

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Martial Frindéthié, Ph.D.

## GENESIS / La Genèse (1999)

Cheick Oumar Sissoko (1945-)

### OVERVIEW

*Auteur* Born in 1945 in San, Mali, Cheick Oumar Sissoko (sometimes spelled Cissoko) is an internationally acclaimed filmmaker and director. After graduating from the University of Paris with a degree in sociology and African history, Sissoko studied cinema at the Ecole Nationale Louis Lumière and then returned to work as a filmmaker at the *Centre National de Production Cinématographique* in his native Mali. Later, together with other Malians, Sissoko founded a film production company called Kora Films. Sissoko also became involved in Malian politics as the co-founder of the African Solidarity for Democracy and Independence party, in 1996. In 2002, Sissoko was appointed Minister of Culture in Mali, a portfolio to which was added that of Minister of National Education, which he held until October 2007. Sissoko's internationally acclaimed films include features such as *Nyamanton/The Garbage Boy* (1986), *Finzan/A dance for Heroes* (1989), *Guimba The Tyrant* (1996), *La Genèse/Genesis* (1999), and *Battù* (2000).

*Film* Sissoko's *Genesis* is a 102-minute dramatic adaptation of the Biblical story of Jacob and Esau. Sissoko's film is the filmmaker's own synthesis of chapters 24, 25, 34, 37, and 38 of the Book of Genesis. The story begins when, after an epic journey through the desert, Jacob's brother Esau, is banished by his father, Jacob, and his mother, Rebekah. Esau sets camp with his army of hunters and vows to make his brother, Jacob, pay for the humiliation he caused him when he bought his birthright with a bowl of lentil soup. With *Genesis*, Sissoko wanted to make a film that would calm the bellicose and fratricidal hearts of humanity by teaching mankind that they are all children of the same God. The film won the Golden Bayard for Best Artistic Contribution at the 1999 Namur International Festival for French-Speaking films and Best Set at the 1999 FESPACO, in Ouagadougou; Burkina Faso.

*Background* *Genesis* was shot in the desert of northern Mali, on the picturesque territory of the Dogon people. The actors in the film are well-known figures from the world of cinema and music. Sotigui Kouyaté, for example, who plays Jacob, is the father of Burkina Faso filmmaker Dani Kouyaté. Sotigui has appeared in a number of films, including *Keïta*, *The Heritage of the Griot* (1995), *Little Senegal* (2000), *London River* (2009) and others. Salif Keïta, who plays Esau, is an internationally renowned singer. An albino himself, Keïta campaigns for equal rights for albinos, who in Africa and many other places are treated as curiosities.

### CHARACTERS

*Jacob* (Sotigui Kouyaté): The Biblical figure of Jacob, who buys his brother Esau's birthright

*Esau* (Salif Keita): The Biblical figure of Esau, who is manipulated by his brother into selling his birthright

*Hamor* (Balla Moussa Keïta): A Canaanite chief, whose son, Prince Shechem, kidnaps and rapes Jacob's daughter Dinah

*Dinah* (Fatoumata Diawara): Jacob's daughter, who is kidnapped and raped by Prince Shechem.

### SYNOPSIS

Alone in his tent, Jacob mourns the death of his son, Joseph. Joseph's brothers have brought back their brother's blood-stained tunic to their father, claiming that Joseph has been devoured by wild beasts. Jacob refuses to allow his son's tunic to be washed and promises not to come out of his mourning until his son's body has been brought back to him, and he has buried it himself. While Jacob mourns, his daughter Dinah ventures into the land of the Canaanites. Prince Shechem, son of Hamor, a Canaanite nobleman, kidnaps and rapes Dinah. Shechem then falls in love with Dinah and wants to marry her. Shechem's father, Hamor,

sends a delegation laden with gifts to Jacob to ask for Dinah's hand in marriage. Jacob's brothers, led by Reuben, Jacob's eldest son, accuse Prince Shechem of defiling their sister.

Dinah's brothers insist that, for the marriage between their sister and Shechem to be possible, all the men of Hamor's tribe must be circumcised. Hamor agrees and has the men of his clan circumcised. While Hamor's men are convalescing and unable to defend themselves, Jacob's sons attack Hamor's clan, exterminating most of the men, raping and enslaving the women and children, and destroying Hamor's fields. A council is organized to find a way towards peaceful coexistence between the clans. Jacob's sons argue that peace will only be possible if a pact is made prohibiting intermarriage between different clans. But, the griots (oral historians) beat this notion to the ground, demonstrating that Judah, one of Jacob's belligerent sons, was the father of Shelah, whose mother Ada was a Canaanite. On top of this, Judah fathered twins with Tamar, a Canaanite woman, whom he considered ethnically impure for his son. A conflict breaks out between the Canaanites and Jacob's tribe, which Jacob tries to resolve by telling the story of his father's time, when the world lived in peace, tribes intermarried, and were rich in culture. While Jacob is telling his story, Esau attacks Jacob's tribe to take revenge on his brother for stealing his birthright, his status as elder brother. Jacob escapes, but in the desert, he wrestles with God in human guise. Jacob emerges victorious from this struggle and is named Israel. His brother, Esau, reconciles with him and advises Jacob's children to go to Egypt to fetch their brother, whom they had sold to desert merchants.

