"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."
—Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Readers whose mental world has been shaped by the stories of Genesis are often bewildered when they first encounter the actual text. Instead of the edifying tales they expected, they find carefully balanced ambiguities; instead of upright conduct, craft and deceit; instead of exemplary models of virtue, flawed human beings and a virtual catalogue of deviancy and vice. A timid Abraham makes his fortune by placing his wife at Pharaoh’s disposal; a jealous Sarah, having given her maid to her husband, sends her off to die in the wilderness; Lot’s daughters and perhaps Noah’s sons rape their drunken fathers; Jacob steals his brother’s birthright and blessing; Joseph cozens the Egyptians. But then God’s own idea of justice seems constantly to be shifting as he makes the world and destroys it, forbids murder and then commands it, punishes the righteous with the wicked… Human or divine, the figures in the stories resist our attempts to judge them as effectively as the stories themselves resist our attempts to bring them to an end. Conflicts arise and are resolved, but the resolutions create more conflicts."
—Herbert Marks, "The Book of Genesis," The English Bible: King James Version: The Old Testament

"Judging from the average quality of composition in the Bible, literary works must have been extremely good in ancient Jerusalem, better, perhaps, than anywhere we know in the ancient world outside of Greece. Even more extraordinary is the fact that the Bible, as it was written in Jerusalem, unlike the books of other ancient peoples, was not the literature of a major or regional power nor even of a ruling elite, but the literature of a minor, remote people—and not the literature of its rulers, but of its critics. The scribes and the prophets of Jerusalem refused to accept the world as it was. They invented the literature of political dissent and, with it, the literature of hope."
—Amos Elon, Jerusalem: City of Mirrors

1. TELLING TALES IN THE BIBLE
Let’s begin with a caveat. The word "bible" means "book," but the Hebrew Bible is in fact many books. Modern scholarship has suggested several different authors or editors, and it’s likely that some of the materials with which they worked came from elsewhere: the story of Noah and the flood, for example, obviously has roots in the ancient Babylonian epic Gilgamesh. The chronological range of these texts is astonishing: scholars believe that the Hebrew Bible spans nearly a millennium of literary activity, which is the equivalent in our literature of the span of time that extends from the medieval Song of Roland to the modernist plays of Samuel Beckett, or from Beowulf to T.S. Eliot. Within the Bible there is an incredible diversity of genres and materials: there are creation myths and genealogies; collections of hymns, or psalms, and of ancient adages, or proverbs; there are historical chronicles, legislative codes, scripts for rituals, and
even, in *The Song of Songs*, some of the most beautiful love poetry ever written. Moreover, the Bible was intended to be read aloud in a public setting; it differs in this respect too from our notion of reading a book in privacy.

But most biblical texts, including *Genesis*, were composed as prose narratives—the language of everyday life rather than the language of romantic lovers or epic heroes. Robert Alter, a professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at Berkeley whose translation of *Genesis* is probably the best we have, writes: "It is peculiar, and culturally significant, that among ancient peoples only Israel should have chosen to cast its sacred national traditions in prose—a deliberate avoidance of epic, transforming storytelling from ritual rehearsal [of timeless events] to the delineation of the wayward paths of human freedom, the quirks and contradictions of men and women seen as moral agents and complex centers of motive and feeling." Moreover, this kind of prose doesn’t describe; rather, it narrates. It is interested in people’s actions, not their appearance. That is why verbs predominate in the text over other parts of speech: character and deeds are one and the same. There is very little physical description of characters. If we are told that Esau is hairy, that Goliath is huge, that Samson has long hair, or that Bathsheba is beautiful, this is not physical description for its own sake, but rather gives the reader the minimum of information necessary to understand the course of events.

More than half a sixty ago, one of the greatest modern literary critics, Erich Auerbach, found refuge from the Nazis in Istanbul during the Second World War. There he produced his masterpiece, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, probably the single greatest book about literature written during the twentieth century. The first chapter of that great book takes up two passages, one from *The Odyssey*, the second from *Genesis*, through which he demonstrates that, unlike characters in *Genesis*, characters in Homer do not develop. The wily Odysseus may disguise himself but he does not reorient his personality; but Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob undergo radical changes over their lengthy lives.

Auerbach showed that in contrast to Homer, the biblical narrator is radically selective in his approach to character. Homer illuminates everything, externalizing every thought: we even know what Odysseus’s dog was thinking when his master returned after twenty years of fighting and wandering. But when the biblical narrator, in Genesis 22, narrates the episode in which God commands Abraham to take his son Isaac to the land of Moriah and make a sacrifice of him, we do not know what Abraham is thinking during the course of his journey. We have only the briefest description of the journey itself, and a few spare lines of dialogue. The tension is overwhelming, the situation is, as Auerbach puts it, "fraught with background," whereas in Homer’s elaborately descriptive style, every thought and motive is brightly illuminated. In Homer, there is only foreground. Homer’s sense of history and character is static, whereas the Bible’s is dynamic. Precisely because of his radical selectivity, the biblical writer gives us a sense of psychological depth, of moral ambiguity, and of development over time. Here, rather than in epic poetry, we find the beginning of the serious treatment of quotidian reality, the problematic character
of everyday life, which was to reach its peak in the great realistic novels of the
nineteenth century. Here is the birth of what we now call fictional realism.

