Climbing Bowen's Ladder of Self-Differentiation:

A Theological Exploration of Family Dynamics and Trauma

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to the one who inspired me not only to write, but whose love and affirmation awakened within me the truth of who I am and the person I was always meant to become. When I could not see my own potential, you saw through me that night as we looked out over the endless field of stars in the mountains of Georgia. Something shifted that evening, and a spark of possibility was kindled in me, setting me on the path I walk today. It is the same spark that first came alive in me when I saw you, and it continues to glow every time I look into your deep blue eyes.

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Finally, I dedicate this work to Kira, my faithful dog and true companion, who loved me unconditionally through some of the most difficult seasons of my life. Kira, and now Hank, have been more than pets; they are living expressions of unconditional love and acceptance.

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Chapter 1: The Power of Narrative and the Evolution of Human Storytelling

The evolution of humanity's creative ability to produce oral and written narratives is a true gift from God, for it has given us the ability to transmit our hopes and dreams through various expressive mediums that have endured the passage of time. The human capacity for creative storytelling makes humanity unique in the realm of creation, for the symbols and themes transmitted through oral and written forms offer modern-day people a peek into what psychoanalyst Carl Jung calls the psychic windows of "the collective unconscious," which "originate chiefly in that realm of psychic life."[1] From Homer's *The Iliad & Odyssey* to Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, these narrative expressions weave a tapestry of themes whose individual threads often become entangled with the stories that we tell ourselves and, at times, serve to unravel parts of ourselves hidden from our conscience behind a trauma-created wall. As Bessel van der Kolk explains, "traumatic experiences do leave traces," becoming "imperceptibly passed down through generations" and manifesting as creative scars in our "histories and cultures" and shared sacred texts.[2] The human capacity to create narratives echoes our species' innovative spirit for survival and unyielding hope in the face of our destructive capacity and despair. These stories are vessels that transmit the infinite possibility at the core of the human soul in the face of chaos, for the themes in them serve as anchors for people who seek a means of escape from their current hardships, allowing them to become engulfed in the hopes and dreams transmitted through the words of the writers.

The power of narrative is not merely a tool for entertainment but a reflection of the deep-seated psychological and spiritual needs of humanity. Stories function as frameworks through

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[1] Carl Gustav Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1933), 73, Kindle Edition.
[2] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2014), 19-20, Kindle Edition.

which people grapple with their fears, hopes, and traumas. The resilience of such narratives, especially in sacred texts, speaks to their capacity to engage with human suffering in a way that transcends temporal limitations. As Carl Sagan asserts, writing serves as "perhaps the greatest of human inventions, binding together people, citizens of distant epochs, who never knew one another."[3] This is evident in the Abrahamic narratives, which not only provide theological insights but also map out the generational transmission of trauma and the potential for healing and growth. As psychoanalyst Galit Atlas suggests, these stories may invite readers to "relive their trauma and pain" as a creative means to imagine "a trajectory from chaos to order, from helplessness to agency, and from destruction to re-creation"[4] The Hebrew Bible, particularly the book of Genesis, reflects this depth as it presents the "primeval period" not as a historical record but as a shared mythical framework where life and human identity are still being established, suspending its narratives in a realm "before time."[5] Despite their symbolic cast, these stories capture profound truths about the human condition.

The Abrahamic Narratives as Archetypal Trauma Stories

In this thesis, I will expand on how the stories that have shaped the three major Abrahamic faith traditions are perfect examples of the concept above, for they have become foundational stories of the human capacity to survive unimaginable trauma, transmitted from generation to generation for more than two millennia. As John J. Collins asserts in his book *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, these carefully crafted mythologies serve as "serious but imaginative attempts to explain life in this world," transcending factual analysis based on

[3] Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1980), 334–335, Kindle Edition.
[4] Galit Atlas, *Emotional Inheritance: A Therapist, Her Patients, and the Legacy of Trauma* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2022), 266, Kindle Edition.
[5] Douglas A. Knight and Amy-Jill Levine, *The Meaning of the Bible: What the Jewish Scriptures and Christian Old Testament Can Teach Us* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 197, Kindle Edition.

historical records.[6] The collection of stories initially found in the Hebrew Bible showcases the power of storytelling to transmit human-divinely inspired wisdom whose themes and characters have served as divine sparks for countless liberating movements throughout history all over this planet. Even in the face of conflicting scientific, historical, and archaeological evidence, these stories remain relevant and "true," as they provide didactic purposes, "illustrating the role of the God of Israel in history" and shaping the identity of the people, rather than serving as an "accurate record of past events."[7]

One significant reason these narratives endure is their ability to encapsulate and transmit traumatic memory, not only on an individual level but across generations. The stories in Genesis, for instance, are steeped in themes of betrayal, loss, family conflict, and reconciliation, universal experiences that continue to resonate across time. These stories operate as vehicles for transmitting collective trauma and collective wisdom. They contain within them the psychological imprints of generational wounds and the potential for post-traumatic growth, offering theological reflections on human suffering, redemption, and transformation. As Galit Atlas notes, "the human unconscious brings us to the original site of where things went wrong with the wish to do it all over again, repair the damage, and heal those who were hurt and wounded."[8] Through this lens, the Genesis narratives can be understood as more than theological constructs; they are psycho-spiritual maps that guide humanity through cycles of trauma, rupture, and healing.

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[6] John J. Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: Third Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 53, Kindle Edition.
[7] Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2107, Kindle Edition.
[8] Atlas, *Emotional Inheritance*, 264.

I propose that the foundational stories and characters found in our shared Scriptures operate as sacred narratives whose individual threads become entangled with the existential holy truth of who we are as humans and our incredible capacity to evolve and grow in the face of trauma. These narratives blend "curious mixtures of untruth and truth" that continue to captivate billions of people around the world today.[9] There is a divine inspiration in these texts that transcends facts and logic, emphasizing theology over historical accuracy, allowing these stories to become “less important for the history they convey than for the theology they develop."[10] The focus of my work will revolve around the impact that the story of the Binding of Isaac (Akedah) has on modern-day audiences through an analytical exploration of family and religious trauma using Bowen’s Family Systems Theory. Analyzing the multiple narrative trauma threads that make up the Akedah, I will also apply the psychological concept of Post-Traumatic Growth to theologically expand on the impact that the Binding of Isaac has on all of the characters in the story and how that text itself can be seen as a traumatic transmission of the collective memory of the Babylonian conquest of 587 BCE. As Richard Tedeschi explains, post-traumatic growth emerges as “a result of our struggle with the emotional, relational, physical, spiritual and existential consequences of life’s ‘hard-knocks.’”[11] Weaving through the Akedah from a trauma-informed perspective gives modern clergy the ability to pluck individual threads and exegete the themes in a way that acknowledges the horrific actions of the characters in the story as a means of unraveling individual and collective trauma.

[9] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner, 1970), 10, Kindle Edition.
[10] Berlin and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible,* 9.
[11] Richard G. Tedeschi, Transformed by Trauma: Stories of Posttraumatic Growth (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2021), 19, Kindle Edition.

The story of the Akedah is not merely a test of faith; it is a narrative dense with unresolved tension, symbolic sacrifice, and intergenerational implications. As Abraham Joshua Heschel aptly notes, “the attempt to convey what we see and cannot say is the everlasting theme of mankind’s unfinished symphony.”[12] Bowen’s Family Systems Theory helps us see that this narrative can be read as an exploration of how unresolved trauma can be projected across generations and how these patterns affect family dynamics. For instance, Abraham’s unresolved anxiety and his complex relationship with obedience and authority are transmitted not only to Isaac but also to subsequent generations. By examining these narratives through the lens of Bowen’s theory, I will reveal how the Akedah becomes a foundational trauma narrative that impacts the entire Abrahamic lineage, echoing through the actions and decisions of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Abrahamic Family System in the Context of Bowen’s Theory

Murray Bowen’s Family Systems Theory provides a robust framework for understanding how trauma is transmitted across generations, and it will be foundational in this thesis. Bowen’s concept of self-differentiation, where individuals seek to distinguish themselves emotionally from the broader family unit while maintaining meaningful connections, offers a critical lens through which we can examine the Abrahamic narratives. As Peter Titelman describes it, differentiation involves the "variation in an individual’s capacity to be an individual while functioning as part of a group."[13] In particular, I will focus on the differentiation process within the Jacob-Joseph story as a key case study. Jacob’s journey toward greater self-differentiation,

[12] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 4, Kindle Edition.
[13] Peter Titelman, *Differentiation of Self: Bowen Family Systems Theory Perspectives* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 25, Kindle Edition.

marked by significant introspection and personal growth, serves as a model of how a patriarchal figure navigates a family system laden with trauma and emotional reactivity. Joseph, in contrast, emerges as a figure who exemplifies high levels of differentiation, characterized by his ability to remain emotionally centered despite intense pressures. Murray Bowen notes that such an individual can stay close to others without losing a sense of self or identity due to achieving a higher level of differentiation.[14] Through his role in the court of Pharaoh, Joseph also serves as a proto-messianic figure, offering a theological metaphor for how differentiated leadership can guide others through crisis and transformation, echoing Michael Kerr's position that better-differentiated individuals or groups "float above" the collective anxiety around them and thus do not get fused into the emotion regression of whatever space they inhabit.[15]

Bowen's theory emphasizes that individuals with higher levels of differentiation are better equipped to manage the emotional complexities of family systems without becoming entangled in the system's anxiety and dysfunction. The stance of emotional repose gives one the ability to maintain a "self" amid family stressors, which can prevent chronic anxiety from spreading through the system.[16] In the context of the Abrahamic narratives, this is vividly illustrated in Joseph's ability to transcend the deep-seated rivalries and betrayals that characterized his relationship with his brothers. Joseph's rise in Pharaoh's court represents not just a narrative of personal success but a demonstration of how self-differentiation can lead to the healing of generational wounds. His reconciliation with his brothers exemplifies how trauma can be acknowledged, addressed, and ultimately transformed through the process of differentiation.

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[14] Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1978), 109, Kindle Edition.
[15] Michael E. Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets: Revealing the Hidden Life of Families* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 156, Kindle Edition.
[16] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets,* 156.

Jacob, on the other hand, provides a more nuanced exploration of the differentiation process. Throughout his life, Jacob wrestles with his identity, his familial obligations, and his relationship with God. His journey is marked by moments of profound introspection, such as his encounter at Peniel, where he wrestles with the divine. This struggle reflects an internal confrontation with the unresolved anxieties and projections that have plagued his family for generations. Jacob's eventual reconciliation with Esau and his ability to bless his sons at the end of his life indicate a more differentiated self, one that has learned to navigate the complexities of family dynamics while maintaining a clear sense of identity and purpose. Therefore, the Jacob/Israel narrative can be understood as a person who climbs the self-differentiation ladder while struggling with regression to old family dynamics to relieve anxiety but ultimately relying on their intellect and observational ability to consider the long-term consequences of his and his family's actions.[17]

Bowen's theory will be applied not only to these biblical figures but also as a model for pastoral care. This thesis aims to develop a pastoral care framework where clergy can operate as self-differentiated leaders, equipped to navigate the complexities of church life while remaining grounded and resistant to being drawn into historical congregational trauma. Such a model requires clergy to have a deep understanding of church history and trauma so they can recognize the emotional undercurrents within their congregations and maintain their differentiation from them. Viewing the church as a family system allows clergy to discern how unresolved issues and traumas within the congregation mirror those found in family systems. Understanding one's family as a system is essential to increasing one's "self" by clearly seeing the dynamics that

[17] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets,* 49.

impede self-differentiation.[18] This approach offers a way for clergy to guide their congregations toward greater health and spiritual maturity, much like Joseph did for his family and the nation of Egypt.

A Theological Approach to Biblical Narratives and Trauma

In addition to the psychological analysis provided by Bowen's theory, this thesis will include a theological exploration of the Hebrew Bible. By considering the biblical stories as both sacred texts and psychological narratives, we will delve into how these stories reflect collective trauma and spiritual insight. The Abrahamic family system, especially through figures like Jacob and Joseph, is rich with themes of intergenerational transmission of trauma, spiritual growth, and the struggle for self-definition. The theological analysis will integrate these themes with Bowen's concepts, offering a dual approach that merges pastoral care with a deep exegetical engagement with Scripture.

The complexity of these narratives lies in their ability to operate on multiple levels simultaneously. On one level, they are stories of faith, covenant, and divine intervention. On another level, they are profound psychological portraits of human beings grappling with existential questions, family dysfunction, and the search for identity. For example, the recurring theme of sibling rivalry in Genesis, from Cain and Abel to Jacob and Esau, and finally to Joseph and his brothers, can be understood as a reflection of unresolved family tension and competition for parental affection. These dynamics are not just theological or moral concerns; they are deeply rooted in the psychological makeup of families, where unresolved conflicts and unprocessed trauma are often passed down from one generation to the next.

[18] Ibid, 6.

Bowen's concept of the multigenerational transmission process helps us see how these patterns of dysfunction "that emerge over the generations" are perpetuated and how they can be interrupted.[19] In the context of the Abrahamic stories, each generation struggles with the legacy of the previous one, whether it's the burden of the covenant, the trauma of displacement, or the scars of betrayal. Yet, within these narratives, there are also moments of transformation, where characters like Jacob and Joseph achieve a level of differentiation that allows them to break the cycle of trauma. These moments are significant not just for their individual stories but for the broader theological narrative that points toward redemption, reconciliation, and the fulfillment of divine promises.

The Complexity of the Hebrew Bible and Its Stories Concerning Trauma

Before we explore the impact of the Akedah on the Abrahamic family system, we must begin with a historical analysis of the origins of the Hebrew Bible to identify the trauma threads that can be extrapolated from its narratives and characters. Doing so will help identify the "why" behind the texts, which is vital in understanding the possible historical trauma that inspired the writers of the Hebrew Bible to use a narrative format as a vehicle for their lived experiences. Anchoring this thesis to a historical trauma marker will become essential to understanding that the Hebrew Bible, particularly the book of Genesis, is a collection of literary works woven together to tell a story of trauma alongside humanity's relationship with the divine.

As John J. Collins notes:

> The recent debates about the Pentateuch show that the reconstruction of earlier forms of the biblical text is a highly speculative enterprise. Perhaps the main lesson to be retained is that these texts are indeed composite and incorporate layers from different eras. The biblical text is not a consistent systematic treatise. Rather it is a collection of traditional

[19] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 168.

> materials that places different viewpoints in dialogue with one another and offers the reader a range of points of view.[20]

Many of the themes found in the book of Genesis are reimagined origin stories of Mesopotamian oral and written narratives reworked into one continuous story arc, incorporating the theological imagination of ancient Israel's perceived special relationship with God.[21] The academic consensus is that the Hebrew Bible was not fully completed until after the destruction of the Temple of Solomon and the sacking of Jerusalem by the Babylonians during the crisis of 587 BCE, with some scholars pushing the completion date to the post-exilic or Second Temple period.[22] The narratives in Genesis are, therefore, mythological tales that transport readers back to the beginning of time itself, whose forward motion weaves much of ancient Israel's folklore and wisdom parables into vibrant and colorful characters whose lives also serve as vehicles for the transmission of the trauma of the Babylonian crisis and exile.

Understanding the historical and cultural context in which these narratives were compiled is crucial for appreciating the layers of trauma embedded within them. The Babylonian exile was not just a geopolitical crisis; it was a profound existential rupture that called into question the very identity and survival of the people of Israel.[23] In response to this crisis, the narratives of Genesis were shaped and reshaped to address the collective trauma of exile and the loss of the temple. The stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were likely reinterpreted to reflect the struggles of a displaced people seeking to preserve their identity and faith in a foreign land. The themes of covenant, sacrifice, and divine promise took on new significance in this context,

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[20] Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible,* 84–85.
[21] Ibid, 70.
[22] Ibid, 36.
[23] Berlin and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible,* 2108.

offering both a theological explanation for the suffering of exile and a vision of hope for restoration.

Why Dating Matters in Understanding Biblical Trauma

The scholarly consensus on dating the composition of Genesis is crucial to understanding the theological imagination woven into its narratives. Although some scholars maintain Mosaic authorship, extending its origins over a thousand years, as noted by Craig Koester in his book *A Beginner's Guide to Reading the Bible*, there is broad agreement that the narrative threads of Genesis suggest post-Mosaic, post-exilic authorship.[24] This shift helps explain why the writers crafted origin stories for the diverse groups living in the Levant, lending credence to the documentary hypothesis of biblical formation.

As Richard Elliott Friedman asserts:

> All these variations (documentary, supplementary, fragmentary, neodocumentary) agree on the central point: that the biblical books were composed by many different authors at different times, not by Moses, not by any one person.[25]

Understanding the Genesis narratives as post-exilic creations helps clarify why the writers emphasized certain characters and events, shaping them in ways that reflect the traumatic memory of exile and the hope for restoration. The exile permanently marked those taken into Babylon, forcing them to wrestle with their beliefs, feelings of uniqueness, and the loss of the holy city and Temple of Solomon. The scribes and religious elites who were exiled played a significant role in purging polytheism and fully embracing the monotheism of YHWH,

[24] Craig R. Koester, *A Beginner's Guide to Reading the Bible* [Kindle Locations 359–360]
[25] Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 245, Kindle Edition.

incorporating prophetic theology that reinterpreted ancient narratives through the lens of collective trauma.[26]

This context also helps to explain the prominence of figures like Joseph, whose narrative of displacement, suffering, and eventual elevation resonates deeply with the experience of exile. Joseph's journey from being betrayed and sold into slavery by his brothers to becoming a powerful figure in Egypt is not merely a story of individual resilience; it is a narrative that mirrors the hopes of the exiled community. The theological reimagining of Joseph as a proto-messianic figure who brings salvation to his family and to a foreign nation speaks to the aspirations of a people yearning for deliverance and restoration. The fact that Joseph remains emotionally stable and principled in the face of such intense adversity makes him an ideal model of differentiation, providing a blueprint for how leaders can remain grounded amidst chaos and uncertainty.

The Preservation and Reworking of the Abrahamic Family Stories

In an effort to preserve their history and stories, the Torah likely began to take shape during the exile, and the heroes of old were reimagined through the experiences of those in Babylon. In his book, *The History of Ancient Israel*, historian Micheal Grant supports the theory that while only the tribe of Judah survived the destruction of Jerusalem and were taken into exile, it is likely that remnants of other tribes migrated to Jerusalem after the fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria in 722 BCE.[27] Thus, the Genesis story, particularly in the context of the Abrahamic family system, preserves narratives that bind the Hebrew tribes together, ultimately

[26] Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. Moshe Greenberg (Jerusalem: Sefer Ve Sefel Publishing, 1960), 3.
[27] Michael Grant, *The History of Ancient Israel* (London: Orion, 1984), 134, Kindle Edition.

favoring Judah and Joseph as symbols of reconciliation. In this sense, Joseph represents a vehicle for reconciling the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah in exile.

The emphasis on reconciliation within these narratives reflects a broader theological agenda: the hope that fractured relationships, whether between individuals, tribes, or nations, can be healed through divine intervention and human agency. Joseph's role in reconciling with his brothers, despite their betrayal, becomes a template for how trauma can be acknowledged, processed, and ultimately transcended. The psychological depth of this narrative, when analyzed through Bowen's theory, reveals that Joseph's ability to forgive and embrace his brothers is not simply an act of mercy; it is the culmination of his self-differentiation process.[28] By remaining grounded in his identity and purpose, Joseph is able to offer forgiveness without becoming re-entangled in the toxic dynamics that once defined his family system.

Bowen's framework is particularly useful in exploring how these narratives can inform pastoral care. Just as Joseph remained emotionally differentiated in a context of familial and political tension, clergy are called to maintain their own differentiation in the face of congregational conflicts and historical trauma. The church, like the ancient family systems described in Genesis, is a complex web of relationships, anxieties, and projections.[29] By adopting a trauma-informed approach grounded in both biblical theology and Bowen's psychological principles, clergy can better navigate the challenges of ministry, fostering healthier and more resilient congregations.

[28] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 109.
[29] Ibid, 158.

Chapter 2: Bowen's Self-Differentiation & Multi-Generational Transmission of Trauma

Understanding the Human Condition through Bowen's Family Systems Theory

Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory offers a comprehensive framework for the understanding that "the laws that govern (humanities) emotional functioning are as orderly as those that govern other natural systems," particularly within families.[30] Central to his theory are the concepts of self-differentiation, family projection, and the multi-generational transmission of trauma. These ideas provide deep insight into how individuals navigate the emotional landscapes of their family systems and how unresolved issues are passed down through generations. Bowen's work intersects profoundly with theological and psychological perspectives on generational sin, trauma, and the preservation of spiritual identity across generations, making his theory an invaluable tool for pastoral care and spiritual formation.

In this chapter, we will explore the core concepts of Bowen's Family Systems Theory, examining how self-differentiation functions as a path to emotional health and spiritual growth. We will then expand on these ideas by discussing how they intersect with broader theological reflections on generational sin and trauma. Finally, we will consider how these concepts can be applied to real-world church dynamics, including leadership, congregational behavior, and pastoral care.

Bowen's Theory Overview: Core Concepts of Self-Differentiation, Family Projection, and Multi-Generational Transmission of Trauma

[30] Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1978), 158, Kindle Edition.

Bowen's Family Systems Theory is grounded in the belief that human behavior cannot be fully understood in isolation but must be viewed within the context of the family system. He posited that families are complex emotional units where members are interconnected, influencing one another in profound and often unconscious ways. The dynamics within these systems are shaped by patterns of interaction, communication, and emotional expression that are passed down through generations. In his book, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, psychiatrist Michael Kerr lays out his list of several key concepts stand out as central to Bowen's theory: self-differentiation, family projection, the multi-generational transmission of trauma, chronic anxiety, emotional triangles, sibling position, emotional cutoff, societal emotional processes, and the nuclear family emotional system.[31]

As Peter Titelman emphasizes:

> Central to Bowen theory is the idea that differentiation of self exists along a continuum from low to high. The same kind of variation takes place in the other seven concepts in Bowen theory: triangles, the nuclear family emotional systems, the family projection process, emotional cutoff, the multi-generational transmission, sibling position, and emotional process in society.[32]

I. Self-Differentiation: The Path to Emotional Maturity

Self-differentiation refers to the process by which an individual develops a strong sense of self while remaining emotionally connected to their family system. Bowen believed that the ability to separate oneself emotionally from others while maintaining meaningful relationships is a critical marker of emotional health. A well-differentiated person is able to manage their own anxiety, make decisions based on their principles rather than emotional reactivity, and navigate

[31] Michael E. Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets: Revealing the Hidden Life of Families* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 1, Kindle Edition.
[32] Peter Titelman, *Differentiation of Self: Bowen Family Systems Theory Perspectives* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 38, Kindle Edition.

conflicts without becoming overly enmeshed in the emotions of others. As Bowen articulates, "A person with a high level of 'differentiation of self,' or 'identity,' or 'individuality,' is one who can be emotionally close to others without emotional fusions or loss of self, or loss of identity, because he has attained a higher level of differentiation of self."[33]

In the context of family systems, self-differentiation allows individuals to break free from patterns of dysfunction and establish a healthy balance between autonomy and connection. People with high levels of differentiation are more resilient in the face of stress, less likely to be swayed by the emotional volatility of others, and better equipped to lead others through crises. Conversely, those with low levels of differentiation tend to be more reactive, easily influenced by the anxieties of those around them, and prone to either emotional cutoff or enmeshment. This idea is reinforced by Titelman, as he explains, "the more emotion dominates the balance of the two instincts, the lower an individual's level of differentiation of self. The more intellect dominates the balance of the two instincts, the higher an individual's level of differentiation of self."[34]

II. Family Projection Process: The Transmission of Anxiety

The family projection process refers to the manner in which parents project their unresolved emotional issues onto their children, shaping the emotional development of the next generation. This projection is often unconscious, driven by anxiety and fears that are not fully understood or processed. Parents who are highly anxious or poorly differentiated tend to transmit these unresolved issues to their children, who then carry the burden of that anxiety into

[33] Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1978), 109, Kindle Edition.
[34] Titelman, *Differentiation of Self*, 25-26.

adulthood. As Titelman explains, "The projection process between parent and child involves the transfer of the parent's anxiety to the latter, and in so doing the child that receives the intensive negative or positive focus automatically takes on and lives out the parental anxiety."[35] The child becomes the repository of the parent's unresolved conflicts, leading to patterns of behavior that replicate the emotional dysfunction of previous generations.

In many families, one child may be singled out as the primary focus of parental projection. This child is often the most emotionally sensitive or the one who is perceived as the most "different" from the others. As a result, this child may carry a disproportionate amount of the family's emotional burden, experiencing heightened levels of anxiety, depression, or behavioral issues. Bowen explains, "the term 'family projection process' refers to the mechanisms that operate as the parents and the child play active parts in the transmission of the parental problem to the child."[36] The family projection process thus serves as a mechanism for the transgenerational transmission of trauma, ensuring that unresolved issues continue to shape family dynamics across multiple generations.

III. Transgenerational Transmission Process: The Inheritance of Trauma

Building on the family projection process, Bowen identified the transgenerational transmission process as the primary means by which patterns of behavior, emotional reactivity, and unresolved trauma are passed down through generations. This process occurs when unresolved issues, anxieties, and relational patterns are transmitted from one generation to the next, often in increasingly entrenched forms. Titelman notes that transgenerational inheritance of trauma is supported by Bowen's understanding that the "multigenerational transmission process,

[35] Titelman, *Differentiation of Self,* 40.
[36] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 127.

and differentiation of self as a multigenerational" as a systems process that can take "more than three generations, perhaps as many as six, seven, or more."[37] The concept of transgenerational trauma is also reflected in the Hebrew Bible as the writers of Exodus note the sins of one generation will be visited "on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."[38] Each generation, therefore, inherits not only the genetic traits of their ancestors but also the emotional legacies embedded within the family system. Bessel van der Kolk, in his work on trauma, echoes this sentiment in his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, noting that "trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present."[39]

Bowen's theory suggests that these inherited emotional legacies can be difficult to identify because they are often deeply embedded in the family's culture, values, and ways of relating. For example, a family may have a long-standing pattern of avoiding conflict, passed down as an unspoken rule everyone adheres to. Over time, avoiding conflict can lead to significant issues, as problems are never addressed directly, and resentment festers beneath the surface. The result is a cycle of dysfunction that perpetuates itself across generations, with each new generation adding layers of complexity to the original unresolved issues.

The transgenerational transmission process can be observed in the way certain traits, such as anxiety, depression, or substance abuse, seem to "run" in families. These traits are not merely the result of genetics but are deeply intertwined with the emotional processes within the family

[37] Titelman, *Differentiation of Self*, 9.
[38] Exod. 34:7. (New Revised Standard Version).
[39] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2014), 45, Kindle Edition.

system. Understanding this process is crucial for those seeking to break free from generational cycles of dysfunction, as it provides insight into the roots of their struggles and offers a pathway toward healing.

