

## **Jubilee Cell Materials (based on the life of Jacob)**

### **Article 1**

#### **Passage: Genesis 25:19-34**

“This is the account of the family line of Abraham’s son Isaac.” The passage used the customary form of narrating ‘this is the family line of XXX’ to begin Jacob’s story. This signified that what happened in the past in the Abrahamic event was related to this coming one, a continuation of the unfolding of events. So God’s expressed intentions and promises to Abraham were key to the development of the story. The start of the story was yet another problem about descendents. Isaac prayed to God after his wife could not conceive, and God gave him twins. (Reflection: the story about his offspring is so different from his father’s.) If you would recall, Abraham experienced so much ups and downs to get Isaac, and the family continued to experience conflict and disharmony because of this child.

For Rebecca to conceive twins, it should have been a joyous event. But she suffered when the babies jostled with each other within her. God explained to her that two nations would be born and they would struggle with one another.

Let us reflect deeper on the story at this point: in comparison with the situation of the previous generation, the state of barrenness was solved when the prayer to God was answered. This seemed to be more “normal” compared to how Abraham and Sarah got their child. Not only that, what was received was not only one son, but twins that would grow into tribes. This implied that God’s promise to Abraham (to become a great nation) would continue to be fulfilled.

The fight of the two tribes began in the womb. Why would God give twins to Isaac? Would their jostling be fated? What does it mean for God to explain the situation to Rebecca? We would naturally ask these questions. So take a moment to ponder over them. Our perspectives would surely influence our interpretation of the following passages; which would then go on to influence our way of life. Of course, one question is pertinent: “the older will serve the younger”. How would this scenario be manifested? Who is older and who is younger? What is serve?

Just like it is for many others, the differing personalities of the brothers led to differing biases for the parents. The development of the story rested with the interaction of the people and their decisions. Jacob bought the birthright from Esau during an “opportunity”, while Esau felt that the birthright would be meaningless if he died. At this point in the story, let us think about: 1. Why did Jacob care about the birthright? Did the birthright matter materially in the end? 2. What does it mean for Esau to despise and sell his birthright? 3. Do you think God was involved in the development of events? Why?

## **Article 2**

### **Passage: Genesis 27: 1-29**

This passage is presented as a 3-scene act.

Scene 1 (verses 1-4): Preparing the blessing

Isaac the father was getting old, not knowing the day he would die, he wanted to bless his elder son Esau. So he called Esau to hunt some wild game for him before he gave his blessing.

Scene 2 (verses 5-17): Mother-Son conspiracy

Rebecca overheard Isaac giving his instructions to Esau. She, however, favored Jacob. So with Jacob, she devised a plan to fool Isaac.

Scene 3 (verses 18-29): Stealing the blessing

In the end, because of Isaac's blindness, and because of the well-thought trickery, Isaac blessed Jacob: promising land, good life and supremacy over others. Those who cursed Jacob would be cursed, and those who blessed him would be blessed.

The script revolves around the theme of "being blessed". According to customs, the eldest son would receive this blessing. But at the risk of being cursed (v.13), Rebecca helped the younger son Jacob steal this blessing, overturning the traditions and morals of proper succession of those times. As an audience, are you on the side of traditions, indignant over Esau's loss of blessing? Or are you in-sync with Jacob, uninhibited by the traditions in grabbing his blessing?

Reflecting deeper, could a person who stole his blessing become a key figure in God's plans? Did receiving the blessing make Jacob's life smooth-sailing? Conversely, did losing the blessing affect the life of Esau materially? We shall see.

## **Article 3**

### **Passage: Genesis 27:41-28:22**

Originally, the blessing of the eldest son was meant for God's blessing upon Abraham to be passed to the next generation. However, Jacob, through his mother's help, got this blessing instead. But he faced an unexpected consequence, his brother wished to kill him. Was that the blessing he hoped for? His mother again helped in his escape to her maiden home in Paddan Aram. She complained about Esau's Hittite wives, and so Isaac dispatched Jacob to Rebecca's brother Laban's family to marry. In the past, Abraham was worried about Isaac leaving the promised land and so dispatched his servant to arrange the marriage; but now Jacob was leaving the promised land, would he

be leaving the promises of God? Who was responsible for Jacob’s marriage? After all the grabbing and conspiracy, why did it conversely result in Jacob forsaking his home?

Jacob passed by Beersheba, a place where both his grandfather (21:22-33) and his father (26:22-25) worshipped God. But he moved on. On the way, while resting, he dreamt of stairs reaching to heaven, with angels moving up and down. He realized that this was holy ground, not made by humans, but prepared by God, in contrast to the intentions of Babel. In ancient times, God spoke to men in dreams, and God blessed him. Compare God’s blessing with Isaac’s blessing.

God’s blessing to Jacob 28:13-15	Isaac’s blessing to Jacob 28:3-4
<p>I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. <sup>14</sup> Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. <sup>15</sup> I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.</p>	<p><sup>3</sup> May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. <sup>4</sup> May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham.</p>

What is the most precious part of this blessing? From Jacob’s response do you think he understood God’s words?

