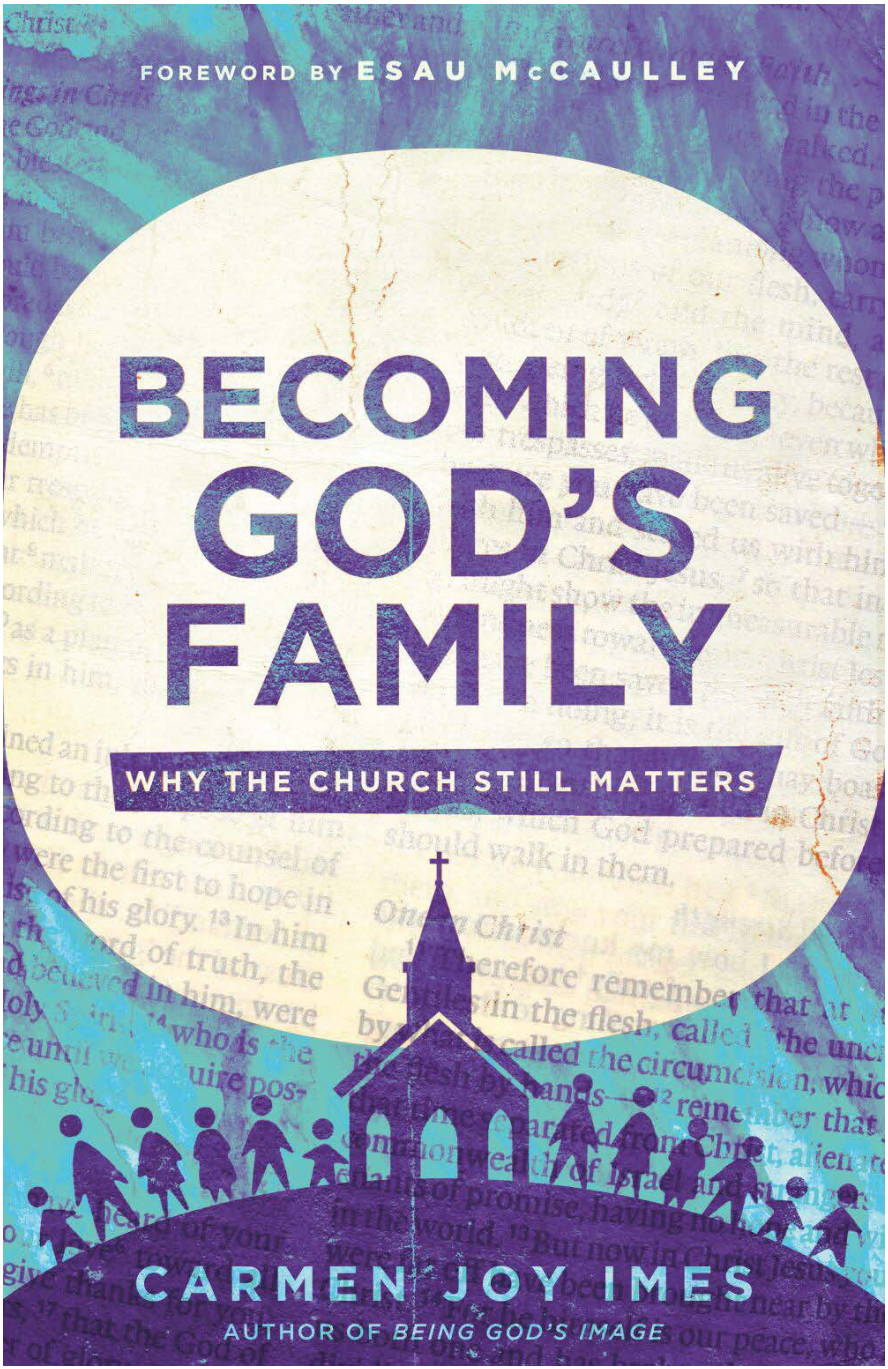

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OUR HUMAN FAMILY

When God created and brought order to the world, he appointed humans to rule over creation on his behalf. He blessed us, encouraging us to multiply and fill the earth so that God's presence would be felt in every place. The first thing in creation that was *not* good was loneliness. The first human was alone until God created a partner, an ally, who could work with him side by side. Together they would govern creation, and together they would produce offspring to be part of God's big family. This would only go well if they oriented themselves toward God and did things God's way.

