THE ART OF
mentoring

A 14-DAY STUDY OF
BIBLICAL EXPERTS

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Introduction

Mentoring is a simple concept but difficult to practice. At the core of mentoring, there is a desire of two people to give their lives away. On one side is the mentor, who is called upon to be a trusted teacher and guide. On the other side stands the student, one who yearns to trust another person to teach and guide him. Yet words like *called, trust,* and *give their lives away* seem radically opposed to the language of individualism and consumerism that drives us to *seek, obtain,* and *protect.*

What makes it even harder for North American Christians to practice mentoring is that *we typically encounter the language of mentoring in the world of business.* If the point is not evident, then a quick web search will reveal that a majority of the hits focus on mentoring from a workplace perspective. However, if you are reading this, you probably got it from a youth worker training event or another youth worker, which places the interest in mentoring outside the realm of business and the workplace. Therefore, we recognize the need for mentors to guide people through life in general and not just in the realm of business.

I propose that we begin to look in other spheres of life for insights into mentoring. Specifically, I suggest that *mentoring can and should also be seen in family life.* If, at the core of mentoring, there is a desire of two people to give their lives away, then anywhere we find this taking place is an opportunity to learn the art of mentoring. It seems prudent to believe that family systems create these types of relationships all the time. So we should look at stories of wise uncles advising their young nephews as an opportunity to reflect on mentoring.

If you are with me so far, then I want to suggest also that the *Bible provides us with insights into mentoring from Old Testament family relationships.* The relationships between people like Abram and Lot, Jethro and Moses, and Naomi and Ruth are filled with insights on the role of the mentor and student *(see Appendix 1 to learn more about family language and systems in the Old Testament).*

I hope that what follows is a challenging and encouraging exploration into the art of mentoring from a source that has long been ignored. May you take each of these in the spirit of a devotional reflection, and may they equip you to practice the art of mentoring.

Abram and Lot

The Book of Genesis:

Chapters 12-14 & 18-19

A Mentor Can Be Trusted

So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

Lot risks everything when he trusts Abram. The point few think about is that Lot doesn't have to trust him. Abram's choice to uproot the household and move them to a foreign land is dangerous. In those days, it was possible for one of the leading men of a household to kill another over putting the whole household in danger.

So why does Lot trust Abram?

The story seems to open up one possible answer. The Hebrew text literally translates, *Go Abram Yahweh Go Lot,* which captures the sequence of events in the story perfectly. Abram trusts Yahweh and leaves; then Lot trusts Abram and leaves with him. Therefore, the possible answer is that Lot trusts Abram because Abram trusts the Lord.

Who trusts you, and whom do you trust?

May you be able to say with the apostle Paul, "Follow me as I follow Christ."

Mentoring Isn't Forever

GENESIS 13:11B-12

The two men parted company: Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom.

Abram and Lot travel many miles together from Haran, somewhere in the northern part of modern-day Syria; to Canaan, southern part of modern-day Israel; and then to Egypt and back to Canaan. They accumulate a large amount of possessions along the way. But at one point they realize they need to part ways.

The realization comes when they experience a lack of resources to sustain their households and hostility among their herdsmen. Yet in the midst of such circumstances, Abram does not turn inward and fight against Lot or simply settle for the bad circumstances. Rather, he turns to Lot and suggests parting ways for the well-being of both of them.

It is hard to find a person you can trust and share your life with. It is even harder to say goodbye to that person. Yet, as a mentor, you need to realize that you are not always called to travel with your student forever. When faced with difficult circumstances, sometimes it is best to turn to the person and suggest parting ways.

May your love for the other person guide your discernment when such circumstances arise.

Mentoring Means Rescuing

He recovered all the goods and brought back his relative Lot and his possessions, together with the women and the other people.

You gotta feel for Lot. First, he parts ways with a trusted friend and family member. Then he moves to a bad neighborhood, and leaders in the area start fighting. His household gets caught up in the violence and is taken by invading tribal leaders. Abram is told by an escapee what transpired, and he gathers a force to rescue his nephew. He meets up with the invading group, defeats them, and rescues Lot and his household.