Awakened from his dream, Jacob set a pillar, poured oil, and named that place Bethel. We hear Jacob pray for the first time. He wished for God’s presence, food and clothes, and safety, so that he would acknowledge God as God. Do you think his prayer was mercenary? How did God respond? Have you experienced God? How did you respond to your experience?

Jacob would go on to live to 147 (47:28). But meeting God at Bethel was like God starting him on the journey, so that the faith of his forefathers now became his own. God was not far away but was talking and journeying with him. Which generation of Christians are you? Are you willing to share your experiences of God with your family?

## **Article 4**

### **Passage: Genesis 29:1-30:24**

Jacob fled his homeland on a distant journey to the East, this was surely no vacation or business trip. From an uncertain future, till he met his kin Rachel, it must have been an emotional meeting. His uncle Laban offered him a place to stay, allowing him to settle down. As the time passed, Laban felt he must be paid his dues. Jacob left his home in a hurry, without a dowry for marriage, so this became his remuneration. Jacob accepted this negotiation. Notice this, Jacob clearly stated his price (Rachel), but Laban's agreement was unclear.

Because of Laban, Jacob worked 7 years for Leah, and then another 7 for Rachel. But though they were sisters, they fought over their fertility due to jealousy. This was even reflected in the children's names. Because of this, Jacob even took their maids as concubines for more offspring.

Some may have felt that Jacob might enjoy a harem, but this was not really the case. He had to live and work under duress under his uncle, and even more so for his wives without a dowry. But he was given 11 sons and a daughter in return. He had to maintain his family as well as harmony with all. He must have had his difficulties. Leah who wasn't loved had many sons, but Rachel whom he loved was barren for a long time. In reflection, Abraham had Isaac with much difficulty, while Isaac had to pray for Rebecca who then gave birth to twins. Jacob in the midst of everything had many children. Jacob did not pray for Rachel's barrenness, till God remembered her, and she gave birth to a son Joseph.

Discussion:

1. From his travel to a foreign land till his present state with a family, would you say that God took care of Jacob? Was he blessed? (Think also of his prayers in the previous chapter, as well as him being swindled by his uncle and "manipulated" by his wives).
2. Living with his kinsmen, Jacob had his share of vexations and need for negotiations. Do you have any such feelings with your own family?

## **Article 5**

### **Passage: Genesis 30:25-43**

Jacob had already paid 14 years of his time at this point in the narrative as bride price, and 6 more he would now invest for the flock. His bargain was in fact below market rate. A hired shepherd was usually paid 20% of the flock, but spotted and speckled livestock did not usually constitute that high a percentage.

To say that Jacob had struck a bad deal would however be an understatement. Jacob himself knew well that the uncle (and father-in-law) had only planned to leave him

empty-handed (31:42). Looking back, he saw himself in servitude, evident from the usage of 'serve' thrice in the Hebrew bible when he demanded Laban to honour the marriage contract. Looking ahead, Laban's invitation to name his wage must have sounded disconcerting to say the least (30:28; c.f. 29:15). The suspicion was proven correct that very day when Laban made the new deal a scam (30:35). Do bosses so scheming, unfair, dishonest and cold blooded exist only during the Old Testament era? Or are we constantly meeting superiors that remind us of Uncle Laban? What would be our responses to such unkindness?

As for Jacob the manipulated, he did what he did best, that is, to turn the tables by manipulating the situation. He used a mix of stripped branches and his skills in husbandry to breed a variegated and strong flock of sheep and goats. The first of his 2 methods perplexed scientist and fertility doctors alike, and the second should make genetic engineers take their hats off to him. But the truth is that Jacob's first method was a folk custom, which makes us wonder why the patriarch whose life was closely watched over by God had found success through the use of superstitious practices.

The answer is found in Jacob's words, "Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me." (31:9) In other words, Jacob did achieve the desired outcome, but as God and God alone is the source of life, Jacob's success should be attributed to God's grace at work behind the scene and not his breeding techniques. The grace of God is also evident when we consider the distance that Laban created between Jacob and his sons. Its initial intention was to prevent variegated livestock from straying to Jacob's sector, but the expanse instead permitted Jacob to attempt selective breeding.

For many of us who spend close to half of each day at work (longer still for homemakers); "What am I in for?" is one question that must have crossed our minds. And should our aim be to burn both ends of the candle for others' welfare and agenda, the question would still be valid. Yet amidst our best efforts and intentions might be defeaters such as exploitation, unkindness of superiors, organisational requirement (as in the unreasonable ones), etc. Jacob came to realise that he had a Partner behind the scene as he worked on his purposes. What then has Jacob's story to say of us whose trails are likewise hounded by the same God?

Discussion Questions:

1. What do we consider as the characteristics of a fair and righteousness boss?
2. Should Jacob's superstitious practice inform our actions at our work place? What did God approve and not approve of Jacob in the story?
3. To quickly settle the 'urgent and important' instead of waiting for God to act is but human. What's the way forward since we do have the Partner 'behind the scene'?

