who could contact the dead and see into the spirit world for admittedly both good and bad intentions. But in patriarchal culture, a woman with such powers was considered particularly dangerous, and so the Mosaic code prescribed, “Do not allow a sorceress to live.”²⁴ The Israelites were forbidden to practice any form of divination in the post-exilic period, despite the fact that their ancestors participated in such psychic activity. Even the highly praised patriarch Joseph was recognized for his prowess in this area, for when he surreptitiously hid his silver cup in the sacks of his brothers, he accused them of stealing the cup he drank from and used for divination.²⁵ Nonetheless, the later Israelite legal code prescribed death for those who employed themselves in divination and sorcery, interpreted omens, or engaged in any form of “witchcraft.”²⁶ And though King Saul was said to have purged the land of all such mediums and spiritists, it seems likely that all he accomplished was driving under-ground those with psychic powers. For when he was in a state of desperation, he apparently was able to find a woman to put him in contact with his departed friend Samuel on the day before his death.²⁷

Symbolism of the Sexes

We have considered briefly the attitude toward women in the culture of the ancient Israelites, but it should be said that the Jewish people were not alone in their treatment of

²¹ Genesis 38

²² Deuteronomy 23:17

²³ Deuteronomy 22:5

²⁴ Exodus 22:18

²⁵ Genesis 44:1-5

²⁶ Deuteronomy 18:9-13; Leviticus 20:6,27

²⁷ 1 Samuel 28

the female gender. When the patriarchal mindset came on the scene long ago, it spread far and wide until it became virtually pervasive in the known world. The social enslavement of the weaker sex has taken various forms even including slavery and systematic brutalization, and for about 4000 years it has characterized the greater part of the globe. Stretching from the Christian West all the way to the Hindu East we have seen its mark. And particularly in the mythology of the latter do we see some of the same kind of universal sentiments about women that we have discussed.

In that civilization, surprisingly there was even at an early date a great fear of overpopulation. Though sex wasn't necessarily seen as evil, unbridled passion and eroticism were regarded as such, for they threatened to overrun the subcontinent with too many people. For the ancient Indians, the idyllic Golden Age was one characterized by the absence of lust, rain, and time. To quote one of their texts, "No one desired another man's wife; everyone was born and died in equal proportions; the clouds did not rain, and there was no development of time."

Ideally, for the Hindu, only enough children were born to replace those who had died. Procreation was good if it did not exceed this but anything more was considered evil and was summarily blamed on the female gender and her wily demeanor. In this Eastern culture, menstrual flow was associated with sin and pollution, and death was linked with sexual increase. The weaker sex was pegged therefore as an instrument of mischief, and in the mythologies of this people, the woman is frequently used by the gods as a vehicle of evil and corruption. Female deities were also cited as the cause of evil, and as a result of these thought processes, freedom of women was restricted by misogynist Hindu laws as indeed it was through most of the known world.²⁸

But as we might imagine, the Hindus were not the only civilization to identify the fairer sex as the source of evil. From the ancient Greeks there arose a myth commonly known as Pandora's Box that expresses similar ideas. One version of the story is as follows:

Zeus king of the gods lived on Mount Olympus and men roamed freely there on the Mount and elsewhere amongst the gods. Living at that time was a man called Epimetheus and he was the wisest amongst the men for he knew the secrets of life. Epimetheus took the beautiful Pandora as his wife.

(Now Pandora had been fashioned from water and clay by the gods and sent down among mortal man to punish them for Prometheus's act of stealing fire and giving it to men.)

Pandora moved into the home of her new husband, and took up her wifely duties..." Now, said her husband "you have all my worldly goods. You can take care of the house and all the animals that I have. You can go anywhere on my property and clean and sweep every corner, but I beg of you, never go to the north room. Keep it locked at all times."

²⁸ O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. "The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology". Berkeley, CA:University of California Press, 1976

Now, Pandora set about her duties and was soon finished. As there was nothing else left to do she became restless and bored and so she began wandering around the house and eventually coming to the north room, she tried the door but it was locked. She went away, but thoughts of the room kept going around inside her head. "Maybe I can just take a little look" she thought to herself, "just take a quick peek; surely there would be no harm in that". After a little while she decided she would get the keys and open the door. She returned to the room and unlocked the door and the door opened noiselessly. Pandora peered into the room, but it was totally empty with the exception of a box in the middle of it. Pandora's curiosity knew no bounds, she felt compelled to open the box, and so she did, and out came hundreds of creatures looking like insects. The insect like creatures bit and stung Pandora all over her body. Then they flew out of the window attacking her husband and the unassuming people in the countryside. Quickly, Pandora shut the lid and sat on it. While sitting there on the box she heard knocking coming from inside it. Now she was reluctant to open the box again thinking that she had already done enough harm. "Let me out", said a tiny voice, "and maybe I can help you". Pandora thought about it and decided to take one more chance. She opened the box and out came a tiny fairy.

"I am Hope," said the fairy, "Pandora due to your curiosity you have let out all possible troubles for mankind. There will be no peace of mind for humans from this day forth. There will be greed and jealousy, insanity and lust, there will be plague and hatred, men will fight each other, wives will be set against husbands, sons against fathers, brother against brother, there will be famine, pestilence, vice and destruction. The world will know great sorrow."

Of course even those who are vaguely familiar with biblical stories will recall a similar account in the very beginning of Genesis. In that tale, God formed man and then placed him in a garden that he had planted, one in which all kinds of trees grew that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden though, there were two special trees, one known as the Tree of Life and the other as the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And God warned the man that he was free to eat of any tree in the garden with the one exception of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. He told Adam, "when you eat of it, you will surely die."

All seemed well for some indefinite period of time as Adam worked the garden and cared for it. But there came a day when God recognized that the man needed a companion, and causing Adam to fall into a deep sleep he took a rib out of his side and fashioned the woman Eve who would be his wife. We are told that a cunning serpent approached Eve enticing her to eat of the forbidden tree. Suggesting to her that partaking of the fruit would make her like God himself, knowing both good and evil, she was taken in by the opportunity and indulged in what seemed "good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom."

Then the story goes on to say that she gave some of the fruit to her husband at which point the "eyes of them both were open." Being aware of what they had done, God informed them of the consequences of that action. To the woman he said, "I will greatly

increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” And to Adam who listened to his wife in eating the forbidden fruit, he said, “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”²⁹

Considering the first primeval story about Pandora, we have a woman who has been given full access to all of her husband’s material goods. Additionally she has been entrusted with care of all of the animals and has been granted the full run of the house. Only one small restriction is imposed on her great liberty, and that is never to enter the north room of the house. And perhaps that prohibition is significant as for ancient man the cold dark north represented hardship and danger and hence evil.

Not content with the things at her disposal, we are told the Pandora’s curiosity got the better of her. With an overwhelming desire to know what was in that forbidden room, she gave in to her inquisitive mind only to reap a nasty reward for her probe, one which unleashed upon mankind all of the sorrows and troubles of the world. Through her unbridled curiosity, an untarnished and pristine humanity was suddenly overwrought with woe in an action that couldn’t be undone.

Turning to the biblical account of Eve, we have in many ways an analogous story of how evil comes into the world. Rather than having access to a vast property and all of the worldly goods associated with it, the woman has at her finger tips a lush garden and all of the beautiful trees and animals that can be found in it. Free to roam anywhere in this paradise, she can eat of any bush or tree that she desires except for one that has been forbidden to her. Enticed by the physical appeal of the fruit of the restricted tree as well as the desire for the knowledge that it could it bestow, Eve was also overrun by an inquisitive nature. Eating of the prohibited fruit, she unleashed great woe on herself, her husband, and the entire human race that would spring from them.

It is interesting that in both narratives the woman is cast as the antagonist. Vilified in each story, she is presented as the culprit who introduces misery to the world. As the very source of evil, she is single-handedly responsible for the woe that comes upon humanity. We may wonder if choosing the female sex for the part of the bad guy was a deliberate choice, for it is true that both tales descend to us from patriarchal cultures and it is easy for us to see these anecdotes illustrating the sexism of such people. However, it must be said that the origin of these accounts is far older than the peoples that we have immediately received them from, and tempted as we might be to dismiss them as just another couple of woman-hating yarns, they betray a wisdom about spiritual things that far predates the Greek and Semitic peoples that have handed them on to us. For at least in the case of Genesis, Moses has merely passed on to us many narratives that even in his day were legendary stories, and it seems that the early anecdotes of that book including the Tower of Babel, Noah and the Flood, Cain and Abel, as well as the account of Adam

²⁹ Genesis 2,3

and Eve that we are considering are all allegories of a more ancient people designed to pass on spiritual wisdom to humanity.

Rather than speaking of a literal man and woman in some ancient historical context, both stories really are focusing on the tale of a single person, the story of any person whose inner being can be broken down into both male and female aspects. Typically these are thought of as the objective and subjective parts of our nature respectively. The former is associated with the intellect and reasoning, the analytical part of us which tends to be stereotypical of men. This is the calm, cool, and collected component of our being which approaches all matters rationally and logically. By contrast the latter is associated with the heart and emotions, the part of us that feels and which stereotypically characterizes women. This is the facet of our being which reacts to experience in the physical world, responding with passion to events that make their impact upon us in life. While the male part of our selves can be thought of as neutral in many ways, the female component is anything but, responding to stimuli in both good and bad ways.

On one level, the message of Adam and Eve and Epimetheus and Pandora is immediately that the emotional side of mankind, that which we associate with the feminine is the cause of all the troubles in the world, whether within ourselves or inflicted on others. Certainly we are not speaking about the positive response to life in the form of love and joy but those negative emotions which result from difficulty and hardship. Pain in one form or another is the catalyst to bring woe upon humanity and when not handled well often leads to feelings of crankiness, anger, depression, or despair all of which when turned outward bring misery on others. It is the subjective component of our nature that at once makes direct contact with suffering in life and acutely feels and responds to it. Because all pain is experiential, it is the subjective part of us that processes it, and for this reason it is by definition personal. Perceived pain can give rise to impatience, jealousy, and envy, emotions which have been the cause of war and man's inhumanity to man from the beginning. Clearly it is man's emotional nature that is at the root of all sorts of problems and sins and this is what the ancients had in mind.

But there are more facets to the male and female genders that they wished to convey than just this basic synopsis. The emotional side of us which we have recognized as the feminine part of our nature is also inextricably linked with our material existence in a physical body. It is through material existence that the emotions have a vehicle to manifest themselves and only through contact with the physical that they come to be.

In the story of Pandora we see this imagery hinted at, for while her husband Epimetheus was a Titan or Greek god of divine origin, she was a created being formed by the gods out of clay and water. In other words, she was molded out of the earth, fashioned out of mud, a product of the soil of the world. And this suggests to us that the emotions express themselves through the conduit of the temporal body that we live in while in the physical world. Similarly, Eve was taken out of the flesh of her husband, formed from a rib while he was slumbering, and this illustration also makes the point of connecting the feminine with the earth body in which man dwells for a time in his journey of life.

Indeed we are given some key information in the vignette of Adam and Eve, and that is the seemingly passing detail of how Adam was put into a deep sleep when his wife was created. More than just a primitive way of suggesting that he was anesthetized for an otherwise painful procedure, we are being told in shrouded language that it is when man enters into physical existence that he “falls asleep” to the spiritual world from which he came. Some have noted that we are never told in the text that Adam ever woke up, and in fact this is the case for in man’s entire material life he is comparatively speaking in an earthly dream world separated from the reality of the spirit realms which he can no longer remember.

Dissecting the language of the biblical story we obtain more clues to the identities of the man and his wife, for we learn that Eve (*chavvah*) is translated as “life-container” or “life-giver.” The context is that of a living place or an encampment, and so we come to understand that Eve is the vessel through which man is able to make his earthly pilgrimage. We may technically think of this as the physical body, though properly speaking, Eve is the symbol of the soul, that part of our eternal being that allows the spirit to make contact with the material world and enter into a physical form. In the modern age we tend to use the terms soul and spirit interchangeably, though in reality they are separate but related entities. In Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews, he suggests that the two are inextricably linked but yet distinct components of our invisible being that can only be divided by a very discriminating instrument. For he says, “the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing *soul* and *spirit* ...”³⁰

We may understand then that the soul is that segment of the spirit proper that permits man to have a physical experience, a sort of bridge between the spirit itself and the material body in which it will come to live. It may be thought of as the vehicle for the spirit to participate in earth life, and as such is correctly understood as the seat of affections, desires, emotions, and the will of man. It is the grosser emotional self which makes contact with material existence, and whatever it learns in the temporal world it immediately conveys to the spirit to which it is attached, for Adam was also given to taste the fruit that Eve partook of the Tree.

While we are all made up of an Adam and an Eve, or a spirit and a soul, it must be said that it is not the spirit proper that is subject to temptation in the world but the soul which makes direct contact with the things of earth. And of course this is why in both ancient stories the male figure does not succumb, for representing either the neutral intellect or unbiased spirit, he only observes, gathering information but does not participate directly with the tangible world. The female figure on the other hand is most vulnerable to being led astray by virtue of her intimate connection with physical life.

It is the point of both primordial stories to suggest that the soul is innately curious and desires experience in the material world to learn and acquire knowledge. Pandora could not resist the urge to know what was in the North room, and Eve could not pass up the opportunity to gain wisdom through the fruit of the Tree. Through the allure of the

³⁰ Hebrews 4:12

senses is the soul drawn to the experiences of earth life. Not that such things are bad, for it is a wholesome thing to satisfy hunger or sexual desire or to enjoy other pleasures of the material world. However, the soul has a tendency to become attached to such experiences, and longing for them can be tempted to satisfy them at any cost, even the abuse and exploitation of others. The soul often doesn't respond well to the deprivation of worldly goods and sensual gratifications, and resenting being in want, it falls prey to hostile emotions within itself and which it inflicts on others. Addiction to material things and pleasures becomes the mechanism by which man abuses his fellow man to satisfy his own desire and so is produced great woe for humanity. The message of both stories is to say that the pursuit of worldly things brings suffering both for ourselves and for those around us. Ultimately pain and hardship follow the trail of desire, for attachment to physical things and sensual experiences only produces sorrow in the end as both Eve and Pandora discovered.

Because the Eve part of our being has an orientation toward material life and all of the vices and sins associated with it, it is common to refer to the nature of the soul that is entwined with worldly things as the lower nature or earth nature. This portion of our invisible self is decidedly bent on selfish pleasure seeking and the acquisition of material things as its highest priority. Fixated on satisfying the whims of its own will without regard for others, it is characterized by a crude and rough disposition governed by hostile and volatile emotions. In hot pursuit of mammon which commonly takes the form of money, power, and fame it seeks to make a name for itself in the land of the living while it follows the motto, "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die."³¹ Indeed this is the nature that we share in common with the animal world, for the beasts of the field primarily occupy themselves with their next meal and other concerns of self-preservation. And so this lower self is also known as the animal nature or bestial nature as it has a similar agenda to the creatures of the field.

No wonder that in philosophical terms, the feminine part of our selves has been associated with the negative because of this characterization. And a fitting symbol it is, for the negative sign as a flat and horizontal emblem is aligned with the plane of the earth to indicate a preoccupation with material living. It is oriented in a prone position which reminds us of our posture while sleeping, and this is to suggest that when we are dominated by the control of the lower nature we are asleep to spiritual things and wholly consumed by physical life. It is interesting that in Eastern thinking this symbolism is apparent, for the feminine Yang is associated with the shady northern side of a hill while the masculine Yin is linked with the sunny southern slope. It was alluded to earlier that the ancients considered the cold and dark north as a place of evil, and hence their rationale for linking the feminine with the negative.

In contrast to the symbolism of the lower self, the positive sign is appropriately the marker of the spiritual or higher self that we link with the masculine. With a vertical bar cutting through the horizontal and pointing upwards, it represents the way of the spiritual man who is oriented toward heaven. This higher self is the part of our being that we associate with Adam and Prometheus, for representing the spirit proper they signify our

³¹ Luke 12:18,19

link to the divine and the highest and best that man is called to. The spiritual nature or divine nature is by implication concerned with spiritual matters, and that means that it is in pursuit of God rather than mammon. Determined to carry out the divine will instead of its own, it purposes to serve God and neighbor in a selfless and sacrificial way. Characterized by humility and self-control and a host of other virtues, it seeks to put others before itself while sublimating all base and wayward emotions into love.

The contrast of the lower and higher natures is apparently a spiritual concept that God has desired to convey to humanity in a number of ways, not least of which is through the testimony of nature itself. It is true of many species of bird that the brighter and more radiant of the two sexes is the male. Two examples will be easily recognized if we consider the cardinal whose males are a deep and bright red while its females are a dull reddish brown. The same is true of the goldfinch whose males are covered in bright yellow feathers while the females barely have any yellow plumage at all. Of course it is true on one level that nature has designed the lackluster females to appear camouflaged for the sake of protecting the young, but God often embeds multiple layers of meaning in the things of the visible world to express a message.

We may consider it unfortunate that patriarchal culture which has dominated the world for several millennia has unjustly elevated the male while denigrating the female, and while we are certainly justified in seeing that development in this way, it must be realized that God has a plan behind the course of history. To quote the words of the patriarch Joseph, we could say that what some meant for evil, God ultimately meant for good,³² and so it is that through the pages of the patriarchal scriptures that we call the Old Testament, full of its bias and negative attitude toward women, God has hidden the message of the higher and lower natures in a number of anecdotes and narratives. Interpreting the text through allegory and symbol, we may come to learn something about the journey of man in the land of the living.

Getting Rid of the Lower Nature

We begin our exploration of the male/female contrast by considering the relative value of the two as expressed in the Mosaic Law. In the Book of Leviticus Moses made provision for those desiring to dedicate a person to the service of the Lord to substitute a monetary equivalent that could be donated to the temple instead. It was not uncommon as an act of thanksgiving for someone to pledge another individual, particularly a child to the lifelong work of God as an offering. This was the case with barren Hannah who promised to God that if he only gave her a son to take away her shame of childlessness, she would dedicate him to the service of God. And so she did by sending her son Samuel to the temple right after he was weaned.³³ But Moses gave an option for the faithful to give a sum of money instead of parting with their beloved family member. He specified, "Set the value of a male between the ages of twenty and sixty at fifty shekels of silver, according to the sanctuary shekel, and if it is a female, set her value at thirty shekels. If it is a person

³² Genesis 50:20

³³ 1 Samuel 1:21-28

between the ages of five and twenty, set the value of a male at twenty shekels and of a female at ten shekels. If it is a person between one month and five years, set the value of a male at five shekels of silver and that of a female at three shekels of silver.”³⁴

Sadly but true, even in 21st century America a woman does not receive the same pay as a man for the same job, and how much more so 3500 years ago when according to this aspect of the Law of Moses the value of the female gender was only worth according to these three age brackets somewhere between 50% and 60% of the male. What spiritual message can we glean from this unabashed sexism except to establish that the higher nature (man) is of much more worth than the lower nature (female.) The latter is of limited value bound only to the finite and temporal earth existence while the former has the potential to expand into infinity, into the very bosom of God himself. The way of one only has to offer a bittersweet existence of fleeting material pleasures mingled with pain and suffering while the other tenders a reality marked by love, joy, and peace and free of the trammels of the flesh forever.

If we interpret the gender inequality this way in the Pentateuch, we may be on to gleaning something more than just the musings of a legal code belonging to a barbaric and primitive people. For not just in this law but in a number of others do we see the value of the fairer sex depreciated against the stronger one. The way of the Israelite was one of ritual purity, and as we have seen a woman’s vaginal blood was regarded as a great impurity stemming from certain primordial fears lingering in this society. Not only normal periodic menstruation but also the blood flow associated with childbirth was to render a woman unclean.

According to Levitical law, “A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period ... Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over. If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean, as during her period. Then she must wait sixty-six days to be purified from her bleeding.”³⁵ Clearly in this passage we have a similar double-standard once again establishing that a male child is more desirable than a female, and as bleeding required purification, a son mandated a penalty that was only half that of a daughter. Indeed even to this day in patriarchal Middle Eastern cultures there is a degree of disappointment when a woman gives birth to a little girl as I am sure there was for the Israelite woman who had to endure social ostracization for twice as long as when she give birth to a boy.

We continue to see the relative worth of the lower nature illustrated in other texts pertaining to the work of the Jewish priesthood. It was the instruction of Moses that anyone who desired to make an offering in restitution for their sin was to bring it to the priest who would offer it to God in sacrifice. According to the code, such offerings were “most holy” and it was given to the priest to eat the meat of the sacrifice. And Moses says that not only he but “any male in a priest’s family may eat it; it is most holy.” “You (the priests) are to have the part of the most holy offerings that is kept from the fire.

³⁴ Leviticus 27:1-7

³⁵ Leviticus 12

From all the gifts they bring me as most holy offerings, whether grain or sin or guilt offerings, that part belongs to you and your sons. Eat it as something that is most holy; every male shall eat it. You must regard it as holy.”³⁶ We may ask what this means other than the obvious unfair exclusion of women from a good meal. Certainly what it is suggested on another level is that the lower self which is often contaminated by sin and worldly things is too defiled to partake in anything as sacred as a sacrificial meal. Only those who are ostensibly holy (the priests) and their male descendants (the higher self) may partake of holy things for which they are worthy. Clearly those who participate in the New Testament sacrifice of the Eucharist are obliged to keep themselves as pure as possible before receiving the Sacrament on pain of illness and even death as a consequence.³⁷ So it is that in the Old Testament sacrificial system, the woman was barred from joining in the sacred meal because of what she represented as a spiritual symbol.

Besides commenting on the value of men and women in the Israelite community, as we have alluded to earlier, the Law of Moses sought in various ways to control women who were among other things considered dangerous. Some of those laws regulating sex have already been discussed, but other spheres of control were enumerated in the legal code as well including an interesting section on the taking of vows. In modern times religious people sometimes make a solemn pledge to God to live a certain lifestyle or do some work for God for a period of time, perhaps even the rest of their lives. Frequently such vows include a promise to live in chastity, poverty, and obedience as those undertake who enter monastic life. In Old Testament times, it was also not uncommon to make an oath to God to do (or not do) something, and we could mention the case of the Nazirite who pledged that he would drink no wine or eat any grape product in addition to refraining from cutting his hair or shaving his face all during the time of his vow.³⁸

A vow was certainly taken very seriously under the Law of Israel, and the Book of Deuteronomy warns, “If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin.”³⁹ In a whole chapter dealing with vows,⁴⁰ the Book of Numbers soberly advises, “When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.” Indeed an oath taken by any man was apparently completely binding and irreversible, but this was not so with a woman.

The chapter spells out in many details that a woman’s pledge to God could be overridden at any time by some male in her life. If a young woman took an oath in her father’s house and her father get wind of it and didn’t like it, he could forbid her and she would de facto be released from her obligation to God. Similarly if a woman got married and her husband learned that she previously made a pledge to God, he could likewise nullify it obviating her responsibility to God. And at any time during the marriage, the husband

³⁶ Leviticus 6:18,29; Numbers 18:10

³⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:27-32

³⁸ Numbers 6

³⁹ Deuteronomy 23:21-23

⁴⁰ Numbers 30

could undo a woman's attempt to make a solemn vow to God should he view it with disfavor. Of course we can see all of this legislation as a means to an end, for the stronger sex would never allow the possibility of a woman's promise to God to compromise his own wishes or comfort especially in a marriage situation. Such laws shielded him from being manipulated by the shrewd and clever woman that he was always wary of.

But in terms of the allegory that we have been considering, we can make some sense of these bigoted rules by again equating male and female with the higher and lower natures. While the ancient Israelites might have considered the fairer sex to often be irrational and rash in their decision making putting themselves at risk of an unnecessary burden, it is true that the lower self is by nature undisciplined and whimsical. Without the ability to concentrate very long, it oscillates from one interest to another making quick and capricious decisions that can get it into trouble. Flitting back and forth, the lower nature is a thing to be harnessed as it wildly seeks to eat, drink, and be merry. Like a child requiring adult supervision, it needs to be controlled and kept under restraint, for unattended it will lead a person to ruin. For this reason, the Mosaic Law provides for a woman's oath to be counterbalanced by either her father or husband who will limit the scope of her plans. Indeed the higher nature must work actively to keep the lower nature in check, lest unbridled it wreak havoc plunging a man to destruction. And so can infer a spiritual meaning not only from this subject matter but from all attempts to control a woman as codified by Moses. For in fact it is a dangerous thing for the spiritual nature to allow the material self to be free and have its own way.

While the Mosaic Law spoke of controlling the female sex, several hundred years later the wealthiest king of Israel sought to offer advice warning against it and coming under its spell. In his Proverbs, Solomon spent a fair amount of time cautioning his son to be on guard against the adulteress.⁴¹ Rendered also as a strange or foreign woman and hence profane, she is presented as a force in the life of the man that can be his undoing. The king offered his words of wisdom (perhaps from personal experience) saying, "The lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead right to the grave. She gives no thought to the way of life; her paths are crooked, but she knows it not."

Naturally Solomon's advice is uni-directional and he only warns men about wayward women and not the other way around as if such a thing were inconceivable in Israel. Of course we know better, though nonetheless we understand from his writings that the spiritual self is always in danger of being seduced by the animal nature to which it is joined. Always a force that would drag the higher self down, diminishing its strength, and causing it to be swallowed up by the interests of the world, man's base nature constantly seeks for an opportunity to deceive the better nature. Like a sniper on the side of the road, the lower self lies in wait to ensnare the higher self in hopes that it can eradicate it and which at times it succeeds in doing.

⁴¹ Proverbs 2:16-19; Proverbs 5:6,7; Proverbs 21:9,19; Proverbs 22:14; Proverbs 30:20; Ecclesiastes 7:26

The king speaks of the wayward woman as if she had honey dripping from her mouth. Indeed, the lower self is a powerful seductive force which paints a rosy picture of the merits of sensual opportunities and material gain. An individual is very easily led down a bad road when he listens to his appetites without considering the consequences. But in the end, heeding the advice of the material self leads only to bitterness when it is discovered that what was so earnestly sought after never really satisfied the soul after all. And so Solomon states emphatically, “I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare.”

So much for overt disparagement of women in the Hebrew Scriptures! Rather than openly vilify the fairer sex with warnings and laws aimed at denigrating her dignity, the sacred text tends to achieve this goal in a little more subtle way. It is through the device of narrative that the books of the Old Testament attempt to paint a negative picture of females in contrast to the opposite sex. Not long after we are introduced to the story of Adam and Eve we come to the account of the Flood of Noah’s day. Immediately we are given a direct cause for the disaster that befell humanity at that time, and as we might guess the fault lay with the weaker sex. The text proposes to make a distinction between what it calls the “sons of God” and what it labels the “daughters of men.” Ascribing something akin to divine sonship to the male gender while linking the female to base humanity, we are led to understand that righteous men were enamored by beautiful and sensual women “and they married any of them they chose.” We infer that the wives were a corrupting element for their husbands, and as a result of their unholy union evil was propagated in the earth. “The sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them.” And this multiplication of evil seed within the race is presented as the reason for God’s intention to wipeout humanity, for “the Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, ‘I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth ...’”⁴²

We would not be surprised to learn that while “sons of God” is a popular enough phrase in the scriptures, “daughters of God” cannot be found in a single passage. And of course we wouldn’t expect anything different from the writers of a patriarchal culture, but considering the allegory that we are employing, we may be enlightened to recognize a deeper level of truth in these phrases. If “sons” is an allusion to the spiritual nature of a person, then it is naturally linked with the divine for the higher nature is the part of us that communicates with God and is rightly called the divine offspring. For this reason, Adam is referred to as the son of God⁴³ though no such title is bestowed upon his wife Eve. She is one step removed from the divine; rather proceeding from her husband, she is in fact a daughter of man. She is a daughter of the flesh and correctly epitomizes man’s earth nature which can neither conceive nor know the divine in any way.

⁴² Genesis 6:1-8

⁴³ Luke 3:38

Narrative after narrative throughout the Old Testament casts the woman in an inferior light to drive home the message of the lower nature. Also within Genesis we come across another familiar story of destruction that took place in the plains southeast of the Dead Sea. Sodom and Gomorrah were targeted for annihilation after their chronic sins could no longer be ignored, and wishing to spare the few good people in Sodom, God sent a couple angels to lead out Abraham's nephew Lot and his family. Sometime after dawn he and his wife departed from the city along with their two daughters, and after they were a safe distance from the towns, God rained down fire and brimstone to level the iniquitous inhabitants of those places. Though warned not to look back or stop as they made their flight to the mountains, Lot's wife made the fatal mistake of turning around to take a gander at the burning cities, and we are told that she turned into a pillar of salt.⁴⁴

Once again, the female gender botches things up in a big way to her own demise, and we recognize that the woman cast as the antagonist in this setting is hardly an arbitrary choice. A memorable legend in the consciousness of the Jewish people, it became a useful illustration by Jesus himself a couple thousand years later in his discourse on the Second Coming. Addressing his disciples, he warned them that on the day of his return, "No one who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot's wife."⁴⁵ Infamous as she was, this byword of Israel served a good purpose in warning not particularly about the dangers of disobedience but more so about the perils of attachment to material things. For pursuit of physical things leads to the soul's destruction. Fearing to journey through life without them, the lower self puts its confidence and aspirations in the things that are seen, for it is convinced that they alone can bring it security. It is not an easy thing for the soul to separate itself from the love of mammon, and those who aspire to go out to meet the Lord when he comes again must certainly put such affections behind them completely lest they be found unworthy to stand in his presence and then suffer a similar fate to Lot's wife.

But reflecting some more on the short reference to this foolish woman in Genesis, it is an interesting thing that the landscape surrounding the Dead Sea is dotted with curiously shaped salt formations. One in particular is officially known as "Lot's wife" in memory of the ancient debacle. We may wonder with all of the possibilities of punishment, what was the significance of turning her into a statue of salt. Why not a pillar of stone, wood, or some other natural substance? Perhaps it is the chief function of salt that was known to the ancient world, that of preservative, that holds the answer to the question.