IV. Chronic Anxiety: The Underlying Driver of Dysfunction

Chronic anxiety, a key concept in Bowen's theory, refers to the pervasive, long-term tension and worry that builds up within a family system and is often passed down through generations. Unlike situational anxiety, which is triggered by specific events, chronic anxiety is more generalized and manifests in persistent patterns of behavior, thought, and emotional reactivity. Bowen identified this type of anxiety as stemming from unresolved emotional issues, unspoken family rules, and the pressures to conform to relational expectations. Chronic anxiety creates a feedback loop within the family system, where individuals react to each other's anxiety, further escalating emotional intensity and perpetuating cycles of dysfunction. Bowen calls this as a "phenomenon of the infectiousness of anxiety" that can pervade the emotional atmosphere of a family or social system and disrupt functioning over time.[40]

In the context of church systems, chronic anxiety becomes evident in behaviors like resistance to change, fear of decline, and overreactions to perceived threats. Congregational conflicts, when viewed through the lens of chronic anxiety, often reveal underlying systemic issues rather than merely isolated disputes. For instance, anxiety about declining attendance or financial strain can manifest as heightened sensitivity to leadership decisions or an exaggerated fear of external challenges.

[40] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 362.

Understanding how chronic anxiety operates within a congregation equips church leaders to address its root causes rather than focusing solely on surface-level symptoms. Leaders who are well-differentiated are better able to recognize the influence of chronic anxiety, maintain a non-anxious presence, and guide their congregations through thoughtful and deliberate decision-making processes. Bowen's insights are particularly relevant here, as he demonstrated that chronic anxiety could influence not just individuals but entire systems, reinforcing entrenched patterns of dysfunction. By approaching church systems with this awareness, leaders can mitigate the effects of anxiety and foster healthier interactions within their communities.

V. Emotional Triangles: Managing Anxiety and Conflict

An emotional triangle occurs when a third person, issue, or entity is drawn into a conflict between two individuals to manage the anxiety between them. In his collaborative work with Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, Michael Kerr explains that involving "a third person decreases anxiety in the twosome by spreading it through three relationships."[41] Emotional triangles are a common coping mechanism in both family systems and church environments, providing temporary stability when anxiety runs high. However, rather than resolving conflicts, triangles often complicate matters by diffusing responsibility and preventing direct engagement between the original parties.

In a church setting, for example, two congregational members who disagree may each approach the pastor separately, seeking to align the pastor with their side rather than addressing the conflict directly. This dynamic creates a triangular pattern that perpetuates anxiety and hinders resolution. The same phenomenon can occur within church leadership teams, where

[41] Michael E. Kerr and Murray Bowen, *Family Evaluation* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 135, Kindle Edition.

unresolved tensions between members may result in triangulating others to avoid direct confrontation.

Recognizing and managing emotional triangles is critical for clergy and leaders. By understanding these dynamics, leaders can maintain their self-differentiation, avoiding the trap of becoming overly enmeshed in conflicts that do not directly concern them. Bowen's emphasis on maintaining healthy boundaries within both families and congregations provides essential guidance for leaders navigating these challenges. He cautions that triangulation in families with "lower levels of differentiation, in conjunction with higher levels of anxiety," while often an automatic response, reinforces emotional dependency and avoids meaningful resolution.[42] Leaders who resist becoming a third point in a triangle can instead encourage direct communication and mutual accountability, promoting healthier relational dynamics.

VI. Nuclear Family Emotional System: The Core of Family Dynamics

The nuclear family emotional system represents the core emotional interactions within a family unit, encompassing issues such as marital conflict, dysfunction in one spouse, or impaired parent-child relationships. In his book, *Family and Self: Bowen Theory and the Shaping of Adaptive Capacity*, psychotherapist Robert J. Noone elaborates on Bowen's perspective, stating that in times of increased anxiety or stress, "nuclear family mechanisms occur automatically and typically result in an increase in either blaming oneself for the tension or blaming the other."[43]

This concept extends beyond biological families and applies to other relational systems, including churches. Within a church context, the "nuclear family" may be understood as the core

[42] Titelman, *Differentiation of Self*, 39.
[43] Robert J. Noone, *Family and Self: Bowen Theory and the Shaping of Adaptive Capacity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020), 151, Kindle Edition.

leadership team composed of the pastor, elders, and key lay leaders. Much like families, church leadership teams experience similar dynamics, such as over-functioning leaders (those who take on excessive responsibility) and under-functioning members (those who avoid accountability). These patterns, if left unaddressed, can lead to burnout, stagnation, and tension within the broader congregation.

Bowen's insights into the nuclear family's emotional system provide a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics. For example, when leadership teams struggle with poor differentiation, they are more likely to react emotionally, resist change, and pass unresolved tensions onto the congregation. Conversely, a well-differentiated leadership team can balance individual responsibilities and foster a collaborative approach, ensuring adaptability and resilience in the face of challenges. Bowen highlights that a family, or in this case, a leadership team, must work to reduce "emotional reactivity, and begin taking constructive actions" to foster individual responsibility and achieve a more functional and harmonious system.[44]

By applying Bowen's concepts to church leadership, congregations can build healthier structures that mirror the principles of emotional balance and resilience. This approach not only strengthens leadership teams but also promotes greater unity and functionality throughout the church community.

VII. Sibling Position: Roles and Expectations in Leadership and Congregational Life

Bowen's concept of sibling position addresses the behavior patterns and roles that often align with a person's birth order within their family of origin. Robert J. Noone explains, "one's

[44] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 281.

birth order refers to how one influences others and how one is influenced by them."[45] Firstborns, for example, may be more inclined to take on leadership roles, exhibit a sense of responsibility, and adhere to authority, whereas later-born children might display greater flexibility, creativity, or even rebellious tendencies.

Understanding sibling position offers valuable insights for leaders as they navigate their roles and interactions within congregational systems. In a church setting, sibling position can influence leadership dynamics, including how individuals perceive authority, manage conflict, and respond to change. For instance, a firstborn pastor may naturally adopt a more directive or authoritarian leadership style, which could resonate with congregations that value structure and decisiveness but might clash with communities that prioritize collaboration and consensus-building. Conversely, a later-born pastor's more flexible or adaptive approach could flourish in a congregation seeking innovation but might falter in one craving stability.

Bowen's insights into sibling position highlight the necessity of recognizing individual tendencies within the broader system, whether in families or congregations. By understanding the influence of birth order, along with observational factors, leaders can adjust their approaches to their congregants to better align with their levels of self-differentiation and emotional maturity, allowing for predictors in organizational influence, fostering a more harmonious and effective ministry for all.[46]

VIII. Emotional Cutoff: Managing Unresolved Emotional Attachments

[45] Noone, *Family and Self*, 159.
[46] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 409.

Emotional cutoff occurs when individuals distance themselves emotionally, or entirely sever relationships, with family members as a way of coping with unresolved conflict or anxiety. Noone describes this as "an adaptive response, enabling individuals to function despite their lack of emotional separation from their parental families."[47] While cutoff might offer temporary relief, it often fails to address the underlying issues, leaving dysfunction unresolved and prone to resurface in new settings.

In church environments, emotional cutoff frequently manifests as congregants withdrawing from involvement, disengaging from relationships, or leaving the church altogether to escape the pressures of unresolved conflicts. Similarly, clergy may experience emotional cutoff through burnout or isolation if they distance themselves from their congregations instead of confronting challenges directly. In his book *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, Edwin Friedman observes that when members of the family system use emotional cutoff to provide temporary relief from anxiety, "the result is always temporary, or includes a transference of the problem to another relationship system."[48] This leads to increased stress on remaining family members or church leaders, exacerbating existing tensions rather than resolving them.

Effective leaders understand the importance of staying connected even during periods of conflict. By maintaining a differentiated stance, remaining emotionally engaged without becoming reactive, leaders can model healthy responses to tension, encourage reconciliation, and

[47] Noone, *Family and Self*, 143.
[48] Edwin H. Friedman, Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue (New York: Guilford Publications, 1985), 41, Kindle Edition.

prevent the dysfunction of emotional cutoff from perpetuating across the system. This approach helps sustain a culture of connection and resilience, both within families and congregations.

IX. Societal Emotional Process: Understanding Collective Anxiety in Congregations

The societal emotional process broadens Bowen's theory to address how societal forces shape collective anxiety and behavior. Noone explains, "The necessary constructive responses to the sources of a society's chronic anxiety, be it climate change, over-population, or decreasing economic opportunities, are neglected as a particular population is seen as 'the problem' to be addressed."[49] Social conditions such as economic hardship, political polarization, or cultural upheaval can heighten anxiety within congregations, influencing their dynamics and decision-making processes.

This concept is particularly relevant to churches grappling with external pressures, such as demographic shifts, debates on inclusivity, or responses to social justice movements. These societal changes often amplify tensions within the congregation, as members project their fears and frustrations onto leadership or one another. For example, during times of political unrest, congregations may experience ideological divisions, with members aligning along partisan lines and questioning leadership decisions through the lens of broader societal anxieties.

A differentiated leader is crucial in navigating these tensions. By staying grounded in the congregation's mission and values, such a leader can reduce reactivity, model emotional steadiness, and create space for meaningful dialogue. This involves acknowledging diverse perspectives while fostering a culture of mutual respect and unity. Leaders who understand the societal emotional process are better equipped to address the root causes of collective anxiety,

[49] Noone, *Family and Self*, 162.

helping their congregations respond to external challenges with resilience rather than fragmentation. Bowen's framework encourages leaders to balance these pressures thoughtfully, maintaining a focus on long-term health and purpose rather than short-term relief from tension.

Theoretical Expansion: Bowen's Ideas and Theological Perspectives on Generational Sin, Trauma, and Spiritual Identity

Bowen's concepts resonate profoundly with theological perspectives on generational sin, trauma, and the preservation of spiritual identity. In her book, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Karen Armstrong notes that during "800–200 BCE" a period termed "the Axial Age," most of the world's civilizations "began to realize that their own behavior" and the consequences of sin, trauma, and unresolved conflict ripple through families, shaping the spiritual and emotional lives of subsequent generations.[50] This notion of "generational curses" or the "sins of the fathers" being visited upon the children parallels Bowen's understanding of how unresolved issues are transmitted through family systems.

I. Generational Sin and the Inheritance of Brokenness

The concept of generational sin is a recurring theme in many religious traditions, particularly within the Judeo-Christian worldview. Scripture speaks of the consequences of sin extending to the third and fourth generations, aligning closely with Bowen's transgenerational transmission process.[51] This theological perspective suggests that the brokenness caused by sin is not confined to individuals but extends across generations, creating entrenched patterns of dysfunction that are difficult to overcome. Bowen explains this dynamic as the transmission of

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[50] Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1993), 42-43, Kindle Edition.
[51] Exod. 20:5; Exod. 34:7; Num. 14:18.

"varying degrees of 'maturity' or 'immaturity'" that lead to unresolved emotional issues, anxieties, and relational patterns, which perpetuate cycles of brokenness across generations.[52]

In Bowen's terms, generational sin can be viewed as an "emotional inheritance," whereby patterns of dysfunction, such as control, manipulation, and secrecy, persist within family systems. For instance, a history of abuse may leave its imprint long after the original behavior has ceased, as these patterns become ingrained and passed down across generations. Psychoanalyst Galit Atlas captures this process in her book *Emotional Inheritance*, when describing how introspection can illuminate the "emotional inheritance that lives within us," helping individuals make sense of their lives and enact meaningful change.[53] As Galit further asserts, identifying these legacies can lead to transformative moments, where the unresolved pain of prior generations is acknowledged and addressed, opening the door to healing.[54]

Theologically, this enduring consequence of sin reflects the need for intentional intervention and healing. Breaking free from these inherited cycles requires not only personal introspection but also the deliberate application of grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation, principles deeply rooted in religious traditions.

II. The Role of Trauma in Shaping Spiritual Identity

Trauma exerts a profound influence on the formation of spiritual identity. Families and individuals who endure significant trauma often find that their spiritual beliefs and practices are shaped by efforts to make sense of that pain. Bowen's theory offers a framework for

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[52] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 161
[53] Galit Atlas, *Emotional Inheritance: A Therapist, Her Patients, and the Legacy of Trauma* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2022), 266, Kindle Edition.
[54] Atlas, *Emotional Inheritance*, 268.

understanding how trauma affects not only individual identity but also the collective identity of families and communities.

In families marked by trauma, spiritual identity may reflect themes of suffering, endurance, and the search for meaning amidst pain. This transmission of trauma can produce a spiritual identity dominated by feelings of being "cursed" or "forsaken," leading to beliefs centered on judgment, punishment, and atonement. Conversely, families that navigate differentiation successfully often develop spiritual identities rooted in themes of redemption, healing, and transformation. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl reinforces this perspective, emphasizing that "life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual."[55]

Bowen's family projection process sheds light on how theological beliefs and practices are transmitted alongside emotional dysfunction. Just as unresolved anxieties are projected onto children, so too are rigid or dogmatic expressions of faith, mirroring the emotional rigidity within the family system. Conversely, trauma may drive individuals to reject their familial spiritual identity entirely, as they seek differentiation. Van der Kolk underscores the depth of trauma's impact, noting that "trauma compromises the brain area that communicates the physical, embodied feeling of being alive."[56] This disconnect profoundly affects both emotional and spiritual engagement, complicating the search for meaning and identity.

III. The Preservation of Spiritual Identity Across Generations

[55] Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 77, Kindle Edition.
[56] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 21-22.

The transmission of spiritual identity involves a delicate balance between preserving tradition and adapting to new contexts. Bowen's theory highlights the tension between maintaining a connection to one's family system and developing an autonomous sense of self. This dynamic becomes particularly evident in the transmission of religious beliefs, where individuals navigate honoring ancestral faith while forging their own spiritual paths.

Highly differentiated families tend to transmit spiritual identity in ways that foster both continuity and growth. These families honor their religious heritage while encouraging exploration and personal development. As Galit notes, such introspection can lead to moments of liberation, allowing individuals to mourn the emotional inheritance of past generations and differentiate "the past from the present."[57] This process facilitates the preservation of vibrant spiritual identities that are open to transformation and curiosity.

In contrast, poorly differentiated families often fall into extremes: either rigidly enforcing adherence to tradition or experiencing a complete breakdown of religious identity as members react against their spiritual inheritance. As Galit observes, trauma left unexamined "reverberates through the generations," perpetuating cycles of dysfunction.[58] This rigidity or disconnection reflects an imbalance between tradition and adaptation, with significant implications for spiritual identity.

Theologically, this tension mirrors the dynamic between legalism vs grace, tradition and innovation. Bowen's concepts offer a lens for understanding how these forces interact within families, highlighting the potential for either growth or stagnation. Differentiated families can nurture spiritual identities that embrace both personal introspection and collective

[57] Atlas, *Emotional Inheritance*, 264.
[58] Atlas, *Emotional Inheritance*, 263.

transformation, fostering resilience and adaptability. Conversely, undifferentiated families risk losing meaningful connection to their faith or succumbing to rigid fundamentalism, projecting unresolved trauma outward and perpetuating harm.

By applying Bowen's insights, we gain a deeper understanding of how spiritual identity can be nurtured across generations. This process requires intentional reflection, differentiation, and openness to change, ensuring that faith serves as a source of healing and growth rather than constraint.

Application to Faith Communities: Bowen's Concepts in Real-World Church Dynamics

Bowen's principles of self-differentiation, family projection, and multi-generational transmission extend beyond biological families, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of faith communities. Churches often function as extended family systems, where congregational interactions mirror the emotional processes found in families. Patterns of anxiety, projection, and the transmission of unresolved issues frequently emerge within these settings. For clergy and church leaders, understanding these dynamics is vital for guiding congregations toward greater spiritual maturity and emotional health.

I. Leadership and Self-Differentiation in Congregations

Leadership within congregations presents challenges analogous to those found in family systems. Church leaders must navigate the anxieties, conflicts, and emotional reactivity of their congregations while maintaining a clear sense of their own identity and purpose. Bowen's concept of self-differentiation offers a critical framework for leaders to remain grounded and effective amidst these challenges.

A well-differentiated leader remains emotionally connected to their congregation but avoids becoming enmeshed in its anxieties. Friedman suggest that such leaders manage conflict without succumbing to overwhelming "togetherness pressures, make decisions based on principles rather than emotional pressure, has the "capacity to maintain a (relatively) nonanxious presence in the midst of anxious systems, and provides stability during times of crisis.[59] Conversely, poorly differentiated leaders often react impulsively to congregational anxieties, leading to inconsistent or emotionally charged decision-making. This reactivity not only exacerbates conflict but can also result in burnout and eroded trust within the congregation. Bowen's assertion that "the goal is to help the stronger side of the family to assume responsibility for the weaker side" underscores the importance of a leader's balanced and differentiated approach in fostering a healthy community.[60]

For example, during times of church conflict, a highly differentiated leader can maintain a non-anxious presence, which helps de-escalate tension and guides the congregation toward resolution. Such a leader listens actively to concerns, validates the emotions of their members, and provides thoughtful solutions without becoming defensive or overly invested in outcomes.

Friedman elaborates on this concept noting that:

> The basic concept of leadership through self-differentiation is this: If a leader will take primary responsibility for his or her own position as 'head' and work to define his or her own goals and self, while staying in touch with the rest of the organism, there is a more than reasonable chance that the body will follow.[61]

This clarity of purpose enables differentiated leaders to guide their congregations through transitions and crises with resilience and foresight.

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[59] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 27.
[60] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 113.
[61] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 229.

II. Congregational Behavior and the Projection Process

Congregational systems, like families, are influenced by the projection of unresolved anxieties onto key figures, such as pastors and church leaders. As Friedman observes, "systems that are at play in congregational life are not just reflections of the emotional process in personal families, but also, both types of family systems plug into one another."[62] Just as parents project unresolved issues onto their children, congregations often project their anxieties onto their leaders. This projection may manifest as unrealistic expectations, idealization, or scapegoating. Members may view the pastor as a problem-solver or, conversely, as the source of systemic issues within the congregation.

When leaders fail to meet these expectations, they may become targets of criticism, blame, or even hostility. This dynamic often obscures deeper systemic issues within the church, such as resistance to change or unacknowledged fears of loss and decline.

Recognizing the projection process is critical for church leaders seeking to navigate these dynamics effectively. Differentiated leaders who understand that congregational anxieties often stem from deeper systemic issues can respond with empathy rather than defensiveness. By maintaining a grounded stance, these leaders help congregations explore and address underlying problems rather than perpetuating reactive cycles of blame and conflict.

For instance, in a church experiencing declining membership, congregational anxiety might manifest as complaints about the pastor's leadership or preaching style. While these concerns may contain elements of truth, they often reflect deeper fears of change, loss, or irrelevance. A differentiated leader can help the congregation unpack these underlying anxieties

[62] *Ibid*, 195.

by facilitating open dialogue and fostering a process of discernment. This approach addresses the root causes of the anxiety, promoting healing and clarity rather than becoming mired in surface-level grievances.

III. The Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma in Church Communities

Churches, much like families, inherit emotional legacies from previous generations. These legacies often include unresolved conflicts, patterns of dysfunction, and traumas that continue to shape the congregation's life long after the original events have passed. Bowen's concept of the transgenerational transmission process provides a framework for understanding how these issues persist within church communities and how they might be addressed.

In many congregations, the unresolved trauma of past events, such as church splits, leadership disputes, or divisive theological conflicts, creates an enduring impact on present dynamics. These traumas are often woven into the culture and identity of the church, influencing its values, behaviors, and overall emotional climate. Friedman writes that "such unresolved issues tend to affect the atmosphere because they are the still active background radiation from the big bang of that congregation's creation."[63] For instance, a church that has experienced a painful split may develop a culture of suspicion, where trust in leadership is tenuous, and members are hesitant to form deep relationships. Over time, this culture of distrust can become entrenched, hindering the congregation's ability to grow spiritually or relationally.

American psychiatrist Judith Herman highlights this phenomenon in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, noting that "traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and

[63] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 196.

community."[64] This breakdown in connection perpetuates cycles of alienation and dysfunction within the congregation, often transmitted to new members who unknowingly inherit these dynamics.

Addressing these generational traumas requires a differentiated approach that honors the past while fostering hope for the future. Church leaders must discern the emotional legacies at play and guide their congregations toward processing and healing. This might involve creating safe spaces for honest dialogue, offering structured opportunities for reconciliation, and helping the congregation develop a collective narrative that integrates both the pain and the resilience of their shared history. By acknowledging and addressing these legacies, leaders can help break cycles of dysfunction and open pathways for renewal and transformation.

IV. Emotional Cutoff and Its Impact on Congregational Dynamics

Emotional cutoff occurs when individuals distance themselves emotionally, or physically, from their congregation in response to unresolved conflict or anxiety. This might manifest as members leaving the church entirely or withdrawing from active participation while remaining nominally connected. Although emotional cutoff may offer temporary relief from interpersonal tension, it often exacerbates existing issues by fostering isolation and perpetuating division.

In church settings, emotional cutoff can create a culture where difficult conversations are avoided, leaving relationships superficial and unresolved tensions simmering beneath the surface. These dynamics stifle genuine community and spiritual growth, as members lack the trust and connection needed to engage in meaningful relationships.

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[64] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 307, Kindle Edition.

For clergy, recognizing and addressing emotional cutoff is essential to fostering a healthier congregational environment. In his book *Bowen Theory's Secrets: Revealing the Hidden Life of Families*, Micheal Kerr observes that congregational members low on the differentiated scale are unable to remain calm in anxious allowing their emotional immaturity to trump "their poorly developed intellectual system."[65] Self-differentiated leaders can play a pivotal role in counteracting the effects of cutoff by modeling differentiated responses to conflict and creating spaces where challenging emotions can be expressed and processed constructively. By encouraging open and respectful communication, leaders help reduce the tendency toward withdrawal and promote more authentic, healing relationships within the congregation.

A key element of this work is fostering a culture of vulnerability and trust, where members feel safe to share their struggles without fear of rejection or judgment. Differentiated leadership provides a stable presence, enabling congregants to face conflicts with courage and clarity rather than retreating into avoidance. Through this approach, church communities can move beyond the fragmentation caused by emotional cutoff and toward deeper connection and spiritual renewal.

V. Societal Emotional Process and Collective Anxiety in Churches

The societal emotional process extends Bowen's theory by incorporating the broader societal forces that impact emotional functioning within families and congregations. This concept is particularly pertinent for church communities grappling with challenges such as racial tension, economic inequality, political polarization, and cultural shifts. During periods of societal

[65] Michael E. Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets: Revealing the Hidden Life of Families* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 49, Kindle Edition.

instability, collective anxiety often intensifies, leading to heightened tension, reactivity, and division within congregations.

Church leaders must remain attuned to how these societal pressures influence the emotional climate of their communities. Understanding the societal emotional process enables leaders to recognize when external anxieties are being projected onto the internal dynamics of the church. This awareness allows them to respond in ways that are grounded, thoughtful, and non-reactive. For example, during times of political unrest, congregations may fracture along ideological lines, with members projecting their fears and frustrations onto leadership. A differentiated leader can address these tensions by remaining focused on the congregation's mission and values, facilitating respectful dialogue that acknowledges diverse perspectives while promoting unity and mutual respect.

Friedman underscores the importance of self-differentiated leadership in such scenarios, noting that "the better self-defined followers will follow the lead of the leader and respond to his or her differentiation by taking their own nonreactive positions, which is not necessarily the same as simply agreeing."[66] In this way, the leader's ability to maintain a calm, clear, and consistent presence can inspire members to adopt similarly composed and thoughtful approaches to navigating conflict and societal anxiety.

Toward a Differentiated Approach to Pastoral Care and Church Leadership

Bowen's Family Systems Theory provides a robust framework for understanding human relationships, whether in biological families or church communities. The concepts of self-differentiation, family projection, and multi-generational transmission offer profound insights

[66] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 229-230.

into how unresolved issues shape emotional and relational dynamics. By applying these principles, church leaders can help their congregations engage in intentional processes of growth, healing, and transformation.

As we transition to the next chapter, these insights will be applied to biblical narratives, particularly the stories of the Abrahamic family system. The lives of figures like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph provide rich illustrations of the principles of self-differentiation and trauma transmission. Examining these stories through the lens of Bowen's theory will reveal how psychological concepts inform theological understanding.

This exploration will deepen our engagement with Scripture while offering practical tools for pastoral care. Church leaders can draw on these combined insights to guide their congregations toward greater spiritual and emotional maturity. Integrating Bowen's theory with theological reflection fosters a holistic approach to pastoral care, addressing both the psychological and spiritual dimensions of human life. Such an approach not only enriches individual and communal growth but also equips leaders to navigate the complex interplay of emotional and spiritual realities within their faith communities.

Chapter 3: The Abrahamic Family System through Bowen's Lens – Family Trauma, Migration, and the Roots of Anxiety

Personal Reflections on Family Trauma

Before delving into the Abrahamic family system, I want to share a personal story about my grandfather, Cosme, a man who represents a significant node in the web of my own family trauma. Cosme's life and actions cast a long shadow over my family, shaping the dynamics, relationships, and emotional inheritances passed down through the generations. Like Abraham's family, the narrative of my grandfather's life is filled with pain, unresolved tension, and trauma.

Cosme was a taxi driver who, according to family accounts, lived a life filled with infidelity, irresponsibility, and abuse. His presence in my family was marked by periods of absence, volatility, and neglect. He fathered two families, one legitimate, the other not, leaving behind a trail of broken relationships and deep emotional wounds. My father, in particular, bore the brunt of Cosme's actions, stepping up as the "man of the house" at the tender age of 11, after physically confronting Cosme in defense of my grandmother. From that day on, my father took on the responsibility of caring for his family, operating as the family's "macho," a role that shaped his identity and emotional life.

The narrative of my grandfather is one of abandonment, betrayal, and unacknowledged grief. When he left for the United States during the Mariel Boatlift in the 1980s, he did not take my father or uncle with him, choosing instead to bring his legitimate son. This decision deepened the sense of abandonment in my father, severing any hope for reconciliation. In Miami, Cosme's life deteriorated further; he became depressed and turned to alcohol, eventually dying alone with

no recorded details of his death, a fittingly mysterious end for a man whose life was filled with shadows.

The story of Cosme serves as a powerful prelude to understanding Abraham's family in the book of Genesis. Both men's legacies are marked by trauma that echoes across generations, influencing their descendants in ways that are often hidden, yet deeply impactful. Like Cosme, Abraham's life is filled with complex relationships, unprocessed grief, and decisions that would reverberate for generations to come.

In this chapter, we will explore the Abrahamic family system through the lens of Bowen's Family Systems Theory, focusing on how unresolved trauma, anxiety, and complicated grief shaped the lives of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and their descendants. We will also examine the psychological impact of migration and displacement, drawing parallels between the emotional turmoil experienced by Abraham's family and those who experience similar disruptions today.

