

How Genesis Faces Chaos

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I am writing in the time of Covid 19, of deep racial protests, political clashes, forest fires burning up the West, hurricanes at our shores, memories of 9/11 haunting our screens, and now the conflicts following the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the president's taxes, and Covid invading the White House. Our churches participate in this chaos and the resulting fears about the future of life in the United States and on the planet. Not knowing about our future life together is our common plight, whether we will face further turbulence or with new energies begin again. Maybe we will regather as worshipping communities, humbly grateful for each other and ready to act in justice and mercy. Maybe we will participate in the further eclipse of our institutions, hardening racism, and deepening divides among us. Even if the intervening election goes as you or I may wish, traumatic wounds and fears among us will remain unhealed. I think the book of Genesis can help us now because it is survival literature.¹

I began studying Genesis closely only after working on the book of Jeremiah, a prophet of the Babylonian Period.² That prophetic book—abounding as it does with images and narratives of disasters, predictions of the end of Judah, and fire and brimstone from God who punishes the people for their harlotry—vividly depicts traumatic violence and its long-term consequences for the people of Israel. Genesis, by contrast, is a book of life, of creation by Word, of love found and babies born, of returning home, of rebuilding peace in the family. Yet God brings new life in this book only after piercing threats to existence. In this way, the book evokes the well-known path of Christian life, of passion, death, and resurrection, of Lent leading to Easter.

Trauma and disaster studies is a loose collection of academic disciplines that investigates effects of violence upon communities and individuals and asks how they can survive. Typically, victims of various forms of disaster are unable to absorb violence because human brains cannot absorb shocking events when they are happening. Violent events overwhelm the senses even though they simultaneously implant fractured memories in bodies and minds of victims. The traces of trauma can dominate communal life until victims or their descendants deal with it. From warfare to natural disasters to profound personal losses, terrifying human experiences typically shut down feelings, meanings, and hope. Traumatic violence spawns social upheaval and destroys traditions, institutions, and the community itself.

With the Babylonian invasions and assaults on the nation, for example, the people of Judah lost nearly everything, their king, rulers, temple, and control of their land. Babylon deported the elite, displaced many who remained in the land, and occupied Judah, undermining the economy. For life to begin again after such devastation, survivors must face the wounds of the past, a task best achieved indirectly so as not to retraumatize them in repetitive loops of traumatic violence.

Victims need to see what happened to them, to grieve it, and ultimately to begin to interpret their experiences. They require new meanings, reframings of their history, reimagined accounts of their shattered traditions. Survival as a people demands

interpretation, new narratives that rebuild their broken lives. Even when these interpretations are simplistic, partial, or inadequate to the complexity of events, they can help the community survive until a clearer framework emerges. Without a process of re-narrating the past, of shaping new stories from old ones, the world will remain chaotic and life thwarted. This is what Genesis does decades after the nation's fall during the Persian Period.

From the perspective of collective trauma studies, Genesis emerges as a work of pastoral care for a suffering and divided people profoundly uncertain about their future. From beginning to end, the book's stories depict chaos, conflict, and repeated threats of extinction for major characters and their families. Yet the book breeds hope, for every story in it ends with survivors and new life. I propose that Genesis functions as a form of artistic survival literature that journeys from near death to life again and again. To show how it becomes a book of resilience, I look briefly to the flood story, the binding/sacrifice of Isaac, and the Joseph novella.

My expanding view of Genesis emerged when I started to work on the story of Noah and the flood (Gen 6-9). There I anticipated a boring battle with source criticism because the multi-chaptered flood narrative, with its repetitions and contradictory duplicate versions of events, most vividly demonstrates pre-existing sources from multiple authors. With trauma and disaster themes still circulating in my head from Jeremiah, however, other features of the text emerged. Beyond the sources, I saw elements of what I call a "disaster narrative," that is, a literary account of colossal destruction, the seeming end of everything, with unclear causes. Yet amazingly, there are survivors, and nearly from scratch, God creates again. The flood presents endings, the destruction of the entire world, of all creation animate and inanimate, a collapse so total that life on earth appears to be over. Only Noah, his family, and their animal companions survive the deluge because God remembers Noah! (Gen 8:1).

