

BIBLE STORIES

told by

Norman Vincent Peale

with illustrations by

Grabianski

Guideposts Associates, Inc.
Carmel, New York

*To my children
and grandchildren,
to whom I have told
these wonderful Bible stories*

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Bible stories.

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS TO US TODAY

Why did I decide to write a book of Bible stories when so many splendid volumes on the same subject have already been written? Certainly it was not because I might produce a book that would be superior to others. It was only that I have certain convictions about the Bible that I felt should be shared with readers and especially with young people.

Of course the Bible is filled with some of the most interesting, even thrilling, stories ever told. And since there is endless variety and meaning in the stories, they bear telling and retelling by anyone who, loving the greatest of all books, believes that a new and fresh emphasis upon its relevance to the modern world can be helpful.

My particular viewpoint is that the Bible is the most contemporary and timeless book ever written. It is as new as tomorrow morning's newspaper and in greater depth. It applies today no less than in former times, indeed perhaps more importantly than ever, considering the overwhelming spiritual needs of our generation.

The Bible relates specifically and directly to every problem of individuals and society at large. For this reason I have endeavored to retell these Biblical stories not only in modern language forms but also with a view toward modern thought concepts.

Hopefully the reader, especially the young reader, will come to realize that the Bible is more—much more—than a musty and dusty old-time book written generations ago. His mind and imagination

will be challenged by fact that in the Bible narratives are to be found workable answers to his every question. He will find creative solutions to all of his problems. He will see that truly this is the book of life... notably his life. The Bible shows the young person how to have the best that he wants from life.

My earnest desire in retelling these Bible stories is to make the greatest book ever written come alive as the handbook, the rule book, the guidebook for living now in the now generation.

Norman Vincent Peale

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the new testament

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the old testament



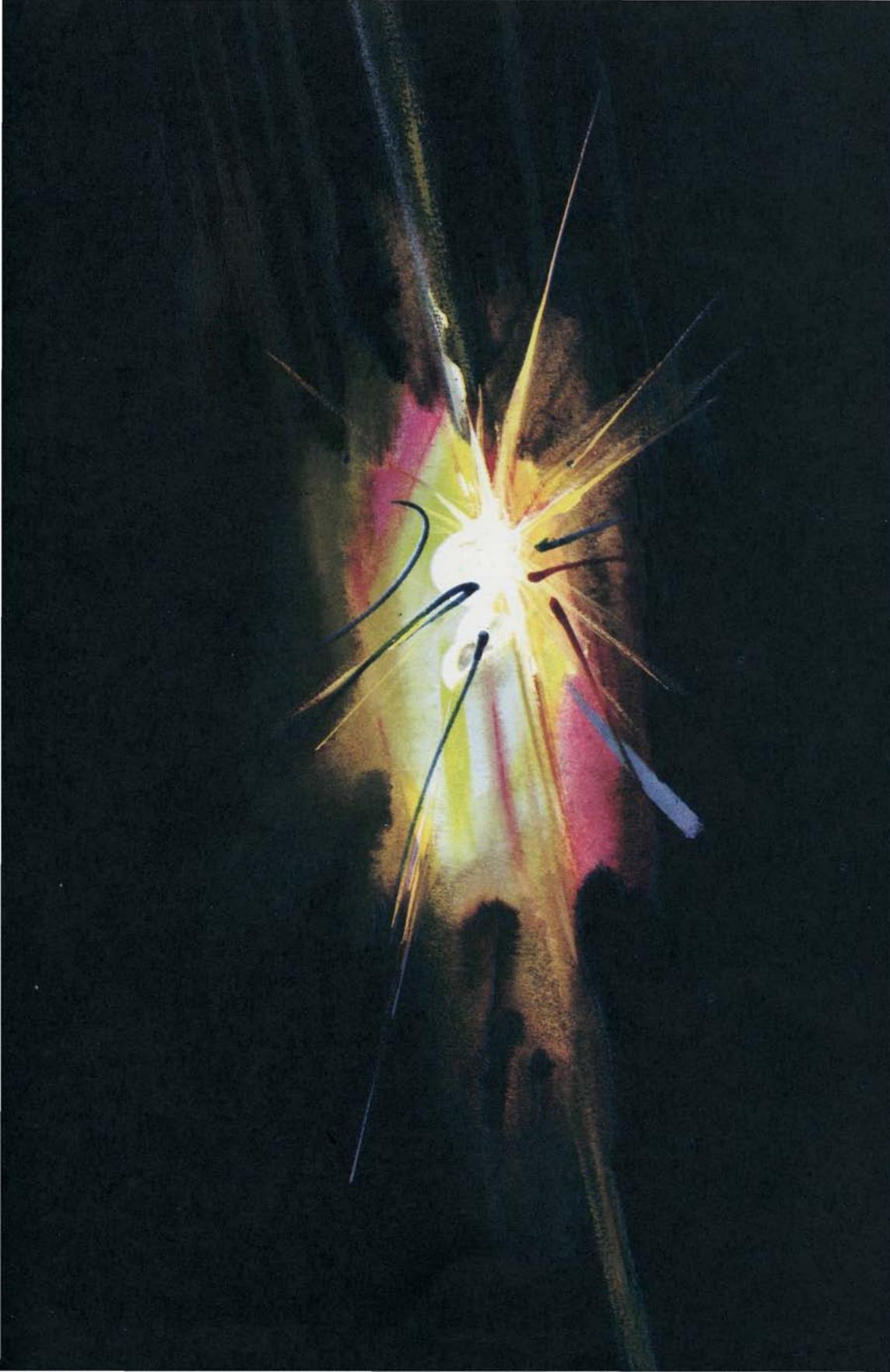
out of nothingness

In the beginning God . . .

With these four majestic words begins the greatest book ever written. Everything that surrounds us, from the tiniest speck of invisible matter to the greatest galaxy in outer space, had to start somewhere. The Bible begins by telling us that there was—and is—only one Source of everything, the infinite Source that we groping human beings call God.

The Story of Creation is intended to be awe-inspiring—and it is. Instantly, without apology or preamble, it forces us to think about ideas that are too big for our limited minds. “And the earth was without form,” says the second verse of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, “and void.” How can we visualize complete nothingness? We can’t, any more than we can grasp the concept of infinite space, or infinite time. But then, in the same verse, the Bible tells us that the Spirit of God moved . . . and when it moved, out of nothingness came everything.

What did God do first? He spoke four words: “Let there be light.” Try to imagine, if you can, what it was like when the first radiance burst upon the blackness that was not just the absence of light but the absence of everything. What a stupendous moment! What an awesome burst of purposeful power! Some modern astronomers believe that the universe began with just such an inconceivable explosion that flung the nebulae like fiery pinwheels into outer







space where they are receding still. Maybe so. The Bible tells us that however it happened, the original decision was made in the mind of God.

That this first manifestation of that Spirit was light is not surprising. Light is the source of all life. Without it, nothing lives, nothing grows. Without it there can be no warmth, no seedtime, no harvest. From the beginning, God knew all this. The Bible tells us that He ended the first incredible day of creation by dividing light from darkness, calling one Day and the other Night.

This first mind-stretching chapter of Genesis goes on to describe how the whole of Creation was carried out in just six days. Some people believe that each of those days consisted literally of twenty-four hours. Others think that each day is a symbolic way of describing the passage of millions of years. I feel sure, myself, that God could have done what the Bible says He did in six days, or in six hours, or in six seconds, if it had suited Him. The work of Creation is above and beyond mere time.

That first day saw the creation of light, and its division from darkness.

On the second day God made the firmament, or the vault of the sky.

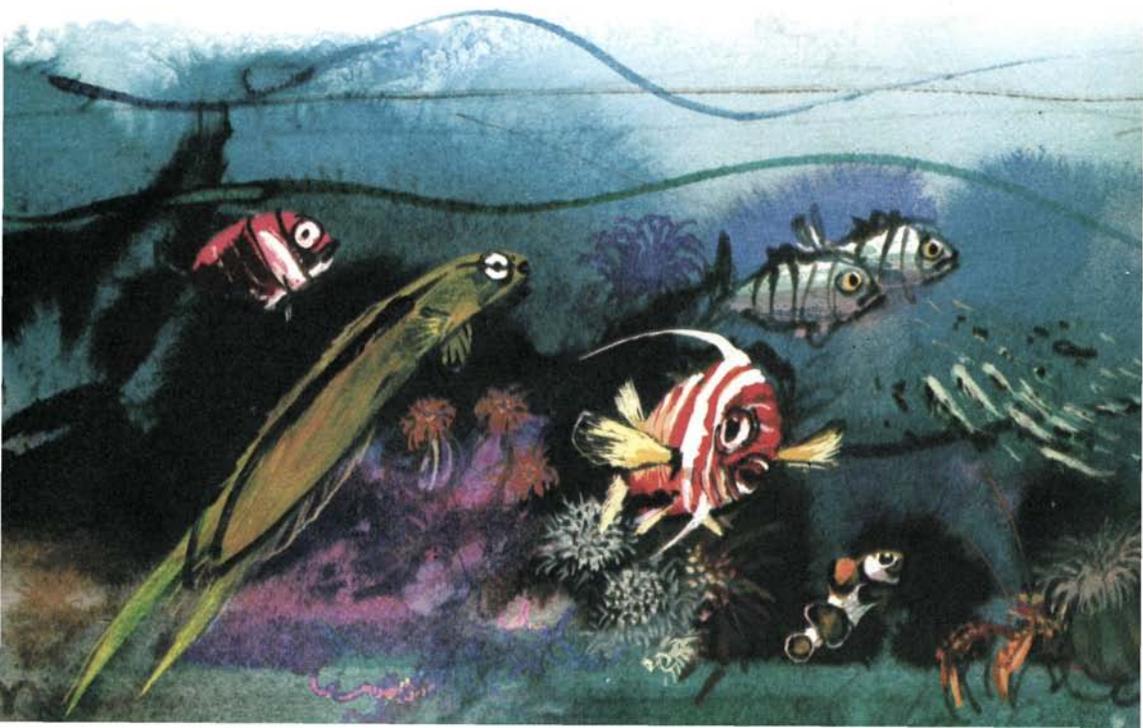


On the third day He created the land and the seas, and He ordered the earth to bring forth grass and plants and trees.

On the fourth day He made "two great lights," one to rule the day and the other to rule the night. It is interesting that the author of Genesis did not name the two heavenly bodies, perhaps because they were objects of worship among more primitive peoples. In any case, on the fourth day the sun and moon came into being. And the Bible adds, in words of staggering simplicity, "the stars also." Think of it! Millions of solar systems. Billions of stars. "He made the stars also."



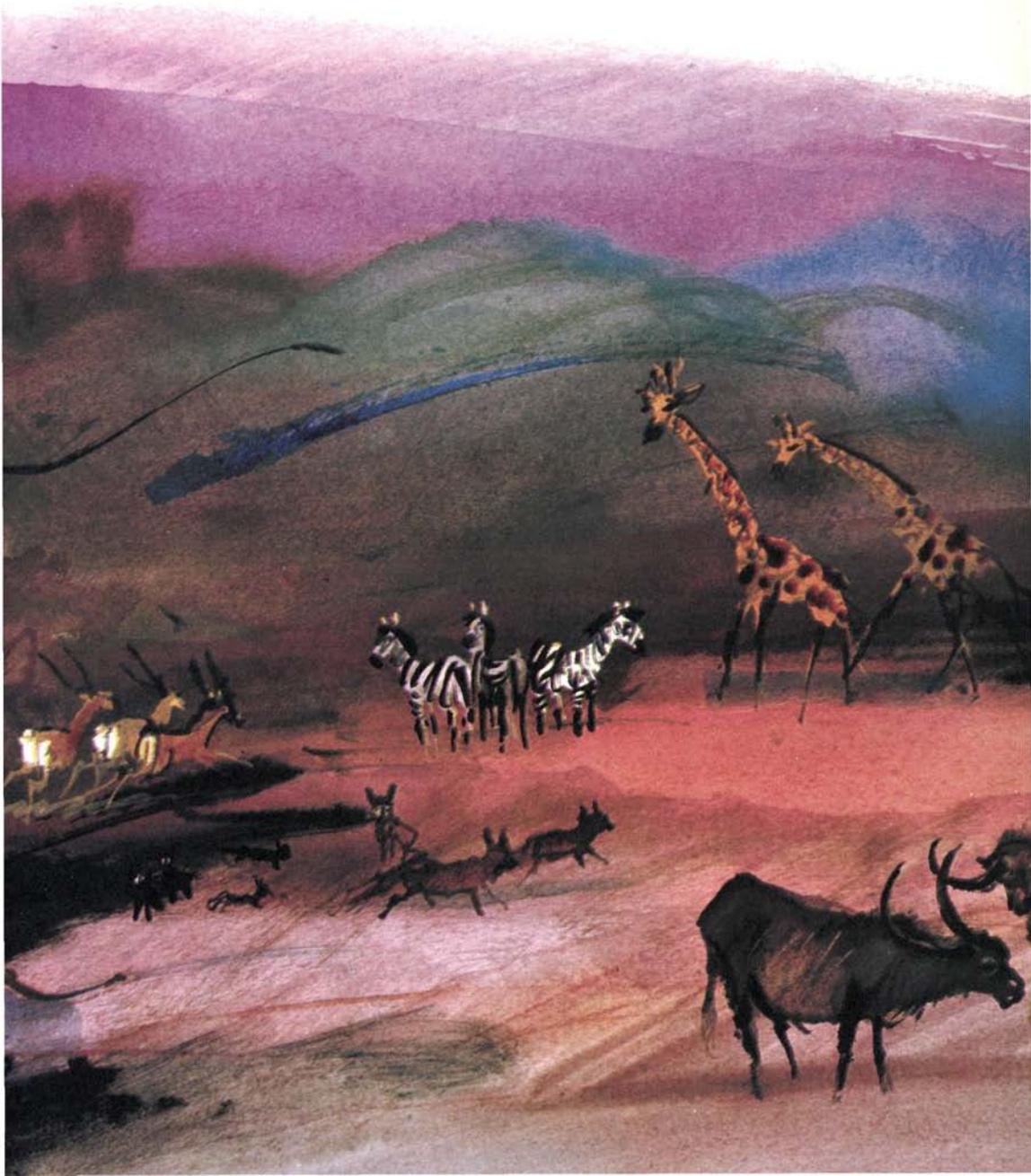
On the fifth day life appeared. "And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth. . . ." How astounding is the way these ancient writings anticipate the scientists of today, who tell us that life did begin in the prehistoric seas. Imagine those silent oceans suddenly filled with the endless variety of fishes and sea animals that persist to this day—"great whales," the Bible says, but also the rainbow colors of the dolphin, the leaping salmon, the lordly tarpon, the tiny flying fish skittering their silver tracks across the furrows of the deep. Imagine, too, how different it was when the cawing of crows and the music of songbirds first rose above the meadows and the treetops. No wonder God "saw that it was good."







On the sixth day God created the living creatures of the earth, each one capable of reproducing its own kind. Note how in the Genesis story living creatures appear in ascending order of complexity. This, too, was part of God's plan, because on this sixth and final day, at the very end of the stupendous process of Creation, God decided to bring into existence the most complex creature of all, a creature fashioned in His own image, the creature known as man.



The second chapter of Genesis tells us vividly how God did it. He took the dust of the earth. Carefully, gently, like a master potter shaping an exquisite vase, He formed a noble figure, clean-limbed, symmetrical, but still lifeless. Then, the Bible says, the Lord God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

What a magnificent concept it is: the spirit of God impinging upon a handful of dust and bringing it to life! And what a thought for each of us to keep in mind, the thought that without the spirit of God permeating us, we are not really alive at all, but just inanimate clay.

Not only did God create man, He created a place for man to live, a garden “eastward in Eden.” That name “Eden” comes from an ancient word meaning “fertile plain.” And this garden was fertile indeed. In it grew “every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food.” Weeds and briars were unknown. There was a crystal river to drink from. The days were warm and golden, the nights gentle and scented with the perfume of flowers and the smell of ripening fruit. In this paradise even the animals lived together in peace and harmony. The Bible says that the Lord brought them all to Adam, to see what he would call them, and Adam gave a name “to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field.”

But each of these creatures had a mate, and Adam had none. Was he unhappy about this? The Bible does not say. Perhaps he was, because he could observe that he alone had no counterpart. In any case, it was the Lord Who decided that “it is not good that the man should be alone,” and so He caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam. While the man slept, God took one of his ribs and from it fashioned a woman. Then He woke Adam from his sleep and brought the woman to him.

Observe the symbolism of this remarkable story. In the case of all other living things, male and female were created separately. Only in the case of man was his mate formed out of a part of himself, a part very close to his heart. This meant that a man and wife could never be totally separate and distinct individuals; they would always be one flesh. As Adam himself put it, speaking of this lovely creature that had been presented to him, “This is now bone of my



bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman because she was taken out of Man.”

So Adam and his new companion, Eve, began an existence in which there were none of the thorns of life as we know it. No guilt. No shame. No disappointment. No disease. No fear of death, for there was no death. Perhaps there was some work—after all, the Lord had put Adam in charge of the garden “to dress it and to keep it.” But the work must have been light and pleasant, just enough to keep him occupied and to give him a sense of achievement. The

man and the woman must have watched the days slide by like beads on a golden chain, confident that they would never end.

And perhaps they never would have ended, except for one thing. In creating man as a rational being, God had granted him free will. Man could do as he pleased. He had a choice. If he had had no free will, no choice, he would have been a soulless automaton, no better than the animals. But because the Lord had breathed upon him, he had a soul, and because he had a soul he also had the power of choice—and the woman had it too.

Now there were, in the middle of the garden of Eden, two mighty trees. Both bore marvelous fruits. One was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The other was the tree of life. God had given Adam permission to eat the fruit of every other tree in the garden, but He had specifically forbidden him to touch or taste



the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. "For in the day that thou eatest thereof," said the Lord to Adam, "thou shalt surely die."

The punishment attached to this order showed how important it was. It was so important that this commandment was given to



Adam before Eve was created, while he was still alone. And yet, while God could give such an order, He could not force either Adam or Eve to obey. This was a limitation that He had placed upon Himself. They could use their free will to obey or disobey Him.

Left to themselves, I like to think that Adam and Eve would have remained obedient. Why not? God had created them out of a handful of dust. He had designed and brought into being a paradise for them to live in. He had given them dominion over all other creatures in it. In return for this extraordinary kindness, what did He ask? Obedience in one thing. Surely this was not asking much! If there was an ounce of gratitude in Adam's heart—and there must have been—he would not have felt at all inclined to displease such a kind Creator. The idea of disobedience would have had to come from the outside. It did—and it came from a source against which Adam, being a man, had little defense. It came from a new force that somehow had invaded the garden. It came in the form of a serpent, but inside the serpent was the Spirit of Rebellion Against God.

How did the new spirit get into the garden? The Bible does not say. The presence of evil in the world was a mystery then, just as it is a mystery now. But that there is such a force, acting through man's capacity for free will, none of us can deny.

"Now," says the Bible, "the serpent was more subtile than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made." Subtle, yes; cunning, yes; but also much more than that. He must have had a tremendous personality, enormous powers of persuasion, to seduce and confuse Eve the way he did. I wonder, sometimes, what he looked like when he first approached the woman. I doubt if he looked like an ordinary snake, as he is sometimes drawn, slyly coiled around the trunk of a tree. I think he must have been a magnificent creature, tall and erect, dressed in brilliant colors. Perhaps, if he was Lucifer himself, the fallen archangel that tradition says he was, he came upon the wife of Adam in all the somber splendor of the Prince of Darkness.

In any case, he made her obedience to the commandment of God seem like stupidity or cowardice or both. He told her that the punishment God had warned of would not happen. He made it

sound as if God were afraid that His own creation—man—might rival Him. He made it seem as if the advantages to be gained from ignoring God's orders would outweigh the disadvantages. Eve was no match for him. "She took of the fruit thereof, and did eat." Then,



knowing that what she had done was wrong, but wanting companionship in her wrongdoing (nothing is lonelier than solitary guilt), she took some of the fruit to Adam. No doubt she used the same arguments on her husband that the serpent had used on her. Perhaps he hesitated. But in the end, partly because he loved his wife, partly because some little arrogant spark in him wanted the forbidden knowledge, he let himself be persuaded . . . “and he did eat.”

Instantly everything was changed. The Bible says that their eyes were opened, and they knew that they were naked. They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. But the guilt in their minds went deeper than that. What they really wanted was a shield or a screen from the sin of using their God-given free will to defy God. For this they knew that the fig leaves were not enough, and so they “hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden.”

But every wrongdoer knows it is not easy to hide from God. In fact, it is impossible. So soon the guilty pair heard the Lord calling them. When He asked Adam if he had disobeyed Him, Adam—all too human—hastily tried to pin the blame on his wife. When the Lord asked Eve what she had done, she was equally quick to blame the serpent.

Since all three shared the guilt, God decreed that each should be punished. The proud serpent henceforth would crawl in the dust and be feared and hated by mankind. The woman would bear children in pain and, instead of being equal to her husband as she had been, would be subservient to him. As for Adam, the generous earth would no longer support him with no effort on his part. He would have to struggle to stay alive, paying for existence with the sweat of his brow. Limits, too, were set upon his life; he could no longer count on happy days forever. He and his wife and all their descendants would have to return, ultimately, to the dust from whence they had come. So the wages of sin, the sin of disobedience, were death, as God had warned them. And each descendant of Adam has to pay that penalty still.