The challenge to the man of faith is to turn away from his former ways making a complete separation. In fact Jesus stated that those who would follow after him cannot set their face to the plough and turn back, not even for a quick glance as did Lot's wife. The reason is that when we keep remembering the pleasures of a sense oriented life and the accumulation of goods, we kindle within us the longing for that way of life again. In effect, like salt we preserve those base desires which still remain within us and help them

⁴⁴ Genesis 19

⁴⁵ Luke 17:30-32

to emerge and manifest themselves again. And so appropriately this infamous woman of Genesis was rendered a formation of salt, for she had effectively preserved her attachment to worldly things in looking back to the doomed cities that she was called to flee from.

Moving further along in Genesis we come to another narrative featuring the popular biblical figure Joseph who was in all ways a man of integrity and blameless throughout the adult life that is painted for us in the scriptures. Many difficulties he had to overcome before rising to the pinnacle of power in Egypt, not least of which was an episode of seduction while still a young man. After being sold as a slave and brought down to Egypt, he was purchased by a high official of Pharaoh's court. Coming to appreciate Joseph's abilities, he put him in charge of his entire household and entrusted to him the care of all his belongings save his wife. And it turned out that this one exception outside of his control proved to be his nemesis.

Casting her eye on him, she urged him to sleep with her, for he was a handsome man. But as his integrity would not allow him to sin so grievously, he flat out refused her. Nonetheless, the woman was not deterred and continued to invite Joseph to bed day in and day out wearying the patriarch to no end. However the young man held his ground refusing to indulge her or even be around her. Eventually not making headway, one day when she approached him, she successfully grabbed his cloak before he could get away. And being spiteful for his constant snubs, she attempted to turn the tables on Joseph, presenting the cloak to her husband and claiming that in fact he attempted to seduce her. Believing his wife rather than his slave, the master of the house full of anger dragged his loyal servant off to prison to pay for his crime.⁴⁶

We learn a few spiritual lessons from this familiar story, namely that the lower self (the master's wife) is always lying in wait to deceive the better nature (Joseph.) It does this by exploiting those areas of life (things in the household not under Joseph's control) which have not yet been mastered by the man of faith and are rather weaknesses for him. When the higher self stands its ground, then a conflict ensues which may cause the soul to fall if for no other reason than sheer exhaustion. Relentlessly (day after day,) the material self continues to launch its attack inviting the soul to give in to sensual gratification. The spiritual self if it is to survive must remain steadfast in resistance ignoring the petitions of the base nature (avoiding the master's wife.) Of course this plan is met by a fierce backlash, for when we refuse to go along with the desires of the lower nature, denying it expression, the spiritual self may find itself locked up and tortured for a spell (thrown in jail) as a reprisal.

Indeed the lower self seeks to eliminate the higher self which it views as a threat to its very existence, and it does this at every opportunity afforded to it. Another account early in the Book of Exodus illustrates this concept well as we shall see. During the Middle Kingdom in Egypt which corresponded to the early Second Millennium B.C., the Pharaohs of the period had a favorable policy of immigration and welcomed large numbers of Semitic peoples from the East. Included among these of course was the

⁴⁶ Genesis 39

family of Joseph, for Genesis indicates that Pharaoh instructed his chief attendant, “Bring your father and your families back to me. I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and you can enjoy the fat of the land.”⁴⁷ Natives from Canaan and further into Mesopotamia came to abide in the land as peaceful aliens and came to become an accepted part of Egyptian life.

Though over time, these once welcome guests came to dominate the fertile Nile delta region and rising to prominence came to rule most of Egypt for over a hundred years spanning the 17th to 16th centuries B.C. Known as the Hyksos or Shepherd Kings (probably because of their traditional Semitic occupation,) this immigrant base grew strong enough to wield political control over the land. Obviously this was resented by the native Egyptians who eventually were successful in driving out the Hyksos and forming the New Kingdom with power once again vested in the hands of a Pharaoh. Needless to say, the Asiatic peoples who had become a part of the fabric of Egyptian life became persona non grata and newcomers were no longer welcome. In the words of the Book of Genesis, “every shepherd [was] an abomination to the Egyptians.”⁴⁸ And those Semites who continued to live in the land were made a subject people under the heavy hand of the ethnic Egyptians.

By the time of the birth of Moses there was a substantial fear that though now a second class race living among them, those of Semitic origin were still increasing steadily in number and were presenting a threat to outnumber the natives and potentially wrest political control once again. Enslavement of the Hebrews along with hard working conditions were expected to slow down the growth rate, but when they failed to do so, according to the Book of Exodus more drastic measures were taken. The Pharaoh eventually ordered a direct method of controlling the number of undesirables in the land by instructing that all of the Semitic male children were to be slaughtered at birth, while female newborns were permitted to live. The expectation was that the girls would grow up and bear Egyptian children for their Egyptian masters. In effect the children of Israel were targeted to be bred out of existence.⁴⁹

Allegorically we can see this story fitting in with the symbolism that we have been presenting. Specifically the narrative illustrates the fierce conflict between the lower and higher selves. When the spiritual self begins to rise in prominence and attempt to rule man’s soul, then there is a response from the animal nature to return to business as usual and the reign of sense and material domination. Accustomed to living life its own way, according to the desires of its own will, the lower self resents the notion of doing the will of the divine which it neither knows or trusts to be of any benefit to its existence. So it tries to expunge the higher nature which threatens its way of life. The lower nature aims at getting rid of the spiritual or positive part of the soul which is represented by the “male offspring,” while it seeks to proliferate the material or negative part of the soul typified by the “female offspring.” Little did the Egyptians realize that their endeavor to breed a race out of existence would depict this spiritual truth!

⁴⁷ Genesis 45:16-20

⁴⁸ Genesis 46:34; Genesis 43:32

⁴⁹ Exodus 1:15-22

Meandering through the Old Testament, we come across more examples that portray the story of the two natures in tension. The tale of Joseph and Potiphar's wife was what we could call a success for the higher nature in the midst of temptation, but another account shows how the spiritual self can at times succumb and go backwards on the journey of faith, sometimes taking a major fall. The story of Samson is one such narrative.⁵⁰ A man dedicated to God from birth as a life long Nazirite, he was according to that rule forbidden to either ingest any fruit of the vine or put a razor to his head until death.

This judge of Israel was renown for his great strength which when the Spirit of the Lord came upon him enabled Samson to perform such miraculous feats as tearing a lion apart with his bare hands or ripping the doorposts of a city's gate out of the ground. Though his power was at times demonstrated in overcoming the forces of nature, he more frequently directed it against his enemies. The Book of Judges chronicles his exploits against the Philistines which entailed burning their fields and striking down their warriors, even a thousand at a time which he pulled off with a donkey's jawbone as a weapon.

Needless to say, the Philistines were very interested in subduing their opponent and learning the secret of his great strength which was wreaking havoc on their nation. Fortunately for them, Samson fell in love with a Philistine woman named Delilah who agreed to cooperate with the leaders of the people in finding a way to harness the judge of Israel. Delilah which means "weak, languishing, impoverished" represents the sensual nature of man which would seek to bring low the man of faith, and indeed she went to work on Samson in an effort to ruin the man of God. Having been promised a great sum of money to ascertain the secret of his strength, Delilah began to question Samson on the matter. But three times he led her on a wild goose chase suggesting that if he be tied with seven new thongs or seven new ropes or have his hair woven into a fabric he would become as weak as any other man. After looking like a fool in front of the Philistines on three occasions when they unsuccessfully tried to subdue him through these means, she played another card on Samson. Questioning the fidelity of his love for her, she sought to make him feel guilty for not confiding in her his deepest secrets, and with continuous nagging day after day, she goaded him until he was "tired to death." The higher self had mocked the sensual nature three times, but the sensual part of man does not give up. Trying new ploys to tap into the vitality of the spiritual nature, like Potiphar's wife it continually badgers the divine nature day after day until it is weary and shell shocked.

Samson was apparently not as strong as his predecessor Joseph, for after some amount of persistent nagging he revealed to Delilah the secret of his strength. In effect, the lower nature broke into its enemy's camp and stole its plans of war. Indicating that to cut his hair would make him as weak as any other, Samson revealed that his supernatural power was linked to his Nazirite vow. In putting a razor to his head, he would abandon that commitment and by inference abandon his devotion to God. Indeed the strength of the spiritual self lies in its dedication to the service of God, and once that is compromised it quickly falls prey to the baser nature.

⁵⁰ Judges 13-16

Having learned the secret, Delilah put Samson to sleep on her knees which carries with it a couple of inferences. That he fell asleep reminds us of the sleeping Adam, an indication that the individual has become oblivious to the things of the spirit, asleep to the reality of the heavenly realms. Once this happens, the soul comes under the control of the lower nature which now has it in its lap or in its possession. While asleep, Samson was shorn and stripped of his divine power. No contest for his Philistine captors, he had his eyes gouged out by his enemies and was then brought down to Gaza (ironically a place name which means “strong.”) There he was bound in bronze shackles and set to grinding in prison. The symbolism of these final details is probably not hard to glean, for in losing his eyes, Samson illustrates the spiritual blindness that overtakes the man of faith in succumbing to the material self. Now in the dark to the way of God, it returns to the bondage of sense-oriented life. The bronze fetters only underscore the impurity of this way of life, for that material is an alloy, a mixture of two substances (tin and copper) rather than a pure single element. Grinding now at the gristmill, spinning around in circles as he revolved the large millstone to crush the grain, Samson was doing labor that in ancient times was considered woman’s work, unfit for men. Indeed the soul must continue in this prison doing the work of the negative until it once again sees the error of its ways.

We can continue now with a couple more brief sketches of the female gender as she is cast as a corrupting force in the life of the man. In the Book of Deuteronomy there is a passage that laid out the law concerning the monarchy which wouldn’t appear for a few hundred years after Moses’ day. Among other regulations pertaining to the king, one ordinance instructed, “He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.”⁵¹

Unfortunately it was a warning not heeded by Israel’s wisest king, for Solomon failed to observe both counts to his own detriment. Starting off well, this famous king had a spiritual inclination to request wisdom from God rather than riches, the death of his enemies, or other worldly interests for which God was well pleased and lavished upon him temporal wealth in addition to the good judgment he had given to him.⁵² Solomon began his reign with the agenda of God on his program and set to erecting a magnificent temple for him in Jerusalem, something his father David was unable to accomplish.⁵³

But though Solomon enjoyed peace all around him, no doubt he sought to maintain healthy relations with his neighbors by taking the daughters of nearby monarchs as wives.⁵⁴ His political savvy led him to consider this a good maneuver, and so we are told he accumulated the staggering number of 700 wives and 300 concubines throughout his lifetime. The Book of Kings indicates that these many women did indeed lead the wise monarch astray, for he began to follow their national gods rather than the Lord alone. Burning incense and offering sacrifices to these other deities along with his foreign

⁵¹ Deuteronomy 17:17

⁵² 1 Kings 3:7-15

⁵³ 1 Kings 5,6

⁵⁴ 1 Kings 3:1

wives, he angered the Lord who commanded that man not have any gods before him.⁵⁵ And though in the modern monotheistic West, it would be unheard of for a devout man to turn to polytheism as did Solomon, practically man goes astray when he chases after other gods of money, power, and fame. Though he may not worship them in a temple of stone, his heart can be devoted to them no less than any other deity, when he serves them rather than the true God. Such is the pull of the lower nature symbolized by the hundreds of foreign women that Solomon wed, and that force was enough to tear apart the glorious kingdom, for after Solomon's death the North broke with the South in what would become a permanently divided nation.

Concluding our look at the detrimental influence of the negative part of man, we turn to the familiar story of Job who serves as the quintessential example of suffering in the bible.⁵⁶ Part of the training of a soul involves subjecting it to periods of pain and want which though undesirable are the necessary catalyst for spiritual development. A whole host of virtues can evolve through a time of testing including among others patience and perseverance which are important qualities of those who belong to the kingdom of heaven. But along with this, suffering has the potential to produce another thing within man, namely detachment from the world which has failed him for a season. Disenchanted with the life of the physical, the soul longs for something better than the bittersweet existence of pain mingled with fleeting pleasures in the land of the living. Setting its attention on higher things, it becomes willing to turn its back on the cruel world for something better.

At least ideally this is God's desired end in suffering. However, the opportunity afforded by suffering is a double-edged sword, for while it is designed to make us better, it can also make us bitter and many a soul goes down that ugly road instead. Job was initially afflicted with the loss of his large temporal holdings. Through natural disasters and the attacks of foreigners, all of his livestock were either killed or stolen away and on top of this his ten children died when the roof of the house collapsed on them. But when the testing shifted from Job's possessions to Job himself, his wife had about all she could bear. After he became afflicted with painful sores all over his body, she urged him to abandon his faithfulness to God and rebel. "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die," she counseled.

Of course this is the advice of the lower nature, for it can comprehend no purpose or utility in any suffering in material existence. It only sees pleasure as the rightful entitlement of man, and it will fight kicking and screaming against anyone or anything that jeopardizes that way of life. So the material self cries out for the soul to leave the way of God for obviously it is doing it no good but only harm. It is convinced that the Deity does not have its best interests at heart. Fortunately for Job, he was a strong enough man to reject the words of his wife replying, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" It seems that she could not accept his response, and later he remarked, "My breath is offensive to my wife."⁵⁷ While

⁵⁵ 1 Kings 11:1-13

⁵⁶ Job 1-2

⁵⁷ Job 19:17

it would seem he was referring to a foul odor coming from his mouth, on an allegorical level we could suggest that the words of the higher self are in fact caustic to the ear of the lower self which can never embrace the reasoning of the spiritual man.

As can be seen, many Old Testament anecdotes portray the conflict between the higher and lower natures within man, a struggle that persists for a very long time, but one that gratefully doesn't last forever. Eventually the spiritual self will win the war for it is destined so to do, but not without many fierce battles along the way. Rather than assuming a defensive posture against the wiles of the material self, the soul on the spiritual path must become proactive in the fight, and this means getting rid of the lower nature and leaving it behind so that it can climb the ladder to God.

A number of narratives depict this concept in various forms all with the same common message. We can turn back again to the time of the Twelve Patriarchs when their father Jacob passed from this life in the land of Egypt. Before his death he had instructed his sons to bury him back in the land of Canaan in the Cave of Machpelah where Abraham and Isaac along with their wives had been entombed many years earlier. Joseph who swore to honor his father's request petitioned Pharaoh that he might go up to the place of his birth to carry out this duty. And after being given permission, Joseph went up with his household along with his brothers and his father's household to their own country. Even the dignitaries of Egypt accompanied him for this solemn journey. A good sized contingent made the trip though we are told that certain members and holdings of the extended family were left behind. Specifically, the children (presumably with their mothers) along with the flocks and herds were left in the land of Goshen while the men made the trek to the land of Israel.⁵⁸

What should we deduce from this other than that the spiritual self alone is qualified to go up (ascend toward the heavens) and enter the Promised Land (the kingdom of God.) It accomplishes this great feat only after definitively separating itself from that which drags it down. So leaving behind the negative (the wives,) the spiritually immature (the children,) and the animal nature (the flocks and herds,) the man of faith enters into the Land of Milk and Honey to which he is called.

Once Joseph and his brethren reached the threshing floor of Atad at the border of Canaan, they began to weep loudly and bitterly. For seven days they mourned the death of Jacob and then proceeded to bury him in the ancestral cave. It is perhaps significant that this period of lamentation took place on a threshing floor, for it signifies the process of separation between wheat and chaff. But in symbolic terms, it represents the separation of the carnal and spiritual man in order that the latter may enter the heavenly kingdom and progress toward God. The name of the locale also appears meaningful, for Atad is translated "pierce, thorn, bramble." It symbolizes the belief that vexations, trials, and sorrows are real, the pain of which is associated with giving up the old material way of life to free the spiritual nature. The week long time of mourning can then be interpreted as the cry of the lower self, for it has been conquered and left behind once and for all.

⁵⁸ Genesis 49:29 – 50:14

However it is certainly no easy thing for man to put away the lower nature and there is much resistance along the way born in large part out of fear. The soul doesn't really know what it will have to deal with along the path of faith, and when it discovers that the road to God is narrow and winding and beset at every turn with obstacles, it can be perplexed. Truly the way is long and hard and one will undoubtedly shed many tears along the way and be overwrought at times with a sense of being overwhelmed. There are intimidating things to confront along the journey and with which the soul must do battle so that it can be tested and proved worthy to progress into the spiritual realms.

After perhaps only a couple years in the desert following the Exodus from Egypt, the children of Israel had an opportunity to enter the Promised Land. Coming to the border of Canaan, Moses sent out spies to scope out the land, and after surveying the country they brought back a report to the Israelites. The people were told that Canaan was indeed a fruitful land flowing with milk and honey, but they were also warned that the inhabitants who lived there were very large and strong with a race of giants among them. Terribly frightened, the Israelites abandoned the prospect of invading the land and chose to complain to their leader. They cried out, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and our children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt? And they said to each other, 'We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.'"⁵⁹

What we infer from this passage is that the soul dreads the unknown and is intimidated with the idea of encountering forces seemingly bigger than itself on the path to God. Rather than step out into unfamiliar territory where it can get hurt, it quickly retreats making for a place of perceived security, the sense-dominated life symbolized by Egypt from whence it came. The way of material living has been all it has ever known, and so it attempts to withdraw back into that existence which it sees as a refuge. Indeed it is deathly afraid that in making a spiritual stride it will lose the safety blanket it has always known. For this reason, it cries, "Our wives (the negative lower self) and children (spiritual immaturity) will be taken as plunder."

The soul's attachment to the familiar is depicted in another story that took place during the wandering in the desert not long before the Israelites would enter the Promised Land. It was at this time that the Lord had instructed Moses to take vengeance on the Midianites who had attempted to lead the Chosen People astray while in the wilderness. Going out to war, the fighting men of Israel struck down their enemy, killing every man among them. But they elected to keep for themselves the spoils of war which included the women, children, herds, flocks, and other goods. Of course we can now recognize on a symbolic level that this was a bad idea for it illustrates yet again the attempt of man to hold on to that part of himself from which he needs to separate if he is to enter the kingdom of heaven. When Moses discovered what the officers of the army had done, he was greatly angered, and he asked them in a chiding tone, "Have you allowed all of the women to live?" He reminded the men that the weaker sex had been responsible for

⁵⁹ Numbers 13:26-14:4

leading the Israelites away from the way of the Lord, and so he summarily ordered that they be butchered, eliminating the possibility of causing further problems.⁶⁰

The soul's resistance to spiritual progress may continue for a long while, but it eventually breaks down as the sands of time pass and man recognizes that his tenacious hold on the natural world has been foolish. Just east of the Jordan a little before the conquest of Canaan, two of the twelve tribes who had very large herds and flocks saw that the land on that side of the river was suitable for their livestock to graze. And desiring to put down permanent roots then and there, just outside of the Promised Land, they asked Moses if they could have that land as an inheritance.

Needless to say, Moses rebuked the Gadites and Reubenites harshly for thinking of their own convenience and ignoring the hard mission facing the Israelites in subduing the country west of the Jordan. Wanting to take the easy way out, they sheepishly asked to stay on the safe side of the river which would provide a grassy spot to nurture their livestock (animal nature.) Naturally the prophet of God castigated them for this backpedalling maneuver. Mustering a little courage, they cut a deal with Moses pledging to fight with their brother Israelites in the war that would soon be upon them until the other ten tribes had successfully overtaken the land and received their inheritance in Canaan. They made this offer on the condition that they could still have the territory east of the Jordan which they took a liking to. Moses accepted their negotiation and also allowed them time to build pens for their animals and cities for their wives and children to stay back east of the river while they went boldly into the Promised Land to fight. In effect, these men (spiritual self) finally had the valor to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land (kingdom of God) leaving their spouses (the negative,) young ones (spiritual immaturity,) and flocks (animal nature) behind where they belong.⁶¹

Besides finding this recurring message in the anecdotes of the Mosaic Law, we can actually discover it in the legal code itself. The idea that man must get rid of his lower nature to advance spiritually is perhaps cloaked in what we could call on the surface a humanitarian aspect of the Jewish Law. In the Book of Deuteronomy there is a somewhat cryptic ordinance that states, "If you come across a bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young. You may take the young, but be sure to let the mother go, so that it may go well with you and you may have a long life."⁶²

Immediately this is a command to show some mercy, for taking a mother and children together would be traumatic for the former as she would be "afflicted at the sight of the spoil of her young" according to the great Jewish scholar Maimonides. In taking only the offspring and letting the mother go, the law was being sensitive to this as well as being ecologically responsible, for allowing her to fly away would still allow for the bird to reproduce again and hence protect the species. But allegorically, we may read into this

⁶⁰ Numbers 31:1-24

⁶¹ Numbers 32; Joshua 1:12-15

⁶² Deuteronomy 22:6

code a little more by suggesting that it is wise to separate the spiritually young from any negative influence that they might make steady and unhampered progress toward God.

Turning again to the narratives of the Old Testament, we could cite more examples of passages that hint at the idea of putting away the lower nature to free the soul of encumbrances along the road to God. In the chronicles of King David we find one such story that echoes this message. It had been promised to David that as a result of his adulterous and murderous actions with Bathsheba and her husband respectively, he would reap a long-term punishment. As he had slept with another man's wife in secret, it was foretold that another would sleep with David's own wives in public.⁶³ And it turned out that this chastisement came through the hands of his son Absalom many years later when the young man attempted to overthrow his father's kingdom. Taking David's concubines, he erected a tent on the roof of the palace and had sex with them in broad daylight in an effort to secure his position.⁶⁴ When David was finally able to put down the rebellion and return to Jerusalem from which he had earlier fled, he proceeded to clean up the mess his son had made. With his ten concubines defiled by his own offspring, he elected to put them away from his presence forever. Never to lie with them again, David confined them to a house under guard where they lived as practical widows until their deaths.⁶⁵ And if numerology has any bearing in this account, we could interpret the number 10 to signify a total and complete putting away of the negative in the life of the great King.

A final illustration of the call to the soul to put away from itself that which is impure and unholy comes to us from the Book of Ezra where the plain reading of one of the passages calls for an action on the part of the Jewish people that definitely seems cruel and inhuman to our modern sensibilities. After returning from 70 years of captivity in Babylon as a punishment for their chronic rebellion for centuries earlier, the people not surprisingly began to stumble into sin once again never learning their lesson very well. Perhaps because mostly men had returned across the desert to their ancestral homeland, there were not many Jewish women available to marry. After the land of Judah had been resettled for several decades, it was discovered that many of the men had taken foreign wives from the neighboring peoples (not unlike Solomon.)⁶⁶ From the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites did they take spouses and have children by them in direct violation of the Mosaic Law. The Book of Deuteronomy commanded, "Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods."⁶⁷

Not only the common man, but the priests and Levites also had violated this ancient rule of Moses. And like Solomon before them, they were now vulnerable to the corrupting influence of foreign women. When Ezra the priest found out about this widespread

⁶³ 2 Samuel 12:11-12

⁶⁴ 2 Samuel 16:21-22

⁶⁵ 2 Samuel 20:3

⁶⁶ Ezra 9

⁶⁷ Deuteronomy 7:3,4

unfaithfulness, he was grief stricken, and taking notice of the man's distress, the Israelite community gathered around him and was filled with remorse for what they had done. Pledging to make right their offense against God, they vowed to send away their foreign wives and children, separating the holy race from the bloodlines of the surrounding nations. And Ezra hearing their oath held them to their commitment, demanding that they fulfill their promise.⁶⁸

While it is indeed callous and insensitive to suddenly separate from a loving wife and children and even more heartless to do so without providing for their future welfare, we can turn our attention away from the superficial meaning of the passage and consider the spiritual implications of this radical separation. When man is "wedded" to the things of this world, the only option to remedy this situation is divorce from the attachment to those interests. Any possessions that we have that are dearer to us than the spiritual life must be renounced and put away for good. In this brutal narrative we see that principle depicted in what has become known as the "Rite of Renunciation" an activity that must happen within the soul along its long journey toward God. Interestingly, the Jewish men recognized that they couldn't settle the matter immediately. They said, "This matter cannot be taken care of in a day or two, because we have sinned greatly in this thing." In truth, our separation from a worldly orientation is not something that can happen overnight. Like all things in man's spiritual evolution, it is something that takes a good deal of time.

Redeeming the Lower Nature

Up until this point we have identified man's lower nature as something that he needs to get rid of if he is to make spiritual progress, and in fact this is true. However, the process of man's sanctification can be looked at from another angle. While in one sense, man needs to discard his bestial self, we can also say that rather than killing off the baser nature, he can redeem it. Instead of destroying it, we can think about the soul transforming it and freeing it of all that is negative. In this sense, the lower nature is sublimated and in the end fused with the higher self in a soul that is no longer divided but of one purpose and aspiration in the service of God.

In effect the lower self makes a transition from the negative to the positive, or in terms of the allegory we have been employing, from the female to the male. By default, we all begin our journey in this world completely entrenched in material existence without an inkling of spiritual inclination. That is to say, we all begin earth life as symbolically female which we could call the characteristic gender of everything at the beginning. Not until sometime later does there stir within us a glimmer of spiritual ambition much further down the road, that which we would link with the stronger sex.

It is certainly interesting that while nature corroborates the symbolism of the sexes as we have mentioned earlier, it also supports the idea of the transformation of the natural self into something of spiritual value.

⁶⁸ Ezra 10

Considering human biology, it is extremely relevant that all human beings begin their existence in the womb as females which is to say that mankind is by definition basically female in form. From the time of conception until about six weeks into gestation, those who will become girls and those who will become boys are anatomically identical possessing a female anatomy. Only after the first month and a half does male sexual differentiation take place when a rush of testosterone triggered by the Y chromosome leads to a different path of development in those who will turn into boys. Nonetheless, the evidence that men once began life as structural females is apparent until the day of their deaths, for all those of male gender have breast tissue and nipples. Though vestigial female characteristics on a male body, they are a carryover from the womb before the fetus made a transition from female to male.

Not only in the womb, the life of a child also follows a similar pattern of transitioning from female to male, not anatomically but in terms of orientation. From the moment of its birth, the newborn infant is put to its mother's breast and is nurtured by her for months and in some cultures even years. She is the first contact that the young one knows and it finds comfort in her embrace and familiar voice. Even after the toddler is weaned from nursing at his mother's bosom, the child still clings to its mother often hiding behind her apron where the little one finds security.

In those primary years, the child spends a good deal of time with its mother, but as it grows it comes to recognize the other parent more and more. Little boys begin to take an interest in the things of men as they develop whether it is playing ball, roughhousing, or helping the father to fix things around the house. As they come to know the paternal figure a bond develops and love for masculine pursuits takes hold. In effect the young one switches orientation from the female to the male.

That it is the divinely appointed order for humanity to move from natural interests to supernatural interests is not only corroborated by biology and ordinary child development but by religious history itself. We began this work noting that mankind's earliest understanding of procreation led him to elevate the woman as a sacred vehicle of life. Consequently, primitive religion was very matriarchal consisting of the worship of the Great Goddess and other lesser female deities. It was not until the rise of patriarchal civilization that religion switched gears to the worship of the Great Father God so that today the face of the earth is dominated by the followers of a monotheistic male deity.

As God oversees the development of all things including human history, it is certainly no accident that these patterns exist in the world, for he has wished to convey to humanity spiritual truth through what is familiar and tangible to us. With that being said, whatever flaws that Patriarchal culture and religion has had over the past several thousand years, that it came to prominence and persisted until the dawn of the modern age was also no mistake. As we have been asserting, it is the biased and bigoted writings of such male oriented religions which God has used to transmit the message of the lower and higher selves, and we continue our examination of the Old Testament scriptures as we trace the redemption of the man's animal nature.

Returning to Genesis once again, we consider the persons of Abram and Sarai, the progenitors of the nation of Israel. Like Adam and Eve whom we have identified as the spirit and soul of man respectively or alternatively ones higher and lower nature, this couple who became the ancestors of the Jewish people equivalently represent the spiritual and material self within a person. So inextricably tied together just like those who are linked within the bonds of marriage as these were, the two natures reside side by side within the individual.

The role that each one plays in our allegorical development can at once be supported through exploration of the Hebrew names and their meanings. Abram comes from basic Semitic roots and translates “High Father” or “Father of the Heights.” We can interpret this to refer to someone who has risen high on the spiritual path or at least aspires to do so. In this way it is very appropriate to see Abram as representing that part of human nature that strives towards the spiritual, or what we call the Higher Self. While Abram has a positive connotation, the same cannot be said for his wife Sarai which translates as “dominating.” As symbolizing the Lower Self, her name communicates negative attributes such as quarreling and strife. Indeed we understand that it is the prerogative of the material self to attempt to control the spiritual nature by binding it to worldly interests and pursuits. And of course this is the perennial struggle between the two natures which we can say was embodied in the relationship between Abram and Sarai.

Always a source of trouble to him, Sarai was a thorn in Abram’s side in just about every narrative that chronicles their exploits. From the time we are introduced to them, we see her more as a test to Abram than any help. Initially we are told that the couple descended into Egypt at a time of famine in the land of Canaan, but fearing that the Egyptians would kill him to steal his beautiful wife, Abram instructed Sarai to say to their neighbors that she was his sister. Unfortunately that plan backfired, for Pharaoh took the presumed unmarried woman into his palace to be his wife. Abram was lavished with material goods as a result. However when serious diseases fell upon Pharaoh and his household on account of Sarai, it was discovered that she was really Abram’s wife and the two were immediately sent out of the country in shame.⁶⁹

But a greater headache would come upon Abram sometime later as a result of the inability of the couple to produce an heir for Abram’s vast estate. Following the old Mesopotamian custom, Sarai convinced her husband to sleep with her maidservant Hagar so that any offspring she might bear would legally become hers. In this way Abram’s wife hoped to obtain an heir by proxy, seeking a natural answer to the problem rather than a miracle from God. Indeed the lower nature with its purely material consciousness is incapable of demonstrating any faith and so lures the higher self into a tangible earthly approach to solving its issues. And while the plan seemed good on the surface, it also became a disaster and a source of grief for Abram.⁷⁰

No sooner did Hagar conceive than she began to have an attitude with Sarah, and not willing to put up with any disdain from her lowly slave girl, Abram’s wife began to

⁶⁹ Genesis 12:10-20

⁷⁰ Genesis 16

mistreat Hagar so that she fled from her. After an angel appeared to the servant woman in the wilderness and instructed her to return to her mistress, Hagar submitted herself to Sarai once again and for over 13 years there seemed to be relative tolerance in the household as Abraham's firstborn son Ishmael grew. Perhaps for these years Sarah regarded the boy as her own son, but when she miraculously conceived at 90 years old and gave birth to Isaac, things changed. No longer did she have any use for the slave woman or her son, for she had her own biological child. When Ishmael began to ridicule her own son, Sarai had had enough and demanded that Hagar and Ishmael leave for good.⁷¹ Of course this distressed Abram greatly as the boy was his own flesh and blood. Never had he expected that this would be the final outcome of following Sarai's suggestion years earlier, and the consequences of that decision have had a much greater ripple effect into the modern age with bitter conflict between Arabs and Jews.

