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The Parent-Child Relationship as an Archetype  
for the Relationship Between God and Humanity in Genesis

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Abstract

This article explored the idea that the relationship between a parent and developing child may serve as an archetype for understanding the changing relationship between God and humanity in Genesis. With Adam, Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph representing successive stages of human development, the narrative structure of Genesis is said to portray the relationship between God and humanity as changing in a way that parallels a parent's changing relationship with his or her children across their growth toward psychological integration. This changing relationship with God, which starts out with a symbiotic union with the divine, progresses through separation and individuation, and culminates in reintegration with God, may offer a Biblical approach to psychological growth and a theoretical conceptualization for the parental nature of God.

The Parent-Child Relationship as an Archetype  
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One of the primary modes of exchange between God and humanity has been to approach each other as Parent and child. Perhaps this relationship is no more cogently captured than in the book of Genesis, where the relationship between God and humanity appears analogous to the relationship between a parent and a child growing through the stages of psychological development. With the lives of Adam, Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph serving as stages in the development of humanity, the narrative structure of Genesis seems to portray the relationship between God and humanity as changing in a way that parallels a parent's evolving relationship with his or her children across their growth toward psychological integration and individuation.

The Birth of Humanity: Adam and Symbiosis

Following the birth of humanity, God engages in a symbiotic union with the helpless Adam in a manner reminiscent of a mother's care for a newborn. Lacking the experience of a collective unconscious, Adam and the humanity he represents is completely dependent upon God for the satisfaction of even his most basic needs (1:29). In the mind of Adam, there is no separation between himself and God, making him the center of a universe where his actions directly elicit the response of God and where he reigns in omnipotence. Within this universe, God is physically present, humanity is fully integrated with the divine and thus with itself, and morality is dichotomous, comprising either obedience or disobedience. To this dependent child God responds directly, anthropomorphically, and with loving discipline. Like a mother caring for her newborn, God provides food and clothing for Adam, fulfills his relational needs (2:22), and cultivates his omnipotence by endowing him with dominion (1:28). To this end, God remains physically present with Adam (3:8) and reveals to him the plans for humankind (3:14-19).

Moreover, the parental God establishes protective boundaries and invokes a loving discipline by commanding Adam not to partake of the tree of moral knowledge, and then responding in prompt discipline to the violation of this prescription.

Ironically, one might say that this state of symbiosis was never intended to be breached. Humanity was never intended to be separate from God or to know the pangs of striving for psychological maturity, for it is only in this state of union that its complete needs are fulfilled and that God's relationship with Adam is identified as "good" (1:31). With Adam's participation in sin, however, this perfect union was severed, forever relegating humanity to strive for the symbiosis it has lost and dissociating the mind of humanity into the spheres of consciousness and unconsciousness. Consciousness became the seat of the knowledge of good and evil, while unconsciousness became the realm of things unknown and the repressed memory of the perfect symbiotic union in the Garden (Edinger, 1986). As a result, humanity has been forever resigned to experience the psychological pain of striving for the integration of the human in consciousness with the divine in the unconscious. Healthy psychological development, then, may represent a return to symbiosis with the divine, a path that utilizes the process of individuation to find an integration that may never be recaptured physically, but that can be wrought through the internalization of God.

#### Abraham: The Childhood of Humanity

With the emergence of Abraham, humanity seems to have entered the phase of middle childhood, with God appropriately responding as a parent facilitating the psychological growth of his child. Beginning with Abraham's obedience to the call to depart from his "father's house" (12:1), humanity commences the process of separating and individuating from God (Edinger, 1986; Kille, 1995). It is this call that beckons Abraham and humanity to a state of differentiation

and growth, losing the symbiosis with kin (13:9) and recognizing the boundaries between God and the self. Like a child separating from its mother, Abraham begins to cultivate a clearer sense of self-identity, having to now work the land for his basic needs and experiencing autonomy from the physical presence of God. Moreover, Abraham presents the first signs of challenging the authority of God, flexing the muscles of independent thought and daring like a child to contest God's decision to destroy Sodom (13:23-33).

God's response to this childhood phase is consistent with that of a parent, granting more freedom to Abraham but not removing the necessary structure (15:1) for growth. He remains directly involved in human affairs and serves as what Shea (1995b) calls a Superego God, demanding obedience even unto sacrificing Isaac (22:2) and fulfilling humanity's needs for discipline by destroying Sodom and Gomorrah (19:24-26). But He has receded somewhat, affording greater control to humanity and operating less anthropomorphically, speaking to Abraham more indirectly through visions and angels (15:1; 22:15; Cohn, 1983). What follows is that God fosters the individuation of Abraham, catering to his independent identity by granting him participation in the plans of the Father (18:9) and allowing His mind to be changed by Abraham (18:32) in a manner that smacks of authoritative parenting (Baumrind, 1967). This may reflect God's abdication of a working *above* humanity for a working *through* Abraham to ultimately foster reintegration (Cohn, 1983).