This story rubs up against a common mentoring truism: *Failure is the best teacher.* Though it is true, there is rarely any qualifier to that proverb that calls for discernment on the part of the mentor. The story of Abram and Lot pushes us to ask, *When does a mentor step in and rescue?*

Just like Abram, you are called to rescue when a student's life is on the line. That includes the possibility of physical, moral, or emotional harm to themselves or others. Remember, they trust that you will teach them by sharing your life with them. What they may not know is that you are called to rescue them when their lives are on the line.

May God strengthen you to act when your students' lives are on the line.

Mentors Intercede through Prayer

GENESIS 19:29
So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived.

The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah must have been well known at the time of the writing of Genesis. It is intentionally mentioned in chapter 13. The foreshadow of the reason for the destruction is mentioned in the same section, for it explains that Lot pitches his tent near the city of Sodom and that the men of Sodom are wicked. Therefore, one listening to this story should be expecting Lot's impending doom.

Between chapters 15 and 19, the story shifts emphasis onto Abram, who is pictured as a hero moving deeper into relationship with God but weak in his trust of God's way and in need of a constant reminder of God's faithfulness. An odd hero to be sure, nevertheless, Abraham is now driven to intercede on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah.

So we jump into Genesis 19 with the knowledge that an imperfect person, Abraham, is called by God to intercede for cities that we know will be destroyed. It seems like the writer of Genesis is pushing us to ask the question, *What will happen to Lot?*

The answer is given in 19:29. And it is here that we learn an essential activity of a mentor. The mentor is to pray for the student. No matter how imperfect you may be in following God, you are still called to pray for those God has put into your care.

Whom are you praying for?

Jethro and Moses

The Book of Exodus: Chapters 2-4 & 18

Strangers Become Mentors

Moses agreed to stay with the man…

We are told very little about Moses's father-in-law when we first encounter him in the story. We know that he is a priest whose household lives in Midian. We know that he is called Reuel, which means "friend of God," and he extends hospitality to a stranger, Moses, who helped rescue his daughters and sheep.

As the story of Moses progresses, we come to recognize that through these years in Midian, Jethro (a title meaning "his Excellency") and Moses form a close bond. Moses looks to Jethro for blessing and direction in life. In short, Moses will come to recognize Jethro as a mentor.

This formative relationship for Moses and Jethro would have never occurred had Jethro not been willing to extend hospitality to a stranger. As mentors shaped by God's story, we must be committed to inviting strangers into our lives. It is not merely a mandate we are to follow but a part of our identities as "friends of God."

Are you inviting strangers into your life?

Mentors Listen and Celebrate

EXODUS 18:9
Jethro was delighted to hear about all the good things the Lord had done for Israel in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians.

Exodus 18 contains an exceptional story about mentoring. Jethro—the trusted mentor—and Moses—the accomplished student—get together after a long period of being a part. In the time away from each other, God has rescued Moses and the people of Israel from Egypt.

We are told that Jethro is excited to hear all that God has done with Moses and for the people of Israel. In a few verses, we learn two key elements to the art of mentoring: listening and celebrating. First, we need to be able to come alongside and hear the whole stories of our students. And we also need to be listening for God's activity in the midst of their stories. Once we recognize God's activity in their stories, we need to be ready to speak words of praise and celebration.

Mentor's Prayer:
God of love,
May my students walk in your way.
May my students immerse themselves in your work.
May my students seek your will.
God of grace,
May I have the ear to hear your will.
May I have the heart to celebrate your work.
May I have the strength to walk in your way.
Amen

Mentors Ask Great Questions

When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?"

After hearing Moses's story of God and celebrating the greatness of God, Jethro walks with Moses in a typical day. Jethro is taken aback by how much Moses is doing for the people. He recognizes the need to question Moses concerning it.

Jethro's question is great. It shows the depth of relationship he has with Moses. It could offend Moses to be questioned on his leadership. Yet Moses takes the question without resentment. The question is also practical and challenging. It is practical in that it relates to a current issue that Jethro observes, and it is challenging because it is open ended and calls for Moses to reflect on the practice.

