

The Biblical Hero Study Guide

Elliott Rabin

Epigraph

Great-heart: Prithee, Mr. Honest, present us with a few particulars.

Honest: So I will. [Mr. Self-will] said, To have to do with other men's wives, had been practised by David, God's beloved, and therefore he could do it. He said to have more women than one, was a thing that Solomon practised, and therefore he could do it. He said, that Sarah and the godly midwives of Egypt lied, and so did Rahab, and therefore he could do it.... He said, That Jacob got the inheritance of his father, in a way of guile and dissimulation, and therefore he could do so too. John Bunyan,

Pilgrim's Progress Book II

- How does Mr. Self-will regard biblical characters as role models?
- Is there any justification for his view?

Preface: The Need for Heroes

- Who do you consider as a hero? Why?
- What purposes does a hero have in society?

A student should read great works of literature "in order that he may imitate or emulate [their heroes] and desire to become like them." - Plato, Protagoras

- Why does Protagoras think we need heroes?
- Why is literature important, in his view?
- Do you agree? Is there a character in literature you esteem as a hero?

*Ethically, the hero might be thought of as the bull's-eye of a target, the ideal achievement of right conduct. ... [By contrast,] negative types represent deviations and failures important enough to be memorialized by society. - Orrin Klapp, *Heroes, Villains, and Fools**

- Do you agree with Klapp that heroes and villains represent guides for ethical conduct?
- What contemporary figures are portrayed as ethical touchstones, for good or bad?
- Do biblical characters serve this role?

*I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" - Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue**

- How do stories serve to direct our behavior?
- What stories, whether real or fictional, have formed who you are or inspired something you've done?

*Stories about heroes, therefore, hold such potent appeal because they evoke our universally felt human longings to transcend the boundaries drawn around our lives. – Elliott Rabin, *The Biblical Hero**

- In what ways have you desired to transcend social or natural boundaries?
- Think of a hero from literature. How does that character succeed in transcending ordinary human limitations?

Introduction: Heroic-Unheroic Heroes: The Biblical Model

We must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are.

Aristotle, *Poetics*

- How are heroes usually depicted?
- Why are they often not represented "as they are"?

*When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
the moon and stars that You set in place,
what is man that You have been mindful of him,
mortal man that You have taken note of him,
that You have made him little less than God,
and adorned him with glory and majesty? Ps. 8:5-6*

- In what ways are people like God and unlike God?
- According to the Bible, do you think people are more like or unlike God?

*King Nimrod read in the stars that a boy would be born who would rise up against him and show that his religion was false. To defend himself against fate's decree, Nimrod ordered the midwives to kill off all boys born in his kingdom. Seventy thousand boys were killed. At this time, Terah married Abraham's mother. When she was ready to give birth, she hid in a cave to avert the terrible edict. After giving birth, she wrapped up the boy in a garment and left him in the cave, praying for God's help. The angel Gabriel caused milk to flow from the little finger of Abraham's right hand. At ten days old, Abraham left the cave. He saw the stars come out and thought they were gods, but when they descended he realized they were not. He saw the sun rise and thought it was a god, but when the sun set he realized it was not. Then he saw the moon and reckoned it as a god, but when clouds obscured it, Abraham said, "This, too, is no god! There is One who sets them all in motion." Louis Ginsberg, *Legends of the Jews**

- In what ways does this story make Abraham seem heroic?
- What parts of Abraham's heroic resume are missing in the Bible and filled in by this midrash?

Classical Model: The Hero as King

*For many of us who have our homes on Olympos [i. e., gods] endure things
from men, when ourselves we inflict hard pain on each other.*

*Ares had to endure it when strong Ephialtes and Otos,
sons of Aloeus, chained him in bonds that were too strong for him,
and three months and ten he lay chained in the brazen cauldron;
and now might Ares, insatiable of fighting, have perished,
had not Eëriboia, their stepmother, the surpassingly lovely,
brought word to Hermes, who stole Ares away out of it*

as he was growing faint and the hard bondage was breaking him.... – Homer, The Iliad 5:382-91

- How are classical heroes depicted as like, and unlike, gods?
- Even today, we use words like “idol” to describe people who are our heroes. Does the very notion of a hero require the ascription of divinity to a person? In other words, does “heroism” by its very nature erase the boundary between the human and divine realms?
- What are the attractions and dangers of depicting heroes as godlike monarchs?