Nor did the Lord allow the man and his wife to remain in the peaceful garden that had been created for their enjoyment. They still had the gift of free will. God knew that at any time they might

use it to disobey Him again. They might even try to gain immortality by tasting the fruit of the other forbidden tree, the tree of life itself. So He drove them out of the garden and placed a guard of cherubim, and a flaming sword, to make sure that they did not return.

Even then, though, His kindness and concern for the two sinners remained. The Bible says that He made coats of skins for these erring children of His, and clothed him. Implicit in this gesture, I think, is the promise that God did not intend to let man stay alienated from Him forever.



In the first three chapters, then, of this amazing book you can find answers to the deepest questions that haunt mankind, questions about the meaning of the universe, of life, of sin, of evil, of pain and suffering and death. If you were to read just these three chapters every day for a month—and I would earnestly urge you to do just that—you would not even begin to reach all the depths or unlock all the treasure chests that it contains.

But you might—indeed you would—begin to understand why this Book of Books overshadows all others that have ever been written, “towering aloft into the blue secrets of Heaven.”

This mighty panorama, this epic of God and man and destiny, was meant for all men in all nations at all times. Let us go forward and explore it together.

the first homicide

One wonders sometimes what it was like for Adam and Eve the first night after they were driven out of Paradise. It must have been pretty miserable. Perhaps they were hungry. Perhaps they were cold. Perhaps they were afraid of wild beasts that certainly were no longer the friendly animals of the Garden of Eden. And if they were miserable physically, what about their state of mind? They knew that they had offended God. They knew, for the first time, the pangs of guilt. They knew, too, that they could no longer live indefinitely. Now they were mortal. The word itself means doomed to death.

So it must have been a deeply unhappy pair of humans who crouched in some cave or took refuge in some tall tree and waited for the warming rays of the sun. Did Adam blame Eve for their predicament? The Bible offers us no clue. Perhaps he did, but I like to believe that in this fallen man were still some sparks of divinity. After all, he was still made in the image of God. I like to think that there was courage in him, and determination to make a new start, and the hope that somehow, eventually, he would regain the favor of the Creator.

In any case, the man and the woman faced up to their new life bravely. Adam began tilling the soil; Eve became a mother, first of a boy named Cain, then of a second son named Abel.

From the start, apparently, these two sons of Adam were very different. Abel was a keeper of sheep, which meant that he was a

nomad, moving from place to place in search of grazing land. Cain was a farmer, a “tiller of the ground,” which meant that he stayed in one place. There has always been a clash of personalities between the restless rover and the stolid stay-at-home. Also, since the world began there has been some rivalry, some jealousy, some friction between the children in any family.

Adam and Eve must have taught their sons to love the Lord, because we first see them trying to please Him. Cain brought an offering of the crops that he had grown. Abel offered lambs from his flocks. Perhaps these offerings were made in an effort to win God’s favor; perhaps they were simply in gratitude for the gift of life. In any case, we are told that Abel’s offering found favor in the sight of the Lord, and Cain’s did not.

Why was Cain’s offering less pleasing? We don’t know. Perhaps his motives in making the offering were less worthy than Abel’s. Perhaps he was already harboring a grudge against his younger brother because he thought his mother favored him, or his father preferred him. . . . That sort of thing, too, has been going on since the world began. In any case, the Lord made it clear that He preferred Abel’s offering. Full of resentment, Cain brooded about it until one day his self-control gave way. He “talked with Abel,” which probably means that there was a fierce argument. Full of fury, Cain “rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.”

Did he actually mean to kill him? Again, we don’t know. Cain knew what death was, all right; he had seen animals die. But no human being had ever died at the hand of another human being. Indeed, no human being had ever died at all. We can imagine Cain staring down at the lifeless form with growing horror and self-condemnation. We can imagine, too, his panic when he heard the Lord asking where Abel was.

“I don’t know,” Cain replied, and he added a question that has haunted mankind ever since: “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

The Lord did not answer that question directly, but He made it clear that Cain had committed a grievous crime. The penalty was banishment, a terrible punishment indeed to the stay-at-home Cain who preferred to live securely in one place, tending his crops. Cain cried out that he could not bear it, adding that wherever he went strangers would try to kill him. The Lord replied that He



would protect Cain's life by setting a mark upon him, so that strangers would know who he was and would not harm him. The Bible doesn't say what that mark was; perhaps it was some form of tattoo that desert tribesmen used far back in the dawn of history. In any case, grievous though Cain's crime was, the Lord allowed him to live and find a wife and have a son named Enoch and even build a city that he named after his son.

What does the story of Cain and Abel have to say to us today? In one way it is a warning that, even though we are all children of Adam and therefore are made in God's image, we also have buried deep within us the savagery and fury that will lead us to murder unless we learn to control and subdue such impulses. After all, what is war in the twentieth century except the crime of Cain magnified

a thousand times and given official sanction? All the human beings on this earth are brothers and sisters under the fatherhood of God. Someday, God willing, the human family will learn to live as a family should.

The other message of the story of Cain and Abel is a more encouraging one. It is that even though a person makes a terrible mistake, that does not mean his life is over. Cain was a murderer, and yet he went on to establish a city. He made his mistake, he took his just punishment, he kept going, and in the end he was able to do something constructive and good.

God promises to forgive us our sins if we are sorry for them and resolve not to repeat them. Forgiveness, then, is nothing but a chance to do better. God gave Cain that chance, and he took it. So can we.

the fantastic VOYAGE

In the early days of the world, according to the Bible, men lived to almost incredible ages. Perhaps their diets were more nutritious than ours are today. Perhaps they had fewer emotional strains and stresses to endure. Perhaps they were given longer life in order to populate the vast empty spaces around them. In any case, we're told that they lived for hundreds of years.

Adam himself, the first man, was nine hundred and thirty years old when he died. Adam's third son, Seth, lived to be nine hundred and twelve. If you assume that under normal circumstances three generations will appear every century, these men were able to look upon twenty-five or thirty generations of descendants before they died.

The record for old age, as everyone knows, is held by Methuselah. He lived for nine hundred and sixty-nine years. Just what he accomplished, if anything, we don't know. Perhaps if you live that long, accomplishments don't matter!

But despite all this long life, God was not pleased with the way things were going on the earth He had created. As time went by, people grew corrupt and "the earth was filled with violence." In his anger, God said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast . . . for it repenteth me that I have made them."

Fortunately for all of us, God decided to make an exception

in the case of one good man and his family. The man was named Noah; he had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The Lord warned Noah that the earth was going to have a devastating flood. All living creatures, except for a chosen few, would perish. The ones destined to survive would take refuge in a great ship called an ark. And Noah was ordered to build it.

If ever a man showed blind, unquestioning faith, it was Noah. He lived far inland where floods never came. He knew nothing about the sea, or about boats. The Lord even had to tell him how to make the ark watertight! Now, suddenly, he was told to start building an oceangoing vessel roughly the size of a modern tanker. But he didn't hesitate. He didn't ask questions. He just did what the Lord told him to do.

How his friends and neighbors must have stared when Noah began pacing off three hundred cubits—about four hundred and seventy-five feet—which was to be the length of the ark. How they must have laughed when he told them that a flood was coming that would drown them all. They must have agreed among themselves that the old man had become senile. No doubt it became a form of neighborhood entertainment to go out and watch as the huge vessel slowly took shape, to ridicule the old man and jeer at his strongly muscled, sunburned sons.

Perhaps among the onlookers there were a few who felt a twinge of uneasiness as the dogged old patriarch, already six hundred years old, supervised the loading of the ark with tons of provisions. What if this crazy old eccentric turned out to be right? But none, apparently, felt uneasy enough to ask to be included in the fantastic voyage. When long columns of animals began to wind down out of the hills and across the plains, then undoubtedly some of the bystanders did become alarmed, because this, surely, was no ordinary happening. But by that time it was too late either to try to join forces with Noah or to build their own means of salvation.

It must have taken several days and nights to load all the creatures aboard. The largest beasts like the elephants and hippopotamuses were probably down on the lowest level. No doubt the gentle grazing animals had to be segregated from the big cats. There must have been a bedlam of sound with hyenas laughing and donkeys braying and lions roaring and endless rows of birds on endless

perches twittering and chirping. A place had to be found for “every creeping thing.” Of animals particularly useful to man, Noah was ordered to take seven pair, just to make sure that when the floods were over those species would multiply rapidly.

The account of the deluge in Genesis is wonderfully specific. The rains began on the seventeenth day of the second month. Slowly at first, then with increasing violence, the downpour came. The people of those days believed that above the vault of the sky were mighty waters, and that when the “windows of heaven” were open, the water would pour through. Now it did, falling in sheets, in torrents, drumming like thunder on the roof of the ark, pouring over the riverbanks, flooding the valleys, engulfing houses and temples, sweeping away whole cities. Men and beasts fled to higher ground, but their flight was in vain. For forty days and forty nights the downpour continued. The waters rose until even the tallest mountains were submerged and nothing was left but an endless expanse of angry, heaving water.

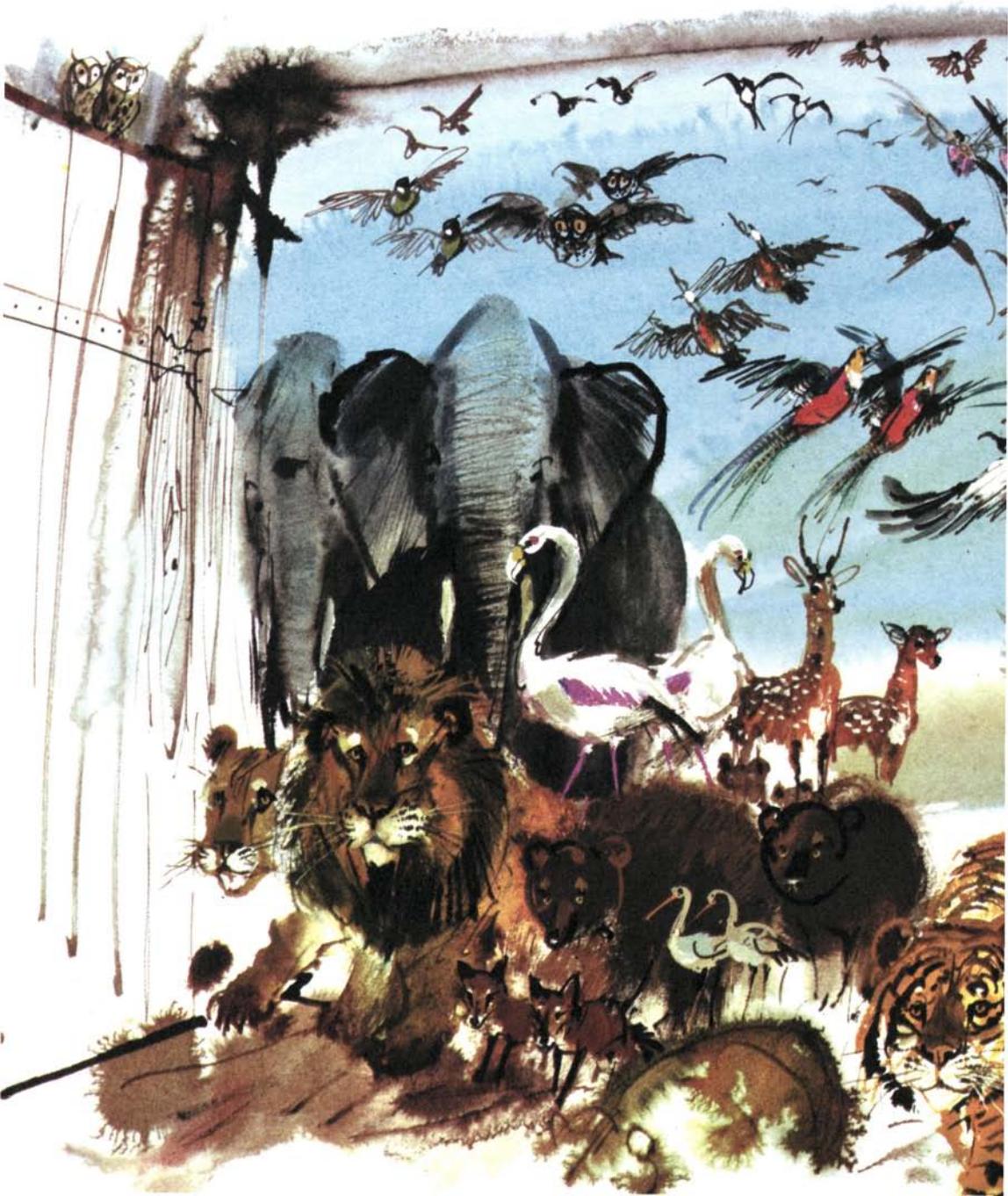
Vivid as it is, this account in Genesis is not the only story of a deluge that has come down to us through the centuries. In almost every primitive culture are similar stories and legends. So uniform are some of these accounts that they all seem to point to the same mighty catastrophe back in the dawn of time.

Archaeology, too, has things to say about the Flood. Not many years ago, digging into the mound of earth that marked the site of ancient Ur, archaeologist Leonard Woolley came upon a stratum of clay more than eight feet thick. Forty feet down, it contained no shards, no rubbish, no manmade relics of any kind, although there were such relics both above and below it. To lay down such a deposit of clay, geologists said, would have required a tremendous and protracted flood in the ancient land of Sumer. Thus, once again, science seems to confirm the words of the sacred Book.

For a hundred and fifty days the ark and its cargo floated upon the empty surface of a limitless sea. Five long months of monotony and cramped quarters, of desperately hard work (all those animals had to be fed!) and uncertainty. Noah and his family must have grown discouraged at times. Had God forgotten all about them? Was the earth drowned forever? Would their provisions hold out? But “God remembered Noah.” What a day it must have been for

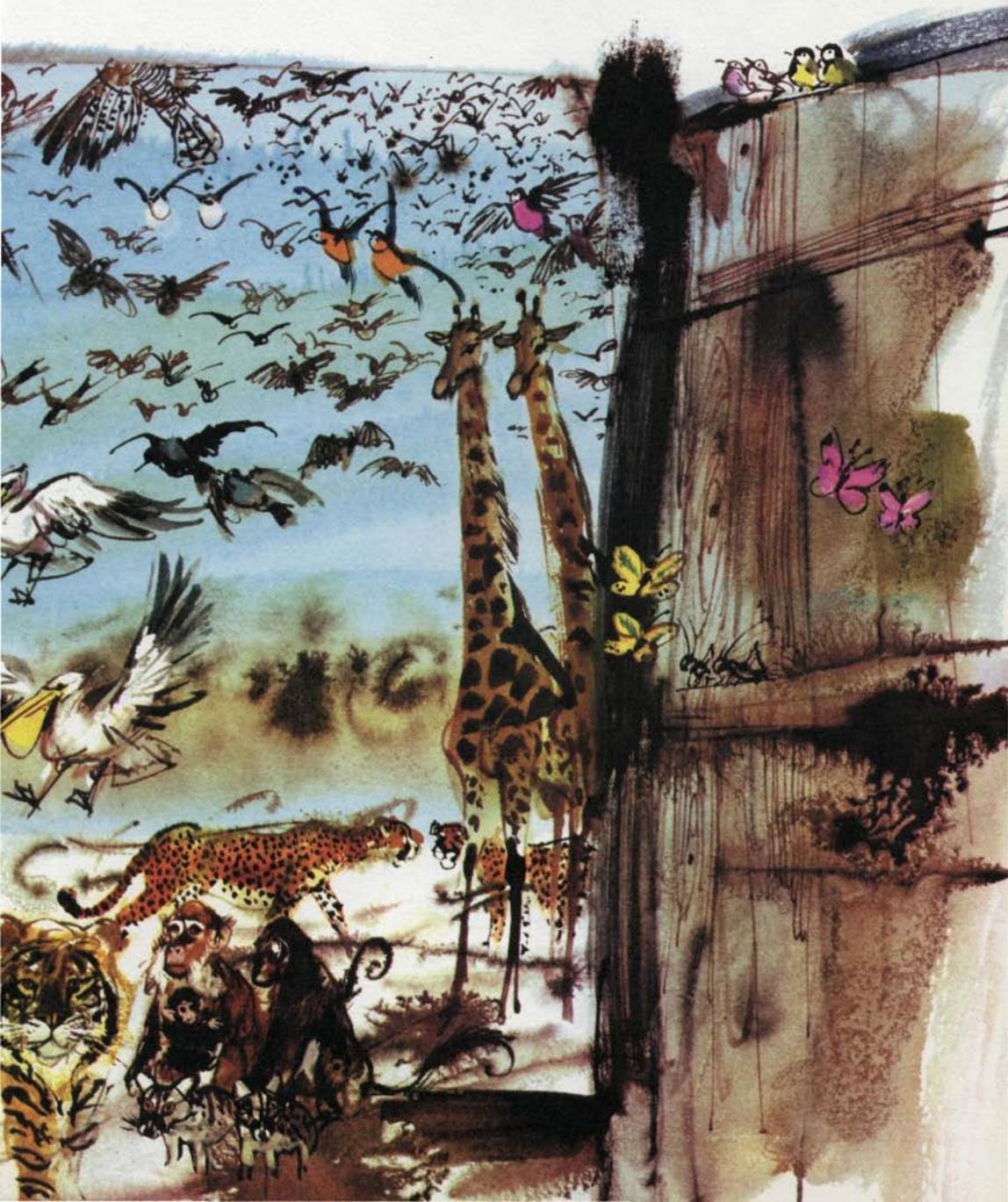
them—the seventeenth day of the seventh month—when the keel grated on something solid and moments later the ark was aground “upon the mountains of Ararat.”

For forty more days Noah waited while the waters gradually subsided. Then he let a raven go, and a dove, “to see if the waters were abated.” The strong-winged raven flew to and fro, but the dove



came back exhausted. Noah waited another week, then sent her out again. This time she returned with an olive leaf in her mouth, and so the weary voyagers knew that somewhere cultivated land was reappearing.

This scene of the gentle bird returning and of Noah's joy as he "put forth his hand, and took her, and pulled her in unto him





into the ark” is one of the most touching and reassuring in the whole Bible. It symbolizes the resurgence of hope after a dark time of difficulty and distress. It means that while floods and dangers and uncertainties occur in every life, the man who trusts God will come through intact. It means, too, that if people will just hang on long enough in times of trouble, God will send a sign, when the testing period is almost over, that good things lie ahead for those who keep the faith and refuse to admit defeat.

In Noah’s case, the olive leaf was just the forerunner of a far greater promise. After he and the animals had come safely out of the ark, and after he had offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving, God established a mighty covenant or agreement with him. Never again, God promised, would the earth be so devastated by water. The sign of the covenant was the mighty rainbow, arching from horizon to horizon in a blaze of brilliant color against the dark storm clouds. “I do set my bow in the cloud,” said the Lord, and He added that His promise was good “for perpetual generations.”

Noah and his sons were ordered to “be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.” They took up their great task with confidence and enthusiasm, heartened by God’s promise that “while the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.”

It was a new dawn, a new day, a fresh start for all mankind.

the tower of pride

In the eleventh chapter of the Book of Genesis is a remarkable short short story. It's completely contained in nine verses—less than three hundred words—but it paints such vivid mental pictures that it has fascinated hearers for at least thirty centuries.

In this story, the descendants of Noah find “a plain in the land of Shinar” and decide to live there. Presumably they prosper greatly and reach a high stage of civilization. They are ambitious, energetic people who are highly unified. They all speak the same language. They all like to get things done. They have a very high opinion of themselves and finally, as a direct reflection of this high opinion, they decide to build a city and a tower so high that it will reach all the way up to Heaven.

They are skilled brick-makers, so they set to work with thousand of laborers and millions of bricks to make this presumptuous dream come true. And they are well on their way to succeeding when God intervenes. He doesn't like the arrogance of these people who consider themselves better than anyone else. He decides to take them down a peg or two.

How did He do it? He “did there confound the language of all the earth” so that the builders of the great tower, the Tower of Babel, could no longer understand one another. Imagine that scene: the astonishment, the dismay, the confusion, the angry shouting. No one able to transmit or obey an order. No one able to explain or

carry out a plan. In the face of this total frustration, all work ceased. The great tower stood unfinished, looming against the sky. And gradually it fell into decay, because the workers split into countless groups, each with its own language, and the Lord “did scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.”

Undoubtedly one purpose of this story of the Tower of Babel was to explain to ancient peoples how all the languages and dialects of the earth came into being. Beyond that, the tower itself may be a historical echo—and criticism—of the soaring pagan temples of Ur or even the pyramids of Egypt, constructed with so much effort and human suffering to so little purpose. But the deeper message, surely, is that confusion awaits those who, in their blind pride, think that they can “get to the top” solely by their own efforts, who assume that they can do whatever they please without the help or approval of God.





If the Tower of Babel does stand for man's pride in his own accomplishments, that lesson seems even more pertinent today. Our amazing technology has let us defeat most diseases, probe into the heart of the atom, put human beings on the moon . . . achievements so tremendous that arrogance is their almost inevitable sequel. If man can do such godlike things, the Devil whispers, what need does he have of God?

The answer—and perhaps this is what the story of Babel is trying to tell us—is that the more advanced our technology becomes, the more we need God. The more complex our culture, the greater grows the danger of alienation, not only from God, but from one another. In this astounding century of ours, we speak increasingly of gaps: a generation gap, a communication gap, a knowledge gap, an education gap. Already the language of science has become so complex that specialists in one field have difficulty understanding specialists in another. As our tower of civilization grows higher, so does our difficulty in understanding one another.