As we examine selected passages in Genesis, let’s keep in mind this principle:
that in tracing the primordial history of the first human beings, of Adam and Eve
and their descendants, and later the story of Abraham and his descendants over
successive generations, the prose of the biblical narrator conveys an
extraordinarily powerful realism about human life, a view of character and
morality developing over time. Some of the stories may seem odd, even bizarre
to us three thousand years later, but read closely, they reveal a thematic unity, a
psychological and moral realism, and a sense of history’s unfolding, that is
astonishing in texts that precede the rise of the modern novel by more than two
thousand years.

2. GENESIS 4: "AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?"
Certain themes recur again and again in the biblical tales. And we can find them
already in the opening chapters of Genesis. Here the concern is with morality
more than mortality (the great theme of Gilgamesh and of Homer’s Iliad), and
with the difficulty of fashioning a decent community out of stiff-necked and hot-
blooded human beings. From the beginning, we find a rejection of the heroic
model of the self, a repudiation of the proud ethos of self-assertion that seems so
typical of the more aristocratic societies of the Middle East and the
Mediterranean basin. If the heroic self embraces pride as one of its principal
values, the vision of the good person in Genesis emphasizes humility.

One can see the rejection of humanity’s pretensions to greatness in the Garden of
Eden but also in the famous Tower of Babel episode: "Come, let us build
ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches the heavens, and let us make a name
for ourselves.” The God of Genesis does not look favorably on such aspirations
towards heroic self-assertion and self-sufficiency. The people in Abraham’s line
live in shepherd’s tents rather than proud towers.

But let’s look in some detail at an earlier episode: the story of Cain and Abel in
Genesis 4. Everyone knows the gist of the story: Cain, the proud, first-born son
of a proud mother, feels the sting of shame when God prefers his younger
brother Abel’s sacrifice to his own. "And Cain was very angry, and his face was
downcast." God attempts to reassure him: "Why are you angry? Why is your
face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do
not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you
must rule over it.” It’s God’s first attempt to educate a man, but it does not
succeed.

Cain lures his brother to remote field, and kills him. "Where is your brother
Abel?” asks God. And everyone remembers the murderer’s famous answer: "I
don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” Notice, by the way, how fast the story
progresses, and how terse and revealing are the few lines of dialogue. That is
how biblical narrative works: "there is never a leisurely description for its own
sake; scene setting is accomplished with the barest economy of means; characters
are sped over a span of years with a simple summary notation until we reach a
portentous conjunction rendered in dialogue; and, in keeping with all this, analysis and assessment of character are very rare, and then very brief" (Alter). But what follows is one of God's longer speeches: "What have you done? Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

Cain's pride has issued in a murder and a curse. The earth will resist the murderer's plow, and he will fear for his security wherever he goes. He founds the first city, with a watchtower, and raises a son. Six generations later there is a descendant named Lamech whose sons in turn introduce tents, cattle, music, and metallurgy into the world. Civilization and progress, yes? But Lamech has a few lines of very suggestive dialogue that are fraught with implication: "I have killed a man for injuring me, and a boy for bruising me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times." He sings of his exploits in fighting, and takes pride in his ability to slay his enemies. It's the heroic ethos again, and it will lead to more slaughter. The Bible clearly rejects it. And Cain's line, "Am I my brother's keeper?" will resonate throughout subsequent books and chapters of the Hebrew Bible. Yes, you are, is the implicit answer, and later the answer will be extended: not only your brother's keeper, but also your wife's, and your children's, and the widow's, and the orphan's, and even the poor stranger's. (See, for example, Leviticus 23:22.)

In other words, Genesis announces its major theme and its vision of human nature, with this story of the first murder. Each of us would like to see himself, like Cain and Lamech, as the star of the show, the leader of the pack, and if we do not receive the recognition that our natural narcissism demands, or if someone else receives the applause we believe should be ours, we feel insulted and injured, and injured pride can lead to smoldering conflict, or perhaps to violence. (The American writer Gore Vidal put it this way: "Every time a friend succeeds, I die a little.") The Biblical writers insist on the necessity of restraint and humility: we fulfill ourselves, not by heroic self-assertion, but by subordinating our own desires to the service of others, by accepting the responsibilities of family life. Later the prophet Jeremiah will make this message explicit: "Thus saith the Lord: 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories, glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord Who practices kindness, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the Lord'" (Jeremiah 9:23).