I write more about our human identity as God's image and our vocation to rule the earth in *Being God's Image*. The Bible teaches that every human is the image of God. We represent God's presence to the rest of creation. God delegates to us the tasks of creating and maintaining order in the world. Nothing we do can disqualify us from this task, and we cannot lose this identity as God's image. It's

the single most important thing about us. But when we live as if it's not true, everything goes wonky.

In the plot line of the Bible, God's good creation and his appointment for humans to rule on his behalf gives way to disaster. Although God designs humans to flourish in community with one another, with himself, and with the world he made, humans chose (and keep choosing) their own path, seeking autonomy from God. Genesis 3 tells the story of the human couple conspiring to make their own way in the world, rather than doing things God's way. They think they can find wisdom outside God's command instead of depending on God to teach them. They hide from God and blame each other, and as a result they experience a life characterized by pain and the lack of cooperation. Instead of working together to care for the garden, God expels them to make their own way in the wide world. Adam and Eve's biggest loss is access to the presence of God. In the garden, God walked among them. Now, they are on their own.

They pass this legacy to their children and great-grandchildren. Their son Cain kills his brother. Their great-grandson Lamech brags to his wives about taking vengeance on others. Eventually human violence is so great that God decides to hit the reset button. God sends a flood to cover the earth and start fresh with a single family. Noah is an exception to the norm. Genesis tells us that he "found favor in the eyes of the LORD" (Genesis 6:8). At his birth, Noah's father expressed his deep hope that Noah, whose name means "rest," would be able to usher in a time of rest (Genesis 5:29). Although the bar is admittedly low in his generation, Noah stands out as one who lived in harmony with God and those around him, making him the best available candidate for a new beginning. Nevertheless, the same wicked tendency to exploit rather than honor others characterizes his son Ham. Almost as soon as the flood is over, the same

problems rear their ugly heads. Ham dishonors his father, introducing tension between parent and child that will send ripples through future generations.

The early chapters of Genesis culminate in a massive building project intended to make one man's empire unshakable. The builders of the tower of Babel (a.k.a. Babylon) try to lure the gods into giving their stamp of approval on the city by coming down from the heavens to dwell in it. Instead, Yahweh descends to scramble their languages and restore his vision of a multicultural world filled by humans who extend the order and fruitfulness of the garden to every place. Humans are intended to "fill the earth and subdue it," collaborating with one another to accomplish the work God delegated to us, cultivating the earth and guarding it and each other against exploitation.

It's against this backdrop of creation, failure, violence, and judgment that God chooses one man through whom he can restore his blessing to all nations—Abram. Because families and origin stories matter, Genesis begins with the story of his father, Terah.

THE FAMILY OF ABRAHAM

Emerging from the dumpster fire of rebellion, followed by the flood and tower of Babel, the author of Genesis zeroes in on one family, the family of Terah. Terah is the eighth generation after Noah's son Shem. Terah has three sons of his own, born in Ur, near Babylon: Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

Terah apparently intends to move his entire family to Canaan, but they never make it. Terah's son Haran dies in Ur. Nahor apparently stays behind when Terah packs up the rest of the family to head west. Halfway to his destination, Terah stops. Perhaps moving is more than he bargained for. Maybe business is good in the land of the Hittites. Perhaps he is tired. In any case, Terah himself settles down and eventually dies

Figure 1.1. Genealogy from Noah to Abram

as a resident of a place called Harran, far north of Canaan.

The name Harran is related to the Akkadian word that means "street" or "road." It's ironic, since they are en route to Canaan. The name is confusing in English, since Terah's dead son is also Haran. Does Terah name this town after his son? Not quite, since in Hebrew the town's name begins with a guttural *h*, which sounds like throat clearing, while his son's name begins with a soft *h*. Still, the similarity is unmistakable. Maybe Terah's inability to move on from Harran says something about his grief over the death of his son. He is permanently on the road. He can't let go of the past.