What we need today is what the builders of Babel lacked—a willingness to admit our own limitations and shortcomings, a willingness to curb the sin of pride, a willingness to listen for the voice of God.

The message of the Tower of Babel is clear and simple: put God first. If a nation does this, it will complete its greatest projects and realize its proudest dreams. If it doesn't, in the end confusion will come upon it, and its people will be "scattered abroad on the face of the whole earth."

the man who was God's friend

Almost four thousand years ago, in the sun-baked land known today as Iraq, a remarkable child was born. Three great religions claim him as a spiritual ancestor. To the early Hebrews, he was known as Abram; to later Jews and to Christians as Abraham; to Muslims as Ibrahim. To all of them he was "the friend of God," one of the first men in the dawn of history to realize that behind the jumble of bloodthirsty pagan gods was a single Supreme Being, Creator of everything, and constantly mindful of His creature, man.

The Bible tells us that Terah, Abram's father, settled in the ancient city of Ur on the banks of the muddy Euphrates River, and it was there that Abram grew to manhood. At the time, two separate races were living peaceably together in Ur: the Semites, from whom Terah and his family were descended, and the Sumerians, a gifted, dark-haired people who had settled in Mesopotamia (the "land between the rivers") a thousand years earlier, bringing with them wheeled vehicles and a knowledge of mathematics and one of the earliest forms of writing. Under the Sumerians, the city of Ur had risen to great heights, with craftsmen in jewels and precious metals whose skill has never been surpassed. But by the time Abram was born, those proud and prosperous days were over, and Ur was beginning to fall into stagnation and decay.

Suppose we were able to look back from this age of television

and spaceships to the Ur of four thousand years ago—what would Abram’s boyhood have been like? In some ways, not too different from the life of a boy today. Since his father was a man of importance, he undoubtedly went to school. He would have learned to read and write, not letters as we know them, but wedge-shaped marks on tablets of wet clay that hardened into almost indestructible bricks. Archaeologists have found thousands of such tablets, some of them clearly the “homework” of schoolchildren. Abram would have studied arithmetic: some of the tablets show problems in square root. He would not have had to struggle with decimals because the ancient Sumerians were more likely to divide things into sixths than into tenths. The twelve hours on our clocks, our custom of counting eggs by the dozen, the three hundred and sixty degrees in a circle—these things come down to us from the Sumerians.

Abram would have studied astronomy, too. He would have been familiar with hundreds of pagan gods, particularly the moon god who was the patron deity of Ur and whose temple was on top of a huge tower of terraced brick known as a *ziggurat*—the word means “heaven,” or “the-place-where-the-god-dwells.” On certain days the young boy would have watched priests bringing the moon-god idol down the long flights of steps to the music of harps and cymbals. He would have seen the citizens of Ur offering doves or lambs to the priests as sacrifices and receiving in return receipts printed quickly and clearly on a clay tablet with a wedge-shaped stick.

The city was dusty and shabby in many areas, but it was a colorful place. There were no horses or camels, but there were chariots and wagons drawn by long-eared donkeys, and sailing ships that brought cargoes up from the Persian Gulf. Houses were made of brick, often two-storeyed, with blank walls on the street to keep out dust and noise and a pleasant courtyard inside surrounded by balconies. In the marketplace businessmen haggled and complained about hard times, sighing that things were better “in the old days.” They were saying it four thousand years ago, and they are saying it still.

An ancient legend says that Abram’s father, Terah, was a maker of idols, and that as a boy Abram sold these images of clay

in the streets of Ur. The legend, which is recorded in the Jewish *Book of Jubilees*, written three centuries before Christ, relates that Abram finally reproached his father for such idolatry. "What can these statues do for anyone?" he is supposed to have said. "They are nothing but bits of clay. The true God cannot dwell in such lifeless things!"

Only a legend, but sometimes legend is a shimmering cloak for truth. In any case, we know from the Bible that the time did come when Terah decided to leave Ur. The reason is not given. Perhaps it was economic: bad times, declining business. Perhaps it was dissatisfaction with the paganism that surrounded him. Anyway, Terah left, taking with him his son Abram, and Abram's wife, Sarai, and a grandson whose name was Lot. They settled in the town of Haran, and there Terah finally died. This left Abram the leader of the clan, with his nephew, Lot, as second-in-command.

Now God had been watching Abram, and what He saw must have pleased Him, because one day when Abram was in his seventy-sixth year the Lord spoke to him suddenly, giving him an order and making him a promise. The order was simply to leave Haran and "get thee . . . unto a land that I will show thee." The promise was magnificently unconditional: "I will make of thee a great nation . . . in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." One might almost say that the remainder of this extraordinary collection of writings that we call the Bible is the story of how that great promise to Abram was fulfilled—and is still being fulfilled.

So Abram and Lot assembled their caravans. Driving their sheep and cattle before them, they moved slowly south into the land of Canaan at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, the territory of modern Israel. There a famine made them push on eventually into Egypt, but when the famine was over they came back. By now the herds of Abram and Lot were so great that there was not enough grazing land for all the animals. Their herdsmen were beginning to quarrel, and so the two leaders agreed to separate peacefully. Abram remained in Canaan, on a plain belonging to a man called Mamre. Lot went to live in the city of Sodom near the shores of the Dead Sea.

The valley of the Jordan River was a pleasant place, but it was constantly being fought over by petty kings and tribal chief-

tains. At one point Lot and his family were made prisoners and carried away by some of these marauders. When he heard of it, the peaceful Abram armed some of his own followers, pursued the invaders, inflicted a sharp defeat on them, and enabled Lot to return safely to his home.

But Sodom and the nearby city of Gomorrah had become evil places, full of sexual perversion and corruption of every kind. No doubt the inhabitants were convinced that morals were what they chose to consider them. No doubt the intellectuals among them proclaimed that God was dead.

But God was not dead. He was watching with growing anger. And eventually the day came when He decided to act.

the destruction of the WICKED CITIES

As the nephew of the upright and God-fearing Abram, Lot was determined not to become involved in the kind of moral degradation that surrounded him. He and his family were the only people in the city of Sodom who feared the Lord and obeyed Him. How long they could have continued to keep up their standards is an interesting question: it's hard to be surrounded by fire and not eventually be burned. Fortunately for Lot, that day had not yet arrived. The inhabitants of Sodom still considered him an outsider; they were willing to let him go his way so long as they could go theirs.

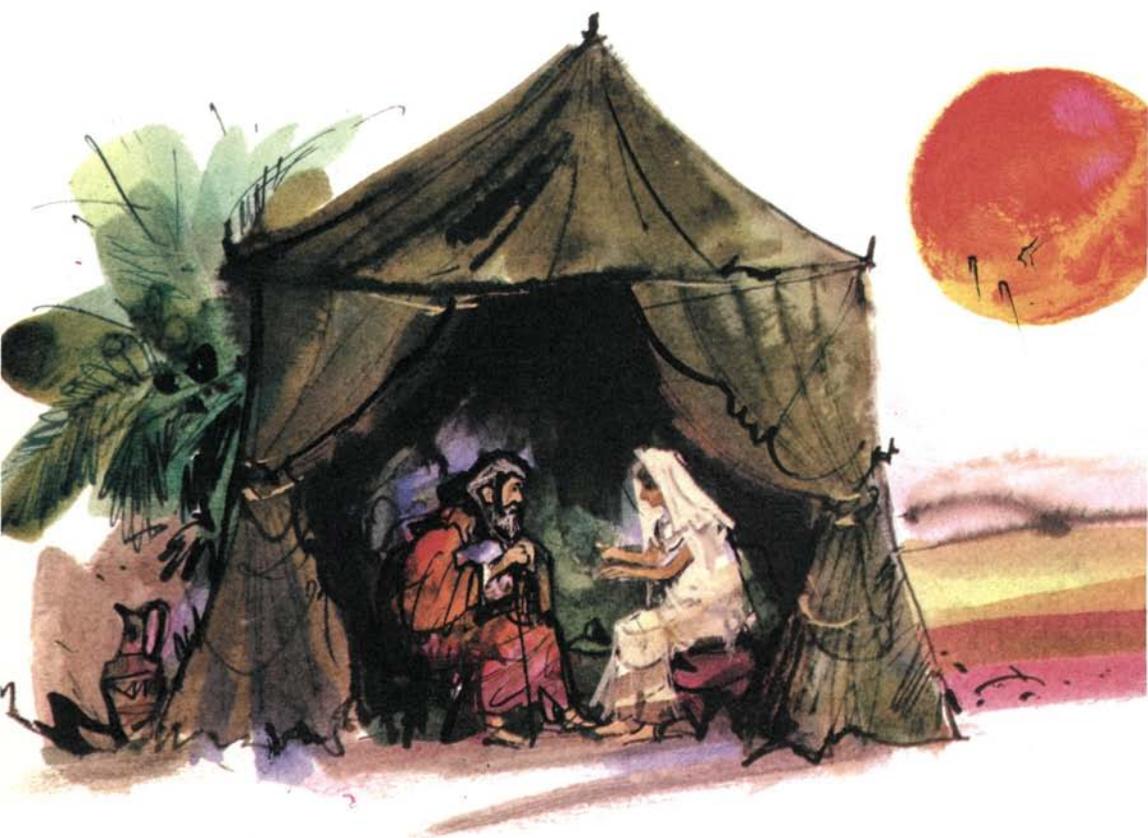
Meanwhile, over on the plain of Mamre, much was happening in the life of Abram. In material things he continued to prosper, but one thing troubled him greatly: his wife, Sarai, had not given him any children. The Lord assured him that one day Sarai would give him a son and even changed Abram's name to Abraham, which means "father of many." He also changed Sarai's name to Sarah, which means "queen" or "princess." But the years were passing, both were getting old, and the promised son had not appeared.

At one point, convinced that she would never bear children, Sarah had arranged for her husband to take one of her handmaidens as a concubine. It was not unusual in those days for a barren wife to urge her husband to have children by other women. So Hagar, the Egyptian slave, had had a child by Abraham, a boy

named Ishmael. But Hagar took advantage of her new status to make Sarah feel inferior as a woman, and so there was no love lost between them. At one point during Hagar's pregnancy Sarah had become so angry and hostile that the Egyptian woman fled from her into the desert. But an angel of the Lord had told Hagar to go back and have her baby. And so an uneasy peace was established in the household.

One afternoon when Abraham was sitting in the shaded doorway of his tent "in the heat of the day," he looked up and saw three strangers approaching. The law of hospitality among nomadic people in ancient times was very strong (it still is), so Abraham at once invited the travelers to stay with him. He brought water for them to wash their feet, a cool luxury after the burning sands across which they had come. He had Sarah prepare a splendid meal. He spread it before his three guests in the shade of a tree and stood by respectfully while they ate.

Now one of these strangers was the Lord Himself. He knew that Abraham was beginning to fear that Sarah would never have





children. So He told His host not to doubt, because a son would indeed be born to them.

Inside the tent, Sarah overheard this prediction and gave a rueful laugh, because she was sure that she was long past childbearing age. The Lord heard her laugh, but instead of being angry, He said a wonderful thing. He said, and I like to think that He smiled as He said it, "Is any thing too hard for the Lord?"

Consider what a marvelous phrase that is! The Bible is full of great thoughts to cling to when we meet difficulties, and this is one of the greatest. It means that no matter how hopeless things seem, there is always someone to turn to, someone so all-wise and all-powerful that in His presence problems simply melt away. Remember that phrase the next time some thorny problem baffles you or some harsh difficulty threatens to overwhelm you. Ask yourself, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" And then hand the problem over to Him!

Well, to get back to the Bible story, the Lord and His two angels (for such were the other two strangers) were on their way to Sodom. If the city was as wicked as it was reputed to be, the Lord told Abraham, He was going to destroy it.

Abraham tried to dissuade the Lord, pointing out that there

might be a few righteous people in Sodom. "To slay the righteous with the wicked," he said, "that be far from thee." This concern of Abraham's for abstract justice and for people he didn't even know



is further proof of what a remarkable man he was, and how far ahead of his time. He was, in effect, answering Cain's question: "Am I my brother's keeper?"—answering it in the affirmative.

Patient with Abraham's objections, the Lord finally agreed that if He could find even ten righteous people in Sodom, He would not destroy the city. As it turned out, there were not even ten. The two angel companions of the Lord came to Sodom, stayed in Lot's house, and barely escaped being maltreated by the evil-minded citizens of that evil-minded place. They warned Lot to flee with his wife and family "lest thou be consumed in the iniquity of the city."

Lot's two sons-in-law refused to listen, so the angels took Lot and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, led them out of the city, and told them to escape while they could. They warned them urgently not to turn back or even look back. As the four frightened refugees made their way to a small town called Zoar, the Lord rained fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah, destroying them utterly, and every living soul in them. Lot and his daughters escaped. But Lot's wife, disobeying the angels, looked back. "And she became a pillar of salt."

A pillar of salt! Perhaps there is a hint here that the salt waters of the Dead Sea rolled over both wicked cities. That desolate region is known for earthquakes, and a violent upheaval of the earth's crust could have done it. If so, the ruins may still lie somewhere beneath that bitter brine. Or perhaps the lesson is simply that those who keep looking back and dwelling on the mistakes and sins of the past are likely to find themselves paralyzed and immobilized so far as moving on into the future is concerned.

In any case, the stern moral message of this great Book of Genesis is once more reaffirmed, the message that man must beware how he uses the gift of free will that has been given to him. Those who love God and revere Him, like Noah and Abraham, will be saved. Those who reject and disobey Him, like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, will suffer the consequences.

the acid test

Time passed, and God's promise to Abraham came true: despite her great age, Sarah did have a son. As the Lord commanded, she called him Isaac, which means "he laughs"—a name chosen, perhaps, to remind her of her own lack of faith in the power of the Lord. It was a great day for Abraham, now a hundred years old, when his son and heir was born.

By now Ishmael was in his early teens. All these years he had had his father's love all to himself, so it is likely that he resented the arrival of the new baby. He showed his displeasure by teasing the newcomer, and naturally Sarah resented this. Also, now that she had a son of her own, Sarah did not want a half brother in the family who might compete for Abraham's affection or even some day contest Isaac's inheritance. So the smoldering animosity between Sarah and Hagar once more burst into flame. Always highly emotional, Sarah now demanded that Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael from his household permanently.

The old patriarch was unhappy about this, because he loved Ishmael. But he loved Sarah more—or perhaps he was a bit afraid of his wife when her hot temper flared. So he gave in to her. He "rose up early in the morning," gave Hagar some bread and a jar or skin full of water, and sent her and her son away into the desert.

Now the Bible is the greatest of books, full of the greatest stories ever told, but it is also a book that wastes no words. Often

it gives just the bare bones of a story, leaving details to the reader's imagination.

For instance, it says of Hagar that "she departed, and wandered in the wilderness." Not a word about the dramatic scenes that must have preceded her banishment. No description of the wilderness itself. The writer of Genesis is relying on the reader to *imagine* what it was like. He is challenging us to visualize this dark Egyptian woman leading her child across the endless sandhills under a blazing sun, doling out the water drop by drop, probably denying herself even the smallest sip, watching the boy droop and wilt, carrying him for a while until her own strength gave out, then placing him under a bush in a pitiful patch of shade. Think of that poor slave woman's state of mind: not just the dreadful pangs of thirst, but the loneliness of that desolate place, the fear of wild animals, the cruel sense of injustice—after all, in giving Abraham a son she had only done what Sarah wanted her to do—the despair that came upon her when she could go no farther and realized that her only child was dying.

In a few poignant words the writer does tell us that Hagar could not bear to watch Ishmael die. She dragged herself about a hundred yards away—"as it were a bowshot"—and sat there with her face in her hands and wept.

What was happening now back in Abraham's tent? Again it's left to the imagination of the reader to picture the anxiety that Abraham must have felt, his growing remorse and self-condemnation. He did have the promise of the Lord that Ishmael would survive somehow, but still he must have felt he had done a harsh and cruel thing. And what of Sarah? Did her sense of triumph fade away, leaving her with a guilty conscience? No mother can really wish the death of another woman's child. Perhaps in time she was able to put the Egyptian woman and the child out of her mind. But I doubt that Abraham ever did.

Meanwhile, in the desert, Hagar sat in total despair, convinced that nothing could save her. But, like her enemy Sarah, she was to discover that nothing is too hard for the Lord. The story says that God heard the child crying, and that the angel of God (that is, the aspect of God that deals with human beings directly) called to Hagar. She was told to pick up her child again and hold

him in her arms, because the Lord intended to make a great nation out of him. “And God opened her eyes,” the narrator says simply, “and she saw a well of water.” Probably it was a tiny spring that she had failed to notice in her misery (a message here, too, for those who give up hope too easily: sometimes despair keeps you from seeing the means of your salvation!). So Hagar and Ishmael were saved, and this son of Abraham grew up in the desert, became a skilled hunter with bow and arrow, and finally married a wife who came from Egypt, like his mother. According to tradition, one of his sons was an ancestor of the prophet Muhammad. Thus Muslims consider themselves the spiritual descendants of Abraham to this day.

Young Isaac, however, was growing up under the proud eye of his father. If Abraham had loved Ishmael—and he did—how much more must he have loved this only child of his lawful wife, born by special intervention of the Lord long after such a thing seemed biologically possible.

Love is never ignored in Heaven and so Abraham’s love for Isaac did not escape God’s notice. Now the Lord decided to use



that love to make one final and supreme test of Abraham's faith and obedience. He ordered Abraham to take his only son and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on a lonely mountaintop. Bind him like a sheep or a goat. Kill him with a knife with his own hand. Burn the remains on a crude altar. Ask no questions, make no judgments, simply leave the justification of such a dreadful deed to the Lord Himself.

Human sacrifice was common enough in those days, eighteen or nineteen centuries before Christ, but to the gentle Abraham this command must have come like a thunderbolt, incomprehensible, terrifying, appalling in its injustice and inhumanity. It meant—or seemed to mean—that the God he had served and loved for so long was as ferocious and bloodthirsty as the pagan gods he had always despised. It meant that God, who had promised to make his descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven, was a liar, because if Isaac was killed there would be no such descendants. Abraham had dared to argue with God about the fate of the inhabitants of Sodom, but now apparently he was too stunned to raise his voice. Like Noah, he bowed in blind obedience to the will of God. He saddled



his donkey, cut the wood for the burnt offering, took two servants and his young son, and set out for “the place of which God had told him.”

What were his thoughts along the way? We can only guess, but they must have been anguished beyond description. How could God command a thing like this? Was it possible or even thinkable to defy or disobey Him? Did the thought cross Abraham’s mind, perhaps, that this was a punishment for his own weakness in yielding to Sarah and sending Hagar and his other son out into the desert to perish?

And what were Isaac’s thoughts? Did it all seem at first like a pleasant and casual outing into the hills? He was an observant lad. He noticed that his father was carrying a knife, and that wood for an offering was loaded on the donkey. But where was the sacrificial animal? When he asked about this, his father replied patiently that God would provide a lamb when the time came. In this whole moving description of a father willing to sacrifice a beloved son is foreshadowed the great drama and message of the New Testament.

When Abraham left the servants behind and began grimly and silently to climb the mountain with Isaac, the intelligent boy must have known intuitively that something dark and terrible was hanging over them. Certainly he offered no resistance when his father began to bind him with the cords, although by then the full horror of the situation was all too apparent. Perhaps his trust in his father was stronger than his fear. Perhaps he was too frightened to run or to resist. In any case, God tested Abraham right up to the last split second. The sun must have glinted fearfully on the knife as the old man raised it above his son’s defenseless throat. Perhaps the sharp edge had even touched the soft skin when the voice of the Lord rang like a great trumpet above those mountaintops: “Abraham, Abraham!”

The old man said, still holding the knife in his shaking hand, “Here am I.”

And the Lord told him to release Isaac, “for now I know that thou . . . hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me.”

Looking up, Abraham saw a ram with its horns caught in a thicket. He caught the ram and sacrificed it in a gesture of humility and reverence, love and gratitude. To this day, in synagogues on



certain high holy days, the rabbi blows a blast on the *shofar*, the ancient ram's horn, to remind the people of the faith and obedience of their ancestor on that lonely mountaintop almost four thousand years ago.

The central message of this great story, one of the most moving and dramatic in the whole Bible, is plain. The message is that if a person will just get his mind full of faith and let the faith thoughts drive out the fear thoughts, all will be well. If that person will let strong belief replace the doubting thoughts, the weakness thoughts in his mind, he will gain enormous strength over all obstacles and difficulties.

That is why reading the Bible is so important. Not just as poetry, not just as history, not just as literature, although it is all

those things, but as a reservoir of faith concepts that can release tremendous power in anyone who will use them.

For a fact, if you take a faith thought out of the Bible each day and drive it deep into your mind and dwell on it and nurture yourself on it, gradually you will become an indomitable individual. The sin and weakness and tensions of the world will no longer overwhelm you. You won't be arrogant or conceited, because you will know that your strength isn't generated by you—it comes from God. But you will be a confident, effective, fear-free person.

Why is faith so important? Because it's the greatest of all mind-conditioners. What problem is troubling you right now? What difficulty has you defeated? Whatever it is, the answer is to get your mind freed of the doubt and hesitancy that are keeping it in chains. Whether we succeed or whether we fail in the important things of life is all in the mind. It isn't in the circumstances. It's the thought processes that determine how we deal with the circumstances.

This is what the Bible says over and over again either directly or indirectly, as in this story of Abraham and Isaac. Faith is a form of belief. Belief is a form of thought. All the believing you will ever do is done in the mind. You can either disbelieve yourself into a frustrated life, or you can believe yourself into a great one.