The American Model: Hero as Outsider

*The traditional hero is at the center of that world, the glass of its fashion, the symbol of its power, the legate of its history. But the American hero as Adam takes his start outside the world, remote or on the verges; its power, its fashions, and its history are precisely the forces he must learn, must master or be mastered by. Oedipus, approaching the strange city-world of Thebes, was in fact coming home; the hero of the new world has no home to begin with, but he seeks one to come. R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam**

- How is the American hero different from the classical model, according to Lewis?

- Lewis wrote this in 1955. Is his vision of the American hero, whether native-born or foreign-born, as outsider still true today?
- Where do people look for heroes today?
- In what ways is the biblical model closer to the classical or the American model? In what ways does it depart from them both?

Chapter 1. Moses: Prototype

Having brought himself and his own life into the middle, as an excellently wrought picture, [Moses] established himself as a most beautiful and Godlike work, to be a model for all those who were inclined to imitate him. - Philo, Life of Moses

- How does the Bible portray Moses as an exemplary person, worthy of imitation?
- Is Moses always portrayed as such a perfect model?

I am Sargon the great king, king of Agade....

My mother, the high priestess, conceived me, she bore me in secret.

She placed me in a reed basket, she sealed my hatch with pitch.

She left me to the river, whence I could not come up.

The river carried me off, it brought me to Aqqi, drawer of water.

Aqqi, drawer of water, brought me up as he dipped his bucket.

Aqqi, drawer of water, raised me as his adopted son. - Mesopotamian poem, ca. 2300 BCE

- What similarities and differences can you find between Sargon's story and Moses's?
- How do those differences indicate the ways that the biblical model departs from the classical model?

[The Lord spoke to Moses:] Die on the mountain that you are about to ascend, and be gathered to your kin, as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his kin; for you both broke faith with Me among the Israelite people, at the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, by failing to uphold My sanctity among the Israelite people. - Deut. 32:50-51

- Contrast these verses with the recounting of Moses's death in Deut. 34:5-6.
- Does Moses die the death of a hero? Why or why not?

When Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender, "Why do you strike your fellow?" He retorted, "Who made you chief and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses was frightened, and thought: Then the matter is known! When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but Moses fled from Pharaoh. - Exod. 2:11-15

- What heroic and/or unheroic motifs emerge from this passage?
- How does this passage foreshadow future episodes in Moses's career?

But Moses said to the Lord, "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." And the Lord said to him, "Who gives man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you what to say." But he said, "Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent." The Lord became angry with Moses. Exod. 4:10-14

- How does this passage portray the relationship between Moses and God?
- Why would the Bible depict its greatest hero this way?

[Moses] said, "Oh, let me behold Your Presence!" And He answered, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Lord, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. But," He said, "you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live." And the Lord said, "See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen." Exod. 33:18-23

- What is God's "Presence"? Does Moses see it? Can God be seen?
- Why can't a person see God and live?
- What is the meaning of Moses's vision?

Then Moses held out his arm over the sea and the Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground. - Exod. 14:21

- Is it Moses or God who turns the sea into dry ground? What is the relationship between Moses's action and God's?
- Who is the hero of the exodus?

Then, whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses's hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set. And Joshua overwhelmed the people of Amalek with the sword. - Exod. 17:11-13

- In what ways does this passage show Moses as heroic and not heroic?
- What does the image of Moses here tell us about the Bible's perspective on human heroism?

As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged; and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. - Exod. 32:19

- Was Moses correct to break the tablets?
- Was breaking them a heroic act?

Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor; that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me? Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant,' to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people when they whine before me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me. If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather; I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness! - Num. 11:11-15

- Compare Moses's complaint to God here with his argument at the Burning Bush. Are they more similar or different? Has Moses changed or grown over this time, and if so, how?
- Why does Moses use maternal imagery in describing his relationship to the people? Does that imagery carry over into other parts of his story?

Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as He had commanded him. Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?" And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them." - Num. 20:9-12

- What is Moses's error here? How does God justify removing him from power at this point?

- How does this episode color the reader's understanding of Moses's heroism?

When the Lord heard your loud complaint, He was angry. He vowed: Not one of these men, this evil generation, shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers.... Because of you the Lord was incensed with me too, and He said: "You shall not enter it either." - Deut. 1:34-35, 37

- Why does Moses blame the people for his own inability to enter the Land of Israel? Is he correct?
- Compare Moses here at the end of his career with his beginning at the Burning Bush. How has Moses grown as a hero, and how has he remained the same?

Chapter 2. Samson: Strongman

An angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her,... "Now be careful not to drink wine or other intoxicant, or to eat anything unclean. For you are going to conceive and bear a son; let no razor touch his head, for the boy is to be a nazirite to God from the womb on. He shall be the first to deliver Israel from the Philistines." - Judg. 13:3-5

- What makes Samson a nazirite? In what ways is he different from the description of a nazirite in Numbers 6?
- Why does Samson, alone among biblical heroes, receive an elaborate annunciation, which takes up an entire chapter (Judges 13)?

Eurystheus ordered [Heracles] to bring the skin of the Nemean lion; now that was an invulnerable beast begotten by Typhon.... And having come to Nemea and tracked the lion, he first shot an arrow at him, but when he perceived that the beast was invulnerable, he heaved up his club and made after him. And when the lion took refuge in a cave with two mouths, Hercules built up the one entrance and came

in upon the beast through the other, and putting his arm round its neck held it tight till he had choked it.

- Apollodorus, *The Library*, 2.5.1

When he came to the vineyards of Timnah, a full-grown lion came roaring at him. The spirit of the Lord gripped him, and he tore him asunder with his bare hands as one might tear a kid asunder; but he did not tell his father and mother what he had done. - Judg. 14:5-6.

- How does Samson resemble the Greek hero Heracles/Hercules?
- Why does Samson not tell his parents what he has done, and what does that reveal about him?

Once Samson went down to Timnah; and while in Timnah, he noticed a girl among the Philistine women. On his return, he told his father and mother, "I noticed one of the Philistine women in Timnah; please get her for me as a wife." His father and mother said to him, "Is there no one among the daughters of your own kinsmen and among all our people, that you must go and take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson answered his father, "Get me that one, for she is the one that pleases me." - Judg. 14:1-3

- Contrast this scene with courtship scenes in Genesis. What does that contrast tell us about Samson?
- Which character in Genesis does Samson most closely resemble?

The Philistines came up, pitched camp in Judah and spread out over Lehi. The men of Judah asked, "Why have you come up against us?" They answered, ""We have come to take Samson prisoner, and to do to him as he did to us." Thereupon three thousand men of Judah went down to the cave of the rock of Etam, and they said to Samson, "You knew that the Philistines rule over us; why have you done this to us?" He replied, "As they did to me, so I did to them." - Judg. 15:9-13

- Characterize Samson's relations with the Philistines and the Israelites.

- How does Samson act as a “judge,” a tribal leader?
- What’s the narrator’s attitude to Samson’s vigilantism?

O Lord God! Please remember me, and give me strength just this once, O God, to take revenge of the Philistines, if only for one of my two eyes. - Judg. 16:28

- Compare this speech to Samson’s earlier behavior. Does Samson change at the end of his life?
- Why does God restore Samson’s strength?

He had led Israel for twenty years. - Judg. 16:31

- In what sense was Samson a leader of Israel? How does he not appear as a leader?
- In light of Samson’s life story, how do you understand this sentence?