These various accounts to cite a few illustrate the way that the lower self may afflict the higher, constantly putting it into positions where it is tested. But if the higher self perseveres and doesn't fall to its baser counterpart, it will over time become witness to the transformation of the negative into something friendly and at peace with the spiritual nature. The war between the two selves will come to an end when the negative part of our being finally becomes sublimated into something positive and aligned with our spiritual interests. No longer divided, there is unity of purpose within the soul when at last the material self is redeemed.

The indication of this gradual transformation is marked by a significant name change that Sarai received during her life. At the instruction of God himself, the woman was no longer to be called Sarai, but Sarah, a name with a very different connotation.⁷² No longer characterized by a domineering and quarrelsome nature, the soul is transformed into something of great value, for Sarah means a "woman of royal birth, princess, or queen." This is the condition of the soul when it has taken on the divine nature and begins to resemble the heavenly King so much so that it can be called His offspring.

It is ordained that man will eventually see the evaporation of the hostile animal nature when the lower self ceases to exist as a separate warring entity. At last it becomes subsumed into one higher nature directed toward God, an idea that is portrayed toward the end of the narratives of Abraham and Sarah. We learn that Sarah died at the age of 127 leaving her husband a widower.⁷³ Having outlasted his rival, Abraham went on to live another 40 years underscoring the fact that at the end of the spiritual journey the one better nature has taken full control and for all intents and purposes exists alone.

It is significant that Abraham took another wife at this late stage in his life, not one who embodied the negative material nature but one who represented the purified and transformed lower self. Keturah became Abraham's second wife and went on to bear him six sons.⁷⁴ We know next to nothing about the woman except that which can be

⁷¹ Genesis 21:1-21

⁷² Genesis 17:15

⁷³ Genesis 23:1-2

⁷⁴ Genesis 25:1-11

derived from her name. The Hebrew translates as “fragrance, perfume, smoke, incense” and carries with it the notion of the transmuted soul. Like a sacrifice that is burned on the altar and transformed from something material into something ethereal, so is the soul that has been sublimated from an earthly to a heavenly orientation. When man persists through the testing of his lower self and endures long enough to outlive its contentious nature, then all that will remain will be a life well-pleasing to God, a sweet fragrance to the Almighty. So we are called to persevere and offer the sacrifice of our lower selves until we become in a permanent spiritual mindset. It is then that we will be dedicated to prayer and constant communication to God embodied by incense that is burned and rises into the heavenlies.

As Sarah gave way to Keturah in the life of Abraham marking the progress of the soul in the life of man, so also did two women color the life of a certain king who lived many hundreds of years later. In the 5th century B.C., a powerful monarch ruled over the vast Persian Empire which encompassed 127 provinces stretching from Egypt to India. King Xerxes as he was known was possessed of great wealth and glory which he proudly displayed to the public for half a year straight at one point in his reign. At the end of this period, he offered a banquet to all the people of the imperial city liberally providing enough wine for all to drink to their heart’s content. Seven days into the celebration, Xerxes was in high spirits and he commanded that his servants bring his wife Queen Vashti to the festivities. Only his intention was not that she should be a fellow reveler as much as a spectacle for all the residents of the city to behold. He had instructed that she be brought forth “wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at.” According to the Rabbinic tradition, it is believed that he sought her to appear in only her crown (i.e. stark naked) to show off his prized possession.⁷⁵

On a symbolic level, we can regard the great king of Persia as man in his earlier stages of development when his soul is governed by the attributes of the material nature. At this period in his existence, his life is centered on ambition and personal whims as he strives to acquire material possessions. Because he is afraid and longs for a tangible form of security in his earthly existence, he chases after mammon which he is convinced will put him at ease. In the pursuit of this universal material god, the soul assumes a disposition of fierceness and worldly might that covers it like a garment. It is then that it also dons a cloak of pride that leads it to thirst after power and have dominion over others.

Indeed because the young soul is full of fear it imagines that security entails having control over its environment, particularly others that it comes in contact with. Not unlike the animal kingdom the characteristics of which govern the primitive soul, man under the sway of the lower nature will exhibit aggressive behavior attempting to become the “top dog” in life. Within any species of pack animal there exists a hierarchy based on strength, size, and aggression that benefits the creatures on the top at the expense of those on the bottom. Often it is the case that the head of the pack will have best access to females for mating as well as control of the choicest feeding and breeding grounds. And among wolves, it is only the alpha male that has the privilege to breed. Whether it

⁷⁵ Esther 1

manifests itself in a henhouse of chickens or within a pride of lions, the pecking order gives the most access to food and reproduction to the strongest. It is part of the law of survival of the fittest, and worldly man adheres to this same principle as a matter of his own survival and wellbeing in the land of the living.

As some animals bear their teeth to others to intimidate and assert their dominance, so too does man governed by the lower nature seek to exhibit his strength to others, if not his own physical strength then as is more often the case the magnitude of his possessions. Such was the interest of King Xerxes who laid out for all to see the opulence of his palace and gardens with the precious metals and stones that adorned them. His six month display of power could be understood as the attempt of the material self to flex its muscles and maintain its position in the pecking order.

It is pride that works in man to show his strength to others in the interests of his own security which we have broadly defined in terms of money, power, and fame. It is the last of these that represents the need of man for love, for the soul early in its spiritual development longs for the acceptance and approval of others. It has the need for the security of belonging and feeling affirmed. Like Xerxes who poured out as much wine into the goblets of his people as they could consume, the primitive soul seeks to impress others to gain their favor.

Like a peacock that spreads its colorful tail feathers five feet high to attract a mate, or other animals who display body parts, strike poses, or emit scents or calls to lure in a partner, so does the material self seek after sensual love through what it has to offer. Motivated by selfish interests as is true to the earthly man's nature, he seeks erotic love to satisfy his own needs. And so we see the naked Queen Vashti as epitomizing the most base and powerful emotions of the soul, that of sexual desire which Xerxes attempted to parade to his subjects.

In the beginning of his earthly sojourn, man is dominated by a very primitive form of love completely on the physical level. Seeking someone who will satisfy his desires, he will show kindness and various forms of benevolence to a prospective partner in exchange for certain favors. Clearly with its own ulterior motives in mind, the soul first learns about the idea of partnership in this way, "one hand washing another" so to speak. In a mutual relationship such as this each party gets what it wants by performing some work or service for the other. And all is well as long as each partner keeps his part of the bargain.

It is true that this principle of reciprocation is the basis of many marriages, for all too often it is the case that a man will show tenderness to his wife because she meets his material needs in the form of cooking, cleaning, or sex. And wishing to preserve those benefits, he is motivated to extend himself to meet her particular needs. Though many relationships may start this way, governed by selfish exchanges of "love," over time what was originally a less than noble motive may grow into something more. Living together for many years may forge a strong bond of affection that can overlook the failure or inability of the other partner to keep their part of the deal. Even when his wife is old,

frail, and unable to do for him as she did in earlier years, a man may still seek to be attentive to her without demanding anything else in return. Such behavior marks the stirrings of disinterested love within the soul, a concern for others without any expectation of being “paid back” in any form. It is the beginning of divine love within the soul which takes us back to the story at hand.

Purely physical love will dominate man for only so long. Eventually the emergence of the spiritual nature necessitates that his charity take a higher form at which point it begins to resemble, though very imperfectly, the pure love of God. It turned out that when Queen Vashti was summoned to appear as a spectacle before the citizens of Susa (the imperial city,) she refused to cooperate rather than be paraded as a sex object. Needless to say this infuriated her husband King Xerxes who proceeded to banish her from his presence forever. It was decided that the king should find a new wife to take her place, “one better than [Vashti]” to assume the royal position. Indeed it is the case that man must do away with his “first wife,” the soul steered by carnal and selfish love and replace her with another spouse, the soul under sway of divine and disinterested love.

It is the rest of the account which tells the story of man’s transition from a lower to higher form of charity. Soon after Vashti’s deposition, a search was made throughout the empire for a new queen. Many young girls were brought into the king’s harem and entrusted to his eunuch for preparation to meet Xerxes. They were given a strict protocol to follow over the course of twelve months before they would have an opportunity to spend a night with the emperor and if lucky enough become his choice for queen. One such candidate was Esther, a Jewess who was brought to the citadel by her cousin and guardian Mordecai. She quickly won the favor of Hegai the eunuch who put her on a regimen of beauty treatments and special food. It is in this passing detail that we understand how the rough and crude soul must be refined through purification and adornment into a something comely and of great value. We are told that the course of such treatments involved first six months application of oil of myrrh followed by another six months of perfumes and other cosmetics. The bitterness of the former suggests to us that the soul must with great difficulty renounce its old life of attachment to the senses before the fragrance of expanding spiritual characteristics begin to exude from its form.

In the course of time, Esther won the favor of the king over all the other virgins of the harem, and Xerxes bestowed upon her the royal crown to take the place of her predecessor Queen Vashti.⁷⁶ In effect the king had elected to cast his lot upon “divine love” marking the first signs of man’s departure from the sensual love he had only known up until that time. But the spiritual growth that is characterized by the shift from one woman to another is not something that happens overnight. Rather, it is an often grueling process, a struggle within the soul between two forces until at last the higher nature wins.

The conflict that takes place within the heart of man at the point he first begins to pursue the way of the spirit plays out in the story through a couple of other characters who interact with Esther and the king. We have already alluded to Esther’s cousin Mordecai who represents one of the opposing forces in the battle of the soul. There are various

⁷⁶ Esther 2:1-18

interpretations of the name and none are very definitive; however for the purpose of our allegory we consider it to be a Persian word meaning “little boy.” In that context Mordecai embodies humility which is characteristic of the higher self. A man governed by the spiritual has learned that the soul can find security in God and therefore has no need to impress others with its powers and achievements. On the other side of the fence, we have a man named Haman, a royal official second only to Xerxes himself. A boastful individual who bragged about his great wealth, many sons, and his position of power in the kingdom,⁷⁷ he obviously represents the qualities of the lower nature, and it is significant that we find him in authority toward the beginning of the story, for it is the material self that has dominion of our souls at the start of our spiritual journey.

The tension between Haman and Mordecai is introduced to us when we learn that all of the royal officials paid homage to Haman at the king’s gate, kneeling down to show him honor. However Mordecai who regularly sat at the gate refused to make this gesture and give respect to the king’s right hand man.⁷⁸ In this way we identify Mordecai as a non-conformist who is true to his own convictions. Indeed the soul ruled by the higher self stands alone not going along with the crowd. Confident in God’s love for it and fixated on his ways, this kind of man is not subject to following the masses and quickly stepping in the path of evil. It doesn’t care what others think of it, for only God’s opinion is important and it remains steadfast in that truth.

Needless to say, Mordecai’s defiance of Haman was an affront to him and the latter plotted to kill him and the rest of the Jews whom he believed were of the same disposition as his nemesis. Like Pharaoh who attempted to kill all of the male children during the enslavement in Egypt, so here we see illustrated the lower nature which conspires to destroy the budding spiritual self when it comes on the scene. It will not tolerate any threats to its authority and rule of the soul, and therefore it makes plans to snuff out the stirrings of the divine within man. So Haman convinced the king that the Jews were an uncooperative and lawbreaking lot, and he obtained from Xerxes an edict that proclaimed that all people of Israelite extraction were to be killed en masse throughout all of the provinces on the 13th day of the 12th month, a genocide of great proportions.

When Mordecai learned of this decree, he was grief-stricken and sending a message to his cousin Esther, he pleaded with her to approach the king and beg for mercy for the Jews. However Esther was a little resistant at first to do so, because Persian law prescribed death to those who entered the king’s chambers without being summoned except if the king should extend his golden scepter to the supplicant to spare his life. But with a little more prodding on the part of Mordecai, Esther mustered up the courage to risk her life in this way to save her people.

However she wasn’t going to go before the Emperor without diligently preparing for that anxious meeting. She instructed Mordecai and all of the Jews of Susa to fast along with herself for three days, abstaining from all food and water. And she expressed to him that

⁷⁷ Esther 5:11

⁷⁸ Esther 3

at the end of that period she would venture to go before the king with her appeal. She knew that she had the best chance of saving her life and gaining an audience with Xerxes if she sought divine aid, and so she took that sacrificial measure before daring to stand in the king's presence.⁷⁹

Allegorically we understand this part of the narrative as a critical juncture in the life of man in which he must decide to continue on with the pursuit of the spiritual or alternatively return to the way of a life of material desire. The king (the will of man) is faced with the decision of welcoming Esther (divine love) into his presence or snuffing her out of his life. Divine love knows that it must soften the will of man so that it will embrace it, and it accomplishes this through voluntary suffering (fasting) to tenderize the heart and make it receptive. The apostle Paul wrote, "I beat my body until it becomes my slave," and his words have become the basis of a long standing tradition in the church of "mortifying the flesh." The key spiritual principle is that voluntary deprivation particularly from the ordinary pleasures of life helps one to become detached from the material world and long for heavenly existence. By depriving the body of its cravings and even inflicting injury to it as Paul suggests, the spirit can acquire mastery over the flesh. By denying the body the pleasure of food, sex, sleep, and other simple drives of physical man, one can become less prone to gluttony, fornication, sloth, and other vices which are associated with the weakness of the flesh. Through the practice of mortification as the Church calls it, a soul can learn the virtue of self-control acquiring mastery over the wiles of the body.

In effect, Esther's act of fasting was representative of the necessary activity of the soul to free itself of carnal attachments so that it might draw near to God. After three days, Esther donned her royal robes and entered the hall of the king which suggests to us that after man has purged selfish desires from his soul then he may clad himself in the richly adorned garments of spirit. When King Xerxes saw her standing in her courts, he was pleased and extended his golden scepter toward her sparing her life. Then Esther approached the king and touched the tip of his scepter at which point Xerxes asked her to state her request and promised to grant her up to half of his kingdom. Rather than voice her concern immediately, Esther proposed that the king along with Haman come to a banquet that she would prepare for the next day where she would reveal her request to the king.⁸⁰

This part of the story indicates to us that man's act of sacrificing physical desires creates fertile ground in his soul to welcome more spiritual progress. At that point, divine love receives permission to affect the power of the will (touch the scepter) spiritualizing it with its finger. Instantly the will becomes like putty in the hands of divine love and surrenders to it granting it control of its resources (up to ½ the kingdom.) When divine love gets this invitation to come in, it then proceeds to show man what is in store for him if he follows the higher path. It throws a "banquet" for him to catch a glimpse and partake of a few of the goodies it has to offer, among which is spiritual refreshment and divine intoxication (wine.)

⁷⁹ Esther 4

⁸⁰ Esther 5:1-8

At the feast that Esther prepared, the king again asked her to state her request while he dined at table with Haman. Seizing upon the proper moment, she pled for her life and that of her people who had been sold to slaughter. The king became incensed at this information and immediately inquired who dared to do such a vile act. At that point Haman's fate was sealed and he was hanged thus creating a vacancy in the post of the highest royal official.⁸¹ Esther proceeded to introduce Xerxes to her cousin Mordecai who received his favor and took Haman's signet ring to become the new "second in command."⁸² And so we see depicted the transition of the will from the sway of arrogant and egotistical forces to more benign influences characterized by a humble disposition.

Regarding the fate of the Jews who were marked for annihilation, King Xerxes quickly neutralized his prior edict of genocide by issuing a new decree that allowed the Jewish people the right to assemble and protect themselves on the same day that they were supposed to be wiped out.⁸³ It was the 13th day of the 12th month, the month of Adar that the Jews triumphed over their enemies,⁸⁴ and a fitting time of year it was for Adar is equivalent to the month of March in the Western calendar, the springtime when new life returns after the long winter. It represents none other than the new life of the spirit that emerges from the deadness of material life.

We have considered now two Old Testament stories that portray the soul's transformation from the sensual to the spiritual, a process that must take place in all mankind. While we have sketched the outline of that conversion, there are additional nuances to that process that we will look at as we continue the allegory of the sexes. Particularly we will examine the role of pain and suffering in the redemption of the soul, a key factor in its metamorphosis.

As a general spiritual principle, suffering like everything that happens to us in life is meant for our highest good. And with that being said, the purpose of pain and sorrow in the world is so that humanity can recognize and feel its separation from God. It is the anguish of disconnection from God that is designed to drive us toward him, creating a longing within the soul for union with its Creator. History has shown that many an afflicted soul has consequently drawn very near to God to come into a state of rich intimacy with him which would not have happened had life been easy and carefree.

In its essence, suffering consists in our separation from God. The mere fact that we are separated from the Source of our being makes us feel lonely and discontented, seeking perhaps we know not what, but filled with the conviction that we are not entirely happy and cannot be happy until we have found that which we have lost. Neither shall we ever be completely happy until our long journey is ended and we return to God, from whence we came.

⁸¹ Esther 7

⁸² Esther 8:1-2

⁸³ Esther 8:3-17

⁸⁴ Esther 9

The mechanisms that come into play to make man aware of his separation from God are embedded deep within the core of his being. When his most intrinsic needs are coupled with suffering, it becomes a sure formula to lead the soul to God, though of course one only recognizes this in hindsight, after he has learned through experience that is true.

Among the basic longings of the heart is the need for fulfillment. We each need to feel that we have accomplished something, realizing some purpose in our existence to make us feel happy. Before the germination of faith within man, he believes that self-realization is only available at a very base level, namely the gratification of his own sensual desires. He pursues pleasure at every opportunity as a means of satisfying the need for exhilaration. Indeed he wants to feel alive and chasing food, sex, adventure, entertainment, and other physical experiences seems to be his answer to that requirement of the soul. It might seem that man would be stuck in this cycle of the senses forever except for the design of creation. Like with anything that we do over and over again, there is a tendency of man to become bored and over time desire for physical things diminishes as he becomes weary with the world and what it has to offer. Perhaps this could be conceived of as pain in a broad sense of the word, for boredom as discontentment is a source of discomfort for the soul. But more traditional pain accomplishes the same thing, for when sickness and disability come, especially with the aging process, the pleasures we are used to enjoying become limited or unavailable to us. It is then that the way in which we have found satisfaction in life becomes denied to us, and in that disenchantment or even despair, the heart of man will look to find fulfillment in another way. At last he becomes receptive to a higher sense of purpose in the form of service to God and neighbor.

Also within the heart of man is the longing for security which we have alluded to earlier, and this inner need is tantamount to the self-preservation instinct which is embedded in all life forms. Early in his spiritual journey, when the lower nature is in control of his being, man believes that he can only have a sense of safety through the acquisition of mammon. It is then that he is full of many fears, and trusting only what his eyes can see, he feverishly chases after possessions which he is convinced will give him peace. In his obsession for acquiring worldly things, he becomes oblivious to those he is abusing and manipulating in his path to secure his treasure. His neighbor becomes nothing more than a pawn on a chessboard, a mere stepping stone to achieve his goal. It is when man chronically takes advantage of his fellow man that he is on a slippery slope to reap the consequences of those actions, and ultimately the long arm of the law will find him when he has given way to thievery, deception, and even murder. It is the punishment that accompanies those activities that will inevitably give a man pause, and recognizing that his pursuit of money, power, and fame is not the worth the price he is paying, he will begin to seek security from another source. Even if man should fall short of deadly sins in his thirst for mammon, the divine program will nonetheless ensure that he become disenchanted with his earthly quest for safe haven, for in due course the one who has accumulated much will suffer some ill wind of fate that will rob him of all that he held dear. Whether through a natural disaster that wipes out a man's crops and livestock in one fell swoop or through the plunge of a crashing stock market, one's assets can be removed quite quickly bringing man to his knees. Such events are sent into the life of

man to teach him that his trust in temporal things is but an illusion. Coming to understand that possessions are indeed fleeting, the soul begins to seek refuge in something more reliable, the unseen world over which God presides.

Of course there are more yearnings of the heart besides the need for fulfillment and security, and perhaps one no less strong is the need to be loved. We all seek this out whether consciously or unconsciously, but before we are aware that there is anything more to life than what we can see, we look to receive affection and a sense of belonging from those we have tangible contact with. In this early stage of development, man is intent on gaining the approval of others so that he may be accepted and feel part of a community. Concerned about what his neighbor thinks about him, he looks for opportunities to impress and gain the favor of his peers. And desiring greatly to fit in, he will follow the expectations of those around him, conforming to their demands in exchange for social acceptance. Unfortunately it is in this phase of the soul's journey that it bears the false-self the strongest, a façade molded to appease its social network. It is afraid to be itself and in truth doesn't even know itself until there comes a point when it must suffer rejection. Despite its best efforts, it does not receive respect or admiration from its neighbors and the crushing blow of ostracization and subsequent isolation teach it that the affections of his fellow man are fickle and at best unstable. It is then that the soul seeks out an other-worldly love, one which it hopes is steadfast and accepting of who it really is. When man finds this invisible source of love, he begins on a lonely path as far as the world is concerned, for no longer will the opinions of men interest him but only those of God whom he is attempting to follow. And indeed it is true that the non-conformist, the man of faith often must walk alone as he winds his way up the spiritual ladder.

With these general principles laid out, we begin our exploration of the function of suffering in the life of man as found in the scriptures. We consider it primarily in its role as the soul's teacher, a part that it played well in the story of David and Bathsheba. Sometimes it is hard for us to believe that the one who was called "a man after God's own heart" fell into grave sin at one point in his life, but sadly this was the case. Looking out from his rooftop one evening, the king happened to see a beautiful woman bathing, and though he already had several wives of his own, desire got the best of him and he sent for Bathsheba to be brought back to the palace. Though he knew she was another man's wife, he nonetheless succumbed to lust and lay with her. Whether he forced her against her will, we do not know, but the story tells us that their one night of union resulted in pregnancy.

Rather than own up to his adulterous act, David immediately schemed for a way to conceal what he had done. After sending for Bathsheba's husband Uriah who was serving in the army, he encouraged him to go home and sleep with his wife. David felt that the easiest way to keep the whole matter a secret was for Uriah to believe that Bathsheba's pregnancy was the outcome of his weekend furlough from the front lines. The king reasoned that Uriah wouldn't think twice about the identity of Bathsheba's child after a night with his wife very early in her pregnancy.

But the clever plan of David fell through when Uriah shocked him with a piety that exceeded his own. Rather than go home for an evening of eating, drinking, and physical intimacy, the warrior slept at the entrance to the palace. Considering himself unworthy of even these simple pleasures while his comrades were sleeping in open fields and facing the hardships of war, he refrained from a very welcome visit to his wife. Needless to say, this unexpected behavior on the part of Uriah made David very uneasy, and continuing down the slippery slope of cover-up, the king committed an even more heinous sin than the adultery that started the whole mess. Knowing that Uriah would eventually discover that his wife's child was not his own, he decided that the only solution to conceal his evil deed was to get rid of the man. Uriah was sent back to the war with a note to the commanding officer which dictated his fate. Bathsheba's husband was to be put on the front lines, and then in the heat of battle, the army was to pull back leaving him alone to be struck down by the enemy. And regrettably this time David's plan succeeded.

As far as man was concerned, David's reputation was safe for the one that he feared learning of his sinful deed was dead. But God was obviously not unaware of what he had done, and sending a prophet to the king he was informed that Bathsheba's child would die as a consequence of his sin. And this news caused great agony for David who pleaded with God for his child's life refusing to eat and sleeping on the floor while his infant lay ill in the palace. Filled with regret for his actions, he showed great signs of repentance, but nonetheless the prophet's words were fulfilled and the child died.⁸⁵

The story only serves to illustrate that when man becomes fixated on a desire, he will chase after it without regard to how he abuses others who get in the way. When there is a little resistance toward achieving what he wants, he will intensify his efforts and take greater measures to ensure that his selfish aspiration is achieved. Small sins against his neighbor become larger sins, and in his obsession with sensual and material acquisitions he unwittingly becomes a monster steeped in inhumanity towards his fellow man.

What can put an end to this vicious cycle in which man regresses into a grotesque aberration of his true self? What can check his downward spiral into the abyss of evil? When all else fails, the intransigent sinner will come to learn the error of his ways through pain, not unlike what he has hurled on others around him. Like a thief who finds himself in prison to pay for his crime, the soul comes to experience suffering which is designed to stop it in its tracks and make it reconsider its wayward direction. A sure mechanism to put man on the upward path, pain of great enough magnitude and duration will bring even the most hardened soul to turn around, recognize the futility of its ways, and begin climbing the steep ladder to God.

Bathsheba's first child died so that David's evil could be transmuted through suffering as indeed it was. But that is not quite the end of the story, for we learn that David lay with his wife again and she conceived and bore another child whom we know as Solomon, the great symbol of wisdom. It is this second child that was born out of the essence of crystallized pain, the fruit of the soul's sorrow that we recognize as wisdom, for this quality is a direct result of the lessons man learns through suffering. The road of hard

⁸⁵ 2 Samuel 11-12

knocks is perhaps the greatest teacher of the soul, for painful experience will surely train man to reject the evil and choose good.

We see the fruit of the soul's sorrow depicted in another somewhat obscure passage from the Book of Judges that communicates to us the redemptive value of pain. Among the twelve people who ruled Israel before the monarchy was established was Jephthah. He was called upon by the people to lead them in the fight against the Ammonites who were making war on them and threatening to take away their land east of the Jordan. After a diplomatic approach failed, Jephthah had no choice but to launch an offensive against the invaders, but before proceeding he made a particular vow to the Lord. He solemnly pledged, "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

In this promise the piety of Jephthah is very clear, but the content of his pledge strikes our ears as rather barbaric and inhumane. The best translation of the text suggests that the judge intended to offer to God the "first creature" to appear on his threshold as he returned, but it seems unreasonable to expect an animal from the flock to be a good candidate for this. It would appear that Jephthah did indeed seek to make a human sacrifice to God in exchange for his victory over the Ammonites, and though that idea is greatly offensive to us, we must realize that it wasn't out of the ordinary for those who lived several thousand years ago. Human sacrifice was perhaps one of the most reverent offerings a religious man could make to God, and as far as the consciousness of the human race had developed in that period, it was acceptable not only for man but also for God. And we should call to mind the story of Abraham and his son Isaac whom God asked to be sacrificed as a burnt offering upon a mountain in Israel. Because Abraham considered it a reasonable request, he planned to follow through on the command until the very last moment when God stopped him.

It seems that God made good on Jephthah's vow, for the servant of God defeated the children of Ammon securing the land east of the Jordan once again. But the story turns tragic in the immediate wake of this conquest, for upon Jephthah's return home, his daughter came dancing out of the doorway to greet him. His only child, she was the first to pass over the threshold of his home making merry with a tambourine. Perhaps Jephthah had expected a maidservant or slave girl or some other member of the extended household to become the object of his pledge to God, but when he beheld his daughter he was horrified, tore his clothes, and lamented, "Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break." The price of victory was suddenly very high and more than Jephthah had anticipated sending him into a state of distress.⁸⁶

Indeed on an allegorical level we could say that the cost of victory was very high for Jephthah, for it was equivalent to the price one must pay to win the spiritual battle that takes place in the soul. It is clear from the text that the girl was very close to him, his only child and an extension of himself. She represents his soul which is the part of our

⁸⁶ Judges 11

being that is very near and dear to us. And for this reason, among all of the people in the household, her appearance on the threshold was most grievous to Jephthah. He knew he had to offer up this precious daughter, who is of course a woman symbolizing the negative part of us that we all need to get rid of on the road to God. She epitomizes the state of the soul still under dominion of the lower nature, the nature that man does not sublimate from his being without great sorrow and woe.

The narrative continues informing us that Jephthah's daughter took the news of his vow with great courage and devotion. She insisted that her father fulfill his pledge to God as planned and promised to submit to the grizzly fate that lay ahead of her. Only she requested that her sacrifice be deferred for two months so that she could roam the hills with her friends weeping and mourning as she would never marry. And we are told that the virgin did so after which time her father did to her as he had vowed.

We may interpret the weeping of Jephthah's daughter on a symbolic level as the tears of penitence that pour forth from the soul along the course of its transformation. It is these tears that bring forth man's spiritual essence and a connection with God that it has long denied and resisted. The crying daughter of this victorious judge of Israel represents the now awakened soul that mourns over its long existence apart from God and devoted to its own way. Reflecting on its past, it can only weep over who it has been and what it has done. Like Jephthah's daughter, the soul recognizes that it has been a virgin, never having borne any fruit for all of its useless strivings in the land of the living. It mourns for itself for not achieving any spiritual union with God, and it mourns for the world which it now sees as vanity.

That a woman (the soul) must suffer to bring about her own redemption is portrayed in other texts of scripture including another code from the Law of Moses. Earlier we had surveyed the ancient Middle Eastern practice of trial by water in which one accused of a crime without witnesses was thrown into the river to determine guilt or innocence. An appeal was made to the gods to decide the truth of the matter which was evidenced by whether the indicted swam to safety or drown. Moses following the tradition of the Babylonians adapted his own form of trial by water, but one which was exclusively biased against women.