The flood story is a symbolic retelling of the nation's destruction (probably at the hands of Babylon), with its terrifying loss of all known supports for the nation, here depicted in a mythic world of uncreation. Before videos, the story takes its ancient audience into a spiritual and psychic space of terror and seeming abandonment through an experience beyond explanation. Yet after a colossal build-up of waters, rescue comes when God remembers Noah, and immediately the waters subside at the same steady pace with which they rose until dry land appears. After this destruction and death, God promises to recreate the world and provide a new beginning for the surviving remnant. Similar narrative patterns appear across Genesis.

Within this literary drama, the flood story presents Judah's national disaster as if in a stage play about primal events that happen to ancient ancestors and for which the causes are mythic and mysterious. The reason for the flood, the text implies, is that the sons of God have intercourse with the daughters of humans (Gen 6:1-8). God overlooks the wicked sexual attack by the heavenly beings and sees only human evil that requires colossal punishment. Yet chaos does not rule the universe, for cause and effect still exist and "explain" the disaster.

Pastors and caregivers today usually understand this interpretive process. When people try to deal with the loss of a child, news of job loss, of eviction, of tragic illness, they often ask what did I/we do wrong? Why is God angry with us? Like so many passages in the earlier works of Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Ezekiel that also propose vague causalities, mysterious and unclear, the cause of catastrophe here is

human failure. Despite ways this interpretation oversimplifies suffering, the act of blaming themselves for their disasters can, surprisingly, be a comfort to survivors. It reduces terror because it provides explanation for the troubles—God is punishing us. Cause and effect prevail in the otherwise chaotic world, and humans have some agency, for they can prevent future disasters by being faithfully obedient like Noah. Righteous living can keep terrors of the world at bay. In this interpretation, suffering is our fault.

To contemporary theologians, such theological interpretations may seem utterly simplistic and inadequate to explain invading empires, military assaults, the fall of a nation, the dislocation of the population, the deportation of leaders, and occupation by aggrandizing foreign powers and natural disasters. I like to call this self-blaming approach to suffering a “momentary stay against confusion” as Robert Frost called poetry, a theological survival strategy for the moment until broader perceptions can one day emerge.³

When the waters subside, the flood narrative concludes with the larger claim of Genesis, that the God who created the world from chaos merely by speaking the words “Let there be” will re-create the world anew, start all over again to establish life after destruction, and by implication, recreate the nation. A rainbow appears, vineyards are planted, children are born, humanity spreads out across the globe.... The people of Judah, too, will survive the occupying empires if they cling to God.

When Genesis turns away from primal origins to stories about the ancestors (chs. 12-50), it enfolds narratives of near extinction within the divine promises, all of which point toward survival and new life for the nation. The promises relate to the survival of a devastated people. To the nation ravaged by invasions and destruction, God promises children in profligate numbers, more offspring than the stars of the heavens and the sands of the sea. To a people whose land is occupied by foreign empires, God promises land in perpetuity; that is, it is still their land. To a people shamed and humiliated by military assaults and devastations, God promises the honor of a great name. And to a people with a ransacked economy, God promises blessing, material blessings beyond mere survival, ultimately realized in abundance of wealth in animals and households.

Yet when the ancestral stories begin, these future events are preposterous, impossible, laughable. Consider the promise of a child to the ancient, barren, post menopausal couple of Sarai and Abram, unable to bear offspring, threatened frequently by famine, by the matriarch’s abduction into foreign harems, until finally a child is born who then is immediately threatened with death by God’s command to sacrifice him on Mount Moriah (Gen 22).