## **Article 6**

### **Passage: Genesis 31:1-55**

This was the second time Jacob faced a life-threatening situation, and both times from his kin! This crisis was averted thanks to God's intervening warning. Still, in Genesis, man did not always heed God's warning. Imagine: what if Laban decided to ignore God, what would have happened?

Let us recall all that Jacob had experienced up till this point. From stealing the birthright to his father's blessing, Jacob had been a fugitive. The grabbing and scheming Jacob became a victim of his own uncle's exploitation. Question: Would you say this was Jacob's retribution? How did Jacob respond to his situations? On the other hand, though Jacob was unfairly treated, God aided him. In Laban's words, God made Jacob a blessing to him. He also transformed Jacob from nothingness to possess his own family and properties. (Irony: It was trickery that made Jacob leave his home empty-handed.) Reflection: His current possessions were not entirely due to his grabbing. God helped an active grabber to reverse his losses into gains. Jacob knew this. Discussion: What effect do you think this had upon Jacob's life? Would one's innate nature determine one's life?

At the same time, we examine Laban. He exhibited trickery and exploitation on Jacob. In pursuing Jacob, he felt he was recovering people and goods that belonged to him. Fortunately, things did not go further downhill because of God's intervention. Instead, they made a covenant of peace. This outcome prevented conflicts for the future generations. So in totality, how would you rate Laban as a person? Jacob, in living with Laban for 20 years, reflected all kinds of life experiences. In the process, right and wrong, gains and losses intertwined, with many surprises. Of course, God participated amidst all that. Discussion: How do you feel about Jacob's life for the past 20 years? Do you think God's "watchfulness" was enough? How do you feel about your personal experiences up till this point?

## **Article 7**

### **Passage: Genesis 32**

The first part of Genesis 32, verses 1-12, parallels Genesis 28:10-22 in a few ways. One, Jacob faced an uncertain future, one that was potentially dangerous. Two, Jacob saw a heavenly vision. Three, Jacob prayed to God. But between the two events, twenty years had passed. Take a moment to compare and contrast the older Jacob in Genesis 32 and his younger self in Genesis 28. On God's part, he had kept his promise in Genesis 28:15. The name Mahanaim means two camps, describing how Jacob's traveling contingent was like a camp, and the angels of God were like a camp traveling alongside his. In Jacob's prayer, he mentioned the other divine promises such as security (31:3) and descendants (28:14).

Discussion point: How does the mention of Abraham and Isaac make you feel about Jacob’s relationship with God? How would you describe his faith at this point? Do you observe any similarities or differences? Do you think he had matured in any way?

Genesis 32:9-12	Genesis 28:20-22
<p><sup>9</sup> Then Jacob prayed, “O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, ‘Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,’ <sup>10</sup> I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. <sup>11</sup> Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. <sup>12</sup> But you have said, ‘I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.’”</p>	<p><sup>20</sup> Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear <sup>21</sup> so that I return safely to my father’s household, then the Lord will be my God <sup>22</sup> and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.”</p>

After sending his first messenger to Esau, with a humble subservient message, Esau responded with a contingent of 400 men to meet him. At this point, we do not know if Esau’s intentions were friendly. Nonetheless Jacob was fearful of an attack. He divided everybody and everything into two camps, so that if one group were attacked, the other group might escape. Point to ponder: Do you agree with his response? How would you respond to a criticism of Jacob, “he already had a divine camp alongside him, he should trust God for his security”? Similarly, Jacob later had another idea to solve his crisis. He sent gifts to Esau, thinking “I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me.” (v.20) One might also conclude from his way of sending his possessions in batches across the ford of the Jabbok in v.22-23, and the way he arranged his family in 33:1-2, that they were further strategies to counter any possible attack from Esau.

Discussion Point 2: What do you feel about Jacob’s solutions to his problems?

In the middle of the night, “Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.” (v.24) One might have assumed that this man was Esau based on the way the story was unfolding, but it turned out to be God in Jacob’s final realization in v.30. But perhaps the initial ambiguity (man or God?) was intended, as Jacob’s life so far “have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.” (v.28) The physical struggle, which ended with a blessing but also with a limp, described Jacob’s journey up to this point. His identity was confirmed with a new name Israel. Let us reflect on the twist and turns of Jacob’s life, as we ponder over this struggle. He struggled with Esau and Laban over birthright and possessions. How did it turn out for him? He struggled with God in his agenda for life. God struggled with him.

Discussion point 3: How do you feel about the conclusion of this episode with Jacob ending up with a blessing and a limp?

## **Article 8**

### **Passage: 创 32:31-33:20**

In this passage, we see that Jacob had just emerged with a new name after a hip-wrenching match with God, and on the road to reconcile with Esau. However, his journey was also far from restful as he continued to struggle in his heart and strategise in his mind how to tackle the relationship issue head-on without losing his most precious Rachel and Joseph among his family. In the relationships with his wives and children, Jacob displayed preferential treatment to Rachel and Joseph in particular. When he “lifted his eyes” and saw revenge (i.e. 400 men) coming, he “divided” and positioned his maidservants and their children in front with Rachel and Joseph in the rear. In the patriarchal system, it was culturally acceptable for Jacob to have such authority over them as his possession. In fact, none of his family members rebelled over his arrangement and no questions were asked. Imagine the chaos that would occur if this happened in our modern society today.

