Introduction

No Google maps or travel guidebooks existed in ancient, preliterate villages. But there were guides for living. Village elders were these guides, and their medium was story. The stories they told constituted the memory of the village—stories of where they came from and the nature of the world they inhabited. Characters in the stories provided both prosocial and antisocial models for living. As villagers saw themselves in the stories, they functioned as mirrors reflecting what behaviors were to be affirmed and also denied. So as memories, models, and mirrors, stories shaped the village community. The storytellers themselves served as the library of the village, as Pascal Kulungu, an African friend, once put it, embodying the wisdom of the past for the present and future.

Among those stories preserved for our present global village are the stories of the ancient book of Genesis. From generation to generation, these stories have informed adherents of all three of the Abrahamic monotheistic religions of our world and inspired others beyond. They continue to do so today as they not only tell us how all began but also how to find our way to where peace is at home. They are as contemporary today as when they were first told.

Story, moreover, is a universal language. Stories continue to powerfully shape our communities, whether traditional or modern. George Gerbner, American media scholar, observes that "those who tell stories hold the power in society. Today," he continues, "television tells most of the stories to most of the people, most of the time."[1]

Gerbner has it right. Yet even in this age, when television has dethroned the traditional storyteller, some older stories just refuse to go away. Among these are the stories of the book of Genesis, along with the story of Jesus.

The Genesis stories were first passed from generation to generation through oral transmission. These stories were ultimately collected and shaped into a single narrative by an editor, likely in the tenth century BCE. As now presented in the unified text that we have inherited, the book opens with an account of creation and early post-Eden generations to the great flood story of Noah and his family. This is followed by the transitional story of Babel and the origins of human diversity. What then follows, occupying the greater portion of Genesis, are the family stories of the three great patriarchs—Abram, renamed Abraham; Isaac; and Jacob, renamed Israel.

Even though these stories are ancient, they still engage us because they draw on universal human experiences. They are timeless classics, even though we may set them aside for a while. They are always there, waiting for our return. So it is that visual artists, novelists, poets, dramatists, musicians, filmmakers, and others continue to find inspiration for creativity in these stories. Scholars continue to probe them for new insights. Even television, on occasion, returns for another look, as in the mid-1990s series on Genesis anchored by Bill Moyers in US public television. Noting the interest at the time, *Time* magazine featured the book on the cover of its October 28, 1996, issue. Simultaneously, new translations of the book also appeared.

My interest, which predates this flurry of attention in the mid-1990s, is to examine the post-Eden family stories of Genesis through the lens of conflict, violence, and peacemaking, along with the later story of Jesus. In so doing, I follow in the footsteps of Old Testament scholar Phyllis Trible, who has suggested that the Bible is like "a pilgrim wandering through history" to which each age brings its questions.[2] Trible sees hope for finding direction in the merger of past and present, and I concur.

In the Beginning

How do we make peace in a world filled with conflict and violence? That is a dominant question of our time. We may well merge past and present in search of answers, but where do we begin?

Critics of Jesus came to him one day with a moral question pertaining to marital relationships. In response, he pointed them back to the early chapters of Genesis—how it had been in the beginning (Matthew 19:3–12). His assumption was that beginnings serve as points of moral clarity. While beginnings do not answer all questions, they do serve as points of moral reference and clarity. So in pursuit of answers to our question of peacemaking in a world filled with conflict and violence, we do well also to go back to the beginning.

The story of creation in Genesis is climaxed with the creation of man and woman. Children soon follow. So the first social unit, the family, was established. Here is where life began then and continues to begin today. And it is in the family that conflict first happens and alternative modes of conflict resolution are learned. Time has not diminished this truth. As psychiatrist James Gilligan has written in our time, "all of our basic problem-solving, problem-exacerbating, and problem-creating strategies, for living and dying, are learned first at home."[3]

I begin then with the question: How was it at the beginning with the family? For the family is not only the beginning context for life but it is also the beginning context for moral clarity. So the earth's first families guide us along alternative pathways, for better or worse, for working with conflict and violence. That is part 1 of our study.

But there are also second beginnings, and among these are the beginnings of our various religious traditions. These, too, are points of moral clarity, not only for families but also for neighbors and enemies. In part 2 then, I examine core teachings related to conflict, violence, and peacemaking at the genesis of my Christian faith, which I know best. My invitation to Jewish and Islamic readers, along with others, is to reflect comparatively in the same manner on the beginnings of their traditions—the Mosaic and prophetic traditions

of Judaism and the Mohammedan and prophetic traditions of Islam, among others.

The Foundation of Freedom

All three of the Abrahamic monotheistic religions of our world begin with the assumption that as humans, we are free to choose our way in the world. From the beginning, it has been so.

The Genesis narrative begins with the grand declaration, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." With God as the master artist at work, we should expect a masterpiece. And so it was. Seven times during the process of creating, God stepped back to assess the emerging masterpiece and declared it to be good. Indeed, the seventh time was "very good." Goodness, in the Hebrew mind, is found in the number seven, and so seven days of creation and seven declarations of goodness represent a masterpiece of God's making.

Placed into the midst of this remarkable work of creation, nevertheless, was a challenge—the challenge of freedom. In the first real test of freedom posed by a cunning serpent, the earth's first two humans miserably failed. Their failure cost them their first home, the lush and verdant garden of Eden, from which they were banished, for choices also have consequences. This loss set the stage for the remainder of the human story.

Among the many things this first narrative of creation teaches us, then, is the great truth of freedom. God has created us free to choose our way in this world. If that were not so, there would be no point to this work. There would be no need to read further. However, Adam and Eve, as all of us, were given the freedom to choose. They chose, and their choice had consequences. Even as today, there are consequences for the choices we make, including our choices when in conflict.

Discerning Scripts

Ancient families, as families today, exhibit both commonalities and differences in their approach to conflict. Not all are alike. Family conflict DNAs do exist, even within singular cultures. These have sometimes been referred to as scripts. In some families, as one example, words fly easily in the face of conflict, while in other families, members retreat into silence. The variations are many.

A modern story that well illustrates a script is told by David Brinkley, the veteran twentieth-century American newscaster. In his book on the transformation of Washington, DC, during World War II, he tells of a Washington 1940s nightclub frequented by members of the different branches of the US military. Rivalry among these branches frequently led to conflict and even outbreaks of fighting. It happened so often that the management of the establishment posted a plan—a script—for dealing with the outbreaks, which was posted in the work area for the benefit of the employees. When conflicts escalated to fights, employees were instructed first to bring down the houselights in the dining area; second, to turn on the spotlight focused on the large American flag, which hung from the ceiling of the room; third, to turn on a fan, focused on the flag so it would flutter in the breeze; fourth, to stop the dance music and have the band strike up the national anthem; and finally, to call the military patrol and the navy's shore patrol in case they would yet be needed. If by the end of the national anthem these symbols of national unity had not been sufficient to divert the attention of everyone from fighting to respectful attention, Brinkley reports, the military police and navy shore patrol would be coming up the steps, ready to quell the disturbance. Then Brinkley adds, "It always worked."[4]

That is a script—a patterned response to conflict. Whether consciously written or not, we all have scripts—as did the ancient families of Genesis, as we will discover. The good news is that while our families of origin shape us, they need not determine forever what we do. We are free to test our inheritance and, if need be, to choose better ways.

In brief, then, motivation for this work springs from my belief in human freedom, in the significance of beginnings as points of moral reference and clarity from which we can learn, and in the need to choose wisely as we construct scripts as pathways that lead to where peace is at home in our time.