The goal is here is not to create heroes, but a decent society, one that is bound by law, by a covenant between God and men, by ties that extend across generations. And the agency of transmission is the family: that is why Genesis is a series of interlocking family narratives. The challenge of Genesis is the development of a moral code that can be transmitted from one generation to the next through the agency of the family. The protagonists of Genesis are patriarchs, heads of families. (The name Abram means "exalted father," and Abraham means "father of multitudes"). And every one of those families is full of tension and conflict,
full of trouble. There is an extraordinary realism in the Hebrew Bible: the text recognizes that the achievement of a moral life and the transmission of that legacy from generation to generation are extremely difficult tasks.

Genesis 4 is a kind of thought-experiment, similar to that of a political theorist like Thomas Hobbes when he tried to imagine what human life would have been like in a "state of nature," i.e., before civilized society. How would un instructed human beings, without a moral code or a central authority to restrain them, behave toward each other? The answer in Genesis 4 is powerful: at the core of human nature, unfortunately, is not love, as we might like to think, but a cauldron of powerful, negative emotions: pride, shame, envy, anger, and the desire, not to do good, but to take revenge.

And civilization itself is founded on an implicit recognition of the ever-present temptation to kill and the fear of violent death that stalks Cain after he has committed the first murder. "The Hebrew word for city, iyr, comes from a root meaning 'to watch' and 'to wake.' In the first instance, a city is a place guarded by a wakeful watch; it is not the market or the shrine but the watchtower or outpost that first makes a city a city.... The paradigmatic crime of the political founder is fratricide, for the aspiration to rule entails necessarily the denial and destruction of radical human equality, epitomized in the relationship of brotherhood.... The more that rude and ambitious men have to do with one another, the more they both need to fear and seek to outdo one another. For both reasons—safety and pride—they cultivate prowess in fighting. They build city walls [think of Gilgamesh and Troy] to protect them from their enemies; but the existence of walls creates new enmities and invites attack. The city begun in fear proudly begets one of heroic ambition. There is a direct line from the plowshare to the sword. The city is rooted in fear, greed, pride, violence, and the desire for domination. These questionable beginnings continue to infect civilization as such" (Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*).

3. GENESIS 12-21: "WILL THE JUDGE OF ALL THE EARTH NOT DO JUSTICE?"

Let’s jump past the stories of Babel and Noah, to the new dispensation that starts with Abraham and an emphasis on education and justice: "For I have singled him out so that he might instruct his sons and his family after him, that they should keep the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice" (Genesis 18:19). And let’s remember how unusual is the relationship between Abraham and the voice that he hears. "Go yourself," (Lekh lekha) says God to Abraham in Genesis 12. Leave the city where you were born, God says to his protégée, and go forth to find yourself, to become a different kind of person. With Abraham, God will try another experiment, to see whether human beings can create a just community and live decently with one another.

For a course devoted to the themes of self and society, this is a significant moment: if you are to find yourself, to become a better person, to strive for justice, you must free yourself from the powerful and corrupting influence of your society. You must break away from your father and reject the customs of his city, with all of its wealth and comforts, and undertake an arduous journey. Perhaps
there is an echo of Gilgamesh here: the ordeal of the journey, of separation from the city, is essential to the project of testing oneself, finding oneself. But Abraham leaves the city, not to slay a giant ogre in the forest, but to found a new kind of society, based on a principle of justice, with a different kind of relationship to the divine.

The gods of Babylon were cruel, arbitrary, and hungry for blood; Abraham's God might sometimes seem that way, but he is really very different. He is not a projection of natural forces or the cycles of the seasons: He transcends nature and intervenes in history, where every act and every personality, because they are unique, carry moral implications. Having no divine peers, he seeks a partnership with humanity, via Abraham. A single God suggests both the possibility of a universal code of ethics and an intimate, personal faith. His name is an archaic form of the verb "to be": "I will be there for you" is one modern scholar's translation, emphasizing God's continuing presence in His creation. Here is a God who cares about the fate of humanity, but also about the individual self.

Abraham clearly has the potential to be a good person. He does not build watchtowers and walls, like Cain and Gilgamesh, but opens his tent on all fours sides, to welcome strangers who are hot and thirsty from the desert sun. "In the arid land of Canaan, where water is the most precious of commodities, and herders survive only if their flocks can drink, Abraham digs wells and takes the unprecedented step of making them available to everyone. He forms an alliance with one of the groups that fights in a local war but refuses to take any share in the booty" (Arthur Hertzberg).