Should a man suspect his wife of committing adultery with another man, it was provided for him to ascertain the validity of his misgivings through a ritual involving the local priest. He was to bring her to the man of God who would then put some holy water in a jar and add to it some dust from the tabernacle floor. Putting the woman under oath, he would pronounce a curse upon the accused if it should in fact be true that she was unfaithful. Making her drink the bitter water he concocted, he would invoke the wrath of God upon her asking that the water cause her belly to swell and her thigh to rot so that she would become an object of scorn among the people.⁸⁷

A terrible ordeal for anyone to go through, it seems that what has been known as the "Law of Jealousy" only applied to men with suspicions about their wives and not the

⁸⁷ Numbers 5:11-31

other way around. Of course we would expect this in a patriarchal society, for the woman always gets the short end of the stick and carries the brunt of inequality. Nonetheless we understand a more spiritual significance to the suffering of the woman while the man gets off easy, for it is necessary for God to prove the soul (the female) through testing to bring it to himself. The negative nature of man must be tried so that it can be eliminated or sublimated into the positive.

Through trouble and pain, the soul is enabled to make its transformation, and we see this illustrated through the bitter water that the wife was commanded to drink. Not ordinary drinking water, but water mixed with dirt was the woman bidden to consume, and we may interpret this dust sprinkled into her cup as the negative experiences of earth life that we all must partake of. The bitterness of life then becomes the catalyst to rid ourselves of the imperfect and malformed fruit that we have conceived in our waywardness. (The woman suffers the curse of miscarriage whereby her “abdomen swells and her thigh is made to rot.”) After being cleansed from her impurity, she will again have opportunity to bring forth something of value within herself

A final illustration of the redemptive value of suffering comes to us from the Book of Judges in what is perhaps an admittedly obscure and esoteric passage. The narrative once again involves Jephthah in the aftermath of his victory over the Ammonites. It turned out that the Ephraimites who lived west of the Jordan in the land of Canaan with the majority of the tribes felt slighted that Jephthah didn’t call to them for help in his conflict with the children of Ammon. Indignant, they marched across the river to fight him and his clan known as the Gileadites (of the tribe of Manasseh.) Having no choice but to engage them in battle, Jephthah routed his fellow Israelites, striking them down in combat. Though there were survivors among the Ephraimites who attempted to escape back across the Jordan, the Gileadites made this impossible by capturing the fords of the river. Standing guard at the Jordan’s banks, they carefully interrogated anyone who desired to enter into Canaan intent on seizing whatever Ephraimite survivors that were left. To distinguish those native to the east of Jordan from those native to the west of Jordan, the Gileadites asked the prospective traveler to pronounce a particular Hebrew term. For the Gileadites, the word “Shibboleth” would serve as an adequate litmus test to identify those warring Ephraimites who were trying to get back home undetected. They knew that the residents of Canaan were unable to pronounce the word the same as the Eastern tribes, for the westerners could only utter the term with a hard “s” sound to say “Sibboleth.” In this way the Gileadites apprehended and killed all those who could not make the soft “sh” sound assuming them to be of the tribe of Ephraim.⁸⁸

At various points in history, natives of different countries have sought to identify and expunge from their land those who were suspected to be spies or undesired foreigners by forcing them to pronounce a word or phrase that only an indigenous person could say correctly. The test of the Gileadites was just one such presumably definitive means of positively revealing one’s enemies, but of the many historical examples that we can cite, the biblical one was seemingly the most trivial. It boiled down to the difference of just a single letter which was enough to seal the fate of any passerby who couldn’t verbalize it.

⁸⁸ Judges 12:1-7

Since we are approaching this passage from an allegorical perspective, we must question what the significance of the letter “H” might be, for that was the letter that determined if the traveler lived or died on his way across the Jordan. A consideration of the Hebrew language may be useful at this point, for like many languages it is gender specific. Unlike English which assigns no such delineation to any of its words, many foreign tongues associate terms with masculine, feminine, or neuter genders. And in Hebrew even the letters themselves can carry such a significance. The English equivalent of our letter “H” is known as “He” in Hebrew. Frequently found at the end of a woman’s name (e.g., Susannah, Delilah, Sarah) it is generally regarded as a feminine letter among mystical writers. With that in mind, we may see it as symbolizing the feminine or emotional nature of man (in contrast to the masculine or intellectual nature.)

Those wayfarers who could vocalize the “H” may be said to represent the soul that has mastered its emotional nature so that it is no longer controlled by its own unrestrained passions and impulses. These have conquered base feelings of anger, jealousy, and lust which no longer steer their direction in life. Having learned to fully constrain the emotions that tend to flare up and get out of hand, such souls have come to the level of human perfection and are therefore worthy of life (eternal life.) And in our story, the “shibboleth” speakers were entitled to pass over unscathed into Canaan (the Promised Land.)

On the other hand, those who could only utter “shibboleth” symbolize souls who have not yet learned to bridle their feelings and are consequently driven into all sorts of sins through their unchecked sensibilities. In the account it is such characters who still must tread the path of suffering and indeed they are slain for their inability to demonstrate mastery over the emotional nature. In reality it is the harsh experiences of life that teach a person to control their feelings and ultimately sublimate them into something spiritual. For young souls, it is natural to throw fits when they don’t get their way or to carry on like a child when things don’t go as desired. After all, the animal nature in us is used to doing as it pleases without any form of restraint. For one to begin learning to check his feelings, certain negative stimuli need to provide him feedback, and sometimes it may be simply the experience of embarrassment while carrying on in a public place that teaches him that it is in his best interest to at least hide his emotions. And concealment of emotion is the first step toward acquiring control of our feelings to which we have long been enslaved. Through time and experience the soul will eventually learn to rule over its emotions rather than the other way around, and then it will embody the fullness of the letter “H.”

We have examined suffering as one important aspect of the redemption of the soul, but it is only one of several factors involved in the perfection of man as he journeys through the land of the living. While in one sense the role of pain is a passive one to steer a human being toward God, we cannot forget that the salvation of man is also in large part dependent on his work in actively drawing near to God. The soul must become spiritually ambitious and labor hard to acquire knowledge of God and his ways as well as tap into his divine power supply if it is to achieve sanctity. Several Old Testament stories

illustrate the work of the woman (soul) as she aspires toward the heavenlies. We begin with one from the Book of Judges that involves the family of Caleb, one of God's most faithful servants to enter the Promised Land.

At the time when Israel was cutting down the Canaanites and subduing the territory that was divinely appointed to them, the tribe of Judah was launching a campaign in the hill country in the south of Palestine. Caleb who was a military leader among the people of Judah set his eyes on the city of Debir (which was formerly known as Kiriath Sepher.) Trying to offer a little incentive to conquer the city, Caleb offered the hand of his daughter Acsah in marriage to the man who attacked and captured Kiriath Sepher. (More or less he was stating that the conquest of the city would be the bride price for his beloved daughter.) As it turned out, Caleb's own nephew Othniel rose to the occasion and received Acsah as his wife.

One day, Othniel urged his wife to ask her father for a field, and complying with his request she rode on her donkey to meet Caleb. When she arrived and dismounted the beast, Caleb asked what he could do for her. And bidding her father to do her a special favor, she said, "Since you have given me land in the Negev, give me also springs of water." Then Caleb acquiesced to her request and gave her the upper and lower springs.⁸⁹

More than just a historical narrative about the conquest of the Promised Land, this passage offers us some insight into the work of the soul (woman) toward its own salvation. Through both the Hebrew meanings of people and place names as well as the basic flow of the story we can infer such information embedded in the account. That the woman is cast as a protagonist in this small excerpt from the Book of Judges is certainly apparent through the details of what she has done, but it is even more evident when we consider that her name translates as "anklet, amulet, or serpent-charmer." We are made aware from her name that this woman represents the soul in a stage where it is actively subduing the temptation to evil (embodied by the serpent.) Long has the Evil One led it down the road of self-indulgence and chasing after possessions, but now it has gained wisdom from the folly of that path and in effect has learned to charm the serpent (become immune to its deceptions.)

It is at this juncture in its development that it becomes wholly devoted to the pursuit of God which we glean from the city of interest in the story. Kiriath Sepher translates as "city of a book" and represents the soul's quest for divine knowledge and understanding. It is the place where man receives learning and instruction in the things of God. From the new name of the city Debir we also surmise this idea, for the Hebrew is interpreted as "innermost part of the shrine, the place of an oracle." It is akin to the root word *debar* which means "words or speech" and so it is linked with the ancient position of oracle (one who acted as a medium for the words of God.) In this way, the woman in her search for God comes to know him in an intimate way so that she eventually learns to hear his voice in the inner sanctuary of her heart.

⁸⁹ Joshua 15:13-19; Judges 1:11-15

Through her learning, she comes to realize that she is in great need of the empowering life-force of God to sustain her. Her whole existence has been a spiritual desert (the arid hill country of Judah known as the Negev.) She reaches out for water which for the Middle Easterner was a symbol of divine life and refreshment, and it is given to her to aid her on her journey. There she is wedded to Othniel (“the force of God”) which cloaks her with divine power.

The work of the woman (symbolizing the efforts of the soul toward holiness) is depicted in another account just a few chapters following the story of Acsah and Othniel. At one point in its history, when Israel had done evil in the eyes of God, she was oppressed by a Canaanite king named Jabin. After twenty years of cruel treatment at the hands of this ruler, the people cried out to God for deliverance and he heard their petition. Raising up an army of ten thousand men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, Barak the leader of the Israelite forces routed Jabin’s forces. Every man was put to sword save Sisera the commander of Jabin’s army. He managed to escape fleeing on foot to the tent of a woman named Jael.

As there were friendly relations between Jabin and the Kenites, the tribe to which Jael’s husband belonged, Sisera must have considered that her tent would provide ideal asylum for him. Hoping to hide in her abode, Sisera was immediately welcomed by Jael, and when he asked for water, she did a little better and gave him curdled milk to drink. Her hospitality for the soldier up until this point was in traditional Middle Eastern fashion, but when Sisera lay down to sleep things turned from congenial to deadly, for Jael took a tent peg and drove it into his temple so that he died. Though we aren’t told in the narrative, it seems likely that Jael was an Israelite or at least an Israelite sympathizer who feigned a warm welcome until she could destroy the enemy of her people. Needless to say, the woman became a heroine of Israel, praised among the Twelve Tribes for killing its chief enemy.⁹⁰

After the great victory over Jabin, Deborah the judge penned a celebration song about the vanquishing of Israel’s oppressor. And she duly crafted a few verses to remember Jael for her efforts on behalf of Israel. Although it should be said that her praise of Jael was made in contrast to her disdain for another party who failed to assist in the battle for freedom. Deborah wrote, “Curse Meroz ... because they did not come to help the Lord, to help the Lord against the mighty.” The reference here is to the town of Meroz in the land of Naphtali, a people who refused to help in the campaign against Jabin. Of symbolic interest is the meaning of this locale’s name which translates as “shrinking, secret place, retreat.” The village’s inaction underscores the spiritual principle of growth and increase. That is, we must make use of those skills and abilities that we already possess and in time we will accrue more. But if we fail to do anything with what we have, what we possess will shrink away and be taken from us. (Matt. 25:14-30) There is no neutrality in the spiritual life.

After cursing Meroz for its lethargy, Deborah introduces Jael as “most blessed of women” for her industrious efforts. And indeed from a symbolic perspective we see this

⁹⁰ Judges 4; Judges 5:23-27

heroine that way, for she represents the soul on the path of redemption. The name Jael is Hebrew for “mountain goat” with associated root word implying “ascending, climbing.” In this way, the woman embodies one who is actively on the upward path toward God. She illustrates this in several ways though principally through the execution of Sisera. As the enemy of the Twelve Tribes, he symbolized the carnal mind in opposition to the spiritual (people of Israel.) Driving a tent peg through his skull, Jael depicted the destruction of the mind controlled by the lower nature, while in the body (tent) of physical man.

Deborah celebrates the heroine writing, “Her hand reached for the tent peg, her right hand for the workman’s hammer,” and in so doing reminds us how the person making spiritual progress must work assiduously to enter the kingdom of heaven. The soul must labor and give more than is requested at times if it is to advance, and we see this portrayed in how Jael gave curdled milk to Sisera rather than the water he asked for. She gave something of substance that she had to manufacture herself, for we understand the curdled milk to be the traditional Middle Eastern yoghurt, the same Hebrew word for butter which is of course obtained by constant churning and labor to bring forth the richest part of the milk.

Our story of the soul’s redemption continues in the figure of Ruth the Moabitess who exemplified hard work and selfless service which ultimately did not go unrewarded. After she was widowed when her Israelite husband died, she elected to depart from her own home country and follow her mother-in-law Naomi back west of the Jordan to the ancestral hometown of her late husband. Apparently coming with nothing (which is to reflect the spiritual substance of the soul early in its journey,) the foreigner purposed to gather food for both her and her mother-in-law. Following the tradition of the poor in Israel, Ruth set out to work in the fields gleaning barley from the sheaves the harvesters left behind. Asking permission of one landowner she tediously labored all day to collect more than half a bushel of grain.

But while at her task, she was noticed by Boaz the property owner who observed her diligence and looked on her with favor after learning of the kindness she showed her mother-in-law in following her back to Israel. He invited her to join him and the workers at mealtime and asked her to continue to glean in his fields until the men finished the harvest. So she stayed on with him for some days. But Naomi recognizing Boaz as one of her close kin who could potentially redeem her family property and take the widowed Ruth as his wife suggested that her daughter-in-law make a bold move.⁹¹

She bid Ruth to go sleep out in the fields one evening where the harvesters were spending the night and instructed her to lay down at the place where Boaz was lying and uncover his feet. And Ruth heeded the advice of her mother-in-law and completed what may seem to us a strange gesture. But in this culture, laying bare the man’s feet was a request that he should offer redemption for Naomi and her family which among other things included taking Ruth as his wife. And as it turns out, the faithful daughter-in-law was well received by Boaz who immediately understood her proposition and praised her for yet another act of kindness toward the welfare of her mother-in-law. Promising her to do

⁹¹ Ruth 1-2

as she requested, he loaded her shawl with six measures of barley to take home to Naomi, and the next day he proceeded to buy her family property and marry Ruth. And from this unexpected union came forth one of the greatest kings of Israel, for Ruth would go on to become the great-grandmother of David.⁹²

What can we infer from this favorite short story from the Old Testament scriptures? Certainly we can read plainly that selfless devotion will in due course bring its own recompense, if not in this life, then in the next. But in this narrative we also see prominently illustrated the male and female polarities at play. Ruth representing the soul communicates to us the efforts of a person seeking to make progress in the things of God. After man suffers hard afflictions and tribulations in life, his prideful self-reliance is broken down, and he is led to depend on his Creator. A great blow to his ego-self, he learns to cast aside the vice of pride and replace it with the virtue of humility or what we might also call being “poor in spirit.” (Ruth became a “poor” migrant worker in the land of Israel after leaving her home country.) It is when one recognizes his lowliness and utter need for God, he will be willing to abandon self-interest and desire to work for God, and this idea is represented by Ruth’s service to another, namely her mother-in-law.

Her assiduous labor drew the attention of the farmer Boaz (the spiritual male figure) who gave her a warm welcome. This is to say that our earnest efforts for God will precipitate the growth of the spiritual nature within us. Our strivings toward holiness will be met by an infusion of spiritual power to help us on our way. The soul’s deep interest in the things of God spurs it to make bold moves to acquire spiritual knowledge. We see this depicted in Ruth’s gesture to lay bare the feet of Boaz, for allegorically this action is equivalent to the soul attempting to “uncover” spiritual wisdom which is often made available to it in the time of trails and tribulations (during the night.) Ruth’s maneuver didn’t go unnoticed, for Boaz was well pleased with her request and gave her a large portion of barley to take home with her. We gather from this that man’s genuine petition for the knowledge of God doesn’t go unheeded, for he will be given spiritual substance (barley) to the extent that he can receive it at the time.

It is interesting that we are told that Boaz gave Ruth six measures of barley, and of course we can glean all sorts of numerological significances for a number like this. In recognition of Ruth’s relation to the famous king of Israel, some have seen the number as an allusion to the six points of the Star of David which can be relevant to this discussion. This emblem of Israel is constructed by superimposing two triangles upon each other, one pointing up and one pointing down. We can see this as signifying the meeting of the divine and the human as portrayed in the union of Boaz (the spiritual) and Ruth (the aspiring soul.)

We now turn to another example of the work and ambition of a woman a little further on in the Old Testament. In the days of the divided nation, when Israel was broken into a Northern and Southern kingdom, there lived a woman in the town of Shunem in the territory of Issachar who took a liking to Elisha the great prophet of God. Whenever he was in the area, she had him over for a meal for she highly revered him as a holy man of

⁹² Ruth 3-4

God. As he came by frequently she decided to make a room for him upstairs where he could spend the night whenever he came through town.

Wishing to repay her for her kindness and hospitality, Elisha sought something he could do for her, and learning that she had no child, he promised her that in a year she would hold a son in her arms. And according to the words of the prophet it came to pass. In the course of time the child grew, and it seems that as young boy he unexpectedly suffered what sounds like a brain hemorrhage from the tone of the passage. We are told the boy died, and his mother brought him upstairs and laid him on the bed of the man of God.

Making haste, she saddled up a donkey and began a search for the prophet. When she came to Mount Carmel, Elisha saw her in the distance and sent his servant Gehazi to intercept her and find out what was wrong. The woman told Gehazi that all was well and kept riding until she met the man of God face to face at which point she took hold of his feet. Telling him what had happened to her son, Elisha sent his servant to try to help the boy, but the woman vowed that she would not leave the prophet. When Gehazi returned unsuccessful, Elisha came to the house himself and stretching himself out on the boy's dead body, he performed a great miracle and raised him from the dead.⁹³

As with the other passages we have examined, we can infer similar allegorical ideas from this story of a woman who befriended a prophet. As both a man of God and a male figure, he clearly symbolizes the spiritual which the woman (the soul) takes an interest in. With determination to show hospitality to the prophet, the woman sets aside a room in her attic for the man to use when he comes to visit her. And we infer from this that the soul with aspirations toward the things of God will make a place in its life (room in her house) for the spiritual to grow and be cultivated. She sets aside a place upstairs for the man to stay which underscores that the one serious about the pursuit of God will make the quest for the divine his "highest" priority in life. And it is this upper room which is also the highest elevation in the house and by implication closest to heavenly things.

Wishing to reciprocate her kindness toward him, the prophet gave her a son of her own. And we can deduce from this part of the story that when the soul makes room for spiritual things in her life, they will in due course germinate within her and fill her abode. Of importance is the fact that the woman conceived a male child which of course signifies the growth of the spiritual within a person who dedicates his life to hunting for the divine.

When the woman was in distress because of calamity in her life, she didn't despair but set her eyes on the man who gave her the beloved child in the first place. So the soul must learn to put its faith in God who fills it with good things. The woman took her dead son and laid him upstairs on the bed of the man of God which communicates to us that we must take what is broken in our lives and raise it up to the Almighty who alone can help us. Setting out in pursuit of the prophet, the woman refused to even speak to his servant on the way which illustrates the soul's determination to make contact with the divine in which alone she places her faith. As she presses forward to find him, she ultimately

⁹³ 2 Kings 4:8-37

comes to locate him on the mountain (the high place representing spiritual reality) which is called Carmel (“fruitful and plentiful field.”) It is there that she partakes of the richness of the spiritual life that is waiting for the soul chasing after God.

The necessity of the soul’s labor toward its own salvation is a spiritual concept that can be found in various accounts of the scriptures, and we conclude our survey of the “work of the woman” with another short passage from the life of Moses. After living in the land of Midian for forty years since fleeing Egypt, Moses received an instruction from God to go back to the country of his birth and lead the Israelites out of slavery. After receiving this commission, the prophet said good-bye to his father-in-law Jethro and took his wife Zipporah and two sons with him to make the journey back to the heart of Egypt. As it wasn’t an overnight trip, the family had occasion to spend the night in different lodges along the way. We are told that in one particular inn that they were staying at, “the Lord met Moses and was about to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son’s foreskin, and touched his feet (genitals) with it. ‘Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me,’ she said. So the Lord let him alone. (At that time she said “bridegroom of blood,” referring to circumcision.”)⁹⁴

Biblical stories often have the element of the supernatural in them, and this little one is no exception, but even the seasoned student of the scriptures will find this vignette a bit bizarre, for it raises a number of questions. Of course it is possible that God might have appeared to Moses in what we might call a theophany or pre-incarnation visit, but the circumstances of such a potential encounter in this case may leave us scratching our heads a little. Why would God want to kill Moses after just having asked the prophet to go on an important mission to Egypt? If he wanted him dead, why didn’t he just do so in the wilderness of Midian rather than attempting to waylay him like a common criminal in some inn en route to Egypt? We are told that God sought to kill him, but clearly if he had really wished to do so, the Almighty would have succeeded.

The details of the narrative seem to reflect less the behavior of a Deity and more the conduct of just another capricious and hot-tempered mortal. And it seems likely that through the centuries this short passage got a little “lost in the translation” concerning the antagonist. Assuming that it was just an ordinary man who confronted Moses at the lodge, we nevertheless have to consider his identity and his complaint to make a little sense of the story. It would appear that the attacker was not merely a common thief who sought to rob the family and knock them off but the flow of the text implies that the assailant was more along the lines of a religious zealot. Perhaps having heard that Moses received a great vision from God, the would-be killer was greatly incensed that the alleged prophet had not even bothered to circumcise his own son. The man was in all likelihood a Semite himself who was very familiar with the Covenant of Abraham, and revering it highly he considered it his duty to rid the world of another false prophet who couldn’t even take the time to meet this most basic requirement of God’s contract with the Jewish forebear. After Zipporah acted quickly to remedy the situation and circumcise the boy, the anger of the antagonist was mollified and the threats were withdrawn.

⁹⁴ Exodus 4:18-26

Though it would seem unlikely that God himself really visited the inn on that eventful night, it appears as if in Divine Providence, he has remained as a main character in the story, for the allegorical implications are strong reading the account in this way. What we have presented to us is yet again another example of the work of the woman (soul) in her own redemption. In this case we see how the labor of the female has the effect of turning away divine wrath, and that is exactly the case in the life of every person on the road to sanctity. Toward the beginning of our spiritual journey we are often mired by many sins and the face of God is obscured from us. We feel that we are under a burden of judgment and the weight of iniquity, and indeed this is true. Very distant from God, we are led to begin drawing near to him through affliction by which we learn many lessons and pay off our debts to God.

Although it is not just through passive suffering that debts are settled but through more active means that the soul is purified. Our sins are also atoned for by our acts of sacrifice and our deeds of service to God and neighbor, and that is what the woman in this narrative communicates to us. Zipporah which means “bird” in Hebrew symbolizes one who has taken spiritual “wings” to soar into the heavenlies in pursuit of God. She, the aspiring soul is willing to work, looking for opportunities to help remedy problems and in so doing she mitigates the anger of God. Through suffering, sacrifice, and service, the soul becomes purified, and in that process what it once saw as a hostile and unfriendly Deity becomes a kind and loving God. And that long road of purification requires the “shedding of blood” as the story intimates.

In the immediate context of the story, this idea is conveyed to us through Zipporah’s words to her husband. “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me,” she said, and her allusion was at least in part pertaining to how she touched Moses’ genitals with the bloody circumcised foreskin of her son. But “bridegroom of blood” specifically has relevance to the wedding night in which the purity (virginity) of the bride is evidenced by the soiling of the bed (and the groom) with her blood. In the ancient world, producing the blood stained sheets the next morning was an important token of the girl’s fidelity, and it became a prized keepsake for her parents. And in our little vignette, that Zipporah symbolizes the soul on the path to holiness is supported by the purity of the bride she refers to.

But the shedding of blood as a metaphor for the soul’s purification has deeper overtones than this. We will recall that for the ancients, blood was equated with life because of the conception that babies formed from a woman’s menstrual blood. Even after it was understood that this was not the case, the ancient idea had already forged itself as a permanent symbol in various cultures, so that even the scriptures of male-biased Judaism could say, “the life of a creature is in the blood.” For this reason the whole sacrificial system of our forebears was centered around blood, for it seemed to them the best gift they could offer to their deity in seeking divine favor or in making reparation for wrong doing.

And while this is true, there is perhaps another nuance to the value of shedding blood, especially as depicted in the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophet Ezekiel tells an allegory of

the nation of Israel as if represented by a neglected child that God adopted and took as his own. Although the baby that he found was not a cute and lovable little tyke as we might expect but a rather loathsome creature that the Almighty took pity on. The prophet speaking for God said, “And when I passed by you, and saw you polluted in your own blood, I said to you when you were in your blood, ‘Live!’ ... Then I washed you with water; yes, I thoroughly washed away your blood from you and anointed you with oil.”⁹⁵

There is expressed in this passage the idea that the life force of a human being is not necessarily pure and vibrant but can be contaminated with impurities, namely the spiritual impurity of sins. After he had committed adultery and murdered a man, a repentant King David cried out to God, “Deliver me from bloodguiltiness” as if he recognized the very life fluid within his veins was tainted.⁹⁶ And God seems to reinforce the idea that toxic blood needs to be purified, for he says through the prophet Joel, “I will cleanse their blood which I have not cleansed.”⁹⁷ Indeed on a symbolic level, the purification of the soul is in some way connected with ridding the body of bad blood and again this concept can be tied back to the identity of the woman (soul) whose ebb and flow of life is intimately connected with blood.

Month after month and year after year, the adult woman releases blood from her body in the process of menstruation. If no pregnancy begins, soon after ovulation the uterine lining breaks down and flushes out of the body, both blood and tissue together. Among mammals this body cycle is rare, and it is almost correct to say that it is unique to the human female. Though it is not clearly understood why our species has evolved to require this unpleasant monthly experience, some experts suggest that it is a healthy cleansing of the uterus to expel micro-organisms that have gained entrance and taken up residence during the prior cycle. By this means infections are purged from the body and the immune system’s integrity is preserved, and this seems to be supported by the observation that menstrual blood contains an unusually large concentration of macrophages (immune cells) as if fighting off a bacterial attack.

We could then rightfully say that menstruation is a cleansing of bad blood, toxic blood laden with infection or other impurities within the body. Along with the pain, cramping, and other ills associated with this monthly ritual, menstrual bloodletting is an experience of suffering which rightly characterizes the purification of the soul which we have been exploring. Ridding herself of contaminated blood, the woman symbolizes the one who is working toward holiness and is becoming acceptable to God, for it is through the shedding of blood that there is forgiveness of sins according to the Apostle Paul and by extension, the turning away of divine wrath.⁹⁸ In fact it is through this metaphorical bloodletting that man can obtain peace with God.

That the shedding of blood (spiritual purification) leads the woman to health and wholeness (holiness) can be seen in some biblical anecdotes particularly one from the

⁹⁵ Ezekiel 16:1-9

⁹⁶ Psalm 51:14

⁹⁷ Joel 3:21

⁹⁸ Hebrews 9:22

gospels which we now consider. We are told that when a large crowd of people was pressing against Jesus, a woman was present who had been suffering for twelve years (a special number for the Jews and other religions.) She had a bleeding disorder for which she saw many physicians but to no avail, and though it is unclear if she was afflicted with vaginal bleeding or some other disease like hemophilia, she not only suffered physically but also socially, for her bodily discharges rendered her unclean to the community. But seeing a chance to be made well again, she exercised a little faith and taking the hem of Jesus' garment in her hands, she was instantly fully restored.⁹⁹

What the story conveys to us in broad terms is that the cleansing of the soul is a process taking many years. During the time of its purification it suffers in a variety of ways including of course physical pain but also emotional and spiritual pain, all which are designed to lead it to salvation. In the story, the course of the woman's issue of blood was twelve years which represents a certain totality and completion of the soul's program of refinement. In numerology the number can be linked to various ideas, but for our purposes we consider that it is the product of 3 (the divine number) and 4 (the number of earth.) In this way the purging of one's spiritual impurities is completed when at last union between heaven and earth is achieved, when man reaches the standard of human perfection.

And this culmination of the cleansing of the soul results in bringing forth the fullness of its spiritual nature, a concept that is also portrayed in the life of a woman. Certainly her body is cleansed of noxious substances and impurities during her period, but this is not only for the sake of her own health but perhaps more importantly it is also to prepare for pregnancy and childbirth. The monthly shedding of the uterine lining and subsequent rebuilding is to keep the uterus fresh and nourishing and free of pathogens for any potential pregnancy. The womb must be sanctified before conception takes place and new life begins.

But after cleansing is complete, naturally a woman can conceive a child of either gender, but in keeping with our theme, we focus on the male child that grows within her. This was the emphasis of the prophet Jeremiah who spoke of the relationship of the rebellious nation of Israel with God. Though she had been wayward for many years, the prophet foretold, "The Lord will create a new thing on earth – a woman will surround a man."¹⁰⁰ In other words, the sinful nation depicted as an unfaithful woman would turn from her evil ways and once again embrace a man (God.) While this is perhaps the immediate meaning of the passage, we can glean another nuance to Jeremiah's prediction. A new thing will happen in the soul (woman) when it conceives spiritual life (surrounds a man) within it. When the soul is purged and learns to submit itself to God, it will become pregnant with spiritual life fully encapsulating it within its "womb."

The soul endures a lengthy pilgrimage of pain and suffering on the way to wholeness, and if it perseveres to the end of its calling, it will bring forth the fullness of the spiritual life within itself. Like a woman who must struggle through the throes of childbirth, so too

⁹⁹ Mark 5:24-34

¹⁰⁰ Jeremiah 31:22

must a person striving for the spiritual life fight hard until it is achieved. It does this with the anticipation of the great reward of joy it will receive if it keeps pushing onward to the goal much like the woman whose new born child causes her to forget the pain that she just endured.

In the end, the female gives birth to the male. The soul brings forth the spiritual self, and the redemption of the lower nature is complete with its complete sublimation to the higher. In the words of the Apostle Paul to Timothy, “a woman will be saved through childbearing – if she continues in faith, love, and holiness.”¹⁰¹ Indeed every soul will be saved when it brings forth the fullness of the spiritual nature within it. Such is the mystery of creation; for though the “first woman” was taken from man, every man is born of a woman in an endless cycle to the end of the world, a living testimony to a profound spiritual reality.