The Bible says it is up to you.

the first LOVE STORY

The years went by; life's shadows were lengthening around Abraham. He had great possessions, but his beloved wife, Sarah, was dead. He had a son and heir, but Isaac, now a grown man, grieved for his mother and had yet to take a wife. His son's melancholy state of mind troubled the old patriarch. He felt more and more strongly that Isaac needed to have a wife and family of his own.

But Abraham did not want his son to choose a wife from among the Canaanite people in whose land they lived. His own painfully established relationship with God was too precious, too unique to be exposed to any possible pagan influence. It would be far better, Abraham told himself, if Isaac's wife came from his own people, the daughter of a kinsman perhaps. That way his daughter-in-law's religious faith would be strong, her ideals and moral values would be high, she would transmit Isaac's great heritage to their children.

Abraham knew that far to the north in the city of Haran his brother Nahor's family had prospered and grown numerous. Perhaps, he thought, a suitable young woman might be found there. Ordinarily the father of an unmarried son might have sent the young bachelor to a far country to choose a bride for himself. But Abraham was afraid that if he let Isaac go, the boy might be tempted to remain in Mesopotamia permanently. This was a possibility that filled Abraham with dread, because he knew the Lord wanted him and his descendants to stay in Canaan.

So he called in his most trusted servant—probably it was the same Eliezer mentioned earlier in the Bible who had been his chief steward and overseer for many years. “Swear to me,” said Abraham, “that you will go to my brother’s home in Haran and seek until you find a bride for my son among his people. If you find such a girl and gain her consent, bring her back with you. If you find her and she refuses to come, then you will be released from your promise.”

Eliezer took ten of his master’s best camels, loaded them with supplies for the journey and also with valuable gifts, chose some of the bravest and hardiest of Abraham’s tribesmen, and began the long trek north.

Swaying across hills and valleys, rivers and deserts, the old servant wondered uneasily how he would be able to recognize the right woman when he found her. As a loyal follower of Abraham, he had great respect for his master’s unseen but all-powerful Deity. And so he did what comes naturally to religious men everywhere when they are faced with a problem: he asked the Lord to help him.

He asked for help in a very specific way. Eliezer knew that in all villages and towns at a certain time of day the young women gathered at the public well to gossip and fill their pitchers. Now he asked the Lord to arrange a meeting for him with such a girl when he came to the city of Haran. “If I ask her for a drink of water,” he prayed, “let her give me one. Not only that, let her be so considerate and so kind that without any prompting she will offer to water my camels also. If she does these things, I will take it as a sign from You that she is the girl I am seeking.”

Eliezer, in other words, was asking for divine guidance. He believed that the Lord could direct him far better than his own fallible human judgment. And as always happens when someone’s faith is strong, the Lord heard him. He brought Rebekah, the granddaughter of Nahor, to the well just as the string of weary camels from Canaan came lurching down the dusty road.

It’s one of the most charming scenes in the Bible, the meeting between the graceful girl, “very fair to look upon,” with her water pitcher balanced on her shoulder, and the dust-caked, grizzled old family retainer. If feminine beauty had been the only thing that

Eliezer was seeking, he would have been satisfied then and there.

But actually the old servant had chosen two yardsticks much more significant: kindness and courage. Not many young girls in those days when all strangers were potential enemies would have heeded a travel-stained wayfarer's request for a drink. Some might have run away. But Rebekah didn't. Smiling, she offered him the brimming pitcher. Then, without being asked, she proceeded to make the much greater effort of drawing water from the deep well for the thirsty animals.

Convinced now that the Lord had guided him to the right person, Eliezer rewarded Rebekah by presenting her with an earring of gold and two heavy gold bracelets. She must have been amazed, but if she was hesitant about accepting such lavish recompense, the Bible doesn't say so. It merely says that she identified herself as Nahor's granddaughter. Then she ran home and breathlessly told her family what had happened.

Rebekah had a brother named Laban, who listened to her story in amazement. This first glimpse of Laban offers us quick insight into his shrewd, somewhat grasping personality. He hurried down to the well and offered hospitality to Abraham's servant. But the Bible tells us, with wry humor perhaps, that it was after "he saw the earring, and bracelets upon his sister's hands."

Regardless of Laban's motives, the visitor from Canaan was given a royal welcome. When he told of his master's great prosperity and opened the packs of rich merchandise to prove it, no one made any objection to his proposal that Rebekah return with him to become Isaac's wife. "Ask the girl herself," they said. "See if she's willing to go." From this ancient passage in the Bible, some authorities think, came the Hebrew tradition that a woman must consent to her own betrothal and her own marriage.

Rebekah was quite willing to go. Perhaps Eliezer's story of how he found her made her feel that this strange proposal was God's will. Perhaps—who knows?—she was bored with the safe routine of life at home, or had found no young man who appealed to her. Behind that pretty face, as we shall see, was a sharp mind and a strong will. She said serenely, "I will go." And that settled that.

It was decided that Rebekah could take her old nurse with her.

Perhaps Rebekah wanted one familiar face to keep her from being homesick. Or perhaps, fiercely protective, the old woman insisted on going to guard and care for her mistress in a strange land. In any case, good-byes were said, and the rested camels began the long journey home.

Meantime, was Isaac awaiting his bride with eagerness and impatience? The Bible doesn't say. Perhaps he had some doubts. After all, this was his father's idea, not his own. What if the girl were ugly? What if she were pious but stupid? Isaac was already forty years old, and we have hints that he was a bit of a mama's boy. We're told that he went out "to meditate in the field at the eventide," and undoubtedly his meditations were a mixture of hopes and fears. While he was meditating, staring at the ground, we're told that "he lifted up his eyes . . . and, behold, the camels were coming."

Rebekah, too, must have felt her heart beat faster when she saw Isaac at a distance and Eliezer told her who he was. When she heard that it was the man she was to marry, she modestly took a veil and covered her face, so that Isaac's first impression of this bride from a distant land must have been limited to a pair of dark, expressive eyes and a musical, submissive voice, and perhaps the glint of golden bracelets on a slender wrist.

Like all good love stories, this one has a happy ending. Doubts and uncertainties are swept aside. Boy gets girl. Isaac "brought [Rebekah] into his mother Sarah's tent" (at last he had found someone to take his mother's place) "and she became his wife; and he loved her." Interesting how, in this very early romantic story, love follows marriage—it doesn't precede it.

Thus it came about that the lonely Isaac found love—and was comforted.

the stolen BIRTHRIGHT

Great men usually overshadow their sons, and to some extent this was true in the case of Abraham and Isaac. Certainly Isaac's life seems placid compared to the dramatic career of his father, the wanderer from Ur.

We left Isaac as a happy bridegroom. So far as we know, his marriage to Rebekah was a monogamous one. No additional wives. No concubines. Now we see him twenty years later. Rebekah has had no children, so Isaac petitions the Lord and is rewarded with twin boys. This is the first mention of twins in the Bible, and it marks the beginning of a new set of stormy relationships between these vivid characters who people the pages of Genesis.

The Bible says that even before birth the twins "struggled together" inside their mother's body. The firstborn was named Esau. The second, delivered so quickly after the first that his hand was clutching his brother's foot, was named Jacob, which means "he takes by the heel." It is in such vivid small details that these old stories ring so true.

From the very first breath, these twins were about as different as brothers could be. Rugged and hairy, Esau was a typical outdoorsman, bluff, hearty, quick-tempered, but essentially good-natured and incapable of holding a grudge. Jacob was the scholarly type, thoughtful, intellectual, sensitive, with smooth pale skin quite free of the reddish pelt that covered his brother's muscular body.

As mothers sometimes do, Rebekah favored her younger son. Perhaps his quick mind and sense of humor amused her. Perhaps he preferred his mother to his father—and showed it. Perhaps Rebekah’s womanly fastidiousness was repelled by Esau’s crude manners and lusty behavior. Perhaps she truly thought that Jacob was better fitted by brains and temperament to be the leader of God’s people. The Bible tells us that both she and Isaac were disturbed when, in his lusty, earthy way, Esau took two wives from the Hittite women among whom Isaac’s family lived.

In any case, Rebekah made up her mind to push Jacob ahead of Esau one way or another. And eventually she did.

Jacob had already taken one step in that direction himself, by talking his older brother out of the birthright that entitled Esau, as the firstborn, to a double share of family possessions. One day when Esau came back half-starved from hunting, he found Jacob preparing a delicious meal of lentils. When Esau asked for a portion, Jacob coolly replied that he could have it if he would surrender his birthright to him. The impatient Esau agreed. “What good is my birthright to me,” he cried, “if I starve to death?” So, as the Bible puts it, he “despised his birthright” and traded it for a helping of red pottage made of lentils.

The underlying message here seems plain indeed. It is that all worthwhile achievements—and ultimately civilization itself—rest on man’s willingness to postpone immediate pleasures or benefits in favor of greater future rewards. In any life, this kind of self-discipline is essential. Obviously Esau didn’t have it, whereas Jacob did. It’s altogether possible that when she heard of this foolish and impetuous act, Rebekah made up her mind then and there that Esau was not worthy of becoming a patriarch.

Now Isaac, on the other hand, had always preferred his older boy. A gentle person himself, he was impressed by Esau’s energy and strength and skill at hunting. He also liked to eat the wild game that Esau brought home so frequently. As he grew older, and as his eyesight failed, eating became one of the few pleasures left to Isaac. So one day, knowing that his own death might not be far off, he asked Esau to go hunting, bring back some venison, prepare it the way his father liked it, and receive the formal blessing that would symbolize the transfer of authority from one generation to the next.

“And Rebekah heard,” the Bible says—eavesdropping, actually—and she knew that she had to move quickly or the leadership of the tribe would be lost to Jacob forever. So she told Jacob to bring her two kids from the flock. She would prepare a meal that would fool her husband into thinking that Esau had brought home the venison. Jacob was to take it in to his blind father, pretend to be Esau, and receive the promised blessing.

Jacob seems to have had few scruples about this deception, but he was afraid of being found out. He pointed out that his father might touch him and recognize his smooth skin. What if this hap-



pened and his father cursed him instead of blessing him? That would be a terrible and terrifying thing.

But like so many women in the Bible, Rebekah could dominate the men around her. “Do as I say,” she told Jacob fiercely. “If anything goes wrong, I’ll take the curse upon myself!”

So Jacob did exactly as she told him. He put on some of Esau’s clothes, clothes that—as any modern hunter’s wife will tell you often happens—had a distinctive aroma of their own. She made him cover the back of his neck and his hands with the hairy skin of the young kids. Then she made him take the steaming dish into his father’s tent.

One amazing thing about the Bible is the way it refuses to pull any punches where its heroes are concerned. In this amazing scene Jacob appears as an out-and-out liar. Not only that, he involves the Lord in his lies. When Isaac, suspicious and puzzled, asks how the venison could have been obtained so quickly, Jacob replies smoothly that the Lord brought him good luck.

Still unconvinced, the old man insists on touching the boy. The hairy skin of the goats leaves him more puzzled still. “The voice,” he murmurs to himself, “is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.” So he asks a direct question: “Are you really my son Esau?”

By now Jacob is very frightened, but he is in too deep to back out. As usually happen with liars, one lie inevitably leads to more lies. “I am,” he says defiantly. His father draws him close, kisses him, smells the rugged outdoors smell of Esau’s clothing, and is convinced. He gives his blessing to Jacob.

Almost at once, Esau comes back from the field and brings his dish of venison to his father. “Who are you?” asks the old man in his quavering voice. “Your son,” is the reply, “your firstborn, Esau!”

Then, says the Bible in a vivid and poignant phrase, “Isaac trembled very exceedingly,” because he knew he had been tricked. And when Esau heard what had happened, he cried “with a great and exceeding bitter cry”: “Bless me, even me also, O my father!”

But the blessing, once given, could not be retracted. Rebekah’s plot had succeeded. Now Jacob, not Esau, would be the spiritual leader of Abraham’s descendants.

In his rage, Esau vowed to kill his brother. When she heard of this, Rebekah decided to send Jacob to her brother, Laban, far to the north in Mesopotamia. Jacob could stay there until Esau's rage had cooled. Jacob, terrified of his brother, agreed to go. Rebekah thought that her favorite son would soon return, but she was wrong, and this was the penalty that she paid for her deceit. It was twenty years before Jacob returned. By that time, his mother was dead.

the shining Ladder

It must have been a troubled and disconsolate Jacob who left his father's home and began the long journey to Haran, where sanctuary awaited him with his mother's people. Apparently he traveled alone, so he must have had time for some somber thoughts. He had talked his brother into giving up his birthright and he had gained his father's blessing by trickery, but it's unlikely that he was very happy about these two tainted triumphs. Perhaps he tried, as he walked along, to find excuses for himself. Perhaps he said, as his ancestor Adam once had said, "The woman tempted me . . ."—the woman in this case being his mother. How easy it is, when people have done wrong, for them to convince themselves that the fault was someone else's!

In any case, the lonely traveler "lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set." He made a hard, lonely pillow out of some stones he found and lay down to sleep. "And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven." It seemed to Jacob in this vision that angels were ascending and descending this ladder, and at the top stood the Lord Himself. If God was angry with Jacob, He didn't show it. On the contrary, He promised to be with him always and eventually to bring him back to this land which he was fleeing.

Jacob woke up terrified, as men who have a guilty conscience



often do. The dream was so vivid that he was sure that somehow he had come upon a place where the veil between the natural and the supernatural was very thin. And perhaps it was. Who is to say that God doesn't speak to us through dreams when the conscious mind—that is, the arrogant, self-willed part of us—is asleep?

When he awoke, Jacob began to do some hard praying, which was probably something he hadn't done in a long time. If he had been praying regularly, I doubt if he would have been able to lie to his father so readily: prayers and lies somehow just don't go together. Now the frightened and penitent Jacob told the Lord that if He would just stay with him and keep him safe and bring him home again someday, he would acknowledge Him as his God

(this implies that Jacob hadn't been doing so lately!); not only that, he would give the Lord a tenth of whatever worldly goods he might ever possess. This is the first mention in the Bible of tithing, a spiritual discipline that is just as valid and effective today as it was then.

Dreams have always fascinated people, and this dream of Jacob's is no exception. What did it mean? What does the image of a great ladder stretched between earth and heaven imply?

Does it not mean that no matter where a person may be, no matter how desolate the place, no matter how lonely or discouraged he is, no matter how stained he may be with sin or falsehood or deceit, the channel is always open for him to communicate with God. There is always a golden ladder with man at one end and God at the other, and that ladder is the thing we call prayer.

Perhaps, as the dream implied, only angels constantly live and move on this spiritual plane. But man can be a part of it. Man can make contact with it. Man can put his foot on the bottom rung of the ladder whenever he wants to, and God, who is at the top, will know it and be responsive to him.

This vision of Jacob's has been the inspiration for much art and much music. The old hymn *Nearer, My God, to Thee* makes reference to it:

*Though, like the wanderer, the sun gone down,
Darkness comes over me, my rest a stone,
Yet in my dreams I'd be
Nearer, My God, to Thee. . . .*

The author of that hymn felt a spiritual kinship with Jacob, and so do we all. All men, whether they know it or not, are seeking some kind of ladder to lead them to God.

Anyone who reads or hears this story of Jacob's ladder might well consider this proposition: what would happen to you, and through you to the world, if you were to make the practice of prayer a central program in your life? What do you think would happen if, instead of hurriedly skimming through a book like this, you actually saturated your mind with the Bible itself, actually studied and practiced the principles of prayer that it contains? Of

course, most of us pray, to some extent, but doubtless most of us would admit that most of the time we only dabble in it.

If a person went all out in a thoroughgoing prayer program, it would be the most revolutionary, life-changing, tremendous experience that person ever had. If you were that person, problems that now baffle you would be solved, burdens that weigh you down would become lighter, sickness or illness that cripples you would be met with power. Tremendous things would happen.

“More things are wrought by prayer,” wrote the poet Tennyson, “than this world dreams of.” Almost the last words of the great scientist Charles Steinmetz to his colleagues in the laboratories were, “Prayer—find out about prayer!”

Jacob found out about it by using it. That was more than thirty centuries ago, but the power is still there. We can use it too.

the return of the exile

Awe-stricken but also heartened by his vision, Jacob came safely to Haran and found shelter with his mother's brother, Laban. Laban's offer of asylum was all the more welcome because there was in his household a beautiful young girl named Rachel. Actually, Laban had two daughters. The Bible tells us that Leah, the older one, was "tendereyed," which sounds romantic but actually means that Leah's eyes were weak. Perhaps she was nearsighted. Or perhaps was cross-eyed. From the start Leah was attracted by the handsome young refugee from Canaan. But Jacob lost his heart to the beautiful Rachel.

Still as shrewd and grasping as ever, Laban quickly realized that the bright and energetic Jacob could be a useful addition to his household, especially when it came to building up his herds, the chief measure of a man's wealth in those days. What, he asked, would Jacob want in the way of wages to stay and work for him? Lovesick and starry-eyed, Jacob said that all he wanted was Rachel's hand in marriage. He offered to serve seven years without pay if at the end of that time he could claim her as his bride.

Crafty Laban was no man to turn down such a bargain. He accepted with alacrity and proceeded to work his nephew hard. But hard work meant nothing to Jacob so long as he could be close to his beloved. The Bible, compressing so much into so few words as it often does, tells us that the seven years "seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her."

Finally the longed-for wedding day came. Laban gave a lavish feast for all his retainers. That evening, in accordance with the traditional ritual, he brought his daughter, heavily veiled, to the bridegroom's tent. But the silent, veiled figure was not the daughter that Jacob was expecting. When daylight came, the astonished and dismayed bridegroom discovered that Laban had brought him not Rachel but Leah.

Furious, Jacob demanded an explanation of such trickery. "Oh," said the wily Laban, "in this country it's our custom never to give a younger daughter in marriage until her older sister has a husband. I thought you knew!"

There was nothing Jacob could do about it. He agreed to serve Laban another seven years without pay if he could marry Rachel as well. Thus both daughters of Laban became Jacob's wives.

Jacob's preference for Rachel was so strong, and he showed it so plainly, that the Lord felt sorry for Leah and allowed her to bear children while Rachel had none. Each time Leah had a son the unhappy woman said to herself, "Now at last my husband will love me." But all her faithful childbearing earned her was the jealousy and enmity of her sister.

When Rachel saw that she could not become pregnant, she gave her maid, Bilhah, to Jacob as a concubine, just as Sarah had given Hagar to Abraham two generations earlier. Later Leah did the same thing with her servant, Zilpah. As the years went by, Jacob acquired a family of ten boys and a girl.

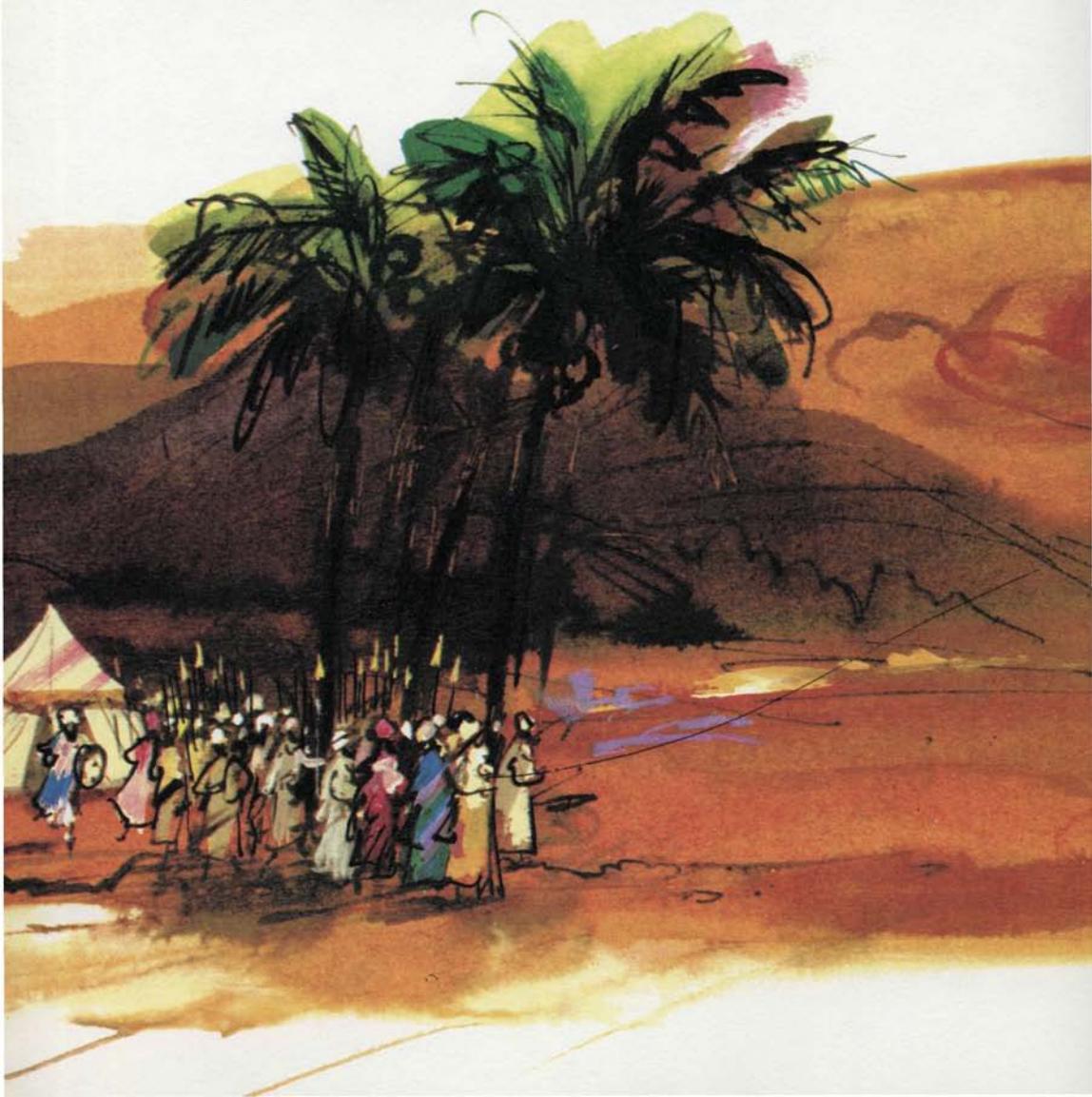
During these years Rachel suffered greatly, because to be childless was considered a disgrace. Finally the Lord heard her prayers and allowed her to conceive and bear a son. "God hath taken away my reproach," she said happily, and she named the child Joseph.