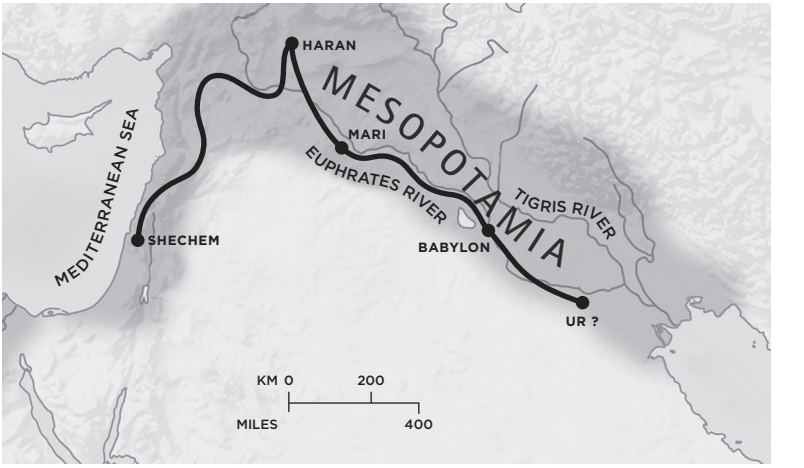

Figure 1.2. Abraham's journey from Ur to the Promised Land

After his father Terah's death, Yahweh urges Abram onward: "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the

land I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). In the ancient world, to leave one's family behind is unthinkable. Abram obeys this directive, despite its vagueness and despite how unsettling it must be to leave behind the last memories of his father and brother. Adult children were responsible to keep alive the memories of their parents and grandparents. Family members were also the first line of defense against poverty, infertility, false accusations, or mistreatment of any kind. Families were the basic building blocks of a stable society.

We might wonder whether his father Terah had instilled a love for Canaan—a place neither of them had ever seen. By leaving, Abram shows his allegiance to the God who calls to him from beyond the confines of what he knows.

Our family has moved often due to our work and schooling (sixteen times in twenty-six years of marriage, to be exact). Since our marriage, Oregon has always been home, but our children have spent very little time there. Our oldest was under two years old when we moved to the Philippines. We returned for just nine months when her younger sister was born. Our son was born in North Carolina, and our children spent their formative years there and in Illinois. It was amusing how fondly all three spoke of Oregon as the best place to live with the ideal climate. Our two younger children had never even lived there, but they spoke of Oregon as if it were the Promised Land. We moved back when they were thirteen, nine, and six. They took to Oregon like a fish takes to water. Evidently, they had inherited our love for Oregon despite not growing up there.

Had Terah spoken longingly of Canaan to Abram and his brothers? Was it the land of opportunity? We don't know what conversations unfolded around their cooking fires in Harran, but when God promises Abram great blessings, Abram does not delay. He sets out in obedience to God's voice. Although God has not specified the destination, when Abram arrives in Shechem, smack dab in the

center of Canaan, God tells him: "*To your offspring* I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7).

This is one of our first clues in the Bible that God's promises are not aimed at helping us reach our personal goals. Instead, God's promises transcend our personal lives and stretch wide to encompass others we will never even meet. Abram would spend his entire life on the move, never settling down permanently. He'd go to Egypt and to Philistia, to the Negev desert and back again. As a nomad, he would keep his flocks and herds moving to find food and water. One day, many hundreds of years later, his descendants would call this land their own.

God's promises are not aimed at helping us reach our personal goals. Instead, God's promises transcend our personal lives and stretch wide to encompass others we will never even meet.

I wonder whether our vision for our lives is too small. Whether we hope for a quiet life where we can keep our own schedule or a life as an influencer with a platform to prove it, do we ever cultivate dreams for future generations? Have you thought about your great-great-grandchildren? Or what kind of legacy you might leave behind for those who will live in your community one hundred years from now?

The author of Genesis tucks away a comment before the family leaves Ur. We might miss it if we're not paying attention: "Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive" (Genesis 11:30). As Richards and James point out, in that cultural context barrenness indicated a failed marriage.[1] Essentially, Abram and his wife Sarai are stuck at the starting gate. Heartache comes in all shapes and sizes. For Sarai and Abram, it is the long wait for children with their biological clocks ticking. Abram is seventy-five years old when they

pack up and head south from Harran. Still no children. Does God's promise to Abram seem like salt in the wound?