This theme is not just one that we infer from the evidence of nature but one that is firmly rooted in the story of the scriptures, for throughout the bible there is a continuous strain of special childbirths stretching from Genesis all the way to the gospels. Collectively they fall under the category of miraculous events affecting a number of women spanning the pages of the Old and New Testaments. Each represents the story of a woman who was barren or sterile and unable to conceive, but after crying out and yielding herself to the will of God she bears a male child, and no ordinary one at that.

Beginning with Sarah, Abraham’s wife, we have a woman who was old and barren for many years who miraculously conceived Isaac the progenitor of the Jewish nation at 90 years of age.¹⁰² Later Rachel the wife of Jacob was full of shame that she could not bear a child for her husband, and after crying out in desperation, “Give me children, or I’ll die,” the Lord opened her womb and she brought forth the mighty Joseph of Egyptian fame.¹⁰³ We also consider a woman in the time of the Judges who was sterile and couldn’t conceive and received a visitation from an angel announcing that she would bear a son. The boy was to be an especially dedicated child, a Nazirite that we know as Samson.¹⁰⁴ Then we remember Hannah who was one of two wives to a certain Israelite man. Because she could not bear any children, she was constantly provoked by the other wife who could. In the course of time, Hannah cried out to God promising to give him the fruit of her womb if she should only be granted a child, and he heard her cry giving her the holy prophet Samuel.¹⁰⁵ Moving into the time of the Divided Kingdom, we recall the story of Elisha and the woman of Shunnam who was unable to conceive a child. As a special gift to the righteous woman, a son was given to her who was later miraculously raised from the dead.¹⁰⁶ Coming to the New Testament, we encounter Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah the priest. She too was barren and advanced in years, and after her husband received a vision while serving in the temple, she conceived John the Baptist. The

¹⁰¹ 1 Timothy 2:15

¹⁰² Genesis 21:1-2

¹⁰³ Genesis 30:1,22-24

¹⁰⁴ Judges 13:2-3

¹⁰⁵ 1 Samuel 1:1-20

¹⁰⁶ 2 Kings 4:8-17

greatest man born of woman, he was the cousin and forerunner of Jesus Christ who paved the way for the Messiah.¹⁰⁷ Of course this naturally leads us to Mary who as a virgin supernaturally gave birth to her Divine Son, the greatest of all the aforementioned examples.¹⁰⁸

What do all of these short sketches communicate to us? More than just an ordinary woman giving birth to a son, each has an emphasis on the miraculous. In other words, the conception of the male child was beyond natural means which points to the fact that the soul's transformation into something of spiritual value is something that happens with divine assistance and is outside of any normal physical process. Additionally we also observe that in all of these cases that the child born has a substantial similarity to Christ. All to varying degrees serve as types of the Messiah which further underscores that the offspring of the women represent the Divine Self that must germinate within the soul. But we also note that all of the women and children are not of the same stature. Rather there is a progression from the women in Genesis to the women in the gospels with those in the latter embodying exemplary holiness and bringing forth the greatest of men, even the Son of God himself. In this way the pages of the bible unfold the development of the soul (woman) in its journey to perfection which is not realized until we come to the end of the saga.

From beginning to end, the scriptures trace the progression of the woman as she evolves along her spiritual journey, putting aside self love and selfishness and replacing it with divine love and submission to the will of God. It is the pilgrimage of every soul as it travels from the Old Testament into the New and from Genesis to Revelation. And it is the transformation from the disobedient Eve to the faithful Mary as so many doctors of the Church have recognized.

Eve of course represents the soul of man very early in its development when it has accumulated very little life experience and has no "knowledge of good and evil." Because it is naïve, it is very easily deceived by the Evil One who can lead it along a path of pleasure and materialism without much difficulty. Thirsty for the knowledge that comes from partaking of the tree's fruit, the young soul jumps headlong into the world which fascinates it, and so it embarks on a trail that though dotted with pleasant things will also have its fair share of sorrows and grief. Along this path it will learn much about its existence, eventually rejecting the way of the world and seeking after its Creator. It is then that the soul takes on the identity of Mary, the handmaid and servant of God intent on obeying his every command.

The one who we regard as the perfected soul of course only arrived at that blessed state through great agony and travail as indeed we have learned through the story of the woman. Mary coming from the Hebrew Miriam stems from the root word *mar* meaning "bitter, myrrh." And so it is that the one who has become wise in the things of God and acquired knowledge of good and evil has indeed passed through troubled water and had its share of heartache and pain to bear. The Mother of the Lord certainly had her fair

¹⁰⁷ Luke 1:5-25

¹⁰⁸ Like 1:26-38

share of anguish, and we must remember the words of Simeon who meeting the Holy Family in the temple at the dedication of Jesus told her that “a sword would pierce her heart.”¹⁰⁹ His allusion of course was to the death of Christ many years to come. The loss of a child is always the source of profound grief to a parent, and how much more so for Mary in the murder of her Divine Son!

In our years of ignorance to the ways of God early in our journey of life, we unfortunately rack up many sins and accrue great debts to God that we only later learn need to be worked off. When we come to spiritual maturity, we realize that we have to labor hard to pay for the misdeeds we committed in our vanity and pride of life. In effect we must pay for our transgressions and opportunities will be given to us to do so naturally through suffering but later in our development through the more important paths of sacrifice and service to God. Particularly through the good we achieve by the latter, we reverse the damage that we caused to ourselves and others through our waywardness. The teachers of the Church have appropriately said, “Mary undid the knot that Eve tied,” and in fact on the allegorical level this is very true, for through the obedience and submission of the soul to God, it neutralizes the effects of the disobedience that had entangled it earlier its existence.

Ultimately the one who has been treading the path of perfection comes to victory, having mastered the experiences of life and learned all the lessons that this world can possibly teach it. That this outcome is assured for all is promised very early on in the story of Genesis. There the woman (soul) after being deceived by the serpent (the Evil One) for the first time receives a special consolation that she should not always be his victim. Speaking to the serpent directly, God said, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and your seed and her seed: she will crush your head, and you will bruise her heel.”¹¹⁰

What should we understand from this interesting verse? In the first part of the statement we are clued in to the fact that there will be a constant battle between the woman and the serpent. But though this conflict should last a very long time, in the end, the woman (the soul of man) will triumph. She will finally “crush the serpent’s head” which is to say that the Evil One’s ability to deceive will be destroyed. Not that he should be rendered completely powerless by her conquest as far as the whole world is concerned; rather with respect to the individual victorious soul he becomes ineffective in all further attempts to lead astray. This is because at the end of the earthly journey, it has acquired full knowledge of good and evil as far as physical existence is concerned, and having mastered life’s lessons, the soul can no longer be duped to go down a road it already knows leads to destruction.

Though victory is assured for the woman in her epic battle, of course this does not mean that she goes through the war unscathed, for we are told that “the serpent will bruise her heel.” Symbolically we can interpret the heel as the lowest and weakest point in the body, and by implication, in terms of the soul’s anatomy it refers to the lower aspects of

¹⁰⁹ Luke 2:33-35

¹¹⁰ Genesis 3:15, Douay-Rheims Version

our human nature (i.e. the Lower Self) that must be sublimated before we can achieve perfection.

We shouldn't be surprised to know that in traditional religious art, it is Mary "the New Eve" (or alternatively the perfected Eve) who is depicted with the imagery of Genesis in view. If one looks closely at a statue of the Blessed Virgin, he will usually see her portrayed as standing with her right foot on top of a snake. Naturally this is because the Church has long seen her as epitomizing the victory of the soul over its opponent, for Mary the perfected human soul was the only one worthy to bear the Divine Son of God within her womb.

It is this Mary that is often seen as embodying a victorious figure in the Book of Revelation which euphemistically for us represents the end of the soul's earthly sojourn. There she is depicted in glory "clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth."¹¹¹ Here she typifies the brilliance of the perfected soul which has come to the fullness of her spirituality signified by the Hebrews favorite number 12. Ready to give birth to the divine male child, she symbolizes the one who has brought forth the "positive" in her life excluding all negative aspects from her being.

It is certainly interesting that at the end of the Book of Revelation which predicts the final victory of man we have another scene with a garden setting including trees and a river similar to what is described in the opening chapters of Genesis. But whereas in the Garden of Adam and Eve there were two trees,¹¹² in the final illustration of Revelation there is only just one.¹¹³ In the beginning we had a Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil along with a Tree of Life, but in the end only the Tree of Life is present. This is because the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil no longer has utility at the culmination of the biblical story, for the soul has gained all of the knowledge that that tree can impart. It is then that it can finally partake of the Tree of Life, the tree of spiritual life which it was certainly unwilling and unable to enjoy at the beginning of the journey.

At last, after a long pilgrimage toward spiritual things, one reaches human perfection. Although it is not a perfection as an end in itself. Rather that a person has attained this goal of sanctity is an achievement driven by a very deep and innate desire, an insatiable longing for God himself. Man's whole life experience is designed to awaken him to this intrinsic need of the soul which especially in the early years of his earthly pilgrimage he is ignorant of. There is a vast chasm between man and God which by definition is the source of all discontent, struggle, and pain in life, for these undesirable conditions are by design the driving forces to propel the soul toward God where it can ultimately find the rest and complacency it yearns for. The restlessness that man feels his whole life can only be remedied by what the saints have long called a mystical union with God. It is not until the soul becomes joined to the One who made it that it can ever experience the deep

¹¹¹ Revelation 12:1-2

¹¹² Genesis 2:9

¹¹³ Revelation 22:2

peace that it longs for, and in the language of the saints we call this the mystical marriage between God and the soul.

In the Book of Revelation it is called the Wedding of the Lamb,¹¹⁴ the great marriage feast that symbolizes this soul union between the Creator and the created. The ultimate goal of mankind, this special bond between God and a soul can only be best described in human terms as the intimate relationship between a man and a wife. And if we can conceive of how close that feels, it is still but a poor representation of this blessed connection between man and the Almighty. Nonetheless the marriage motif runs throughout the bible to communicate to us the union we are called to, and it is especially evident in the Book of Revelation.

In the beginning of that work by the Apostle John, Jesus speaks to seven churches in Asia Minor critiquing each of them for their performance. To the church in Philadelphia he made several remarks and at the end of his message to it he offered an exhortation: “To the one who overcomes ... I will give my new name.”¹¹⁵ That is, the one who successfully perseveres through life and gains mastery over it will take on a new identity given to him by God. If we reflect on this we can see nuptial imagery that is part of our own Western tradition, for when a woman gets married she usually takes the name of her husband abandoning her own. In this cloaked language we can imagine the soul as the bride and God as the groom who bestows on his beloved his own name as if giving her a new identity. And indeed it is the case that when the soul abandons self-love and directs its affections entirely to God, it surrenders its own identity to its Creator who envelopes it in his own.

Jesus also gave a short discourse to the church in Pergamum, a message that also carries the imagery of a wedding in a veiled way. He said in similar fashion to the other church, “To him who overcomes ... I will give a white stone with a new name written on it.”¹¹⁶ If we stretch our minds a little bit, we can conceive of this white stone as a diamond ring which a man gives to his betrothed as a symbol of their soon to be union. Especially in the West, the diamond is the most popular and highly prized stones among many gems to choose from. Perhaps because it is white, we see it as the symbol of purity, and we are attracted to its special brilliance that stones of color do not have.

If we consider how the diamond comes to be, we will recognize it as a very appropriate gift for the soul on a symbolic level. Formed under great pressure, heat, and time within the earth, the diamond is transformed from ordinary carbon based minerals into a lattice of exquisite beauty. And in this we see mirrored the journey of a human being in this world who subjected to the great stresses of life is ultimately forged into a spiritual gem. Many of the qualities of the diamond reflect the perfected soul, for we understand that this precious stone is almost completely free of any impurities (cleansed of all sins) and is known to be one of the hardest materials known to man (resilient to the attacks of the Evil One.) This highly coveted gem is also characterized by many facets that cover its

¹¹⁴ Revelation 19:9

¹¹⁵ Revelation 3:11-13

¹¹⁶ Revelation 2:17

surface to illustrate that the one who has come to the wisdom of God has comprehended the many aspects of universal truth.

As a final illustration of the marriage motif between God and the soul, we consider one more biblical idea put forward by the Apostle Paul. In his epistle to the Corinthians, he compared stubborn unbelievers with those who are blinded as with a veil. He likened them to those who cannot comprehend the scriptures because this barrier is in the way. He says, “Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their (the Jews’) hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.”¹¹⁷

Remembering the deeply entrenched patriarchal society that Paul came from and for that matter dominated most of civilization going back many centuries before, we recall the tradition that demanded a woman to cover her face with a veil to shield her from public view. No one but her husband could see her without it, and in this we see our last spiritual message regarding the allegory of the sexes. When the soul (woman) finally comes in contact with the spiritual (her husband,) then the veil that had formerly clouded her other worldly vision is taken away and she sees what long obscured her sight.

¹¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

Chapter 2- Allegory of the Older and Younger

Cain and Abel

The conflict between physical and spiritual man is an age old idea and one that occupies many pages of the scriptures if not directly then in allegorical form. We have seen how the story of the soul has been illustrated through the opposing metaphors of male and female as they interact through various narratives of the Old Testament, and though the twin symbols of man and woman form a consistent thread in the Bible, they are but one of several different types of representations depicting the same concept. We now explore another pair of prominent devices as they weave their way particularly through the Pentateuch, and our focus begins with the classic story of Cain and Abel.¹¹⁸

Situated right after the tale of the Fall of Man, the account of the two brothers appears superficially as the chronicle of the first family with the effects of sin at play. We are told that Eve gave birth to Cain and sometime later to Abel. The older boy was a tiller of the soil, a farmer, while the younger was a shepherd or keeper of the flock. In the course of time, the brothers presented their offerings to God, and we are informed that Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil, while Abel rendered to God some of the choice animals of his flock.

We are not told the reason why, but the passage indicates that God was pleased with Abel's offering but did not look with favor on his brother's. God's sentiments were apparently communicated to the two of them, and as a result Cain became angry at the rejection of his sacrifice. Full of jealousy as well, he invited his brother to go out with him into a field, and while there Cain attacked and slew Abel, the first recorded fratricide in the Bible.

Though Cain seemingly sought to hide his evil deed from public view by committing it in a remote field, of course his action was not hidden from the sight of God who quickly reprimanded the older brother. Putting him under a curse such that Cain would be a fruitless farmer from that day forward, God also promised him that he would be a restless wanderer on the earth roaming to and fro. Complaining that his punishment was more than he could handle, Cain lamented, "Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."

But to Cain's objection, God assured the first murderer that his fears would not be realized, for whoever would attempt to kill the older brother would suffer divine vengeance seven times over. To identify Cain as his own object of divine justice, he put a mark on the man so that no one who found him would do him any harm, understanding him to be in the hands of God himself. After God branded Cain with some unspecified mark, the story goes on to say that Cain "went out from the Lord's presence and lived in

¹¹⁸ Genesis 4

the land of Nod, east of Eden.” In that region he found a wife and started a family of his own, but the conclusion of the narrative informs us that back in his homeland, his mother was also building a family again. Having given birth to a son named Seth, Eve received the child from God as a replacement for Abel whom Cain had slain.

So ends the story of the two brothers, and while on a literal level we can certainly derive some important lessons such as the dangers of anger and jealousy, we are nonetheless left with some difficult details to reconcile on a superficial level. Namely we must wonder how if Adam and Eve were the parents of all the living (only Cain and Abel at the time,) then from where did the people of the “land of Nod” originate, from whom Cain took a wife? But this logistical difficulty is not nearly as important as the theological problem of the brothers’ offerings. We have Abel presenting God with some lambs, a blood sacrifice and a meat offering to God which was looked upon with favor, while his brother Cain who gave to God a share of his vegetation was denounced.

While the narrative may well have stemmed from the time of the ancient conflict between the Semitic herdsmen and the Sumerian farmers nearly 5000 years ago, there is little to support the idea that a meat sacrifice should be superior to a vegetable one, for especially throughout the Books of Moses we see the propriety of grain offerings by the faithful as ordained by God.¹¹⁹ And for that matter, we may even understand that the Mosaic Law regarded vegetable offerings as superior in a certain sense, for they alone could be offered in the very holy inner chambers of the temple (i.e. the burning of incense) while animals could only be sacrificed in the outer courts.¹²⁰ Nonetheless, some have suggested that Abel’s offering was acceptable to God because it foreshadowed the sacrifice of the “Lamb of God”¹²¹ which was to come, and while there may be some truth in that, there is nonetheless much more to the story than what we pick up on the surface.

Examining the account a bit deeper, we may find a clue to God’s puzzling response to what ostensibly are two bona fide offerings from the children of Adam. But the answer to this question we shall see lies not so much in the nature of the sacrifices as that of the ones bringing the offerings. If we consider the occupations of the two brothers, we note that Abel was a “keeper of the flock” which on a symbolic level indicates that he is a person who has control of the animal nature. As shepherd of the sheep, he has power to direct all the activities of the beasts in his care which is also metaphorically the ability of spiritual man to keep his bestial instincts and behavior in check. In presenting to God choice lambs from his flock, he signifies the willingness of the man of God to offer up his lower nature to God in sacrifice. By contrast Cain who was a tiller of the soil or a farmer represents man who is preoccupied with things of the earth (ground,) those things pertaining to material existence. In this respect he typifies physical man who is entrenched in the way of the world.

Like the allegory of male and female, what we have in the story of Cain and Abel is the tale of the higher and lower natures at play with each other but depicted under a different

¹¹⁹ Leviticus 2

¹²⁰ Exodus 30:1-10

¹²¹ John 1:29

type of imagery from what we have just finished analyzing in the first part of this book. Rather than seeing the conflict of the spiritual and physical portrayed in the story of man and woman, we have in this very early narrative of Genesis the interaction of two brothers, one older and one younger which carries the same kind of message. Beginning in this anecdote and continuing through the earlier books of the bible, we see a common pattern of two siblings where the older is the antagonist and the younger is God's friend. The older receives God's frown, while the younger gets his favor, and if we should ask why the writers devised the stories in this way, we need not go any further than recalling the concepts we have already explored thus far.

Clearly the journey of the soul is an evolution from an orientation to worldly things in the early stages to spiritual things in the latter stages. With this in mind the older brother who by definition comes into the world first represents each of us in the primitive stage of our existence when we are alienated from God and absorbed in material pursuits. It is only with the passage of time that the younger brother is born. That is, through the knowledge that comes through many years of experience in life, each of us begins to turn away from carnal living and embrace spirituality. Therefore the younger brother who is God's ally symbolizes each of us in the later parts of our earthly sojourn when we have taken an interest in the things of higher realms for which we long to go.

Physical man comes first and spiritual man always comes second in the development of the soul, and so we see this depicted in the story of the sinful Cain and the innocent Abel whom we have just sketched out. But while this basic principle is at the heart of all such narratives in this form of allegory, there is certainly more to say about the tale of Cain and Abel. The writer has not only clued us in to the characters' symbolic identities through their occupations and birth order but also very significantly through the names that he has given them in the account.

Considering the name of the elder brother Cain, we can trace the Hebrew definition to two related words which are very relevant to the story line. The first *qayin* means "fixity" or more vernacularly "fixation." The second related term *qanah* translates as "purchase, own, possess." Putting the two words together we get the clear message that Cain represents one who is "fixated on possessions" which is the basic characteristic of any soul early in its journey of life.

Without yet delving into the etymology of Abel, we can already deduce from the details of the narrative that the younger brother signifies that which "fixation on possessions" kills, and among other victims that something may be identified as spiritual ideals, the treasure of the man of faith. Rather than acquire material possessions that he knows are worthless, spiritual man seeks to nurture and fan into flame those intangible and ethereal qualities such as love, joy, and peace. It is these invisible attributes, the substance of heavenly reality that he strives to "collect" and put in his quiver.

That the name Abel carries this meaning in the context of the story can be seen if we string together the various Hebrew connotations of the word. Properly *hebel* translates as "emptiness, vanity, transitory" which also bears the physical notions of a "vapor, breath,

or mirage.” The word carries with it a negative implication as if to identify something as having no substance or something very close to nothing. It can also convey the pejorative notion of “leading astray.” But on a positive note, Abel can also potentially be traced to the compound word *habel* formed from *hab* meaning “gift” and *el* meaning “God” to denote “gift of God.” Integrating this altogether, we can regard Abel as a gift of God and therefore something of objective value which is not recognized by the worldly man. Rather, to the one chasing after possessions, Abel is empty, worthless, and vain, something to be avoided, for it presents the danger of “leading astray” from material pursuits. Consequently it is something that must be snuffed out, as indeed Cain handily slew Abel in the narrative.

Nor should we be surprised that this happens, for early in man’s pilgrimage, his budding spirituality appears to him as something vague and nebulous, a mere vapor that he can’t perceive clearly or get his hands around. Without understanding its true value, he easily allows it to be stamped out by the pressures of normal living in the physical world which vie for his attention and squelch out the hazy and obscure invitations of the spiritual world that present to him. The story of Cain and Abel is therefore an illustration of the soul’s early testings in which it must decide between material and spiritual things. Unfortunately, with little knowledge behind its belt, it will most often choose the former, and when that happens, the love of worldly wealth will eradicate any fleeting interests in spirituality (or allegorically Cain kills Abel.)

The love of money will always kill off the higher nature within man, and for this reason Jesus said emphatically, “You cannot serve God and Mammon.”¹²² The two are diametrically opposed to each other, and any who think they can be sought after together is unquestionably deceived. Those who run after material gain whether they are aware of it or not exile themselves from the face of God, an important concept embedded in the narrative. We are told, “Cain went out from the Lord’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.” Once again, the place names in this verse are very significant, for we understand that the Hebrew *nod* translates as “flee, wander, disappear” while *eden* which we identify with paradise is appropriately rendered as “delight, pleasure, to live in luxury.” Summarizing the spiritual message that is encapsulated in this detail of the story, we can say that “love of possessions causes us to wander further away from the presence of God in search of pleasure.” Or put another way, the one who in this physical world is obsessed with material things consequently erases his belief in God.

While “Nod” clearly has a relevant meaning for us as translated from the original tongue, we can appreciate that those celestial beings on higher spiritual planes who inspired the scriptures have had the foresight to embed multiple nuances in various passages. And some such nuances can have a direct relevance to the English speaking world, for we note that the word nod is synonymous with falling asleep (e.g., “nodding off.”) So from another angle, we can interpret the verse to suggest that those who pursue physical things put their spiritual nature to sleep much like the sleeping Adam who metaphorically was awake to the earth but oblivious to the heavenly realms above.

¹²² Luke 16:13

Stepping back a verse, there is another interesting detail of the account that is worth our exploration, and that is the mention of the mark that God put on Cain. Though we are not told the nature of this sign, it was apparently to warn all those who encountered the murderer that to harm him would incur divine vengeance, and therefore he should be left alone. In the context of the timeframe in which this story was written, it seems likely that the mark that the author alludes to is brand much like we place on animals today. However in ancient times, the practice of branding was much more barbaric and not reserved for beasts alone but also for human beings. Historically, criminals received such disfiguring marks not only as a punishment but also as a perpetual sign that their status in life had been downgraded. Slaves also received brands from their owners such as the Greeks who marked with the letter Δ and in more recent times the slaves transported from Africa to North America also received permanent stamps upon their skin to designate their status.

Clearly the ancient practice of branding was to forever communicate to the world that an individual was a malefactor, and though it was certainly a stigma, on a positive note it seems to also have functioned as a protective mark as we have indicated in the passage. From this perspective, we acknowledge this verse as a Mosaic commentary on keeping law and order in Israelite society, for we remember that especially in ancient times, man was governed by a significantly more barbaric and retaliatory instinct that needed to be kept in check. Even if one slew another by accident, a feud was liable to erupt with terrible casualties to the family of the victim and the perpetrator. For this reason, Moses was wise to create cities of refuge for the innocent to flee to so that they could remain there indefinitely until the wrathful relatives of the victim simmered down.¹²³ He also provided asylum for those in danger of receiving vengeance by granting them the privilege of “taking hold of the horns of the altar” at which point no man could strike him down.¹²⁴

Perhaps in this way we can see the branding of Cain fitting in with the medieval legal concept known as “deodand” which comes from the Latin for “given over to God.” One who was marked in this way meant that no one could touch them, and if one were to violate this rule it would be a heinous crime in the sight of God. In the Middle Ages this type of law was found in Arab countries and in Europe, though in the latter it was frequently employed with animals who had intentionally or unintentionally killed people. Rather than put them to death, they were forfeited to the Crown to be used for some pious purpose.

That the mark on Cain was more of a protective or positive sign upon him jibes well with our understanding of theology, for we understand that the ultimate redemption of sinful man is assured. Through the mechanisms that we have so far explored in this work we know that the soul progresses slowly but surely to a higher end, but that it will eventually get there is dictated more than anything else by the reality that it bears the divine mark upon it. Each man is created in the image of God which is to say that all contain a spark of the divine at the core of their beings which inevitably drives them back to God from

¹²³ Deuteronomy 19:1-14

¹²⁴ Exodus 21:12-14; 1 Kings 1:49-51

which they came. In this way, the mark upon Cain can be viewed as a down payment or pledge of a spiritual reality that will surely emerge in time. Physical man is then not to be cut off but rather allowed to progress working out his salvation upon a long and rocky road.

From the beginning to the end of the journey, the mark of the heavenlies that he carries upon him will safeguard him to the goal, and so we see the mark not only appearing in Genesis where man starts his pilgrimage but in Revelation where it is completed. It is there that the seal of God is inscribed on his forehead, the very name of God itself.¹²⁵ And yet earlier than that we see the mark of God upon man in the Book of Ezekiel where he is branded with the Hebrew letter tau originally similar in shape to the Greek tau or “the cross.”¹²⁶

Because physical man is destined to become spiritual man, early setbacks like those depicted in the story of Cain and Abel do not mean that the higher self is snuffed out forever. For a season the lower nature will dominate and then the spiritual self will again attempt to reemerge, and this is no better captured than in the very end of the tale we have been considering. The final verses indicate that Eve conceived another child who was to be a replacement for Abel whom she had lost. Seth which means “substitute” was given to rebirth the legacy of Abel who was so quickly erased from the scene. So the spiritual nature which may go dormant for a time after man fails an initial test will surely appear again, and though man often takes two steps forward and one step back on his road to God, ultimately the higher self will become a steady presence in his life no longer to be pushed underground.

Isaac and Ishmael

And when it does an enormous power struggle ensues between the two natures, a veritable war within the soul which seemingly goes on forever. We now focus our attention back on the story of Abraham in which the bitter conflict is portrayed through his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Although it might be more accurate to say that the Genesis narratives concentrate more on the strife between their mothers Hagar and Sarah to whom they are intimately linked on a symbolic level. We have already investigated the interaction between Abraham and Sarah in the first part of this book and now we direct our attention to the relationship between Sarah and her maidservant.

The dichotomy between the two has been a popular illustration even finding an allegorical development at the hands of St. Paul in his epistle to the Galatians.¹²⁷ He recalls that Sarah, the lady of good birth from Mesopotamia was a free woman under control of no one, not even her husband. Hailing from the remnants of a matriarchal culture that once held sway in Ur, she enjoyed a marriage where both parties were more or less on an equal footing together, very unlike the Semites and most all peoples of the known world over the past 4000 years. St. Paul contrasts Sarah with her maidservant

¹²⁵ Revelation 7:3

¹²⁶ Ezekiel 9:4

¹²⁷ Galatians 4:21-31

Hagar focusing on the fact that the latter was a slave, a mere bondswoman from the land of Egypt. Of course he wishes to communicate that the free woman is a figure of the spiritual nature which enjoys great liberty, unshackled by the fetters of sin. By contrast he draws the parallel of the slave woman to the lower nature which is harnessed by bondage to the flesh and its many appetites.

We might expect the etymologies of their names to support those character assignments, and indeed we can glean some relevance from them. We recall that the wife of Abraham originally went by Sarai (“dominating,”) to symbolize the primitive soul still under the power of the lower self. But toward the later stages in her life she graduated to Sarah (“noble woman, queen”) to signify the redeemed soul which comes to fruition after many years of effort and struggle. By contrast, Hagar, a name which is apparently of non-Hebrew origin means “fugitive, immigrant, stranger” and is potentially related to Hegira which was the historic “flight” of Mohammad from Mecca to Medina in the 7th century. From this connotation we may think of her as representing the soul who is running from God, carnal man who is a stranger to God and unacquainted with his ways. Clearly the two women symbolize the soul at opposite ends of its development, but for the purposes of the narratives that we will consider we will simply regard Sarah as the higher nature and Hagar as the lower nature which are in a fierce state of conflict with each other.

Reiterating some of the earlier material we presented, we remember that Abraham’s wife was barren and unable to conceive a child. Attempting to get an heir for the large estate of her husband she did what was customary in those days as an alternative to personally birthing a child. Taking her maidservant, she gave the slave woman to her husband to sleep with in hopes that she would become pregnant with a child that she could then adopt and call her own. And it seems that all started off according to plan, for Hagar conceived after lying with Abraham.

But no sooner did she realize that she was pregnant then she began to despise Sarah her mistress treating her with contempt. The situation apparently became bad enough that Sarah began to deal hardly with her slave so that the maidservant fled from her presence into the wilderness.¹²⁸ What we intimate from these details is that it is a fatal mistake for the spiritual self to ever seek to cooperate with the lower nature naively thinking that any good can come from it. When the flesh is given any opportunity for its own advancement it will quickly capitalize on it, and though only given an inch it will take a mile. This kind of mistake can only be remedied by harsh measures and so it becomes necessary for the higher self to beat its baser counterpart into submission again. St. Paul said, “I beat my body until it becomes my slave,”¹²⁹ and indeed unless we are tough with the part of us that wants to indulge the senses it will quickly get the upper hand.

