pilgrimage in the Bible

an OLD TESTAMENT RETELLING
Pilgrimage is an ancient spiritual practice that finds its roots in the Old Testament story of Abraham. Abraham was compelled to leave his homeland by a covenant God made with him to make him the father of many nations. The remainder of the Old Testament is a narrative of this journey of God and the Israelites, one of both the successes and failures of the Israelites’ journey with God toward redemption.

The stages of pilgrimage cycle throughout the Old Testament story as well as exist as a metanarrative for the story of God and humanity. These stages are departure, arrival, and return. Departure is the point of initiation and rises out of chaos: in order to bring forth life, a change and movement toward order must take place. Arrival is the point of intersection with God, also called the sacred encounter. The sacred encounter occurs when God meets humanity in the most intimate and altering place, and thus the pilgrim is transformed. The stage of return marks continual transformation—order has been created out of the chaos that originated the journey, and the pilgrim returns home with a restored and rooted identity.

The work of God is essential in pilgrimage, for it is God who knows our deepest wounds and places of chaos, and can therefore bring us toward true healing, restoring us to order and our true
identity as image-bearers. When the narrative of the Old Testament is viewed through the lens of pilgrimage, with the Israelites as pilgrims journeying with God in a covenant of co-creation, the pattern of departure, arrival, and return—or initiation, sacred encounter, and restoration—reveals not only the constant wrestling of the relationship between humanity and God, but also the unending love of God and everlasting efforts of God to remind humanity of their identity and return them to the kingdom of blessing and wonder intended for them.

The rise of pilgrimage today is a testament to the transformative capacity of the stages of initiation, sacred encounter, and restoration and is bringing seekers to God in authentic and intimate ways, particularly those seekers who have been rejected or put off by the modern church. Because of these transformative experiences within pilgrimage, retelling the narrative of the Old Testament through the lens of pilgrimage offers newly authentic and intimate ways of looking at the saga that is the ongoing relationship between God and humanity. Our God is not one who is in relationship with humans only if they read the Bible or go to church on Sundays. Rather, our God is one who journeys with all of humanity, in places of light and darkness alike.

Similarly, the use of the categories of order and chaos found in this retelling rather than the more black and white categories of good and evil tell of a relationship with God that is about more than obedience and doing the right thing, as is often the perceived message of modern evangelicalism. Instead, the categories of order (as identity) and chaos (as disorientation) speak of a God who has a deep desire and purpose for humanity, one that is so great that humanity bears God’s imprint. Therefore, just as the identity of humans is fulfilled in God, there is something of the identity of God that finds fulfillment in humans, particularly in shared relationship.

Because of the rising significance of pilgrimage within the spiri-
In the beginning there was chaos. As with chaos, everything was formless and ununified. This chaos awakened deep desire within the Divine to create, as well as a heavy longing for relationship. And so, since the essence of the Divine is order that brings forth meaning and identity, the Divine initiated order out of the chaos.

With the deep desire to create, the Divine formed the earth, along with its plants, creatures, and great mysteries. With the heavy longing for relationship, the Divine imagined and brought into being humans. These humans filled the Divine’s heavy longing for relationship because they were reflections of the Divine’s image. And these image-bearers were marvelous, wonderful, worthy. Order was made of the chaos—meaning and identity created from what once lacked significance and being—and it was very good, as the Divine intended.

The humans existed with order and peace in their hearts, completely fulfilled because they were in relationship with the Divine, who was a reflection of their true selves. However, one day, the hu-
Though the essence of the humans was a reflection of the order of the Divine, the humans were now immersed in chaos. And thus, to calm the waters of chaos that resulted from this altering encounter, the Divine had to initiate order once again. However, since the humans were a reflection of the Divine, this return to order must be a co-creation, albeit in the midst of the chaos. And so the journey begins.

A PROMISE IS GIVEN:
DEPARTURE AND SEARCH FOR SACRED ENCOUNTER

*Genesis 12:1-4, Exodus 20:1-17, Leviticus 16, Numbers 13:26-14:35*

As the humans departed from a realm of order and complete goodness, they entered a world of chaos. Because they bore the ordered nature of the Divine, the chaos that surrounded them clashed with their true selves. When they leaned into the chaos rather than trusting the image of the Divine within, the humans became increasingly disoriented. The initiative of the Divine to restore order was continually thwarted, because the humans were too distracted to listen to the longings of the Divine in their true selves, and thus were not able to co-create in a journey toward restoration. And so, in a moment of sacred encounter, the Divine spoke to one man, in the hopes that through co-creating with one, the desires and the initiative of the Divine would be known to all. This man’s name was Abram.