"*To your offspring* I will give this land."

That one sentence hangs in the air awkwardly, exposing their great disappointment. *Offspring? Umm . . . about that . . .*

Abram has given up on ever having children of his own, but his household is the size of a town. When Abram's nephew Lot gets into trouble later, Abram mobilizes the fighting men born in his household—all 318 of them (Genesis 14:14)! Fertility has apparently not been a problem for those minding his herds and cooking his meals, weaving his clothes and tanning his leather. Are all those pregnant bellies difficult for Sarai to see? When God appears to Abram again in a vision to reassure him, we can hear the angst in Abram's reply: "Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? . . . You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir" (Genesis 15:2-3).

At one point, a decade after their arrival in Canaan, Abram's wife, Sarai, suggests that Abram should impregnate her Egyptian maidservant. Hagar functions as a surrogate womb for Sarai. In a time before medical interventions, surrogacy of slaves was an ancient solution for infertility. However, God neither commands nor condones this behavior. The family dynamic that results is deeply problematic: Hagar despises Sarai for what she has done to her, and Sarai mistreats Hagar out of jealousy. Pregnant Hagar runs away to escape the tension, but God sends her back to Sarai for a time, probably because Hagar's chances of survival in the desert while pregnant are so low. Later, when her son is grown, Abram sends her away permanently (Genesis 16). God meets her on that journey to promise her many descendants.

In the aftermath of that messy situation, God appears to Abram again with more specific promises and instructions. Yahweh changes

their names to Abraham and Sarah to symbolize a new chapter in their story. He gives them a powerful symbol of their shared commitment to living in obedience to God: circumcision.

This may seem like an odd requirement, but by marking every male in their household with a surgical sign of their covenant with Yahweh, Abraham's family experiences a daily physical reminder that God is the source of their offspring and that they must trust him for their future. God waits to bless them with a son until they have implemented the sign of the covenant because God's intentions for Abraham are much bigger than one man. They extend to all his descendants to come—even you and me. As members of the nations who would eventually find blessing through the family of Abraham, we benefit no matter our ethnic background.

Abraham's fruitfulness cannot be explained naturally. No human can take credit. Sarai's barrenness introduces a pattern that will afflict future generations as well (including Rachel, Rebekah, and Hannah). The struggle to get pregnant reminds successive generations that the gift of children is a divine blessing. Abram and Sarai are the first in God's family who must learn to wait for God to act supernaturally.

WHEN GOD'S FAMILY DOES HARM

The portrait of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis is not entirely flattering. In addition to Hagar's forced pregnancy, twice Abraham lies about his wife, Sarah, to save his own skin. This puts her in harm's way and jeopardizes the fulfillment of God's promise, while Abraham benefits handsomely. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and Abimelech, king of Gerar, each take Sarah into his own palace with intentions to add her to the royal harem (Genesis 12; 20). When they realize she is a married woman, they both send her away with lavish gifts for Abraham, including slaves.

Speaking of slaves, Abraham and Sarah buy slaves and receive them as gifts on several occasions. This is not just a matter of ancient methods of employment. Genesis is explicit (in more ways than one) about Sarah's mistreatment of her Egyptian slave, Hagar. First, Sarah uses her to bear a child for herself. Naturally, Hagar resents being used to build someone else's family. Second, with Abraham's blessing, Sarah abuses Hagar harshly enough that Hagar runs away into the desert, where she will surely die.

The Bible does not sugarcoat the behavior of its central characters. Ironically, just as Abraham and Sarah mistreat her Egyptian slave, so the Egyptians eventually mistreat their descendants while they are enslaved in Egypt (Genesis 16:6; Exodus 1:11-12). Description is not prescription. We cannot assume that because the Bible describes something that happens, it is being held up as a positive example. In fact, the law given at Sinai prohibits such mistreatment in the strongest terms possible, as we'll see in chapter two.