Discussion point 1: Do you think, as the head of the household, Jacob’s actions and words posed a significant influence in feeding jealousy, doubt, and unhealthy comparisons among the family members? Retrospectively, do you think Jacob could see where he went wrong with his treatment of his own family through the “preparation” that he made for the encounter with Esau?

Rehearsing in his mind the angry Esau he remembered from twenty years ago, Jacob’s focus was to pacify his brother. It never occurred to him that Esau could have forgiven him unconditionally, such that he himself was in stark disbelief. Incidentally, Esau embodied the extravagance reconciliation like a motion picture: he ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. Jacob was clearly surprised that Esau was not running to kill him but to embrace him. Then in contrast to what Jacob’s eyes saw, Esau “lifted his eyes” and saw peace (i.e. women and children) before his eyes, and his questions drew out grace-filled responses from Jacob. For out of the abundance of the heart, his mouth speaks. Reflection: Do you speak as to encourage others to respond with grace or do you try to instigate guilt? As far as we know, Jacob never verbally confessed the wrong he had done to Esau twenty years ago, however he did reciprocate with gifts to make restitution for his wrongdoing. Esau accepted the gifts for it was his brother that he wanted.

Discussion point 2: Do you think that this step of restitution in the process of reconciliation is as important as taking the step to talk about what had happened?

Relationships are precious and they must be nurtured and even restored at some point in life. Jacob had to come face to face with Esau, no matter how hard it was for him, his part was to show up. The face to face reconciliation led him to say “for to see your face is like seeing the face of God” to Esau. Just before this passage, Jacob also exclaimed to “have seen God face to face.” (32:30)

Discussion point 3: What do you think Jacob saw when he expressed so extravagantly to both experiences? Could it be the face of grace and mercy he received so undeservingly when he knew how bad the situation could have been if Esau did not forgive him unconditionally? How does your life reveal “the face of God” in the way you handle your relationships and reconcile with those who you have wronged or have wronged you?

## Article 9

### Passage: Genesis 34

(The main difficulty of this passage lies in not knowing the cultural norms of those times, especially on a topic as controversial as rape. We do not intend to trivialize such as serious matter, but it is important to note that in our discussion, it has to be weighted alongside other concerns, such as survival or racial pride, which also affect the characters of the story tremendously.)

The text itself is unambiguous about the offensiveness of the sexual assault of Dinah (v.2), the word indicates non-consensual sex, and it is “a thing that should not be done”. (v.7) However, it is equally vocal about Shechem’s love for Dinah. This is explicit in verses 3, 8, 11-12, and 19. Shechem was willing to pay any price to marry Dinah. Unfortunately, the text is also silent about Dinah’s feelings for Shechem or her thoughts on the marriage. (For later Mosaic laws on this matter, you may refer to Exodus 22:16-17 and Deuteronomy 22:28-29) Goldingay in his commentary warned against being presumptuous: “When this kind of thing happens, it’s often impossible for anyone outside the relationship to understand the dynamics or the rights and wrongs. It’s probably impossible for the people themselves. People outside have to be wary of thinking they understand.”

Discussion point 1: Do you agree with Goldingay? What kind of responsibility do we have regarding the relationships of others? If you were Jacob, would you proceed with the marriage?

Jacob and Hamor focused on the mutual benefits of the two communities living together as one. Hamor was generous with his offer, and Shechem motivated by his passion was even more so. Such generosity was not necessary given their numerical advantage. Jacob in verse 5 and 30 indicated that his decision was also a well-considered one. This arrangement allowed for peace, without compromising identity because Hamor’s tribe would also be circumcised.

On the other hand, the sons of Jacob focused on vengeance. “Should he have treated our sister like a prostitute?” (v.31) Do you think their primary concern was about Dinah? It seemed to be more about their “defilement” as a people (“an outrageous thing against Israel” v.7; “defiled” v.13, v.27; “disgrace” v.14; “prostitute” v.31). And they thought such an act deserved a deceitful response (v.13). The sign of covenant became a sign of death. In the end, their acts included “taking” Dinah (v.26), “loot” the city (v.27), “seized” their flocks (v.28), “carried off” all their wealth and all their women and children (v.29), “taking” as plunder everything (v.29); are all these acts any different from Shechem’s act to “take” Dinah in verse 2? Take a moment to think about all the conflicts in the Middle East.

Discussion point 2: Is revenge ever a solution to conflicts?

The text in ending with Jacob's consideration as well as his sons' retort invites us to consider which is good. Shechem's reckless act brought chaos into God's plan for his people, in the sense that Jacob's people could not continue to live in peace with other people. It would not be easy to restore the harmony. On a broader scale, the people of God were called to be a blessing to the nations. How are they to fulfil this calling? In doing so, interaction with outsiders may threaten the purity of the community.

Discussion point 3: We are often torn between fulfilling our calling to reach out, and maintaining our purity from assimilation. What are the guiding principles to inform our responses whenever we feel the purity of our community is "defiled"?