Chapter 3. Esther: Queen

[There were hangings of] white cotton and blue wool, caught up by cords of fine linen and purple wool to silver rods and alabaster columns; and there were couches of gold and silver on a pavement of marble, alabaster, mother-of-pearl and mosaics. Royal wine was served in abundance, as befits a king, in golden beakers, beakers of varied design. - Esther 1:6-7

- Compare the palace setting of Esther with other settings in biblical stories. What does the Persian palace most closely resemble?
- What can the contrast between Ahasverus’s palace and Abraham and Sarah’s tent tell us?

[Shahrazad’s sister] said, By Allah! O my sister, relate to us a story to beguile the waking hour of our night. Most willingly, answered Shahrazad, if this virtuous King permit me. And the King, hearing these

words, and being restless, was pleased with the idea of listening to the story; and thus, on the first night of the thousand and one, Shahrazad commenced her recitations. - One Thousand and One Nights

- What similarities can you find between Shahrazad (also known as Sheherazade) and Esther?
- What might those similarities teach us about Esther?

And the law for the drinking was, "No restrictions!" - Esther 1:8

Then the king consulted the sages learned in procedure. For it was the royal practice [to turn] to all who were versed in law and precedent. ... If it please your Majesty... let it be written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it cannot be abrogated, that Vashti shall never enter the presence of King Ahasuerus. -Esther 1:13, 19

- How does the book of Esther depict the role of law in ancient Persia?
- Is the law above Ahasverus or is the king above the law?
- Does the narrator portray the king as more weak or strong?

Esther too was taken into the king's palace under the supervision of Hegai, guardian of the women. –

Esther 2:8

- How is Esther depicted in the first two chapters? Does she have any control over what happens to her?
- What does she think about the beauty contest? Why does she enter?
- The ancient rabbis related the name Esther to the Hebrew verb *lehastir*, to hide. Is Esther hiding something, and if so, what and why?

[Mordechai] was foster father to Hadassah—that is, Esther. ... Esther did not reveal her people or her kindred, for Mordechai had told her not to reveal it. - Esther 2:7, 10

- Why does Mordechai have Hadassah/Esther hide her Jewish identity? How does hiding it help Esther? Who in the court knows and doesn't know that she's Jewish?
- Where else in the book of Esther do people hide things?
- Why is concealing and revealing a central theme in Esther? What do you think we can learn from it?

Compare Esther with Joseph as Diaspora heroes.

- What similarities can you find? In what ways does the story portray them as Israelite or non-Israelite Egyptian, Persian?
- Why is God absent from the text of these stories?

Mordechai had this message delivered to Esther: "Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis." - Esther 4:13-14

- How does Esther change, and what makes her change? What does she learn about herself and her position?
- Does the way she acts cast light on her thoughts and identity earlier in the story?

[Esther said to King Ahasverus,] "If Your Majesty will do me the favor, and if it pleases Your Majesty, let my life be granted me as my wish, and my people as my request. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated. Had we only been sold as bondmen and bondwomen, I would have kept silent; for the adversary is not worthy of the king's trouble." - Esther 7:3-4

- Does the king know who Esther’s “people” is before this point?
- Why is this the right point in the story for Esther to confront the king?
- What do you think Esther means in the last sentence?

Chapter 4. Abraham: Pilgrim

The Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.” - Gen. 12:1-3

- What seems confusing or unrealistic about these blessings?
- How do you think Abram and Sarah reacted to them?
- In what senses can Abram/Abraham be considered a pilgrim?

Roman, remember by your strength to rule

Earth’s peoples—for your arts are to be these:

To pacify, to impose the rule of law,

To spare the conquered, battle down the proud. - Aeneid, Fitzgerald translation, 6:1151-1154

- Compare Abraham’s mission with Aeneas’s. What similarities and differences do you see?
- Are they more similar or different, in your view?

There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. - Gen. 12:10

[The Lord said to Abram,] “Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.” - Gen 15:13

- Where is Abram's home? Does he develop a sense of home? Why is his home so precarious?
- How do Abram's experiences foreshadow those of the children of Israel later on?

Now the Lord had said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do... For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right, in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him." - Gen

18:17, 19

- Why does God here pose a question to God's self?
- What does God's internal monologue reveal about God's relationship with Abraham?
- Does that relationship change over the course of the story? If so, how and why?