As a mentor, we need to recognize the power of questions. They open our students up to needed reflection. Questions also place them in a position to hear advice that leads them to a better way of life.

May you recognize that revealing is as powerful as informing.

Mentors Exhibit Presence and Provide Advice

EXODUS 18:17

Moses's father -in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good."

Read the advice Jethro gives Moses (Exodus 18:17-23).

Enough can't be said for the great example Jethro gives us as mentors. First, he shows great care for both Moses and the people. He knew that Moses's current practice will wear out both Moses and the people. A big-picture perspective is key when observing the lives of our students. We need to understand the complexity of their situations before we speak.

Jethro recognizes that his advice needs to be discerned in the context of following God's will. He tells Moses, "…I will give you some advice, and may God be with you." Essentially, he tells Moses to listen to his idea then decide if it is what God would have for the people. We also must remind our students that they must discern whether our advice is in accord with God's will for their lives.

Finally, Jethro gives his recommendation. It is not an order but a suggested alternative to the current practice. It is given only after Jethro has journeyed with Moses, heard the stories of his life, and observed his practices. Jethro has spent more time listening and being with Moses then he does advising him.

The balance between presence and advising must be recognized in our contemporary context. We have the temptation to catch up with a person over email or stay connected via Facebook. However, a true mentor is one who is present; one who journeys in the lives of people long enough to be able to hear God's movement in their stories and discern unhealthy practices.

Are you giving enough time to being with your students?

Mentors Hope for the Best

Then Moses sent his father-in-law on his way, and Jethro returned to his own country.

One fault of many youth workers is a lack of hope. We focus so much of our attention on doing things and accomplishing tasks that we often do not leave room in our lives for hope. Contrary to this reality is our calling as Christ followers. Jesus invites us to live and serve out of a fullness of hope.

Jethro's actions with Moses reveal that hope is an enduring quality of their relationship. Jethro receives Moses, a stranger, into his home and family. Jethro blesses Moses's calling to go and participate in God's liberation of the people of Israel. Finally, Jethro leaves despite the difficult circumstances and enormous leadership role that Moses carries. These types of actions aren't done by a person focused on merely getting things done. These types of actions are done by a person who has hope that God is at work.

Are you mentoring out of hope or fear?

Naomi and Ruth

The Book of Ruth

Mentoring Born in Adversity

But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?"

You probably already know that mentoring relationships develop in both intentional and unintentional ways. However, most of us think about mentoring once we reach some imaginary point where we believe that we possess enough time, energy, experience, and resources. We create this imaginary point because we are taught that we can't care or lead others if we are not "healthy." That is good advice, but too often we define healthy as *possessing* an abundance of things such as time, energy, experience, and resources.

The book of Ruth clearly sets out Naomi's situation as moving from pleasant (Naomi) to bitter (Mara). With the death of all the men in her household, Naomi is left defenseless (both legally and physically) and poor. It is in the midst of this bitter situation that Ruth gives her life and identity over to Naomi, the people of Israel, and the God of Israel.

Might we be missing mentoring relationships in the midst of difficult situations? Naomi re-narrates for us what the requirements of "healthy" are for followers of God. Healthy may mean that we don't possess anything but hope in God. With a hope that endures through seemingly hopeless situations, we may be able to accept the commitment of a person who wants to journey with us.

Mentoring relationships develop at unexpected times and situations. Are you looking for them in the midst of adversity?

Mentors Bond

When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

Naomi does not expect Ruth to make such a strong commitment to her. She urges her to follow Orpah back to the Moabite people. Yet Ruth persists and declares Naomi to be her family despite the absence of legal or religious requirements and despite the poverty and oppression they will face without a male family member.

The mentor-and-student bond gets little attention. It seems prudent, though, that the mentoring bond would resemble that of family bonds. When two people are giving their lives to one another in order to learn and be formed, they are reflecting familial relationships.