## **Article 10**

### **Passage: Genesis 35**

In the previous chapter, the actions of Jacob's sons put everybody in great peril. If the local people of the land took revenge for the people of Shechem, then Jacob's household would be outnumbered and destroyed (34:30). God intervened once again in this crisis, first by asking him to return to Bethel to build an altar. Jacob responded by doing so, after asking them to discard all their foreign idols in Shechem (See 31:19ff). Jacob must have felt negatively about those idols. Then, when they set off, the terror of God fell on the towns all around them so that no one pursued them.

Discussion question 1: Do you think that God's act of salvation was related to the response of Jacob and his household?

Bethel was a special place for Jacob. It was the place where God first appeared to Jacob, at a time when he was fleeing Esau. There, God promised protection (28:15). Later, when Jacob was in trouble with Laban, God again reminded him of Bethel (31:13). Jacob said in verse 3, "Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone." Even though God was with Jacob wherever he was, Bethel was unique in remembrance of God's presence in his life.

Discussion question 2: Do you have such a place in your life? Share about the importance of such a place of spiritual reminder in your times of difficulty.

This time, God also renewed his promises of blessings. Compare 28:13-14 and 35:11-12. It should remind you of the promises to Abraham and Isaac. Later, with the birth of Benjamin, the twelve tribes of Israel were completed (v. 23-26). The death of Isaac marked the end of a phase in the narrative, before we move on to the story of Joseph. Let us take stock of the journey so far. When the story began with God's calling of Abraham to be a great nation, Abraham and his wife were barren in their old age. But by the time their only son Isaac died, the twelve sons of Jacob had appeared. Yet,

troubles never truly fade away, and the next generation after Jacob still faltered. At the death of Rachel, Reuben slept with her maid-servant Bilhah. This was done probably to increase his stature in the family, to position himself as the successor to his father. But it turned against him. (see 1 Chronicles 5:1, Gen 49:4) We can thus see that continuing to be reminded of God's faithfulness in the past generations is important, so as to ensure that it stays true for future generations.

Discussion point 3: Describe your feelings as you hear God's promises to Jacob repeated in this chapter. How would God's promises work in your own life?

This passage mentioned the changing of names three times. From Luz to Bethel (house of God), Jacob (grabber) to Israel, and Ben-Oni (son of my troubles) to Benjamin (son of my right hand). Israel means "you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome" (32:28). The name changes reflect a different understanding of the person named. It could mean that Jacob was transformed from his early days. It is also from this chapter onwards that the narrative began to address Jacob with the name Israel (despite the name change occurring earlier in chapter 32).

Reflection and Discussion point 4: Why do you think this is the case? Do you see a more transformed Jacob in chapters 33-34? For all the previous 11 sons, the mothers had named them. Why do you think Jacob renamed Benjamin? What does your name mean? Do you have a "name" to describe your current relationship with God?

## **Article 11**

**Passage: Genesis 37** (Reflection includes 36)

Before we embark on the final stage of the story with Jacob and Joseph, there were narrative closures for the first half of his life: the death of Isaac and information on the descendants of Esau. The scene of "his sons Esau and Jacob buried him" (35:29) seems like a calming conclusion to an episode of sibling rivalry. Despite all the struggles over birthrights and Isaac's blessing, in the end the brothers buried the past and moved on with their lives.

Genesis 36 serves both as an epilogue to the preceding chapters and as a comparison for the following chapters. As an epilogue, we are informed of the future of the family of Esau. He was blessed with great possessions and descendants. His possessions were not inferior to Jacob's. His descendants included chiefs and kings.

Discussion point 1: Do you feel that the struggles over birthrights and Isaac's blessing mattered in the end? When the land was not big enough to accommodate both families, it was Esau who chose to move away. Do you feel this is consistent with Esau's personality, or do you think that he had transformed after all that had happened?

Besides being an epilogue to what happened earlier, Genesis 36 also serves as a comparison to Jacob's own story which follows. In chapter 37, the family immediately plunged into yet another crisis with the uncertain future of Joseph. This was the result of Jacob's family discord, including Jacob's own favouritism as well as the personalities of his sons.

#### Discussion point 2:

- i. How would you describe Joseph's personality? (See verses 2, 5, 9) Do you think Jacob's favouritism is related to biasness towards Rachel or compensation after Rachel's death?
- ii. How would you describe Reuben? (See verses 21, 29) How does it compare to 35:22?
- iii. How would you describe Judah? (See 26-27; if the cell group is keen they could even discuss chapter 38.)
- iv. Together with Simeon and Levi (see 34:25), these were the four eldest sons of Jacob (and Joseph the eldest son of Rachel). Do you sense a worrying trend for the next generation of Jacob? And given the somewhat rosy picture of Esau's descendants in chapter 36, how would you compare their lives so far?

Dreams featured prominently in Joseph's story (see also chapters 40-41). Verse 11 says, "His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind." Again we reflect on the personality of Jacob-Israel, as well as his relationship with God's promises to him and his forefathers. Goldingay, in *Genesis for Everyone*, said "The Old Testament never refers to dreams as a purely human or psychological phenomenon; it refers to them only as something of supernatural significance." However, he continued, "Not untypically, human waywardness and fortunate coincidence play a part in its development." Dreams may be a sign from God of what is to come, but human decisions and random events also play a part in shaping the future.