But Abraham is not a perfect paragon of virtue either: twice he tries to save himself from harm by pretending that his beautiful wife Sarah is his sister, and that inability to fulfill the demands of the role of husband, to care properly for his wife, will cost him and his family dearly. The first time Abraham speaks (Genesis 12: 11-13), "He emerges as a faithless and panicked character, rather than a staunch follower of God. Instead of asking for God's assistance and trusting to His powers, he decided that he would rather sacrifice his wife's honor to preserve his own skin" (Charlotte Gordon, The Woman Who Named God). The consequences of that initial failure reverberate, as moral failures always do in Genesis. Abraham, before he can become the father of a great nation, requires an education.

But that process of education appears to be mutual: that is, Abraham and God seem to educate each other, as we can see in the episode of Abraham's argument with God over the fate of Sodom (Genesis 18). Sodom is important for a discussion of justice in Genesis because it is the very opposite of a just society: here the stranger does not receive the courtesy of hospitality, which is the test of a civilized community. Instead, the stranger is subject to the threat of sexual exploitation, of rape. (In the Odyssey, Homer imagines an uncivilized island in which the host, who is a Cyclops, does not serve his guests but eats them—another egregious violation of the principle of hospitality toward strangers in need!) Sodom is a place where sexuality, which from the biblical perspective
ought to be disciplined to the responsibility of family and procreation, runs wild and swerves toward violence.

Nevertheless, Abraham asks God, will you destroy the city if fifty, or even ten, righteous people can be found there? "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put to death the righteous with the wicked. Far be it from you. Will not the judge of all the earth do justice?" (18:25). Will God allow the innocent to suffer with the guilty? It's an amazing moment, when this timid man, who had been afraid that the Egyptian Pharaoh might covet his wife, negotiates with his all-powerful God on an issue of justice for strangers. This kind of negotiation between God and man is unprecedented. Odysseus petitions Athena in the *Odyssey*, but he asks for help in slaughtering his enemies, which she duly provides. Abraham asks his Lord, on the contrary, to save people. He challenges God to live up to a standard of justice that seems to have its own validity.

But then how do we account for Abraham's silent obedience to God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac in Genesis 22? And what do we make of the fact that a new covenant is announced shortly after this episode? The is the most controversial episode in Genesis, the one that has elicited the most extensive commentary and debate, the one that Erich Auerbach described as "fraught with background."

Let's remember that Abraham had another son, Ishmael, before Isaac, as a consequence of his episode of moral failure in Egypt. Hagar, an Egyptian slave, bears Abraham a son, Ishmael, at Sarah's request, but almost immediately arouses Sarah's jealousy and rage. This seemingly bizarre story of surrogate motherhood turns out to have poignant moral implications. Hagar is so distressed by the harsh treatment she receives from Sarah that she flees into the desert (where she has the first encounter with an angel, in Genesis 16: 8-10). Later, Abraham, to appease his wife Sarah (and with God's approval), abandons Hagar and Ishmael in that same desert, where Hagar believes her son will surely die of thirst, and weeps. But then God provides water from a rock, and speaks directly to her, and she to Him. "You are El-roi" (Genesis 16:13) she says, "God of seeing, the all-seeing God," which also seems to mean something like "God of my seeing, whom I have seen, and who sees me."

In a wonderful book about this episode, Charlotte Gordon argues that Hagar, the slave, is "the first to define God as a being who could 'see' people. To modern readers, who are used to the idea of a deity who is aware of and cares about each individual, this seems an obvious attribute. But in ancient times, that God would 'see' Hagar—take note of her—was a revolutionary idea, as it demonstrated that he was unlike the other deities of the ancient world, who routinely ignored their followers unless they were coaxed and fed expensive delicacies by specially trained priests. Hagar's God, on the other hand, was a democratic God, a divinity who was actually concerned about a poor woman." And the God who sees the individual who needs help is also a God who hears: Ishmael's name means "he hears," and by extension "God who hears the voice of those who cry out to him."
Ishmael’s descendants would be partly responsible (along with Jacob’s sons) for the sale of Abraham’s great-grandson Joseph into Egyptian slavery, and indirectly, for the enslavement of the entire people of Israel in Egypt—another example of the Hebrew Bible’s invisible moral accounting, the principle of payback for moral sins that plays out ironically over several generations. To take another example, does Abraham’s grandson Jacob deceive his father Isaac and cheat his brother Esau out of his birthright? His father-in-law Laban will deceive him by switching brides on his wedding night. Much later, his sons will use Joseph’s coat to deceive their father about Joseph’s fate. Genesis is full of reversals such as these, but the text seldom offers an explicit comment about them. The art of biblical narrative is subtle: it invites us to extract the moral implications, the meaning, of its terse stories, which repeatedly echo each other in significant ways.

Eventually, Jacob’s son Joseph will become his brothers’ keeper—the savior of the very brothers who had sold him into slavery and deceived the old deceiver Jacob about what they had done. Those brothers, by dispatching their younger brother into slavery and then lying about it, had nearly recapitulated the crime of Cain. So the fateful moral consequences of actions echo and proliferate over generations. The time-perspective here is different from that of epic poetry, which is usually concerned with the brightly illuminated present moment and the near future. In the Hebrew Bible the moral bookkeeping may be opaque, but it’s there and it works itself out in what we might almost call historical time.