“Leave behind the chaos you have known, and together we will journey to a place of complete goodness,” the Divine said to Abram;
“If you join me in this journey, you will be transformed—from one, there will be many, and through you wonder will be known by all.” And so, Abram became the first pilgrim to join the Divine on the journey, bound by the covenant of co-creation. With this covenant, the Divine gave Abram a new name. His name became Abraham, meaning “through one, many,” reflecting the promise of the Divine and the journey toward restoration.

As time continued and Abraham’s descendants grew, they continued to journey with the Divine as co-creators because of the covenant and the wonder that Abraham passed onto them. However, though they were bound in relationship to the Divine, they were still surrounded by the chaos of the world. Eventually, this brought the journey off course, to a land that was controlled by chaos. As the descendants grew in number, the chaos engulfed them, and they became its slaves. But the Divine remembered the covenant of co-creation and, with the help of the Divine, the descendants departed from their slavery of chaos and continued on the journey of co-creation toward restoration.

However, this generation of descendants that were liberated from slavery were far removed from their father, Abraham, and his covenant of co-creation with the Divine.

_The journey toward restoration initiated by the covenant of co-creation needed to be reintroduced, lest the covenant of co-creation be forgotten forever._

And so, the Divine spoke to the descendants in a moment of sacred encounter in an effort to remind them of their covenant of co-creation, helping to separate the chaos from the complete goodness that they journeyed toward.

“Remember that we are on this journey together. If you try to journey with another, you will most certainly veer off course. Walk in step with me on this journey and you will experience the wonder promised to Abraham, but choose to interrupt the journey and even your descendants will be lost. Rather, we must respect each other on our journey of co-creation, and you must honor those who came before you, for they know the journey well. They can tell you what comes of chaos—murder, adultery, theft, lies, and lusting. If you get caught up in the chaos you will easily lose the way. To avoid losing the way, join me in a rhythm of Sabbath and remembrance. As we live into the wonder of my intention every seven days, we will continually come closer to the ordered wonder in which I created you to share in relationship with me.”

Despite these words of guidance and wisdom, the humans continued to be disoriented by chaos.

_Just as the Divine had attempted through words of guidance and the ritual of sabbath, the journey toward restoration initiated by the covenant of co-creation needed to again be reintroduced, lest the covenant of co-creation be forgotten forever._

And so, the Divine initiated a new ritual, called the Absolution Offering, which was part of the Day of Atonement. This offering was sacrificial and mirrored the journey that the humans must take from chaos into order for complete restoration. It was the hope of the Divine that participation in this ritual would bring more lasting realization of the disorientation brought about by chaos, as well as a deeper understanding of the covenant of co-creation to a people that were so experiential.

However, even words and rituals from the Divine could not distract the humans from the chaos that surrounded them and convince them of the wonder of the journey toward restoration. Abra-
ham’s descendants had finally reached the outskirts of the land promised to them in the covenant of co-creation with the Divine—the land that was intended to be full of wonder and blessing and an echo of the complete restoration to come. However, the descendants were more seduced by chaos than they had ever been. Rather than trust that the Divine and the essence of the Divine within their true selves, the descendants declared that they would rather return to the land from which the Divine rescued them, in which they had become enslaved by chaos. In their years of slavery and journeying, they had squelched the Divine essence of their true selves and instead assumed the identity of the chaos.

Upon this realization, the Divine knew that these people could not bear to enter the promised land full of wonder and blessing because they had lost contact with the Divine essence within.

Just as the Divine had attempted through words of guidance and rituals of sabbath and sacrifice, the journey toward restoration initiated by the covenant of co-creation needed to again be reintroduced, lest the covenant of co-creation be forgotten forever.

And so, the Divine did as the descendants asked and sent them away from the promised land into the wilderness, in hopes that a period of wandering would bring about transformation. However, because of the covenant of co-creation, the Divine would stay with them in their wanderings, seeking to transform the hearts of the descendants through sacred encounter. After those who found security in the chaos had passed, the Divine led the descendants to the land of blessing and wonder once more, renewed.

Sometime later—indeed, after those who found security in the chaos had passed—the Divine again brought the descendants to the outskirts of the land promised to them in the covenant of co-creation with the Divine. The descendants had returned to the land of blessing and wonder that the Divine had intended for them, and it was the hope that in this land humans and the Divine would reach complete restoration, returning to the order that was imagined and established by the Divine so long ago. For an entire generation the descendants lived in blessing and wonder in the promised land, co-creating restored order with the Divine.