May you recognize your students as part of your extended family and guide them as you would your child, sibling, niece/nephew, or grandchild.

Mentors Reveal Harmful Situations

RUTH 2:22

Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with his girls, because in someone else's field you might be harmed."

Much like Jethro does for Moses, Naomi names the harmful situation for Ruth. It is a generous perspective that allows Naomi to be able to identify it. She also has a genuine concern for Ruth and wants her to avoid the pain of the situation.

When mentoring a person, we need to ask ourselves if we have a generous perspective. Do we see enough of the big picture? If not, we need to spend some more time listening and gaining that insight before we advise our students. We also need to be motivated by genuine concern for our students. If love does not rule our truth telling, we need to spend more time praying about the motivations of our comments.

Do you need to reveal to someone a harmful situation?

Mentors Are Trusted

RUTH 3:5

"I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered.

Ruth has a wild trust in Naomi. I am shocked by how she repeatedly lays her life and well-being in Naomi's hands. It says a great deal about Naomi's character.

As mentors, we cannot do enough to build this type of trusting relationship with our students. They are going to face difficult times and moral dilemmas. In those moments, we will want to have a sufficient trust built up in order for them to see us as guides and counselors.

The greatest compliment a mentor can get is to have a student say, "I trust you."

Mentoring Is a Blessing

RUTH 4:14

The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel!"

Wow. I am speechless when I read the story of Ruth and Naomi. They move from two women who are bonded together in the midst of adversity. They must face a patriarchal way of life that has pushed them to the margins. Yet in the midst of the overwhelming difficulties, God provides for them.

At the end, Naomi is blessed because of her bond with Ruth. She has lived with and guided Ruth through the whole story. And in the end, God has not left Naomi without one who will protect and provide for her and Ruth.

How is mentoring a blessing to you? Think about writing a note to your student to let her know how her life has blessed you.

Appendix: Family Language in the Old Testament

So Joshua rose early in the morning, and brought Israel near tribe by tribe, and the tribe of Judah was taken. He brought near the clans of Judah, and the clan of the Zerahites was taken; and he brought near the clan of the Zerahites, family by family, and Zabdi was taken. And he brought near his household one by one, and Achan son of Carmi son of Zabdi son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken. Joshua 7:16-18

This brief section of text from the book of Joshua captures the multiple terms used to describe the various spheres of kinship or family relations in the Old Testament. The concepts that relate to the terms and phrases translated as *household*, *clan*, and *tribe* will be explored to understand the kinship relations.

Beginning with the rise of Ancient Israel, the Hebrew phrase *bet' ab*, literally *father's house*, is what typically gets translated as *household*[1]. The Old Testament also contains the phrase *bet' em*, which is literally translated *mother's house* and also means *household*[2]. These two phrases can also refer to a person's biological lineage, possessions, or a compound where one lives. However, *household* typically refers to the basic family unit, made up of multi-generational kinship relations and non-kinship relations[3]. For example, a household in the Old Testament might have consisted of a wife (or wives) and a husband, their sons, daughters-in-law, the unmarried daughters, nephews, nieces, cousins, servants, parents of the man and/or the woman, and potentially any captives taken in military actions (e.g., Jacob's household, David's household).

The household shared a common religion, provided for the material needs of each individual, and provided protection and education[4]. It would be at this level that individuals understood their specific identities. For example, many names in the Old Testament would be accompanied by the phrase *son of* or *daughter of,* such as Achan son of Camri in the text above.

The concept of the household was most prominent during the period of Ancient Israel when the rural life demanded much from each family unit in order to survive[5]. However, as times changed with the rise of the nation state and beyond, this basic family unit was weakened[6]. After the exile, the household was still present in the community but no longer a prominent part of the way of life for Second Temple Jews. Therefore, the household was an enduring institution throughout the Old Testament.

The *clan* is typically the translation for the Hebrew word *mispahah*. More technically, the *mispahah* is a kinship unit of related *bet' ab*, or households[7]. In other words, a clan was a collection of related households. Along with common ancestry, the clan shared their resources, a common religion, and also the responsibility for protection[8]. It would have been from this level of kinship relation that people would find marriage partners (Genesis 24, 29)[9]. This would have ensured that the property—both land and animal—stayed within the clan[10].