God works through flawed people to accomplish his purposes. This is not to say that God ultimately tolerates harm, and neither should we. Scripture is clear that Yahweh "does not leave the guilty unpunished," which is to say that he takes sin against our fellow humans seriously (Exodus 34:7). God will ultimately bring unrepentant sin to light and punish those who committed it.

Perhaps you are among those who have been harmed by church leaders or fellow Christians. If so, please know that the way you were treated is unacceptable. God sees your suffering. He has not forgotten you and he will ultimately make things right—either in your lifetime or at the end of the age. Our capacity to hurt others and be hurt is a byproduct of God's decision to design a world in which humans have free will. We (and others) often make choices that cause harm.

Amid her mistreatment, Hagar encounters God. In their tender conversation, God speaks promises over Hagar that open a new

future for her. Hagar likely feels powerless, but God empowers her to name her son, to exercise her own choice by returning home, and to hold on to his promises that her life will not become a dead end. She will have many descendants of her own. This means so much to Hagar that she becomes the first in Scripture to name God: "You are the God who sees me" (Genesis 16:13). God sees you too, and he has not forgotten your pain. Even in our pain we can walk forward in this living hope.

BIRTH OF A NEW NATION

We often think of Exodus as a liberation story about slaves set free by God. But that's a lopsided way of telling the story. Exodus is not about freedom for freedom's sake, as if it were offering a long-deserved vacation for individuals who were overworked. Exodus is the story of a change in masters. Yahweh defeats Pharaoh so that the Hebrews may go from serving Pharaoh to serving Yahweh. Repeatedly his command to Pharaoh is to "send my people away *so that they may serve me* in the desert." The Hebrews are not portrayed as a group of unfortunate individuals who happen to share the same fate. Instead, they are collectively the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to whom God promised the land of Canaan.

What does it look like to serve Yahweh? Let's look at two scenes in the story that tend to get less attention. Together, these suggest that God acts to create a new nation oriented around the worship of Yahweh rather than to free individuals for a life of self-actualization. Back in Egypt, on the verge of their deliverance, God told Moses, "Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are" (Exodus 12:3-4). The entire

community celebrated on the same night, with every individual incorporated into a household. No one ate alone that night. Even the smallest family gathered with neighbors, enjoying the protective presence of Yahweh in their midst. The communal Passover meal initiated the formation of a new community. Pastor-theologian Mark Glanville calls this "festive kinship"—a community born out of feasting together.[2]

The second scene to notice is the song sung by the Israelites after they crossed the sea on dry ground. Having celebrated Yahweh's single-handed defeat of Pharaoh's army, the song speaks of Yahweh's guidance for "the people you have redeemed," saying, "In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling" (Exodus 15:13). The song culminates in this vision: "You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance—the place, LORD, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, Lord, your hands established" (Exodus 15:17). The goal of the exodus was not autonomy. The goal was a new community gathered around Yahweh's presence offering proper worship. Egypt's primary institutions were temples devoted to the worship of other gods. By leaving Egypt, the Hebrews were free to organize their society around the worship of Yahweh alone. That's what the word *service* entails in Hebrew—an act of worship. We still tip our hat to this by referring to our weekly gatherings as a worship *service*.

Yahweh calls the nation into being as they feast together, cross the sea, and enter the desert. Their initial destination is the mountain where they will experience God's presence in all its glory. The corporate singing and dancing in Exodus 15 simply cannot be replaced by individual praise. Something distinctive happens when we gather to eat and to sing the same song. Exodus 15 joins the community in a shared interpretation of the event they have just witnessed. Yahweh is the warrior who hurled Pharaoh's army into the sea.

As I point out in *Bearing God's Name*, the laws at Sinai were not Israel's means of salvation (they were already saved!) but rather how they would carry out their mission *together* as God's people. The laws are not an individual code of conduct but rather a collective witness to the nations. Together they entered a covenant relationship with Yahweh. Together they would reflect God's character to a watching world. Yahweh invited them into his mission with delight, rather than duty, by offering his own presence among them. God is not looking for people who will do his work for him, but for those who will carry his presence, participating *with* him.

Something distinctive happens when we gather to eat and to sing the same song.