## SCENES

**Esau's resentment** Esau, brother of Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebekah, marches through the desert with his tribe of hunters, carrying their exhausted and their wounded on stretchers. Esau vows revenge on his brother Jacob, who has taken his birthright from him. Esau recalls that Jacob and he were brothers, bound by justice. And that virtue left his brother, and greed overtook him instead.



**Jacob is in mourning** Jacob, the shepherd, is in his tent, mourning the death of his son, Joseph. Jacob's youngest son, Benjamin, runs to him to inform him that his sister, Dinah, is washing some clothes in the courtyard. Jacob calls on Dinah to ask her what she is washing. Dinah replies that her mother, Leah, asked her to wash her brother Joseph's tunic.

**Leah has had enough** Jacob calls on his wife, Leah, to complain. She tells him that she has had enough of his 20-month-long mourning that has deprived her of a husband and her children of their father. Leah asks Dinah to carry on with her chore and wash the blood off Joseph's tunic. Leah tells her husband that Joseph is dead, eaten by wild animals, and that he will never return. She tells Jacob that the mourning to which he has submitted the family for 20 months is over as far as she is concerned.



**I want proof of Joseph's death** Jacob emerges from his tent, furious at Leah. He tells her that her sons have come to him with Joseph's blood-stained tunic, saying that he was killed by some wild beast. Jacob tells Leah that he wants proof of it, and that until he sees Joseph's body and washes it and buries it himself, he will be in mourning. Jacob gathers some dust and covers his face to make his point. Jacob chases Dinah away and removes his son's tunic from the washing basin. Jacob wrings out Joseph's bloody tunic and takes it into his tent to dry.



**The abduction and rape of Dinah** While assigned to watch over her father's herd, Dinah, Jacob's daughter, flirts with Prince Shechem, son of Hamor, chief of the tribe of Canaanite farmers. Shechem kidnaps Dinah, takes her to his kingdom and has sexual intercourse with her. The men and women of Shechem's kingdom celebrate Dinah's virginity, which their young prince has snatched from her.



**Shechem wants to marry Dinah** The celebration is interrupted by the unexpected arrival of King Hamor. Hamor is not happy. He accuses Dinah of being a promiscuous girl who has seduced his son. Dinah defends herself and points out to Hamor that his language is unworthy of a chief. Hamor hits Dinah for her insolence. Hamor withdraws into his hut, refusing to speak to his son Shechem. Shechem comes to beg his father's forgiveness. He tells him he loves Dinah and he would like to marry her. He asks for his father's blessing.



**Hamor visits Jacob** Hamor, the farmer, and his notables go to visit Jacob. They bring with them gifts in the form of food and donkeys. Through their go-betweens, the cousins, Jacob and Hamor, greet each other and recognize each other's greatness. Then, from his mourning tent, Jacob asks Hamor the reason for his visit. Hamor's spokesman speaks up and explains that they have come to see Jacob about his daughter, his gazelle, his treasure Dinah. Jacob replies that his only treasure was his son Joseph. The visitors tell Jacob that they sympathize with his grief. They remind him, however, that his daughter Dinah is still alive.



**Leah feels dishonored** At a signal from Hamor, his retinue presents Jacob with the gifts they have brought him. Leah approaches. She looks disdainfully at the gifts and begins to spill their contents into the dust. Then she drops to her knees, lamenting the dishonor her daughter has brought down on her by prostituting herself to the Canaanites.



**Let our people become one** Jacob emerges from his tent and invites Hamor to a private meeting. Jacob expresses his distress concerning the defilement of his daughter by Prince Shechem. Hamor asks Jacob to allow the marriage between his daughter Dinah and Prince Shechem, so that their peoples become brothers and their lands become one. Prince Shechem wants to make amends. Prince Shechem speaks in public. He asks Jacob to forgive him for having offended him and says he is ready to do whatever Jacob wants in order to remedy his mistake and marry Dinah. Jacob's sons, led by Judah, reject Shechem's apology. They refuse to make an alliance with the uncircumcised of Canaan.