Complicated Grief: The Unresolved Pain of Abraham's Father, Terah

Complicated grief is a condition that occurs when the normal grieving process is disrupted or prolonged, leading to intense and chronic emotional pain that interferes with one's ability to function.[67] Unlike typical grief, which diminishes over time, complicated grief is characterized by an inability to accept the loss, persistent longing or yearning for the deceased, and a preoccupation with the circumstances of the death. This type of grief often results in symptoms similar to depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[68]

[67] American Psychological Association, "Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms May Predict Future Health Problems," last modified August 12, 2021, https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2021/08/post-traumatic-stress-symptoms.
[68] Ibid

In the case of Abraham, the origins of his journey are rooted in the actions of his father, Terah, who experienced the loss of his son Haran. The biblical narrative is sparse in its details, but we know that after Haran's death, Terah uproots his family and begins the journey from Ur to Canaan, settling in the village of Haran.[69] This decision to leave Ur and start anew in Haran may be seen as a manifestation of Terah's complicated grief. Complicated grief, as understood in psychological terms, often leads individuals to make life-altering decisions that are driven by their unresolved emotions rather than rational thought. Terah's decision to migrate, along with his subsequent settling in a town that bears his son's name, suggests that he is caught in a cycle of grief that drives his actions. Rather than processing his loss and moving forward, Terah is seemingly trapped in his grief, unable to fully leave behind the memory of his son. As Galit Atlas explains, those who are caught in complicated grief or what Freud termed as "melancholic grief" become detached from those around them, are unable to connect emotionally, and have low morale.[70] This unresolved grief likely had a profound impact on Abraham, who inherited not only the physical journey from his father but also the emotional baggage associated with it, compounded by the stress of Sarah's inability to conceive children, which will be addressed later in the chapter.[71]

Bowen's concept of multi-generational transmission is relevant here: the unresolved grief of Terah is transmitted to Abraham, influencing the choices he makes and the dynamics within his own family system. Following Bowen, Terah's grief is not just an isolated emotional experience; it becomes a part of the emotional landscape that shapes the lives of his descendants.

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[69] Gen 11:27–32 (New Revised Standard Version).
[70] Galit Atlas, *Emotional Inheritance: A Therapist, Her Patients, and the Legacy of Trauma* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2022), 74, Kindle Edition.
[71] Gen 11:30.

Abraham's eventual departure from Haran and his journey to Canaan may be seen as an attempt to break free from the shadow of his father's unresolved grief, even if the emotional scars remain.[72]

The Psychological Impact of Migration: Stress, Anxiety, and Family Dynamics

Migration, whether voluntary or forced, is a profound experience that disrupts the stability of family systems and often leads to increased levels of stress and anxiety. The process of leaving behind one's home, culture, and social networks to start anew in a foreign land can be psychologically taxing, particularly when the migration is accompanied by economic hardship, social marginalization, or cultural dislocation. In the case of Abraham, his life is marked by a series of migrations, first from Ur to Haran, then from Haran to Canaan, and finally from Canaan to Egypt.[73] Each of these migrations would have imposed significant stress on Abraham's family system, shaping the dynamics between its members.

The psychological impact of migration can be understood through several lenses. First, migration often leads to a loss of social support, which in turn increases the family's dependence on its internal relationships. In such circumstances, any unresolved issues or conflicts within the family are likely to be amplified, as the family members become each other's primary (and sometimes sole) source of emotional support. Second, migration introduces a host of new stressors, including the need to adapt to unfamiliar social norms, economic instability, and the potential for discrimination or exploitation.[74] These stressors can lead to heightened levels of

[72] Gen 12:1–4.
[73] Gen 11:31, 12:1-5, and 12:10.
[74] Gen 12:11–13.

anxiety and tension within the family, which, if left unprocessed, can result in long-term psychological issues.

In Abraham's case, his initial migration from Ur was prompted by his father, Terah. The narrative suggests that this migration was motivated by the need to escape a situation that was emotionally and spiritually unfulfilling. For Terah, leaving Ur was likely an attempt to find closure after the loss of Haran, but the emotional residue of that loss lingered.[75] Marriage and family therapist Pauline Boss notes in her book *The Myth of Closure* that attempts at closure are often hindered by the misunderstanding that suffering can be escaped rather than faced "and learned to live with."[76] As a result, the family's migration to Haran was marked by a sense of unresolved tension, as Terah's grief and unprocessed emotions permeated the family dynamic.

When Abraham later left Haran after Terah's death, he did so in obedience to God's call.[77] However, the psychological toll of repeated migration would have already been imprinted on his family system. Abraham's subsequent journey to Canaan, and later to Egypt, introduced new layers of stress and anxiety. Each migration involved entering unfamiliar territories, interacting with foreign cultures, and navigating the complexities of survival in a world where alliances and resources were constantly shifting.[78] It is like Judith Herman's observation that the trauma of migration is tied to constantly having to create a "new life within a radically different culture" from the one left behind.[79]

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[75] Gen 11:28–32.
[76] Pauline Boss, *The Myth of Closure: Ambiguous Loss in a Time of Pandemic and Change* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), 9, Kindle Edition.
[77] Gen 12:1-4.
[78] Gen 12:10-20.
[79] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 307, Kindle Edition.

Bowen's theory helps us understand how the anxiety generated by migration could have exacerbated existing family dynamics. In the absence of a stable support system, family members may project their anxieties onto one another, leading to increased conflict and emotional reactivity. In Abraham's case, this anxiety was often expressed through his interactions and use of Sarah, as well as in his attempts to secure his family's survival by any means necessary, including deception.[80]

Unprocessed Trauma, Anxiety, and the Impact on Pregnancy: The Case of Sarah and Hagar

One of the more fascinating intersections between psychology and the biblical narrative is the relationship between unprocessed trauma, anxiety, and its effects on pregnancy. Research in modern psychology suggests that high levels of stress and anxiety can negatively impact reproductive health, contributing to issues such as infertility, complications during pregnancy, and difficulties in childbirth.[81] This is particularly relevant when considering the story of Sarah's infertility and her eventual pregnancy after years of waiting.[82] It is important to note that Sarah, according to the text, was in her nineties when she became pregnant, which to a modern reader, should be a glaring inconsistency to what we know of modern medical science. Biblical scholar Craig Olson agrees as he writes in his book *How Old Was Father Abraham?: The Genesis Lifespans in Light of Archaeology*, that the long lifespans present in the Torah represent "symbolic exaggerated numbers" to add to the ancient nature of the stories.[83] Olson adds that

[80] Gen 12:11-13 and 20:1-2.
[81] National Institutes of Health, "NIH Study Indicates Stress May Delay Women Getting Pregnant," last modified March 23, 2016, https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/nih-study-indicates-stress-may-delay-women-getting-pregnant.
[82] Gen 11:30 and 18:11-12.
[83] Craig Olson, *How Old Was Father Abraham? The Genesis Lifespans in Light of Archaeology* (Trowel Press, 2020), 74, Kindle Edition.

none of the dental records or bone DNA tests from ancient human remains tested in recent times have "shown any signs of living for hundreds of years."[84]

Sarah's inability to conceive was a source of deep emotional pain, both for her and for Abraham. In the cultural context of the time, a woman's value was often tied to her ability to bear children, and Sarah's barrenness would have been seen as a significant social and personal failure. The anxiety and stress associated with this situation likely created a cycle of emotional turmoil within the family system.

Bowen's concept of emotional projection is particularly useful in understanding how Sarah dealt with this anxiety. Unable to bear the weight of her own unfulfilled desires, Sarah projected her anxiety onto Hagar, her Egyptian slave, by offering her to Abraham as a surrogate.[85] This act was not merely a pragmatic solution to the problem of infertility; it was a means for Sarah to displace her own feelings of inadequacy and failure onto another woman, triangulating her in order to evacuate Sarah's anxiety. By placing the burden of childbearing onto Hagar, Sarah temporarily relieved herself of the societal pressures that had plagued her for years. However, this solution only introduced new sources of conflict and tension within the family.

Hagar's pregnancy introduced a new dynamic into the family system, one marked by jealousy, resentment, and rivalry. The triangle that formed between Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham is a classic example of how unresolved issues within a family system can lead to the creation of emotional triangles, another key concept in Bowen's theory.[86] In an emotional triangle, three individuals are involved in a relationship where the tension between two of them is diffused by

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[84] *Olson, How Old Was Father Abraham? 95*.
[85] Gen 16:1-2.
[86] Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1978), 160-161, Kindle Edition.

involving a third person. In this case, the tension between Sarah and Abraham over her barrenness was diffused by introducing Hagar into the equation. However, rather than resolving the underlying issues, the triangle only served to complicate matters further.[87]

Sarah's eventual pregnancy, which occurred after Hagar had already given birth to Ishmael, can be understood in light of the psychological dynamics at play. Once Hagar had fulfilled the role of surrogate, Sarah's anxiety was partially alleviated, creating a psychological environment in which conception became possible.[88] Modern psychological research supports the idea that reducing stress and anxiety can improve fertility outcomes, suggesting that Sarah's ability to conceive was not simply a miraculous event but one that was made possible by the alleviation of the emotional burden she had been carrying for years.[89]

However, the relief that Sarah experienced was short-lived, as the birth of Isaac introduced new layers of tension and rivalry into the family system. Hagar and Ishmael, who had once been seen as necessary components of Abraham's legacy, were now viewed as threats. Sarah's demand that Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael reflects the same anxiety-driven behavior that had initially led her to offer Hagar as a surrogate.[90] The unresolved tension within the family system was displaced once again, this time through the expulsion of Hagar and her son.[91]

The psychological toll of these events on all parties involved cannot be overstated. For Hagar, the experience of being cast out after fulfilling her role in the family is one of profound

[87] Gen. 16:4-6.
[88] Gen. 21:1-2.
[89] National Institutes of Health, "Stress May Delay Women Getting Pregnant."
[90] Gen. 21:9-10.
[91] Gen. 21:14.

betrayal and rejection.[92] For Abraham, the decision to send away his firstborn son would have created deep internal conflict, as he was forced to choose between his loyalty to Sarah and his love for Ishmael.[93] For Sarah, the presence of Ishmael was a constant reminder of her own inadequacy, making it impossible for her to fully embrace the joy of motherhood.

The Formation of Generational Trauma: From Abraham to Isaac and Ishmael

The events leading up to the births of Ishmael and Isaac set the stage for the generational trauma that would continue to reverberate throughout the Abrahamic family system. Bowen's theory of multi-generational transmission provides a framework for understanding how the unresolved issues, anxieties, and emotional patterns of one generation are passed down to the next. In the case of Abraham, the trauma and tension that characterized his relationships with Sarah and Hagar were transmitted to both Isaac and Ishmael, shaping their identities and destinies in profound ways.

Ishmael, as the firstborn son, was initially the focus of Abraham's hopes and dreams.[94] However, his status within the family was precarious from the beginning, as he was born to a woman who was never meant to be more than a servant.[95] Hagar's elevated status as the mother of Abraham's son only intensified the rivalry between her and Sarah, creating an environment in which Ishmael's position was always under threat.[96] The emotional instability within the family would have been keenly felt by Ishmael, who grew up in a household marked by tension,

[92] Gen. 21:15-16.
[93] Gen. 21:11-12.
[94] Gen. 16:15 and 17:18–20.
[95] Gen. 16:1.
[96] Gen. 16:4-6.

jealousy, and the constant fear of being cast out, a fear realized when Sarah demanded that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away.[97]

Isaac, on the other hand, was born into a family system already steeped in unresolved trauma.[98] Although he was the child of promise, his birth did not bring peace or resolution to the family's conflicts. Instead, it introduced new layers of complexity, as Isaac's presence forced Abraham to confront the divided loyalties within his heart. The story of the binding of Isaac (Akedah) is often viewed as a test of Abraham's faith, but it can also be seen as a manifestation of the unresolved trauma within the family system.[99] The willingness of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is reflective of the emotional detachment that often occurs in families where generational trauma has not been adequately processed. As Herman notes, unprocessed trauma creates conscious states that "are similar to hypnotic trance states," leading to "features of surrender of voluntary action, suspension of initiative and critical judgment, subjective detachment or calm, enhanced perception of imagery, altered sensation, including numbness and analgesia, and distortion of reality, including depersonalization, derealization, and change in the sense of time."[100] The writers of Genesis allude to Abraham's eerie silence as they made their way up to Moriah. It is possible to interpret the text through the lens described above, as Abraham appears to be in a hypnotic trance state, subjectively detached and calm with his son, having suspended critical judgment as he surrenders to an enhanced perception of imagery. This state leads him to

[97] Gen. 21:10-14.
[98] Gen. 21:1-3.
[99] Gen. 22:1-19.
[100] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 66, Kindle Edition.

suspend voluntary action, distorted by the reality of his depersonalized obedience to the divine commandment of filicide.[101]

Bowen's theory suggests that individuals in such families often repeat the patterns of behavior that they inherited from previous generations. In this case, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac can be seen as a continuation of the detachment and emotional distancing that characterized his interactions with Sarah and Hagar. The trauma of nearly losing his life would have had lasting effects on Isaac, shaping his relationships and emotional life in ways that would become evident in his interactions with his own children.[102]

The Interplay of Family Systems, Trauma, and Psychological Concepts in the Abrahamic Narrative

The story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar can be interpreted as a complex narrative that offers deep insights into the psychological dynamics of families, particularly those marked by trauma, anxiety, and migration. By examining these dynamics through the lens of Bowen's Family Systems Theory and trauma-informed theology, we gain a clearer understanding of how unresolved issues within a family can be transmitted across generations, creating patterns of behavior that are difficult to break. As we move into the second part of this chapter, we will focus on the events surrounding the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, and how these psychological dynamics continue to play out in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and their descendants. By doing so, we will further illuminate how the unresolved trauma of one generation is transmitted to the next,

[101] Gen 22:1-19.
[102] Gen 26:34–35 and 27:1–13.

creating a cycle that can only be broken through self-differentiation, self-introspection, and emotional growth.

The Akedah and the Ripple Effect of Trauma in the Abrahamic Family System

Introduction: The Akedah as a Trauma Catalyst

The Akedah, or the binding of Isaac, is one of the most profound and perplexing stories in the Hebrew Bible. This narrative, which centers on Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's command, has long been viewed as a test of faith, illustrating Abraham's unwavering obedience to God.[103] Many theologians and writers depict Abraham as a model of obedience and faith, as he is willing to sacrifice the son he longed for, the son described in the text as beloved.

For example, in his theological treatise *Fear and Trembling*, Soren Kierkegaard calls Abraham a "knight of faith" for his willingness to accept the absurdity of what God demands from him. Kierkegaard admits the request from God is ludicrous, as any modern reader would agree.[104] Yet, it is the nature of the insanity of the request that Abraham resigns to "the absurd, on the strength of the fact that for God all things are possible."[105] It is an attempt to protect and save Abraham from the sane judgment of modern readers. By calling Abraham a knight of faith, Kierkegaard shields the ethical implications of filicide in a thin veil of absolute obedience to God, where "the ethical is reduced to the relative."[106]

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[103] Gen 22:1-19; 27:1-13.
[104] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes De Silentio* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1986), 75, Kindle Edition.
[105] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 75.
[106] Ibid. 98.

The story of the Akedah is read from pulpits around the globe yearly to billions of people as an example of obedience and piety to God. Abraham is touted as the father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, whose faith in the face of Divine absurdity trumps any ethical implications of his actions and choices. This framing, however, is contested by modern scholarship. In her book *Opening Israel's Scriptures*, Ellen Davis critiques the notion that Abraham's act reflects "absolute and unconditional obedience."[107] She points out that "there is no reason to test Abraham's obedience; old as he is, he has left his home place of Haran at YHWH's call, evidently without resistance." Instead, she argues, Abraham's willingness to submit to God in this instance would be "monstrous" if motivated purely by obedience.[108] Rather than mindless compliance, Davis suggests that the true test is one of heartfelt trust, a quality Abraham had previously struggled with, as seen in his decisions to pass off Sarah as his sister out of self-preservation.[109] Additionally, in his book *The Hebrew Bible as Literature: A Very Short Introduction*, Tod Linafelt reminds us that the literary structure of the text denies access to Abraham's inner thoughts.[110] The silence surrounding Abraham's emotional state invites readers to consider the profound inner conflict that may accompany his actions, a conflict that renders him neither a cold fanatic nor an untroubled man of faith, but something far more human.

[107] Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 31–32, Kindle Edition.
[108] Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures*, 31–32.
[109] Ibid
[110] Tod Linafelt, *The Hebrew Bible as Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 36, Kindle Edition.

When examined through the lens of family systems theory, particularly Murray Bowen's concepts of generational trauma and self-differentiation, the Akedah takes on new dimensions. Davis observes that in the "ghastly silence on Moriah," Abraham's trust in God is total, trusting God with Isaac's life, a trust intertwined with Abraham's understanding that "life and life with God are the same thing."[111] This trust, profound and unsettling, challenges the reader to grapple with the relational and psychological complexities embedded in the Abrahamic family system, as well as its implications for the generations to follow.

In this chapter, we will explore how the Akedah serves as the culmination of unresolved traumas and anxieties within the family, while also setting the stage for the generational dynamics that will shape the lives of Jacob and Joseph. We will examine how the trauma of this event ripples through the lives of not only Isaac but also Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and even Abraham's servant, Eliezer. By considering the Akedah from multiple perspectives, trauma, grief, theology, and relational dynamics, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of how this moment becomes the defining event that reshapes the family's identity and sets the tone for the narrative of Genesis.

Moreover, exploring the Akedah through a trauma-informed lens allows for a more human understanding of Abraham, which, unlike Kierkegaard's attempts, does not need to be made right but can exist in the messiness of lived experience. Understanding the trauma of the Akedah and the ripple effect in the Genesis story also allows clergy to explore the impacts of familial trauma with their congregations, using the Abrahamic family system as a literary device for trauma-informed care and intervention.

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[111] Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures*, 31–32.

Isaac: A Life of Secondary Agency and the Shadows of Trauma

Isaac is a unique figure in the Genesis narrative. Unlike his father Abraham, who is often portrayed as an active agent in shaping his destiny, Isaac's life seems to be characterized by passivity and a lack of agency, particularly after the Akedah. This shift in Isaac's role, from an individual with potential to someone to whom things happen, suggests a profound psychological impact from the trauma of nearly being sacrificed by his father.[112] From that point forward, Isaac becomes a character whose actions are dictated by others, and his identity is largely defined by his relationships with those around him rather than by his own choices.

In the aftermath of the Akedah, the narrative subtly hints at the emotional distance that develops between Isaac and his father. In Genesis 22, after the "angel" intervenes and Isaac is spared, the text is notably silent on any interaction between father and son. There is no record of them speaking or reconciling after the traumatic event. Instead, the narrative shifts focus, with Abraham continuing his journey alone, while Isaac's whereabouts and emotional state remain unaddressed.[113] This silence is significant, as it suggests a rift that is never fully mended, a rift that shapes Isaac's sense of self and his relationships moving forward.

One of the most telling details is that Isaac does not reside in Abraham's tent after the Akedah. Instead, he lives in Sarah's tent, a space traditionally reserved for the matriarch.[114] This physical separation from Abraham symbolizes an emotional and relational distance that reflects the unresolved tension between them. By living in Sarah's tent, Isaac is positioned in a space defined by the anxieties, fears, and unresolved grief of his mother, rather than in a space of

[112] Gen. 22:9-12.
[113] Gen. 22:19.
[114] Gen. 24:67.

patriarchal leadership and strength. This dynamic underscores the degree to which Isaac is shaped by the trauma of the Akedah, as he retreats into a more passive role, overshadowed by the powerful figures in his life, first his father, then his wife Rebekah, and later his sons Esau and Jacob.

The psychological aftermath of the Akedah may be seen in Isaac's interactions in later chapters, where he demonstrates a reluctance to assert himself or challenge the status quo. For example, in Genesis 26, when Isaac finds himself in Gerar and fears for his safety, he repeats his father's pattern of deceit by telling the Philistines that Rebekah is his sister rather than his wife.[115] However, unlike Abraham, Isaac quickly realizes that this deceit is unnecessary, as the king does not intend to harm him.[116] This moment represents a subtle but significant step in Isaac's differentiation from his father; he learns that survival does not require deceit or manipulation. Despite this growth, Isaac's overall narrative arc remains one of reactivity rather than agency, a pattern likely rooted in the unresolved trauma of nearly being murdered by the person he trusted most.

Isaac's avoidance of conflict is another defining trait. When disputes arise over wells that Isaac's servants dig, he chooses to move on rather than engage in confrontation.[117] This behavior may be understood as a manifestation of his deep-seated desire to avoid further trauma. It is as van der Kolk notes that trauma imprints in the psyche having "ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present."[118] Having already experienced profound betrayal and near-death at the hands of his father, Isaac seems determined to distance himself

[115] Gen. 26:6-7.
[116] Gen. 26:8-11.
[117] Gen. 26:19-22.
[118] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2014), 45, Kindle Edition.

from any situation that could lead to further emotional harm. His passivity, therefore, is not just a character flaw; it is a survival strategy born out of deep psychological wounds.

The Silent Grief of Sarah: Trauma's Lingering Echoes

While Isaac's trauma is evident in his passivity, Sarah's response to the Akedah is characterized by silence and absence. The narrative offers little insight into Sarah's thoughts or emotions during or after the event, but the implications of her absence are profound. In fact, the next mention of Sarah in the text is her death in Genesis 23. Jewish midrashic traditions suggest that Sarah's death is directly connected to the Akedah, that she died from grief upon learning that her husband intended to sacrifice her son.[119] This interpretation, while not explicit in the text, resonates with the psychological reality that trauma and grief are often intertwined, manifesting in physical symptoms, isolation, and, in Sarah's case, death.[120] Sarah's pain can be described by Atlas's assertion that unprocessed trauma "is held in our minds and in our bodies and makes itself known to us via what we call symptoms: headaches, obsessions, phobias, insomnia, can all be signs of what we have pushed away to the darkest recesses of our minds."[121]

Sarah's silence in the biblical narrative can be understood as a form of complicated grief, a grief so overwhelming that it renders the sufferer unable to articulate their pain. In psychological terms, complicated grief occurs when the natural process of mourning is disrupted, leading to chronic and debilitating emotional pain. Isaac's survival of the trauma of filicide must have impacted Sarah deeply, possibly creating what Boss claims as "ambiguous loss," where

[119] Tamar Kadari, "Sarah: Midrash and Aggadah," *Jewish Women's Archive*, accessed November 19, 2024, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/sarah-midrash-and-aggadah.
[120] Gen. 23:1-2.
[121] Atlas, *Emotional Inheritance*, 12.

Isaac was "physically present but psychologically gone."[122] For Sarah, the Akedah might represent the ultimate betrayal, not only from her husband, who was willing to sacrifice their son, but also from God, who initiated such a test. The weight of this betrayal is compounded by the years of waiting, anxiety, and unfulfilled desires that characterized her relationship with Isaac. Her death, therefore, may be seen as the culmination of a lifetime of unresolved grief and trauma.

The impact of the Akedah on Sarah is not limited to her alone; it also affects Isaac's emotional world. The loss of his mother, who was his primary source of security and emotional stability, would have deepened Isaac's sense of abandonment and reinforced his retreat into passivity. In this sense, Sarah's death is not just a tragic event; it is a turning point that shapes Isaac's relationship with others, particularly with his future wife Rebekah.[123]

The Invisible Trauma of Hagar and Ishmael

The Akedah also has far-reaching implications for Hagar and Ishmael, who are no longer directly part of the family system but remain emotionally entangled. Hagar, having been cast out with her son by Abraham at Sarah's insistence, carries with her the trauma of being both a servant and a mother who was used and discarded.[124] Ishmael, though not the target in the Akedah, is nevertheless affected by the dynamics that led to it. He is the "other son," the one who was rejected in favor of Isaac, a rejection that shapes his identity and his relationship with both his father and his half-brother.[125]

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[122] Boss, *The Myth of Closure*, 17.
[123] Gen. 24:67.
[124] Gen. 21:10-14.
[125] Gen. 21:9-12.

From the perspective of Bowen's theory, the triangulation that existed between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar is a key factor in understanding the family's dysfunction. Hagar was drawn into the family system as a surrogate, meant to alleviate Sarah's anxiety about her barrenness.[126] However, rather than resolving the underlying issues, Hagar's involvement only intensified the emotional volatility within the family, leading to further trauma. Her eventual expulsion, and Ishmael's along with her, did not remove the tension; instead, it simply displaced it onto Isaac, leaving scars that would reverberate across generations.[127]

For Ishmael, being sent away likely instilled a profound sense of rejection and abandonment. These feelings would have been further intensified by the knowledge that his father was willing to sacrifice his half-brother, as noted in *Midrash Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer.*[128] While the Akedah narrative focuses on Isaac, the Midrash interpretation suggests that for Ishmael, it serves as a stark reminder that he too was an expendable son who could be cast out without consequence. In *Midrash Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*, Eliezer reminds Ishmael, "He has already driven thee out like a woman divorced from her husband, and he has sent thee away to the wilderness."[129] This statement reflects a theological perspective within Jewish thought that Abraham's actions traumatized not just one, but both of his sons, highlighting his inability to maintain a clear sense of self amid familial anxiety. For Ishmael, this awareness would have shaped his self-perception and future relationships, allowing for some level of self-differentiation

[126] Gen. 16:1-4.
[127] Gen. 21:14-21.
[128] *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 31:5*, accessed November 19, 2024, https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_DeRabbi_Eliezer.31.4?lang=bi.
[129] Ibid

by establishing bonds of empathy and understanding echoed in the later union between Isaac's and Ishmael's descendants through marriage.[130]

Abraham's Servant Eliezer: The Silent Witness

One often-overlooked character in the Akedah narrative is Eliezer, Abraham's trusted servant, who, according to *Midrash Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*, accompanied Abraham and Isaac on their journey to Moriah.[131] While the text does not explicitly name Eliezer in this story, Jewish tradition holds that he was one of the two servants mentioned in Genesis 22:3 who were left behind as Abraham and Isaac ascended the mountain. Eliezer's presence adds another layer to the story's complexity, as he serves as a silent witness to the unfolding drama.

From a psychological standpoint, the role of a silent witness in a traumatic event is significant. Witnesses, especially those who are powerless to intervene, often experience vicarious trauma, a form of emotional distress that occurs when one is exposed to the suffering of others. For Eliezer, watching Abraham prepare to sacrifice Isaac would have been a moment of profound inner conflict. On the one hand, he was bound by loyalty to his master; on the other, he would have been horrified at the thought of his master sacrificing his only legitimate heir. The tension between these conflicting loyalties would have left a deep emotional imprint on Eliezer, influencing how he viewed both Abraham and Isaac moving forward.

Eliezer's silence in the Akedah narrative may be interpreted as a form of emotional suppression, a common response to trauma when one cannot process or articulate what they have witnessed. This silence does not imply that the event had no impact; rather, it suggests that the

[130] Gen. 28:8-9.
[131] *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 31:4*.

trauma was internalized, remaining unspoken yet deeply ingrained. Eliezer's subsequent role in securing a wife for Isaac in Genesis 24 can be viewed as an effort to restore stability to the family system.[132] However, it also underscores his continued entanglement in the family's unresolved issues.

Like Ishmael, Eliezer was intricately tied to the family through his adoption. As Victor Harold Matthews notes in *Old Testament Parallels*, Abraham used the legal mechanisms of his time, "adopting Eliezer as his heir because he and Sarah have no natural children," to ensure the transfer of wealth within the family.[133] Perhaps Eliezer, aware of the trauma experienced by Isaac, Ishmael, and even himself, achieved a higher level of differentiation by recognizing a painful truth: to Abraham, every member of the family system was ultimately interchangeable, a means to secure his own well-being and maintain his perceived special relationship with the divine.

Abraham's Perspective: The Boundaries of Faith and the Transmission of Trauma

Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is often heralded as the ultimate example of faith, yet it is also a moment filled with profound psychological and ethical tension. From a theological perspective, his obedience is celebrated as the pinnacle of trust in God.[134] However, when analyzed through Bowen's family systems theory, Abraham's actions can also be interpreted as the culmination of unresolved trauma, anxiety, and relational dysfunction within his family system.

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[132] Gen. 24:1-9.
[133] Victor Harold Matthews, *Old Testament Parallels (New Revised and Expanded Third Edition): Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2016), Kindle Locations 453-454, Kindle Edition.
[134] Gen. 22:12.