Instructions for building a tabernacle, or portable temple, dominate the latter half of Exodus. We may find those chapters irrelevant, since we have no intention of building a tabernacle today. However, the tabernacle is essential to biblical theology because it resolves the separation between God and humanity that resulted from Adam and Eve's decision to disregard God's command. Their expulsion from the garden introduced the major plot conflict of the Bible, in search of resolution. How can humanity reunite with our Creator? How can we experience the presence of God again?

Moses' careful attention to crafting the tabernacle according to the divine instructions opens the way for humans to approach God's presence again. The cherubim that guarded the way to the tree of life in the garden of Eden now mark the entrance to a portable tabernacle filled with God's presence. Its central features, the ones that took the most time and care to craft, were the covenant chest (or ark) and the high priest's garments. Together they symbolized access to God's presence.

The ark was an elaborately carved chest decorated with cherubim and carried on poles. The entire object was plated in gold, making

it the single most expensive piece of furniture in the tabernacle. The only person who had access to it was the high priest, who moved about among the people dressed in elaborate garments that reflected the glory of the most holy place and whose symbolic garments ensured every Israelite was represented by his ministry. On his chest, he wore a pouch decorated with twelve gemstones, each engraved with the name of one of the twelve tribal families.

The covenant chest looked remarkably like chests with carrying poles in Egypt that either contained idols inside or on their lids, flanked by winged protectors.[3] Parading the gods from one location to another was a regular part of Egyptian worship ceremonies. By designing the chest according to this conventional Egyptian style, Yahweh clearly communicated both his superiority over the gods of Egypt and his difference from them. The Israelites could easily see that the worship of Yahweh was meant to replace the worship of Egyptian gods, not coexist with it. While Egyptian priests carried idols of their gods on chests such as this, Yahweh could not be represented by wood or stone and could not be carried. In fact, Exodus 19:4 announces that Yahweh was the one who "carried" the Israelites to Mount Sinai. Yahweh had become the central focus of Israelite worship, replacing any so-called rivals from Egypt. The chest carried by the Israelite priests did not contain Yahweh but rather symbolized his intention to accompany them in their travels. The chest was merely his footstool (1 Chronicles 28:2).

The chest was not the only element of Israel's tabernacle that was strikingly similar to Egyptian counterparts. The dimensions of the tabernacle co-opted the layout of the war tent used by Ramesses II during the famous Battle of Kadesh. That battle was the most widely advertised battle in the ancient world.[4] Its story was carved on temple walls in at least five locations across Egypt, combining images and text, poetry and prose. Ramesses II was intensely proud of what he

termed a single-handed victory over the Hittites after his troops abandoned him. The parallels between these accounts and the biblical account of Yahweh's defeat of Pharaoh at the sea are striking, but the most remarkable of all is that the dimensions of Yahweh's tabernacle mimic the dimensions of Pharaoh's war tent. Both feature a rectangular, east-facing courtyard surrounding a central rectangular reception tent whose inner chamber comprised the western third of that tent.

If the Israelites lived in Egypt during the reign of Ramesses II (which I think is likely), they could scarcely have missed the fact that Yahweh's tent followed the same model. By adopting a Pharaonic convention while subverting all its symbolism, Yahweh effectively communicated that he replaced Pharaoh as Israel's true king and that he was present among his people and fighting on their behalf. While Pharaoh slept in the inner chamber, the God of Israel could not be contained in that space (and did not sleep!). Instead, his presence was represented by the ark of the covenant and a pillar of cloud.

Moses doesn't tax the people to build such an elaborate tent. The people contribute willingly. Every tribal family participates because they all benefit from the ministry of the high priest, who has access to Yahweh's presence. Men and women contribute their wealth. Women weave the cloth needed for the curtains while men build the furniture and hammer the gold. By the end of Exodus, the tent is complete—the ultimate group project. As a community they will camp with the presence of God in their midst. They prepare for this profound new reality *together*.

Their future is not of their own making. Moses doesn't gather the tribal leaders for a brainstorming session so they can come up with a vision and mission statement or a five-year plan. The gathered community depends entirely on *Yahweh's* leadership. They await *his* presence and seek to remain faithful to *his* commands and follow *his* instructions.