**Not unless you submit to circumcision** Jacob adds that what his sons have just said is a truth that comes down from his ancestors and his ancestral father, Abraham. Jacob says that an alliance with the clan of Hamor is only possible on one condition: that the clan of Hamor bend to the laws of his clan, that they become like them, meaning that all the men of the clan of Hamor must be circumcised.



**The warning of Jacob's sons** Judah, Jacob's son, tells Hamor that a refusal on his part to have his men circumcised would be proof that his clan's intention was simply to defile his sister and humiliate Jacob's clan, which would require bloodshed between the two peoples. Judah's other brothers rise in turn to voice their approval of their brother's warning.

**Hamor accepts Jacob's condition** Hamor undergoes circumcision. Then Prince Shechem and all the other men of Hamor's clan undergo circumcision. Dinah, Jacob's daughter and Shechem's beloved, is pleased to see that Shechem's clan has accepted the conditions imposed by her father. All the men of Hamor's clan are now sore and incapacitated. For days they can do nothing but nurse their wounds.



**Judah's army attacks Hamor's clan** Judah, Jacob's son, sends a sentry to investigate Hamor's clan, under the false pretext of carrying a gift to Hamor's clan. The sentry rushes back to tell Judah's army, waiting at the gates of Hamor's kingdom, that the men of Hamor's clan are all disabled. The army of Judah, son of Jacob, attacks Hamor's clan. The children of Jacob's clan drive Jacob's herds into the fields of Hamor's clan, destroying the crops. Caught off guard and unable to defend themselves, Hamor's men are killed by the army of



Dinah's brothers. Women and children are taken as slaves. Prince Shechem is killed, but his father, Hamor, manages to escape.

**Hamor wants a council of peace** Jacob hears the news of his sons' raid and is furious. He orders Dinah to accompany him to see Hamor, who has taken refuge in the desert. Jacob tells Hamor that he has come to mourn his son-in-law, Shechem. Jacob tells Hamor that he, too, has no more sons, that he had only one good son, Joseph, who is said to have been killed by wild beasts. Hamor deplures the fact that hatred and strife have dried up the granaries, brought drought, and put hatred and death at the doorstep of mankind. Hamor calls for dialogue among men of good will to restore peace. Jacob promises Hamor that his people will be at this council of nations, but that he will not. He tells Hamor that now he has two sons to mourn in his tent, and he asks Hamor to represent his voice at the peace council. Jacob takes Dinah to Hamor and tells him that Dinah is henceforth his daughter. Dinah implores her father to not abandon her. She showers herself with dust. Jacob leaves without looking back, despite his daughter's pleas. Dinah lays her head on Hamor's lap, who comforts her.



**The Council of Nations** All the clans converge on the site of the Council of Nations, held in the desert. The clan of Jacob the shepherd arrives dressed in blue. The clan of the Canaanites arrive dressed in yellow. The slaves are also there, bare-chested or completely naked. The Canaanites confound Jacob's sons. The Canaanites express their doubts on the version given by Jacob's sons regarding the death of their brother Joseph. They are puzzled that no evidence of teeth or claws marks or struggle was found on Joseph's tunic, whereas Jacob's sons insist that their brother was devoured by wild beasts.



**No marriage between shepherds and farmers** The Canaanites claim that Jacob's clan has been devoid of a valiant and compassionate heart since the death of Joseph, Jacob's blessed and respectful son. They conclude that the evil that befell them is the result of the lack of a shepherd in Jacob's clan, and that the flock is abandoned to rabid dogs, an allusion to Jacob's warmongering sons. Jacob's sons reply that it is rather the lust of Hamor's men for the beautiful women of Jacob's clan that is the cause of their misfortunes. Jacob's sons demand that a pact be sealed between the shepherds' and farmers' clans, forbidding marriages between shepherds and farmers.



**Cutting Shulah in two** A woman named Ada, from the tribe of the Canaanites, is summoned. She is the wife of Judah, son of Jacob, and mother of Shulah, son of Judah. The messenger of the Canaanites has two strong men seize Shulah and announces that Shulah will be cut in two to remove from him the part that belongs to the shepherds, since it is the shepherds' wish not to mix with the farmers. Judah looks on, indifferent. Ada, Shulah's mother, throws herself at the feet of her son's captors and begs them to let him live. Judah accuses Shuah, prince of Canaan, of having given him his daughter in marriage in order to trap him and bring down the curse on his clan. The audience laughs at the absurdity of Judah's allegations.



**Unvirtuous fathers and impure clans** A slave minstrel recounts Judah's descent. He reveals to the audience that Judah's descent comes in part from Canaanite women, despite Judah's efforts to keep his lineage pure. The minstrel also reveals that Judah was tricked into sleeping with his son's wife (disguised as a prostitute), whom he found not chaste enough for the latter, and that he bore her twins.