However, after the passing of this generation who journeyed with the Divine and recognized the essence of the Divine within themselves, another generation rose up in the promised land. This new generation of Abraham’s descendants quickly became disoriented by the chaos that surrounded them, just as their ancestors did.
not so long ago. The descendants had completely forgotten the Divine’s warning that if they tried to journey with another, they would certainly veer off course. Immersed in this chaos, the descendants began abandoning their covenantal journey of co-creation with the Divine and instead journeyed with idols.

Just as the Divine had attempted through words of guidance, rituals of sabbath and sacrifice, wandering in the wilderness, the journey toward restoration initiated by the covenant of co-creation needed to again be reintroduced, lest the covenant of co-creation be forgotten forever.

This time, instead of rituals, the Divine initiated the use of Reconcilers to remind the descendants of the covenant of co-creation and the journey toward complete restoration. Under the guidance of the Reconcilers, the descendants departed from their chaos and returned to live in the blessing and wonder that was an echo of the complete restoration. But when the Reconcilers themselves passed, chaos engulfed the descendants like a mighty wave, seducing them as if it was their one true love and source of security. On and on, this cycle continued: from chaos, to transformation, toward restoration and back again.

It seemed impossible for the descendants to not be distracted from their covenant of co-creation and their journey toward restoration with the Divine. In time, they no longer wanted to be a people and a nation guided by God. On the contrary, like the other nations that surrounded them and so easily seduced them, Abraham’s descendants wanted to be ruled by a lavish king. And so, through the final Reconciler, the Divine chose a king for the descendants. This king was indeed a leader for the descendants, but in the end he, too, distracted them from their covenant of co-creation and their jour-

Just as the Divine had attempted generations before through words of guidance, rituals of sabbath and sacrifice, wandering in the wilderness, and the use of Reconcilers, the journey toward restoration initiated by the covenant of co-creation needed to again be reintroduced, lest the covenant of co-creation be forgotten forever.

And so even while the first king still ruled, the Divine initiated through the final Reconciler the anointing of a young boy as the future king. His name was David, and he knew his true self was a reflection of the Divine and lived in blessing and in wonder. The Divine knew that he would be the one to remind the descendants of their covenant of co-creation with the Divine, of the blessing and wonder of the promised land, and of their journey with the Divine toward restoration.

This was indeed the case. Under the rule of King David the descendants returned to their journey with the Divine toward restoration. While chaos still surrounded them and influenced them at times, including King David, the descendants ultimately remembered their true selves were a reflection of the Divine and lived in blessing and wonder. This continued for generations. However, as seems to be the case, after a few generations passed, the descendants again became engulfed by the chaos. Many of the descendants chose to journey with guides other than the Divine, and false seers rose up who led the descendants off course with their false guides.

Just as the Divine had attempted generations before through words of guidance, rituals of sabbath and sacrifice, wandering in the wilderness, the use of Reconcilers, and the anointing of King David, the journey toward restoration initiated
by the covenant of co-creation needed to again be reintroduced, lest the covenant of co-creation be forgotten forever.

This time, the Divine initiated the use of a Seer full of blessing and wonder to expose the false seers who led the descendants off course with their false guides. This Seer of the Divine was named Elijah. Through Elijah and an eminent moment of sacred encounter, the Divine exposed the illusions of the false seers and false guides. In this moment of revelation the devotion of the descendants was transformed, and they remembered their covenant of co-creation and again began to journey with the Divine toward complete restoration.

This transformed devotion did not last long. The descendants quickly became reoriented toward chaos, abandoning their journey with the Divine, denying the reflection of the Divine within their true selves and the covenant of co-creation. On and on, this cycle continued: from chaos, to transformation, toward restoration and back again.

Just as the Divine had attempted before through words of guidance, rituals of sabbath and sacrifice, wandering in the wilderness, the use of Reconcilers, the anointing of King David, and the actions of Elijah the seer, the journey toward restoration initiated by the covenant of co-creation needed to again be reintroduced, lest the covenant of co-creation be forgotten forever.

Through the Seers, the Divine also reminded the descendants of their covenant of co-creation, their journey toward complete restoration and the blessing and wonder that accompanies it. But this time, the descendants would not listen.

And so, the Divine did what the descendants least expected, and sent them into exile away from their precious Promised Land, no longer full of blessing and wonder.
HOPE FOR RETURN: 
THE REIGN OF GOD AND THE RESTORATION OF GOD’S PEOPLE
Jeremiah 29:4-14, Daniel 3, Nehemiah

In exile, the descendants were displaced from the Promised Land. And even though while in the Promised Land they chose to find security in the chaos rather than nourishment from its fruits of blessing and wonder, in this place of exile, the descendants were disoriented by their displacement. And so, the Divine used this time to communicate with the descendants. The Divine initiated the use of a seer named Jeremiah to not only remind the descendants that they had veered off course through the seduction of chaos, but to also remind them of their role in the covenant of co-creation, and to invite them to again join in the journey toward complete restoration.