And Sarai said to Abram, "The wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The Lord decide between you and me!" -

Gen 16:5

- What does Sarai accuse Abram of? Do you think there's merit in her accusation?
- What is the source or sources of their conflict?
- From what we see in the biblical stories, how would you describe the relationship between Sarah and Abraham?

Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test.... And He said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love... and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you." -Gen 22:1-2

- Note the striking similarity between God's call to Abraham here and at the beginning of Abraham's story in Genesis 12. Why are these passages so similar?

- Think about the *Akedah* in relationship to everything that came before, both in Abraham's life and in earlier stories. Can you find there any understanding of why God would put Abraham to such a test?
- What does God learn from Abraham passing the test?

And Ephron replied to Abraham, ... "A piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver—what is that between you and me? Go and bury your dead." Abraham accepted Ephron's terms. -Gen. 23:14-16

- Why does Ephron propose such a high amount and pretend it is nothing?
- Why does Abraham accept it so quickly? Is he being smart or swindled?

Chapter 5. Jacob: Trickster

Then his [Esau's] brother emerged, holding on to the heel ['ekev] of Esau; so they named him Jacob [Ya'akov]. - Gen. 25:26

- How is the etymology of Jacob's name significant?
- What does Jacob's action in utero tell us about his character?

*"[French folk tales] do not advocate immorality, but they undercut the notion that virtue will be rewarded or that life can be conducted according to any principle other than basic mistrust." - Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, 54*

- The heroes of French folk tales are generally tricksters. Does Jacob operate according to these same principles in his stories?
- Why do tricksters shunt ordinary rules of morality aside in their behavior?

When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp. ... And Esau said to Jacob, "Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished." ... Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." And Esau said, I am at the point of death, so of what use is my birthright to me?" But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. – Gen. 25:27, 30-33

- What impression do we get of the two brothers?
- Why does Esau say he is “at the point of death,” and why is he so willing to sell his birthright? Why is Jacob so intent on taking it from him, and why doesn’t he give his brother food when he’s hungry?
- What information does the initial contrast between “man of the outdoors” and “mild man who stayed in camp” convey? How does that contrast shape the next scene between the brothers, in which Jacob steals his father’s blessing?

Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night.... Taking one of the stones of that place he put it under his head and lay down in that place. He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. - Gen. 27:10-12

- How does the Bible portray the experience of traveling, of being on the road, in between places?
- Why does the word “place” recur three times in the first two sentences?
- Why do you think Jacob has this particular vision and at this point in his story?

One day Coyote was out walking. He was walking in the forest. He saw Rabbit. He started to chase Rabbit. Rabbit ran in a hole. Coyote said: "I'll get you out of that hole. Let me think." Coyote sat down to think. "Now I know. I'll get you out. I'll get weeds. I'll put them in the hole. I'll set fire to them. Then

you will come out,” said Coyote. Rabbit laughed. “No, I will not come out, my cousin. I like weeds. I’ll eat the weeds.” ...

“I know,” said Coyote. “Piñon pitch.”

Rabbit looked sad. “You will kill me. I do not eat piñon pitch,” said Rabbit.

Coyote... put the piñon pitch in the hole. He set the piñon pitch on fire. He bent low. He blew on the fire.

“Come closer,” said Rabbit, “blow harder.” Coyote came closer. He blew harder.

“I’m nearly dead,” said Rabbit, “come closer. Blow a little harder.”

*Rabbit turned. He kicked hard. The fire flew in Coyote’s face. Rabbit ran away. He was laughing very hard. - Erdoes and Ortiz, eds., *American Indian Trickster Tales*, 48-49 Navajo.*

- Compare Jacob and Laban to Coyote and Rabbit, as trickster competitors. How do the details of their story conform to classic features of trickster tales?
- In what ways do the tales of Jacob and Laban resemble and differ from those of Jacob and Esau as trickster stories?