The Akedah is not an isolated incident; it reflects a lifetime of experiences that shaped Abraham's identity, his relationship with God, and his understanding of faithfulness. Throughout his life, Abraham repeatedly faced dilemmas where he had to choose between competing loyalties, whether between Sarah and Hagar, between survival and integrity, or between his love for his son and obedience to God. These decisions, often driven by fear and anxiety, led to pragmatic choices that left deep emotional scars on those around him. Moreover, the narrative raises questions about God's intentions. As Linafelt observes:

> Without knowing what motivates God or what God is thinking as the knife is raised, we cannot finally even know whether Abraham has passed or failed the test. Most readers assume that he has passed, but a few have dared to suggest that God wanted not blind obedience from Abraham but resistance, after all, such resistance was honored when Abraham argued on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, and that in failing to argue with God, Abraham failed to show the strength of character that God hoped to see.[135]

Bowen's concept of differentiation offers a lens through which to understand Abraham's internal struggle. A well-differentiated individual can balance their own needs and values with the expectations of others while maintaining a strong sense of self, even under intense pressure. In the Akedah, however, this balance breaks down. Abraham suppresses his emotions and submits to blind obedience, or as Davis suggests, relies on "Abraham's capacity for trust."[136] This lack of differentiation is evident in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac without question. While traditional interpretations celebrate this as an act of faith, it could also be viewed as a tragic failure to engage with the relational and emotional complexities of the moment.

As Linafelt notes, Abraham's silence is striking in light of his earlier willingness to argue with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah.[137] This raises questions about his internal state.

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[135] Linafelt, *The Hebrew Bible as Literature*, 39.
[136] Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures*, 30.
[137] Linafelt, *The Hebrew Bible as Literature*, 39

Abraham's previous actions reflect a tension between his agency and his perceived obligation to divine authority. For example, as Davis points out, "Abraham's willingness to pass off Sarah as his sister and see her go into the harem of a powerful ruler, not once but twice (12:10–20; 20:1–18), suggests that he does not trust God to see them through; he is looking out for himself."[138] Yet, in the face of the divine command to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham remains silent and seemingly indifferent. There is no debate with God, no attempt to scheme or find an alternative to Isaac, just silence.

This silence may stem from Abraham's own unresolved grief and emotional cutoff, influenced by Sarah's immaturity and his family's history of dysfunction. Just as Terah may have displaced his family due to unresolved grief over the death of Haran, Abraham could be grappling with his own trauma and struggling to process the emotional immaturity within his family system. His ambiguous response to the command to sacrifice Isaac may reflect this ongoing struggle.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida offers an additional perspective on the ambiguity of Abraham's actions in *The Gift of Death*. He describes Abraham's obedience as "absolutely irresponsible in the face of men and his family, and in the face of the ethical, because he responds absolutely to absolute duty, disinterestedly and without hoping for a reward, without knowing why yet keeping it secret; answering to God and before God."[139]

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[138] Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures*, 31.
[139] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, *Second Edition & Literature in Secret* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 73, Kindle Edition.

The ethical and theological implications are so challenging that the Book of Jubilees, a post-exilic text, divorces God from the command entirely, attributing it instead to Prince Mastema, which is equivalent to Satan:

> Prince Mastema came and said before God, "Look, Abraham loves Isaac his son, and he delights in him above all things, tell him to offer him as a burnt-offering on the altar, and You will see if he will do this command, and You will know if he is faithful in everyway that You test him."[140]

For a modern audience, rather than seeing God as a mere tester of faith, we can interpret the divine as a participant in a complex relational dynamic, where generational trauma is brought to the surface and confronted. The angel's last-minute intervention may be understood not merely as an act of divine mercy but as a literary signal of hope, employed by the writers of Genesis to demonstrate that the cycle of trauma can be broken.[141] Understanding the Akedah as a moment where trauma is transmitted rather than resolved reframes the narrative by highlighting the complexities of its human and divine dimensions. Even in the face of immense pressure, a way out exists, or as text puts it, "The Lord will provide."[142] Perhaps, for those living as an exiled community in Babylon, this text served as a way for the writers of Genesis to emphasize the importance of retaining faith, even in the face of total loss, as a reminder that God will provide when all seems bleak.

The Akedah, therefore, is not simply a tale of faith rewarded but a narrative exploration of the relational, psychological, and theological tensions within the human and divine experience. It invites readers to grapple with the enduring impact of generational trauma and the possibility of interrupting its transmission through acts of grace and intervention.

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[140] Joseph Lumpkin, *The Apocrypha: Including Books from the Ethiopic Bible* (Blountsville, AL: Fifth Estate Publishing, 2010), 518, Kindle Edition.
[141] Gen. 22:11-12
[142] Gen. 22:14.

Setting the Stage for Jacob and Joseph: The Legacy of the Akedah

The trauma of the Akedah does not end with Isaac; it reverberates through the lives of his descendants, particularly Jacob and Joseph. Isaac's experience on Mount Moriah sets the tone for how he relates to his own children, leading to a family dynamic marked by favoritism, deceit, and rivalry.[143] The unresolved trauma that began with Abraham's journey continues to play out in the lives of his grandchildren, who, like their forebears, must navigate the complexities of identity, loyalty, and divine calling.

In the next chapter, we will explore how Jacob, as the inheritor of both the promises and the traumas of his father and grandfather, navigates these dynamics. Unlike Isaac, who remains largely passive, Jacob exhibits a high degree of agency, albeit in ways that often perpetuate the family's dysfunction. His story is one of both struggle and growth, as he learns to differentiate himself from the patterns of deceit and rivalry that defined his upbringing.

Joseph, on the other hand, represents a shift toward greater differentiation and healing within the family system. As we will see, Joseph's journey from being the favored son to becoming a powerful leader in Egypt involves a process of self-discovery and transformation that allows him to break free from the cycles of trauma that have plagued his family. His ability to forgive and reconcile with his brothers stands in stark contrast to the patterns of conflict and retribution that characterized the earlier generations. [144]

The Akedah as a Turning Point in the Abrahamic Family System

[143] Gen. 25:28 and 27:1-35.
[144] Gen. 45:1-15 and 50:15-21.

The Akedah is more than a test of faith; it is a moment of profound psychological and relational significance that reverberates throughout the generations. By examining this event through the lens of family systems theory, we gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play within the Abrahamic family and the ways in which unresolved trauma shapes the identities and relationships of its members.

As we transition to the stories of Jacob and Joseph in the next chapter, we will see how the legacy of the Akedah continues to influence the family's journey. The narrative shifts from a focus on survival and obedience to one of reconciliation and transformation, offering a glimpse of hope for breaking the cycles of trauma that have defined the family's history. Through the lens of self-differentiation, we will explore how the characters in these stories either perpetuate or transcend the patterns of dysfunction that have been passed down to them, ultimately leading to a vision of healing and wholeness that points toward the fulfillment of the divine promises made to Abraham.

Chapter 4: Jacob's Journey Toward Self-Differentiation – Breaking the Cycle of Generational Trauma

Psychoanalysis and the Inner Journey Toward Healing

The process of psychoanalysis is often likened to a long, arduous journey into the self, a journey requiring a willingness to confront the shadows and wounds lying deep within the psyche. For those who undertake this journey, it is not merely about resolving surface-level issues but about excavating the layers of generational pain, inherited trauma, and unconscious patterns that shape one's life. As psychoanalyst Carl Jung describes in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, psychoanalysis is a "treatment by catharsis," with the goal being "full confession, not merely intellectual acknowledgment of the facts, but their confirmation by the heart and the actual release of the suppressed emotions."[145] Psychoanalysis demands commitment, patience, and the courage to face uncomfortable truths. It is a process of disentangling the loops that bind us to destructive behaviors and thought patterns, offering the possibility of liberation and authentic selfhood.

For many, entering into psychoanalysis can feel overwhelming. Seeing a psychoanalyst multiple times a week and revisiting the same stories and traumas might seem like an excessive commitment. Yet, it is through this repetitive process that insights emerge and patterns become clearer. Jung goes further in comparing psychoanalysis to the "groundwork of psychoanalysis and the religious institution of the confessional."[146] Opening one's psyche through conversation may seem simplistic to those who favor more action-oriented intellectual therapies. However,

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[145] Carl Gustav Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1933), 36, Kindle Edition.
[146] Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, 31.

psychoanalysis is not merely an intellectual exercise; it is an experience of being seen and heard by another, a witness who, through careful observation and empathetic listening, helps bring the hidden aspects of one's inner world into consciousness. The belief that we are all made in the image of God resonates deeply here. When observed by another in a therapeutic setting, we are, in a sense, being observed by the divine, the God within each of us who sees our authentic selves, even when we cannot. As Jung notes:

> (Psychoanalysts) appeal only to the patient's brain if we try to inculcate a truth; but if we help him to grow up to this truth in the course of his own development, we have reached his heart, and this appeal goes deeper and acts with greater force.[147]

This spiritual dimension of psychoanalysis echoes the transformative journeys of biblical characters who, through deep introspection, divine encounters, and moral struggle, break free from destructive cycles and emerge into fuller expressions of their true selves. Figures like Moses, Elijah, and Jeremiah undergo intense self-examination, often in isolation, as they wrestle with their callings and the burdens placed upon them. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel describes the prophet as someone upon whose soul God has thrust a burden, a "crossing point" between the divine and the human.[148] At such moments of divine intersection, one confronts not only external challenges but also internal forces, the fears, doubts, and inherited wounds that threaten to keep them bound. It is through this process of wrestling with their inner selves that they are transformed, emerging with a renewed sense of purpose and identity. This transformation goes beyond individual change, entering the realm of collective challenge and disrupting the status quo. As Walter Brueggemann explains in *The Prophetic Imagination*, one who has been intersected by the divine and transformed from the inside out begins to "evoke a consciousness

[147] Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, 10.
[148] Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 5-6, Kindle Edition.

and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."[149] This concept will be explored later in this chapter through the life and actions of Joseph.

In the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, we find characters whose choices set them apart from the patterns defining their families and communities. These are the Esthers and Ruths, the Boazes and Jonathans, whose small acts of courage and faith ripple through history, transforming not only their own paths but also the collective outcomes of the narrative. For example, in tracing the lineage of Jesus, we see a tapestry woven with figures who, by embracing their unique callings, contribute to the realization of a divine promise. Their stories are not without struggle; in fact, it is precisely through their struggles, wrestling with fears, limitations, and the expectations of others, that they become conduits of transformation. As Heschel describes, they are vessels through whom "God is raging" in their words and actions.[150]

This chapter examines the stories of Jacob and Joseph through the lens of Bowen Family Systems Theory and post-traumatic growth, incorporating insights from previous chapters on Abraham and Isaac. Jacob's journey is one of growth and transformation, marked by key moments where he confronts his role in family dynamics, wrestles with internal conflicts, and makes conscious choices that lead to greater self-differentiation. We will also explore Esau's parallel journey toward self-differentiation and the significance of their eventual reconciliation in breaking cycles of generational trauma. Finally, Joseph's arduous journey will be analyzed as an example of a fully self-differentiated person whose lived experiences present a proto-messianic figure in Genesis. Through biblical examples and personal reflections, this chapter delves into

[149] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 3, Kindle Edition.
[150] Heschel, *The Prophets*, 6.

the immense work required to break free from familial dysfunction and move toward healing and wholeness.

The Wounds of Generational Trauma: Jacob's Early Life and the Influence of Family Dynamics

Jacob's life is shaped from the beginning by the unresolved traumas and anxieties of his parents and grandparents. His birth is marked by conflict, as he emerges from the womb grasping the heel of his twin brother Esau, symbolizing the rivalry that will define their relationship.[151] This tension reflects the family dynamics passed down through generations, Abraham's deception, Isaac's passivity, and Rebekah's favoritism all contribute to the complex web of relationships that entangle Jacob from birth. Notably, the very names given to members of the Abrahamic family system by the writers of Genesis reflect these complexities and their place within the family. As theologians Amy-Jill Levine and Douglas Knight observe in *The Meaning of the Bible: What the Jewish Scriptures and Christian Old Testament Can Teach Us*, in the Hebrew Bible, "a name is more than just a handle; it expresses something essential about the one carrying it…a fundamental trait or experience."[152]

Rebekah, who favors Jacob over Esau, plays a pivotal role in shaping Jacob's early identity.[153] Her preference for Jacob is driven not only by maternal love but also by her need to find validation and purpose within a family system marked by patriarchal dominance and emotional distance. Rebekah's favoritism is an attempt to elevate Jacob's status within the family, positioning him as the chosen heir to Isaac's blessing. In *Womanist Midrash*, Wilda

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[151] Gen. 25:21-26 (New Revised Standard Version).
[152] Douglas A. Knight and Amy-Jill Levine, *The Meaning of the Bible: What the Jewish Scriptures and Christian Old Testament Can Teach Us* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 206-207, Kindle Edition.
[153] Gen. 25:28.

Gafney points out that the writers also involve God in the family dynamics, noting, "Rebekah loves her younger son, Ya'aqov (Jacob), the one God said would dominate his older brother, Esav (Esau)."[154] Conversely, Isaac's love for Esau reflects an inherent favoritism that parallels his own relationship with his brother Ishmael. In that earlier dynamic, Abraham's bond with Ishmael is emotionally manipulated and ultimately severed by Sarah, who chooses to prioritize her son Isaac over the child of her servant Hagar, even though Isaac is technically the second-born.[155] One could argue that Isaac's favoritism toward Esau is not only tied to Esau's birth order but also to how he is described in the text as a "skillful hunter, a man of the field," in contrast to Jacob, who is depicted as a "quiet man, living in tents."[156] Esau embodies traits associated with traditional masculinity, strong, hairy, and powerful, what modern audiences might call a "man's man." Jacob, on the other hand, is portrayed as a "mama's boy," quiet and reserved, with smooth skin, spending his time cooking and dwelling in the tents with his mother and the other women of the household, a role traditionally viewed as feminine.[157]

Is it possible that Isaac's love for Esau is rooted in the unfulfilled affection he wished he had received from Abraham, rather than being treated as merely another instrument of Abraham's devotion to God? Similarly, could Rebekah's love for Jacob stem from her understanding of Isaac's past, as she seeks to protect Jacob from enduring the kind of suffering his father experienced on Mount Moriah? This favoritism, however, comes at a cost, it entrenches the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau and sets the stage for the deception that will define Jacob's early life.

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[154] Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2017), 49, Kindle Edition.
[155] Gen. 16:1-6; 21:8-14.
[156] Gen. 25:27-28.
[157] Gen. 25:29; 27:11.

From a Bowenian perspective, Rebekah's actions can be understood as a projection of her unresolved anxieties. By manipulating family dynamics to secure Jacob's future, she attempts to resolve her feelings of powerlessness and insignificance. In doing so, however, she transmits her anxieties onto Jacob, making him complicit in the deception of his father and the alienation of his brother.[158] Gafney argues that "it is Rebekah and not Jacob [who] defrauds Esau because it is her plan."[159] Although Rebekah originates the plan to deceive Isaac, Jacob's passivity cannot be reduced to mere blind obedience to his mother. The generational pattern of using deceit as a survival mechanism is well established in the Abrahamic family system and undoubtedly permeates it in unconscious ways. This pattern of deceit and trickery continues as Jacob, still enmeshed in his mother's influence, lacks the differentiation needed to forge his own path. His lack of self-differentiation makes him complicit in the deception, one that divine providence itself set in motion before his birth: "One shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."[160] For Rebekah, Esau's continued ascendency forces her to become an active participant in fulfilling the promise that the son she loves will overturn the status quo.

The deception of Isaac, in which Jacob disguises himself as Esau to steal the blessing, is a pivotal moment that exposes the depths of family dysfunction.[161] Jacob's reliance on his mother's plan underscores his lack of agency and his dependence on the approval and guidance of others. In this moment, Jacob does not act out of his convictions or values; he becomes a vessel for the ambitions and anxieties of those around him. The fallout from this event, Esau's

[158] Gen. 27:1-9.
[159] Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 50-51.
[160] Gen. 25:23.
[161] Gen. 27:1-29.

anger and the subsequent estrangement between the brothers, marks the beginning of Jacob's long journey toward self-differentiation.

Jacob's Flight: Emotional Cutoff as a Catalyst for Growth

After deceiving his father and stealing Esau's blessing, Jacob is forced to flee his home to avoid his brother's wrath.[162] This physical separation from his family exemplifies what Bowen refers to as emotional cutoff, a strategy often employed by individuals who struggle to manage the emotional intensity of their family relationships. Emotional cutoff can manifest as physical distance, as in Jacob's case, or as deliberate avoidance of emotional engagement. While typically a defense mechanism signaling low differentiation, in Jacob's story, it becomes the first step in his journey toward growth.

Leaving home allows Jacob to temporarily escape the toxic dynamics that have shaped his life. However, the deeper issues remain unresolved, and Jacob carries the weight of his family's dysfunction with him. As Wilda Gafney observes, Rebekah's final act is to direct Jacob to her brother Laban's land, ensuring that he marries within her family of origin and not "a Hittite woman like his brother."[163] In this final act of the narrative, Rebekah further enmeshes Jacob within her family system, exposing him to the same unresolved trauma and dynamics that defined her own life and choices. Jacob's journey to Laban's household is marked by events that mirror the dynamics he sought to leave behind, deception, manipulation, and rivalry remain central themes.[164] Laban's deceit, particularly the swapping of Leah for Rachel on Jacob's

[162] Gen. 27:41-45.
[163] Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 51.
[164] Gen. 29:1-30.

wedding night, starkly reminds Jacob that he cannot fully escape the patterns of his past. To find true liberation, he must confront these dynamics directly.

Laban's betrayal becomes a turning point for Jacob, forcing him to recognize the pain that deceit can inflict. Judith Herman notes that when individuals are consciously impacted by their traumatic past, they begin to craft a new future through mourning and introspection.[165] In Jacob's case, this process begins as he incorporates the lessons of his traumatic experiences, taking deliberate "steps to increase his sense of power and control."[166] Unlike his father, Isaac, who passively accepted the deceptions in his life, Jacob begins to respond with a growing awareness of his agency. He devises a plan to outwit Laban, using his intelligence, curiosity, and knowledge of animal husbandry to build wealth and secure independence.[167] Perhaps Jacob became aware of what Herman calls a recognition of how one "understands the effects of (their) victimization," incorporating "the lessons of (their) traumatic experience into (their) life."[168] Through his recognition and intimate awareness of the pain caused by deceit, Jacob embarks on a journey of introspection, recognizing the toxic effects of trickery and how deeply it is ingrained in his family system. This moment of self-reflection, coupled with intellectual creativity and strategic thinking, marks a significant step in Jacob's journey toward self-differentiation. He is no longer a passive participant in the schemes of others but is actively shaping his own destiny.

The true test of Jacob's growth, however, comes not in his dealings with Laban but in his decision to return home and confront the unresolved conflict with Esau.[169] This decision is

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[165] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 281, Kindle Edition.
[166] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 282.
[167] Gen. 30:25-43.
[168] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 282.
[169] Gen. 31:1-3.

fraught with fear and uncertainty, as Jacob must face the consequences of his past actions. Yet, it is in this moment of vulnerability that Jacob takes a decisive step toward breaking the cycle of generational trauma. By choosing to face his brother rather than continue running, Jacob demonstrates a willingness to engage with the emotional realities of his life rather than avoid them. Herman notes that as individuals ascend the ladder of self-differentiation, they begin to "take more initiative in (their lives)...creating a new identity," enabling them "to risk deepening (their) relationships" with friends and family.[170] Jacob's return reflects this transformative process, as he begins to reconcile his past and forge a new path toward healing and wholeness.

Wrestling with the Divine: The Night of Transformation

The night before Jacob is set to meet Esau, he finds himself alone, wrestling with a mysterious figure until daybreak.[171] This enigmatic encounter, often interpreted as a struggle with God, carries profound psychological and theological significance. On one level, it represents a moment of intense introspection, a confrontation with the unresolved fears, guilt, and anxieties that have plagued Jacob throughout his life. On another level, it is a divine encounter that catalyzes a profound transformation in Jacob's identity. It is no coincidence that this confrontation occurs after Jacob decides to leave his uncle, seek reconciliation with his brother, and face the consequences of his past actions. This trifecta exemplifies what American psychologist Richard Tedeschi identifies in *Transformed by Trauma: Stories of Posttraumatic Growth* as the "three elements of posttraumatic growth… appreciation for life, relationships with

[170] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 293.
[171] Gen. 32:22-32.

others, and spiritual and existential change."[172] Jacob is evolving into a new version of himself, taking risks as he climbs the ladder of self-differentiation.

From a psychological perspective, this wrestling match culminates Jacob's internal struggle to differentiate himself from the destructive patterns of his past. Throughout his life, Jacob has been defined by his relationships with others, his mother's favoritism, his father's neglect, his brother's rivalry, and his uncle's manipulation.[173] In this solitary moment, Jacob is forced to confront himself without the influence of these external forces. The struggle is not only with the divine but also with the hidden, unexamined parts of himself, those that have kept him trapped in cycles of deceit and conflict. Judith Herman describes this process as an introspective reexamination of "aspects of [one's] own personality or behavior that rendered [one] vulnerable to exploitation."[174] For Jacob, it is a reckoning with the internalized patterns of manipulation and survival that have shaped his identity.

The physical injury Jacob sustains during the wrestling match, his dislocated hip, serves as a metaphor for the profound psychological shift within him.[175] Transformation often comes at a cost, and for Jacob, this cost is both physical and symbolic. The limp he carries afterward becomes a visible reminder of the internal battle he fought and the changes he underwent. Galit Atlas explains that unprocessed trauma often manifests as physical symptoms, where the psyche intersects with the body; in this way, "the body experiences what the mind cannot remember."[176] Jacob's transformation is further underscored by his name change from Jacob to Israel. No

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[172] Richard G. Tedeschi, *Transformed by Trauma: Stories of Posttraumatic Growth* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2021), 68, Kindle Edition.
[173] Gen. 25:28.
[174] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 286
[175] Gen. 32:25-32.
[176] Galit Atlas, *Emotional Inheritance: A Therapist, Her Patients, and the Legacy of Trauma* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2022), 120, Kindle Edition.

longer the "heel-grabber" or deceiver, Jacob is now "Israel," a name that signifies his new identity as one who has wrestled with God and prevailed.

Theologically, this moment fulfills the promise given to Abraham. Jacob's transformation into Israel is not merely a personal victory; it is the realization of the divine covenant established generations earlier.[177] The name "Israel" encapsulates the essence of the nation that will emerge from Jacob's descendants, a people who, like their patriarch, will wrestle with God, endure suffering, and ultimately find redemption. Jacob's journey from deception to reconciliation mirrors the broader narrative of Israel's relationship with God, marked by cycles of conflict, repentance, and renewal.

Psychologically, Jacob is transformed from the inside out. The writers of Genesis depict this transformation as both physical and psychological, creating a literary link between the inner self and the external world. At this point in the story, Jacob becomes acutely aware of the pain inflicted by his family's repeated patterns of trickery, deceit, and pride. Through Laban's actions, he has come to understand how these behaviors perpetuate harm, enriching some at the expense of others. It is a similar family dynamics that enriched Jacob's family of origin as Abraham lies and uses Sarah and his possible knowledge of foreign laws, as suggested by Victor Harold Matthews, in his book *Old Testament Parallels*, to gain favor and riches from those in positions of high status.[178] Levine and Knight agree that Abraham and Sarah's trip to "was profitable, as they return to Canaan with the property Pharaoh had bestowed on (Abraham)."[179] These toxic

[177] Gen. 35:9-12.
[178] Victor Harold Matthews, *Old Testament Parallels (New Revised and Expanded Third Edition): Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2016), Kindle Location 450, Kindle Edition.
[179] Knight and Levine, *The Meaning of the Bible*, 234.

elements, woven into Jacob's family system, constitute a cycle of generational trauma, repeating from one generation to the next.

Jacob's wrestling with God can be interpreted through Atlas's insight that the unconscious compels individuals to confront "what went wrong, the wish to do it all over again, repair the damage, and heal those who were hurt and wounded."[180] Similarly, Richard Tedeschi, Crystal Park, and Lawrence Calhoun suggest in *Posttraumatic Growth: Positive Changes in the Aftermath of Crisis* that in times of high anxiety and stress, growth occurs when individuals "step back from the immediacy of events and take a broader perspective. In this way, even the most traumatic events can take on various meanings and evoke less emotional distress."[181] That night, Jacob did much more than wrestle with past hurts and trauma. He entered into a new relationship with himself, his past, and his future. This encounter not only transformed Jacob but also affected his entire family system. It brought closure to the multitude of unresolved dynamics, integrating and rehabilitating them into Jacob's new identity as Israel.

Esau's Journey of Forgiveness and Self-Differentiation

While much of the focus is on Jacob's transformation, Esau's journey is equally significant in understanding the dynamics of reconciliation and self-differentiation. Esau, wronged by his brother and denied the blessing that was rightfully his, could have easily harbored resentment and sought revenge.[182] Yet, when the two brothers finally meet, Esau

[180] Atlas, *Emotional Inheritance*, 264.
[181] Richard G. Tedeschi, Crystal L. Park, and Lawrence G. Calhoun, *Posttraumatic Growth: Positive Changes in the Aftermath of Crisis* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1998), 14, Kindle Edition.
[182] Gen. 27:30-41.

embraces Jacob with open arms, offering forgiveness rather than retribution.[183] This act of grace testifies to Esau's process of growth and differentiation.

Esau's decision to marry a daughter from the line of Ishmael is a crucial detail that provides insight into his journey toward healing.[184] By aligning himself with Ishmael's descendants, Esau creates a bridge between two branches of the Abrahamic family that were previously estranged. This marriage serves as a symbolic act of reconciliation, not only between Esau and Jacob but also between the lineages of Isaac and Ishmael, both of which were affected by Abraham's choices. Judith Herman notes that trauma disrupts familial and community connections. However, those who survive "learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others."[185] Through this union, Esau positions himself as a figure seeking to heal rifts within the survivors of family trauma rather than perpetuate them.

From a Bowenian perspective, Esau's actions demonstrate a high level of self-differentiation. He separates his own identity and values from the hurt and betrayal he experienced, choosing a path of forgiveness and reconciliation. By confronting the pain of his past and integrating it into his present, Esau moves beyond the cycles of rivalry and conflict that have defined his family. As Herman explains, Esau's introspection into the effects of trauma on the extended family system allows him to "take more initiative in [his] life and [be] in the process of creating a new identity."[186] His ability to forgive Jacob is not a sign of weakness but

[183] Gen. 33:1-14.
[184] Gen. 28:8-9.
[185] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 307.
[186] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 293.

of strength, it reflects a profound understanding of their interconnected lives and a willingness to move forward in peace.[187]

Esau's reconciliation with Jacob also highlights the importance of emotional cutoff in the process of differentiation. By creating distance from his brother after the initial betrayal, Esau was able to process his emotions and reach a place of forgiveness. This time apart allowed both brothers to grow independently, each coming to terms with their respective roles in the family drama. When they finally reunite, they do so as individuals who have undergone significant transformation, ready to engage with one another from a place of mutual respect rather than rivalry.