The binding/sacrifice of Isaac is the most vivid and challenging of disaster narratives in Genesis. The promised son whose birth readers anticipate for ten chapters, who miraculously arrives amid overwhelming layers of infertility, is about to be eradicated from the book and the world. Isaac, however, like all the major characters, represents the nation; his death would mean the end of the line, the cessation of the promises, the loss of the family, and the disappearance of Israel/Judah from the face of the earth. At the very last minute, when all hope is lost, the God who commands the sacrifice intervenes to prevent it.

Chapter 22 is a highly structured, ritualized story told in a series of dramatic moments, as if in a divine commissioning with the responsive, obedient Abraham utter-

ing “Here I am” three times across the chapter (vv. 1, 7, 11). The first verse explains and interprets the scene as well as the nation’s disaster. The command to execute the innocent child-ancestor is a test of Abraham’s faith, not the consequence of anything anyone did. This is a far different interpretation of the nation’s fall than that of the flood story, where sin is the cause. In both interpretations, however, God remains in charge of the world.

Again, a narrative of proximate death resonates with the plight of the Judean people nearly destroyed by Babylon. Told here in a sharply focused narrative about Isaac, the text is equally terrifying but more realistic than some other disaster narratives in Genesis, such as fire and brimstone destroying Sodom. Genesis 22 offers a competing interpretation of why the nation nearly disappeared, another approach to suffering well-known to pastors and caregivers. People who have known great tragedy frequently seek a silver lining and declare their loss and pain to have been a test that they have survived and that has strengthened them despite the despair at the time. This interpretation is another human effort to make sense of the senseless, and it also leaves us with a problematic theology. Rather than the equally problematic view of God as an arbitrary Punisher, God appears here as a cruel Tester. These interpretations are inadequate, partial ways to find some redemption after loss and suffering. They are survival strategies. Abraham and Isaac survive the catastrophe no matter the cause, and by implication, the book’s ancient audience will also survive.

My favorite male ancestor in Genesis is Joseph. His story is more coherent and longer than other Genesis narratives as if, perhaps, it is offering a symbolic summary of the audience’s present situation. Here is what happened to us, it suggests. In it, the psychological subtleties of characters’ actions seem to call the ancient audience to struggle with motivations and revelations for their own sakes. During the early Persian period, Judah/Israel faces additional threats to their life together including inner conflicts and power struggles, uncertainty about whether exiles should return to the land, disputes about who belongs to Israel, and whether or not conflicts between the exiles and those who were left in the land can be resolved. In the Joseph narrative, all these matters come into play against the background of the catastrophic famine. Will the children of Jacob/Israel survive as a people in this overturned world?

After Joseph’s predictive dreams in this well-known narrative, father Jacob unwittingly ignites the plot by failing to grieve the loss of his beloved wife Rachel, a failure that becomes the catalyst for family havoc. Failure to grieve is a common consequence of traumatic experiences, a coping strategy based on heroic determination to get on with it. Jacob gets on with it by transferring his love for Rachel to her sons and so breeding toxic jealousy among the brothers. He gives Joseph alone a special coat and then blindly commissions this chosen son to investigate the peace/well-being of his brothers. When they see Joseph approaching from afar, they plot to kill him, abandon him in a dry pit to die, but after haggling among themselves, they finally sell him to passing merchants. Then they trick father Jacob into an interpretation of another unthinkable loss: wild animals must have devoured his beloved son. Readers can wonder if Jacob’s haste to explain Joseph’s bloody garment covers up suspicions about his other sons’ involvement. Later details suggest that possibility. Jacob cannot recover from this loss either, nor perhaps can the survivors of the destroyed nation easily grieve their losses.