Reuben came upon some mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, “Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.” But she said to her, “Was it not enough for you to take away my husband, that you would also take my son’s mandrakes?” Rachel replied, “I promise, he shall lie with you tonight, in return for your son’s mandrakes.” – Gen. 30:14-15

- Mandrakes were considered a magical fertility aid. How in this scene does Rachel resemble Jacob?
- Are there ways that Rachel as well as Leah can be considered tricksters like their husband?

Then Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, ‘Return to your native land and I will deal bountifully with you’! I am unworthy of all the kindness that you have so steadfastly shown your servant.... Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike. Yet You have said, ‘I will deal bountifully with you and make your offspring as the sands of the sea, which are too numerous to count.’” – Gen. 32:10-13

- Contrast Jacob’s prayer here, before his encounter with Esau, with the vow to God he makes in 28:20-22. How is his tone different and why?
- What do these two utterances tell us about Jacob’s relationship with God? Does that relationship change or develop?
- What does Jacob anticipate may happen when he meets Esau? Why?
- Why does Jacob wrestle with the angel in 32:23-33, and what significance does this have if any for Jacob’s relationship with Esau?

Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, “You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my men are few in number, so that if they unite against me and attack me, I and my house will be destroyed.” But they answered, “Should our sister be treated like a whore?” Gen. 34:30-31

- Whom do you think the narrator agrees with more: Jacob or Simeon and Levi?
- In what ways do the brothers act like tricksters?
- Read the law of the raped virgin in Deut. 22:28. Does it cast any light on the way we should regard Shechem?

Then [Joseph] instructed his house steward as follows,... “Put my silver goblet in the mouth of the bag of the youngest one, together with his money for the rations.” ... With the first light of morning, [Joseph’s brothers] were sent off with their pack animals. They had just left the city and had not gone far, when Joseph said to his steward, “Up, go after the men! And when you overtake them, say to them, ‘Why did you repay good with evil? It is the very one from which my master drinks and which he uses for divination. It was a wicked thing for you to do!’” – Gen. 44:1-5

- Why does Joseph set up Benjamin to be punished?
- Compare this act of overtaking with Laban overtaking Jacob and his family in Genesis 31.

Whom does Joseph most closely resemble in that scene: Laban, Jacob, or Rachel?

Israel [Jacob] stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim’s head, though he was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh’s head—thus crossing his hands—although Manasseh was the first-born.... “Not so, Father,” Joseph said to his father, “for the other is the first-born; place your right hand on his head.” But his father objected, saying, “I know, my son, I know. He too shall become a people, and he too shall be great. Yet his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall be plentiful enough for nations.” – Gen. 48:12-19

- Compare this blessing scene to the one at the beginning of Jacob’s story in Genesis 27. In what ways is Jacob in the later scene like Isaac, and in what ways like the younger Jacob? Whom does he resemble more?
- What impression of tricksters does the narrator leave us with?
- How should we evaluate Jacob’s trickster character: as a bad trait that he overcomes, or a trait with some good qualities?

Chapter 6. David: King

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his eyes. Judg. 21:25

And the Lord replied to Samuel, "Heed the demand of the people in everything they say to you [by asking for a king]. For it is not you that they have rejected; it is Me they have rejected as their king." -

1 Sam. 8:7

- How do these two statements contradict each other? Is there a way to see them as complementary?
- Why does God instruct Samuel to support the people's demand for a king?

Brutus: As Caesar loved me, I wept for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honor him. But as he was ambitious, I slew him. - Shakespeare, Julius Caesar 3.2

- Why is ambition considered such a grievous fault in a leader?
- Does the Bible portray David more as someone ambitious to take the throne or as lacking ambition?

The Lord makes poor and makes rich,

He casts down, He also lifts high.

He raises the poor from the dust,

Lifts up the needy from the dunghill,

Setting them with nobles,

Granting them seats of honor. - 1 Sam. 2:6-8

- How does the story of Hannah's barrenness and the birth of Samuel in 1 Samuel 1 set the stage for the long saga of David and the subsequent history of Israelite kings?
- What does this excerpt from Hannah's prayer tell us about God's relationship with Israel's leaders?