The Significance of Jacob's Name Change: From Deceiver to Israel

The name change from Jacob to Israel signifies more than just a shift in identity; it represents a transformation of the entire family system. In Hebrew, the name "Israel" is often translated as "one who wrestles with God" or "God prevails," both of which encapsulate the essence of Jacob's journey.[188] This new name marks a break from the past, a departure from the patterns of deceit and manipulation that defined Jacob's early life. It suggests that Jacob has undergone a profound internal change, one that will not only reshape his own life but also the lives of his descendants. Viewed from the perspective of psychological theory, this transformation arises not from external conflict or violence but from Jacob's introspection and self-analysis, which enabled him to climb the ladder of self-differentiation. As Judith Herman explains, those who embark on the journey of liberation from trauma can reimagine their

[187] Gen. 33:9-11.
[188] Gen. 32:28.

authentic selves through "the active exercise of imagination and fantasy."[189] Alone in that tent, Jacob began the process of self-liberation, an internal battle in which his false self engaged in mortal conflict with his true self. The outcome of this battle was a new name that reflected Jacob's rebirth as Israel.

Theologically, Jacob's name change represents the fulfillment of the covenantal promise made to Abraham. The transformation of Jacob into Israel is a pivotal moment in the biblical narrative, marking the beginning of a people, a kingdom, that will bear this name.[190] Through Jacob's journey of self-differentiation, the promise given to Abraham, that his descendants would become a great nation, is realized in a transformative way. The struggles, conflicts, and reconciliations Jacob experiences are echoed in the history of Israel, a people that, like their patriarch, wrestles with God and finds its identity amidst adversity and chaos. Jacob symbolizes hope in the face of such adversity, offering a narrative that the exiled community in Babylon desperately needed as they faced an uncertain future. As Amy-Jill Levine and Douglas Knight observe, those who read or heard the story of Jacob's triumph over adversity "may associate him with Solomon; they are both figures who use their brains rather than military might to achieve their ends."[191] For the exiled community, stripped of military power and living in a foreign land, Jacob's story offered a source of hope, illustrating how words and wisdom could triumph where weapons could not. This narrative served as a literary vehicle for processing their traumatic experiences, providing continuity and resilience in the face of displacement.

Jacob's name change also carries significant psychological implications. In the ancient world, names were more than mere labels; they encapsulated one's identity and destiny.

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[189] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 289.
[190] Gen. 35:9-12.
[191] Knight and Levine, *The Meaning of the Bible*, 64.

Receiving a new name symbolized Jacob's rebirth, freeing him from the limitations of his past. The narrative situates Jacob alone, suggesting his experience could be interpreted as a nightmare or a cathartic moment, enabling him to shed years of trauma and pain. Did he cry as though facing death? Did he feel the pressure in his chest, the shortness of breath that often accompanies profound emotional release? If he was alone, who was he wrestling with? Levine and Knight propose that the opponent may have been "Jacob's conscience, was the patriarch wrestling with, and wounded by, his own shame and guilt?"[192] This internal wrestling with shame and guilt, along with the subsequent feelings of rebirth, mirrors the process of psychoanalysis, where one confronts their past, present, and the many potential futures that can unfold. The concept of rebirth is central to the church's understanding of transformation, as baptism and salvation are means of dying to the false self and being reborn into one's true self in Christ. In that tent, Jacob was born again, as he declared, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."[193]

For Jacob, the name "Israel" reflects the integration of his life experiences, the struggles, deceptions, and moments of introspection, that culminated in his transformation. It is a name that embodies both the individual and collective journey toward healing and reconciliation, symbolizing not just Jacob's personal evolution but also the redemptive trajectory of his descendants.

The Path Toward Reconciliation and Wholeness

Jacob's journey is one of profound transformation, marked by moments of introspection, confrontation, and, ultimately, reconciliation. Through his encounters with family members, the

[192] *Ibid, 133-134*
[193] Gen. 32:30.

divine within, and his internal conflicts, Jacob gradually raises his level of self-differentiation, breaking free from the cycles of trauma that have plagued his lineage.[194] His story provides a powerful model for those seeking to heal from generational wounds, illustrating the importance of self-awareness, resilience, and the willingness to confront the past.

As we move into the second part of this chapter, our focus shifts to the story of Joseph, who represents the culmination of the process of differentiation within the Abrahamic family system. Unlike his forebears, Joseph attains a level of self-differentiation that enables him to rise above the rivalries and dysfunctions of his family, becoming a figure of reconciliation and salvation. His journey, which takes him from betrayal and exile to power and restoration, exemplifies the potential for growth and healing even within the most broken family systems.[195]

In the next section, we will explore how Joseph's story builds upon the themes of transformation and reconciliation introduced in Jacob's narrative. We will examine how Joseph's choices lead to the breaking of cycles of trauma and the realization of the divine promise in a new and profound way.

Joseph and the Redemption of Jacob's Family – A Proto-Messianic Journey Toward Healing

The Sons of Jacob – Love and Family Conflict

The story of Joseph, Jacob's beloved son, is deeply intertwined with themes of generational trauma, sibling rivalry, and the possibility of redemption. From a Bowen Family Systems Theory perspective, Joseph's story represents a culmination of the unresolved anxieties,

[194] Gen. 33:1-11 and 32:22-32.
[195] Gen. 37:1-36 and 45:1-15.

rivalries, and dysfunctions that have plagued Jacob's lineage. Yet, amidst the chaos of this family system, Joseph emerges as a figure who breaks the cycles of violence and resentment, demonstrating a level of self-differentiation and wisdom that surpasses his forebears.

Jacob's family tree is a complex web of relationships, marked by favoritism, deceit, and rivalry. His twelve sons, born to multiple wives and concubines, reflect the tensions and conflicts inherent in a family system burdened by unresolved trauma. Leah's sons, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun, carry the resentment of knowing they were born from a union not of love but of deception.[196] Rachel's sons, Joseph and Benjamin, are favored by Jacob due to his deep love for Rachel, creating a stark divide between them and their half-brothers.[197] Meanwhile, the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, Rachel and Leah's maids, complicate the family dynamics further, as their lower status within the family hierarchy exacerbates rivalry and competition.[198]

The repetition of anxious pregnancy dynamics within Jacob's nuclear family parallels the tension between Sarah and Hagar. One striking aspect of this repetition is the divine intervention portrayed in the text: God takes pity on Leah, opening her womb because she is unloved by Jacob.[199] Jacob and Leah's relationship, initiated through Laban's deception in switching his daughters after the wedding feast, underscores the manipulation of women as tools by men wielding power to advance their own interests. When Jacob discovers Laban's bait and switch, he is outraged and confronts his uncle. Laban defends his actions by appealing to local customs regarding the firstborn daughter's precedence in marriage. Here, Jacob experiences the same betrayal he enacted when, with his mother's help, he usurped Esau's blessing. This moment

[196] Gen. 29:21-30.
[197] Gen. 37:3-4.
[198] Gen. 30:3-13.
[199] Gen. 29:3-31.

forces Jacob to endure the anger and pain of deception, as he must labor another seven years to marry the daughter he loves.

From a Bowenian perspective, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel are fused in what Murray Bowen terms a "family ego mass," a system where transgenerational trauma is transmitted, leading to repetitive cycles of dysfunction. As Bowen states, the term "undifferentiated family ego mass," is meant to describe the "emotional system in the 'nuclear family, father, mother, children,' whose patterns ripples throughout 'extended families and social relationship systems.'"[200] Laban's connection to Rebekah, and through her to the lineage of Abraham's brother Nahor, ties Rachel and Leah to a family system steeped in unresolved trauma.[201] This undifferentiated family ego mass can be traced back to Terah and the death of Haran, reflecting how unprocessed generational trauma radiates outward. As Galit Atlas notes, epigenetic research provides evidence for the transmission of trauma through genetic memory, affecting family systems across generations.[202] In light of epigenetic research, the ancient biblical observation that unprocessed trauma repeats "to the third and the fourth generation" finds new life modern scientific observations of transgenerational inheritance.[203]

Judith Herman observes that "resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete."[204] Despite Jacob's progress in climbing the ladder of self-differentiation, his family remains tethered to the unresolved tensions and anxieties of the system. Jacob's favoritism toward certain family members reflects unresolved issues from his past, perpetuating ripples of trauma within the family. As Herman notes, "issues that were sufficiently resolved at one stage of

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[200] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 203.
[201] Gen. 24:15.
[202] Atlas, *Emotional Inheritance*, 265-266.
[203] Exod. 20:5; Exod. 34:7; Num. 14:18.
[204] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 303.

recovery" may resurface, especially when members of the family, such as Jacob's wives and children, exhibit low levels of self-differentiation. Bowen underscores that the progress of one family member does not guarantee the differentiation of all offspring, as the effects of the undifferentiated family ego mass persist.[205]

The impact of low self-differentiation is evident in the actions of Leah's children. Their struggles with rejection and perceived injustice illustrate Bowen's observation that individuals at lower levels of differentiation are more likely to cling to rigid beliefs, hold others responsible for their happiness, and resort to extreme emotional mechanisms like isolation, conflict, or violence to manage closeness.[206] Conversely, Rachel's children, particularly Joseph, demonstrate higher levels of self-differentiation, with Joseph reaching an exceptional level on Bowen's scale. In his book, *Differentiation of Self: Bowen Family Systems Theory Perspective*, Peter Titelman explains that differentiation of self refers to the ability to distinguish between thoughtful, purposeful actions and impulsive, emotional reactions. Adding that Bowen's model places individuals on a spectrum that quantifies "individuals according to their ability to differentiate between emotional and intellectual functioning."[207] The lower one is on the scale, the more emotionally fuse they are within the family system. The higher one is, the less reactive one becomes to family dynamics during times of heightened anxiety, with those on the top exhibiting extraordinary levels of self-control and emotional maturity. Titelman adds that:

> One hundred on the scale was equal to a hypothetically complete level of differentiation of self or emotional maturity, or a complete self. Zero on the scale was equivalent to

[205] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 74.
[206] Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1978), 165, Kindle Edition.
[207] Peter Titelman, *Differentiation of Self: Bowen Family Systems Theory Perspectives* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2014), xvii, Kindle Edition.

> complete undifferentiation of self. Of course all people function from low to high. No one is either a total no self or a total complete self.[208]

Bowen himself acknowledged rarely encountering such differentiated individuals in his clinical or personal experience.[209] Joseph's story is an example of someone who comes close to the theoretical limits of Bowen's model, providing a narrative of hope for exiled communities and prefiguring the liberating themes of the Exodus.

The complex family dynamics described above set the stage for Joseph's rise, fall, and ultimate triumph. His journey, from favored son to slave, and from prisoner to ruler of Egypt, is more than a tale of personal resilience. It is a narrative of how one individual transcends the destructive patterns of his family system, bringing healing and reconciliation to those around him. Theologically, Joseph's story is profound, as his actions foreshadow the messianic hope woven throughout Hebrew prophetic literature. Joseph emerges as a proto-messianic figure, embodying wisdom, forgiveness, and reconciliation, qualities that prefigure the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to Israel and, through them, the world.

Limits of Individual vs. Collective Differentiation

Both Jacob and Joseph demonstrate significant levels of self-differentiation, with Joseph reaching the upper echelons of Bowen's self-differentiation scale. However, societal pressures and systemic limitations can affect even those with advanced emotional maturity and intellectual functions. Joseph's narrative in Genesis culminates in a way that raises ethical and theological questions. By leveraging his administrative skills and the authority granted by Pharaoh, Joseph

[208] Titelman, *Differentiation of Self*, 33.
[209] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 164.

mobilized Egypt during seven years of abundance to store vast reserves of essential resources, ensuring survival during the ensuing famine.[210]

Rabbi Micha Odenheimer argues in his essay, "A Jewish Response to Globalization," that Joseph symbolizes the serpent's promise to Eve, where "You will be as God (Elohim), knowing good and evil."[211] Unlike earlier patriarchs, Joseph does not directly communicate with God; instead, he acts as a human intermediary, akin to characters in Esther or Ruth, where divine will manifests indirectly through human agency.[212] Odenheimer's observation of the absence of God in the Joseph narrative suggests that Joseph "seems to function as a virtual stand-in for God, recalling the serpent's prediction" that humanity would become like God, possessing the capacity to understand their own power.[213] This awareness includes the choice of whether their actions will serve good or evil, self-interest, or the betterment of others. From the perspective of self-differentiation, Joseph's ability to remain true to himself while utilizing his God-given capacity for dream interpretation and administrative intelligence transforms him into a physical representation of the divine within the narrative. This role secures salvation for his family system, ensuring the survival of future generations as promised to Abraham. However, his human limitations, even as someone high on the differentiation scale, result in actions against the Egyptians whose consequences reverberate through the very generations he sought to save. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, in their biblical commentary in *The Jewish Study Bible*, note that Joseph's actions lead to the Egyptians losing their land and financial independence,

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[210] Gen. 41:33-36.
[211] Micha Odenheimer, *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice* (Nashville: Turner Publishing Company, 2011), Kindle Edition.
[212] Ibid
[213] Ibid

culminating in their enslavement.[214] The text details Joseph's efforts to administer his comprehensive control over the land, instituting a feudal tax system in which Egyptians retained 80% of their harvest while 20% was allocated to Pharaoh.[215] Yet this system also centralized power in a way that advantaged Pharaoh and Joseph's family, raising questions about the ethical implications of his actions.[216]

From a Bowen Family Systems perspective, two interpretations emerge. First, Joseph's self-differentiation might have driven him to consolidate control over land and resources to manage Egypt's societal anxiety and low differentiation levels effectively during the famine. His knowledge of agriculture, reminiscent of Jacob's expertise in animal husbandry, suggests he utilized advanced methods, perhaps even providing superior seeds for planting.[217] This aligns with Bowen's principle that highly differentiated individuals are often best equipped to creatively solve systemic issues.[218]

Second, Joseph's actions underscore the dangers of power centralization. Odenheimer's claim that Joseph "became like God" implies a moral duality: Joseph's understanding of good and evil shaped decisions that, while beneficial for his family, may have exacerbated inequality, foreshadowing future enslavement of the Israelites.[219] This interpretation resonates with Kohelet's reflection that "What has been is what will be... there is nothing new under the sun," as historical cycles of oppression persist.[220] Bessel van der Kolk's insight from his book, *The Body*

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[214] Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 94, Kindle Edition.
[215] Gen. 47:24.
[216] Gen. 47:1-6
[217] Gen. 47:23.
[218] Titelman, *Differentiation of Self*, 10.
[219] Odenheimer, *Righteous Indignation*.
[220] Eccl. 1:9

Keeps the Score, supports this notion, highlighting how systemic inequality breeds trauma, perpetuating a cycle of harm: "Hurt people hurt other people."[221]

Prophetic warnings about the dangers of concentrated power further illuminate Joseph's story. The Prophet Samuel warns Israel about kingship's pitfalls, highlighting the oppressive systems it could perpetuate.[222] Heschel notes that similarly, Amos critiques societal injustices, condemning affluence that blinds the elite to widespread suffering.[223] As Odenheimer states, these themes challenge readers to grapple with the ethical tension in Joseph's legacy: did he, in his quest to secure Egypt's survival, unwittingly sow the seeds of future oppression?[224]

Joseph's actions invite reflection on humanity's broader ethical responsibilities. As beings created in the image of God, with the knowledge of good and evil, we face the recurring question: do we act for the betterment of our immediate kin or for society as a whole? Joseph's story and its subsequent consequences underscore the importance of fostering collective solutions that elevate society's differentiation and resilience. Only by addressing societal anxiety with creativity and equity can we avoid repeating the destructive cycles of history.

The Favoritism of Jacob and the Roots of Resentment

Joseph's special status within Jacob's family stems from the deep love Jacob held for Rachel, his true love. Unlike Leah, whom Jacob married due to Laban's deceit, Rachel was the woman for whom Jacob willingly labored fourteen years to marry.[225] This love transfers to Joseph, Rachel's firstborn, immediately creating a divide between him and his half-brothers.

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[221] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2014), 506, Kindle Edition.
[222] 1 Sam. 8:10–22
[223] Heschel, *The Prophets*, 33.
[224] Odenheimer, *Righteous Indignation*.
[225] Gen. 29:18-30.

Jacob's overt favoritism is epitomized by the iconic "coat of many colors," a tangible symbol of Joseph's special status in his father's eyes.[226] From a Bowenian perspective, this overt favoritism exacerbates the emotional cutoff between Joseph and his brothers, intensifying the tension within the family system.

The resentment and lack of differentiation among Leah's sons stem directly from their perception of being unloved and undervalued by Jacob, who views them as secondary to Rachel's children. This emotional immaturity and alienation manifest in their aggressive behavior and eventual conspiracy against Joseph.[227] Reuben, as the firstborn, should naturally assume a leadership role within the family. However, his authority is undermined by Jacob's clear preference for Joseph, as well as later for Judah. This dynamic creates a power struggle that culminates in Reuben's moral failure when he sleeps with Bilhah, his father's concubine.[228] This act can be interpreted as an attempt to assert dominance within the family system, echoing Ham's actions in the story of Noah.[229] Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, in their biblical commentary in *The Jewish Study Bible*, note that in the Bible, the phrase "to uncover the nakedness" often means "to have sexual relations with his wife (e.g., Lev. 20.11)," as in the case for Ham.[230] Berlin and Bretter further add that when it comes to Reuben, "having intercourse with his father's concubine was a declaration of rebellion. (2 Sam. 16.20– 22; 1 Kings 2.13– 25)."[231] Reuben's transgression further destabilizes the family structure, deepening the rift between him

[226] Gen. 37:3.
[227] Gen. 37:18-20.
[228] Gen. 35:22.
[229] Gen. 9:20-24.
[230] Berlin and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2107. 94.
[231] Ibid

and Jacob. In the narrative, both Joseph and Judah eventually surpass Reuben in influence, as reflected in Jacob's deathbed blessings.[232]

The rivalry among Jacob's sons also mirrors the generational patterns established by their ancestors. The deception that led to Leah's marriage to Jacob, the manipulation of Isaac by Rebekah and Jacob, and the competition between Esau and Jacob all find echoes in the conflict between Joseph and his brothers.[233] These recurring patterns of deceit and rivalry are transmitted through the family system, perpetuating cycles of pain and resentment that threaten to fracture the family.

Joseph's Dreams and the Seeds of Conflict

Joseph's prophetic dreams, in which he envisions his brothers bowing down to him, serve as the catalyst for the events that follow.[234] While these dreams are divine revelations, they are perceived by his brothers as arrogance and a claim to superiority. Joseph's naiveté in sharing these dreams only heightens the tension, as his brothers see him not only as their father's favorite but also as a threat to their own status within the family.

From a psychological standpoint, Joseph's dreams can be interpreted as a manifestation of his unconscious awareness of the family dynamics. These dreams reflect his deep-seated belief that he is destined for greatness, a belief reinforced by the love and attention he receives from Jacob and Rachel. However, this belief further isolates him from his brothers, who interpret the dreams as evidence of Joseph's desire to dominate them. Amy-Jill Levine and Douglas Knight argue that Joseph's dreams empower him with "divine backing," breaking the cycle of the

[232] Gen. 49.
[233] Gen. 29:23-25 and 27:5-29.
[234] Gen. 37:5-11.

need to "steal birthright or blessings."[235] Furthermore, Levine and Knight note that Joseph's "coat of many colors" symbolizes his unique position in the family system, intensifying familial tension and anxiety by setting him apart from his brothers. The decision to sell Joseph into slavery, rather than killing him outright, stems from a mix of resentment and pragmatism.[236] By doing so, the brothers eliminate what they perceive as an immediate threat while distancing themselves from the guilt of murder.

The selling of Joseph into slavery marks a moment of profound betrayal, not only of Joseph but of the family system itself. The brothers' decision to remove Joseph is an attempt to rid themselves of their anxiety without addressing the underlying issues that created the tension in the first place. In Bowenian terms, this is a classic example of emotional cutoff, an effort to resolve tension by distancing oneself from the perceived source of the problem rather than confronting it directly. Predictably, unresolved issues persist and fester, leading to further complications within the family system, such as Reuben's transgression of sleeping with his father's concubine, Bilhah.[237]

Collins observes that the brothers' deception, dipping Joseph's coat in blood to convince Jacob of his death, "echoes Jacob's own deception of his blind father, Isaac."[238] This act of deceit demonstrates the cyclical nature of unprocessed trauma within the family system. The brothers' betrayal, their lies, and the ensuing familial dysfunction are all manifestations of the unresolved generational patterns that continue to ripple through Jacob's lineage.

Joseph's Resilience and Self-Differentiation in Egypt

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[235] Knight and Levine, *The Meaning of the Bible*, 238-239.
[236] Gen. 37:25-28.
[237] Gen. 35:22.
[238] Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 114-115.

Joseph's journey in Egypt is marked by a series of challenges that test his character and resolve. Despite being sold into slavery and later imprisoned on false charges, Joseph exhibits remarkable resilience.[239] This resilience is rooted in the love and validation he received from Jacob and Rachel, which allowed him to develop a strong sense of identity. The impartation of love, particularly from Jacob, elevated Joseph's sense of self-differentiation, placing him higher on the scale than Jacob himself. Joseph's time in Egypt, away from his family, also reduced his familial fusion, enabling him to maintain a sense of self in the face of adversity. In *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, Roberta Gilbert suggests, "the degree of individuality each has depends on how fused we were/are in our family relationships."[240] The emotional cutoff Joseph experienced, akin to Jacob's flight from Esau, did not lead to a repetition of trauma. Instead, it became a moment of posttraumatic growth. As Richard Tedeschi explains, "trauma can shape how we see and relate to others, and it can lead us to a life that is deep, meaningful, and satisfying."[241] Unlike Jacob, Joseph thrived and remained emotionally stable, demonstrating a level of self-differentiation and emotional maturity far exceeding that of his brothers.

Joseph's ability to rise above his circumstances reflects his exceptional level of self-differentiation. In Bowenian terms, self-differentiation refers to the capacity to maintain one's identity and values despite external pressures and conflict. Joseph exemplifies this quality through his interactions with Potiphar, his fellow prisoners, and ultimately Pharaoh.[242] Rather than succumbing to bitterness or a desire for revenge, Joseph channels his energy into using his gifts and talents to navigate his challenges. This focus on personal growth allows him to adapt to

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[239] Gen. 39:7-20.
[240] Roberta M. Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory* (Falls Church, VA: Leading Systems Press, 2004), 27, Kindle Edition.
[241] Tedeschi, *Transformed by Trauma*, 90.
[242] Gen. 41:15-16.

the complexities of Egyptian society with wisdom and integrity. As Tedeschi observes, "people who recognize their personal strength, for example, also recognize their limits and their vulnerability. This is an important paradox of posttraumatic growth."[243] Through introspection and a steadfast sense of self, Joseph transformed negative encounters into opportunities to demonstrate his authentic character, confronting each trial with calmness and composure.

The turning point in Joseph's story comes when he interprets Pharaoh's dreams (Genesis 41:25-37), a moment that not only secures his release from prison but also elevates him to a position of power second only to Pharaoh.[244] Joseph's rise is significant not merely as a personal triumph but because it positions him to save his family and fulfill the divine promise made to Abraham. Berlin and Brettler, note that Pharaoh's dreams, and Joseph's interpretation are closely tied to Joseph's original dream, which dealt "with the triumph of the weak over the strong."[245] The theological implications of this moment are profound: Joseph, the son cast out and betrayed, becomes the instrument through which God's covenant is preserved. His role as a savior to his family prefigures the messianic expectations that later unfold in prophetic literature.

The Reconciliation of the Brothers: Breaking the Cycle of Violence

The climax of Joseph's story is his reunion with his brothers, a moment charged with emotional complexity and theological significance. When the brothers arrive in Egypt seeking food, they fail to recognize Joseph, who now wields the power of life and death over them.[246] At this pivotal moment, the narrative takes a dramatic turn. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler observe that in the Joseph narrative, God works through Joseph's gifts and his ability to interpret

[243] Tedeschi, *Transformed by Trauma*, 71.
[244] Gen. 41:25-37.
[245] Berlin and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*, 94.
[246] Gen. 42:6-8.

dreams and patterns "even more than in the Jacob cycle," where the "ambivalent and devious designs of flawed human beings" are transformed into victories.[247] They further note that this reversal extends to the brothers, who once plotted Joseph's death and enslavement out of seething resentment but now humbly accept subordination to the younger brother who has become their savior.[248]

Joseph's initial decision to test his brothers through a series of trials to determine whether they have changed reflects, through a Bowen lens, the human limitations that persist even in someone who has achieved a high level of self-differentiation.[249] These tests can also be understood as Joseph's way of ensuring that the destructive patterns of deceit and betrayal that defined their earlier relationship have been broken. As Richard Tedeschi explains, those who thrive in the aftermath of trauma "find themselves to be more empathic" and seek to build "deeper and stronger relationships" with others.[250] By testing his brothers, Joseph creates an opportunity for them to demonstrate their transformation, laying the groundwork for genuine reconciliation.

Joseph's self-differentiation is fully realized in his decision to reveal his identity and forgive his brothers, marking the pivotal moment that breaks the cycle of generational trauma in Jacob's family. Except for Esau, Joseph's ancestors often responded to betrayal with deceit or violence. Joseph, however, chooses a path of reconciliation and healing.[251] His ability to forgive reflects his profound self-awareness and recognition of the divine plan at work. Joseph

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[247] Berlin and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*, 9.
[248] *Ibid*
[249] Gen. 42:9–25; Gen. 43:26–34; Gen. 44:1–13.
[250] Tedeschi, *Transformed by Trauma*, 82.
[251] Gen. 45:1-15.

understands that his suffering served a greater purpose, that God used his brothers' harmful intentions to bring about a greater good.[252]

This act of forgiveness is also theologically profound. By choosing reconciliation over revenge, Joseph embodies the qualities of a proto-messiah, prefiguring the redemptive work of later messianic figures in Hebrew prophecy. His willingness to embrace his brothers, despite the harm they caused him, models the type of reconciliation that lies at the heart of God's covenant with Israel. This moment points toward the ultimate hope of redemption and restoration that permeates the Hebrew Bible, offering a vision of healing that transcends individual relationships to encompass the broader covenantal promises of God.

Esau's Influence on Joseph's Brothers: A New Model of Reconciliation

In understanding Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers, it is essential to consider the influence of Esau's earlier reconciliation with Jacob. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler suggest that Joseph's act of forgiveness "is highly reminiscent of the reconciliation of Esau and Jacob."[253] As explored in the first part of this chapter, Esau's decision to forgive Jacob and embrace him upon his return set a precedent for a new kind of resolution within the family system.[254] Esau's marriage to a daughter from the line of Ishmael symbolizes his own process of self-differentiation and healing, as he consciously integrates the marginalized branch of the family into his lineage.[255]

This act of reconciliation and inclusion would have created a ripple effect within the family system, influencing the attitudes and behaviors of subsequent generations. The

[252] Gen. 50:20.
[253] Berlin and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*, 94.
[254] Gen. 33:1-4.
[255] Gen. 28:8-9.

willingness of Joseph's brothers to humble themselves before him, confess their wrongdoings, and seek his forgiveness reflects a departure from the patterns of rivalry and deceit that defined their earlier interactions.[256] In a sense, they follow the model established by Esau, who chose to break the cycle of violence by extending grace to Jacob.