Hagar no longer able to withstand the abuse of her mistress went into the desert and sat near a spring on the road to Shur. There she was found by the angel of the Lord who questioned what she was doing there. He asked her, “Where have you come from and where are you going?” When she answered that she was running away from Sarah, the

¹²⁸ Genesis 16:1-6

¹²⁹ 1 Corinthians 9:27

angel told her to go back and submit to her and promised her that her descendants would be “too numerous to count.”¹³⁰

In this vignette we learn some important things about God’s dealings with the lower nature. While God is the perceived enemy of the primitive soul, it is certainly not the other way around. He loves it no less than the most premiere saint or the highest angel. He takes a profound interest in its welfare and its progress, and so we see the angel appearing to the forlorn woman as she languishes in the desert. He asks her what is really a very profound question when we consider it as it pertains to the soul: “Where have you come from and where are you going?” In other words, “What is your origin and what is your destiny?” The truth is that man in the early stages of his development does not know the answer to that inquiry, for he is confused. He travels round and round in circles not knowing from where he has come or to where he is going, a truth that is captured in the name of the locale where Hagar is abiding in the desert. *Shur* which translates as “turning, travelling about, or going round a wall” implies the seemingly endless development of man which takes place in cycles. Though he is often not even conscious of his wanderings, they nonetheless play an important role in his spiritual growth for much is learned in the circle of life and nothing is ever wasted in the formation of the soul.

The imagery of this place name in the desert is certainly relevant to the symbolism of the story but is no less so than the spring that Hagar was found sitting next to in the wilderness. It not only represents man’s deep thirst for love, fulfillment, and security for which he is constantly searching, but this spring of water signifies what to the ancients was the source of life itself. And in our allegory it is particularly the divine life force that proceeds from God and waters all of creation. In God’s love for the lower self, his friend, the Creator drenches physical man in the life giving waters thus making him spiritual. His intent is to “baptize” physical man, saturating him in the divine stream which will surely convert him to his higher calling.

When God begins to work on the lower nature, it realizes that it can only truly be happy by submitting itself to the higher. (So Hagar returns to her mistress Sarah.) In doing so it comes to know that it too will be prosperous (have numerous descendants) when it forfeits its own agenda and comes under the auspice of the spiritual self who is ultimately destined to reign in the heart of man.

But though the seeds of conversion are seen in the encounter by the well, the conflict is far from over at this point in the story. According to the word of the angel, Hagar returned back to the tents of Abraham and bore a son named Ishmael whom he described in somewhat unsavory terms. The angel predicted, “He will be a wild donkey of a man: his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.”¹³¹ And certainly we can consider this a very fitting profile for the first born son, the one who epitomizes the animal nature of man with

¹³⁰ Genesis 16:7-10

¹³¹ Genesis 16:11-12

implied characteristics of stubbornness and insistence on its will (donkey) and violence (his hand against everyone.)

After the birth of the boy, there is an interlude of 13 years in the biblical chronicle during which time we assume that all was well in the family. All were probably content to regard Ishmael as the heir of Abraham's estate until the patriarch received a vision from God. In it he was told to circumcise his entire household as part of a covenant between him and the Almighty. At the end of the instruction, Abraham was informed that his wife Sarah would shortly conceive a child even in her old age, a message that caused both him and his wife to burst out laughing at the incredulity. Yet, nonetheless, Sarah gave birth to Isaac ("he laughs") at 90 years old undoubtedly to the surprise of the entire nomadic community.¹³² And it is at this point that trouble brews again in the family.

Of course we shouldn't be surprised for while there is only one offspring there can be no rivalry, and in matters of the spirit, when only the material self is on the scene there is relative peace for there is no other nature within man to question or threaten its authority over the heart. For many years there is undivided purpose within the soul before the stirrings of spirit take place and so though it might be hostile toward the things of God, it is by definition not at war within itself. But as soon as the spiritual nature begins to germinate within man, the long-term conflict begins, a war that will wage for a very lengthy period of time. Symbolically this is witnessed by the birth of the second child, the one representing the higher self whose appearance takes the first born off guard.

In the story, Ishmael does not appear happy at the birth of his younger brother but rather somewhat perturbed. When Isaac was weaned (probably at the age of two or three) Abraham threw a great feast, and Sarah noticed that the older brother was ridiculing the toddler, mocking the offspring of her womb. Surely enraged by this, she demanded that Abraham take action. Fuming she commanded, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."¹³³

An important culmination to the entire account, the ending of the narrative conveys to us other nuances of the inner battle. There are many ways that the lower nature attempts to retain its power, and among them the story bears out intimidation and demoralization. The animal nature will mock the budding spiritual self in an effort to destroy its confidence and stop its forward progress. Hoping that it will retreat back into the shadows it tries to convince it that its goal is foolhardy and a waste of time. Wishing it to doubt its abilities to stay on its chosen course, it resorts to bullying to the end that it will capitulate and leave only one unquestioned nature in command of the soul.

A tough road it is indeed for the nascent spiritual nature, and it has little choice than to counter the offensive. It must speak to the lower nature in the only language it understands, that of harshness and a heavy hand. It makes a bold move to purge the animal soul (Hagar) along with its natural desires (Ishmael) from its being. Cohabitation between the two forces cannot continue indefinitely, for one must leave before peace can

¹³² Genesis 17-18:15; Genesis 21:1-7

¹³³ Genesis 21:8-10

be established inside of the soul. But in the end it will always be the younger brother (the spiritual self) who wins for as Sarah says, “the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance of my son Isaac.” Ultimately the spiritual nature of man will acquire full control when its lower counterpart is banished or alternatively sublimated into the higher self.

Esau and Jacob

So far we have examined two pairs of brothers who illustrate the tale of man’s two natures in similar fashion to the allegory of the sexes in the first part of this work. We now turn our attention to a couple of twin boys who perhaps of all sibling pairs in the bible best portray the struggle between the higher and lower selves. The story continues once again in the family of Abraham through the children of his son Isaac. After the death of Sarah, Abraham sought out a wife for his son and he acquired a beautiful girl from among his own people living further north in Paddan Aram (or modern day Syria.) At 40 years old Isaac took Rebekah into his tent and she became his wife.¹³⁴ But the scriptures suggest that Rebekah, not unlike her deceased mother-in-law was barren and the couple were married 20 years before God opened up her womb so that she could conceive.

And it seems that Isaac’s wife got two for the price of one perhaps in repayment for her years of infertility. Although it seems that she was unaware of this at first and was troubled by the babies jostling with each other in her belly. Inquiring of a local prophet of the Lord, she asked “Why is this happening to me?” And the first time mother was told, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.”¹³⁵

Of course we are not surprised by the imagery provided at the beginning of the narrative, for we recognize at once that the contention within Rebekah’s womb is symbolic of the perennial struggle between the spiritual and material natures within man. The twins wrestle with each other to depict how the higher and lower selves are continuously vying for power in the heart of man. Though Rebekah must certainly have been surprised to learn that she was pregnant with twins, undoubtedly she was more taken aback by the mystic’s message that the older child would serve the younger. In an age of primogeniture where the privileges of the firstborn were very high, this was assuredly a perplexing statement to the new mother which flew in the face of the culture that she was well acquainted with. And though she was surely confused by this prophecy, we naturally understand the spiritual meaning behind what for these Semitic peoples would be a bizarre turn of fate. Ultimately, we realize that it is the spiritual self that will triumph over the animal nature when the battle is at last over. The second born will in the end have full dominion over the first.

As in the prior two stories we just analyzed, the account of Isaac’s children goes on to provide details about the two sons, both physical characteristics and personality traits that

¹³⁴ Genesis 24

¹³⁵ Genesis 25:21-23

are very relevant to the allegory that is woven in the passage. The narrative continues at the point of Rebekah's delivery, and we are told that the first child to come out of the womb was red and his whole body was like a hairy garment, and because of these qualities they named him Esau as that Hebrew word best captured his description. The second child quickly followed the first and was actually holding on to his older brother's heel on the way out of the womb, and for this reason they named the boy Jacob, for the Hebrew term embodied the child's strange and unexpected gesture at birth.

From this point the story skips over the boys' childhood and turns immediately to their activities in adult years. We learn that Esau was a "skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents." And having identified the brothers' occupations, the passage reveals that each parent had a favorite son. Isaac who loved wild game favored Esau, while Rebekah loved Jacob.¹³⁶

Clearly the narrative aims at contrasting the brothers as we see that they are opposites in whatever is presented to us, and while we certainly know which son is identified as the protagonist at the expense of the other character, some historical background will reveal the deeper agenda of the author. The original inhabitants of the Middle East are believed to have been a tall, fair-skinned, red-headed, and hairy race of people who dwelt from Mesopotamia to Palestine. It seems that as the centuries progressed another race moved into the region that we know as the Semites who had very different physical characteristics. A good deal shorter than the indigenous race, they were wiry with dark hair and a smooth skinned darker complexion.

Conflict between the two peoples seems to have occurred as early as the 3rd Millennium B.C. when the Semitic Akkadians invaded the great Sumerian Civilization. As we might expect racial hostility between the two peoples arose and in man's bigoted way it took the form of disdain for each other's unique physical traits. While the ancient red-headed race does not survive in modern times, to this day the Middle Eastern population of Semitic origin has a general social objection to excessive body hair which they interpret as dirty and primitive, and it seems that this attitude potentially stems from the ancient clash between the two races.

Particularly in the land of Canaan the disgust for the hairy people was apparently more acute, for the Semites who wandered west to the land near the sea noted that their racial enemy dwelt in underground caverns that they had hewn out of limestone. Looking down on these inhabitants of Palestine, the Semites considered them inferior for their subterranean living and pejoratively referred to them as the Horites or "cave dwellers." Perhaps the idea of living beneath the earth was revolting to the Semites who buried their dead in caves and equated it with the place of the deceased (Sheol,) so there was little respect for the red-headed people. But it would seem in all fairness to the natives that they were probably more sophisticated than the invaders for they had relatively advanced metal tools with which to cull out their abodes, and the truth be told they were undoubtedly more comfortable living underground in the heat of the day than their nomadic neighbors living in tents.

¹³⁶ Genesis 25:24-28

With this background being set, we can return to the story of Esau and Jacob with some more cultural understanding of the account as we further consider the two siblings. Clearly from the descriptions of the text, the older boy resembled the indigenous race of the Middle East with his red hairy body which was very pronounced even from birth. And by contrast the younger son was much more typical of a regular Semite for we are told a little later in the narrative that he had smooth skin. Though both boys were born of the same parents, they were as racially distinct in appearance as was possible, and for this to be the case, it seems that Isaac and Rebekah must have carried the genes of the tall and hairy race. Certainly there must have been some intermarriage between the two peoples living in close contact as in the ancestral homeland of Abraham in Akkadian controlled Sumer. And indeed the people of Israel were not so racially pure not to have a certain population of redheads living among them as was apparently the case with the ruddy David and by tradition Judas Iscariot. Nonetheless they were still a minority among the Semitic tribes, and one that only reminded the people of racial clashes in times gone by.

As we shall see, the author of the story of Esau and Jacob clearly desired to exploit the tension between the two people groups, vilifying the older Esau while elevating his younger brother to deliver a spiritual message to his hearers. Because of the enmity that the Semites had for the hairy fair skinned race, we should not be surprised to know that they equated hairiness with sinfulness. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures there is a common theme of depilation as a sign of repentance, mourning, and purification. In the Book of Leviticus there is a cleansing ritual that requires the candidate to shave off all his hair.¹³⁷ In the story of Job, we see the concept underscored when the patriarch shaved his head after his many trials began.¹³⁸ Additionally, the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah refer to shaving the head and cutting off the beard.¹³⁹ For the Hebrew writer of the narrative, it is smooth skin that is praised and regarded as tantamount to holiness, as if the hairless man is free of the spiritual contamination that shagginess brings.

With this imagery in mind the author of the account intends to convey the message of the higher and lower natures to an audience that could relate to the racial contrast. While this picture is clear, there are nonetheless additional nuances to the description of the twin boys that we can relate to. Focusing again on Esau, we note that the Hebrew meaning of his name is appropriately “shaggy, untrimmed, rough to the touch” and we acknowledge that these are certainly characteristics of man’s lower nature. The primitive soul is very unrefined, crude, and sinful in all of its dealings. There is no tact or gentleness about it but rather it is governed by flippant behavior and a whimsical nature. Moreover, we can regard Esau’s shagginess or hairiness as more than just the prominent feature of a hated ethnic rival. Plainly this distinct characteristic is the mark of the animal world which by inference identifies the older brother with man’s animal nature. And this parallel is reinforced even more by Esau’s profession for we learn that he was a hunter. The man not only looked like an animal in appearance, but he was close to animals in his work as a man of the field. We could say metaphorically that in chasing the beasts of the field that

¹³⁷ Leviticus 14:8-9; Numbers 8:7

¹³⁸ Job 1:20

¹³⁹ Isaiah 15:2; Jeremiah 48:37

he followed after the ways of the animal world which are governed by instinct and the senses. Not coincidentally, the descendants of Esau bear the same connotation, for the inhabitants of Seir (“shaggy, goat, hairy, rough”) are appropriately of his lineage.

While we can surely connect the older brother’s appearance and behavior as characteristics of the lower nature, the same kind of parallels can be made with the younger brother and the higher nature, though the association of Jacob and the spiritual self is admittedly more subtle. Perhaps we could say that the man’s smooth skin is indicative of the mature soul’s refinement, an evolution from the primitive half man-half beast that was characteristic of our ancient ancestors. And maybe we could say that Jacob’s affinity to “stay among the tents” is symbolic of a more polished soul with more sophisticated interests than that pertaining to the dirty fields and countryside. But the key to Jacob’s association with the divine nature has more to do with that curious gesture at birth when coming out of the womb he clenched his older brother’s heel.

To make sense of this strange move of Jacob’s we turn briefly to another story from antiquity, a familiar tale from Greek mythology centered around a man named Achilles. When this legendary character was a baby, there was a prophecy that foretold he would die in battle from an arrow to the foot. Attempting to prevent this, his mother took the infant to the River Styx, that magical stream that divided the land of the living from the underworld. As it was believed that the river could make someone invincible and immune from any attack, she took her young son and dipped him in the water holding him by the heel as she did so. But as her hand obscured the saving waters from making contact with the base of the baby’s foot, he was made invulnerable except for this very small part of his body. When Achilles grew up, he became a great warrior and survived many battles unscathed, but one day the enemy launched a poisonous arrow that lodged in his heel, and the valiant warrior died shortly thereafter.

While in the myth Achilles’ heel is presented as a place of physical weakness and vulnerability on the body, the story has made its way into Western Culture to take on a broader metamorphical significance as well. In popular speech, an “Achilles’ heel” refers to some deadly weakness in spite of something’s overall strength, and that weakness can certainly be physical but more often than not it is an allusion to a less tangible defect. Perhaps it could be a reference to a frailty in some large corporation, a small cog in its business process that threatens to undermine the whole operation. Similarly it could be the identification of a flaw in someone’s character or personality that could be the source of his undoing. An Achilles’ heel is then any vulnerable point in a person or thing, physical or intangible that can bring it to ruin.

With this interpretation of the heel as the weakest point in the “body,” we return to the story of the rival twins Esau and Jacob. With this idea in view, the narrative can take on a deeper shade of meaning, and we can offer a very significant explanation for the younger boy grasping the heel of the older. That Jacob exits the womb holding the foot of his brother can be taken not necessarily as a sign of fraternal love but more as an indication of aggression. The boy is in hot pursuit of his older sibling, perhaps grabbing

onto him to hold him back. In so doing he makes an attempt to push forward and bypass his brother to take the lead.

Of course his bid for primacy means that he must somehow trip up his rival who is in first place, and he does this by clenching his heel. That is, he seeks to exploit the weaknesses of the older brother to take him out of the running that he may get the upper hand. Naturally we are describing the allegory of the higher nature who must take precedence over the lower self, something that it must accomplish through a certain level of cunning and clever attempts to take advantage of the animal nature which was the first to be in existence and which rules the soul with a tenacious stronghold. This is why we link Jacob with the spiritual self, for the Hebrew translation of his name is “heel catcher or supplanter” which testifies to the destiny of the higher nature to overtake the lower, supplanting its place of control over the soul.

Certainly, in the conflict that occurs within each individual it is needful that the higher self employs all possible methods in subduing the lower, fighting a “dirty” war so to speak and laying bare all its frailties, for as long as we exist in the physical world, the lower self retains a number of key advantages that we have to contend with. That is, as long as we live on earth, our lower nature, with its affinity for food, drink and worldly pleasures, will always have some level of control over us, because the physical body has physical needs. As long as we are on earth, to a greater or lesser extent, we are bound to these physical needs; all that our higher self can do is to try to limit our susceptibility to them, to avoid excessive indulgence in them and the abuse of our bodies that results. However, if while still on earth we learn to control the demands of the body so that it becomes our slave and not our master, we will be well fitted to advance to the heavenly kingdom when at length we leave the physical world behind us for ever.

Continuing now with the story at hand, the passage goes on to describe Jacob’s first exploitation of his older brother in a moment of weakness. While Jacob was home cooking some stew, Esau came in from the fields completely famished after presumably hunting the whole day without any nourishment. Begging his brother to relieve his hunger, he asked Jacob for some of the food he was cooking. But rather than quickly show mercy to his sibling obliging him with a much needed meal, Jacob did something that by most any human standard would be considered cruel. Putting a condition on the stew he would give him, Jacob told Esau that he would first have to sell him his birthright.

And being “over a barrel” so to speak, Esau felt he had no choice but to comply. He said to Jacob, “Look, I am about to die. What good is the birthright to me?” Having his brother right where he wanted him, Jacob forced Esau to swear to him on oath that this transaction would signify that the birthright was formally being transferred. After pledging that he had officially sold the right of the firstborn over to Jacob, Esau was given some bread and lentil stew to assuage his hunger. The older brother ate and drank, and then got up and walked away. As a passing commentary on the whole matter, the vignette concludes by saying, “So Esau despised his birthright.”¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Genesis 25:29-34

Now it is important to consider this coveted birthright which is the center of the exchange between the two brothers. We must understand the great prize that Jacob was so interested in obtaining. As alluded to a little earlier, the birthright has to do with the patriarchal tradition of primogeniture. Unlike in modern society where all the offspring receive an equal share of the temporal wealth of the parents, ancient Semitic culture dictated that the oldest took a double portion of the estate over the other siblings upon the death of the father. The birthright then entailed a large share of the inheritance in the form of material goods, but it also importantly included a special spiritual privilege not given to the other siblings. As the principle heir of the estate, the firstborn would assume a position of moral authority as the head of the extended family. In a special blessing shortly before the patriarch's death, he would invoke the favor of heaven towards the eldest son and in so doing impart the key elements of his own spiritual and moral authority upon the firstborn.

Such was the premium put on the ancient birthright, and in the case of Isaac's heir it seems that it carried more than the usual importance because of the promise made to Abraham. On numerous occasions the patriarch was told how he would be made into a great nation and receive God's benediction. In particular the spiritual heritage of Abraham was to be unique for it was told to the great man of faith that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."¹⁴¹ And we understood this to be a reference to the Messiah coming forth through Abraham's principle line.

In the context of the account, we infer that Jacob was greatly interested especially in the spiritual privileges of the firstborn. So eager for the right that normally belongs to the oldest son, Jacob was apparently willing to manipulate and connive to acquire it. While ostensibly such opportunistic behavior is not very spiritual in itself, we can only regard the story on the allegorical level understanding the younger son's bid for primacy as the ambition of the higher self for spiritual things. With cunning and shrewdness it seeks to take every advantage possible over the lower self in its struggle for control of the soul. And so while Jacob's manipulation can hardly be acceptable at surface value, we can understand what the story is conveying symbolically.

Of course the spiritual value of the birthright is of no worth to the material self which is only interested in tangible things, and this is why Esau could so easily trade it for one good meal. Only concerned with its physical needs and desires, the animal nature will be more than willing to give up something of inestimable worth just to relieve its hunger, and so we see Esau "despising his birthright" only to get a quick fix from a pot of stew and loaf of bread.

Jacob capitalizing on the moment of his brother's despair did not hesitate to exploit Esau's weakness to get what he wanted. With his eye on something much higher than what earthly existence has to offer, the younger brother was fast to seize an opportunity. Outwitting and outmaneuvering his older brother, he claimed for himself the inheritance

¹⁴¹ Genesis 12:2,3

that rightfully belongs to the spiritual self but which first must be wrested away from the material nature to become an active reality in the soul.

Now although Jacob was certainly satisfied that he had secured Esau's birthright through a cunning but legitimate deal, the exchange was hardly a public event. It seems that there were no witnesses, and Isaac did not respect the arrangement. We understand from the passage that Isaac was preferential to Esau, while Rebekah favored Jacob; so it is pretty fair to say that the boys' father would never have accepted any change in his sons' legal status and surely not over a mere bowl of stew.

As the narrative continues we see that this was exactly the case, for when Isaac was old and nearly blind, he called for his firstborn son to come to him. Requesting that Esau go out into the field and hunt some game to make him a savory meal, Isaac promised the elder boy that he would receive his blessing after he ate of his food. So out he went to his task, but not unnoticed, for Rebekah overheard their conversation and began to scheme an alternative plan.

The boys' mother wasted no time but found her favorite son Jacob informing him of the arrangement between Isaac and Esau. Proposing a deception to make good on the birthright her younger son had won some time earlier, she instructed Jacob to get a couple goats from the flock so that she could prepare them in a way to Isaac's liking. But it was clear that the meal alone wouldn't convince the old man that his elder son had prepared his game for him and was therefore entitled to the blessing. Should Isaac attempt to touch his son, Jacob's smooth skin would be a giveaway to the visually impaired father that the boy before him was not his beloved firstborn. To deal with this complication, Rebekah found some of Esau's best clothes and had Jacob put them on. Then she took goatskins and affixed them to the younger boy's hands and neck to complete the ruse.

With all prepared and Esau conveniently still out in the countryside, Jacob came into his father's presence bearing a tasty dish. Somewhat incredulous, Isaac questioned how his son could have found game so quickly to which objection Jacob swiftly gave credit to God for helping him secure his prey in little time at all. Still skeptical about the identity of the man who stood before him, Isaac asked that his son come close so that he could touch him to ascertain the truth of the matter, and this seems to have confused him even more, for the patriarch exclaimed, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." And then he asked him directly if he were really Esau to which Jacob unhesitatingly affirmed he was.

Perhaps a bit wary about the whole matter, it seems possible that Isaac wanted to mull over these contradictory indicators, and so he called for his food to eat. When he was done eating, he proposed one final test and bid his son to kiss him. At that point, Isaac was apparently satisfied, for smelling the clothes of Esau, he proceeded to give the younger son his solemn and irreversible blessing. After invoking the blessing of heaven upon him in accord with the fullness of the birthright, Jacob left the tent of his father only minutes before Esau's arrival on the scene with his fresh kill.

When Isaac discovered the identity of this newcomer to really be his son Esau, he shook violently. Indeed he was undoubtedly extremely angry that he had been duped and led to rob his favorite son of the intended blessing, and not only he but Esau was full of rage as well. Begging his father for a blessing also, Esau sought some favor upon him and his posterity in some form. But Isaac could not oblige him, for the entirety of the traditional firstborn's benediction was poured out upon Jacob in a binding fashion as recognized not only by the patriarch but also God himself. From that point Esau began to plot how he could kill his brother, but Rebekah catching wind of his plan dispatched Jacob at once to her brother Laban in Haran for asylum until the wrath of Esau should die down.¹⁴²

What can we say about the actions of Jacob and for that matter his mother Rebekah in this part of the story? Certainly if the younger son's manipulation of his hungry older brother was reprehensible, how much more so this last act of deception whereby not only Esau was again victimized but an old blind man was duped as well. Clearly Rebekah's favorite son was intent on cashing in on what he had purchased from Esau perhaps years earlier, and seeing that neither Esau nor his father recognized that deal, mother and son had to act quickly to turn the table in favor of Jacob.

While we can see that from Jacob's perspective the whole affair was a matter of the ends justifying the means, nonetheless there are few who could condone his actions. And even though we acknowledge that Jacob's interest was more spiritual than material, his motivation was hardly an excuse for an outright deception of his very own father. What can we take away from this narrative other than the allegorical theme we have been considering? We must regard Jacob's unbridled ambition as none other than the aspirations of the higher self in its progress toward God. The duplicity of the younger son represents just another trick of the spiritual nature to overcome its opponent, the material self. The issue of the deception has nothing to do with morality but rather is more akin to the cunning an army must display in defeating its enemy. All is fair in love and war, and indeed the inner battle of the soul is war.

While the physical self is distracted (Esau out hunting in the field) the spiritual self must act quickly and "on the sneak" to take what belongs to the lower nature. When the attention of the animal nature is turned away for a spell, the divine self must seize the opportunity and strike while the iron is hot. Only then can it wrest control from its lower counterpart and put it into submission.

Many nuances can be taken from the passage, and though we do not have time to consider them all, one segment of the text is worthy of mention. Particularly there may be some symbolic meaning in the words of Isaac, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau" which he uttered after touching the masquerading Jacob. We may regard the statement as a commentary on the whole integrated man, perhaps at the dawn of faith in the individual when both natures become present in the soul. It is at that point that we (Jacob) come to our heavenly Father (Isaac) as we really are, the earthly animal like being that we have always been but now seeking something higher and better out of life. It is a point of transition for the soul ("the voice is the voice of

¹⁴² Genesis 27

Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.”) And because of the humble acknowledgement of our identity and this self-realization within us, we receive the acceptance of the Father (Isaac) and his blessing to begin on the path of the spiritual life.

Continuing on with the narrative of the two brothers, we come now to the conclusion of their story which reinforces the concepts we have been exploring thus far in this work. After swindling both the birthright and its associated blessing away from Esau the firstborn, Jacob hightailed it far away from the tents of his father, escaping for his life as it were. Esau was carrying a bitter grudge against his brother and had made it known that he intended to kill him after Isaac’s anticipated death in the not too distant future.

So Jacob went to live with his uncle in Paddan Aram where he could live in relative safety apart from the wrath of his brother. While there, he married the two daughters of his uncle Laban and fathered a large family of twelve boys and a girl, and because God was with him the flocks that he was tending increased greatly so that he became a wealthy a herdsman. Indeed the effects of the patriarchal blessing were already beginning to multiply in his life, but this created jealousy on the part of his uncle, and Jacob realized he needed to take his family and leave his father-in-law.¹⁴³

On the way back to his home country, we are told that Jacob sent a message in humble terms to his brother Esau seeking to meet him after what was presumably many years. Esau responded and started on his way with 400 men to meet his brother in the countryside. When Jacob learned this, he was sorely afraid fearing that Esau was at last coming out to make war on him and get revenge. As an act of peace and goodwill, the younger brother thought to mollify the angry Esau with generous gifts of the flock that he sent on before him in a last ditch attempt to win the favor of the older sibling. Bracing himself for the worst, Jacob repeatedly bowed down to the ground in deference to Esau as he approached. But much to his surprise, rather than slugging Jacob with a vengeful fist, a congenial Esau ran up to his brother, threw his arms around him and kissed him. Then after long years of estrangement, the two wept greatly.¹⁴⁴

What an unexpected climax to the account of the two brothers who were at odds with each other even from their time in the womb! From a human perspective, we would have envisioned a bitter conclusion with one brother finally slaying the other to end the lifetime conflict, but this was not the way it turned out. While on a literal level, we might be surprised by this kind of ending to the story, on the allegorical level the concluding scenario pieces together very nicely. Sure, Esau was incensed that he was robbed of his birthright as we would expect, for that is to say that the natural man within us is infuriated when it realizes that it is no longer running the show and that a competitor has risen up to take power within the soul. The conflict rages for what seems like an age, but then peace comes in the end. And this is because the lower self ultimately realizes that it is happiest when it is under the rule of the spiritual. The material nature finally recognizes that is in its best interests to “play second fiddle” to the higher self, for things just work out better that way.

¹⁴³ Genesis 29-31

¹⁴⁴ Genesis 32:1-21; Genesis 33

When this point is reached after a very long road, the soul reaches human perfection and harmony exists within itself. Although it should be said that the reconciliation of the two natures with each other is not because of some compromise of give and take between both parties but because of a complete surrender of the lower to the higher. At the conclusion of the soul's journey, the physical man becomes completely sublimated and subsumed into the spiritual self so that unity exists within the integrated being. And then there is cooperation between the two forces that were long at war with each other, a truth that is evidenced by the final verses of the entire story of the two brothers. At the very end of Jacob and Esau's saga, we are told that Isaac died (apparently much later than Esau anticipated) and both of his sons buried him.¹⁴⁵ United and in concert with each other, the two natures are at last depicted side by side working together.

Zerah and Perez & Ephraim and Manasseh

It was mentioned toward the beginning of this section that the theme of the older and younger sons is one that weaves throughout the earlier parts of the bible, particularly the Book of Genesis. While the narrative of Esau and Jacob is undoubtedly the most prominent example, there are other smaller stories that are presented to reinforce the same message and we now consider the remaining passages starting with a small anecdote from the life of Jacob's son Judah.

Through a less than praiseworthy series of events, Tamar, the widowed daughter-in-law of Judah became pregnant by her father-in-law. When it was time for her to give birth, it was discovered that she was carrying twin boys in her womb. We are not told that they struggled with each other in utero like the sons of Rebekah, but the narrative does indicate that one boy attempted to exit the womb first. Sticking out his hand into the light of day, the midwife tied a scarlet thread on his wrist to identify the all-important firstborn, for she exclaimed, "This one came out first." But as it would have been nearly impossible to be delivered arm first, the throes of labor caused a rearrangement of the babies within the mother so that the one with the scarlet thread on his wrist withdrew his hand back inside again. Then the other brother proceeded to be born presumably in the normal way. He was in turn followed by the one with the wrist marker whom they named Zerah meaning "red" in the Hebrew tongue. The other boy they named Perez which translates as "breaking out," for they were surprised at the sequence and manner in which he exited the womb.¹⁴⁶

It is perhaps possible to draw a parallel between the "technical" firstborn Zerah and the ruddy Esau, for they both share the color red with their identity. A tone that can carry various significances from culture to culture, within the context of our allegory we can consider those almost universal negative connotations that are associated with it. Principally it is the color of the passions, particularly anger for which reason we say that one is "hot under the color." But it can allude to any form of lust or desire that certainly characterizes the natural man. Similarly it is regarded certainly in the West as the shade

¹⁴⁵ Genesis 35:27-29

¹⁴⁶ Genesis 38

of sin, for we often refer to criminals as being caught “red-handed,” and idea that originally stems from Hebrew roots with the idea of a murderer being found with blood on his hands. And for this reason the medieval devil has often been painted red. The color also denotes a sense of power, namely physical strength as it implies high energy and ambition similar to the fiery passions that this hue evokes. And of course physical might to the exclusion of any spiritual prowess is the marker of the juvenile soul, the one we call the natural man.