What if our churches today looked more like this instead of following the latest church growth plan (which are modeled after corporate business strategies)? What if we were marked by the joy of feasting together in God's presence instead of the quest to increase "giving units" or online followers?

A MULTIETHNIC FAMILY

One feature of the Israelite community that readers often miss is how ethnically diverse it is. From the beginning, members of Jacob's family intermarry with non-Hebrews. Consider these examples from Genesis and Exodus:

- Abraham's household includes Egyptians, Canaanites, and Arameans, some of whom he acquires as gifts from Pharaoh and Abimelech, along with others who join him along the way.
- Jacob marries two women who are related to his mother, Rebekah, but by these marriages he also acquires two maidservants who are likely unrelated: Zilpah and Bilhah.[a] The children he bears by these Mesopotamian maidservants become tribal heads of Israel.
- Jacob's son Judah lives among the Canaanites, marries a Canaanite woman, and produces heirs with his daughter-in-law Tamar, who is likely a Canaanite (Genesis 38). Their descendant five generations later, Salmon, marries Rahab the Canaanite, who aids the Israelite spies and declares allegiance to Yahweh. Her son Boaz marries Ruth, the Moabite woman who demonstrates loyalty to her Israelite mother-in-law (Ruth 4). Boaz (the half-Canaanite) and Ruth (the Moabite) become the great-grandparents of king David.
- Jacob's son Joseph assimilates to Egyptian culture and marries Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest (Genesis 41:45). Jacob adopts their two ethnically mixed

sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as his own (Genesis 48:5). They are counted among the twelve tribes of Israel.

- Moses, grandson of Jacob's son Levi, is raised by an Egyptian princess and marries first a Midianite woman, Zipporah, and then a Cushite woman (Exodus 2:21; Numbers 12:1). Moses maintains relations with his Midianite in-laws, relying on their advice.
- When God delivers the Israelites from Egypt, Exodus tells us that a mixed multitude joins them (Exodus 12:38). Evidently, others become convinced that Yahweh is a God they want to follow, and that this community is one they want to join.

My point is this: From the beginning, the Israelites were a multiethnic family whose most prominent members often married foreigners. Later laws against intermarriage are focused exclusively on protecting Israelite worship rather than trying to maintain the purity of the Israelite bloodline. Many Israelite laws speak of the participation of nonnatives in Israelite society. Through circumcision, the males of the family, even those of foreign blood, are eligible for full participation in the life of the community, including worship at the tabernacle.

PRESENT IN COMMUNITY

Any discussion of tabernacle worship is incomplete without a look at Leviticus. Leviticus is often described as a priestly instruction manual, but that's not quite accurate. Much of the information the priests need to do their jobs well is missing. Instead, the book addresses the people collectively regarding worship practices. They are a "kingdom of priests" and a "holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6). Every Israelite is responsible to maintain holiness. The people benefit directly when the procedures are carried out according to God's command.

Leviticus solves a community problem introduced at the end of Exodus. They build, furnish, and consecrate the tabernacle. The awe-inspiring conclusion to this project is when the presence of God visibly takes up residence in the tabernacle, indicating that they have successfully carried out God's commands. They see God's glory manifest on top of the mountain, and with the completion of the tabernacle, the glory moves down the mountain and takes up residence among them (Exodus 40:34). God plans to live in a tent in the center of their camp. The problem is that Moses is unable to enter the tent (Exodus 40:35). This is a setback. Up until this time, Moses has communed freely with God on the mountain. He has entered the very cloud of God's presence. Now he cannot, and this loss affects the entire community because Moses is the one designated to intercede on their behalf.

What has changed? Why can Moses not enter God's presence in the tent of meeting? What is amiss? With God's presence near the whole community, the danger of ritual pollution is greater than before. The concept of ritual impurity may be foreign to modern, Western cultures, but it was widely understood in ancient times. Ritual impurity was caused by a handful of substances: bodily fluids associated with procreation, mold, mildew, skin disease, and dead bodies. To be in a state of ritual impurity was a regular part of life and was not considered sinful. However, everyone needed to know whether they were in a state of ritual purity because that determined whether it was appropriate for them to enter sacred space.