Again, as Robert Alter insists in his superb book *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Genesis refrains from moralizing: its scheme of justice emerges from a very economical narration of events and a few flashes of dialogue. The characters are free to choose, to remember the covenant or to forget it. But without their choices and mistakes, there would be no story, no trouble, no narrative, no transformation: the succession of characters would recede into mere genealogy. With fascinating insight into the specific strengths and weaknesses of its characters, biblical narrative repeatedly underscores the waywardness of human nature, the difficulty of living according to a moral standard and transmitting that standard to the next generation. So committed is Genesis to family as the matrix of morality that it practically discounts the theme of friendship, which is so important in *Gilgamesh* and in Greek and Roman literature.

Robert Alter: "Human reality, perhaps most memorably illustrated in the cycle of stories from Jacob’s birth to his death in Egypt with Joseph at his bedside, is a labyrinth of antagonisms, reversals, deceptions, shady deals, outright lies, disguises, misleading appearances, and ambiguous portents.... What is it like, the biblical writers seek to know through their art, to be a human being with a divided consciousness—intermittently loving your brother but hating him even more; resentful or perhaps contemptuous of your father but also capable of the deepest filial regard; stumbling between disastrous ignorance and imperfect knowledge; fiercely asserting your own independence but caught in a tissue of events divinely ordained; outwardly a definite character and inwardly an unstable vortex of greed, ambition, jealousy, lust, piety, courage, compassion and
much more?" All of that complex understanding of the human self is implicit in Genesis.

4. GENESIS 27-37: BROTHERS AGAIN
Let's jump forward again, to the story of Jacob and his brother Esau. Unlike her mother-in-law, Sarah, Rebecca doesn't encourage her husband to treat a servant as a concubine when she has difficulty conceiving. She is rewarded with twins, but twins are a problem: the natural rivalry of brothers, so vivid in the Cain and Abel story, is accentuated in the case of twins. Isaac prefers the first-born, stronger son, who becomes a hunter and satisfies Isaac's appetite for meat. Esau too, is a creature of appetite, as he proves when he sells his birthright to his younger brother Jacob in exchange for a red stew. This transaction prepares the stage for the famous story of the stolen paternal blessing, a drama in seven scenes (Genesis 27:1-28:8).

Isaac, old and blind, wants another good meal before he delivers his paternal blessing to his older son. The text contrasts Isaac's deficient eyesight and dull wits with Rebecca's sharp hearing and quick thinking. She devises the ruse that enables her more intelligent and promising younger son to receive the blessing from Isaac, and she enables her enfeebled husband to play his proper role of patriarch, at last concerned for the future of his family and his people, in the final act of the drama. She is the one who negotiates the labyrinth of conflicting emotions and misapprehension in this family crisis, and who prevents her son Jacob from suffering the fate that Cain inflicted upon Abel. Her combination of quick thinking and far seeing, her concern for the future and her mindfulness of the covenant—these are the qualities that ensure successful transmission of Abraham's legacy. Leon Kass: "As the exemplar of virtuous womanhood—eager for marriage and children; prudent, tactful, and energetically farsighted; with an ear for the transcendent voice" of God—Rebecca is the first but not the last of the Bible's strong female characters.

The long cycle of stories involving her son Jacob might be called, with a pun on one of Shakespeare's titles, "the taming of the shrewd." Intelligence and guile are not enough, nor are years of hard labor (atonement for cheating Esau), nor is it sufficient for this self-reliant trickster to survive a wrestling match with an angel on the eve of his reunion with his estranged brother. The real challenge is the transmission of Abraham's legacy, and here Jacob nearly fails. By playing favorites with his sons, Jacob revives in them the old propensity to fratricide, of which his favorite son Joseph, is nearly the victim.

Joseph, in Genesis 37, always refers to his older siblings as his brothers, but they never refer to the haughty Joseph has their "brother." "And he [Joseph] said, I am seeking my brothers... and Joseph went after his brothers... And they saw him from afar. The men said, each one to his brother, behold, that master of dreams is coming, let us kill him and throw him in one of the pits and say that an evil animal devoured him" (Genesis 37: 16-20. Only Judah refers to Joseph as a brother, but only to propose to profit from him by selling him as a slave: "What profit have we in killing our brother? Let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, for he is our brother, our flesh" (Genesis 37: 26-27). Here we find biblical characters, the
descendants of Father Abraham, once again on the verge of repeating the crime of Cain, and lying about it.