#### Jacob: The Adolescence of Humanity

In the narrative of Jacob, God tailors His response to humanity to represent that of a parent facilitating the eventual individuation of an adolescent. Jacob manifests the ambivalence of humanity's youth, exhibiting deviousness and cunning on the one hand (27:32), while displaying a willingness to assume responsibility for his actions on the other (33:5). Together,

this latter shrewdness and its accompanying maturity lead to a greater depth of personality, sharpening his identity against the identity diffusion of Adam and Abraham, and reflecting the adolescent struggle toward differentiation (Shea, 1995a). In fleeing from his family (26:10) and enduring a lack of food (28:29), Jacob consummates the process of separation begun by Abraham and enters into the trials of adolescence. Just as trials mold the character of adolescents, however, Jacob's tribulations yield two encounters with the divine that herald the first signs of reintegration with the divine and with himself. The first of these, a dream of a ladder set between heaven and earth (28:12), awakens in Jacob the awareness of the need for integrating the human and the divine, the conscious and unconscious (Edinger, 1986; Kille, 1995). In the second, Jacob strives for this symbiosis by wrestling with God and the divine aspect of his unconscious, refusing to concede until some measure of reconciliation has occurred (32:24-26).

The God who meets this adolescent humanity is a parent who relates through mystery and weakness to cultivate His offspring's psychic maturation. To Jacob's deviousness, God responds not with childhood discipline, but with accommodation, adapting to Jacob's idiosyncrasies and supporting his task of identity differentiation. To Jacob's trials, God responds with quietness and distance, respecting Jacob's boundaries and refusing to shelter him. In doing so, God has traded both the frequency and anthropomorphic quality of his appearance to Abraham for a more rare and mysterious presence that appears only at strategic times, through the greater mediation of other divine beings and numinous dreams (28:16; 32:2; Cohn, 1986; Shea, 1995a). As a result of this "lowering of the divine profile" (Cohn, 1983, p. 9), Jacob and youthful humanity are permitted to act independent of divine control, while yet experiencing a compulsion to explore God's mystery and His adoption of weakness. Ironically, this compulsion awakens in humanity a desire to know and to begin internalizing God, thereby strengthening the synergy between the

conscious and unconscious.

Joseph: The Adulthood of Humanity

Finally, the relationship between God and Joseph reflects that of a parent relating to a child in the stage of adulthood, consummating the integration of the divine and the human as well as the conscious and unconscious. Joseph's embodiment of humanity's adulthood is marked by his wisdom, depth, and integrated psyche. Unlike Jacob's cunning and insecurity, Joseph demonstrates the wisdom of maturity, such as planning a long-range strategy to abate the famine for Egypt (41:33-36). Like Jacob, Joseph also exhibits a layered dimensionality, but his personality has become more sophisticated and refined, nuanced by an ability to forgive (50:15-21) and to acutely understand the human condition and its dreams (20:7-19). Underlying this is the realization of humanity's complete integration of God within the self and thus consciousness with unconsciousness. Accordingly, Joseph has internalized God, such that the character and precepts of God have become his own. He acts in the name of righteousness towards Potiphar's wife (39:9) and attributes his gift of dream interpretation solely to God (41:16), thereby seeing no separation between himself and the divine (41:5-8; Edinger, 1986).

The corresponding script of God in this final scene is that of a parent sustaining His adult child's psychological integration through subtlety and paradox. Compared to the divine encounters experienced by Joseph's forebears, God never once appears or speaks to Joseph (Fretheim, 1996). This may be because Joseph and the adult humanity he represents has already internalized the divine, which does not mean that God is inactive, but rather that His activity is subtle and designed to operate behind human events to sustain Joseph's internalized relationship with God, instead of directly guiding it (Cohn, 1986). What this requires of God and any parent of an adult is a comfort with paradox. God must be paradoxical with the adulthood represented in

Joseph because He “is at one and the same time . . . other-then-the-self and not other-than-the-self” (Shea, 1995a, p. 423). On the one hand, He relates *through* Joseph’s internalization of the divine, but on the other He relates *external to it* so as to consistently sustain the very act of internalization itself. Through this paradox, God keeps open the door between Himself and humanity, and thus the human conscious and unconscious.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, the relationship between a parent and his/her developing child may serve as an archetype for understanding the changing relationship between God and humanity in the narrative of Genesis. For God, this parent-child relationship reflects a covenant that promises to unify the divine and the human in the conscious and the unconscious. To engage in this covenant, however, requires a willingness to approach the pain of separation from God and one’s unconscious. While this may prove to be a threatening price, our negligence of this task may lead us to fall desperately short of the full potential in our relationship with God and our own psychological maturation.



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