Saul said to Samuel, “I did wrong to transgress the Lord’s command and your instructions; but I was afraid of the troops and I yielded to them. Please, forgive my offense and come back with me, and I will bow low to the Lord.” But Samuel said to Saul, “I will not go back with you; for you have rejected the Lord’s command, and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel.” - 1 Sam. 15:24-26

- Compare God’s treatment of Saul with God’s treatment of David. Does Saul deserve his punishment?
- How can you read Saul’s actions in this chapter positively and negatively?

David replied to Saul, “Your servant has been tending his father’s sheep, and if a lion or a bear came and carried off an animal from the flock, I would go after it and fight it and rescue it from its mouth. And if it attacked me, I would seize it by the beard and strike it down and kill it. Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and that uncircumcised Philistine shall end up like one of them, for he has defied the ranks of the living God” - 1 Sam. 17:34-36

- Compare this passage to Judg. 14:5-6. Why does David portray himself like a Samson?
- Can you find other resemblances between the two characters?
- Does this passage change the way we understand David in his conflict with Goliath?

David replied [to the king’s courtiers], “Do you think that becoming the son-in-law of a king is a small matter, when I am but a poor man of no consequence?” ... And Saul said, “Say this to David: ‘The king desires no other bride-price than the foreskins of a hundred Philistines, as vengeance on the king’s enemies.’—Saul intended to bring about David’s death at the hands of the Philistines. When his courtiers told this to David, David was pleased with the idea of becoming the king’s son-in-law. Before the time had expired, David went out with his men and killed two hundred Philistines; David brought

their foreskins and they were counted out for the king, that he might become the king's son-in-law. - 1

Sam. 18:23-27

- Saul clearly intends to kill David, by subterfuge. Is he wrong to try to do so?
- Compare David's actions toward Uriah in 2 Samuel 11. Is David here acting differently from Saul in 1 Samuel 18?
- What is David's attitude toward marrying Michal and becoming Saul's son-in-law?

[David said to Saul,] "You must see plainly that I have done nothing evil or rebellious, and I have never wronged you. Yet you are bent on taking my life. May the Lord judge between you and me! And may He take vengeance upon you for me, but my hand will never touch you." - 1 Sam. 24:12-13

- This scene is charged with overt and latent hostility between David and Saul. What is David's attitude toward Saul in this speech?
- Is there evidence that David's feelings are in conflict?

Late one afternoon, David rose from his couch and strolled on the roof of the royal palace; and from the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and the king sent someone to make inquiries about the woman. He reported, "She is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam [and] wife of Uriah the Hittite." David sent messengers to fetch her; she came to him and he lay with her. 2 Sam. 11:2-4

David wrote a letter to Joab...: "Place Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest; then fall back so that he may be killed." - 2 Sam. 11:14-15

- What propelled David to commit adultery and murder, and to abuse his power as king?
- How does David's behavior toward Bathsheba and Uriah square with his actions prior to this scene? Is this David different from or the same as the David we've seen until now?

[Nathan the prophet said,] “You have put Uriah the Hittite to the sword; you took his wife and made her your wife and had him killed by the sword of the Ammonites. Therefore the sword shall never depart from your House.” ... David said to Nathan, “I stand guilty before the Lord!” -2 Sam.12:9-10,

13

- How do you understand David’s confession? Is he bravely admitting his crimes, or was his confession coerced by Nathan?
- Does his confession absolve or mitigate his actions?
- Does David change after this scene?

Amnon lay down and pretended to be sick. The king came to see him, and Amnon said to the king, “Let my sister Tamar come and prepare a couple of cakes in front of me, and let her bring them to me.”

David sent a message to Tamar in the palace, “Please go to the house of your brother Amnon and prepare some food for him.” - 2 Sam. 13:6-7

- What role does David play in the rape of Tamar, and in its aftermath?
- What does this scene indicate about David’s relationship with his children?
- Are there other scenes that show David acting in this same way?