As we might expect, it is not to this son that the birthright will fall for the man of the world can never inherit the kingdom of God. We learn later that it was Perez rather than Zerah who became the leading clan of the tribe of Judah. And apparently the fullness of the promise to Abraham was to be transmitted through his line and not his brother’s, for Perez became the Messianic forebear to serve as the ancestor of the great king David and later of Jesus Christ.

Tracing the allegory of the older and younger a few more chapters ahead in Genesis, we come to another account where the ordinary privileges of the firstborn are unexpectedly swapped with the younger son. It is the story of the patriarch Joseph’s two boys, Ephraim and Manasseh that is told right at the end of Jacob’s life when the extended family was dwelling in Egypt. Aware that his father was ill and nearing death, Joseph came to visit Jacob along with his two sons presumably for the final blessing. Jacob’s sight had been failing, and he could hardly see, so Joseph brought his sons close to his father. Placing the firstborn Manasseh under his right hand and the second born Ephraim under his left, Joseph signaled to his father that his sons were positioned according to the order of precedence and were ready for the patriarchal blessing.

But much to the displeasure of Joseph, the old man proceeded to cross his arms placing his right hand on the younger Ephraim and his left on the older Manasseh and started to invoke his blessing. Joseph intent on keeping his father from making a mistake immediately tried to uncross Jacob’s arms and place his hands on the proper sons, but Jacob resisted and vocalized his refusal to observe the normal tradition. Acknowledging that he knew full well which was the first and which was the second of Joseph’s sons, he indicated that certainly Manasseh would become a great nation, but he stated, “Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he.” And saying the blessing over the boys, he put younger Ephraim ahead of the older Manasseh.¹⁴⁷

As history would bear out, the prophecy of Jacob would come to pass according to the patriarch’s words. Towards the end of his life, Moses was quoted as saying, “Such are the ten thousands of Ephraim; such are the thousands of Manasseh”¹⁴⁸ to indicate the relative magnitudes of their sizes. Many hundreds of years after Jacob pronounced his preeminence, Ephraim would go on to become the most powerful of the 10 tribes comprising the Northern Kingdom of Israel. So prominent was this tribe that prophets

¹⁴⁷ Genesis 48

¹⁴⁸ Deuteronomy 33:17

such as Isaiah and Hosea repeatedly referred to the entire nation simply as Ephraim whose identity dominated the whole country.¹⁴⁹

The Death of the Firstborn

Up to this point, we have considered several pairs of sons who illustrate the allegory of the older and the younger, and while there are no more such specific families to cite on this topic, there is a well known story that also reinforces this symbolism we have been exploring. Early on in the Book of Exodus we read about the nation of Israel enslaved in Egypt and under bitter oppression. Moses had been sent by God to liberate the people from their bondage and was encountering a great deal of resistance on the part of the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. In order to convince the ruler to let the Israelites go free, God sent a series of plagues on the land so that Pharaoh would relent of keeping this people captive and send them away. After nine onerous plagues, it turned out that the king was still unwilling to free the children of Israel, so God decided to send yet one more blight upon the Egyptians that would compel them to release their grip on the Chosen People and allow them to leave the country.¹⁵⁰

And that final sanction to afflict the nation of Egypt has been known as the Plague on the Firstborn. Fortunately for the Jews, Moses instructed the Israelites in advance about what measures they needed to take to avoid being victimized by this last woe that would hit the country. The plan was that the angel of the Lord would come through the land around midnight on the 14th day of the first month and put to death the firstborn son of everyone in Egypt. From the richest to the poorest, the firstborn was to be killed, and not only among humans, but the firstborn of the animals living in Egypt were also to be slaughtered. So comprehensive was the plan to inflict this plague of death upon the nation! However, the Israelites were to escape this fate by following a special ceremony that involved sacrificing a lamb and applying its blood to the doorframes of their homes. When the angel of the Lord would come by at midnight and see the blood on the lintel and doorposts, he would pass over that home and spare the firstborn that lived there.¹⁵¹

Following the instructions of Moses very carefully, the Jewish people were preserved from this devastating blow, and for generations to come the miraculous safeguarding of the Israelite firstborn has come to be known as the Passover of the Lord. We will consider this memorial feast of the Jews and the events surrounding it in more detail in the remaining parts of this book, but as the message of the firstborn has immediate bearing on the allegory we have been developing, that aspect will be addressed here.

Within the allegory of the sexes that we introduced at the beginning of this work and within the allegory we are now examining we have identified two concepts regarding the sanctification of the soul. Namely we established that much of the symbolism in the stories we were looking at either depicted the destruction of the lower nature so that the

¹⁴⁹ Isaiah 7:2,5,8-9; Hosea 9:13; Hosea 12:1,8

¹⁵⁰ Exodus 3-11

¹⁵¹ Exodus 12

higher could prevail or alternatively the sublimation of the lower nature that it may come into union with the higher. Both ideas are captured in the account of the Passover.

Clearly the death of the firstborn son is a consistent metaphor for the elimination of the lower self, the destruction of the natural man within us to pave the way for the spiritual man to take control. When the physical self dies, the divine self becomes free to reign in the soul and serve God unhindered. Much has been said about this, and so we turn to the other concept that is embedded in the text, that is, the redemption of the lower self.

The miraculous protection of the Israelite children on that fateful night was a kind deed of God, but as we read further in the story we learn that it was not free, for there was indeed a price attached to that act of mercy. After the Passover, Moses conveyed to the people that in return for sparing the lives of every firstborn Jewish boy and animal, from that day forward all the firstborn of Israel would belong to God.¹⁵² Nor should this surprise us, for even though God is the perceived enemy of the lower self, it is not the other way around. Rather the lower self is in fact God's friend, for the Almighty can do nothing but love his created beings no matter where they are along the spiritual journey. But God demands redemption of the lower nature, for Moses says, "Redeem every firstborn among your sons." That God has befriended us requires that our rough and sinful natures melt away. And indeed through much labor on our parts this purification comes. We must pay a price as did the Israelites to redeem their firstborn, and according to the Book of Numbers the cost was set at five shekels of silver.¹⁵³ Why five we may ask, and perhaps the answer to that question could entail a bit of biblical numerology if we equate that number with the five senses of man. A shekel must be paid for the redemption of each one of the physical perceptions of man that all may be sublimated from the pursuit of pleasure to the service of God.

¹⁵² Exodus 13:11-16

¹⁵³ Numbers 18:14-16

Chapter 3- Allegory of Light and Darkness

Symbolism of Light and Darkness

Having made our survey of two prominent symbolic threads in the Old Testament, we turn to another which weaves throughout the entire bible and for that matter is found throughout all of the spiritual writings and cultures of the world. Some symbols are just universal, and the pair we consider now is just that. The polarities of light and darkness as ancient as the cosmos itself are one that needs no explanation. Etched in the minds of all humanity, the figures of day and night carry with them a certain racial memory, the former evoking something positive and the latter something negative. It seems that this association was forged very early in the existence of man, for the darkness was a source of great fear to him. Beasts of prey which roamed the forests during the night posed a real threat to our ancestors, and so there was always an uneasiness until the dawn arrived.

With a definitive appreciation for the daylight and a dislike for the nighttime, it should come as no surprise to us that man incorporated light and darkness into his religious writings in a way that we can readily identify with. Particularly in the bible, light is equated with many spiritual qualities, a number of which are enumerated in the Psalms. Many verses link righteousness with light, and we can cite Psalm 97 which states that “light is sown for the righteous” or Psalm 112 which promises that “light arises for the upright.”¹⁵⁴ In Psalm 36, God promises to “bring forth [man’s] righteousness as the light.” Other positive qualities such as truth also are associated with brightness, and in Psalm 43 the author prays God to “send out your light and your truth; let them guide me.” Later in the gospels the apostle John announces that “whoever lives by the truth comes into the light.”¹⁵⁵ Overall the symbol of light serves as an all-embracing metaphor of all that is spiritually good. It reflects a state of illumination within the soul, understanding of spiritual things, and a comprehension of truth.

On the other hand, the darkness implies just the opposite. If the upright are characterized by light, then the workers of iniquity are without exception linked with the blackness. The apostle John in his straightforward style tells us that “Light has come into the world but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.”¹⁵⁶ The beloved disciple who was very fond of this imagery was sure to comment on one of the most evil deeds in history, for he notes that when Judas left the Upper Room to betray the Savior, “it was night.”¹⁵⁷ All too often, Jesus employed the same kind of metaphor and frequently he would refer to blindness, the inability to see the light with a poor spiritual condition. Many times he castigated the hypocritical Pharisees calling them “blind guides,”¹⁵⁸ for they were incapable of leading the souls in their charge along the path to God. What can we say then about the darkness? If the light

¹⁵⁴ Psalm 97:11; Psalm 112:4

¹⁵⁵ Psalm 43:3; John 3:21

¹⁵⁶ John 3:19-20

¹⁵⁷ John 13:30

¹⁵⁸ Matthew 15:14; Matthew 23:16

symbolizes spiritual understanding, then the absence of it signifies a state of ignorance about heavenly things. It is a condition of being unaware of any reality beyond that of the five senses and the physical world in which one lives, and for this reason it is also connected with the idea of sleep. Just as the sleeping Adam has been interpreted as an individual oblivious to the spiritual world, so are worldly people in a state of slumber regarding the things of God.

With light and darkness respectively associated with good and evil, it goes without saying that God who is good is spoken of with the imagery of light. The apostle John in his epistle went so far as to define God as the very definition of light in all of its fullness and purity. He tells his readers, “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.”¹⁵⁹ But John was only keying off a long standing tradition in his own Jewish faith that spanned far into the Old Testament. The Psalmist wrote, “The Lord is my light and my salvation,” and in another place he said, “In your light shall we see light.”¹⁶⁰ John rightly referred to Jesus as the “true light” but he was only echoing the Messianic prophecies of Isaiah who predicted that “those who were in darkness (the Gentiles) have seen a great light.” Foreseeing the day of Christ’s coming, he wrote to the people, “Arise, shine for your light has come.”¹⁶¹

The Light is hidden in the Darkness

Though God is characterized by a brightness that is beyond description, it is certainly curious that particularly in the Old Testament we see the Divine Presence cloaked in a thick canopy of darkness. A seemingly unfitting thing for the Lord of the Universe to be enveloped in, nonetheless several passages depict God in this way. The first to mention pertains to the Ark of the Covenant that Israel carried around in the desert for many years until it found a permanent home in Solomon’s temple.¹⁶² The Ark embodied the presence of God and had so much power associated with it that were anyone to touch it accidentally he would be struck dead.¹⁶³ It was this special piece of furniture representing God himself that was housed deep within the temple building in the Most Holy Place.¹⁶⁴ A perfect cube, this part of the building had no windows or portals but was in total darkness the year through, shrouding the presence of God in total blackness.

Going back several hundred years earlier, a similar image was in the sight of the Israelites at the time when Moses received the Ten Commandments. The Lord told him, “I come to you in a thick cloud that the people may hear when I speak to you, and believe you forever.”¹⁶⁵ And the Lord revealed the Decalogue to the people from the top of the mountain where he had descended, and we are told that the people shook in fear, but “Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was.”¹⁶⁶ King David may very

¹⁵⁹ 1 John 1:5

¹⁶⁰ Psalm 27:1; Psalm 36:12

¹⁶¹ John 1:9; Isaiah 9:2; Isaiah 60:1

¹⁶² Exodus 25:10-22

¹⁶³ 2 Samuel 6:1-11

¹⁶⁴ Exodus 26:31-35

¹⁶⁵ Exodus 19:9

¹⁶⁶ Exodus 20:18-21

well have been recalling that epic event in the history of Israel when he wrote that “the Lord made darkness pavilions round about him, dark waters, and thick clouds of the skies.”¹⁶⁷ On that day atop Mount Sinai the Lord had come in the midst of a thick cloud resting upon the peak, and it seems that he did so to shield the people from seeing him manifested before him in the ball of fire that had come down from heaven.¹⁶⁸

Moving ahead again to the time of King Solomon, we come to the record of the dedication of his magnificent temple in an elaborate ceremony in Jerusalem. At the end of the affair, the priests brought the ark into the Holy of Holies where it was to permanently reside. At that point the glory of the Lord filled the temple, and the cloud was so thick that none of the priests could see to perform his duties. Solomon then spoke up saying, “The Lord said that he would dwell in thick darkness.”¹⁶⁹

All three of these illustrations more or less depict a common idea, namely that the Godhead though brilliant in splendor shrouds himself in a garment of darkness. Outwardly there can be a number of reasons for this including the idea of protecting the people from this overwhelming radiance. Often in the scriptures we are met with the notion that mortal flesh “cannot see the face of God and live” for which reason Moses was only permitted to “see God’s back” upon the mountain.¹⁷⁰ A similar concept is found in the New Testament where we are told that God’s enemies will be “destroyed by the brightness of his [second] coming.”¹⁷¹

Of course this explanation is perfectly reasonable to account for these manifestations of God in times past, though on a deeper level we can perhaps suggest that there is more to the imagery of these sketches. That God, the one true light is housed in a shroud of darkness may be a symbol of things more intimate and personal than we realize. At the heart of these depictions is the idea that the divine is encompassed by a sea of blackness, not necessarily a reference to God but to you and me in whom a spark of the divine resides. The divine nature or higher nature as we have called it is embedded in every human being within the physical body of flesh that we often connect with the darkness. In fact the whole material world is generally identified with blackness for as we have well established the physical elements have a strong connection with passion and pleasure and other worldly pursuits that occupy the interests of the immature and the sinful soul.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that man is from the beginning of his journey totally captivated by the things of material existence, there is still even in the most spiritually backward person a small seed of the divine, a very tiny flicker of light that reflects that he is made in the image of God deriving from his very substance. It is the thing of inestimable worth within us, cloaked by a physical body in which the soul dwells. There incarcerated within the bonds of the flesh is the spiritual seed, often latent in many people

¹⁶⁷ 2 Samuel 22:12

¹⁶⁸ Exodus 19:18

¹⁶⁹ 1 Kings 8:1-12

¹⁷⁰ Exodus 33:18-23

¹⁷¹ 2 Thessalonians 2:8

but present if even in embryo, the vilest of sinners included. To quote the words of St. Paul, it is within the “tent of this body”¹⁷² that the kernel of the spiritual self resides, precious beyond description in the sight of God. Like the fire of God enveloped in a dark cloud or a precious treasure residing in a dark temple room is the higher self within the physical frame that contains it.

The Light emerges from the Darkness

That the light is truly hidden within each one of us is supported through the testimony of nature, for every day at dusk the sunset communicates the same story to us over and over again. Every time the sun sinks into the horizon, we are being reminded that the light is concealed in the darkness, within the darkness of our physical bodies and dominated by a nature oblivious to the God who made it. Though it is not for the spiritual self to remain this way, encapsulated by a dark and formidable prison; rather as we have portrayed through this book, it is the calling of the higher self within us to grow and break free of the trammels of the physical stronghold that binds it. And this is the message of the sunrise which metaphorically depicts the light emerging from the darkness, day in and day out as a reminder of this incredibly important spiritual principle.

Naturally we would expect to find illustrations of this idea in the scriptures and of several examples to choose from we now take a look at a story from the life of Gideon who was one of the twelve judges ruling the nation of Israel before the monarchy was established. In this narrative of faith, God instructed Gideon to take a mere 300 men into battle against their enemy the Midianites, but without the luxury of sword and spear. Instead they were to carry other implements as if they were taking a casual stroll through the woods at night. Each man was to bear in one hand a trumpet and in the other a clay jar with a torch inside.

When the time came to engage the enemy, the three hundred men surrounded the camp of the Midianites and blew their trumpets. Then they smashed their jars and held the torches aloft in their hands at their positions around the encampment. As it turned out God didn't fail to provide a miracle, for the Midianites fled in fear and turned on each other with the sword killing themselves. And so with a trumpet, a clay jar, and a torch, Israel defeated their foe.¹⁷³

Besides the obvious story of faith that is told in this biblical narrative, there is more to be inferred from the passage on the symbolic level, and we focus our attention particularly on the clay jars and the torches that were inside of them. Following along with the idea in Genesis that man was fashioned out of the earth or clay in the Garden of Eden, we are presented with the jar as a symbol of the physical body of man which serves merely as a container for something greater. St. Paul whom we just alluded to was fond of this illustration, for in his second epistle to the Corinthians he used the same metaphor when speaking of our material bodies as “jars of clay.”¹⁷⁴ Only he wasn't as much interested in

¹⁷² 2 Corinthians 5:1; 2 Peter 1:13

¹⁷³ Judges 7

¹⁷⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:7

the jar itself but a treasure that was hidden inside of the jar. Frequently it was the case in ancient times for people to conceal their valuables in earthen vessels as they lacked any outward appeal that might attract unwanted inquirers. But for Paul, this treasure was a lot more valuable than mere gold or precious stones; rather it was something priceless and without comparison to anything found in the physical world.

Clearly the reference to the contents of the jar is the higher self that is shrouded by the earthly body of every person. Within the context of the Gideon story, it is portrayed under the device of the torch, itself a representation of light. Within the dark confines of the earthen vessels that Gideon and his men were carrying into battle was a concealed flame burning incognito to signify the spiritual nature that is hidden in the body of flesh. Though for some it is merely a tiny flicker, almost imperceptible and camouflaged by the physical nature that overshadows it, yet ultimately it is destined to wax into a mighty flame, a conflagration of divine love so much so that it must break out of its confines and become visible to all. This is why the small Israelite army smashed their jars, for metaphorically they were releasing the light that was within, and in that process they obtained a victory over their enemy, the same victory assured for the human race in its conquest of the lower self.

We now turn to a much earlier example depicting the same kind of message by going to the very introductory verses of the bible.¹⁷⁵ In many ways the scriptures illustrate the story of the human soul from its infant stages to the height of its development, and it does so on the microscopic and the macroscopic levels. At the beginning of man's earthly sojourn his soul is clouded in thick spiritual darkness without any knowledge of God shining within it. Consequently we read in the first few verses of Genesis that darkness was on the face of the deep which allegorically represents the darkness of man's spiritual mind in the very beginning of his human existence.

However, we know that this bleak condition of the soul is not to remain indefinitely. It is God's agenda to lead man along the spiritual path, and so we read that the Spirit of God was moving over the dark waters. We can understand from this that it isn't until God begins to work (move) on man's inner self that the seed of light begins to germinate within him and he begins to develop a steady and growing belief in him that dispels his natural darkness.

When God's spirit moves on the waters of man's mind, there is an ignition of the light within to grow into a flame of fire. So it is apparent in the next verse, for when God said, "Let there be light," the light exploded from deep within the primordial darkness. Out of pitch black and nothingness the light emerged to flood the universe, and so it is with mankind that within the utter spiritual darkness that engulfs him, the light breaks forth from the inner recesses of his being. One only needs to cooperate with the divine program and allow the light to grow inside of him. Then what has been merely a small latent flicker, much like a pilot light in an oven will turn into a formidable flame, a beacon that can be seen by all men.

¹⁷⁵ Genesis 1:1-3

Before continuing with additional biblical imagery, we look again at the testimony of nature which illustrates how it is the order of the universe for the light to break out of the darkness. A process which is continually ongoing in the cosmos is the birth of stars which vividly depicts what we have been discussing. Within the spiral arms of a galaxy, dark clouds of interstellar gas (mostly hydrogen) and dust collect, and as they grow their sheer mass causes them to begin to collapse upon themselves through the power of gravitational forces. As they begin to contract they also start to heat up according to basic physical laws reaching tens of millions of degrees. At that point an important event happens. Within the core of the cloud nuclear fusion commences as the hydrogen atoms fuse to form helium releasing an enormous amount of energy. At this moment a self-sustaining star has ignited within the depths of the cloud. Though at this time the bright young star is still cloaked from view, eventually it will absorb into itself the rest of the cloud and become a visible luminous body emitting light for often billions of years.

While the birth of a star is a normal part of the course of the physical universe, as an event that takes place many light years from our planet, it is certainly an illustration that is beyond our every day experience. One much closer to home that we can all identify with is the germination of a seed. Buried under dark layers of soil, when the spring rains come it activates underground and begins its journey within the earth. Working its way through the soil, often pressing through hard packed dirt and negotiating around rocks and other obstacles, the tender seedling finally breaks the surface of the ground to come into the light of day. From there it grows into a plant or perhaps a bush or tree. In due season, if it can survive it will come to maturity and begin to flower and produce vegetation.

Because Jesus was living in an agrarian society, he was particularly fond of using the metaphor of a seed in teaching the people about spiritual things, and he incorporated it in a number of his parables. An ideal symbol for the latent divine self that is resident in all men, this common token from the farming world was very useful to the Savior, for it represented that within every man is the potential for great spiritual growth. With the understanding that the seed begins in darkness and then must struggle to get out of the ground and then weather the hardships of climate and predators, the people could relate to the idea that the growth of the spiritual nature is one that is marked by trial and tribulation until it finally comes into its fullness.

As it is the destiny of the spiritual seed within man to have its start in the dark physical envelope of the body and then eventually break free of its original confines, Jesus told stories like the Parable of the Growing Seed: “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”¹⁷⁶ What he illustrates in this small sketch is the entire journey of the spiritual self from the time it is dormant within the soul until the point that it becomes the dominant principle within man. At the time of its

¹⁷⁶ Mark 4:26-29

maturity the sanctified soul is collected (harvested) back to God who formed it, the seed having borne the fruit it was programmed to produce at the beginning.

Jesus also taught the Parable of the Mustard Seed to give another nuance to the process: “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.”¹⁷⁷ What the Master reveals in this vignette is that the spark of the divine within man is indeed tiny, perhaps barely perceptible if at all to any but God alone who implanted it in man. But though dormant and inert in the initial stages of man’s journey, it will nonetheless become like a formidable tree by the time it is ready to bear fruit.

Of course, the Son of God also offered the very popular Parable of the Sower to his listeners which described the conditions of the earth that the seed encounters along its way. Casting it in different settings, Jesus spoke of the seed falling upon the hard path, on the rocky ground, among the thorns, and also upon good rich soil. Each of the first three environments he specified was meant to convey a particular difficulty presented to the growth of the seed including the adversity of the Evil One in various forms, namely trouble, persecution, and the allure of wealth.¹⁷⁸ Every man will metaphorically experience these three different soils along the road and particularly in the beginning of his earthly sojourn he will succumb to them. And though this will cause the seedling to stagnate or go backwards in its development, eventually it will learn hard lessons and ultimately find itself growing in the good soil that will take it to fruition. No negative experience is wasted, for everything in life is designed to correct us and lead us on the path to God, though few recognize it at the time.

The message of the seed has various nuances, but its primary import is the idea that spiritual life begins in the darkness. And for that matter the testimony of creation affirms it. Not only the seed has its start within the blackness of the earth, but all life whether it be fish, amphibians, reptiles, or birds that start out within the confines of an egg or mammals including you and I that begin life in the darkness of our mother’s wombs have their beginning in pitch darkness. We shall continue to explore this message again in the scriptures focusing our attention now on the character Joseph who has a long tale in the Book of Genesis.

It is very well recognized that the illustrious patriarch Joseph, for all intents and purposes a righteous man throughout his whole life is a Christ figure of the highest caliber. That is, the many details of his life foreshadow the person of Jesus in a prophetic sense. From the very beginning of our encounter with him in the Book of Genesis we get this notion about this hero of Israel, for we note that he was the most beloved of all Jacob’s sons and favoring him above the others, the old man clad him in a richly ornamented robe.¹⁷⁹ And as the beloved son of his father, we may be reminded of how Christ was the beloved son

¹⁷⁷ Mark 4:30-32

¹⁷⁸ Matthew 13:1-23

¹⁷⁹ Genesis 37:3

of God the Father who spoke from heaven and declared that he was well pleased with him.¹⁸⁰

Naturally, Joseph's brothers were terribly jealous of his special position in the eyes of their father and they hated him for it, but as if that were not enough for them to dislike their younger brother, Joseph's dreams added significantly more fuel to the fire. The teenager on several occasions related his visions of the night to the rest of the family which in no uncertain terms infuriated them. He communicated to his siblings that he had a dream about them all working in the fields binding sheaves, and Joseph's sheaf stood upright and all the other sheaves gathered round it and bowed down to it. He also told them about another dream in which he saw the sun (his father,) the moon (his mother,) and eleven stars (his brothers) bowing down to him for which he got a rapid rebuke.¹⁸¹

The simple symbolism of the dreams he shared didn't leave too much to the imagination, and so his family knew full well that Joseph was envisioning them all bowing down to him in obeisance. Of course these visions were none other than foreshadowings of the worship and homage Jesus would receive when the eleven apostles bowed at his feet and worshipped him before his ascension,¹⁸² but needless to say, like the Savior, Joseph did not readily receive the adulation and respect of his contemporaries at the onset. Indignant, Joseph's brothers chided him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you rule us?" and we are reminded of the Parable of the Ten Minas that Jesus taught about a king whose subjects hated him saying, "We will not have this man to reign over us."¹⁸³ And certainly the Savior's hypothetical story became all too true at the time of his crucifixion when the people of Israel shouted, "We have no king but Caesar."¹⁸⁴

Like the Pharisees who hated Jesus and wanted him dead, Joseph's brothers also plotted to kill him out of envy. When the teenage boy came out to visit his kin as they tended their flocks in the fields they conspired to do away with their younger brother. But planning to murder him in cold blood, they were fortunately thwarted by the older brother Reuben who convinced them to preserve the boy's life and throw him in an empty pit where they could keep him confined until they deliberated what to do with him next. When Joseph came to the place where his siblings were shepherding, they seized him stripping off his richly ornamented robe (much like Christ was stripped of his highly valued seamless garment) and threw him into the hole. With Joseph at the bottom of the dry cistern the brothers (without the knowledge of Reuben) proceeded to sell him into slavery to a caravan of Ishmaelites who were travelling down to Egypt with their camels laden with spices, balm, and myrrh.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁰ Matthew 3:17

¹⁸¹ Genesis 37:5-11

¹⁸² Matthew 28:16-17

¹⁸³ Luke 19:12-27

¹⁸⁴ John 19:15,16

¹⁸⁵ Genesis 37:12-26

So begins the story of Joseph's woes of which there is much symbolic significance to our theme. We have taken extra effort to draw a parallel between Joseph and Jesus Christ in this introduction to the patriarch's life, and that is because we wish to establish Joseph as a representation of the spiritual self within man. As a fully divine person, the Son of God epitomizes the divine self which is a part if not a very tiny part of a human being. Hence, Joseph as a type of Christ also shares this metaphorical identity and so we start our analysis of this Old Testament figure in earnest.

We have learned that God implants the spiritual seed within the physical world, namely within the material body of man where it must germinate and then grow up back toward heaven. With that in mind, the onset of Joseph's passion beautifully illustrates that theme, for after he was seized by his brothers, he was brutally thrown down to the bottom of a pit. Locked underground in the darkness, the young man depicts how the higher self falls from heaven where it comes from God only to become incarcerated in the lowest part of the created realms. There at "rock bottom" so to speak, it has no place to go but up, and so in time it will begin its ascent back to the One who sent it into the physical world. Here in the pitch black, within the earth the seed of the divine must begin to grow. It is very interesting that Joseph was said to have been cast into a pit, for our English nuances of that word only reinforce this picture. We frequently use the term to refer to the kernel or core of a piece of fruit. It is the seed that we find in the middle of a peach or plum, its dormant life that will go on to later grow into a tree if planted in the ground. And so we perceive the seed of the spiritual implanted in the heart of the physical world from which it must begin its journey toward the light of day. Not that this is easy, for we note that the cistern Joseph was confined in was empty. That is, it was devoid of water to indicate the comparatively spiritual aridity of the physical realm. In a harsh environment it must nevertheless find a way to develop.

We understand that the imprisonment of the spiritual nature within man is a great condescension considering where the divine nature originated. Compared to the great freedom that it enjoyed where it came from and the liberty that awaits it at the place it is going to, it is by all standards in a state of slavery. Though the soul hardly recognizes this fact as it has nothing with which to compare its own immediate experience, it is nonetheless in bondage to a physical body with all of its needs and desires which occupy its time and keep it on a continuous merry-go-round of survival. And in this state it is certainly a slave to pleasure seeking and gratifying its own selfish interests. St. Paul would rightly call it a "slave to sin"¹⁸⁶ for the demands of the earthly body make temptation most difficult for the soul embedded in material form. For these reasons, Joseph was sold to the Ishmaelites to become their chattel on the way down to Egypt. Significant on a few levels, we recognize that this people group was descended from none other than Ishmael the son of Abraham whom we previously identified with the lower nature of man. Naturally at the beginning of the earthly journey, man's latent higher self is completely dominated by a lower nature that has full control of the thoughts and actions of the individual, and in this respect it is totally in bondage. Of course life in the physical is no picnic despite the delusions of the animal nature, for hardship and difficulties far outweigh any fleeting pleasures it may experience, and for this reason the

¹⁸⁶ Romans 6:16

Ishmaelites were carrying spices among which was myrrh, that “bitter perfume” to signify the bitterness of material existence.

We have been tying the lives of Jesus and Joseph together, and so it is perhaps appropriate to mention that not only Jacob’s favorite son but also Jesus has portrayed the condescension of the spirit into the trammels of the flesh. We are fond of retelling the story of Christ’s birth each Christmas season, undoubtedly a joyous event but one the details of which hint at the common reality of mankind. We note that when Mary brought forth her firstborn son that she wrapped him in swaddling clothes.¹⁸⁷ Much like a mummy wound tightly with bandages, the newborn was confined in a “straightjacket” of sorts which signifies how entrance into the material world was for the Son of God like entering a prison compared to the glorious realm from which he came. Though much more painful for him, because he knew the difference, nonetheless we find ourselves in the same situation here on planet earth.