The connection between Esau's and Joseph's stories underscores the intergenerational nature of healing within family systems. Just as trauma and dysfunction are transmitted across generations, so too can models of forgiveness and reconciliation. The decision of Joseph's brothers to seek reconciliation rather than perpetuate cycles of envy and resentment reflects the growth and transformation that has occurred within the family system. This shift marks a significant step toward fulfilling the divine promise given to Abraham, a promise not solely about land or descendants, but about the creation of a people who embody the values of justice, mercy, and love.[257]

Joseph as a Proto-Messiah: The Theological Significance of His Journey

Joseph's journey from betrayal to forgiveness mirrors the broader narrative arc of messianic hope that runs throughout the Hebrew Bible. As the son cast out yet ultimately becoming the savior of his family, Joseph prefigures the role of the messiah as envisioned in later prophetic literature. His rejection by his brothers resonates with Isaiah's portrayal of the suffering servant, "despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity."[258] Similarly, the trajectory from rejection to exaltation echoes the psalmist's declaration, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone," a motif that

[256] Gen. 44:14-34 and 45:3-8.
[257] Gen. 12:1-3.
[258] Isa. 53:3-6

underscores the unexpected ways God brings salvation.[259] Moreover, Joseph's rise from slavery to a position of power and his role in preserving life during famine reflect the messianic vision of a ruler who brings peace and justice.[260] Through these connections, Joseph's story serves as a typological foreshadowing of the messianic hope woven throughout Scripture. The messianic dimension of Joseph's story is most evident in his role as a redeemer who brings life and salvation to both Egypt and his own family.[261] Even though the system Joseph establishes ultimately leads to the enslavement of the Hebrews, the overarching narrative embodies qualities later associated with messianic figures: wisdom, humility, suffering, and the capacity to bring about reconciliation and restoration.[262] These qualities align with Judith Herman's examples of "individual courage and success" whose purpose is to "inspire a group with optimism and hope, even as the group is immersed in horror and grief."[263]

Joseph's ability to interpret dreams and navigate the complexities of Egyptian society is not merely a testament to his personal intelligence but also a manifestation of divine wisdom working through him.[264] In this sense, Joseph transcends his historical role as a biblical figure to become a theological symbol of God's active involvement in human history, a precursor to the prophets and messianic figures who will emerge in Israel's later history. As Collins suggests:

> The character of Joseph has an exemplary quality that was often emphasized in later Jewish tradition. In the edition of the Pentateuch, the story forms a bridge from the patriarchal narratives to the exodus, by explaining how the Israelites came to be in Egypt. The Joseph story is unlikely to have been composed as early as the reign of Solomon, as earlier scholars had supposed. The theme of the wise courtier, of which Joseph is the prototype, is especially popular in late Hebrew literature (in the books of Esther and Daniel). It is noteworthy that the heroes of all these stories are Israelites or Jews in the

[259] Ps. 118:22.
[260] Zech. 9:9–10; Mic. 5:2–4; Isa. 11:1–10.
[261] Gen. 41:46-57.
[262] Isa. 11:1–10.
[263] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 319.
[264] Gen. 41:25-40.

> service of foreign kings. Many Jews in fact rose to prominence in the service of foreign kings in the period after the Babylonian exile.[265]

The apocalyptic undertones of Joseph's story, with its themes of famine, suffering, and ultimate deliverance, further align him with the messianic expectations that shape Israel's prophetic imagination. Just as Joseph's actions usher in a new era for his family, culminating in their settlement in Egypt, so too will the messiah bring about a new age for Israel, marked by peace, justice, and the fulfillment of God's covenant.[266]

Joseph's story serves as a theological bridge between the patriarchal narratives of Genesis and the liberation theology of Exodus. It points toward the future hope that sustains Israel through its darkest moments, prefiguring the redemptive work of the messiah and the fulfillment of God's covenantal promises.

Joseph's Legacy and the Transition Toward a New Era

Joseph's story represents the culmination of the Abrahamic family's journey through trauma, rivalry, and reconciliation. His ability to break the cycles of deceit and violence that defined his family's history sets the stage for a new identity for the people of Israel. By forgiving and embracing his brothers, Joseph exemplifies leadership grounded in wisdom, compassion, and a deep understanding of the divine plan.[267] His life serves as a prototype for the messianic hope later realized in prophetic and apocalyptic literature, positioning him as a central figure in the theological narrative of the Hebrew Bible. In *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, John Collins highlights the apocalyptic undertones of the Joseph narrative, stating that the "earliest apocalypses embodied discursive resistance to imperial domination and hegemony,

[265] Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 115-116.
[266] Gen. 47:11-12.
[267] Gen. 50:15-21.

offering an alternative mythology, cosmology, language, and vision."[268] The Abrahamic cycle, culminating with Joseph, showcases how God remains active amid chaos, presenting hope through literary means even in the face of suffering.

The apocalyptic tone of Jacob's and Joseph's narratives is particularly evident in Genesis 49, where Jacob's dying words to his children incorporate Joseph's half-Egyptian sons into the tribes of Israel and establish Judah's descendants as royal leaders and Joseph's as spiritual leaders of Israel. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler expand on this by suggesting that the purpose of the Joseph story may be to explain "why Joseph (the dominant tribe of the North) and Judah (the royal tribe of the South) became more important than Reuben (the first-born)."[269] This commentary provides further academic support for the idea that Genesis reflects the perspective of an exilic community grappling with the trauma of losing their homeland, temple, and perceived unique relationship with the divine during the Babylonian exile.

As we transition to the next chapter, we will examine how the lessons from the patriarchs' stories can be applied to contemporary faith communities, with a particular focus on church leadership. Viewing the church as a family system, we will examine how clergy can achieve higher levels of self-differentiation, enabling them to lead with wisdom, compassion, and resilience in the face of congregational challenges. Just as Joseph's leadership was characterized by his ability to navigate complex family dynamics while remaining true to his sense of self, clergy must develop the capacity to lead from a place of self-awareness and emotional maturity, fostering environments where healing and reconciliation can flourish.

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[268] John J. Collins, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 159, Kindle Edition.
[269] Berlin and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*, 94.

Chapter 5: Church as a Family System & Clergy Self-Differentiation

Throughout this work, we have examined how the Genesis story can be interpreted through a trauma-informed lens by exploring how unprocessed trauma impacts the lives of the biblical patriarchs and their family systems. The repetition of trauma in the stories of these foundational literary characters, revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims worldwide, underscores the ancient biblical wisdom that unprocessed trauma, or sin, reverberates across time, with consequences felt from one generation to the next. From Adam to Joseph, and from Eve to Asenath, the biblical narrative weaves an unbroken story demonstrating how the actions of a few can affect the many, and how one person taking the first steps toward self-differentiation can begin to break the cycle and create a new path forward.

These narratives illustrate an evolving human understanding of divine reflection, humanity's intimate connection to the God of the Hebrew Bible, and God's continued involvement in human lives through intermediaries. These intermediaries, for better or worse, reflect the divine amidst the messiness of life.

This very messiness permeates all aspects of human systems, as is evident in the lives of those within our congregations. As this chapter will show, examining Bowen Family Systems Theory while utilizing a trauma-informed reading of shared theological narratives can help clergy better understand their own family dynamics and how these dynamics influence the congregational family system. Congregations are, after all, shaped by the individual family systems of their members, which combine to form a larger, collective system.

Bowen's work, which began in psychoanalysis and evolved by integrating insights from disciplines such as evolutionary biology and systems theory, highlights the importance of a

multidisciplinary perspective.[270] Bowen recognized that no human is born into a vacuum or begins life as a blank slate, instead, an individual's self is influenced in their relations to others.[271] All humans are influenced, from conception, by a multitude of variables that trace their origins back to our primordial ancestors. This biblical concept finds scientific support in the theory of a shared genetic ancestry through "Mitochondrial Eve" and "Y-chromosomal Adam," as scientists theorize that these individuals passed down portions of their genomes to the entirety of humanity:

> Mitochondrial Eve and Y-chromosomal Adam , two individuals who passed down a portion of their genomes to the vast expanse of humanity , are known as our most recent common ancestors.[272]

Evolutionary theory and biological evidence provided Bowen with insights into how external pressures shape life, leading to adaptation and change.[273] He understood that DNA, passed from one generation to the next, influences future development, a concept mirrored in the biblical writers' acknowledgment that the consequences of "the iniquity of parents" can affect "the third and fourth generation."[274]

From a Bowen perspective, one can perceive a much larger system at work in all aspects of human life. This system, which Bowen refers to as the "emotional process in society," functions within the nuclear family, the extended family, local communities, religious spaces, civic governments, nation-states, and humanity's place in the cosmos, forming a singular,

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[270] Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1978), 398, Kindle Edition.
[271] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 224.
[272] Stanford Medicine, "Common Genetic Ancestors Lived During Roughly Same Time Period, Scientists Find," last modified August 1, 2013, https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2013/08/common-genetic-ancestors-lived-during-roughly-same-time-period-scientists-find.html.
[273] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 270.
[274] Exod. 20:5 (New Revised Standard Version).

dynamic family system.[275] For clergy, it is crucial to recognize that most, if not all, conflicts within congregations stem from the complexities of individuals and their interconnected family systems, with origins stretching back generations.

However, if clergy can maintain self-differentiation and resist being drawn into these conflicts, they can remain in a state of emotional repose.[276] This stability opens the door to new options and creative solutions, paving the way for climbing Bowen's ladder of self-differentiation, not only for themselves but also for their congregations. By modeling and fostering this growth, clergy can guide their faith communities toward healthier, more integrated relationships and systems.

The Church as a Complex Family System

Driving down highways in the deep South, you may encounter signs proclaiming, "Go to church, or the devil is going to get you." Such stark warnings encapsulate a reality many have experienced, where the church, instead of being a sanctuary of healing and peace, becomes a space where religious trauma festers. For countless people, the devil was not an external threat but present in the church itself, manifesting in the actions of those unable to escape the generational trauma passed down to them. In many churches, especially in more conservative spaces, the complexity of trauma is left unspoken, with generational pain masked by piety and glossed over with the promise of a better afterlife. For many, addressing the brokenness of life and truly healing deep internal wounds is often deferred, as congregations are urged to simply

[275] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 426.
[276] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 109.

"pray it away" and focus on eternal rewards rather than confronting the pain and suffering in the here and now.

In this context, the church functions as a family system where unresolved trauma is continually projected and recycled. Bowen's Family Systems Theory provides a crucial framework for understanding how congregations operate as systems marked by intergenerational transmission of anxiety, unresolved conflict, and relational dysfunction. Much like in families, the church's emotional system tends to externalize its anxiety, often triangulating between two divine figures: God and Satan. This projection of both the best and worst aspects of human nature onto these figures reflects how congregations, like families, often seek to displace their internal conflicts onto an external source. This dynamic aligns with Sigmund Freud's assertion that "God is the exalted father, yearning for a father is the root of religious need" in his book *The Future of an Illusion*.[277] Biblical writers, much like Freud above, projected their observations of family dynamics onto their understanding of God, who was seen as both the source of blessing and the enforcer of justice.

The church does not exist in a vacuum. Like a family, it is a product of countless interconnected systems across history. This understanding, rooted in a theological genealogy that spans from the mythological figures of Adam and Eve to Christ himself, reveals that no congregation or denomination is isolated from the influences of history. As with families, these interconnected systems carry forward patterns of behavior, anxiety, and unresolved tensions that profoundly shape the dynamics of congregational life.

[277] Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2008), 22, Kindle Edition.

Understanding the church as a family system helps clergy navigate the complexities of congregational life by recognizing that the conflicts they face often have deep historical roots tied to generational trauma, anxiety, and projections of unresolved tension. Bowen Family Systems Theory underscores the importance of identifying these patterns within relational systems to address underlying issues rather than surface-level symptoms. This perspective equips clergy with the tools to move beyond immediate crises, enabling them to address systemic anxieties that have accumulated over time.

Culture also plays a vital role in shaping how congregations function and adapt to change. In their book, *Navigating the* Future, Andrew Hogue and L. Gregory Jones highlight the pervasive but intangible influence of culture, noting, "Culture shapes how people think, behave, and feel, and thus profoundly shapes how innovation happens and how institutions maintain vibrancy."[278] However, because culture is "fuzzy" and diffuse, it often resists change, especially within large, complex, or historically entrenched organizations like the church.[279] Recognizing the cultural factors that influence congregational behavior allows clergy to better understand the resistance to change and the persistence of certain dynamics, even in the face of new leadership or evolving societal contexts.

By applying Bowen's concepts, clergy can achieve higher levels of self-differentiation, enabling them to lead with clarity and purpose even amid historical and cultural challenges. Self-differentiation allows clergy to maintain their sense of identity and mission without becoming enmeshed in the anxieties or projections of their congregations. This emotional grounding is

[278] Andrew P. Hogue and L. Gregory Jones, *Navigating the Future: Traditioned Innovation for Wilder Seas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020), 225, Kindle Edition.
[279] Ibid

crucial for mitigating the risk of burnout, as it helps clergy navigate the inherent tensions of leading within complex, multigenerational systems.

Incorporating a systems perspective alongside a nuanced understanding of culture empowers clergy to address both the historical roots of conflict and the cultural forces that sustain it. This approach fosters healthier congregational dynamics and positions the church to maintain its vibrancy and relevance in an ever-changing world. By acknowledging its interconnectedness with history and culture, the church can draw on its theological foundations to navigate challenges with innovation and adaptability, ensuring its continued growth and mission.

The Church as a Family System: Applying Bowen's Concepts to Congregational Dynamics

In Bowen's Family Systems Theory, the family is viewed as an emotional unit where each member's behavior and emotional state are interdependent. This same concept can be applied to the church, where congregational life is shaped by the interactions, tensions, and anxieties of its members. The church, like a family, is a system influenced by historical and generational patterns, where the behaviors of individuals are deeply interconnected.

Just as family systems must navigate the balance between individuality and togetherness, congregations operate within a similarly complex dynamic. Bowen Family Systems Theory provides a lens for understanding these interactions, emphasizing that emotional processes in groups mirror those in families. The interdependence within a congregation means that individual anxieties can ripple through the system, shaping the collective experience. This systemic perspective is crucial for clergy seeking to lead with clarity and resilience, as it shifts

the focus from isolated issues to the broader emotional dynamics that influence congregational life.

Navigating these complexities requires not only an understanding of systems theory but also the ability to engage with the congregation's deeper purpose and mission. Hogue and Jones describe this approach as "traditioned innovation," which involves embracing the complexities of modern challenges while remaining rooted in transcendent, ultimate purposes. They note, "Traditioned innovation likewise summons us to understand and account for the world's inevitable complexities and our frequent bewilderments amid the storms and fogs of these wilder seas."[280] Applying this framework, clergy can guide congregations through the turbulence of change by leveraging their historical and theological foundations to imagine and collaborate toward a shared vision.

The church as a family system also reflects Bowen's insight that historical and generational patterns shape present dynamics. Unresolved conflicts and anxieties from a congregation's past often resurface in contemporary tensions, mirroring the multigenerational transmission process observed in families. Recognizing this interconnectedness allows clergy to address root causes of conflict rather than merely reacting to surface-level issues. For example, disputes over worship styles or leadership transitions may stem from deeper fears tied to the congregation's history, such as past experiences of division or instability. By applying a systems perspective, clergy can help the congregation navigate these challenges with greater awareness and intentionality.

[280] Hogue and Jones, *Navigating the Future*, 201.

Ultimately, the application of Bowen's Family Systems Theory to congregational life provides clergy with tools to lead through complexity and uncertainty. By understanding the church as an interconnected system and employing strategies of traditioned innovation, leaders can foster resilience and adaptability within their congregations. This approach not only strengthens the church's ability to face contemporary challenges but also deepens its capacity to achieve its ultimate purposes.

Leadership Transitions and Generational Dynamics

One of the most significant challenges in congregational life is leadership transitions. When a new pastor is appointed, the congregation's underlying anxieties often surface. Resistance to change, conflict over new directions, and heightened scrutiny of the pastor's decisions are common responses during such transitions. These reactions can be understood as manifestations of the congregation's collective anxiety, rooted in past experiences and expectations. For instance, if a congregation has a history of short pastoral tenures or failed leadership, members may project those anxieties onto the new pastor, leading to tension and conflict. Recognizing these patterns can help clergy navigate the transitional period with greater awareness and resilience.

Bowen Family Systems Theory provides a valuable lens for understanding the congregation as an emotional system during these transitions. In their book, *Family Evaluation*, Michael Kerr and Murray Bowen explain that the emotional system is governed by two counterbalancing forces: individuality and togetherness. These forces create a dynamic tension within relationships, influencing how individuals and groups respond to change. When this balance is disrupted, symptoms of dysfunction, such as heightened anxiety or conflict, often

emerge.[281] For congregations, a leadership transition can destabilize this balance, triggering reactions rooted in the group's need for connection and security.

In *Generation to Generation*, Edwin Friedman highlights that the emotional interplay during leadership transitions parallels that of personal family separations. The congregation's response to the departure of a pastor can reflect unresolved personal anxieties, such as those tied to experiences of terminal illness, divorce, or other separations in their own lives. According to Friedman, "the emotional interlock between personal and congregational families also has the capacity to heighten understanding."[282] By addressing the congregation's collective anxiety through a systems perspective, clergy and leadership teams can facilitate healthier transitions and create opportunities for growth rather than conflict.

Friedman also cautions against "all-or-nothing approaches to separation," such as distancing or minimizing contact with a departing pastor, which can amplify emotional intensity rather than alleviate it.[283] Instead, he advocates for using the transition as a learning moment for the congregation, encouraging members to reflect on their own emotional processes and separation experiences. This approach can lead to "more objectivity in the selection of a new partner" and allow the incoming relationship to begin with "less baggage."[284]

To successfully navigate leadership transitions, clergy must be mindful of the balance between individuality and togetherness within the congregational system. This requires maintaining emotional clarity and resisting the pull of congregational anxiety. Bowen's

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[281] Michael E. Kerr and Murray Bowen, *Family Evaluation* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 59, Kindle Edition.
[282] Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Publications, 1985), 252, Kindle Edition.
[283] Ibid. 251.
[284] Ibid. 252.

differentiation of self concept is particularly relevant here, as it enables clergy to stay grounded in their principles while remaining connected to the group. By fostering this differentiation, clergy can provide steady leadership that mitigates reactivity and promotes a smoother transition.

Incorporating these insights, congregations can better manage the complexities of leadership transitions, using them not only as challenges but as opportunities for renewal and collective growth. Through the application of Bowen Family Systems Theory, both clergy and congregations can engage the emotional system with greater awareness, fostering healthier dynamics and more resilient communities.

II. Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma and Congregational Conflict

The concept of intergenerational transmission of trauma is highly relevant to church dynamics. Congregations often carry the unresolved conflicts and traumas of previous generations, which manifest in current conflicts over seemingly minor issues. For example, disputes over worship style, building renovations, or even the church bulletin's layout can become flashpoints for deeper, unresolved anxieties. Members may resist change not because they are opposed to new ideas but because those changes trigger fears rooted in the church's history. Understanding these deeper dynamics allows clergy to address the underlying issues rather than getting caught up in surface-level conflicts.

Bowen Family Systems Theory provides critical insights into these dynamics by emphasizing the importance of chronic anxiety and differentiation in relationship systems. Kerr and Bowen describe chronic anxiety as "a system or process of actions and reactions" that gains momentum and becomes independent of its initial triggering event.[285] In congregational settings,

[285] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 113-114.

chronic anxiety is often propagated not by specific conflicts, but by the congregation's collective reaction to disturbances in the system's balance, such as changes in leadership or long-standing traditions. These reactions, deeply rooted in the emotional system, can perpetuate unresolved traumas across generations.

The multigenerational transmission process highlights how emotional processes and unresolved conflicts in previous generations influence current relational dynamics. Kerr and Bowen note that life experiences significantly shape psychological and physiological development, and these influences are anchored in both biology and emotional systems.[286] Congregations, much like families, are not "blank slates"; they carry the imprints of their history, both in overt traditions and in the underlying emotional patterns that shape their interactions. Recognizing these patterns allows clergy to approach conflicts with greater objectivity and discernment, addressing the root causes rather than reacting to symptoms.

A critical factor in addressing intergenerational trauma is the differentiation of self, which Kerr and Bowen describe as the ability to maintain one's sense of identity while managing relational stress.[287] Differentiation is directly linked to a person's or system's ability to adapt to stress. Low differentiation correlates with reduced adaptiveness, making individuals and systems more prone to conflict and dysfunction. Kerr and Bowen explain, "The lower a person's level of differentiation, the less his adaptiveness to stress."[288] In congregations with low differentiation, chronic anxiety can escalate even small changes into major conflicts, impeding the group's ability to grow or evolve.

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[286] Ibid. 224.
[287] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 60-61.
[288] Ibid. 112.

Additionally, the variation in levels of functioning among members within the same or different generations can contribute to congregational dynamics. As Kerr and Bowen note, "significant differences in levels of functioning can exist between members of different generations," ranging from exceptionally stable to exceptionally unstable.[289] This variability within a congregation can create tension, as those with lower differentiation are more likely to react to change with heightened anxiety, while those with higher differentiation are better equipped to adapt and guide others through the process.

For clergy, maintaining a systems perspective is essential. Kerr and Bowen emphasize that a systems approach requires leaders to avoid magnifying emotionally charged details and instead focus on broader relational patterns.[290] This perspective enables clergy to de-escalate conflicts and foster healthier dynamics by addressing chronic anxiety rather than reacting to specific triggering events.

Ultimately, well-differentiated clergy can lead congregations more effectively through the challenges of intergenerational trauma and conflict. As Kerr and Bowen observe, individuals with higher differentiation have greater capacity to manage responsibility, make decisions, and maintain stable relationships, even under stress.[291] By cultivating their own differentiation, clergy can model emotional stability and provide the guidance necessary to help congregations confront and resolve the deeper issues that perpetuate conflict. This not only alleviates chronic anxiety but also fosters a healthier and more adaptive church community.

III. Triangulation and Anxiety in the Congregation

[289] Ibid. 221.
[290] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*. 60-61.
[291] Ibid. 235-236.

In family systems, triangulation occurs when two individuals in conflict bring in a third person to stabilize the relationship. In congregations, triangulation often manifests when members bring their anxieties to the pastor, expecting them to mediate conflicts or take sides. For clergy, becoming caught in such triangles can be emotionally exhausting and can lead to burnout. Bowen's theory suggests that effective leaders resist being drawn into these dynamics by maintaining clear boundaries and focusing on their own self-differentiation. By staying emotionally grounded and refusing to take on the anxiety of others, clergy can help de-escalate conflict and guide the congregation toward healthier interactions.

Bowen Family Systems Theory highlights that anxiety is a natural response to perceived threats, whether real or imagined, and is present in all living organisms. As Kerr and Bowen explain, reactivity to anxiety occurs along a continuum, ranging from hyperactivity to hypoactivity, with both extremes representing challenges in maintaining balance.[292] In congregational life, anxiety often arises from changes or disruptions to the system, creating instability that individuals attempt to manage through triangulation. The process of spreading anxiety through a triangle stabilizes relationships temporarily, but it often perpetuates underlying tensions, especially when clergy are drawn into these dynamics.[293]

Triangulation can also extend beyond the immediate congregation, involving denominational hierarchies and broader relational systems. Friedman notes that religious hierarchies often become entangled in a complex web of triangulated relationships as they attempt to manage clergy placements, conflicts, and transitions. These "in-law" issues, as Friedman calls them, can be particularly taxing for those in leadership roles, who are expected to

[292] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 112.
[293] Ibid. 135

maintain balance within a perpetually shifting system.[294] This revolving door of relational demands creates significant stress for clergy and denominational leaders alike, highlighting the need for clarity, boundaries, and self-differentiation.

In navigating these challenges, the cultivation of certain virtues and character traits is indispensable. Hogue and Jones argue that leadership must be marked by values such as humility, gratitude, and discernment, which help foster a culture of mutuality and respect.[295] In congregations, this approach minimizes fear and nurtures courage, creating an environment where clergy can focus on nurturing practical wisdom rather than being consumed by the reactive dynamics of triangulation. These values also empower congregations to embrace a "Three Musketeers" ethos of shared responsibility and support, reducing the likelihood of unhealthy dependency on clergy as mediators.[296]

The key to addressing triangulation lies in understanding its role within the broader emotional system. Kerr and Bowen emphasize that while triangulation can temporarily diffuse anxiety, it often prevents the deeper issues and "can create more distance" within the relationship system from being addressed.[297] Clergy, therefore, must resist the impulse to become overinvolved in the system's emotional dynamics, focusing instead on their own differentiation. As Friedman observes, this differentiation allows leaders to act not as reactive participants but as stabilizing presences within the system, helping to guide congregations toward healthier patterns of interaction.[298]

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[294] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 254.
[295] Hogue and Jones, *Navigating the Future*, 226.
[296] Ibid
[297] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 146.
[298] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 258.

Ultimately, addressing triangulation requires both systemic awareness and the intentional cultivation of a moral ecology within congregational life. By fostering environments of trust, kindness, and grace, congregations can reduce anxiety and dependency, empowering individuals to engage relational challenges with courage and resilience. For clergy, this approach not only mitigates the risk of burnout but also allows them to lead with clarity and purpose, creating a culture of stability and growth within the congregation.

Clergy Self-Differentiation: Challenges and Strategies

Self-differentiation, as defined by Bowen, is the ability to maintain one's sense of identity and purpose while remaining connected to others.[299] For clergy, this means navigating the pressures of congregational life without becoming enmeshed in the emotional dynamics of the congregation. However, this is easier said than done. Clergy face unique challenges in maintaining self-differentiation due to the expectations placed on them by their congregations, denominational structures, and their own sense of calling.

I. The Pressure to Meet Congregational Expectations

Clergy often enter ministry with a sense of idealism and a desire to make a positive impact. However, they quickly encounter the reality that congregations come with deeply entrenched patterns of behavior, expectations, and anxieties. Members may project their unfulfilled needs, frustrations, and fears onto the pastor, expecting them to be a counselor, mediator, and spiritual guide all at once. This can lead to what Bowen would describe as

[299] Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1978), 108, Kindle Edition.

emotional fusion, where the pastor loses their sense of self by constantly responding to the emotional needs of others.

Bowen's understanding of emotional systems provides critical insights into this dynamic. He observed that emotional processes in work and social systems mirror those in family systems, though family dynamics tend to be more intense.[300] For clergy, this means recognizing that the congregation operates as an interconnected emotional system, where individual anxieties can quickly escalate and influence group behavior. The key to navigating these challenges lies in achieving self-differentiation, which Titelman describes as the ability to "act for oneself without being selfish while being able to act for others without being selfless."[301] This balance is crucial for clergy to maintain their sense of identity and purpose without becoming enmeshed in the congregation's anxiety.

Bowen postulated that differentiation of self involves balancing two instinctual forces: togetherness and individuality. Togetherness drives an individual to seek connection and interdependence, while individuality drives a desire for independence and self-direction. The interplay of these forces determines one's level of differentiation, with emotion-dominated dynamics correlating to lower levels of self-differentiation and intellect-driven dynamics correlating to higher levels.[302] Clergy who prioritize intellectual clarity and defined principles, what Bowen termed the "solid self", are better equipped to resist congregational pressures and maintain their leadership integrity. As Bowen noted, individuals with a solid self "will take responsible action on principles even in situations of high anxiety."[303]

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[300] Titelman, *Differentiation of Self*, 19.
[301] Titelman, *Differentiation of Self*, 25.
[302] Ibid. 25-26.
[303] Ibid. 28.