Back in Egypt, Joseph’s life follows in the pattern of historical suffering and

success experienced by the Judean exiles in Babylon. Like the exiles, he is a slave deported to Egypt, a stand-in for Babylon and, in his case, sold to the Potiphars. Like the exiles, he prospers (on and off) in his new land, that is, until Mrs. Potiphar abuses him in a sexual assault. She lies about him, belittles him racially, or at least ethnically, as a lowly and despicable Hebrew, and then her husband has him incarcerated in Pharaoh's prison. Marking the symbolic low point of his captivity, the prison, too, is called a "pit," like the pit of near death where his brothers put him in the desert, and we again expect him to die.

Despite his wrongful incarceration and against expectation, Joseph prospers in prison, and like the exiles, he is captive for a very long time. The tension of imprisonment increases when he wisely interprets dreams of Pharaoh's servants, and the pleased cupbearer promises to remember him. His release seems imminent, but the cupbearer forgets him. He seems to have no future until years later when, luckily, the Pharaoh has indecipherable dreams.

Pharaoh's dreams involve another threat to survival, this time from a famine overtaking the whole world. As a folkloric hero, Joseph is a wise interpreter of dreams, and Pharaoh immediately recognizes his amazing talents and so elevates him to second in command and gives him control of all the business of the empire. Suddenly "in clover," Joseph embraces the culture and customs of his new world, as did some Judean exiles. He is there to stay. He gains an Egyptian name, an Egyptian wife, and two Egyptian-born sons whose names reveal his coping strategies in his new reality. He names his first son Manasseh (God has made me forget my father's house) and the second Ephraim (God has made me prosperous). Typical of immigrants and displaced people, and perhaps of Judean exiles, Joseph "forgets," that is, he denies his very painful past.

Joseph assimilates, thrives, and finds honor in his new land, until one shocking day when his denied and repressed life descends upon him in a waterfall of remembrance. His brothers are suddenly bowing before him begging for food. They do not recognize him, so Egyptian has he become, but he recognizes them.

This moving, fate-filled moment seems to invite all readers to consider how we ourselves would respond if, like Joseph, we were suddenly confronted by our betrayers, people close to us who wanted us dead. In this scene, Joseph, the Judean exile, symbolically confronts the people who remained in the land. Separating them from each other are all the disagreements, jealousies, conflicting memories, and power plays that make life together imaginable. At this moment, Joseph's dreams come true, for he has vast power over his prostrating brothers and can take delicious revenge, torturing them in any way he pleases. Amazingly, he does not. Instead, he conjures up a set of tests to see if his brothers have changed. Readers may notice that the tests re-enact aspects of Joseph's own trauma when he imprisons Simeon and then sets a trap with Jacob's other beloved son Benjamin as bait.

No story in Genesis presents a literal representation of the multiple problems facing its ancient audience. Rather, the book approaches profound loss, fear, denial, conflict, and doubts about the future through indirect pictures of Judean experiences of catastrophe in stories happening to someone else wherein they can see their own suffering, recognize their lives obliquely, and begin to interpret the past anew, to re-frame it within a broader reality. The Genesis stories set history before them through the ancestors' lives. Death threatens them all, but God intervenes in both miraculous

and naturalistic fashions, and they survive. God brings them again and again to the land, even if only to bury bones of loved ones.

After Jacob learns that Joseph is alive, his grief, depression, and hopelessness disappear in an explosion of new life. The father of the nation is exhilarated to reunite with his exiled son. In the lives of these characters, the people of the land reunite symbolically with exiles who are not lost, not dead, but thriving in captivity. So accepting and happy is Jacob with Joseph's Egyptian family that later he formally adopts Joseph's foreign-born sons as his own sons, lifting them from grandchildren to the level of his own sons. The restored nation cannot not reject foreign-born children of foreign women as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah propose, and to hammer the matter home, a genealogy of all Israelites in Egypt includes Joseph's Egyptian wife Asenath, the only woman listed as a wife among the sons of Jacob (46:8-27).