5. GENESIS 38: "SHE IS MORE IN THE RIGHT THAN I..."

Turning to the very next chapter, we find another example of God’s ability to see and to hear the case of a woman abandoned. Genesis 38, the story of Judah and Tamar, is an episode that might seem at first glance like a bizarre digression among the stories of the patriarchs. Judah prevented his brothers from killing their younger brother Joseph, but he participated in the scheme to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt, and to deceive their father Jacob about Joseph’s apparent "death." Genesis 38 begins with Judah having abandoned his brothers, and his people, to live among the Canaanites. He marries a Canaanite woman, and has three sons in rapid succession. For the eldest, he finds a Canaanite bride, Tamar, but the eldest son is displeasing to the Lord, and makes a rapid exit. The second son, Onan, refuses to follow the law ("Levirate marriage") that requires he take his brother's place and marry the widow: he does not wish to play second fiddle to his brother. He too displeases the Lord and makes an early exit. Judah promises the third son to Tamar, but has no intention of keeping his promise. Is Tamar cursed? In any case, Judah denies her what is hers by law and right. He does not treat her as a member of his family, does not bother to console her or even to think about her anymore. He allows her to languish while he carouses with his friends.

Only now does Tamar decide to deceive Judah—yet another example of the deceiver deceived in Genesis!—to play the role of a harlot and to seduce him. "Until this point," Robert Alter observed in a classic article, "Tamar had been a passive object, acted upon—or, alas, not acted upon—by Judah and his sons. The only verb she was the subject of were the two verbs of compliance and retreat, to go off and dwell, at the end of verse 11. Now, a clear perception of injustice done her is ascribed to Tamar (verse 14), and she suddenly races into rapid, purposeful action, expressed in a detonating series of verbs: in verse 14, she quickly takes off, covers, wraps herself, sits down at the strategic location, and after the encounter, in verse 19, there is another chain of four verbs, to indicate her brisk resumption of her former role and attire" ("A Literary Approach to the Bible," in The Art of Biblical Narrative). Tamar even engages in a very businesslike exchange with her client, insisting that he leave his seal and staff (his credit card, as it were) in lieu of immediate payment.

Three months later, informed that "Tamar your daughter-in-law and played the whore and what’s more, she's conceived by her whoring," Judah responds with the most brutal line in Genesis: "Take her out to be burned." But Tamar springs her trap: "Recognize, pray, whose are this seal-and-cord and this staff?" That "recognize, pray" echoes the same line that Judah and his brothers had used when they asked Jacob to examine the bloody garment that convinced the patriarch that his famous son was dead (37:32). But now the "evidence" is genuine rather than doctored, and Judah acknowledges: "She is more in the right than I, for have I not failed to give her to Shelah, my son?" It is the first time that a character in Genesis has publicly admitted his own failure to be behave justly.
And let’s remember that Tamar, a Canaanite and a woman, has taken an enormous risk by asserting her rights in the only way available to her.

The episode now ends abruptly with the birth of twins, echoing the births of Jacob and Esau, and foreshadowing the birth of Tamar’s descendant, who will become King David (who will have a daughter named Tamar). But Judah’s story is not over: he returns to his family, his father and brothers, and becomes their spokesman in the crisis that envelops them in Egypt. Chastened by his experience with Tamar, Judah, without losing his confidence and his powers of persuasion, has become a wiser, more responsible person. He will soon reaffirm the meanings of fatherhood and brotherhood, which are such crucial themes in Genesis.

6. GENESIS 44: HIS BROTHER’S KEEPER
In Genesis 43, Judah uses his considerable powers of persuasion to convince the elderly Jacob to allow the youngest son, Benjamin, to accompany the brothers to Egypt in search of food. Their brother Joseph, now the viceroy in Pharaoh’s Egypt, the power behind the throne, now fulfills the dream of his childhood: all of his brothers now bow down to him, although at this point they have no idea that it is in fact their brother Joseph, whom they had hated and tried either to kill or to sell into slavery, who is standing before them, holding their fate in his hands. Joseph weeps when he sees his younger brother, the other son of his late mother Rachel. His tears are born of compassion, based on brotherly identification: the Hebrew word is rachamim, derived, scholars think, from rechem, “womb.” He weeps for the brother who derives from the same womb as he did, but he does not yet trust the other brothers, who abandoned him.

The plot thickens. Joseph subjects them to a test: he will place them in a position where they will be strongly tempted to treat Benjamin as they had treated him, abandoning him to prison and slavery. But none of them even thinks of deserting their youngest brother. They have become their brother’s keepers at last. And Judah has become their spokesman.

In the longest speech in Genesis, seventeen verses (44: 18-34), Judah appeals to Joseph, the brother whom he had sold into slavery (but who has not yet revealed his true identity), not to take their younger brother Benjamin, as a slave and hostage. “And so, let your servant, pray, stay instead of the lad as a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers. For how shall I go up to my father, if the lad be not with us? Let me see not the evil that would find out my father!” Eight times Judah puts the word ‘avi,’ “my father,” in Joseph’s ears, thus underscoring the father-son relationship, as well as that of brothers.