Discussion point 3: Do you agree with Goldingay? How should we regard our dreams or spiritual signs today?

#### **Article 12**

##### **Passage: Genesis 42-43**

When the survival of the family was at stake, Jacob's eleven big boys "look at one another" rather than to put their act together to help the situation (42:1). Their unwillingness to join forces had of course to do with their personalities, yet their passiveness is nonetheless a product of their family's history (see 37:3-4) and Jacob's leadership. Where '1' is the most condemnable and '10' the most admirable, rate Jacob as the head of his family in light of the inaction herein.

But we may want to hold on a bit before deciding the scores. Jacob the elderly man proved to be more responsible than the young and able; he deployed his children to buy grains in Egypt. Yet, the way in which it was done probably rubbed salt into an old wound. He sent only 10 of his sons and kept Benjamin from the dangers involved in the expedition, which possibly included being sabotaged by his half-brothers.

Discussion point 1: Which word would we use to describe Jacob's action? Do we see the same in our families?

The troops soon returned with food supply, a report, their original budget and the request to bring Benjamin to Egypt in order to prove their honesty to the governor and to free Simeon from imprisonment. Jacob in casting blame on the nine when he saw the money (42:36) suggests that he might have suspected that they had sold Simeon (a viewpoint shared by Calvin and modern commentators). Jacob's response is again reflective of the nature and quality of his leadership.

Discussion point 2: Do we think that Jacob's distrust is justified? Distrust and suspicion, how many families have never had any trace of it?

Regardless of whether the point about Jacob's ill-thoughts against his children can be established, something far worse about him was revealed at this juncture. It was for him a clear cut 'no' to send Benjamin. To him, Simeon could be tortured; Benjamin was not to be touched. Jacob's permission was the solution to Simeon's plight, but we don't see him as a man with a heart toward his boy.

But he had a tummy and a sense of responsibility towards the rest in his home. So when the storehouse was getting empty, he considered himself to have no choice and sent Benjamin with the brothers. His words prior to their departure might just alter his final score, "May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved." (43:14). More than the sons, this emotionally injured father exhibited faith in the El Shaddai. In other words, Jacob saw that it was only God's mercy that could break the cycle and grant a new beginning to his family.

Looking for a biblical example (not biblical model) of a family? Here we have it. A family with love-hate relationships at work, spiced with acts of kindness (42:25) and unkindness. Under this roof, we see the humanness of Israel's forefathers and in turn the acceptance of humanness in the Holy Scripture. The text is one that sends alarm bells and wisdom concerning practices to avoid and to adopt as we work on family relationships.

Discussion point 3: As for Jacob, shouldn't his trust placed in the El Shaddai greatly determine his score albeit the many blunders he made?

## **Article 13**

### **Passage: Genesis 44-45**

After repeated tests set by Joseph, he extracted such touching words from Judah (44: 18-34), so Joseph realized his brothers were now different. (In chapter 44, Judah is one of the protagonists. If you read Chapter 38, and then compare Judah there with the one in Chapter 44, do you see a sharp contrast?) This brother, Judah, who was once so heartless to sell him off, now through the words he said under serious grilling, showed his deep understanding of his father's heart. Even knowing of his father's extreme favoritism, Judah was willing to replace Benjamin, to live a lifetime of slavery. This conversation moved Joseph, and he cleared the room, so that when he identified himself, there would be no other reservations to burst out crying.

Sharing 1: Have you ever had this experience of an urgent need to bare your feelings?

Imagine, what attributes would the descendants of Abraham need to inherit the covenantal promises of God? From the forefathers to their father's generation, they had experienced famine, loss of wife; then coming to this generation of the sons of Jacob, cruelty, murder, deceit, disunity. Many situations made it difficult for God to fulfill his promises! God had to intervene at times! But God absolutely did not abandon the family. Through the development of the story, we see Joseph repeatedly testing his brothers' reaction, to decide how to treat them. He knew the brothers because they sold him to Egypt, but all these years in the presence of God, from Potiphar's house to the prison, he was blessed by God. Hungry people from around the area came to Egypt for food, and he had the authority from Pharaoh to prepare food, hence he could not help but said to his brothers, "God sent me."

This is a remarkable statement. If saying "I am Joseph" would make the brothers faint, then "God sent me", like a pair of big warm hands, supported them from falling into dismay or fear. And in the process of reconciliation, revelation of the truth is necessary. Hence the words from Joseph "God sent me here, to preserve life," echoed the "be fruitful and multiply" theme of Genesis, and in the flood narrative "to preserve life"

Discussion 2: In the journey of life, do we often remember "God preserves life"? So with encouragement, that we can overcome moments of hardship, shall we continue to see God blessing life?

