

CHAPTER 4

The Patriarchs

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

The Biblical account of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has been pivotal in the history of the Jewish nation. The patriarchal narratives are read in the synagogue at key times in the Jewish year (see Chapter 74). Yet, as we have seen, there are serious questions about the historicity of these narratives. From the nineteenth century onwards, Biblical scholars have argued that these ancestral stories are myths which have been incorporated into the Biblical text. Traditional Jewish writers, however, have fiercely denied such claims, insisting that these legends are historically accurate. In their view, these tales are so full of human emotion and drama that it is unlikely they were invented at a later date. Do you agree?

One of the stories contained in these early chapters of Genesis is particularly puzzling. In Genesis 28 we read that Jacob had a vision of a ladder rising to heaven, and heard God speak to him promising that his offspring would inherit the land and fill the earth. Later, he wrestled with a mysterious stranger in the gorge of the Jabbok river. There he took on the name Israel (meaning ‘he who wrestles with God’). Although the Bible records that Jacob wrestled with a man, the place where this incident took place was subsequently called Peniel (‘the face of God’). We are told that Jacob’s name was changed as a result of this event, because he had striven with God and with men but had prevailed. What is the meaning of this passage? With whom did Jacob wrestle? Was it a human being, or God?

These patriarchal narratives are followed by a series of stories about Jacob’s youngest son Joseph. Favoured by his father, he evoked his brothers’ wrath, and they sold him into slavery. Eventually, he rose to a position of power in Egypt. Later he appeared before his brothers when they came to ask for food due to a

famine in Canaan. He revealed himself to them, telling them that they were not morally culpable. Rather, he stated, it was God’s will that he go to Egypt so that eventually he would be able to ensure his family’s future. What do you think of this explanation? Does it make sense to believe that God providentially guides events to reach such an outcome? Or do you think human beings must ultimately accept full responsibility for all their actions? (See Chapter 60 for a discussion of this issue.)

THINGS TO DO

- Go to Google, and click on images. Have a look at the various ways in which the events described in the patriarchal narratives have been presented visually.
- Stay in Google. Type in ‘Jacob dream’. See how this passage has been understood mystically.
- Continue with Google. Type in ‘Jacob wrestling’. Look at the various ways in which artists have painted this scene.
- Take out a video of *Joseph’s Technicolour Dreamcoat* and compare it with the original Biblical text. See what changes have been made to the Biblical story.
- Go to Google. Look for websites dealing with the patriarchs such as <www.jewfaq.org>.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Scripture recounts that God told Abraham to circumcise himself and his son. This act has become symbolic of the covenant, and Jews have been circumcised through the centuries. However, in the nineteenth century some Reform Jewish thinkers argued that circumcision is a barbaric rite. Invite a doctor to the class to discuss the merits of circumcision. Have a discussion about circumcision. Ask the students if they think this rite should continue or be abandoned in the modern world.
- Divide the class into small discussion groups, and ask them what they would have said to Joseph's brothers if they had been Joseph. Reconvene the group for a discussion about moral responsibility, divine providence, and forgiveness.
- Show the video *Joseph and His Technicolour Dreamcoat*. Ask the students whether the Biblical story is enhanced or diminished by such a treatment.