The Hebrew word ‘ach (brother) means to be tied together, from the verb ahot meaning to sew or stitch. It derives from a sense of unity, oneness (ehad), which comes from the understanding of having emanated from one father. Etymologically, the narrator’s careful choice of Hebrew words pulls the threads of the narrative together. “When Judah declares to their father that he will stand as surety for Benjamin, he is expressing his newfound recognition that the youngest son of Rachel is truly the ‘ach, the brother, an inextricable part of him,
Judah, even though he was born of a different mother. When he tells the viceroy that he is willing to be a slave instead of Benjamin—so that this son of Rachel may be restored to his loving father in order to save Jacob further pain—he is demonstrating the bond of ultimate unity between siblings, and between them and their father. This is aḥab (brotherliness), which creates an indissoluble bond, ḥibur or haverut (profound attachment). It is at this point of Judah's self-sacrifice for Rachel's youngest son that Joseph recognizes his brother's repentance and is ready to forgive and reunite with them" (Rabbi Shlomo Riskin).

In other words, Judah has now acknowledged the full meaning of brotherhood and will do anything now to avoid causing more grief for the brothers' long-suffering father. The man who had said callously of Tamar, "Take her out to be burned," is now saying, "Take me instead." The man who had proposed to sell his brother into slavery in Egypt is now saying, to that same brother, "Enslave me instead." He is willing to sacrifice himself "to be the ram" (Genesis 22) for his father and brother. He has become his brother's keeper. He has acquired a capacity for empathy. He has become a leader. If there is a version of heroism in Genesis, this is it. It is he, rather than Joseph, who provides the final answer to Cain's rhetorical question in Genesis 4.

7. EXODUS AND MLK: "AND HE'S ALLOWED ME TO GO UP TO THE MOUNTAIN."

Of course we should remember that Genesis is only the first of many books of the Bible. The next book, Exodus, is equally important—and perhaps more so. Is this the epic of the Hebrews? Is Moses an epic hero? Well, not quite. Because of the odd circumstances of his upbringing he is a member of the Egyptian royal court, the elite. When he kills a slave-driver in anger, he finds that his oppressed people are not necessarily grateful for his help, and that his position at court has become untenable. He goes into exile in a place called Midian, which represents for him a stern desert moral code in sharp contrast with the polytheism and the cult of the dead at the Egyptian court. The Midianite way of life—the life of shepherds and artisans—was much more like that of his Hebrew ancestors than the Egyptian way. (He is reversing the trajectory of Joseph, who had gone from being a shepherd in the desert to the highest circles of the Egyptian court.) And there is a strong biblical association between the shepherd and the leader-as-protector. The shepherd is the antithesis of the warrior-hero of epic poetry. And of course it's worth noting that Moses is a reluctant and imperfect prophet: he has a speech impediment, and needs his brother Aaron to speak for him and his sister Miriam to sing for him.

Again, remember how the wanderings in the wilderness are not presented as an epic of heroic endurance in the face of enormous obstacles, but as a series of accounts of grumbling, murmuring, backsliding, ingratitude, weakness of will, and loss of faith. His people, of course, would rather worship an idol than an invisible God who makes extreme moral demands on them. These include not just the Ten Commandments, but also a whole series of reiterated commands (in Deuteronomy) to assist and empathize with the widow, the orphan, the servant, the poor, and the stranger.
Why is there such a loathing of idol worship in the Bible? Not just because the Hebrew God is jealous, but also because the Bible associates idol-worship with injustice. Baal and Moloch are gods of human desires who bestow power, wealth, and victory on those who make bloody sacrifices to them, but the Hebrew God suggests "that the only acceptable offering is justice: to treat others fairly and compassionately and never to exploit the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, or to shed innocent blood" (Thomas Cahill).

Notice the repeated insistence on the relationship between the memory of bondage and the obligations of social justice: "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:21). "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore remember the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (Deuteronomy 5:15). "You shall not subvert the rights of the fatherless... remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and that the Lord your God redeemed you" (Deuteronomy 34: 17-18). "If a stranger lives with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You must count him as one of your own countrymen and love him as yourself, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:33-34). The theme of kindness toward the stranger is beautifully rendered in the book of Ruth, a poignant short text that is one of the most delicate and moving in the Hebrew Bible. The prophet Amos will go further: if you have more than you need, you are a thief, for what you "own" is stolen from those who do not have enough. Eventually the moral vision of Exodus matures in the prophets' dream of universal brotherhood, peace, and justice: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4).