Conversely, reliance on the pseudo-self, a self shaped by external pressures and emotional fusion, leads to overadaptation and reactivity. This pseudo-self, described as a "pretend self," is vulnerable to congregational anxieties, as it lacks the stability and convictions of the solid self.[304] For clergy, this manifests as a tendency to bend to congregational demands, even when those demands conflict with their personal values or professional judgment. To counteract this, clergy must develop and maintain a solid self through intentional self-reflection and boundary setting.

Bowen's observation that "there are no angels or devils in one's family" highlights the importance of acknowledging both strengths and limitations within any relational system.[305] Applying this perspective to congregational leadership, clergy can approach their role with humility and self-awareness, recognizing that they are not responsible for resolving every anxiety within the system. By focusing on their own differentiation, clergy can remain emotionally grounded, enabling them to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively to congregational pressures.

Ultimately, clergy who cultivate a solid self can lead with clarity and conviction, fostering healthier dynamics within the congregation. This approach not only protects clergy from emotional burnout but also empowers congregational members to take greater responsibility for their own anxieties, contributing to a more balanced and resilient community.

II. The Role of the Clergy Family System

[304] Ibid
[305] Titelman, *Differentiation of Self*. 13.

One crucial yet often overlooked aspect of clergy self-differentiation is the need for personal introspection and understanding of their family system. Just as clergy are called to guide others through their spiritual and emotional struggles, they must also be committed to their own inner work. As we will explore in this chapter, psychoanalysis provides a structured space where clergy can explore their own family histories, unresolved traumas, and internal conflicts. This self-reflection is vital for developing the emotional resilience needed to lead a congregation without becoming overwhelmed by its anxieties.

Friedman underscores that emotional processes operate the same way in all families, including clergy families, challenging the myth that clergy families are fundamentally different.[306] Clergy families, like all families, contend with universal struggles, including "closeness and distance; the capacity for flexible separation; the ability to maintain self in the context of intimacy; the binding quality of others' expectations; and the displacement and projection of unresolved issues from one generation to another."[307] For clergy, more than most professionals, work and family systems are deeply interconnected, and significant changes in one system can quickly destabilize the other.[308] Churches and denominational bodies should incorporate psychoanalysis into clergy support packages as a standard benefit. The high expectations placed on clergy, coupled with the “fishbowl” environment, frequent moves, and the difficulty of forming lasting relationships, exacerbate the need for structured self-reflection and support.[309]

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[306] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 278.
[307] Ibid.
[308] Ibid, 279.
[309] Ibid, 277.

Friedman further highlights how the fusion between clergy families and the congregation can complicate self-differentiation. Members of the congregational family often view the minister and their family as an extension of the church body, holding them to higher standards than they would apply to their own families. This perceived "holiness" not only increases expectations but also places undue pressure on the clergy family, as their actions and dynamics are often scrutinized more intensely.[310] Moreover, the myth that clergy families are fundamentally different from the families they serve has additional consequences. According to Friedman, "this weakens our effectiveness in all three relationship systems and increases the likelihood of underestimating the power of their interconnectedness."[311] Such misconceptions shift the focus from process to content, creating a false sense of separation that hinders self-awareness and emotional growth. For clergy in nontraditional or marginalized family systems, this dynamic can be even more pronounced, compounding emotional strain.

Challenges for Clergy in Nontraditional Families or LGBTQ+ Communities

For clergy in nontraditional family systems or those who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, these challenges are compounded by the social expectations of both the congregation and denominational structures. The expectation to conform to outdated beliefs or traditional family norms often places an added emotional burden on these leaders. Congregations that lack emotional maturity or have unresolved theological tensions regarding gender and sexuality may unintentionally trigger or retraumatize clergy through microaggressions, judgmental attitudes, or outright rejection.

[310] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 280.
[311] Ibid, 281.

This dynamic can make it particularly difficult for LGBTQ+ clergy or those in nontraditional families to remain self-differentiated. As Friedman points out, such circumstances can lead clergy families to see themselves as victims of their context, allowing situational factors to obscure their own agency in navigating challenges. This reliance on "cultural camouflage" perpetuates the cycle of victimization and diminishes the ability to address systemic anxiety constructively.[312] LGBTQ+ clergy and those in nontraditional families face the added pressure of managing congregational projections while working through their own emotional processes to remain grounded in their identity and calling.

By fostering a culture of inclusivity and supporting diverse clergy through psychoanalysis and systemic education, churches can challenge outdated beliefs while empowering leaders to remain self-differentiated. This approach not only strengthens the individual clergy but also enriches the entire congregation, modeling a more compassionate and emotionally mature faith community.

Practical Recommendations for Enhancing Self-Differentiation in Clergy and Churches

Given the challenges outlined, it is essential for clergy and church leaders to adopt strategies that enhance self-differentiation and promote healthier congregational dynamics. Below are practical recommendations for both clergy and congregations:

I. Embrace a Systems Perspective

Clergy should approach their leadership with a systems perspective, recognizing that congregations function as interconnected emotional units. As Noone emphasizes, “systems theory” aids leaders in understanding the “complexity of family interactions and the number of

[312] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 281.

variables involved."[313] In the congregational family system, leaders are not merely addressing isolated individuals or small groups but rather a complex web influenced by individual family dynamics and transgenerational trauma. Noone further describes the congregation as a "family emotional system."[314] This approach enables clergy to discern patterns of behavior and anxiety within the congregation, providing a nuanced understanding of stakeholders in any conflict. With this perspective, leaders can anticipate and address conflicts before they escalate, prioritizing long-term growth and transformation over immediate crises.

II. Prioritize Personal Boundaries and Self-Care

Establishing clear boundaries is crucial for clergy to avoid emotional burnout. This involves limiting the roles they take on within the congregation and intentionally dedicating time for rest and reflection. In *The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*, American sex educators Emily and Amelia Nagoski stress the significance of "high-quality relationship(s)," asserting that "self-care is facilitated by the ways (in which one cares) for and is cared for by someone."[315] Self-differentiated leaders must cultivate support networks outside their congregational contexts, such as peer groups, mentors, professional counselors, or spiritual advisors. The Nagoski siblings also note that having people who are "attuned to you" creates a network capable of "literally feeling your pain and standing with you inside it."[316] Such a network provides a safe space for processing challenges and receiving guidance free from the pressures of congregational dynamics. It also enables leaders to discuss their congregants candidly without fostering gossip

[313] Noone, *Family and Self*, 147.
[314] Noone, *Family and Self*, 147.
[315] Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski, *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2019), 140, Kindle Edition.
[316] Ibid.

or toxic "us vs. them" attitudes, which can divide congregations and heighten anxiety among members.

III. Implement Regular Congregational Education on Systems Theory

A key strategy for fostering healthier church dynamics is education. Congregations benefit from learning about Bowen's Family Systems Theory and its applications to their communal life. In her book, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, Roberta Gilbert explains that "systems thinking strives to look at the emotional process going on among people while never losing sight of the facts of a given situation."[317] Through systems thinking, congregants can step back to see the broader picture of conflicts, allowing them to detach from anxious emotions and seek innovative solutions that benefit the wider whole. Gilbert observes that individuals or groups engaging in systems thinking "better manage oneself and one's own contribution to the situation" rather than attempting to "control" or blame others.[318] Workshops, sermons, and study groups focusing on systems thinking can help members understand their roles within the congregation's emotional system and encourage contributions toward a more positive environment. Educating congregants on these concepts reduces reactivity and promotes self-awareness and responsibility.

IV. Encourage Clergy to Engage in Ongoing Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis should be a foundational element of clergy development. Regular sessions with a psychoanalytic therapist can provide clergy with deeper insights into their emotional patterns, helping them recognize and address the triggers that lead to reactive

[317] Roberta M. Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory* (Falls Church, VA: Leading Systems Press, 2004), 2, Kindle Edition.
[318] Ibid

behavior. Freud underscores the importance of understanding the "why" behind one's actions by analyzing the "past and present," allowing one to envision a future filled with possibilities.[319] This reflective practice should be an ongoing journey rather than a one-time solution. Fully embracing psychoanalysis enables clergy to understand their place within family systems and break self-destructive cycles. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman notes that through self-introspection, those who become "keenly aware of their continued vulnerability to threats and reminders of the trauma" can transition from being passive transmitters of trauma to actively facing their fears.[320] Incorporating psychoanalysis into compensation packages represents an investment in clergy well-being and the congregation's health, as it fosters greater differentiation and reduces reactivity to congregational emotional systems.

V. Cultivate a Culture of Open Communication and Conflict Resolution

Churches that emphasize open communication and transparent conflict resolution processes tend to exhibit healthier dynamics. Titelman explains that people who "seek emotional closeness and open communication" with others often possess a "moderate range of differentiation."[321] Clergy can enhance differentiation by modeling effective communication, addressing conflicts directly and compassionately, and encouraging members to do the same. Establishing clear conflict resolution guidelines, such as mediation teams or structured forums for grievances, helps prevent issues from festering and escalating into divisions.

VI. Integrate Historical Context into Church Visioning

[319] Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 3.
[320] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 283, Kindle Edition.
[321] Titelman, *Differentiation of Self*, 37.

Understanding a congregation's and denomination's historical context is essential for moving forward with clarity. Just as Joseph's story reflects deep awareness of his family's history, clergy and congregational leaders should recognize the historical traumas and patterns shaping their church's present reality. In his book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk observes that revisiting trauma is key to regaining a sense of self.[322] Similarly, applying this principle to congregational visioning allows stakeholders to confront past failures and conflicts, creating space for renewal and innovation.[323] In the Joseph narrative, healing occurred when the brothers acknowledged their roles in family dysfunction. Likewise, churches that acknowledge their past can work toward healing and envision a future liberated from destructive cycles.

Moving Beyond Family Systems to Societal Self-Differentiation

In this exploration of the church as a family system, we have seen how Bowen's concepts can be applied to congregational life, offering clergy tools for navigating the complexities of church leadership. The emphasis on self-differentiation is not just about personal growth; it is a pathway toward healthier, more resilient communities. However, this journey does not end with the individual congregation. The principles of family systems theory extend beyond the church and can be applied to society at large.

In the next section of this chapter, we will explore a series of case studies that reflect real-life congregational challenges, each aligned with parallels in the Abrahamic family system. These case studies will delve deeper into how understanding these biblical dynamics can equip

[322] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2014), 300, Kindle Edition.
[323] Ibid

clergy and congregations to address their own systemic anxieties and foster healthier, more resilient communities of faith.

Case Studies in Clergy Self-Differentiation: Lessons from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph

The Relevance of Biblical Parallels for Clergy Self-Differentiation

In the previous sections, we explored the dynamics of self-differentiation through the lens of the Abrahamic family system, using Bowen's Family Systems Theory as a framework for understanding generational patterns of behavior that influence church leadership and congregational life. In this section, we apply these theoretical concepts through a series of fictionalized case studies that parallel the experiences of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Each case study represents real-world challenges facing clergy today: resistance to change, doctrinal divisions, struggles over inclusivity, and the dangers of Christian nationalism. These case studies will demonstrate how clergy can learn to better self-differentiate by recognizing family systems dynamics within their congregations and how to respond in ways that lead to healthier church environments.

Each case study focuses on a specific aspect of Bowen's theory and how it intersects with biblical narratives, offering practical insights for clergy navigating the complexities of congregational leadership. By exploring these parallels, we aim to provide clergy with concrete examples of how to apply these principles in their ministry contexts, fostering greater self-awareness, resilience, and effectiveness.

Case Study 1: The Abraham Parallel – Navigating Congregational Resistance to Worship Style Changes in a Diversifying Community

Context and Background: Resistance to Diversity and Change

Rev. Jon Archer has been called to serve as the pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church, a historically white congregation located in a neighborhood that has experienced significant demographic shifts in recent years. Once a predominantly Anglo community, the area is now home to a growing population of Hispanic, African American, and Asian families. Recognizing this shift, Archer proposes changes to the worship service and church bulletin that reflect the diversity of the neighborhood, including incorporating multilingual liturgy, diverse music styles, and visual elements that celebrate different cultural traditions.

However, these proposed changes are met with strong resistance from long-time members who are attached to the traditional worship style. They argue that the changes "disrupt the sacredness" of the service and are an unwelcome departure from how things have always been done. As tension grows, members voice their dissatisfaction in meetings, through emails, and even during worship, where some walk out in protest. Rev. Archer finds himself in the middle of an escalating conflict, trying to honor both the historical identity of the church and its need to reach out to a new, more diverse community.

The Bowenian Dynamics: Chronic Anxiety and Resistance to Change

From a Bowen Family Systems perspective, the situation at Trinity UMC reflects chronic anxiety rooted in fears of losing a sense of identity and control. For long-time members, the proposed changes to worship represent a threat to the continuity and stability they have relied on for decades. This anxiety is not just about the changes themselves but reflects deeper insecurities about the church's place in a rapidly changing world. The congregation is behaving much like a

family system undergoing significant change, where members cling to familiar patterns to maintain a sense of security.

Archer initially responds by trying to explain the rationale behind the changes, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and outreach. However, he quickly realizes that the resistance is not primarily intellectual but emotional. As the conflict intensifies, Rev. Archer begins to feel discouraged, questioning whether he can guide the congregation through this difficult transition.

The Abrahamic Parallel: Complicated Grief, the Akedah, and the Journey to the Unknown

The resistance Archer encounters echoes the dynamics of Abraham's story, where the emotional and spiritual legacy of his father, Terah, shapes his journey. Just as Terah's complicated grief over the loss of his son Haran led him to migrate from Ur, the congregation's resistance can be seen as an expression of unresolved grief and fear over losing their historical identity. Terah's journey ultimately stalled in Haran, symbolizing how unresolved emotions can inhibit progress. Likewise, Trinity's long-time members are grappling with the loss of a familiar cultural landscape and fear that their church may no longer reflect their identity.

The Akedah (the binding of Isaac) introduces another layer of complexity to Abraham's journey and provides a rich parallel to Archer's experience. For Abraham, the Akedah represents the ultimate test of trust in God, forcing him to confront the terrifying possibility that God's plan could involve sacrificing the very promise of his lineage and identity. The potential loss of Isaac, the fulfillment of God's covenant, presents Abraham with a crisis of faith: can God be trusted, even when the divine plan seems to contradict all assurances of stability and legacy?

Archer faces a similar dilemma of trust as he attempts to lead his congregation through their own version of the Akedah. The resistance he encounters may feel like a test of whether he can trust in the vision he believes God has placed before him, even as the congregation's pushback threatens to unravel the stability and continuity of the church. Just as Abraham must reconcile his fear of losing Isaac with his trust in God's ultimate faithfulness, Archer must grapple with whether he can trust that God will sustain the church through this transformative period, even if it involves significant loss or redefinition.

Application and Insights for Clergy: Trust as a Foundation for Self-Differentiation

To navigate this challenging environment, Archer must practice self-differentiation by maintaining a clear sense of his identity and vision while staying emotionally connected to the congregation. He needs to resist the temptation to either withdraw in frustration or become overly reactive to the resistance he faces. Instead, Archer can learn from Abraham's journey by recognizing that leading a congregation into a new phase requires patience, persistence, and trust in the larger vision.

The Akedah underscores the importance of trust, not just trust in God, but trust in the process of transformation. For Archer, this means recognizing that the path toward inclusivity and renewal may involve painful sacrifices, including the loss of some long-time members who may never fully embrace the changes. However, by trusting in God's faithfulness, Archer can move forward with confidence, knowing that even in the face of loss, new possibilities for growth and connection will emerge.

One strategy for Archer is to build relationships with those who are resistant, not by attempting to convince them through arguments, but by listening to their concerns and validating

their emotions while remaining firm in his commitment to change. By creating space for dialogue and slowly building trust, he can gradually guide the congregation toward greater openness. This process mirrors Abraham's willingness to stay in relationship with God throughout the ordeal of the Akedah, even as he wrestled with doubt and fear.

Psychoanalysis and Support Structures: Navigating Emotional Baggage

In addition to applying Bowen's principles, Archer would benefit from engaging in psychoanalytic therapy. This process would allow him to explore his own reactions to the congregation's resistance and identify any unresolved issues from his past that may be influencing his leadership style. By addressing these dynamics, Archer can better manage his emotional responses, remain grounded, and avoid becoming enmeshed in the congregation's anxieties.

For instance, during therapy, Archer might uncover a formative experience in his early ministry when he served as an associate pastor at a suburban church. In that role, Archer proposed a significant outreach initiative to engage with a nearby low-income housing community. Despite his enthusiasm and commitment, the proposal faced resistance from the senior pastor and church leaders, who believed the initiative was too radical and would alienate their core membership. Archer internalized their rejection as a personal failure, interpreting it as a reflection of his inadequacy and inability to lead effectively.

This experience left a deep emotional imprint, subtly influencing his current responses to conflict and resistance. Now, as he encounters similar pushback at Trinity UMC, Archer's unresolved feelings of rejection and self-doubt may resurface. Without realizing it, he might hesitate to assert his vision fully, fearing that doing so will further alienate members and

reinforce his sense of inadequacy. Alternatively, he might overcompensate by becoming rigid and defensive, unintentionally heightening the congregation's resistance.

Through psychoanalysis, Archer can revisit and process this early experience, reframing it not as a failure but as a lesson in the complexity of leadership and systemic dynamics. By recognizing how the echoes of his past influence his present reactions, Archer can develop greater self-awareness and emotional resilience. For example, he might learn to distinguish between the congregation's anxieties and his own, enabling him to engage with members' concerns empathetically without becoming overwhelmed or defensive.

This inner work can also help Archer refine his approach to self-differentiation. For example, instead of withdrawing when faced with resistance, he might develop strategies to stay emotionally present while holding firm to his vision. Archer could practice active listening during congregational meetings, acknowledging members' fears and validating their feelings without capitulating to demands that conflict with the church's mission. At the same time, he can seek support from trusted mentors or peers, ensuring that he remains grounded and focused on the larger goal of creating a welcoming, inclusive worship community.

Embracing the Call to Transformation

By integrating insights from therapy into his leadership, Archer can better navigate the emotional complexities of transformation at Trinity UMC. Like Abraham at the Akedah, Archer must confront his fears and trust that God's faithfulness will sustain him and the congregation through the uncertainties of change. As he processes his own grief and unresolved emotions, Archer can help the congregation do the same, fostering an environment of mutual understanding and shared growth. In this way, trust becomes both the foundation and the fruit of the

transformative journey, trust in God, in the process, and in the new life that awaits beyond the sacrifices.

Case Study 2: The Isaac Parallel – Navigating Doctrinal Division and the Threat of a Church Split over Women Clergy

Context and Background: Divisions over Biblical Interpretation and Leadership Roles

Rev. Dr. Catherine Janeway was elected as the pastor of Grace Community Church, a mid-sized congregation with a strong tradition of biblical teaching and robust lay leadership. Janeway was only elected as senior pastor by a few votes. Recently, the church has been deeply divided over the issue of whether to allow women to serve as clergy. Half of the congregation believes that the Bible supports the full inclusion of women in all levels of ministry, citing passages like Galatians 3:28 ("There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus"). The other half holds firmly to a more conservative interpretation, pointing to passages like 1 Timothy 2:12 ("I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet") as evidence that women should not hold pastoral authority.

The division has become so intense that members have threatened to leave the church if the issue is not resolved in their favor. Both sides are entrenched in their positions, and each faction uses Scripture to justify its stance. Janeway is caught in the middle, feeling the pressure to take a definitive stand while also fearing that her decision could lead to a church split. Her own position aligns with those who support women clergy, but she is aware that if she openly advocates for this view, she risks alienating a significant portion of the congregation.

The Bowenian Dynamics: Emotional Fusion and the Fear of Conflict

This situation illustrates the concept of emotional fusion, where Janeway's identity and decision-making are heavily influenced by the polarized emotions of the congregation. In this highly charged environment, Janeway struggles to maintain her own voice amidst the competing demands of the two factions. Bowen's theory suggests that individuals in emotionally fused systems often feel pressured to conform to the dominant emotions and expectations of the group, leading to either avoidance of conflict or reactive decision-making.

The congregation's polarized emotions create a system in which Janeway feels trapped between two opposing forces. The fear of alienating either group paralyzes her leadership, preventing her from articulating a clear vision or guiding the church toward resolution. This emotional entanglement mirrors the dynamics within a family system where unresolved tensions and anxieties are projected onto a single individual.

The Isaac Parallel: Living in the Shadow of Tradition and Inherited Expectations

Janeway's experience mirrors the story of Isaac, who inherited the legacy of his father, Abraham, without fully stepping into his own identity. Isaac is often portrayed as a passive figure, someone who is acted upon rather than someone who actively shapes his destiny. Like Isaac, Janeway finds herself in a situation where she is expected to uphold a tradition she has inherited while also confronting the need for change. Her struggle to assert her own leadership reflects Isaac's challenge in distinguishing himself from the legacy of his father.

Isaac's passivity following the Akedah provides a cautionary tale for Janeway. After nearly being sacrificed by his father, Isaac retreats into a life defined by the actions and decisions of others. This pattern is evident in his interactions with Rebekah and his sons, where he avoids confrontation and fails to assert his own agency. For Janeway, the challenge is to avoid falling

into a similar pattern of passivity and instead take proactive steps to define her leadership and vision for the congregation. This requires a commitment to self-differentiation and the courage to embrace her role as a transformative leader.

Application and Insights for Clergy: Differentiation Amidst Doctrinal Conflict

For Janeway to effectively lead through this crisis, she must engage in the difficult work of self-differentiation. This means clarifying her own convictions about women's leadership in ministry while maintaining a connection with those who disagree. One approach is for Janeway to facilitate structured conversations where both sides can express their perspectives and hear one another's interpretations of scripture. By focusing on dialogue rather than immediate resolution, Janeway can create a space where the congregation can process the conflict without forcing a premature decision.

It is also important for Janeway to address the underlying fears driving the conflict. For those opposed to women clergy, the resistance is often rooted in concerns about losing a sense of theological certainty or being alienated from the broader evangelical community. Acknowledging these fears and creating a pathway for continued fellowship, even in disagreement, can help mitigate the potential for a church split.

Janeway can also draw on the Isaac narrative as a cautionary example. Rather than avoiding the conflict or allowing herself to be defined by the expectations of the congregation, she can use this moment as an opportunity to assert her leadership and clarify the church's mission. By climbing Bowen's ladder of self-differentiation, Janeway can model a healthier approach to navigating conflict, demonstrating that it is possible to hold one's convictions while remaining empathetically connected to others.

Building Emotional Resilience through Psychoanalysis

To navigate this deeply divisive issue, Janeway would benefit from ongoing psychoanalysis. This process would help her explore the emotional triggers that arise during conflict and provide strategies for staying grounded in her own beliefs while remaining connected to the congregation. Additionally, reflecting on her own family history and the dynamics that shaped her understanding of authority and gender roles could offer valuable insights into how she approaches this conflict.

For instance, during therapy, Janeway might uncover an experience from her childhood that continues to influence her leadership style. Growing up, she often witnessed her father, a prominent lay leader in their church, passionately argue against the inclusion of women in pastoral roles. His strong, vocal opposition created an environment where young Catherine felt her opinions were unwelcome, leading her to internalize a sense of inadequacy regarding her ability to challenge authority. When she later felt called to ministry, this internalized message led her to pursue her calling quietly, striving to avoid conflict and prove her worth through tireless effort rather than open advocacy.

This history of conflict avoidance and a need to earn approval could now be influencing Janeway's hesitancy to take a clear stand on women's leadership at Grace Community Church. Psychoanalysis could help her identify and process these underlying patterns, enabling her to differentiate her identity and leadership from the legacy of her father's views. By understanding how her past shapes her present, Janeway can begin to develop a more authentic and self-assured leadership style.

This inner work could also help Janeway reframe her approach to the current conflict. Instead of seeing it as a personal challenge to her authority, she could view it as an opportunity for growth, for herself and for the congregation. By embracing her agency and addressing the congregation's anxieties with empathy and clarity, she can lead Grace Community Church through a process of transformation that honors its past while paving the way for a more inclusive future.

Leading Through Adversity with Courage and Clarity

Janeway's journey parallels Isaac's struggle to assert his agency amidst the weight of inherited expectations and unresolved family dynamics. Like Isaac, she faces the challenge of navigating complex relational and systemic pressures while carving out her own identity as a leader. By embracing the principles of self-differentiation and engaging in psychoanalytic exploration, Janeway can rise above the fears and tensions of her congregation, fostering a path toward healing and transformation.

In doing so, Janeway has the opportunity to model a leadership style that balances empathy with conviction, creating a space where Grace Community Church can confront its divisions with honesty and faith. Just as Isaac's story offers lessons in perseverance and growth, Janeway's leadership journey can serve as a testament to the power of clarity, courage, and trust in navigating the complexities of congregational life.

Case Study 3: The Jacob Parallel – Wrestling with Inclusivity and the Struggle to Become a Reconciling Church

Context and Background: Debates over LGBTQ+ Inclusion in a Denomination in Crisis

Rev. Micheal Burnam is the pastor of New Hope United Methodist Church, a mid-sized congregation in the midst of a contentious debate over becoming a Reconciling Church, fully affirming LGBTQ+ individuals and allowing queer clergy to lead. The debate is especially heated given the recent division within the United Methodist Church over language in the Book of Discipline regarding the ordination of LGBTQ+ clergy and the celebration of same-sex marriages. Some members of New Hope are passionate advocates for inclusion, arguing that the church must align with Christ's message of love and justice. Others feel that affirming LGBTQ+ identities is a departure from biblical teachings and fear that doing so will compromise the church's witness.

The congregation, which consists of a mix of African-American and Hispanic members, brings unique cultural dimensions to the debate. Within these communities, traditional views of family and gender roles often carry deep significance, making conversations about LGBTQ+ inclusion particularly complex. Advocates for inclusion emphasize the need for the church to reflect Christ's radical love, while those resistant to change often frame their concerns around maintaining cultural and theological integrity.

Burnam is personally supportive of full inclusion, believing it reflects Christ's call to justice and love. However, they are acutely aware that pushing too hard could alienate a significant portion of the congregation. Additionally, Burnam's own identity as a gender-nonbinary individual adds another layer to their internal struggle. While they do not use their LGBTQ+ identity to define their pastoral role, it is a part of their lived reality, shaping their empathy for those marginalized by the church. Yet, Burnam has never fully come out to the congregation, a choice rooted in their desire to avoid becoming a focal point of the debate and their fear of rejection or misunderstanding.

The Bowenian Dynamics: Triangulation and the Pressure to Mediate

Burnam's situation exemplifies triangulation, a dynamic in which they are drawn into the conflict between two polarized factions within the congregation. In Bowenian terms, triangulation occurs when a third party is enlisted to stabilize the tension between two conflicting sides. This dynamic places immense pressure on Burnam to mediate the conflict, manage the anxieties of both factions, and find a resolution that will prevent a schism. However, the congregation's deep emotional investment in the issue makes it nearly impossible for Burnam to remain neutral or unaffected.

This triangulated position mirrors the systemic anxieties within New Hope. For many in the congregation, the debate over LGBTQ+ inclusion is not only a theological disagreement but also a proxy for deeper fears about identity, cultural change, and the future of the church. Burnam, like Jacob, must wrestle not only with the external conflict but also with the internal questions it raises about their identity, leadership, and calling.