Finally, *sebet* is the Hebrew word that is translated as *tribe*. It would be accurate to understand that this relationship is an association of clans[11]. At this level of kinship, there would have been a common religion and military obligation. The strongest bonds at this level were clearly their kinship and kinship-in-law relations, along with their religion[12]. The tribes would have understood their identity as collectively being *'am YHWH* or the *kindred of YHWH*[13].

The kinship language, or language used between family members to talk about each other and their responsibility to one another, has typically been obscured in years past by the emphasis placed on covenant language. Frank

Moore Cross makes the point:

> *Often it has been asserted that the language of 'brotherhood' and 'fatherhood,' 'love,' and 'loyalty' is 'covenant terminology.' This is to turn things upside down. The language of covenant, kinship-in-law, is taken from that language of kinship, kinship-in-flesh[14].*

Cross comes to this conclusion through a study of West Semitic tribal groups which he believes to be grounded in kinship[15]. He finds that their identities, properties, legal acts, and military power were tied to an understanding of their obligations to their kindred[16]. Phrases that have been explained as covenant language such as *bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh* and the love terms *hesed* and *'ahabad*, are better understood as first being family language[17]. Also, the obligation to redeem *(ga' al)* is best understood as *to act as family[18]*. This responsibility was turned into a role in the religious rituals of Israel with the rules of the *go'al*, or *kinsman redeemer.*

As the complexity of the West Semitic tribal groups grew from households to clans and then tribes, there became the need to articulate their relationships with the larger group. The kinship language was a natural way to talk about these people; thus, the rise of the kinship-in-law language, which was a legal fiction that allowed for outsiders to become insiders[19]. The language of marriage, adoption, and oath used by both individuals and groups allowed for ways of understanding one's relationship to others outside the kinship-in-flesh, along with their responsibilities to them[20]. Therefore, the language that was used above to describe the clan and tribe were all part of an increasingly complex family language that was developed by the West Semitic tribes and found in the Old Testament.

Therefore, when we read the Old Testament terms we typically refer to as *covenant language*, it would serve us well to keep in mind that it developed from family language. This does not degrade the religious significance or theological implication of such language. Rather, it deepens the reality that when people made covenants in the Old Testament, they were declaring that their relationship with a person or God was as close and meaningful as their own flesh and blood. In short, covenant language declared an outsider as family, which carried all the roles, responsibilities, identities, and religion described above[21].

[1]Joel F Drinkard, *An Understanding of Family in the Old Testament: Maybe Not as Different from Us as We Usually Think* (2001) 490–492. The period of Ancient Israel is dated between 1200 to 1000 B.C.E. This has typically included the books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth.

[2]Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers, *Families in Ancient Israel*, 1st ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 34. Examples: Genesis 24:28; Ruth 1:8; Song of Solomon 3:4 and 8:2.

[3]Drinkard, *An Understanding of Family in the Old Testament*, pp 490-491.

[4]Blenkinsopp, Collins, and Meyers, *Families in Ancient Israel*, pp 24-27.

[5]Blenkinsopp, Collins, and Meyers, *Families in Ancient Israel*, p 38.

[6]Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon* (JHU Press, 2000), pp 16-18.

[7]Drinkard, *An Understanding of Family in the Old Testament*, pp 492-493.

[8]Cross, From *Epic to Canon*, pp 3-4.

[9]Drinkard, *An Understanding of Family in the Old Testament*, pp 492-493.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Drinkard, *An Understanding of Family in the Old Testament*, p 494.

[12]Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, pp 11-12.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, p 11.

[15]Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, p 3.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, p 4.

[18]Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, p 5.

[19]Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, p 8.

[20]Cross, *From Epic to Canon,* p 9.

[21]Ruth's commitment to Naomi is an example where the connection between covenant language and family language can be easily observed (Ruth 1:15-18).