If God appears in the flood story as a punisher and in the Isaac story as a tester, God is distant and barely mentioned in Joseph's experience except for comments by the narrator. Unlike his forefathers, Joseph has no direct contact with God. Perhaps he forgets God along with repressing his Israelite identity. The narrator reports that Joseph succeeds in Potiphar's house and in prison because God is with him, but Joseph does not know this. Presumably he lives a life of unknowing, and possibly, almost certainly, of deep despair, of a hopelessness that is never recorded, never expressed, but is an implied undercurrent of his abuse by his brothers, the Potiphars, and in the pit of a prison. No wonder he forgets his father's house and becomes an assimilated Egyptian. He does indeed mention God or the gods (Elohim) when he interprets dreams for the other prisoners and Pharaoh, but in both cases, he is speaking to Egyptians who believe in the gods, not YHWH. He seems to have forgotten YHWH.

Yet even if the characters are unaware of divine presence, God is not absent. God is there indirectly through dreams across the story, through the narrator's comments. God's presence becomes evident to Joseph only after the fact, after all the suffering, the displacement, slavery, wrongful incarceration, and abandonment.

When Joseph finally recognizes God in his life, he reframes and re-interprets the past. The opening may begin when he sees his brothers bowing before him, holds back from judging them, and devises tests to discover that, yes, they have changed. From Judah's impassioned speech, he learns that they will not betray Benjamin nor ignore the despair of their father Jacob. Judah's words reveal him and by implication his brothers to be renewing creatures, and that disclosure makes it safe for Joseph to reveal who he is. He is the brother whom they believe is dead. "Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. . . , a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God" (Gen 45:5, 7-8, see Gen 50:19-21).

Divine involvement in their survival appears only in retrospect, in interpretation after-the-fact. Joseph's enlarged vision places their long history of suffering within a beautiful world of divine intention and order. It does not deny the past nor the brothers' guilt nor his pain, but sets all within a more expansive vision of their suffering, giving their experiences meaning, power, and significance beyond their separated lives. Joseph's interpretation is a survival strategy not unlike seeing pain and destruction as a test or as divine punishment, but it is perhaps more adequate to the breadth of their experience. God was hidden, Joseph asserts, behind their conflict, pain, guilt, and denial. There was a reason, even a plan, for devastating experiences that were so

painful—to keep them alive and create them anew as a people. The exiles and those in the land can find life together, for God has been there all along.

Joseph, the dreamer and interpreter of dreams, is above all an interpreter of life, of pain, of struggle. He is the victim of his brothers' hatred, of Mrs. Potiphar's assault and racism, and of wrongful incarceration. The victim is able to embrace without condition the very people who acted to end his life. Because he can do this, he saves the family/nation and brings them back together so they can survive conditions where life has seemed impossible. The victim is the hero, the hero the victim, who speaks from his experience. He does not offer abstract doctrine but reframes the past suffering from his own life, and so a way to the future is possible.

There is so much more to say about this moving and provocative story of near ending, but Joseph and Genesis itself do the work of preachers; that is, they interpret and reframe suffering within the light of God. The United States is not under military invasion at the moment, so perhaps it is excessive to ask if we will survive as a people in this time of overlapping threats to life and to national unity, yet aspects of Genesis reverberate now. Precisely how preachers can bring new meaning to troubled families and our troubled nation, filled as we are with anger, denials, and lies, accusations, and betrayals, is not clear to me, but that it must be done is evident.

In the chaos of unknowing, uncertainty, and fear, perhaps today's challenges invite us to embrace our deeply unsettling circumstances and a future without clarity or much shape at all. Perhaps acceptance of the fears brought to the surface by not knowing can more deeply open us to the divine life yet to be discovered and received in our broken and blighted times. "You intended it for evil, but God intended it for good." May it be so.

Notes

1 Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Genesis 1-25A* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2018), and *Genesis 25B-50* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2020).

2 See Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011).

3 <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/98513-the-figure-a-poem-makes-no-one-can-really-hold>.