After Joseph was born, Jacob wanted to return to his father's home in Canaan. But Laban, who rightly attributed his own prosperity to Jacob's skill in managing the herds, begged him not to go. Jacob finally agreed to stay if he could have for his own all the brown lambs among the sheep and all the speckled or spotted goats. Since such animals were comparatively rare, Laban quickly agreed. But now the trickster became the tricked. Jacob had so much knowledge of animal husbandry that he was able to breed the herds

so that great numbers of brown sheep and spotted goats were born. Soon his flocks were greater than Laban's.

This led to great resentment among Laban's sons, who felt that Jacob was robbing them of their inheritance. Their hostility increased until Jacob began to fear for the safety of himself and his family. So one day, without giving any notice to Laban, he "rose up, and set his sons and his wives upon camels; and he carried away all his cattle, and all the goods which he had gotten . . . for to go to Isaac his father in the land of Canaan."

This was the second time that Jacob had fled along the caravan trail between Canaan and Mesopotamia, leaving an angry relative behind. Finding both his daughters and his son-in-law gone, Laban pursued them and overtook Jacob's household after a week



of hard marching. But the Lord warned him in a dream not to harm Jacob or to try to make him turn back. So the two descendants of Terah made their peace and parted in friendship.

Jacob continued his journey, but now he was oppressed by the thought of meeting Esau again. Twenty years had passed, but Jacob knew that some men have long memories. Esau was probably still the rough, impetuous man of action that he had always been. What if he were still angry? What if he were still determined to kill his brother—kill not only him but his whole family as well? The closer Jacob came to Canaan, the more worried he grew. He sent messengers ahead to tell Esau that he was coming. The messengers returned with the ominous news that Esau was marching north with four hundred men. Just that word and nothing more. Jacob began to pray more fervently than he had in some time.

Just as Jacob had had a strange and mystical experience on his



way to Haran when he dreamed of the ladder, now he was to have one equally strange on his way home. At a place where the river Jabbok was shallow, he sent his family and his retainers across, but he himself stayed behind. While he was alone, during the night, a stranger appeared, a powerful being in the likeness of a man and yet somehow not a man. The apparition grappled with Jacob, wrestled with him all night long, and put his thighbone out of joint. When daybreak came, the stranger struggled to get away, but Jacob refused to release him until his opponent had given him his blessing. The apparition told Jacob that henceforth he would be called Israel, which means “champion of God,” “soldier of God,” or “He who strives with God.” But he would not give his own name, and after blessing Jacob, he disappeared.

Who or what was this strange apparition? A modern psychologist might point out that Jacob was under a lot of pressure, that he was indeed wrestling with a problem—the problem of whether to face his brother or run away again. Also, the insistence on a blessing might be a guilt echo of the trickery whereby Jacob had obtained his own father’s blessing.

And yet the episode must have been more than just another dream, because when Jacob crossed the river the next day he was lame from the injury to his thigh. Jacob himself was convinced that the stranger was God Himself. “I have seen God face to face,” he said, “and my life is preserved.” Martin Luther once suggested that the antagonist might have been the “pre-existent Christ,” and that it was actually Jesus who thus visited Jacob hundreds of years before the Nativity in Bethlehem.

Be that as it may, Jacob went forth the next day to meet his brother. Far off on the horizon he saw a cloud of dust where Esau was coming with his four hundred men. Calmly Jacob arranged his family in a procession with the concubines and their children in front, then Leah and her children, and finally the two he loved most, Rachel with young Joseph, at the rear where they would have the most protection. Then he walked past them, bowing to the ground seven times in great humility as he approached his brother.

It was a moment of agonizing suspense for the travelers from Haran. But then, in a scene that foreshadows the great story of the Prodigal Son, instead of trying to kill his brother, the good-hearted

Esau “ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept.” Esau didn’t even want to accept the lavish presents that Jacob offered him; he said that he had enough cattle already. But finally, mainly to ease his brother’s conscience, he did.

So Jacob returned to the land of his father, but sorrow came with him. In the last stages of the journey Rachel, pregnant for the second time, died in childbirth. The baby, the last of Jacob’s sons, was called Benjamin. From these twelve sons were to come the twelve tribes of Israel. And the descendants of Jacob are known as the children of Israel to this day.

from PRISONER to prince

Of all his children old Israel—or Jacob as he was still called by his family—loved Joseph best. The children of Leah were his offspring; so were the sons of the concubines. But Joseph was the first-born of the woman he loved. Benjamin was also Rachel's child, and Jacob loved him dearly too. But Benjamin's birth had cost his mother her life. No, Joseph was the old man's favorite, and everyone knew it.

He was a bright and handsome child. In looks he probably resembled his beautiful mother. And even at an early age he showed some of the drive and determination and energy of his father. But when we first get a close look at Joseph as a youngster of seventeen, he is not a lovable person. He was his father's pet, just as Jacob had once been his mother's pet (family patterns often tend to repeat themselves), and he knew it. In other words, he was spoiled. By and large his older brothers were a rough, self-centered lot. When they made a mistake, or got out of line, Joseph was quite capable of running to tell his father. Nothing escaped his sharp, inquisitive eyes. This did not endear him to his brothers.

Nor did the special garments that his doting father gave him to wear. In the King James version of the Bible, it's "a coat of many colors." The Revised Standard Version calls it "a coat with long sleeves." Perhaps it was both. Among those ancient people an ornamented tunic was the sign of a chieftain or leader. Since

Joseph ranked only eleventh in age among Jacob's twelve sons, his older brothers saw no reason why he should be rated ahead of them.

Besides, Joseph had an exasperating way of rubbing it in. "Let me tell you about a dream I had," he said eagerly one morning to his brothers. "We were all in a field together, binding grain into sheaves, and guess what? All your sheaves bowed down to my sheaf! What do you think of that?"

The brothers let him know profanely what they thought, but this did not prevent the brash youngster from relating another dream, one that showed him in an almost godlike position. In this dream, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to Joseph. Even his indulgent father took exception to that kind of egotism and scolded him for it. But being a man of dreams himself, old Jacob wondered privately if prophecy might not be involved in Joseph's dreams as well as conceit.

The resentment of the older brothers smoldered steadily. One day when they were all away tending their father's flocks near a town called Dothan, Jacob sent Joseph to check up on them. Seeing him coming, gay and unconcerned in his coat of many colors (and also exempt from the monotonous work of tending sheep), the brothers felt their anger boil over. "Here comes that wretched dreamer," they said to one another. "Let's get rid of him once and for all. Let's kill him and pretend some wild beast has devoured him. That will put an end to his obnoxious dreams!"

They would have killed him then and there if the eldest brother, Reuben, had not shown a flicker of compassion. "Let's just throw him in a pit," he said. Actually, what Reuben had in mind was to rescue Joseph later and thus gain the gratitude and favor of his father. But the other brothers liked this method of elimination that seemed to stop short of open murder. They seized Joseph and stripped off his hated coat of many colors. Then, ignoring his frightened cries and pleas for mercy, they threw him into a deep pit, perhaps a dry well, that was nearby.

What a shock for an impressionable seventeen-year-old! Walking along one minute in the sunshine, cheerful, gay, enjoying his high opinion of himself and his favored position in life. Then the next minute stripped, bruised, dazed by harsh words and oaths

from his own kinsmen, half-stunned by the fall into a dark and terrifying hole that for all he knew would become his grave. No matter how he screamed, no one would hear him in that lonely place except his brothers, who were now sitting down to eat, filled with the fierce satisfaction of rough, wild men who think they have settled an ancient grudge.

As the brothers ate, along came a caravan of Ishmaelites bound for Egypt, "their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh." Then up spoke Judah, another of the brothers. Either his conscience was troubling him, or else he saw a chance to make some easy money. "Why don't we sell Joseph to these merchants?" he said. "They can resell him at a profit in Egypt. That way his blood won't be on our hands, but we'll be rid of him forever."

By now the brothers' anger had cooled somewhat and they had lost their appetite for murder. They hauled Joseph out of the pit, haggled for a while with the fierce, hawk-faced leader of the caravan, and finally sold their brother into slavery for twenty pieces of silver.

That got rid of Joseph, but now there arose the problem of



what to tell their father. The solution they hit upon was even crueler than the truth would have been because it denied the old man the knowledge that his favorite son was still alive. The brothers took the coat of many colors, dipped it in the blood of a young kid, then brought the stained garment to their father. “We found this,” they said, pretending doubt as to its ownership. “Does it belong to your son or not?”

Poor old Jacob did not doubt this “evidence” that Joseph had been killed by some wild animal. Crushed and despairing, he “mourned for his son many days.” The Bible says that all his sons and daughters tried to comfort him, the daughters with sincerity because they did not know the truth, the sons with sickening hypocrisy because they did. But he refused to be comforted. “I will go to my grave,” he said pathetically, “mourning for my son.”

Meantime, far away in Egypt, the Ishmaelites put Joseph on the auction block where slaves were sold. There must have been some eager bidders for the handsome but dejected lad. It took a rich man to outbid the others, and a rich man—or perhaps his representative—did. When the sun went down that day, Joseph found himself the property of an Egyptian named Potiphar, one of the great Pharaoh’s most trusted officers, the captain of the royal guard.

What, by this time, was Joseph’s state of mind? The Bible story does not tell us, but already he must have been vastly changed from the spoiled, vain youth who left his father’s home so light-heartedly to pay a visit to his sheep-tending brothers. As the old saying goes, there’s no school like the school of hard knocks for bringing out the latent characteristics in a person. On the long, hard journey down to Egypt, Joseph had had a clear-cut choice: to give in to despair and become a slave in mind and heart as well as in fact, or to summon up all his courage and resourcefulness, trust in God, and wait for a chance to escape from the trap that had closed on him.

This choice was really a gift from God, as hard choices often are. Jacob would never have put his favorite son to such a test. He would have gone on spoiling him indefinitely, and much more spoiling might have ruined the boy. This is a thought that many overprotective parents would do well to ponder: when hardship descends on a child, it may be a blessing in disguise.



In any case, the best qualities in Joseph—patience, intelligence, energy, adaptability—now began to emerge. He quickly learned the language of his master. With astonishing speed he absorbed everything in the more advanced Egyptian culture that was worth absorbing. His quick mind and pleasing personality captivated Potiphar, who gave him more and more freedom and responsibility. Before long the nimble-minded young Hebrew was in charge of the whole household. And just as Jacob's skill and knowledge had benefited Laban a generation earlier, so his son's intelligence and organizing ability brought prosperity to the house of Potiphar.

In refusing to give in to discouragement or despair, Joseph had passed the first real test of his young life, but now an even more difficult one appeared in the form of his master's wife. There is no actual description of this lady in the Genesis story, but we don't need one to visualize her: rich, selfish, bored, arrogant, accustomed to having whatever she wanted whenever she wanted it. Perhaps her husband's military duties caused him to neglect her. Perhaps he was much older than she. Perhaps she made a game of collecting lovers. If so, she decided to add Joseph to her list. She told him that she wanted him to make love to her.



It was a tremendous temptation for the young man. The Ten Commandments had yet to be formulated. He had no wife of his own. Here was a passionate and no doubt elegant woman throwing herself at him. Accepting her proposition might give him a kind of revenge on the Egyptians who looked down on all foreigners, especially Hebrews. Becoming her lover might lead to all sorts of material advantages and privileges. Through Joseph's mind must have run all the rationalizations that participants in adultery ask themselves today. Who will ever find out? What people don't know doesn't hurt them. What's wrong with a little excitement now and then? And so on.

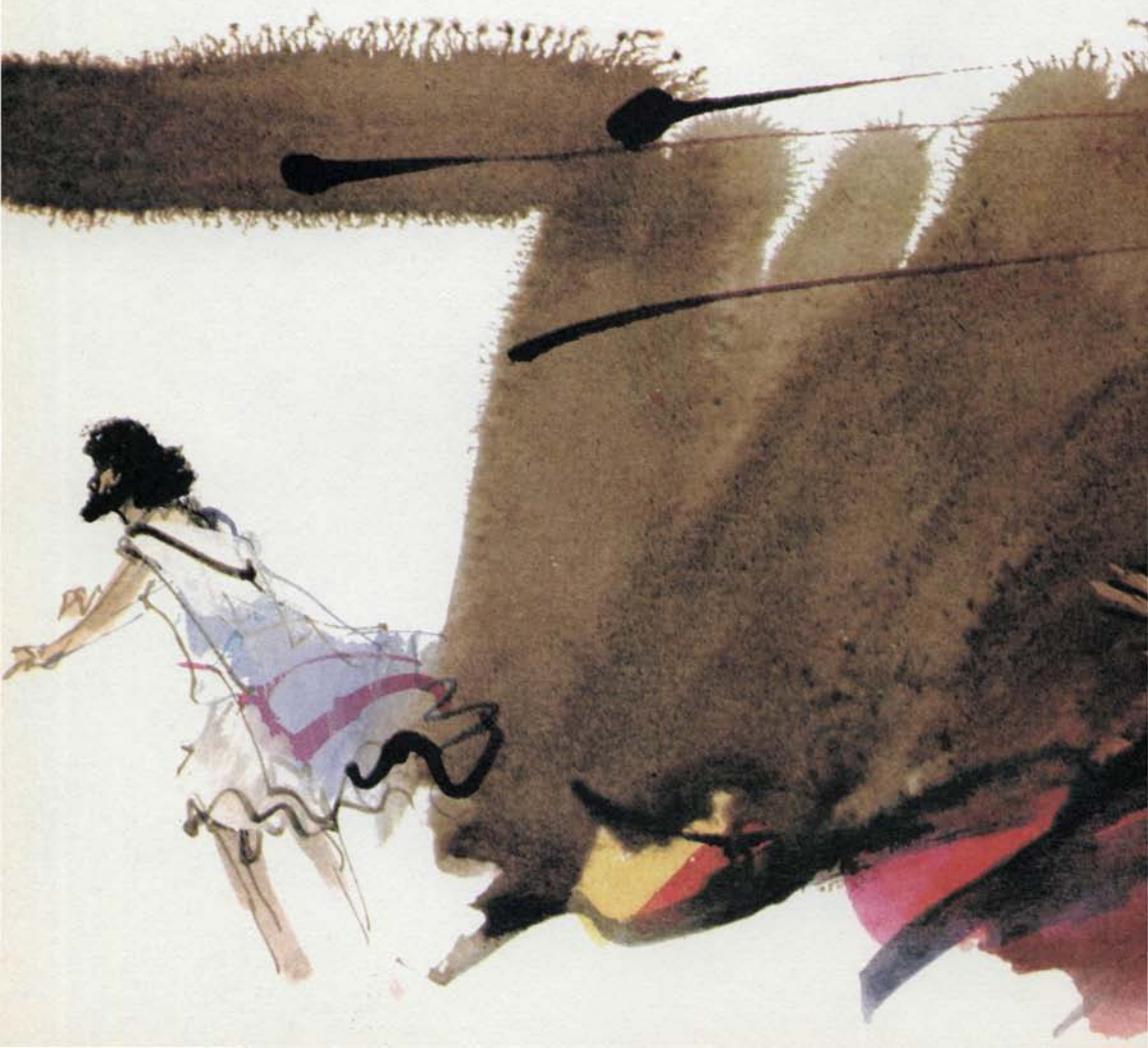
But three things made Joseph refuse the advances of Potiphar's wife. The first was a sense of loyalty and obligation to her husband. This man had trusted and befriended him; how could he now deceive and betray him? The second was his own conscience. "How then," he said to the lustful woman, "can I do this great wickedness?" The third was his belief in a God to whom such actions were a violation of righteousness. That was the ultimate yardstick: the righteousness of God, and it was not a yardstick that could be bent or altered to suit man's convenience.

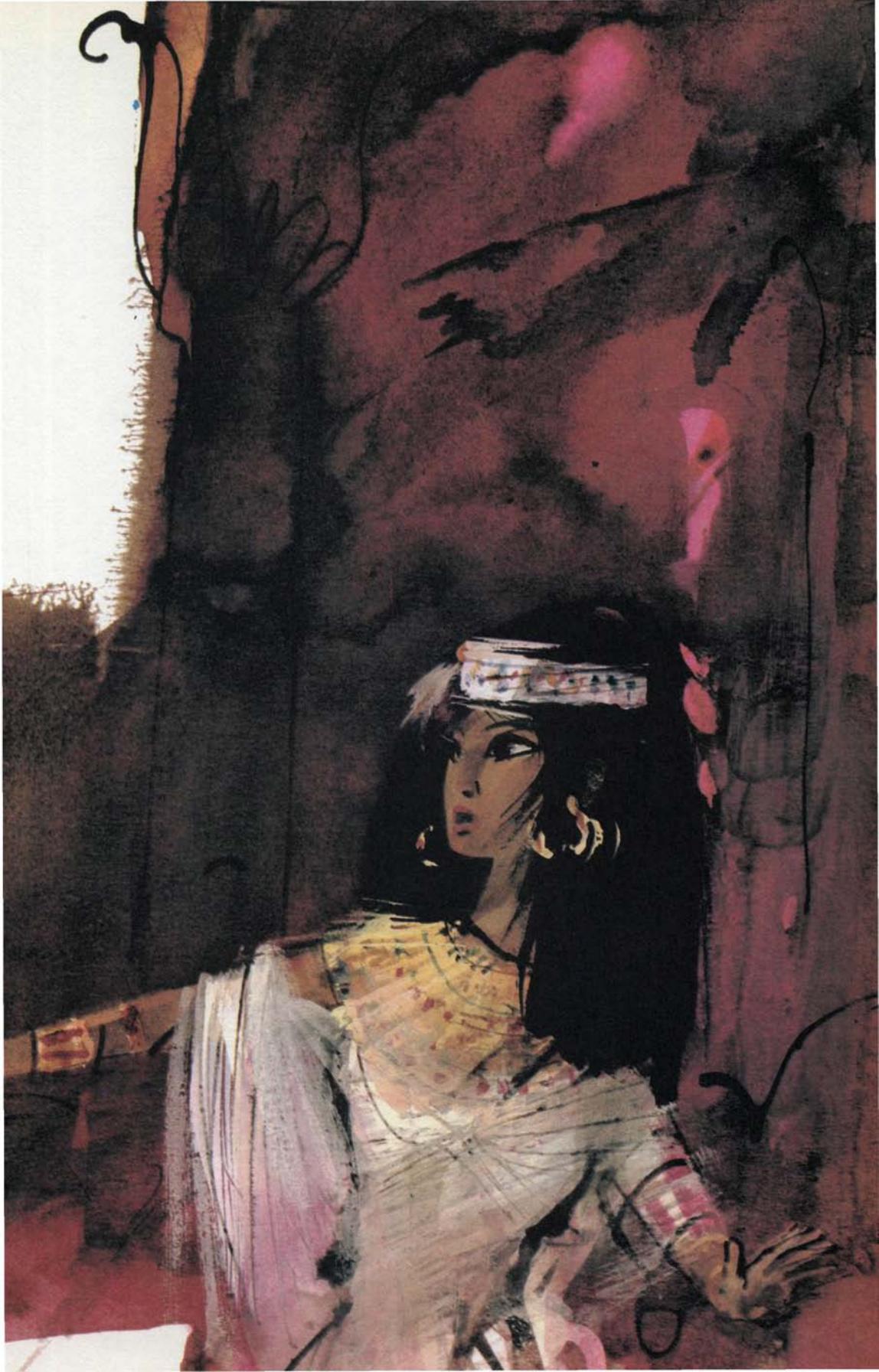
Joseph tried to make the Egyptian's wife see that what she was

proposing was not just a crime against her husband, it was a sin against God. But, probably because she didn't acknowledge a single Supreme Being, she would not listen. She continued in every way to try to seduce Joseph, who in turn tried to avoid her. Then one day the inevitable happened. Furious at being rebuffed, she told her husband that Joseph had made advances to her. This lie so angered Potiphar that he had Joseph thrown into prison.

But think about this for a minute! In a way, mere imprisonment was an act of leniency on the part of this high Egyptian officer who could have ordered Joseph killed on the spot. Perhaps he knew his wife better than she supposed he did. Be that as it may, Joseph was disgraced and imprisoned, but he wasn't put to death.

Once more Joseph might have been justified in giving way to despair, but once again he didn't. He won the confidence of the





jailer, who put him in charge of other prisoners (this Joseph was what we moderns call a “take-charge guy!”). Among the men languishing in jail were two of Pharaoh’s servants who had incurred their royal master’s anger. Joseph amazed them by interpreting some dreams they had had. He predicted that Pharaoh’s butler would be pardoned, but that his baker would be executed. Both predictions came true: the butler was restored to his position in the royal household, but the baker was hanged. One would think that the butler would have remembered the remarkable young Hebrew with gratitude, or even tried to help him. But the Bible says, laconically, that he “forgot him.”