The Jacob Parallel: Wrestling with Identity and the Struggle for Reconciliation

Burnam's experience closely parallels Jacob's wrestling with God at Peniel (Genesis 32:22-32). Like Jacob, who struggled through the night seeking a blessing and a new identity, Burnam is in a season of profound struggle. The divisions within the congregation reflect the divisions within Burnam themself. Their personal commitment to inclusivity and justice clashes with the pressures to maintain congregational unity, leading to a deep internal conflict.

Jacob's journey offers a poignant lesson: growth and transformation often come through struggle. For Burnam, this means embracing the discomfort of the current moment as an opportunity for self-reflection and differentiation. Just as Jacob wrestled with his identity and

emerged as Israel, Burnam is being called to wrestle with their own identity, both as a pastor and as a person, to lead the congregation toward reconciliation and wholeness.

Application and Insights for Clergy: Navigating Inclusivity with Integrity

To lead through this crisis, Burnam must take intentional steps to navigate the external and internal conflicts with integrity. One strategy is to create structured opportunities for dialogue within the congregation, such as town hall meetings or small group discussions, where members can share their stories and theological perspectives in a respectful environment. By focusing on personal experiences and lived realities, these conversations can humanize the debate and foster empathy across opposing viewpoints.

Burnam must also prioritize their own self-differentiation. This involves clarifying their personal convictions and values while maintaining a connection with the congregation. Burnam's ability to lead with integrity will depend on their willingness to wrestle with their own fears and anxieties, rather than avoiding the discomfort of the situation.

Building Emotional Resilience through Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis could play a critical role in helping Burnam navigate this complex season of leadership. This process would allow them to explore the deeper issues underlying their internal conflicts and gain insight into how their past experiences influence their leadership style. By addressing these patterns, Burnam can develop greater self-awareness, resilience, and clarity in their decision-making.

For example, during therapy, Burnam might reflect on their upbringing in a conservative Christian household, where traditional gender roles and rigid interpretations of Scripture were emphasized. As a child, Burnam often felt out of place, sensing that their nonbinary identity did

not fit the expectations imposed by their family and church. This dissonance led Burnam to become adept at blending in and avoiding conflict, a survival strategy that now influences their hesitancy to fully embrace their identity as a leader.

In one formative memory, Burnam recalls a moment in their teenage years when they confided in a youth leader about their feelings of difference. The leader responded with well-meaning but dismissive advice to "pray harder" and trust God to "fix" them. This experience left Burnam with a deep fear of rejection and a tendency to suppress their authentic self to gain acceptance. These early experiences of rejection and invisibility now resurface as Burnam grapples with the congregation's polarized emotions and their own reluctance to take a definitive stand.

Psychoanalysis could help Burnam process these unresolved feelings and recognize how their past influences their current struggles. By confronting these experiences, Burnam can begin to develop a stronger sense of self, separate from the expectations of others. This growth would allow them to engage with the congregation's anxieties without becoming enmeshed in them, embodying a differentiated leadership style that models integrity and compassion.

The Path Forward: Wrestling as a Path to Transformation

Jacob's wrestling at Peniel serves as a powerful metaphor for Burnam's journey. Just as Jacob emerged from his struggle with a new name and identity, Burnam has the opportunity to transform this moment of conflict into a defining chapter in their ministry. By embracing the struggle, engaging in deep self-reflection, and seeking creative solutions to the congregation's divisions, Burnam can lead New Hope United Methodist Church toward greater inclusivity and reconciliation.

The limp Jacob carried after his wrestling match reminds us that transformation often comes at a cost. For Burnam, this cost may include the vulnerability of fully coming out to their congregation or the loss of members unwilling to embrace change. Yet, like Jacob, Burnam can emerge from this struggle with a renewed sense of purpose and a deeper understanding of their identity as a leader.

Through this process, Burnam can embody the hope and resilience at the heart of the Reconciling Church movement, demonstrating that the path to inclusivity and justice is one of both struggle and grace. By climbing Bowen's ladder of self-differentiation, Burnam can lead New Hope toward becoming a community that truly reflects Christ's radical love, a place where all are welcomed, affirmed, and valued.

Case Study 4: The Joseph Parallel – Confronting Christian Nationalism and the Challenge of Declining Membership

Context and Background: A Church Divided by Politics and Ideology

Rev. Ben Sisko is the pastor of Grace United Church of Christ, a small congregation struggling with declining membership and financial instability. Located in a town where Christian nationalism has gained significant traction, the church is deeply divided along political and ideological lines. Despite its Open and Affirming status within the United Church of Christ (UCC), the congregation is dominated by conservative members who blame the church's decline on the progressive members and their "woke" ideology. They view movements toward LGBTQ+ inclusion and social justice as antithetical to Christian teachings, while simultaneously rejecting any discussion of politics from the pulpit, despite leveraging divisive political rhetoric to support their positions.

Sisko was brought in as a last-ditch effort to revitalize the church, yet he quickly realized that the congregation's resistance to change runs deep. Younger families have left, alienated by the church's rigidity and alignment with far-right ideologies. Meanwhile, the conservative members are pressuring Sisko to abandon the UCC's progressive stance and remove the church's Open and Affirming designation. Despite these challenges, Sisko remains deeply committed to the calling he feels from God: to make Grace UCC a place of radical hospitality, reflecting the love and inclusion of Christ. This vision keeps him awake at night, filled with wonder and hope for the church's future, even as he wrestles with the weight of resistance and division.

The Bowenian Dynamics: Emotional Cutoff and the Threat of Polarization

The situation at Grace UCC exemplifies emotional cutoff, a Bowenian concept in which systems become isolated to manage anxiety and avoid conflict. The conservative members of the congregation have withdrawn into an ideological echo chamber, rejecting broader societal conversations and UCC principles that challenge their worldview. This emotional cutoff has left the congregation disconnected from the community it seeks to serve and resistant to any effort to bridge the ideological divide.

For Sisko, navigating this environment requires balancing the congregation's anxieties with the urgent need to reintroduce openness and inclusivity. The polarization within the church mirrors the broader culture wars, where entrenched positions leave little room for dialogue or growth. Sisko's role, therefore, is not only to lead but also to embody a differentiated presence that can model resilience, empathy, and a commitment to the transformative power of the gospel.

The Joseph Parallel: Thriving in a Hostile Environment and Leading with Wisdom

Sisko's journey parallels the story of Joseph, who rose to prominence in Egypt despite being surrounded by a foreign culture with values that often conflicted with his own. Like Joseph, Sisko finds himself in a hostile environment, where his vision for radical inclusion clashes with the congregation's dominant ideologies. Just as Joseph used his emotional maturity, resilience, and intellect to navigate complex dynamics, Sisko must employ wisdom and creativity to lead the congregation toward a renewed sense of mission.

Joseph's story offers a template for Sisko's leadership: to remain faithful to his calling while working within the constraints of the system he is called to lead. Joseph's ability to interpret dreams and offer solutions during a time of crisis resonates with Sisko's own vision for Grace UCC, a vision that draws from the radical hospitality of Christ to create a church where all people are welcomed, regardless of their background, political affiliation, or identity.

Application and Insights for Clergy: Confronting Toxic Ideologies with Grace and Courage

To lead through this crisis, Sisko must embody Joseph's approach: addressing the congregation's anxieties with empathy while holding firm to his convictions. One strategy is to root his sermons and teachings in biblical principles that emphasize love, justice, and inclusion, framing these values as central to Christian discipleship. By grounding his vision in scripture, Sisko can offer a counter-narrative to the distorted Christianity that underpins the congregation's alignment with Christian nationalism.

Additionally, Sisko could create spaces for structured dialogue within the church, where members are encouraged to share their experiences and perspectives in a respectful environment. These conversations could help humanize the debate and build bridges between opposing factions, fostering a greater sense of community and shared purpose.

However, Sisko must also set clear boundaries and address harmful behaviors that threaten the church's witness. This may mean confronting members who use divisive rhetoric or resist the church's mission of inclusivity. While this approach risks alienating some members, it aligns with Sisko's vision of creating a church that embodies the love of Christ, a vision that prioritizes the flourishing of the whole community over appeasing individual agendas.

Building Emotional Resilience through Psychoanalysis

Navigating such a polarized environment can take a significant emotional toll, making psychoanalysis an essential tool for Sisko's leadership journey. Through therapy, Sisko can explore the deeper patterns and experiences that influence his leadership style, gaining insight into the internal conflicts that arise in challenging moments.

For example, Sisko might uncover a formative memory from his seminary days, when he served as an intern at a church embroiled in a similar ideological divide. As a young ministerial candidate, Sisko was tasked with leading a Bible study on social justice. While many participants responded positively, a vocal group accused him of promoting a political agenda, challenging his authority and questioning his calling. This experience left Sisko with lingering doubts about his ability to navigate conflict effectively, leading him to avoid confrontation in certain situations.

In therapy, Sisko could revisit this experience, recognizing how it shapes his current responses to conflict within Grace UCC. By processing the fears and insecurities rooted in this memory, Sisko can develop greater self-awareness and resilience, enabling him to lead with confidence and authenticity. This inner work would also help Sisko differentiate between the congregation's anxieties and his own, allowing him to remain grounded even in the face of intense resistance.

A Vision for Reconciliation and Renewal

Like Joseph, who used his position of power to reconcile with his brothers and save his family, Sisko has the opportunity to lead Grace UCC toward a new chapter of reconciliation and renewal. This requires embracing the tension of the present moment as a catalyst for transformation, using creativity and emotional maturity to chart a path forward.

Joseph's story reminds us that leadership often involves wrestling with difficult truths and finding creative solutions to systemic challenges. For Sisko, this means holding fast to the vision that keeps him awake at night, a vision of a church that reflects the radical hospitality of Christ, where all people are welcomed, loved, and valued. By embodying this vision, Sisko can inspire the congregation to imagine new possibilities for their shared life together, creating a space where grace and truth can flourish.

Leading with Faith and Resilience

Sisko's journey mirrors Joseph's in its complexity and its potential for redemptive transformation. By engaging in psychoanalytic reflection, building emotional resilience, and leading with wisdom and grace, Sisko can navigate the challenges of Christian nationalism and declining membership with integrity. Like Joseph, he is called to use his gifts and vision to break cycles of division and lead his congregation toward a future defined by love, justice, and reconciliation.

Through this process, Sisko can demonstrate the power of self-differentiation, modeling the emotional maturity and courage needed to confront toxic ideologies while remaining faithful to the gospel's transformative message. As Joseph's story reminds us, even in the most challenging circumstances, God's dreams for redemption and renewal are always within reach.

Lessons Learned and Moving Forward

The four case studies presented in this thesis, paralleling the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, provide a vivid tapestry of how clergy can apply Bowen's Family Systems Theory to the complexities of ministry. Each case illuminates unique dynamics within congregational life, showcasing the transformative potential of self-differentiation, emotional resilience, and adaptive leadership.

In Abraham's story, the origins of unresolved grief and generational trauma within Terah's family highlight the profound impact of emotional baggage on leadership. Rev. Jon Archer's parallel case demonstrates the need for self-differentiation when navigating resistance to change in a congregation experiencing demographic shifts. Like Abraham's call to leave Haran, Archer must balance honoring tradition with a courageous embrace of God's vision for inclusivity, practicing patience and persistence in the face of conflict.

The Isaac narrative emphasizes the perils of passivity and the necessity of agency. Rev. Dr. Catherine Janeway's experience of doctrinal division over women clergy mirrors Isaac's challenge to step out of the shadows of tradition. By confronting their fears and embracing their calling with courage and clarity, Janeway exemplifies the importance of ascending Bowen's ladder of self-differentiation to lead with integrity amidst resistance.

Jacob's story illustrates the power of wrestling with identity to transcend familial dysfunction. Rev. Micheal Burnam's case, steeped in the tensions of LGBTQ+ inclusivity, demonstrates how intellect and emotional maturity can be harnessed to reconcile competing factions within a congregation. By engaging in psychoanalytic reflection, Burnam discovers their

own agency, moving beyond the projections of others to create a church where radical hospitality becomes the cornerstone of ministry.

Finally, the story of Joseph shows the culmination of self-differentiation, as he rises above betrayal and systemic dysfunction to offer reconciliation and creative solutions. Rev. Ben Sisko's parallel journey highlights the challenges of confronting Christian nationalism and declining membership in a deeply divided congregation. Like Joseph, Sisko uses emotional maturity, and a vision rooted in the gospel to inspire hope and guide the church toward renewal, even in the face of resistance.

Across these case studies, a unifying theme emerges: when leaders begin to climb Bowen's ladder of self-differentiation, they enter into a state of repose, a profound stillness amidst the chaos of congregational dynamics. In this state, they are better able to discern the God-called possibility inherent in their ministry. They find clarity in the midst of conflict, hope in the face of resistance, and the courage to lead with conviction and compassion.

These lessons extend beyond the fictional congregations explored in this thesis. Bowen's Family Systems Theory offers the church a framework for addressing the collective anxieties of our time, guiding society toward greater unity, healing, and renewal. Just as Joseph's leadership preserved the people of Israel in a time of crisis, today's clergy can offer a prophetic voice, embodying the gospel's transformative power to heal divisions and create spaces where all are welcomed, valued, and loved.

As we move toward the conclusion of this thesis, the focus shifts to how these insights can be applied at a societal level. The church, called to reflect the radical hospitality of Christ, must rise to meet the collective anxieties of a fractured world. By embracing self-differentiation

as individuals and as a body, the church can become a beacon of hope and reconciliation, embodying the vision of the God who calls all of creation toward wholeness and peace.

Chapter 6: A Vision for the Future

Humanity is a "beast of possibility." This concept has become integral to my ministry, underpinning the vision that drives my belief in a hopeful and transformative future. As we advance further into the 21st century, the insights gained from the field of psychology have given us resources that could not only transform individual human relationships, but also propel us into a new era where human consciousness transcends the tribalism, division, and collective anxiety that have long defined our past.

In his book *The Creative Spark: How Imagination Made Humans Exceptional*, Agustín Fuentes highlights this potential by tracing humanity's evolutionary trajectory back to a time "when things really started to change," two million years ago.[324] Fuentes notes that "hominins from our specific lineage" have been unearthed "in both Southern and Eastern Africa."[325] Although modern humans evolved alongside other protohumans, "our ancestors did something no hominin ever did before: They moved fast and far."[326] This mobility allowed our ancestors to explore the world, encounter one another repeatedly, share information, and create increasingly complex societies. These movements set the stage for a species uniquely capable of monumental achievements, from unraveling the mysteries of DNA to stepping foot on the moon.

Despite this progress, humanity continues to wrestle with age-old conflicts and anxieties. Our path forward depends on integrating the traumas of our past and collectively advancing toward self-differentiation, not only in our families and personal lives but also in societal and global structures. Galit Atlas, in her book *Emotional Inheritance*, underscores the weight and

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[324] Agustín Fuentes, *The Creative Spark: How Imagination Made Humans Exceptional* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2017), 37, Kindle Edition.
[325] Ibid.
[326] Ibid.

resilience of inherited trauma, stating that "trauma is transmitted through our minds and through our bodies."[327] Yet, she also emphasizes that "resilience and healing" are passed down in the same way.[328] Atlas adds that our capacity for memory and the transmission of information allows us to relive the pain of our generational past and "reference the traumatic past" in ways that enable us to create a better future for ourselves and generations to come.[329]

By integrating our trauma, we can craft "a trajectory from chaos to order, from helplessness to agency, and from destruction to re-creation."[330] This cyclical journey of processing trauma becomes a gateway not only for personal healing but also for envisioning collective well-being.

The church, in this context, holds a pivotal role in guiding humanity through this transformation. Faith communities have the potential to become sanctuaries of mutual love, understanding, and collective healing. The narratives of figures like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, whether historical or mythic, emerge from the theological imagination of a traumatized people during the Babylonian Exile in 587 BCE. These stories reflect humanity's struggles and enduring hopes for a better future. As such, they resonate with today's society, which grapples with existential anxiety amid rapid technological and scientific advancements.

Bowen's Family Systems Theory suggests that chronic anxiety stems from the loss of new frontiers, spaces where individuals once reinvented themselves.[331] While space exploration

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[327] Galit Atlas, Emotional Inheritance: A Therapist, Her Patients, and the Legacy of Trauma (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2022), 266-268, Kindle Edition.
[328] Ibid
[329] Ibid
[330] Ibid
[331] Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1978), 443, Kindle Edition.

may offer such an external frontier, I argue that the next and final frontier is internal. Humanity must confront the deep generational wounds that keep us trapped in self-destructive collective loops and seek differentiation from the traumas shaping our lives. This inward journey aligns with the prophetic imagination of the Hebrew Bible, which challenges us to reframe our inherited patterns of anxiety and move toward liberation. As Walter Brueggemann states in *The Prophetic Imagination*, the role of prophetic discourse is to create an "alternative consciousness" that seeks to dismantle the status quo.[332]

Theologically, this moment calls for embracing both the vast possibilities of our interconnected humanity and the mystery of divine presence. The Hebrew Bible's prophetic tradition reminds us that transformation arises not from the top-down imposition of power but from the ground-up reclamation of collective hope and love. With this vision, we can imagine a new era where humanity, through self-differentiation and by fully embracing the calling of the prophets and the gospels, becomes an intermediary of God's ultimate salvation, not only for humanity but for all creation. In claiming our roles as caretakers and partners of the divine, we reflect the divine potential within us, participating in the unfolding of God's redemptive work in the cosmos.

Humanity's Potential: The Tools, Imagination, and Possibilities for Transformation

Approaching biblical figures through a trauma-informed lens allows us to see them not as flawless, superhuman heroes but as deeply relatable individuals shaped by trauma, much like ourselves. In recognizing their humanity, we find strength and inspiration for our own journeys. Just as they experienced brokenness and healing, we too can discover resources for growth and

[332] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 100, Kindle Edition.

transformation in their stories. In his book, *Cosmos*, Carl Sagan poetically captures the timeless connection that stories provide, stating that the written word allows readers to "hear the voice of another person, perhaps someone dead for thousands of years."[333] Sagan adds that books are a form of time travel, allowing those who open their pages to dissolve time as the "author is speaking, clearly and silently, inside your head, directly to you."[334] The written word "break(s) the shackles of time, proof that humans can work magic."[335] Biblical narratives, especially when interpreted through this lens, transcend their original contexts, becoming repositories of wisdom and pathways to healing.

Humanity is uniquely endowed with three essential elements: our material agency, collective imagination, and capacity for shared purpose. These gifts enable us to act as stewards of creation, envision transformative futures, and collaborate on manifesting shared aspirations. Abraham Joshua Heschel encapsulates this dynamic in his book *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, stating that, "together with the potentialities locked up in our nature, we possess the key to release and develop them." Heschel adds that it is our aspirations that are the source of our divine fulfillment, "to attain any value, we must anticipate, seek, and crave for it."[336] Our aspirations guide our pursuit of justice, compassion, and knowledge, forming the backbone of our shared journey.

As our understanding grows, so too must our spiritual and ethical maturity through self-analysis and introspection. Heschel emphasizes the importance of self-reflection, stating that "a

[333] Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1980), 334-335, Kindle Edition.
[334] Ibid
[335] Ibid
[336] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 259, Kindle Edition.

person is what he aspires for."[337] He adds that humanity, in order to "known (itself)" must wrestle with questions such as "what are the ends I am striving to attain…(and) what are the values I care for most?[338]" By aligning our aspirations with values rooted in justice, compassion, and shared purpose, we chart a course toward a legacy future generations can admire.

From the perspective of Bowen's Family Systems Theory, the narratives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph reveal a timeless truth: transformation begins with the willingness to wrestle with our inner conflicts and fears. These figures were profoundly human, shaped by trauma, doubt, and moral failure. Yet, it was in their struggles that they discovered pathways toward growth, healing, and ultimately, divine purpose. Their stories teach us that the path to wholeness lies not in avoiding conflict but in engaging with it directly, with courage and resilience.

Jacob's climb up the ladder of self-differentiation and his encounter with the divine, culminating in his transformation into Israel, is emblematic of this truth. Wrestling with God, Jacob emerges both wounded and blessed, his new name reflecting his renewed identity. In his book, *I and Thou*, Martin Buber captures the sacredness of such intimate encounters with the divine, stating that humans "have addressed their eternal You by many names. When they sang of what they had thus named, they still meant You...all names of God remain hallowed, because they have been used not only to speak of God but also to speak to (God)."[339] These relational dynamic underscores the necessity of struggle in our journey toward becoming. Meaningful

[337] Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 259.
[338] Ibid
[339] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner, 1970), 123, Kindle Edition.

transformation requires confronting our deepest fears and generational traumas; a confrontation where humanity's false self engages in mortal combat with our true self, our ultimate possibility.

The trauma of exile forced the Jewish community to reimagine their identity, history, and relationship with God. Stripped of their homeland and temple, the exiles turned to storytelling and theological reflection to preserve their collective memory. This reimagining was revolutionary. With the final shaping of the Hebrew Bible, we see a God as a universal presence concerned with justice, human flourishing, and solidarity with the oppressed. Heschel articulates this holistic perspective, stating that "Heaven and earth are equally (God's) creation."[340] While Heschel does not explicitly state that evil is a function of humanity's transgenerational trauma, this interpretation aligns with his broader theological framework. He emphasizes that evil does not originate from the divine, for "nothing in creation may be discarded or abused...good is equated with life…being is intrinsically good (for) God saw it was good."[341] This perspective suggests that the roots of evil lie within human history and experience, rather than in the inherent nature of creation itself.

In exile, the prophetic schools wove together ancient wisdom, cultural myths, and lived experiences, creating a narrative of hope and redemption. These narratives remind us that even in the face of immense trauma, humanity has the capacity to rewrite its story. This lesson is particularly poignant as we face modern societal challenges, offering a framework for reimagining a future grounded in justice and compassion.

The Hope of Possibility: A Call to Wrestle for Transformation

[340] Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 264.
[341] Ibid.

As daunting as the challenges before us may seem, the narratives of the Hebrew Bible remind us that transformation is possible. This hope, however, is not passive. It requires engagement, struggle, and perseverance. Jacob's wrestling with the divine, culminating in his transformation into Israel, symbolizes the labor of confronting the spiritual, psychological, and societal forces that hold us back. Heschel reflects on this imperative for engagement, observing that humanity is uniquely "compelled to draw a distinction between the utterable and the unutterable, to be stunned by that which is but cannot be put into words."[342] Wrestling with this ineffable truth is the path toward discovering new meaning and forging transformation. Let the unknown excite us, rather than threaten us into a state of blind submission to the gods we have triangulated to escape our collective anxiety.

We are the inheritors of a legacy of hope and possibility. The transformation of Jacob into Israel and the rise of Joseph as a leader and savior are metaphors for the journey humanity must undertake. Through self-differentiation, both individual and collective, we can overcome divisions, heal traumas, and build a world where all people can thrive. This work requires persistent effort, much like the repeated boiling of bitter lupine until it becomes sweet, as the Midrash Tanchuma illustrates, humanity has the knowledge and power to "sweeten the bitter things that (God has) created to satisfy (our) needs, how much more so are (we) able to control the evil inclination within (us)."[343] Through personal and collective introspection, this process of transformation is difficult but not impossible. We have the power to control nature, to damn rivers, and build towers that put Babel to shame. Perhaps the thing that holds us back is our

[342] Ibid 4.
[343] *Midrash Tanchuma, Bereshit 7:2*, accessed November 19, 2024, https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Tanchuma%2C_Bereshit.7.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en.

inability to see through that mirror dimly and see possibility staring right back.[344] Maybe to know ourselves as God knows us is too much for some, threating unravel the false self that so many of us create to mask our vulnerabilities and true desires.

The Hebrew Bible's wisdom, reframed through the lenses of modern psychology and theology, offers a roadmap for transformation. It challenges us to move beyond passive hope, calling us to be active co-creators with God. Heschel eloquently captures the imperative of human engagement with the divine, writing that "perhaps more significant than the fact of our awareness of the cosmic is our consciousness of having to be aware of it, as if there were an imperative, a compulsion to pay attention to that which lies beyond our grasp."[345] This awareness inspires awe and humility, qualities essential for the work of transformation.

Heschel continues, noting that "what smites us with unquenchable amazement...is not what is beyond our range in time and space but the true meaning, source and end of being."[346] This sense of amazement compels us to engage with the mysteries of existence and to wrestle with questions of meaning and purpose. Through this process, we align ourselves with the divine imperative to create, heal, and transform. The material world is not fixed or unchangeable. For too long, humanity has ignored the truth that we have always been the potters of our own stories, with our minds and spirits as the clay.

Hope is the thread that runs through the biblical narrative, a hope rooted in action and perseverance. The stories of Jacob and Joseph illustrate that transformation is possible when we confront and wrestle with the forces of bitterness and division, turning them into sweetness and

[344] 1 Cor. 13:12.
[345] Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 3-4.
[346] Ibid 4-5.

unity. As Karen Armstrong observes in her book *A History of God*, this transformative work is arduous, requiring the courage to transcend our "egotism, insecurity, and inherited prejudice" to build societies founded on justice, compassion, and love.[347]

As co-creators with God, we are tasked with using our knowledge, creativity, and compassion to shape a future that reflects the best of what humanity can be. This vision demands that we confront our limitations and the forces that threaten to undermine our progress, replacing them with a renewed commitment to hope and possibility. By embracing the timeless wisdom of the Hebrew Bible, we embark on a journey not just of survival but of flourishing, guided by the ineffable source of all being.

Toward a Transformative Framework

This thesis has argued that Bowen's Family Systems Theory and a trauma-informed approach can deepen our understanding of the ancient wisdom found in the Hebrew Bible. By integrating insights from multiple disciplines, psychology, theology, and systems theory, we are better equipped to address the challenges of our time. As Peter Titelman notes, in his book *Differentiation of Self: Bowen Family Systems Theory Perspectives*, Bowen grounded his theory in a broad array of disciplines, believing that "the seeds of a theory of human behavior" required an interdisciplinary foundation.[348] Likewise, humanity must embrace a holistic, integrative approach to confront the complexities of modern life. We must work together to learn from one another for we are all unique expressions of the divine and so all hold a small piece of God's mosaic.

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[347] Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1993), 376, Kindle Edition.
[348] Peter Titelman, *Differentiation of Self: Bowen Family Systems Theory Perspectives* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 4-5, Kindle Edition.

At the heart of this work is the recognition that human progress begins with self-awareness and self-differentiation. We must see ourselves and one another more clearly, through the lens of forgiveness that acknowledges both the harm we have suffered and the harm we have caused. The primordial story of Adam and Eve, far from being a simple tale of disobedience, is a metaphor for the origins of human anxiety and trauma. In their story, we triangulated a God who embodied our best and worst impulses. But as Paul writes, it is time to "put away childish things" and mature into a deeper understanding of ourselves and our world.[349] By doing so, we can, like Joseph, transcend generational pain and embody the messianic vision of the Hebrew prophets, a vision fully reflected in Christ's life and teachings.

Hope is the thread that runs through the biblical narrative, a hope rooted in action, perseverance, and transformation. The stories of Jacob and Joseph remind us that healing and renewal are not only possible but necessary. By wrestling with our fears and divisions, we can build a world where all people can thrive. As co-creators with God, we are called to participate in the unfolding of God's redemptive work. By embracing the transformative power of Scripture

[349] 1 Cor. 13:11.

and the insights of Bowen's theory, we embark on a journey of healing, growth, and flourishing, not only for ourselves but for all creation.

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