Joseph commanded his brother to tell his father all the glory and wealth they had seen, so that the family could move to Egypt to be reunited. Joseph gave two tips: first, "Don't worry about your belongings," Do not let any matter bind you, or reduce your intimacy with family members. Second, "Don't quarrel on the way!" (NIV), or as another version of the translation (NET) states "As you travel don't be overcome with fear." Let's understand that Joseph was actually assuring his brothers, telling them not to worry about revenge from Joseph after migration. As with Joseph and his act of reconciliation, he had to consider all the possibilities beforehand.

Discussion 3: Are the tips from Joseph a good reminder for you and me? Have you reconciled with anyone before? How was your experience? Were you able to let others come in good faith and reconcile?

## **Article 14**

### **Passage: Genesis 46: 1-34**

In the preceding passage, Joseph commanded his brothers to return to the land of Canaan to his father Jacob and then to migrate to Egypt. This passage shifts focus to Joseph's father, Jacob.

Three points:

1. God revealed: Israel (= Jacob) at Beersheba sacrificed to his father Isaac's God. At night, God appeared to him. With an ancient story as material, the narrative demonstrated that God will appear to guide people in important moments. Here, the God of Israel, chose to introduce himself: [I am God, the God of your father. ] (v. 3) and asked Israel not to be afraid, and made a promise [I will make you into a great nation]. The promise is an important theme and tradition. God had promised Abram [I will make you a great nation] (12: 2), [Abraham shall surely become a great and powerful nation. ] (18:18). Here, we see the continuation of the old promise still in effect. Jacob precisely relied on God's promise to overcome his fear, to make the trip to Egypt.

Discussion 1: How do you think Jacob's mood changed after God revealed himself? God's promise comforted Jacob. How does that make you feel?

2. Genealogy: verses 8-27 listed Jacob's family, a total of 70 people (cf. v. 27). If the numeral 70 is on the left side of an equation, the right can be seen as a big tribe. By God's mercy, a small group of 70 people later became a great nation, giving birth to a vast number of people, [as the stars of heaven, sand of the sea] (Genesis 22:17), and fulfilling God's promises to Abraham. Later God said to Moses: [Your ancestors who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky] (Deuteronomy 10:22).

Discussion question 2: 70 persons went to Egypt resulting in a big people at the end, this was God's promise. What about you, do you believe in it?

3. The arrival at Goshen in Egypt: Joseph met his father Jacob, and he threw his arms around his father and wept for a long time. Jacob said [Now I am ready to die, since I have seen for myself that you are still alive.] (30). Jacob came to Egypt not purely for his son. In the early days, he used his might to grab his birthright, used his might to grab what was his at Laban; in his old age, he trusted in God's promises and obeyed the word of God to leave the land of Canaan and move to Egypt. The elderly Jacob was no longer a person who grabbed, but a person who believed in the promise. May God, in all seasons of our lives, continue to shape us to trust in Him!

Question 3: To what extent does our trust in God transform in different stages of life in old age and in youth?

## **Article 15**

### **Passage: Genesis 47:1-12, 27-31, 48:1-22**

These three events described in the Scripture happened after Jacob moved to Egypt. In Genesis 47: 1-12, we see Jacob with his family in Egypt. Because of Joseph, Pharaoh favored Jacob and his family, and as they were shepherds, Pharaoh gave them Goshen, the most suitable land for livestock. When Pharaoh asked Jacob how old he was, he replied: "The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers. ..." (47 : 8-9).

**Discussion 1:** When you read such a reflection from Jacob, how do you feel? Why do you think he lamented that his life was short and bitter? Let us ask ourselves, what is life to us?

Genesis 47: 27-31: Jacob lived in Egypt for 17 years, reaching the age of 147 years old, and Jacob (Israel) knew that the day of death was coming. He wanted Joseph to swear not to bury him in Egypt, but to bring him back to his fathers' burial place (back to the land of Canaan) - from this point, do you see in the heart of Jacob the promised land? When Joseph promised, Jacob was assured enough to worship in bed. This is the portrayal of the elderly Jacob's relationship with God, in his bed (leaning on his rod) to worship the Lord. From the first time that God spoke to him, and he poured oil on the pillar (28: 16-22), in Peniel wrestling with the angel of God (32: 22-31), building an altar to God in Bethel (35: 1-15), these were him at different stages of life expressing his understanding of God.

**Discussion question 2:** Now on the bed, old Jacob worshiped the Lord, what inspiration is it for us? From our current knowledge of God, what will be our witness to the people around us about the Lord God, the shepherd of our lives, who redeems us from all evil? Share about how God shepherded you through your troubles at different stages of your life.

Genesis 48: 1-22, Joseph heard that his father was dying, and brought his two sons to his father. From 48: 15-16 old Jacob's blessing to Joseph (actually Joseph's two children), " "May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked faithfully, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm, may he bless these boys. .... "

**Discussion 3:** If we compare this with Jacob's vow at Bethel (28: 20-21), do we see the transformation of Jacob's relationship with God? Would such life transformation imply that every believer would undergo a similar transformation? The change when vowing in the past "If God will be with me ...", in comparison to his old age, saying, " the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm ", do you have a similar transformation in your relationship with God?