Time passed. Joseph remained in prison. Then one night the great Pharaoh, supreme ruler of Egypt, had a pair of disturbing dreams. In the first, seven fat cows were devoured by seven lean ones. In the second, seven plump ears of corn were swallowed up by seven withered ears. Puzzled and somewhat frightened, the monarch summoned his soothsayers and magicians to interpret the dream. When none could, the butler suddenly remembered Joseph. So the young Hebrew, bathed and shaven, was brought from the prison and placed before the great king.

Many painters have tried to depict the scene with the brooding monarch scowling suspiciously at the tall young man. "I am told that you can interpret dreams," Pharaoh finally said.

"No," replied Joseph, "I have no such power of myself. But



God does, and speaking through me, God will give Pharaoh a peaceful answer to the dreams that are troubling him.”

Who was this ancient monarch? Historians are not sure, but some think it may have been Ikhnaton, the first of the pharaohs to grasp the concept of monotheism and try to establish it as the religion of his people. The attempt failed; after Ikhnaton’s death, the people turned again to their old pagan gods. But it’s fascinating to wonder if Ikhnaton and Joseph did meet and, in that case, if Joseph’s strong belief in the God of his fathers was somehow related to this momentary flash of spiritual insight that briefly illuminated the dark night of paganism in Egypt so many centuries ago.

Joseph explained to Pharaoh that his dreams were a forewarning of a great famine. There would be seven years of good harvests followed by seven years of drought. He urged the ruler to build granaries and to store surplus food during the good years so that Egypt would survive the lean ones.

Pharaoh was impressed. He not only believed Joseph, he decided to make him director of the whole food program. He put a gold chain around the former prisoner’s neck, placed his own ring on his finger, gave him a magnificent chariot to ride in, and ordered all the people to bow down to him. Interestingly, I’m told that an ancient Theban painting has been discovered showing Ikhnaton decorating a young prince with a golden chain because “he had filled up the storehouses” of the land.

From prisoner to prince almost overnight—an extraordinary accomplishment for a young man still only thirty years old. Pharaoh gave Joseph a priest’s daughter to marry and made him governor of all the people of Egypt. Two sons were born to him. During the seven years of good harvests, grain piled up in the granaries until it was “as the sand of the sea.” Every aspect of Joseph’s life was filled with magnificence and fulfillment, but the arrogance that had marred his character and flawed his early youth did not come back. It did not come back because Joseph no longer gave himself credit for all his success.

He gave the credit to God.

the testing of the BROTHERS

After the good years, as Joseph had predicted, came the lean ones. Famine haunted the land, not only in Egypt but all through the neighboring countries. In Canaan the crops failed, grazing animals died from lack of pasturage, people were facing starvation. Joseph's brothers, simple-minded herdsmen, had no solution to offer. They shook their heads, scanned the pitiless sky, and muttered that sooner or later it must rain.

Their father, Jacob, was old now, but he was still a man of action, a leader capable of making decisions. "Why do you stand around staring at one another?" he demanded angrily of his sons. "I have heard that there is food to be had in Egypt. Go down there and buy some, before we all perish of hunger!"

The ten brothers did as they were told. They would have taken Benjamin with them, but Jacob would not let them. He had already lost one of Rachel's two sons, or so he thought. He did not want to risk losing another.

When the brothers arrived, they found that they had to obtain permission to buy grain from the all-powerful governor of Egypt. In this mighty personage they did not recognize the kinsman they had sold into slavery so long ago. But Joseph recognized them instantly. He remembered, too, when they bowed humbly before him, the dream of the sheaves of wheat bowing down to his sheaf.

But Joseph did not identify himself for several reasons. First

he wanted to know if his father and his younger brother were still alive. Next he wanted to learn if his older brothers felt any remorse for the way they had treated him. Finally he wanted them to prove to him, somehow, that they were no longer fierce, selfish men, that the years had mellowed them and taught them the meaning of compassion.

So he spoke to them harshly, accusing them of being foreign spies. When they protested that they were honest buyers of grain whose father and youngest brother were anxiously awaiting their return, Joseph felt a great yearning to see Benjamin once more, his only full brother, the only guiltless one. He told the others sternly that he doubted their story and would hold one of them hostage until they brought Benjamin to see him. If they did, he would believe their story. If not, he would know they were liars.

Consternation prevailed among the brothers at their strange treatment from this awe-inspiring man. Their guilty consciences whispered that this misfortune had come upon them because of their cruel treatment of their brother so many years ago. Reuben, the eldest, even said, "I told you so!" little dreaming that this mighty Egyptian prince who stood so haughtily by could understand every word they were speaking in their native tongue.

The brothers were too afraid of Joseph to question his decree. They agreed to leave Simeon behind as a hostage. Then they loaded their donkeys with the grain that the governor permitted them to buy, and they started home.

On the way they got another shock. One of them opened a sack of grain to feed his donkey. There in the mouth of the sack was a bundle of money equivalent to the amount he had paid for the grain in Egypt! Each man looked; each man found his money where Joseph had secretly ordered his servants to hide it.

It's probable that Joseph was trying to spare his father the expenditure of these funds, but it's also likely that he was paying his brothers back a little by mystifying and frightening them. Men of guilty conscience cannot accept a simple act of charity without wondering if hidden strings are attached. Joseph knew they would be more terrified than pleased. And they were.

Old Jacob's distress was pitiful when he learned that Simeon was a hostage in Egypt and that the great governor there was

demanding to see Benjamin. At first he simply refused to let his youngest go. But as the famine worsened and when "they had eaten up the corn which they had brought out of Egypt," there was little choice. The brothers made plans to go back to Egypt, this time taking Benjamin with them.

Old Israel, practical as always, urged them to try to placate the governor. "Take . . . the man a present," he said, "a little balm, and a little honey, spices and myrrh, nuts and almonds." He also urged them to take a double amount of money in case their money had been returned the first time by mistake. But finally, and typically, he turned to the ultimate source of all help. "And God Almighty give you mercy before the man," he said in his quavering voice, "that he may send away your other brother, and Benjamin."

Apprehensively the brothers retraced their steps along the dusty caravan trail, seeing everywhere the misery caused by the famine, not knowing what awaited them at the end of their journey. Their fears grew with every mile. Would they all be imprisoned for theft? Was Simeon still alive? Would they ever see their father again?

When Joseph ordered them to come to his house for a meal, the invitation left them more frightened than ever, but they spread out the presents they had brought and waited to see what would happen. When the great governor strode into the room, resplendent in his robes of office, they all prostrated themselves before him. But when Joseph saw Benjamin among them, he was so touched that for a moment he could play-act no longer. Deeply moved, he went into his private quarters where no one could see his tears. It is a poignant scene, this older brother yearning over a younger one, because in the Bible story so far no such emotion has been shown. There has been the love of God for man, and of man for God. There has been the love of man for woman, and of husband for wife. But between brothers, up to now, we have encountered mostly jealousy and hostility, treachery and animosity. Here for the first time the love of brother for brother shines through with unmistakable warmth and feeling. And notice the first words that Joseph addresses to Benjamin: "God be gracious unto thee, my son." Pronouncing this blessing so shook Joseph's iron self-control that he had to leave the room quickly in order to hide his tears.

Soon, though, he recovered. He “washed his face, and went out, and refrained himself”—that is, he mastered his emotions. He sat down alone to eat, as befitted the viceroy of a great kingdom, but he sent portions of food to all his brothers, the largest going to Benjamin. He also seated them in order of seniority, which must have astonished them greatly. How could this man know such things about them? He must be a wizard or a magician, as well as a governor.

Joseph had yet to hear any convincing expression of remorse from his brothers, so he continued his cat-and-mouse game. Once again he sent them away laden with grain, but this time he ordered his servants to conceal his own drinking cup, an ornate silver goblet, in Benjamin’s sack. Then he sent his steward galloping after them, his chariot wheels stirring up clouds of dust, to accuse them of theft, arrest them, and bring them back. When once more they stood before him, frightened and confused, he told them that he intended to keep Benjamin as his slave and let the others go.

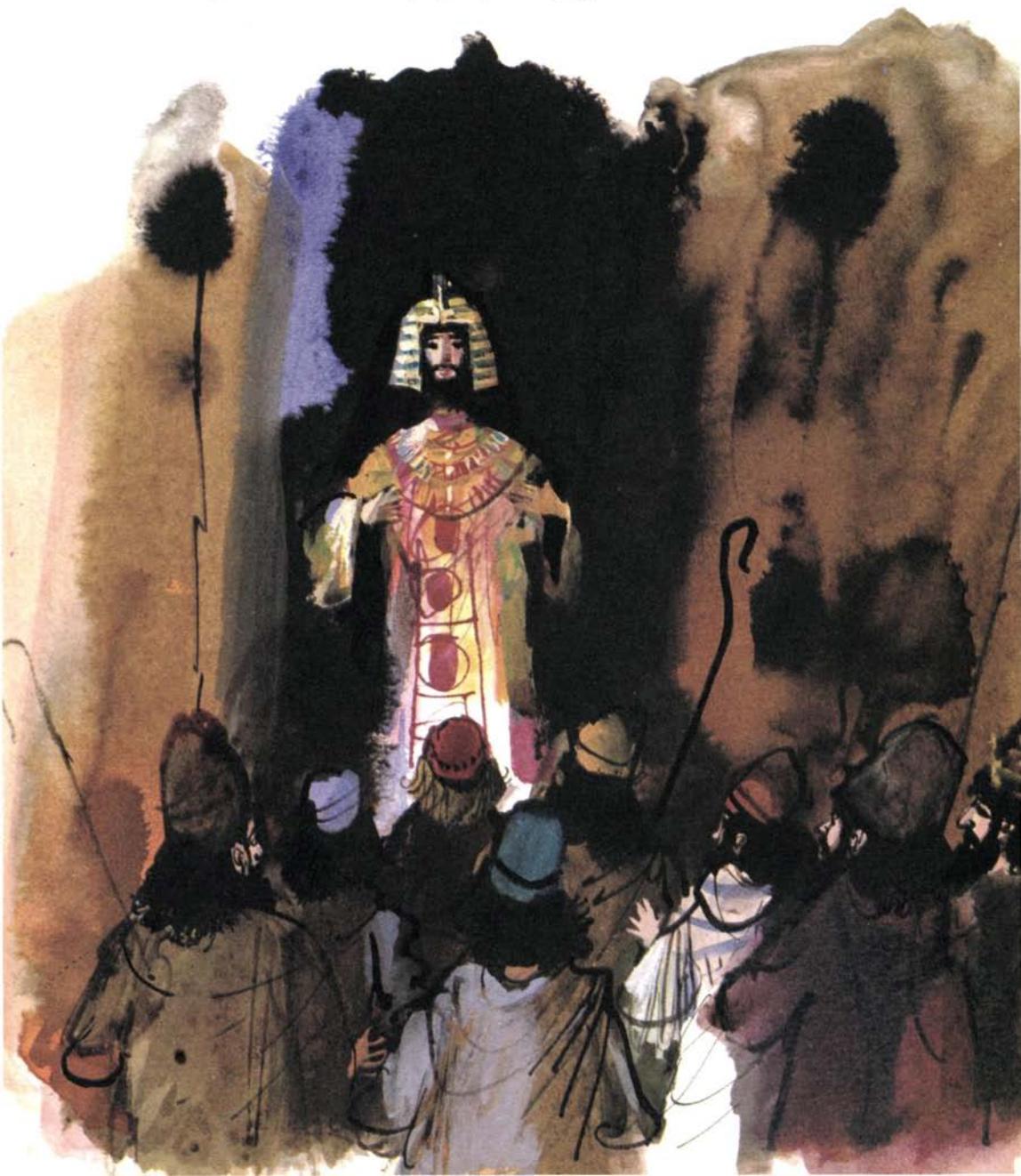
Then at last Judah spoke up bravely. He said that if they returned to Canaan without Benjamin, their father would die of grief. He offered to become a slave himself if only the governor would let Benjamin go. What a change had come over these men! Once they heartlessly sold a brother into slavery; now one of them was ready to become a slave in order to save a brother. The Bible message here is that there is a spark of nobility even in the worst of men; that no human being, however cruel, is entirely beyond hope; that one redeeming act of kindness can go far toward compensating for past mistakes, even though it may not wipe them out.

This urgent plea of Judah’s convinced Joseph that his brothers truly were changed men. He sent all his Egyptian servants and retainers out of the room. Then his emotions overcame him and he burst into tears. “I am Joseph,” he said to his brothers. “Is my father still alive?”

Fright, guilt, astonishment left the brothers speechless. One can almost see the expression of stupefaction on their faces. Joseph saw it too, but then he said a remarkable thing. He told his brothers not to be ashamed or angry with themselves, because even in their cruelty and heartlessness God had been using them to work out

His purpose. "It was not you that sent me hither," Joseph said, "but God." What a man! It takes a fine person to sense remorse in people who have wronged him and to give them credit for feeling such remorse. It takes a deeply religious person to see or sense in apparent affliction the mysterious workings of God. This man was both.

The gentle prince sent his brothers home, all eleven of them, to "tell my father of all my glory in Egypt," and to offer him and



all his family a home in the land of Goshen, a long, narrow valley on the frontiers of Egypt. When his sons came home bearing their extraordinary news, Jacob's old heart almost stopped beating, because it was almost too good to be true. But when he saw the wagonloads of gifts that Joseph had sent, and the three hundred pieces of silver that he had given to Benjamin, his doubts vanished. "It is enough," said the old patriarch. "Joseph my son is yet alive: I will go and see him before I die."

Overjoyed though he was, the old man wondered if God really wanted him to leave the land of Canaan. So the Lord came to him in a dream and reassured him, saying, "Fear not to go down into Egypt; for . . . I will go down with thee into Egypt; and I will also surely bring thee up again." So Jacob assembled all the members of his family and moved them to Egypt in the wagons that Pharaoh had provided. There at last he met his long-lost son. Joseph came up to Goshen to meet him, and embraced his father, and "wept on his neck a good while." Later Joseph introduced his father to Pharaoh himself, and the old man blessed this pagan ruler who had heaped so many honors on his son. For seventeen more years Jacob lived peacefully in Goshen, where Joseph could visit him often. He died finally at the age of a hundred and forty-seven. But before he died he made his son promise to bury him with his ancestors in the land of Canaan, and Joseph did.

When their father died, Joseph's older brothers were afraid that he might have been concealing a grudge all this time. They sent him a message saying that their father had specifically left word that they should be forgiven.

The Bible says that when Joseph heard this message he wept. Why these tears? Was he disheartened because, after all his kindness, his brothers still feared him? Was he grieving because, after all he had done, their guilty consciences still tormented them? Whatever the cause, he made a noble reply. "Fear not," he said, "for am I in the place of God?" Who am I, Joseph seems to be saying, to judge my fellowman? Who can read the secrets of the human mind or unravel the motivations of the human heart? Only God can do this. Why not leave it all to Him? Centuries later a Person far greater than Joseph would say the same thing: *Judge not, that ye be not judged. . . .*

So the sons of Jacob were allowed to live in peace in the land of Goshen. Under Joseph's protection, the numbers of their descendants increased greatly. Joseph himself lived to be a hundred and ten. No doubt he could have been buried in Egypt with great pomp and ceremony. No doubt he could have had a pyramid for a tomb. But, like Jacob, he chose to be buried in the land of his fathers, and he made his children promise to "carry up my bones from hence."

Joseph also prophesied that some day God would lead the children of Israel back to the promised land of Canaan. So ends the great "book of beginnings," with its magnificent sweep of narrative stretching from Creation itself to the emergence of the twelve tribes of Israel, each representing the descendants of one of Jacob's twelve sons.

Up to this point in the Bible story, God has revealed Himself primarily to a few individuals and their families. Now He is ready to make a covenant with a whole people. For this He will need a great leader. In the mighty drama of the Bible, such a leader is now ready to move onstage.

His name is Moses.

FROM BULRUSHES TO BURNING BUSH

As long as the memory of Joseph was there to protect them—and his fame lingered long—the children of Israel prospered in the land of Goshen. The little band of seventy souls that Jacob had brought with him from Canaan became a multitude. At first the native Egyptians tolerated them, but as the Hebrews grew in strength and numbers they began to hate and oppress them. Finally under a Pharaoh who “knew not Joseph,” the children of Israel found themselves virtually enslaved.

Slave-owners always fear their slaves. Alarmed by the high birthrate of his captive people, Pharaoh commanded all midwives to kill male Hebrew children as soon as they were born. When the midwives ignored this murderous order, he decreed that all such children should be thrown into the Nile—and he sent his soldiers to enforce this law.

Soon after this cruel edict was handed down, a young Hebrew mother of the tribe of Levi gave birth to a son. She already had a daughter, Miriam, and another son, Aaron. Born before the extermination order, Aaron was relatively safe. But his mother knew the king’s soldiers would kill the new baby if they could find him. For three months she managed to conceal her infant son, but this became steadily more difficult and dangerous. Finally she took a basket, made it waterproof, placed the child in it, and set it among the river reeds and bulrushes at a place where the ladies of the royal court came down to bathe.

The child's mother did not dare remain close by, but she left her little girl, Miriam, to watch. Soon Pharaoh's daughter herself came down with her retinue of handmaidens. She noticed the basket in the reeds and ordered it brought to her. When she saw the wailing child, the Bible says, she "had compassion on him." She knew it was a Hebrew baby but, defying her father's fierce order, she decided to adopt it.

At that point, little Miriam came out of her hiding place and



joined the group of women who were exclaiming over the baby. We can imagine her shyly plucking at the sleeve of the princess. Would Pharaoh's daughter like a nurse from among the Hebrew people to care for the child until it was older? Miriam knew just where to find one! With the permission of the princess, she ran and called her mother. And so the child was handed back to its own parent, who kept him until he was old enough to join the royal household.

Did all this happen simply by good luck or by chance? Hardly! That young Hebrew mother planned the whole thing. She did what most everyone would do when in a tight spot. She didn't just sit there, bemoaning her fate. First, she prayed about her situation. Then, using her good brain, she took the problem to pieces, bit by bit. Where could a male Hebrew child find protection? In his own home? No. Among other Hebrew families? No. Where, then? Why, under the shadow of the same authority that was trying to destroy him!

Once that inspiration came to her, the young mother worked out every move in advance. She knew where the royal princess would come to bathe. She knew she would regard the baby as a fascinating (and forbidden) toy. She counted on the compassion that dwells in all individual hearts, no matter how harsh collective decrees or actions may be. She knew that people tend to love what they protect.



Was her plan risky? Certainly. Was it brilliant? Absolutely. No wonder the baby in the bulrushes was destined some day to become one of the world's greatest leaders. If he had brains, if he had courage, if he had faith—and later he proved he had all three in abundance—he didn't acquire them by accident. He got them by inheritance from his cool-headed, courageous mother.

So Moses, as the princess named him, grew up, part Hebrew peasant and part Egyptian prince. What a combination! What a chance to observe and understand two vastly different cultures. What an opportunity to see the cruel contrasts between vast wealth and grinding poverty.



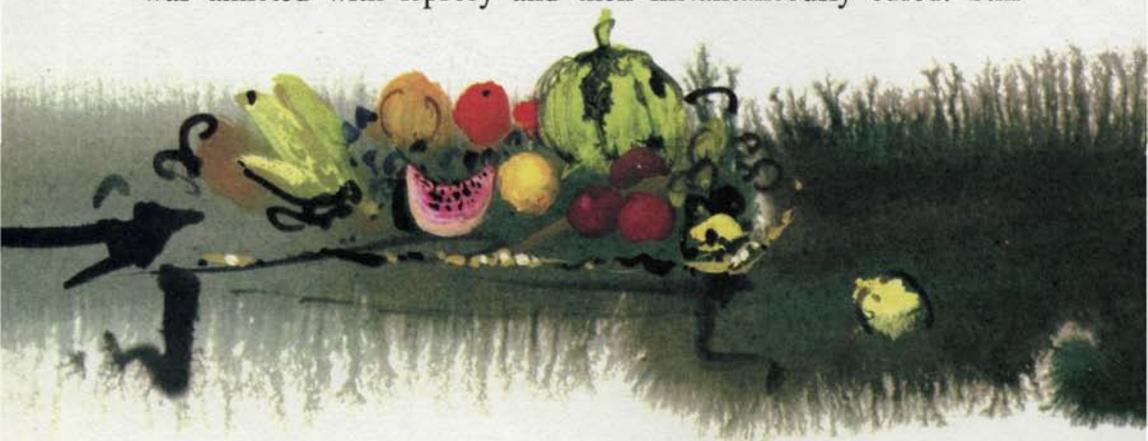
At times, no doubt, the young Moses wondered where his deepest allegiance lay. Then one day he had a chance to find out. He came upon an Egyptian overseer beating a Hebrew slave. In a flash of fury he struck the overseer and killed him.

Now Moses was no longer a privileged member of the royal household; he was a Hebrew wanted for manslaughter. He fled far into the wilderness where Pharaoh's vengeance could not find him. In the land of Midian, deep in the southeastern part of the Sinai Peninsula, he married Zipporah, daughter of a priest, who bore him two sons. He lived as a simple shepherd, tending his father-in-law's flock. As the years passed, the life he had led in faraway Egypt began to seem like a dream.