[Speaking to Bathsheba,] the king took an oath, saying, ... “The oath I swore to you by the Lord, the God of Israel, that your son Solomon should succeed me as king and that he should sit upon my throne in my stead, I will fulfill this very day!” - 1 Kings 1:29-30

- Why did Bathsheba and Nathan require such an elaborate strategy to convince David to have Solomon enthroned as his heir?
- Is David here expressing his own will or acting as a puppet for Bathsheba?
- Did David swear an oath that Solomon would be his successor?

Chapter 7. God: Archetype or Antitype?

The Lord came down to look at the city and tower that man had built ... - Gen. 11:5

- In what ways does this sentence portray God in anthropomorphic terms? Compare with other anthropomorphic aspects of God's depiction in the Bible.
- Are there other ways that this sentence is less anthropomorphic? Contrast the Bible's depiction of God to the appearance of divinities in other religious texts and works of literature.

[This is] what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God. - Mic. 6:8

Abraham came forward and said, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?... Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" - Gen. 18:23, 25

- Why does the Lord require of people these three things?
- On what basis does Abraham question God's intentions?
- If God is taken as the hero of the Bible, does Abraham's questioning of God's justice detract from or enhance God's heroic status?

How long shall the wicked, O Lord,

how long shall the wicked exult,

shall they utter insolent speech,

shall all evildoers vaunt themselves? - Ps. 94:3-4

- How is God depicted here?
- On what basis does the psalmist question God about the triumph of the wicked?
- Does the psalmist think that God will act to restore justice? If so, why does he think so?

I beheld my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; and the skirts of His robe filled the Temple. Seraphs stood in attendance on Him. Each of them had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his legs, and with two he would fly. And one would call to the other, "Holy, holy, holy! The Lord of Hosts! His glory fills all the earth!" - Is. 6:1-3

- How is God here depicted as king?
- In what ways does God resemble and not resemble a human king?

Let Israel rejoice in its maker;

let the children of Zion exult in their king.

Let the faithful exult in glory;

let them shout for joy upon their couches,

with paeans to God in their throats

and two-edged swords in their hands,

to impose retribution upon the nations... - Ps. 149:2, 5-7

- What kind of king does God represent in this Psalm?
- How does God's heroic nature differ in Psalm 94, Isaiah 6, and Psalm 149?

The Lord is my strength and might,

He is my salvation....

The Lord is a Man of War—

Lord is His Name! ...

Agony grips the dwellers in Philistia,

Now are the clans of Edom dismayed;

The tribes of Moab—trembling grips them;

All the dwellers of Canaan are aghast. - Exod. 15:2-3, 14-15

- What heroic actions does God take in Exodus, and why?
- Why does the biblical author call God a “Man of War”? Does God act elsewhere also as a “Man of War”?
- What does God’s saving deeds in Egypt accomplish?

O God, my king from of old,

who brings deliverance throughout the land;

it was You who drove back the sea with Your might,

who smashed the heads of the monsters in the waters;

it was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan,

who left him as food for the denizens of the desert;

it was You who released springs and torrents,

who made mighty rivers run dry. - Ps. 74:12-15

- Why does God fight against the sea monsters?
- What connection is there between God’s defeat of the sea monsters and the release of springs and torrents?

Who closed the sea behind doors

When it gushed forth out of the womb,

When I clothed it in clouds,

Swaddled it in dense clouds,

When I made breakers My limit for it,

And set up its bars and doors,

And said, "You may come so far and no farther;

Here your surging waves will stop"? - Job 38:8-11

- How does God describe the sea to Job? Why?
- Is the God of Job a hero?

For He is angry but a moment,

and when He is pleased there is life.

One may lie down weeping at nightfall,

but at dawn there are shouts of joy. - Ps. 30:6

- Is God too powerful to be considered a hero?
- Is the Bible's focus more on people or God as the protagonist?

[God said,] "I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage." - Exod. 20:2

The Lord spoke to Moses, "Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely." - Exod. 32:7

- Does the book of Exodus attribute the exodus to God, to Moses, or to both?
- Why does God tell Moses that he brought the people out of Egypt?