While still in exile, through moments of sacred encounter the Divine heard the sighs of the descendants and gave them words of assurance and guidance. Communicating through the seer Jeremiah, the Divine promised that in time, the descendants would return to their home. Until then, the Divine encouraged the descendants to part three
to seek blessing and wonder even in this time of displacement, for ultimately, blessing and wonder doesn’t come from a particular place, but rather from journeying with the Divine toward complete restoration.

Through this guidance, many of the descendants began to journey with the Divine again, even though they were still in exile. This soon came to the attention of the king of Babylon, the land in which the descendants were displaced, and the loyalty of these descendants to someone other than himself enraged the king. In a movement intended to enforce loyalty to himself rather than the Divine, the king threw three of the descendants into a blazing fire. However, in an opposing display of loyalty and a moment of sacred encounter, the Divine joined these descendants in the fire and prevented them from being harmed by the flames. Through this sacred encounter, the king of Babylon himself was transformed, and declared that all of Babylon would join in the loyalty of the descendants and journey with the Divine toward complete restoration.

Although the entire land of Babylon now knew of the Divine, the nation was still easily seduced by chaos. Under the guidance of the ruling kings, the nation of Babylon cycled from chaos, to transformation, toward restoration and back again, just as the descendants had so many times before. This made it difficult for the descendants to continue their journey with the Divine as well. However, after many years had passed, Babylon was conquered, and the ending to the descendants’ exile was in sight. Soon, they would be able to slowly return to the promised land.

Even though many descendants had returned to the Promised Land, committed the covenant of co-creation with the Divine and eager to journey with the Divine toward complete restoration, they found that the land once ruled by the blessed and wonderful King David had fallen to ruins. This realization was discouraging for the descendants, and could easily lead them to forget that their true selves reflected the image of the Divine, causing the descendants to be seduced by chaos once more. And so,

*just as the Divine had attempted before through words of guidance, rituals of sabbath and sacrifice, wandering in the wilderness, the use of Reconcilers, the anointing of King David, the actions of Elijah the seer, the communication through other seers, and the exile in Babylon, the journey toward restoration initiated by the covenant of co-creation needed to again be reintroduced, lest the covenant of co-creation be forgotten forever.*

This time, the Divine chose to remind the descendants of the continued journey and covenant of co-creation through initiating the rebuilding of the promised land and its blessing and wonder.

This rebuilding was led by a man named Nehemiah. Over a small period of time, the descendants came together to bring restore the land that was promised to them so long ago, particularly the city of Jerusalem, where the blessed and wonderful King David once reigned and the Temple built by his son, the wise King Solomon once stood. In an effort to protect Jerusalem, the descendants built up boundaries around the city. Despite the chaos of mockery and threats that came from other nations during the rebuilding process, the descendants were united in their efforts, being transformed as they again joined with the Divine on the journey toward restoration. Even though the promised land was no longer fully their own as it once was, this action of co-creation brought forth blessing and won-
der, because of their joining with the Divine. When the descendants finished rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem, let by Nehemiah, they formally renewed their covenant of co-creation with the Divine.

**epilogue**

**AN ALLUSION OF COMPLETE RESTORATION**  
*Isaiah 52:13-53:12*

The descendants remembered the renewal of their covenant with the Divine for many centuries. However, chaos still remained, and as time passed, they forgot that the blessing and wonder of complete restoration does not come from power, but rather from journeying alongside one another and the Divine.

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reintroduced, lest the covenant of co-creation be forgotten forever.

Again, the Divine initiated the use of a Seer. This Seer was named Isaiah, and the message the Divine gave to him was greater than any that had come before. The Divine revealed through Isaiah the coming of a Messiah who would bring complete restoration not only to the descendants of Abraham, but to all humans. The coming of the Messiah would be the ultimate sacred encounter, and his actions the complete restoration and reordering of chaos. In finally bringing completion to the co-creation of humans and the Divine, all would be transformed into the Divine’s original intention.

However, because the descendants began to seek blessing, wonder, and complete restoration through power, they heard the message of a coming Messiah but did not listen further to hear the humility in which the Messiah would come and model what it is like to truly journey and co-create with the Divine. Despite this, the words of the Divine through the Seer Isaiah remained. The question remained, as well: because of their preoccupation with power, would the descendants miss this humble Messiah of whom Isaiah foretold?

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS?

I’d love to know what you think! Share your thoughts about this retelling and viewing stories through the lens of pilgrimage in the comments section here (all one line):

http://asacredjourney.net/2013/04/tracing-pilgrimage/