No other people in antiquity derived their sense of themselves and their mission from the experience of slavery. The tortuous long march of an enslaved people toward a "promised land" of freedom has an archetypal significance in Western political thought. The Jewish tradition looks backward, not toward a golden age in Eden, but toward the experience of bondage in Egypt. It also looks forward, toward a vision of redemption in the future. On the night before his death, Martin Luther King gave one of the great speeches in American history. It drew unforgottably on the imagery of Moses on the mountaintop and the Promised Land: "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!"

One of the central insights of the Hebrew Bible, which Martin Luther King of course understood very well, is that the work of creating a good society is intergenerational. The good society can't be created all at once, but neither can there be any significant progress without a vision, however distant, of the goal and of our obligation to future generations.
The Hebrew Bible may seem very remote from us now, but the narratives of Genesis and Exodus offer an extraordinarily powerful vision of the complexity of the self and the difficulty of creating a just society. Unlike the Gilgamesh narrative, which disappeared for thousands of years and was rediscovered only a little over a century ago, the Hebrew Bible has been a continuous source of inspiration for more than two millennia. And the King James translation of the Bible has been second only to Shakespeare as an influence on the English language: think of all the words that came into English through successive translations of the Bible: "loving-kindness," "tender mercies," even the word "beautiful" (not found in English before the Tyndale translation in the time of King Henry VIII). And from one short piece alone, David's lament for Jonathan: "how are the mighty fallen," "in their death they were not divided," "swifter than eagles, stronger than lions."

8. THE BIBLICAL LEGACY: "FOR WHERE YOU GO, I WILL GO…"
At the risk of some repetition, let's summarize: for a course devoted to the themes of self and society, the importance of the Hebrew Bible is twofold: a conception of the self as having depth, and a conception of society as aspiring toward justice.

The conception of the self in depth means that the Bible, perhaps for the first time, imagined fully rounded characters with hidden thoughts, secret motives, buried emotions, ambivalent feelings—characters who are often selfish and limited in various ways but are capable of penitence and growth. To convey insights of this kind, the biblical authors deployed the techniques of what we now call prose fiction, illuminating the human personality in all of its range and complexity.

The conception of society as aspiring toward justice is our second theme, and it is not unrelated to the first. The authors of the Bible were extraordinary in their realism about human nature—the stories in Genesis often seem to record one moral failure after another. But the idea of the Covenant opens up the possibility of progress towards a more just society. It's often said that the authors of the Bible were among the first to offer something like a historical narrative of their people's past (rather than a wholly mythological one). But they also imagined a better future, one in which we will care for each other rather than succumb to envy and anger and selfishness. It won't happen, as Martin Luther King reminded us, in one lifetime, and there will be backsliding, and murmuring, and setbacks. But the image of a better world is there, and it is implicit in the interlocking family narratives of Genesis, and explicit in some of the later, prophetic books of the Bible.

Many of the biblical narratives will seem strange to us now, but if we read them with close attention we can begin to understand that they embody a sense of hope that has inspired generations of readers (and listeners) for more than two thousand years. We find echoes of it in our own politics and literature—in Abraham Lincoln's greatest speeches, in novels by Melville and Faulkner and Steinbeck, and in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. It's hard not to be moved, even now, by so simple a story as the book of Ruth: "Do not urge me to
leave you or to turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God." It's a long way from Cain's "Am I my brother's keeper?" to Ruth's "I will be there for you." But the contrast between those quotations is a measure of the distance the Hebrew Bible travels.

In memory of Rebecca Siebenmorgen (1986-2005), Stevenson Class of ’07.

RECOMMENDED:

Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981)—Alter is both a great literary critic and a masterful translator of Hebrew. This may be the best modern introduction to the art of biblical storytelling. See also his recently published translation The Five Books of Moses (New York, Norton, 2005), and Frank Kermode’s review of it in The New York Review of Books, October 20, 2005.

Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953)—the first chapter of this classic work contains an unforgettable analysis of Genesis 22.

Assaf Inbari, "Towards a Hebrew Literature," Azure (Spring 2000)—an excellent introduction to the distinctive characteristics of biblical prose.

Leon Kass, The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis (New York: Free Press, 2003)—a brilliant reading of the fifty chapters of Genesis, to which the discussions of Rebecca and Tamar in this lecture are heavily indebted.


William Faulkner, Absalom! Absalom!—the David story updated; John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath—hear the biblical echoes in Tom Joad’s great speech: "I’ll be all around in the dark. I’ll be ever’-where – wherever you can look. Wherever there’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever there’s a cop
beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there. I’ll be in the way guys yell when they’re mad – I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know supper’s ready. An’ when the people are eatin’ the stuff they raise, and livin’ in the houses they build – I’ll be there, too.”

Judy Collins and Pete Seeger, *Turn, Turn, Turn* ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJVU2Js-Aeo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJVU2Js-Aeo))

The lyrics, from the Book of Ecclesiastes, are more than two thousand years old, but the song reached number on the Billboard chart in 1966! It's a treat to hear a version of it by two of our greatest singer-songwriters.