Then one day as he was leading his flock near the slopes of Mount Horeb, also known as Sinai, he saw a remarkable thing. Not far from him a bush burst into flame. The fire burned brightly, but somehow the bush was not consumed. Astonished, Moses ventured nearer. As he did, God's voice spoke to him from the burning bush. The Lord told Moses that He had seen the suffering of the children of Israel in Egypt and had decided to rescue them. Moses was to be the Lord's instrument of deliverance. He was to go and confront Pharaoh—a new and even harsher king was on the throne of Egypt. Then he was to lead his people to the promised land of Canaan.

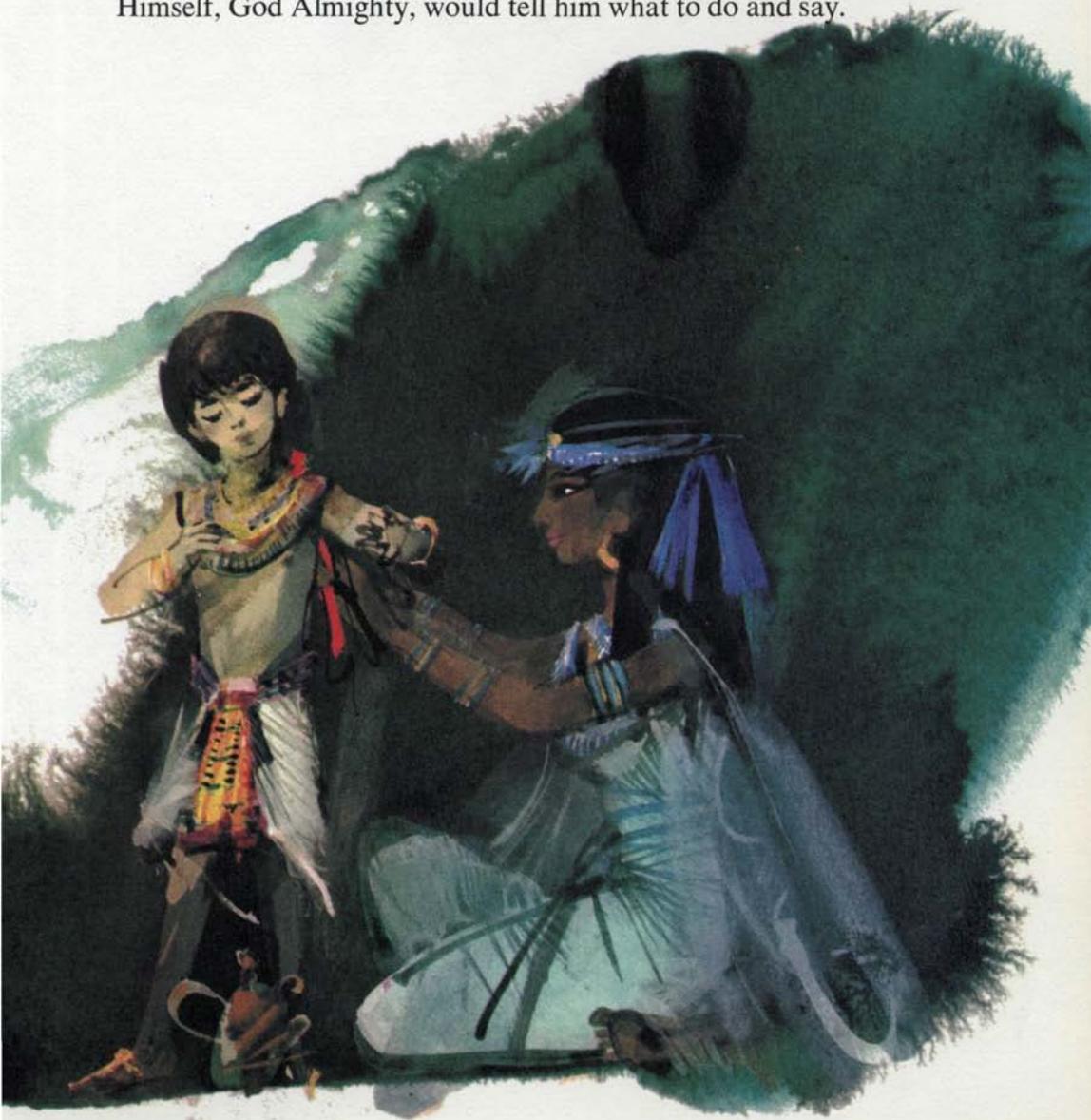
Moses' first reaction was hardly one of enthusiasm. He sounded, in fact, like a negative thinker. "Who, me?" he asked the Lord incredulously. Then he began to give a host of reasons why the children of Israel would not listen to him and why the whole idea would not work.

To prove Himself to Moses, the Lord caused two miracles to happen then and there. First Moses' shepherd's staff was changed into a serpent and then back into a staff again. Next, Moses' hand was afflicted with leprosy and then instantaneously cured. Still



Moses was highly dubious. He told the Lord that he was a stammerer, slow of speech, someone who could never persuade anyone to do anything.

When a man is filled with this kind of self-doubt, it's very difficult to put backbone into him. The Lord Himself had a hard time with Moses. It's interesting, though, that He chose for this great task a man who had such a low opinion of himself. It was almost as if He wanted to show mankind that one-person-plus-God can do anything. Even though Moses kept begging Him to find somebody else, the Lord would not take no for an answer. He told Moses that his brother, Aaron, would help him and that He Himself, God Almighty, would tell him what to do and say.





God also gave Moses an awe-inspiring definition of Himself. When Moses asked His name, God said to him, "I AM THAT I AM." These mysterious words can be translated in various ways: I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE, or I AM, BECAUSE I AM. What it means is that everything else has a beginning and an end, but not God. He simply *is*, too mighty, too powerful, too infinite to be comprehended by mere men. He said to Moses, "Say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you." And Moses finally accepted the assignment.

The story of the burning bush can be read and understood on many levels. To the religious historian it might mark the transition from superstitious belief in fire gods or mountain spirits to an awareness of the omnipresent majesty of a single Creator. For those who respond to symbolism, it might be a way of describing how the spark of an idea can fall into a man's mind and leave him on fire with a burning desire to achieve some worthwhile goal. The mind of such a man is not consumed by the heat of his inspiration any more than the bush was consumed by the fire that enveloped it.

May we not think that every painter, every musician, every writer, every poet, or indeed anyone who creates something beautiful or something true has within him his own burning bush. The traditional word for it is *inspiration*. But when the goal is a noble one, as it was in the case of Moses, it is also the voice of God.



“let my people go!”

Back to Egypt came Moses, charged now with the awesome responsibility of freeing a captive people from a ruthless tyrant. His task was all the harder because the people’s spirit had almost been broken by an iron dictatorship based on force and cruelty. But the fire that he had seen in the burning bush was now blazing in the mind and heart of Moses, and he was no longer hesitant and afraid.

With Aaron at his side, he sought an audience with the sneering ruler of all Egypt. He told the king that the God of the children of Israel wanted them to be given relief from their labors so that they could go into the wilderness and offer sacrifices to him.

This was a direct challenge to the royal authority, and Pharaoh was enraged. He not only refused, he ordered his slave drivers to stop supplying the chopped straw that was a necessary ingredient in the bricks of sun-dried clay that the Hebrews were forced to make. “Let them gather their own straw,” said Pharaoh contemptuously. “But make sure that they meet their production quotas all the same!”

When the quotas were not met, the workers were lashed unmercifully. “Look what you’ve done,” they cried to Moses. “You have angered the Egyptians so that they will kill us all!”

Even Moses was momentarily dismayed. “Lord,” he murmured, “why did You ever send me here?”

In His reply, God repeated all His promises to Moses. And

this was a God of power speaking, angry and irresistible. He said that in the end Pharaoh would be forced to give in.

Now began a dramatic struggle: centralized authority against the spirit of freedom; pagan magic against spiritual strength; the power of evil as embodied in the sadistic Pharaoh against the righteousness of a just and indignant God.

One after another, terrible plagues fell upon the Egyptians. First the life-giving waters of the Nile were turned to blood. Then, when Pharaoh remained unmoved, a horde of loathsome frogs came out of the ponds and rivers, invading people's homes, crawling into their beds, jumping into their food. To get rid of the frogs, Pharaoh agreed to let the captive people go. But when the frogs were dispersed, he went back on his word.

Then came swarms of lice and flies. Next a terrible disease struck all the domestic animals of the Egyptians, wiping out their herds. But none of these disasters fell upon the children of Israel. Sheltered by the hand of God, they were immune.

Next came boils, followed by furious hailstorms smashing trees and crops. Then clouds of locusts, so many that "they covered the whole face of the whole earth." Then a terrifying darkness fell upon the land, so thick, the Bible says, that it could be felt. Perhaps it was a terrible sandstorm; in any case, it lasted for three days, and no Egyptian could see his hand before his face.

Time and again, trying to escape from the relentless pressure, Pharaoh promised to let the captives go. But each time, once the plague was ended in response to his promise, he changed his mind.

Finally the Lord decided to send a tenth and final plague, the worst of all. In a single night, every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the son of the great Pharaoh himself to the child of the humblest Egyptian worker, would die. Moses warned the king that this was going to happen, but "the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, so that he would not let the children of Israel go. . . ."

On this dreadful night, Moses ordered each Hebrew family to kill a sacrificial lamb, take some of the blood, and mark the doorways of their homes, so that when the Angel of Death swept over the land he would see the blood and pass over the marked houses, leaving the occupants unharmed.

All took place just as Moses had predicted. When the sun

rose, a great cry of anguish went up all over Egypt, for "there was not a house where there was not one dead."

Now at last word came down to Moses from Pharaoh: "Rise up . . . go . . . take your flocks and your herds . . . and be gone!" Knowing that this evil king might change his mind again, the children of Israel left in such a hurry that there was no time even to bake their daily bread. They wrapped the unleavened dough in pieces of cloth and took it with them. Most experts think that this critical date in Jewish history occurred in the thirteenth century before Christ. To this day, more than three thousand years later, the descendants of the people who took part in the great Exodus from Egypt eat unleavened bread in their observance of Passover.

Driving their herds before them, the refugees traveled as fast as they could. The Bible says that the Lord went before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Led by these mighty symbols of divine protection, sustained by faith and hope,



the fugitives hurried on. But not fast enough. The tenacity of evil is unbelievable. Behind them in Egypt, the wicked Pharaoh decided that he had made a mistake in letting this supply of free labor get away. He "took six hundred chosen chariots," and the rest of his army, and led them in furious pursuit.

The children of Israel were encamped by the sea. The traditional translation calls it the Red Sea, but the original Hebrew means literally "sea of reeds." Scholars differ as to where this place was. Perhaps it was along the marshy Mediterranean coast where tides might vary enormously in different wind or weather conditions. Perhaps it was around the shores of Lake Timsah.

In any case, looking back, the children of Israel saw the dust boiling up from the racing wheels of the Egyptian war chariots, and they became panic-stricken. "Look," they screamed wildly to Moses, "here comes Pharaoh with his whole army. We are lost! We are done for! It would have been better to stay in Egypt as slaves than die here in the wilderness like dogs!"





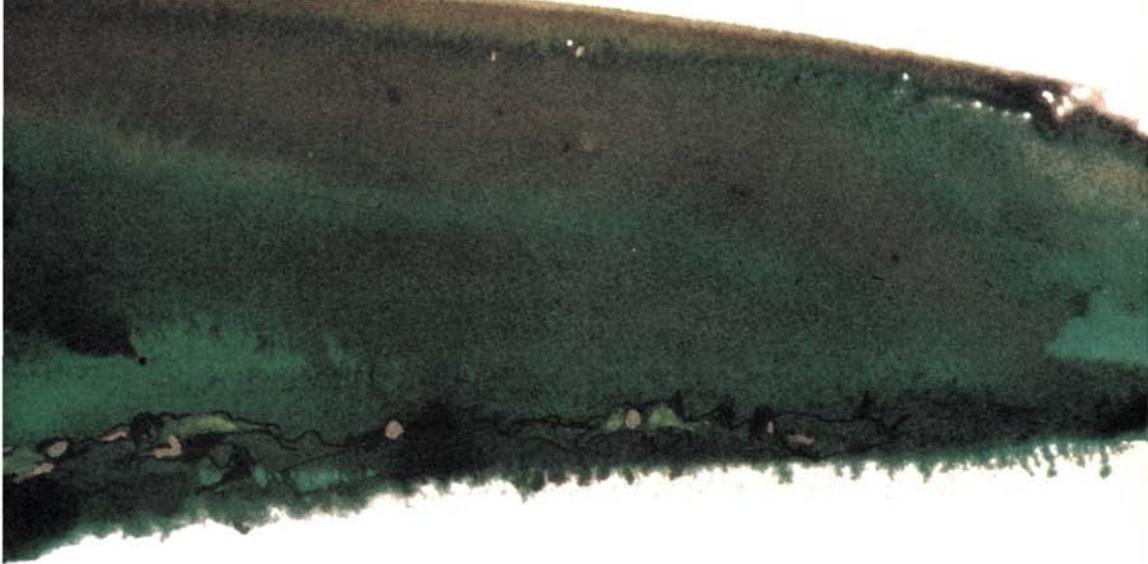
Better slave than slaughtered. In our own time, the phrase is better Red than dead. Strange how the language of cowardice repeats itself on the pages of history.

But Moses stood up and spoke to them in a voice like a great trumpet: "Stand firm! Fear not! The Lord will fight for you!"

What had happened to this eighty-year-old man who had been so weak, so vacillating, so unsure of himself? He had been touched by the finger of God, and it had changed him by changing his patterns of thought. Instead of thinking small, he had learned to think big. Instead of thinking failure, he had learned to think success. Instead of holding in his mind thoughts of doubt and weakness, he began to hold thoughts of confidence and strength. As soon as his *attitudes* changed, he began to live up to the greatness that was in him all along.

If only more of us could grasp this concept that changed thinking means changed lives! Try asking yourself this question right now: am I living up to my littlest self or to my greatest self? When you face up to that question, you're really dealing with fundamentals!

Some people are good, but only in a negative way. They don't steal, or drink too much, or take drugs. They don't run off with



someone else's wife. They're good people, but they're small people, held back by little concepts, little ambitions, little objectives.

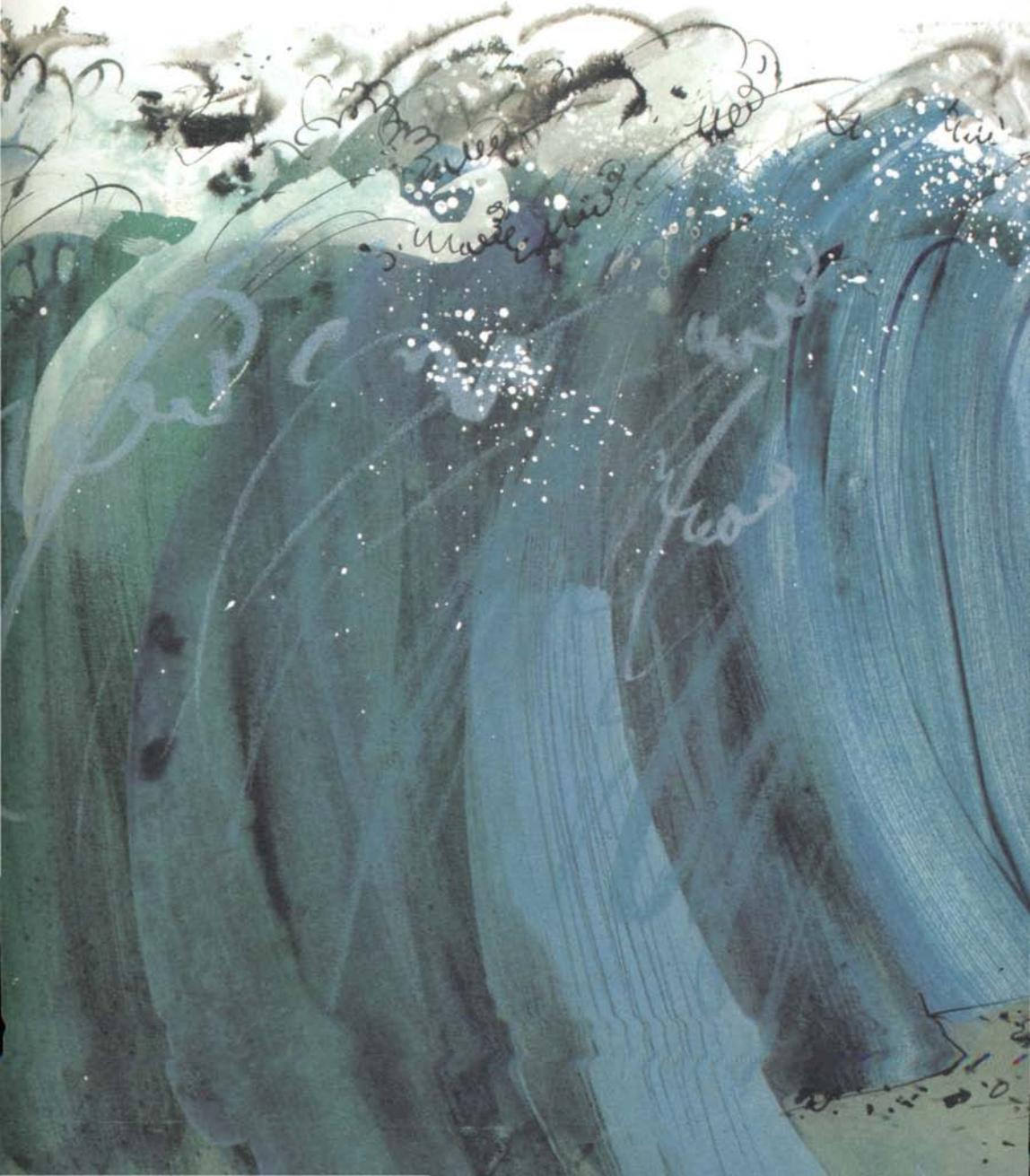
But the story of Moses tells us that no one has to stay small. If you let yourself be touched by the finger of God, you can be much bigger than you are, more successful, happier, healthier, stronger and better in every way. That is what happened to Moses. That is why, in the face of almost certain disaster, he could cry out to the children of Israel with blazing faith and confidence, "Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord!"

Then, says the Bible in a majestic and awe-inspiring passage, "Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground: and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left."

After them came the on-rushing Egyptians, howling like wolves, their horses covered with dust and sweat, the wheels of their chariots dragging in the damp sand. Then abruptly the tide turned and the wind blew "and the sea returned to his strength." Back came the surging waters, slowly at first, then faster, finally in an irresistible torrent that poured over the struggling army, upsetting chariots, drowning horses, sweeping away whole regiments. Maddened soldiers clawed at one another as their heavy armor dragged them down. Screams and curses filled the air, then grad-

ually died away. "Thus the Lord saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea shore."

What a fantastic climax to an amazing story! It's one we all should remember when life's troubles seem to pursue us like avenging armies. "Stand firm!" said Moses. "Fear not!" That call to courage was magnificent thirty centuries ago. It's still magnificent today.





forty years of wandering

For a little while after their miraculous deliverance from Pharaoh's army, the children of Israel were full of enthusiasm. They danced and sang and made up hymns of praise and gratitude. Then they resumed their march, but it wasn't long before they began to grumble about the hardships of life in the desert. Probably there were a handful of malcontents who infected the rest. "What are you doing to us?" these heart-sinkers said to Moses and Aaron. "In Egypt we may have been slaves, but at least we had meat and bread to eat. Now you have brought us out here to starve to death!"

The Lord responded to these complaints by sending flights of quail—a bird well known in that area to this day—and also a strange white substance that lay upon the ground and tasted "like wafers made with honey." Perhaps it was a sweet, sticky sap given off by certain desert shrubs—notably the tamarisk—at certain times of year. Whatever it was, the refugees were glad to get this "bread of God." They called it "manna," a word that may come from a Hebrew phrase meaning "what is it?" Exactly what it was, no one knows, but ever since, people have used the phrase "manna in the wilderness" to describe some welcome and unexpected blessing.

The quail and the manna solved the food problem, but finding water was a never-ending struggle. Plodding along, day after day, the people grew more and more sullen and discontented. They

complained so constantly that Moses finally cried out in exasperation and fury, "What shall I do unto this people? they be almost ready to stone me!"

Again the Lord heard and again He miraculously intervened. He ordered Moses to strike a rock with his staff. When he did, a torrent of water gushed out, enough for the parched travelers and their thirst-maddened animals. This episode has always had strong appeal for painters. I'm told that in the catacomb paintings of the early Christians, this scene appears more often than any other in the Old Testament.

Hunger and thirst were not the only enemies that harassed the weary marchers. Their route took them across the territory of a fierce tribe of desert warriors, the Amalekites, who were descendants of Esau. Perhaps the Amalekites started the trouble with hit-and-run raids on the Israelites. Or perhaps they saw them as invaders with whom they were unwilling to share water and pastureland. In any case, it became clear to Moses that he was going to have to fight his way through.

He called upon one of the boldest and strongest of his young men, a natural-born leader named Joshua. He ordered him to hand-pick a group of fighting men. "Go out, fight with Amalek," Moses said. "Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in mine hand."

As long as Moses stood there outlined against the sky with his hands raised up to heaven, the Israelites fought well. But whenever he grew weary and lowered his arms, the tide of battle turned in favor of the enemy. Finally Aaron and a man named Hur (tradition has it that Hur was the husband of Miriam, Moses' sister) stood on either side of Moses and supported his arms, holding them extended until the sun went down. Does this vivid scene foreshadow the great symbol that will dominate the New Testament—the symbol of the cross? Some people think so. In any case, Joshua and his men mowed down the Amalekites. The way across their territory was open. The great migration continued.