Returning again to the plight of our Old Testament friend Joseph, we note that life was difficult for him from the moment he was taken captive and sold as a slave. After being brought down to Egypt, he was purchased by a powerful government official and became his servant within the household. As it is common to man to be vexed by temptations in this world, it was not enough for the young man to be living a life of bondage but he was also subjected to the seductive voice of his master’s wife who as we have seen constantly nagged him to sleep with her. That Joseph was a man of integrity gave him the resolve to resist that opportunity, but it certainly came at a price. When the spurned mistress of the house sought to get even with Joseph, she turned the tables on her would-be lover and the young slave found himself in prison.¹⁸⁸

What we infer from this sketch is that though dormant for a long time, once the seed of the spiritual self begins to stir and assert itself against the ruling authority of the soul (as did Joseph with his master’s wife,) then there is a quick backlash on the part of the lower nature and the higher self is subjugated (put in prison) immediately for demonstrating any resistance. The path of the divine self in its material surroundings is a hard one for sure, but continued opposition to the agenda of the animal nature is its key to growth and one day overcoming its opponent.

Joseph languished in prison for some unspecified amount of time and while he was there it turned out that Pharaoh got angry with both his butler and baker and incarcerated them in the jail along with Joseph. After being there for awhile, both men had dreams during the night that they could not understand, and telling their stories to the young slave they hoped for an interpretation. As it came to pass, the servants of Pharaoh were not disappointed, for Joseph gave each a detailed symbolic rendering of their visions. Addressing the butler, he communicated to him that his dream indicated that he would shortly be restored to his former position as the cupbearer to Pharaoh. But good news was not in order for the baker of whom Joseph foretold his imminent execution. Within

¹⁸⁷ Luke 2:6,7

¹⁸⁸ Genesis 39

three days, things came about just as Joseph said and the one man was freed while the other paid for his offence with his life.¹⁸⁹

What we see in this vignette is yet another Messianic foreshadowing in which Joseph (the Christ figure) is flanked by two criminals much like the two thieves who were crucified on either side of Jesus.¹⁹⁰ To one malefactor Joseph predicted his restoration and to the other he foretold his destruction, and we are reminded of how Christ promised the “good thief” life in Paradise while the other died unrepentant. But this observation is for the purpose of making one more link between Joseph and the Savior. More pertinent to our discussion is the allegorical significance of Joseph’s tenure in prison.

We may be tempted to think of it as a waste of time for the higher self to be suppressed by the baser nature, but while it remains steadfast in its opposition to the one which incarcerates it much good is happening to the spiritual self which develops rapidly under such adverse conditions. We note that while in jail Joseph was interpreting dreams for his fellow inmates. More than just a passing detail of the story, the ability to decode such visions represents one of many spiritual skills that must be acquired during the course of life before the soul becomes sanctified. That Joseph was exhibiting this prowess in the bleakness of the dungeon shows how the developing spiritual nature begins to procure divine abilities through the trouble that it encounters in life and eventually the powers that it cultivates leads to its freedom from the tyranny of the flesh.

The continuing narrative of Joseph supports this very point, for an unforeseen turn of events would reverse the fortunes of the weary slave. After the butler’s release from prison, a full two years passed by while the young patriarch patiently endured what no doubt seemed to him an indefinite stay in jail. But then a strange thing happened in the palace. The Pharaoh began to have troubling dreams during the night which no one could interpret. Calling for the wise men and magicians of Egypt, the king solicited help but to no avail until the cupbearer learned of Pharaoh’s predicament. Remembering his fellow inmate Joseph, the butler told the king that he knew of a man in prison who could reliably interpret his troubling dreams. Thrilled at the prospect, Pharaoh quickly fetched Joseph out of prison, and relaying his visions to the young seer he eagerly awaited his response. And Joseph didn’t fail to measure up to the job, for he revealed to Pharaoh that his two disturbing dreams were one in the same: Egypt would experience seven years of great abundance only to be only to be followed by seven years of severe famine.

Joseph offered his advice to the king on how to manage the impending crisis suggesting a wise plan to store up plenty of grain in the years of plenty to tide the nation over until the long drought would end. Convinced that Joseph had accurately interpreted his dreams and satisfied that his plan would save Egypt from disaster, Pharaoh immediately put the young slave in charge of the entire project and elevated him to the second in command in all of Egypt, only subordinate to Pharaoh himself.¹⁹¹ In a remarkable sequence of events, the young Israelite went from bondsman to ruler of the entire land of Egypt all in one

¹⁸⁹ Genesis 40

¹⁹⁰ Luke 23:32-43

¹⁹¹ Genesis 41

day. While only the Providence of God could have arranged for all of this to transpire as it did, the message of the story is not just the fact that God can change the course of our lives very quickly. Rather, on the allegorical level, the revelation is that the soul which perseveres through hardships and fans into flame its spiritual nature will in the end see the victory of the higher self. Though the spiritual self spends long years under the thumb of the lower nature, in tyranny to its selfish rule, eventually its developing divine powers allow it to turn the tables on its opponent and wrest control from him. Then that which was formerly a slave becomes a ruler which the account of Joseph vividly portrays.

Israel and Egypt

The story of Joseph certainly is a powerful illustration of how the light emerges from the darkness, but the picture we have painted thus far is incomplete. The fullness of the imagery is only apparent when we consider another prominent symbol that runs through the background of the entire story and for that matter weaves through the bible as a whole. Within the story of Joseph we have frequent mention of the land of Egypt, itself a strong metaphor for the place of oppression and hardship that appears over and over again in the scriptures.

In the Hebrew language, the country is identified in the plural form to encompass both the Upper and Lower Egypts of antiquity. The word that is employed is *Mitsrayim* which conveys several related ideas including the notions of “being distressed, hemmed in, besieged, or limited.” A very strong figure of the realm of material existence, Egypt represents the place where the spirit is incarcerated and suffers the confinement and limitations that the flesh imposes upon it. Of course that Joseph’s enslavement took place in this country was very fitting and needless to say it adds another whole dimension to the story as such.

It is hard to say for sure how this African nation came to be identified with the physical world, but perhaps as a result of chronic harsh experience in that foreign country, Jewish thought has long associated Egypt with slavery and more specifically enslavement to the material world. Among Jewish spiritual writers, the land of the Nile River has become synonymous with the material life of man as opposed to his spiritual nature. In that way Egypt embodies the idea of slavery to the flesh and its appetites as well as the sin that is attached to life devoid of the spirit. For this reason the writer of the Pentateuch would associate the country with “flesh pots”¹⁹² as if the consumption of meat were tantamount to indulging the carnal nature.

At least by the beginning of the Christian era deliberate allegories were crafted to portray Egypt as the land of physical existence, and probably the most famous is the “Hymn of the Soul” which comes from the apocryphal Acts of Thomas that dates to the early 2nd century A.D.¹⁹³ In that metaphorical work, Egypt is clearly identified as a place of exile in which the soul being sent from God finds itself in a more difficult environment than it

¹⁹² Exodus 16:3

¹⁹³ Acts of Thomas, verses 108-113 (the Ninth Act)

had previously known. In the story the soul is depicted as one of the king's (God's) sons who travels a great distance to the land of Egypt (material world) where it clothes itself in the dirty clothes of the Egyptians (thinks carnal thoughts) and eats their food (indulges in the pleasures of physical existence) and falls asleep (forgets its spiritual heritage.) Aware of his predicament, the king (God) sends a letter to the son to arouse him from his slumber (spiritually awaken him) and make the journey back home again to where he belongs (return to God.)

A classic parable of the soul's journey from God and back to God again, the content of the Hymn of the Soul (also known as the Hymn of the Pearl) finds itself reflecting a frequent pattern in the scriptures of the same sort of thing. Over and over again in the bible we see a common theme of people descending to Egypt and then working their way out again back to the Promised Land. The patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarai were there for a season during a time of famine in Canaan only to make their way back to the Land of Milk and Honey.¹⁹⁴ Later at the onset of the Divided Kingdom, Jeroboam who was promised by a prophet to become the king of the 10 Northern Tribes fled to Egypt from the wrath of Solomon. There he waited until Solomon's death before returning and playing a hand at fracturing the nation and taking leadership of the land of Israel.¹⁹⁵ The prophet Jeremiah also made his journey to the "dark" country of the Nile accompanying a contingency of Jews fleeing from Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian threat to their nation. Eventually a group of fugitives returned to their homeland once again after some unspecified amount of time.¹⁹⁶ Even Joseph whose tale we have considered, after descending to Egypt as a bondsman finally made his return to the Holy Land though admittedly hundreds of years later for he gave orders that his body be carried up to Canaan which ultimately happened at the time of the Exodus.¹⁹⁷

Though the story of Joseph is perhaps the most detailed example, all of these references communicate the same kind of message. Having been sent from God, the soul finds itself impregnated in the physical world which we metaphorically identify as Egypt. There it begins its journey of life dominated by material concerns, oblivious to the knowledge of God or the way of the spirit. It remains in darkness for many years, suffering much and learning much until taking an interest in the spiritual it leaves that "dark country" behind and returns to the One who sent it.

Such is the roundtrip that is destined for every soul though few at any time recognize that they are on such a grand pilgrimage. So important a message this is that the Savior himself sought to illustrate it for us within the context of his own short life on earth. We recall that when Christ was born, King Herod had learned of it and sought to stamp out the Messiah whom he considered a threat to his rule. He put to death all of the infant boys in the local region around Bethlehem two years and younger. Only little did he know that Jesus and the Holy Family escaped his clutches and fled to Egypt where they remained for a few years until Herod was dead, and when it was safe to return, Joseph,

¹⁹⁴ Genesis 12:10-20

¹⁹⁵ 1 Kings 11:26-12:2

¹⁹⁶ Jeremiah 42:4-7; Jeremiah 44:14

¹⁹⁷ Exodus 13:19

Mary, and Jesus made their way back to the land of Canaan to spend many quiet years in Nazareth of Galilee.¹⁹⁸

St. Matthew the gospel writer comments on the whole affair with a poignant quotation from the prophet Hosea. He regards the descent to and return from Egypt as a fulfillment of a multifaceted prophecy in which God says, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”¹⁹⁹ For Matthew the Holy Family’s excursion to the land of the Nile was a fulfillment of this prediction, and while on the literal level we understand the words to signify the conclusion to a near death adventure for the young child, there is naturally a deeper significance for all of humanity. God is communicating to us that it is out of the bondage of material life that he is calling each of us who rightly are his sons and daughters, offspring of the Creator and therefore the children of the King (as the Hymn of the Pearl expresses it.) We begin our journey deeply entrenched in the physical world and all it has to offer us, but that is not the end of the story. The One who sent us into existence on earth then begins to whisper our name beckoning our return to him, and though it is a long time before each of us recognizes the voice and then has the wherewithal to follow the voice, eventually all respond and make their exit from Egypt back to the Promised Land flowing with Milk and Honey.

Now although Matthew appropriately attributes Hosea’s well known prophecy to the Son of God in his return from asylum in Egypt, we must remember that this was not the immediate application of the verse. In its full context, the text reads, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” The prophet’s immediate interest was therefore the people of Israel, the nation that God had chosen for his very own, and we will spend the remainder of this chapter focusing on this ethnic group and its relationship to the land of Egypt which follows the same kind of pattern we have been tracing.

Though it did not figure into our sketch of the patriarch Joseph, once the former slave rose to power he would play an important role in the life of his family, eleven brothers, a sister, and their father who resided in Canaan. The famine that plagued Egypt was apparently not merely a local issue but one that spanned a good portion of the Middle East. With food scarce in their homeland, the sons of Jacob made a trip down to Egypt for they had heard that there was plenty of grain in the federal storehouses available for purchase. Taking their silver with them, they came to the officials to fill their sacks so their families wouldn’t starve, but Joseph noticed them and in a very emotional encounter revealed himself to his brothers, the ones who had sold him into slavery. Though terrified at first at the thought the one they wished to kill was now as powerful as the king of Egypt, the brothers were eventually relieved to know that Joseph authentically forgave them and was genuinely interested in their well being.

Instructing them to go back home and retrieve Jacob their father along with their families, a total of 70 in all, Joseph told his siblings that he would settle them in the land of Goshen in Lower Egypt where he would be able to look after them for the remaining

¹⁹⁸ Matthew 2:13-23

¹⁹⁹ Hosea 11:1

years of the famine. Apparently this plan pleased Pharaoh, for he sought to help Joseph's brothers to relocate giving them carts to load their belongings on and provisions for their journey. As the political interests of the time were very pro-immigration, especially welcoming to Semitic peoples from the East as we have mentioned earlier, the king of Egypt was only too helpful to bring in some more aliens which he planned to settle in the best parts of the country.²⁰⁰

And so the family of Jacob, the proto-Israelites descended into Egypt where they stayed for not just a few years until the drought was over but for four hundred years. The small band left the land of Canaan only to become practically permanent residents of the dark country where they made their home in what was initially favorable surroundings. Following our allegory, the small clan of less than a hundred people, a humble tribe of souls was nothing more than a seed of a nation at the time, and so we rightly regard it as the seed of the spiritual planted deep in the heart of Egypt, lodged in the depths of the material world.

Within the dark earth, the seed germinates and begins to grow, and so we note the commentary of the Book of Exodus which communicates to us how the extended family of Jacob was very fruitful in that alien country to become exceedingly numerous. But all was not well for the growing tribe, for the favorable reception of foreigners came to a halt when during the Second Intermediate Period the Semites essentially took control of the country. Known as the Hyksos or Shepherd kings, they became a stench to the indigenous Egyptians who undoubtedly regretted welcoming the Asians into their country long before. Eventually regaining political control of the nation, the natives quickly turned the foreigners in the land into a subject people and oppressed them greatly so that they would never infiltrate the ranks of government again. So began the years of slavery for not only the descendants of Jacob but for all the Semitic peoples living in the country. And of course this condition like the position of Joseph in his early years of living in Egypt epitomizes the incarceration of the soul within the physical world or alternatively, the subjugation of the spiritual self under the rule of the dominant lower nature.

Naturally, the competing forces within the soul vie for power, but clearly in the early stages of the soul's tenure on earth, the lower self definitively has the upper hand and so it oppresses its weaker opponent vehemently. The introductory chapter to the Book of Exodus tells us about the forced labor that the Israelites were subjected to. "Working them ruthlessly, [the Egyptians] made their lives bitter with hard labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields."²⁰¹ Yet, a strange thing happened; according to the passage, "the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites." Indeed according to the law of the universe, resistance makes all things stronger, and so much to the chagrin of the lower self, the very tactics it uses to suppress its enemy actually work to strengthen it, for hardship is the spring of many virtues within the soul.

²⁰⁰ Genesis 42-45

²⁰¹ Exodus 1:11-14

The tension between the higher and lower natures that we shall now examine takes form in the persons of the prophet Moses and the Pharaoh who respectively represent the children of Israel and the Egyptians. For nearly half of the book of Exodus this conflict is acted out in an ever intensifying struggle. The story begins with the birth of Moses to a couple from the tribe of Levi at a time when the campaign against the Semitic peoples was fairly fierce, sometime in the late 16th century B.C. Then as we considered in the first chapter, a genocide was underway to eliminate all of the Hebrew male children from the land in an effort to effectively assimilate the Semitic peoples among the Egyptians. But Moses' mother wishing to spare her child this fate did her best to give her newborn a chance at survival. Putting him in a basket of reeds that she crafted, she floated him along the bank of the Nile hoping that he would be taken in by a compassionate Egyptian.

And indeed her plan succeeded, for Pharaoh's daughter discovered him among the reeds and adopted the child as her own knowing full well that it was a Hebrew baby to which she was giving asylum. The king's daughter wishing to properly care for the child sent to find a Hebrew woman to serve as a wet nurse, and as things would turn out, the child's birth mother was found and hired to suckle the child.²⁰² Probably for at least three years Moses' mother had charge of her own son, but at the time of his weaning he was officially turned over to Pharaoh's daughter whose identity in all likelihood was the great Hatshepsut, daughter of Thutmose I.

As the position of Pharaoh was one acquired through marriage into the royal family and not simply by being the son of the existing king, the one who wed the monarch's daughter, also known by the royal title of "God's wife" became the new ruler of the land. Thutmose II ascended the throne when he married Hatshepsut and the couple had a daughter Neferure who was also destined to become the progenitor of the royal line, but as fate would have it, Thutmose II died prematurely leaving behind a daughter too young to marry, and so no one was able to assume the power of the monarchy. Instead, Hatshepsut functioned as regent and ultimately as a Pharaoh herself wielding power in Egypt for many years. Assuming that Moses was indeed her adopted son, it seems likely that Hatshepsut's intention was for him to marry his sister Neferure when she came of age to become the next Pharaoh of Egypt. According to the first century Jewish historian Josephus, Moses was indeed the heir to the throne and while still a young man led a successful military campaign against the Ethiopians.²⁰³

A life of power and pleasure was apparently at his finger tips but undoubtedly to the shock of the royal family, at some point in his early adult life he decided to turn his back on it. We are told by the apostle Paul that following the path of faith, "Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter."²⁰⁴ Instead he chose to identify himself with the afflicted Semites with whom he shared an ethnic identity. It seems that his formative years at the breast of his birth mother left enough of an impact on him to still have some regard for his heritage, and witnessing the plight of the Israelites at the cruel hands of the Egyptians he was motivated to buck the system and become their defender. Making him

²⁰² Exodus 2:1-10

²⁰³ Antiquities of the Jews, Book 2, Chapter 10

²⁰⁴ Hebrews 11:23-29

unpopular with the elite of Egypt, such solidarity with an oppressed people would not necessarily have put Moses on the outs with his own royal family members, but a certain event that occurred around the time he was 40 years old assuredly created a permanent rift with his adoptive mother and siblings.

The Book of Exodus tells us that one day Moses went out to observe his people laboring hard under the heavy hand of their Egyptian taskmasters. Seeing one of them getting beaten by his master, he was incensed and perceiving that no one was around, he killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. But unfortunately for Moses, another Egyptian was watching and word got back to the royal household about it. We are informed that at that point Pharaoh (presumably Hatshepsut his own adopted mother) tried to kill him, and so he fled the country to the land of Midian.²⁰⁵ Whether Moses had informed Hatshepsut before this event that he would not be marrying Neferure and assuming the throne is unclear, but certainly after murdering the Egyptian taskmaster, there was no way that he could ever be accepted by the people as Pharaoh, even if he still consented to her wishes to wed her daughter. If there had been growing estrangement between Hatshepsut and Moses leading up to the murder, then this treacherous act against the Egyptians certainly caused a permanent break between the two. Hatshepsut was undoubtedly irate not only at how her adoptive son could betray her people but also at how her plans for him were now foiled as he was no longer politically eligible to be king. So choosing another road than the one that was planned for him, he made his departure from Egypt staying out of the country for the next 40 years. In the meantime, Hatshepsut gave her daughter Neferure to another who became Pharaoh Thutmose III, one with whom Moses would have more dealings in the future.

From the perspective of the world, the actions of Moses were indeed foolishness. Who living in the lap of luxury would throw it all away just to stand up for mere principle? Who would compromise a life of ease for some nebulous ideals? Yet that is exactly what Moses did. Not merely able to stand by and watch an oppressed people toil away in misery, he asserted himself at the cost of his own comfort. St. Paul tells us that Moses “chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.” Clearly Moses represents the spiritual self within man, for he chooses the hard road of rejecting power, pleasure, and ease all that he might tread the path of faith and attain something of much greater value.

The conflict between the higher and lower selves begins here in the Book of Exodus with the murder of the Egyptian which we could say represents an early attempt of the divine self to overthrow the lower nature. But as the spiritual within man is not well developed at this point, such attempts are not usually successful and a brutal backlash from the ego-self, the selfish animal nature within is sure to follow. And so Pharaoh, the ruling power according to the interests of the flesh tried to kill Moses snuffing him out like a wick.

Though the spiritual is at this point forced back into hiding (with Moses’ exile to Midian) the war between the inner factions of the soul is far from over. It will wage again fiercely at the appropriate time, and so it was that after 40 years the prophet sent on a mission

²⁰⁵ Exodus 2:11-15

from God returned to Egypt. The Israelites were crying out bitterly for deliverance, and God heard their petition charging Moses with the job of rescuing them from their bondage. Returning to the land of darkness, the prophet marched into Pharaoh's court and began making demands of the king,²⁰⁶ and before we dismiss the idea that Moses obtaining an audience with the ruler of the nation is far-fetched, we must recall some facts from the prophet's earlier life.

Certainly Moses was a member of the royal household for forty years and knew all of the players in the high ranks of government, and for this reason a "knock on the door" would have given him the privilege of standing before the monarch. But additionally we must remember that by this time Hatshepsut, the one who eagerly wanted to kill him was dead. In her place was Thutmose III who married her daughter, and it seems that he had no axe to grind with the prophet. Rather, in all likelihood he was probably somewhat grateful to Moses for abdicating his right to the throne that he might obtain it for himself.

In any event, Moses and his brother Aaron were readily able to approach the throne at regular intervals upon the prophet's return from Midian. Their initial encounter with Pharaoh was to deliver a simple message and one that would be reiterated many times before a final resolution was achieved. Addressing the king, they said, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel says: 'Let my people go that they may hold a festival to me in the desert.'" But Pharaoh protested that he didn't know the Lord and would not let the people go.²⁰⁷ Indeed the lower nature does not know God at all, for its reality does not extend beyond what the five senses can detect. It cannot comprehend anything outside of physical existence nor does it wish to, and so the king of Egypt sought to stifle this foolish petition by making things a lot harder for the Semites in the land. Intent on snuffing out any pursuit of spiritual interests which it regards as a waste of time and counterproductive to life in the material world, the lower nature will beat on the higher self in an effort to make it abandon its intangible and high ideals. So Pharaoh, put the people back to brick making but no longer provided them straw for this task. Instead the Israelites had to gather their own straw while still maintaining the same quota of bricks.

This act of retaliation just made the Semitic slaves all the more miserable, and they cried out to Moses questioning the wisdom of his confrontation with the king. In fact this is the experience of all aspiring souls who making an effort to follow the path of God encounter ever increasing resistance along the way. Unless one understands that this is the normal state of affairs, he will question whether his charted course is the right one perhaps erroneously assuming it should be some sort of "highway."

At this point, the conflict between Moses and Pharaoh was only just beginning to escalate, and neither party was backing down. The prophet was ready to begin taking greater measures with his opponent to achieve liberation for the people. If asking nicely wasn't going to work, then there were more tricks up his sleeve to get the stubborn king to cooperate and let the children of Israel go. The next step involved performing a miraculous sign for the monarch to prove to him that God was genuinely behind the

²⁰⁶ Exodus 2:23,24; Exodus 3:10; Exodus 5:1

²⁰⁷ Exodus 5:1-21

message of Moses. Aaron threw his staff on the ground and it became a snake, and though the Egyptian magicians were able to do the same, the staff of Aaron consumed those of all the wise men of Egypt to signal its superiority.²⁰⁸ But even this did not convince Pharaoh that he should oblige the request to free the people from slavery. Nonetheless the message of this particular exchange in the king's court is that it is necessary for the higher self to begin "flexing its muscles" and display its spiritual powers before the material self. Like Joseph whose power to interpret dreams won him the command of Egypt, so too the display of spiritual skills on the part of the higher self will ultimately cause the lower nature to cede control of the soul through intimidation if for nothing else.

At an impasse, the contest between king and prophet was only to get fiercer. Tougher means of getting Pharaoh to cooperate were in store taking the form of ten plagues upon the Egyptians, and in this we understand the ordinary program that God has in store for every soul to drive it on the spiritual path. The plagues that were inflicted upon the land of the Nile are symbolically equivalent to the pain and suffering that physical man is destined to endure during his tenure in the land of the living. God sends affliction to the soul that it might become disenchanted with earth life as we have learned. He does this so that within the heart of man there might stir a longing for something more that it doesn't yet know but hopes for, a reality beyond the cruelty of physical existence to set its sights on. We have already spent much time on the redemptive value of suffering and suffice it to say it is once again embodied over several long chapters here in the Book of Exodus as the Egyptians are plagued with one catastrophe after another.

Flies and gnats, locusts and hail and several other blights were all experienced by the people of Egypt in a long series of hardships over some unspecified period of time.²⁰⁹ In most cases, while weathering the affliction, Pharaoh relented of his refusal to let the Israelites go. But then no sooner did Moses lift the plague to give the Egyptians relief than Pharaoh went back on his word and changed his mind again. So things went back to business as usual as if the king had never promised to revoke the policy of enslavement. And how true is this of the developing soul! Ever before it becomes completely devoted to God, it spends years in a phase of vacillation. When times are difficult, indeed God gets its attention and it is willing to cooperate and follow the path. It seeks relief and will do anything to obtain it. But as soon as the heat is turned off, it quickly forgets the trouble it was in and also returns to its old ways. Of course we observe this all the time with people who flock to the churches in a time of crisis only to abandon the pews when things return to normal again. But this is a normal phase in the development of the soul. Only repeated episodes of hardship will finally weary it to the point of being willing to turn its back on the way of pleasure and profit and commit itself wholeheartedly to God whether or not things are going well in its life. Indeed that is what God is after – devotion that is independent of the tide of human life, and the program of suffering ultimately achieves this goal in every soul though admittedly it takes some longer than others.

²⁰⁸ Exodus 7:8-13

²⁰⁹ Exodus 7:14-10:29

For Pharaoh, it took a grand total of ten consecutive plagues before he finally capitulated and really let the people go. He and the Egyptians were getting tired out by one devastation after another, but the last of the plagues put every one over the edge of the cliff. As we had surveyed in the last chapter, it was the death of the firstborn, a tragedy affecting just about every home in Egypt that brought the oppressors to their knees. Not only did Pharaoh permit the Semites to go, he and the Egyptians more or less begged them wishing to avert any more incidents of God's wrath upon them.²¹⁰ To what should we compare this breakthrough? It is certainly a cathartic moment for the soul, and perhaps we could say it is equivalent to the time when the soul no longer vacillates but becomes focused on the path of perfection before it, wishing to serve God to the best of its ability all of the time. At the very least it represents a changing of the guard within man where finally the higher self becomes the dominant player within the heart. In our allegory of the firstborn it symbolized the point at which the second born comes to supplant his older brother and take the reins of power within the soul. Whatever we identify it as, it is a step of freedom for man emerging from bondage to self.

This final plague of great devastation is tied together with another great event in the history of Israel culminating in the Exodus from bondage. What is known as the Lord's Passover was the last ritual meal celebrated by the Jewish people on the fateful night the firstborn were put to death, the eve before the great Exodus from slavery. As alluded to in the last chapter, each family was to take a lamb and slaughter it on the final day in Egypt. Subsequently they were to take the blood from the animal and smear it on the door posts to ward off the angel of death from harming anyone in the home on that night of carnage. Moses instructed the people to roast the lamb over a fire with head, legs, and inner parts intact. Then each family was to consume it along with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. While on the surface none of this seems particularly strange, it was commanded that the Israelites should eat the meal with their "cloaks tucked into their belts, with their sandals on their feet, and with their staffs in hand."²¹¹

The symbolism contained in the ritual probably isn't too elusive, for it is clear that partaking of the meal fully dressed to run out the door signifies that the people were about to make an imminent departure from the land after a long 400 years away from Canaan. But on the allegorical level that we have been considering it implies even more. In this transition in which the lower nature gives way to the higher, the soul is to make a clean break from its former ways, a putting away of sin. As if running away from it fully dressed and ready to go it is called to embark on a new life set on holiness. It is not to be sluggish in its abandonment of the ways of the flesh but put them behind it as quickly and efficiently as possible. Like those who left Sodom and were told not to look back, the soul must forge ahead with great determination and effort, even fleeing from the occasion of sin as did Joseph who ran away from his adulterous master's wife.

Because of the need to make haste in their exit from Egypt, the people were told to dress for rapid departure and along with that prepare a meal that could be arranged quickly. For this reason, they roasted the nearly intact animal over a fire, the way wandering

²¹⁰ Exodus 11; Exodus 12:29-33

²¹¹ Exodus 12:1-11

shepherds would do in the wilderness. In the interest of time, they also baked unleavened bread, for omitting the yeast there was no need to wait for the dough to slowly rise. Certainly getting rid of this one ingredient fits in well with the theme of expedience, but of course it also has an additional overtone. Frequently in the scriptures, leaven serves as a symbol of corruption and sin, and along these lines the Savior warned his disciples about the “leaven of the Pharisees”²¹² referring to the poisonous words they spread among the Jews. And so discarding the yeast serves as another metaphor for putting away sin during this time of transition from bondage to freedom.

Finally we make note of the bitter herbs that the Semites ingested along with the meal of roasted lamb and unleavened bread. These included such plants as endive and chicory that were indigenous to the land of Egypt, and naturally in the context of the Passover they signify the bitter years spend in that dark country. These acrid vegetables were to be a reminder of the hardship, struggle, and tears that were endured during years of enslavement. Following our allegory, they represent the bitter struggle the soul engages in to make the transition from the carnal to spiritual way of life. All who achieve sanctity have passed through an agony of soul marked by many many years of suffering, sacrifice, and great effort. Indeed it is a bitter path that all must journey on before coming into the freedom of the kingdom of God, one that is represented by this simple Passover meal celebrated many centuries ago.

In the end we are reminded that all of the events of the Exodus occurred in the first month of the Jewish year, the month of Abib.²¹³ Like the story of Esther that we surveyed in the first chapter, freedom was obtained for the Israelites in what according to our calendars is late March/early April. In the Providence of God we see this as also very relevant to mark the transition from deadness of winter into the new life of spring. It is final commentary on the soul which is called to emerge from the darkness into God’s glorious light.

²¹² Matthew 16:6

²¹³ Exodus 12:4