Leviticus walks the community through the necessary preparation for them to safely enter the presence of God by maintaining both ritual and moral purity. It begins with fellowship offerings in preparation for the full consecration of the priest. After the priests and the tabernacle are set apart and cleansed, the priests make offerings on behalf of the people and bless them.

The priestly blessing is a significant moment in Israel's story because the blessing confers Yahweh's name on them (Numbers 6:27), marking them as God's own people. The rest of Leviticus trains the nation regarding ritual and moral purity, festival observances, and priestly boundaries.

The global pandemic that began in 2020 provides a helpful analogy for ritual impurity. During the pandemic, our communities became more sensitive to the spread of germs. At first, no one knew exactly how Covid-19 spread and how deadly it would be, so we took various precautions to avoid contamination, including hand sanitizer, masks, and keeping our distance from one another. Getting Covid was not considered morally problematic, but entering a crowded room while sick was inappropriate because others would be put at risk of infection.

In a similar way, ritual impurity was not a moral problem unless someone who was ritually impure entered the tabernacle. Bible scholars have used the analogy of dirt to explain this.[5] In the right place, dirt is a good thing. We need soil to grow crops. Outside in the garden, dirt is fine. But a clod of dirt does not belong on your living room floor or in your bed. The ritual purity system of ancient Israel was designed to keep uncontrollable substances where they belonged. Menstrual blood and semen are both natural, God-given aspects of creation, but their unpredictability makes them too volatile for safe entrance into the tabernacle. The Bible does not explain the *reason* for the ritual purity system. It simply assumes people already understand it. Egypt and Mesopotamia had similar rules regulating sacred space, so these parameters would have seemed natural to the Israelites.

Moses charged the entire community to safeguard the divine presence in their midst by taking sacred space seriously. Just as we would not show up for a job interview with a stained shirt or to a black-tie dinner in cargo shorts, so the Israelites cannot show up to the

tabernacle in a state of ritual impurity. To enter God's presence requires solemn preparation. We bear collective responsibility for it.

Leviticus is crucial in resolving the problem left hanging at the end of Exodus—Moses' inability to enter the tabernacle (Exodus 40:35). After Leviticus, the book of Numbers opens with a comment about God speaking to Moses "*in* the tent of meeting" (Numbers 1:1). Fellowship is restored, and the community is ready to move forward.

To enter God's presence requires solemn preparation. We bear collective responsibility for it.

Numbers continues the theme of God's family. In it, we learn the layout of the Israelite camp, with all twelve tribes camped around the perimeter of the tabernacle. The people are not free to pick just any spot to pitch their tent. As Moses instructs, "The Israelites are to camp around the tent of meeting some distance from it, each of them under their standard and holding the banners of their family" (Numbers 2:2). Crossing the wilderness is not a freestyle event. The assembly is anchored around the presence of God, with designated camping spots.

We can already begin to sense how this might have implications for the church today. We no longer think about ritual purity in the same way. The death and resurrection of Christ has cleansed us once and for all. But underlying this system is something that endures. The way ancient Israel thought about worship pushes against what Myles Werntz calls "the bedrock evangelical assumption that the Christian life is ultimately an individual adventure, fundamentally between God and the soul." The ritual purity system reminds us how seriously we need to take the presence of God. It underscores the communal dimensions of worship. In these foundational books, the Bible presents the life of faith as a group project. Werntz continues, "This community is to be centered on Christ, who is present in its midst. Christ has

called each person beyond themselves to be a part of this corporate body."[6] What would need to change if we took this seriously?

KEY IDEAS

- Our human vocation as God's image is to collaborate to accomplish the work God delegated to us, cultivating the earth and guarding it and each other against exploitation.
- Abraham and Sarai must learn to wait for God to provide what he promised.
- Sometimes the people of God harm others, but God sees the pain of the victims and will ultimately make things right.
- God frees the family of Abraham from slavery to become a new nation gathered around God's presence.
- The Israelites bore collective responsibility to safeguard the divine presence in their midst.

DIGGING DEEPER

Carmen Joy Imes. *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters.* IVP Academic, 2019.

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Related videos from BibleProject: "Temple," "The Covenants," and "Blessing and Curse." See QR codes for these videos at the back of this book.