In the third month after they had escaped from Egypt, the children of Israel came to the wilderness of Sinai where God had first spoken to Moses out of the burning bush. And it was on the same sacred mountain that one of the great landmark events of

human history now took place: the handing down of the Ten Commandments.

The drama begins like the prologue of a great play with the Lord calling to Moses from the heights of the mountain. First He reminds the children of Israel of the great things He has done for them. "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself." He renews His great promise to them: "If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people."

How amazing all this is! Man is not seeking God so much as God is seeking man. Man can't begin to reach up to the heights where God dwells, so God decides to come down to him. The children of Israel were told to get ready, because on the third day the Lord would descend in person to the top of Mount Sinai. Everyone would then know that it was God Himself, not merely the voice of Moses or any other prophet, that was speaking to them.

Sure enough, on the third day the mountain was veiled in smoke. The ground quaked. Lightning flashed, thunder roared. The whole mountain seemed to be on fire. No one could see the face of God, but in a sound like a thousand trumpets He spoke the majestic words that changed forever the moral climate of the world, beginning with the tremendous announcement of His own identity: "I am the Lord thy God. . . ."

Given in smoke and fire on Mount Sinai, the Ten Commandments have come thundering down the centuries. Other creeds, other statements of the law have been made, have lasted a few generations, have passed away. But the Commandments remain,





towering above all manmade laws and statutes. In the briefest possible form, they might be summarized as follows:

- 1. One God only*
- 2. No false idols*
- 3. No blasphemy*
- 4. The Sabbath to be kept holy*
- 5. Parents to be honored*
- 6. No killing*
- 7. No adultery*
- 8. No stealing*
- 9. No lying under oath*
- 10. No evil thoughts*

Scholars have pointed out that some of these principles were already recognized in the codes developed by primitive peoples. But this was the first time that the best and most important were singled out and given the direct sanction of Almighty God.

To a remarkable extent, the Ten Commandments cover man's chief obligations to his Maker and to his fellowman. The last five, in particular, are designed to safeguard the cornerstones of civilization. The prohibition against killing was essential if the community of Israel was to survive—and is essential for the same reason in every community to this day. The prohibition against adultery protects the family, the basic unit of any society. The prohibition against stealing proclaims the sacredness of property; without this concept, man will not work, and without work nothing worthwhile can be accomplished.

The prohibition against false witness—lying under oath—protects the judicial system, without which there can be no justice, no law, no order, only barbarism and chaos. Finally the tenth commandment, which is the most inclusive, recognizes that every evil action begins with an evil thought. Here the prohibition is not so much against a specific deed as against a state of mind.

Called up to the top of the mountain, shrouded in smoke and flame, Moses received the Ten Commandments written by God's own finger on tablets of stone. In God's presence, time ceased to exist for Moses. But down below where the people waited, forty

days went by. The longer they waited, the more uneasy they grew. They were still a superstitious, volatile, impatient, easily discouraged group of men and women. They had undergone great hardships. They had suffered many narrow escapes. Their nerves, you might say, were not in the best possible condition. Their leader, apparently, had vanished. Who could say what had happened to him? Perhaps he had been destroyed by the lightning or the fire on the mountain. Perhaps this rather terrifying God had decided to forget all about them. In that case, they had better find another leader and another god, and they had better do it quickly.

Stirred up by the doubters and the rabble-rousers, the people came running to Aaron in a belligerent mob. After all, he had been second-in-command. "Look," they said to him, "we don't know what's become of your brother. Here we are with no one to lead us, no one to make plans, no protection at all. You had better get busy and make us a new god, one that we can see and touch and understand, one that will lead us away from this awful mountain. Who wants to stay around here with all these storms and earthquakes? Get busy and get us out!"

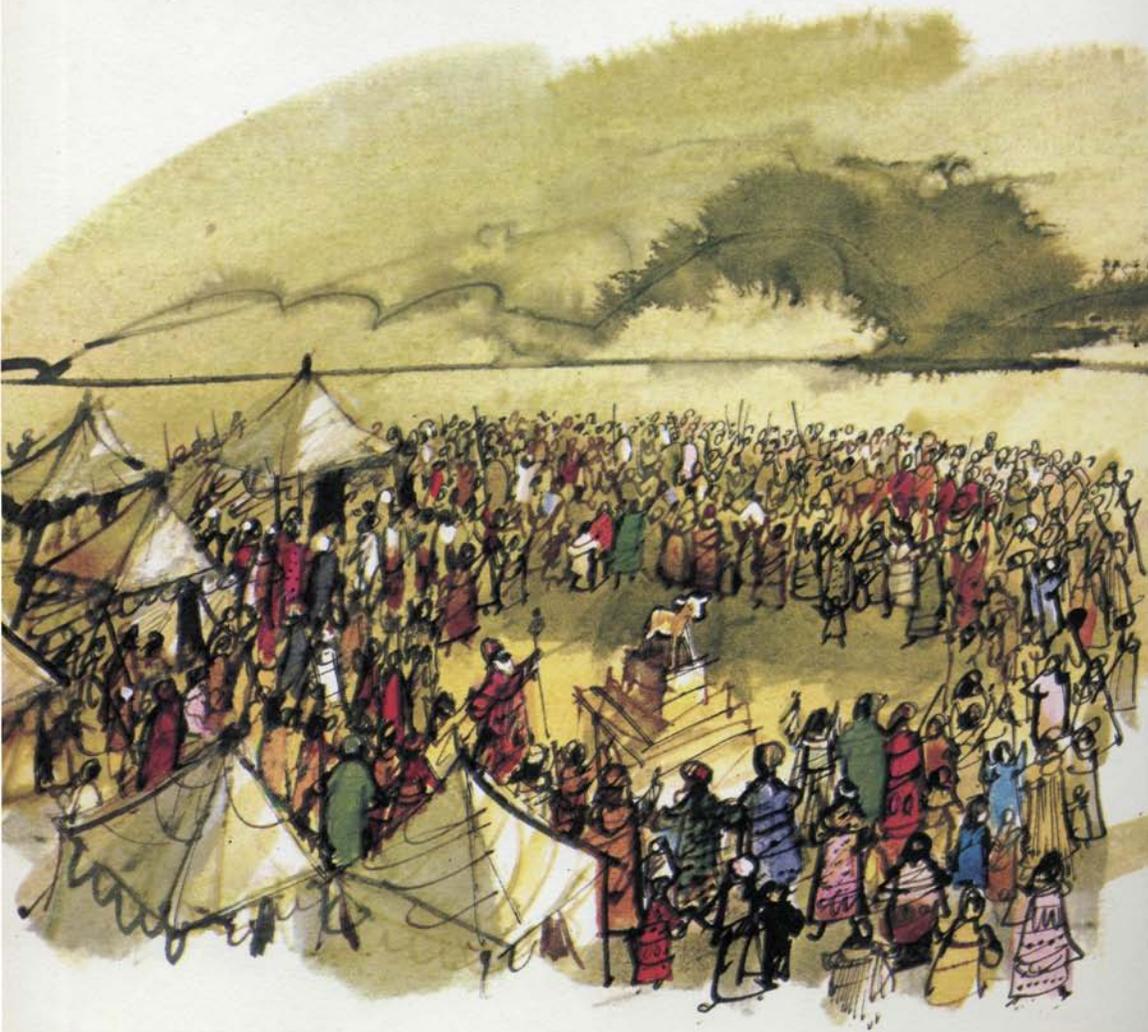
Aaron's response was the typical reaction of a man who means well but is basically weak. He gave the mob the answer they wanted. Perhaps he rationalized what he was doing. Perhaps he told himself that he was just buying time until Moses returned. Perhaps he told himself that these primitive people really needed some kind of visible, tangible object to worship. "Bring me all your golden ornaments," he told them. When they did, he melted them down and fashioned a golden calf. He built an altar for it and proclaimed a feast of dedication. The people came and offered sacrifices to the golden calf. The Bible says that they "sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play." They were relieved to have a god that made no demands on them. They thought that the God of Moses had forgotten them.

But the Lord had not forgotten. High on His mountain, He knew everything that happened, and He grew very angry at this backsliding of the children of Israel. Speaking to Moses, He no longer called them "my people"; it was "thy people" who had "corrupted themselves." God knew Moses well enough to know that he would plead even for this disobedient and ungrateful rabble. "Let

me alone,” said God (almost as if Moses could really hinder Him), “that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them!” This is a fierce and jealous God speaking; he demands complete loyalty, nothing less, and the penalty for disobedience is death.

In His anger, God even told Moses that if He destroyed the children of Israel He would make a great nation out of Moses’ own descendants. Moses must have been tempted to keep quiet and step aside, but he didn’t do this. Instead, he argued fiercely and passionately with God, reminding Him of all the promises He had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Finally—and reluctantly—the Lord agreed to spare this “stiffnecked people.”

Carrying the stone tablets engraved with the new commandments, Moses went down the mountain to where Joshua was waiting for him. Together they made their way to the camp where the



people were singing and dancing around the golden calf. Moses already knew what they were about, but when he saw them doing it his rage and shame boiled over. He hurled the stone tablets to the ground and smashed them, thus symbolizing the breaking of the covenant between God and the children of Israel. He took the golden calf, burnt it in the fire, and ground it to powder. He mixed the powder with water and made the people drink it as a sign of their guilt. Much of his anger was focused on Aaron. "What have you done?" he cried. "How could you bring such a great sin upon the people?"

A weak man always offers weak excuses. "You know how these people are," Aaron said, "when they get the wrong ideas in their heads. All I did was melt down some gold ornaments they gave me and—would you believe it?—out of the furnace came this wretched calf!"

That excuse wasn't good enough; Moses knew that the people had to choose between God and paganism once and for all. He hurled forth a ringing challenge: "Who is on the Lord's side? Let him come unto me!" Many of the faithful who were actually ashamed of themselves joined with Moses, but there were some who held back. In a brief, bloody interlude, all the doubters and the backsliders were killed.

Back once more to the sacred mountain went Moses, this time to make atonement for the sinners. If God would not forgive them, Moses said, he hoped the Lord would take his own life away. Angry though He was, the Lord agreed not to take vengeance on those who had promised to be "on the Lord's side." He told Moses to cut new tablets of stone, on which He would again write the Ten Commandments. He had given Moses many other lesser laws and had ordered him to build an ark, or chest, in which to keep the stone tablets. He also had given detailed instructions for building the tabernacle that would contain the ark. The Lord now promised to hover over the tabernacle in a cloud, and this cloud would guide the children of Israel in the way they should go.

When Moses finally came down from the mountain, his face shone so brightly from being in the presence of God that his followers were afraid. He had to put a veil over it until the glory faded.

The cloud led the Israelites to a place called Kadesh, close to

the southern border of Canaan. "Send scouts ahead," the Lord said to Moses. "Choose one leader from each of the twelve tribes and let them spy out the country that lies ahead of you." Among the men Moses selected was the battle-tested Joshua, a member of the tribe of Ephraim. As second-in-command he chose a strong young warrior named Caleb, of the tribe of Judah.

For forty days the little band of scouts made their way carefully through the land. They found rich farmlands, vineyards heavy with grapes, fig trees, and pomegranates. Fat sheep and cattle grazed in the lush meadows. There were prosperous villages and strong walled cities. The people who lived in them seemed powerful and self-assured. It was clear that they would not willingly relinquish their homeland to a horde of half-starved nomads from the badlands to the south.

All this Joshua reported to Moses on his return. Caleb, the fierce young man of action, was all for invading Canaan forthwith. He was sure the children of Israel could sweep aside any opposition because the Lord would be with them.

But the other scouts were not so much men of action as men of doubt. They may have been jealous of Joshua and Caleb. Or they may simply have been timid. Anyway, they told Moses that the towns were strongly fortified, that the inhabitants were fierce and warlike. "Why," they said, "some of them were giants . . . so big that they made us feel like grasshoppers. Caleb must be out of his mind if he thinks we are capable of defeating people like that!"

Nothing is more contagious than fear. The more the scouts talked, the more they exaggerated, and the more they exaggerated, the more frightened their listeners became. Moses, Joshua, and Caleb were not afraid, but panic seized their followers. "These madmen will lead us to our doom," they cried. "Let's choose another leader and go back to Egypt!"

This time the Lord grew really angry with these faithless and spineless people. He caused a glowing light to appear and He spoke from it, threatening them with a plague, vowing to disinherit them altogether. Again Moses interceded, and again the Lord relented. But He was not altogether placated. He told the children of Israel that because of their doubts and lack of faith they would have to spend another forty years wandering in the wilderness. No one

above the age of twenty who had murmured against God would enter the promised land. Only Joshua and Caleb would be allowed to do so. The message here seems very plain: the more a person gives in to doubt, the longer he will have to wait for the rewards of faith. And if he gives in to doubt completely, he may never taste those rewards at all.

So for forty long years the children of Israel continued to live as nomads, fed with manna, waiting for the promised day to come. Perhaps during these years they made probing attacks on the frontiers of Canaan; ancient clay tablets have been unearthed written by the Canaanites of this period to Egyptian pharaohs complaining of an invading people called the Habiru—a word fairly close to Hebrew—who seemed bent on conquering the land. Moses continued to lead, but now he was very old. Finally the Lord told him to go up to the top of Mount Nebo in the land of Moab, not far from the city of Jericho. From there he would be able to see the promised land with all its fertility and beauty, even though he himself would never set foot there.

Painfully and slowly, supported by Joshua, the old man made his way up the mountain. He was now a hundred and twenty years old, but the Bible says “his eye was not dim.” He looked longingly at the goal he had struggled so hard to win. Then he died and was buried in the land of Moab, “but no man knows the place of his burial to this day.”

So ended the life of the great law-giver, the mightiest of all the Old Testament prophets. Other great men would rise up to lead Israel in the years that lay ahead—Joshua would be the next. But never again would there be one like Moses, the peasant-prince whom “the Lord knew face to face.”

JOSHUA- SWORD OF ISRAEL

Between the strongly fortified city of Jericho and the desert-hardened legions of the children of Israel lay the river Jordan. It was more than just a physical barrier, it was a symbolic dividing line between two completely different cultures and two completely different religious viewpoints. The Canaanites worshiped the idol Baal and other pagan gods. Their rituals called for human sacrifice, sexual orgies, and the practice of magic. The religion of Israel forbade all these things. From their monotheism and from their special relationship with God came the tremendous drive and assurance that the children of Israel would need to conquer the rich territories that lay before them.

This is an important thing to keep in mind: the Israelites were not motivated primarily by greed. They felt that by their immoralities and their paganism the Canaanites had forfeited their right to the land. They believed that it was their own divine mission to drive them out and establish a society based on love of justice and the worship of the one true God. At the bottom of all success lies strong motivation. The Israelites believed that they were right and their enemies were wrong—and when a person or a whole people believes that, nothing can stop them.

All this is clearly indicated at the beginning of the Book of Joshua. Three times in the first ten verses the Lord urges His people to “be strong and of a good courage.” He exhorts them to “be not



afraid, neither be thou dismayed.” Why not, in the face of such powerful enemies? Because “the Lord thy God is with thee withersoever thou goest.”

Jericho is one of the oldest cities in the world, perhaps the oldest. Some scholars think people were living there eight thousand years ago. At this point in its long history it was a fortress with frowning walls and massive gates that were always closed at sundown. It was provisioned to resist prolonged siege. By any standards, it was a tough nut to crack.

As an experienced military commander, Joshua wanted to determine what preparations for defense the garrison was making, so he sent two of his men to slip into the town and bring back a report. The account of the adventures of these two spies is one of those brilliant bits of reporting that make the Bible so fascinating—the details are as vivid and convincing now as when they were first set down centuries ago.

Posing as harmless travelers, the two Israelites spent the day noting the military strengths and weaknesses of the town. When night fell, they found lodging at the home of a woman named Rahab, a harlot. Perhaps they chose her house because they knew she would not be too inquisitive about strangers. But the king of Jericho had counterespionage agents who were not asleep. They brought him word of suspicious strangers in Rahab’s house. Within minutes, soldiers were at her door.

Rahab’s morals left much to be desired, but she was a shrewd and observant woman. She knew that the inhabitants of Jericho

were terrified of the Israelites. She wanted to be on the winning side. So she hid the strangers under some flax that she was drying on her roof, and the soldiers did not find them. Her house was built on top of the city wall. Late that night when the city was dark and quiet, Rahab lowered a rope from her window to the ground outside the city. She told the spies that they could escape by sliding down the rope. All she asked in return was that in the coming attack on Jericho she and her family be spared. A typical Canaanite, this Rahab: she was ready to betray a whole city full of her countrymen if by so doing she could save her own skin.

The spies were willing to make the bargain. If Rahab would display a scarlet cord in the same window when the Israelites attacked, orders would be given to spare that house and everyone in it.

So the spies came back with their report of bad morale among the defenders of Jericho. Even so, the walls were strong and the Israelites had no weapons capable of battering them down. Also there was the river to be crossed—no easy matter for the forty thousand fighting men in Joshua’s army. Some leaders might have been discouraged, but Joshua had no doubts at all. The Lord had said He would be with His people; that was all that mattered.

First the Lord took care of the river-crossing problem. It was springtime, the river was in flood, there were no bridges. But the Lord stopped the waters from flowing. He caused an earthquake, which in turn was probably followed by a landslide that blocked the river channel upstream. Such a phenomenon has been known to happen in the Jordan valley even in modern times. So the Israeli fighting men and the Ark of the Covenant and all the people were able to walk across a dry riverbed. The Bible says the people “hasted and passed over”—evidently they knew the riverbed would not stay dry for long.

From their frowning walls the defenders of Jericho must have watched with growing dread as the children of Israel carried out Joshua’s instructions. For six days they marched around the city once a day with the Ark of the Covenant preceded by seven priests blowing on seven trumpets made of rams’ horns. The soldiers marched in silence; no man spoke a word. It must have been hot—Jericho is some eight hundred feet below sea level—and dusty.

Some of the marchers must have wondered if they were taking part in an exercise in futility.

To the citizens of Jericho this strange series of maneuvers must have been even more ominous and terrifying than the assault they were expecting. The wailing of the trumpets must have had a demoralizing effect. They must have felt that the God of these strange people, the Power that had dammed the river and made this invasion possible, was preparing some awful and supernatural fate for them.

And they were right. On the seventh day the Israelite army marched around the city not once, but seven times. On the seventh circuit, when the trumpets blew, Joshua cried out to the people, "Shout; for the Lord hath given you the city!"

There was an electrifying moment of silence. Then a great roar of voices went up. All the people shouted, all the trumpets blew, and—almost as if they were made of crystal that could be shattered by sound waves—the huge walls began to crack. Enormous chunks of masonry fell from the battlements. Great fissures appeared. The ground beneath the foundations seemed to heave and writhe. With a grinding crash of pulverized stones, the walls fell down flat, carrying with them the best fighting men of the king of Jericho.

Straight into the dust and confusion charged the Israelites, each man with sword or spear in hand. There was almost no opposition; the earthquake had completely stunned the defenders. The town was set on fire. Every living soul in the city, except for Rahab and her family, was put to the sword.

Archaeology confirms the destruction of Jericho at this time and in this manner. Actually the diggers tell us that there was a double wall around the town, and that it did indeed fall down flat. The outer wall went tumbling down a hill. The inner wall fell into the space between the two walls. Then a great fire raged, utterly wiping out the place. It was centuries before Jericho was rebuilt.

The battle of Jericho was only the first in a series of smashing victories won by Joshua. The only setbacks came when, through foolishness or willfulness, the people disobeyed the commandments of God. As long as they were faithful to the covenant in which they had promised obedience in exchange for protection, so was He.



On one famous occasion a league of five Canaanite kings fought furiously against Joshua and his men. It became apparent to the Hebrew commander that the Israelites could win a great victory only if they had more time. So Joshua commanded the sun to stand still in the heavens, and it “hasted not to go down about a whole day. And there was no day like that before it or after it, that the Lord hearkened unto the voice of a man.”

The account of this ancient miracle has long troubled literal-

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ists who point out that the sun does not really move across the sky. It is the earth, they say, that turns, and if it stopped turning suddenly, centrifugal force would fling everything movable into space. But I don't see myself why the Lord might not have simply altered men's perception of time or duration on that occasion. Certainly time is a very subjective thing—five minutes in the dentist's chair can sometimes seem to me like five hours! If the Lord wanted that day to seem long, I'm sure He could have made it seem so—and I'm also sure it seemed very long to the defeated Canaanite kings and their fleeing warriors.

So the Promised Land was conquered and divided among the tribes of Israel. The Canaanites were not exterminated. They continued to live alongside the invaders in some places, and they continued their practice of pagan rites. This was a source of constant worry to Jewish leaders. At the end of his days, Joshua warned his followers not to be seduced into the worship of false gods. "Choose you this day," said Joshua, "whom ye will serve." And the people answered, "We will serve the Lord."

This exhortation of Joshua's is one that all of us might ponder from time to time. It implies that each of us has the power—here it is again, this gift of free will—to decide what comes first in our lives. It also implies that it is very easy to drift into worshipping false gods. Not idols or graven images like Baal or Astarte, but false gods nevertheless. Some men worship money. Some worship power. Some women worship personal appearance. Some bow down to social position. Some human beings are blind devotees of drink, or gambling, or sexual promiscuity.

Because there are so many false gods, Joshua's words are as challenging now as they were then. *Choose you this day whom ye will serve.* The only master truly worth serving is the Master of the universe.