Genesis 48:15-16	Genesis 28:20-22
May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked faithfully, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm —may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly on the earth.	<sup>20</sup> Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear <sup>21</sup> so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God <sup>22</sup> and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."

## **Article 16**

### **Passage: Genesis 49:1-28**

The emergence of this chapter, whether by its content or location, is obviously of great significance! Genesis records from 48:29 to 49:33 what Jacob said to his children before his death. It was an instruction and also a blessing! These words are worth our attention to read and to reflect upon: in the end what is the meaning of these words and action? Let us first understand the contents that were conveyed to the twelve children. Read carefully, and you will realise that:

1. Jacob based his prophecy on the past performance of each child, most obvious in the case of the first four children.
2. The situation of Judah was the most special, and only his prophecy involved his future "status".
3. In relation to the other children, they involved material things with Joseph receiving the most abundant material blessings.

These were the instructions of Jacob to the twelve children, they were also blessings towards each individual. When we scrutinize these words against the children's past for comparison, Jacob blessed each child by their past performances! Obviously, the call in 48: 2 for Jacob's children to gather and listen to the words of their father Israel had a reviewing and reflective function. Similarly, just like God's pronouncements to Adam and Eve after their disobedience, is "what will happen to you in days to come "(49:1) meant to be fatalistic?

Everyone (each child) should recall their past deeds to each other and to others. Doesn't this function as a warning and a reminder? In the future, whenever the twelve children have the opportunity to gather together to recall their father Israel's parting words, perhaps Israel would no longer be fighting and hurting each other and past mistakes would not be repeated?

On the other hand, Jacob did not seem to pass on God's promises and blessings to the children. Did he think that the child's future depended on his predictions? We all know that Jacob and Jacob's descendants were blessed by God. Beginning from Abraham, specific contents of "blessing" were repeatedly stated to come upon the descendants of Abraham. Why was there no mention of these relevant contents by Jacob? In this case, the author ended in this manner: "All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them, giving each the blessing appropriate to him."

Within the same passage, we find a variety of introductions (49: 1,2) and conclusions (49:28). Was this meant to arouse the reader's attention and query: What about "God's blessing upon the descendants of Jacob"? What are the effects of human words and the words of God? Does it mean that God's words would surely replace and supersede the effects of human words?

## **Article 17**

### **Passage: Genesis 49:29-50:21**

(Because of space limitations, we cannot describe this in detail. But in fact, Joseph's event is the intersection of a lot of themes and messages in Genesis. God's creative act and will were demonstrated and presented in the narrative, peruse the scriptures and discover them! In addition, God's different and multi-faceted forms of guidance will increase our faith in God. Lastly, research this: were the dreams of Joseph realized in the end? What is the significance of the answer to that question to you?)

This passage gives a very detailed account of Jacob's burial. Jacob's wish to be buried in the land of Canaan was not due to feeling homesick! This matter was related to God's promises to his forefathers and what God was to accomplish in his family. Scripture reminds us that Jacob was buried in "foreign" land, the land of Canaan was still the hands of others. Although the land wasn't attained yet, because he understood the will of God, Jacob was determined to be buried in the land of Canaan to express his faith in the promises of God.

Of course, we have also seen problems and challenges, Joseph and his brothers must now stay in the land of Egypt! How would the Lord's promises to Abraham be realized in the future? Recalling the life of Jacob, how did God fulfill his promises to him? What was achieved? How was Jacob's "performance" throughout the process?

Back to Joseph, when faced with the worries and fears of his brothers, Joseph said that he could not replace God! At the same time, Joseph also witnessed how God was able to bring out the "good" from "evil" --- thus saving his life! Through these words, the author brings us to the entire theme of the book of Genesis. Since the creation of the world, we see that Joseph was called out to live as a person with God's image:

- With status in Egypt (only subordinate to Pharaoh), he displayed wisdom and ability to govern the earth, so that "fruitful and multiply" and "life" could occur and continue.
- Joseph feared God and acted godly, and enabled God's promises to Abraham to be achieved to a limited degree --- by becoming a blessing to others!

In addition, we also see the image of God in Joseph in another aspect. God in Genesis, revealed himself, creating "light, order, abundance" from "dark, chaos, emptiness". From the "evil", he created "good". That's the continuing act of God (of course, God punishes evil!)! Joseph was attacked by a lot of evil, even naming one of his children in honor of his misfortune (Manasseh). Calling the child's name did not cause Joseph's pain to accumulate, nor develop in him a mentality for revenge. Despite the evil encountered by Joseph, they did not become an excuse to repay evil with evil. Joseph did not become a person against God's creation!

Carefully compare the past figures of Adam and Eve, Cain ..... .. God's will expressed in Creation (including: man should obey God to live according to God's image, man should live in God's presence, man should fear God and live and govern the earth with wisdom and potential), all these were fulfilled in Joseph to the greatest degree! All in all, God allowed "life" to be the ultimate and eternal truth! God and man create the "living"! Two thousand years later, Jesus of Nazareth - the last Adam, extended the following words of Joseph to the extreme and became the eternal truth!

"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

How will you live your life?