**The Canaanites are furious against Hamor** Dinah, daughter of Jacob and beloved of the late Shechem, reveals in parabolic language that Hamor, Shechem's father, had sexual intercourse with her. The Canaanites are offended and accuse both Jacob's children and Hamor himself of having brought disgrace and the wrath of the Canaanite gods upon them. The



Canaanites ask that the gods be appeased, and honor restored. They ask that Jacob's sons and Hamor be sacrificed. Conflict breaks out.

**Jacob tells the story of Isaac's finding a wife** Benjamin, Jacob's youngest son, runs to warn his father that war has broken out. Jacob emerges from his tent. His brother Esau's men, who had been waiting in ambush, take aim at him, but Esau asks them to wait a little longer before firing their arrows. Jacob arrives on the scene of the conflict and asks everyone to calm down. He reminds them that there was a time when all men lived in peace. It was the time of his father, Isaac. Jacob begins to tell the story of his father, Isaac, son of Abraham, from whom they are all descendants. Jacob tells of how his father Isaac, son of Abraham, was found a wife, Rebekah. Abraham has sent his messenger with camels loaded with gifts to go seek his son Isaac a wife in the land of his forefathers.



**Rebekah the kind one** The messenger asked God to guide him in his choice by bringing him the first woman that would give him water to quench his thirst and his camels' thirst. Rebekah appeared and offered Abraham's messenger some water and hospitality at her parents' home. Abraham's messenger gives expensive gifts to Rebekah. He asks Rebekah's hand for his master's son. Rebekah's parents ask her if she is ready to marry the messenger's young master in a faraway land. Rebekah agrees, and the messenger travels back with her to meet her new husband, Isaac, who has come to meet them.



**Why Esau hates Jacob** Esau attacks the council. Esau's archers shoot flaming arrows at the council members as Jacob tells the story of his father's marriage. Esau accuses Jacob of embellishing the ugly reality. He says his father, mother and brother conspired against him to take away his birthright. Jacob's youngest son, Benjamin, asks his father Jacob why his uncle Esau is so angry with him. Jacob tells Benjamin that the story goes back to their childhood. When Jacob returned from hunting empty-handed and hungry, Esau sold him his birthright for a bowl of lentils. Ever since, Esau has been angry at Jacob for stealing his birthright. For his foolish act, Rebekah, their mother and Isaac, their father, both cut all ties with Esau and banish him and Jacob. However, Esau is convinced that God has determined for him a moment of justice, one of revenge over his brother Jacob.



**Go to Egypt** In the desert, where he has taken refuge after Esau's attack, Jacob grapples with God in human guise. The battle is tough, but Jacob emerges victorious. Someone announces to Jacob's sons that their father has gone missing. The children set off in search of their father. They find him lying unconscious in the desert. Esau, too, comes to his brother's rescue. Jacob's children ask their father how they will survive. All their livestock has been decimated, and famine threatens. Esau advises his nephews to go to Egypt. Dinah tells her brothers to tell the handsome prince of Egypt that they come in her name, and he will open his granaries to them. Esau adds that the prince of Egypt will deliver Jacob's sons from their guilt. Judah asks what guilt Esau is talking about. Esau replies that he is talking about their guilt concerning their brother Joseph.



**God changes Jacob's name** God gives Jacob a new name, Israel, that is he who wrestles with God's envoy and came out victorious. God gives Jacob, Israel, his blessings and promises him a life of fruitfulness. In Egypt, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and forgives them for selling him to the desert traders.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**JACOB** Jacob is envious and deceitful. He manipulates his older brother, Esau, when the latter is at his most vulnerable, and buys Esau's birthright for a plate of lentils. However, humbled by God, Jacob goes to his brother and asks for forgiveness.

*Ambitious/Envious* Jacob is an ambitious and envious man. From his mother's womb, he had ambitions to be Isaac's eldest son and benefit from his father's blessing. For this, he fought with his twin brother, Esau, to be the first to emerge from his mother's womb, and he was born clutching Esau's heel, the first to emerge. He coveted Esau's birthright, however, until the day he finally succeeded in wresting it from Esau for a plate of lentils.

*Deceitful* Jacob's name translates in Hebrew as 'the deceiver'. Among the many deceptions that Jacob performed in the Book of Genesis, Sissoko's adaptation focuses mainly on Jacob's manipulation of his brother Esau. One day, when Esau came empty-handed from hunting and was very hungry, Jacob offers to trade a bowl of lentil soup with Esau for the latter's birthright. With this birthright, Jacob went on to garner his father's blessings, which would normally go to the firstborn son.

*Repentant* Jacob, having spent his life deceiving and cheating his peers in order to gain God's blessing, has a test of humility imposed on him by God. God becomes man and wrestles with Jacob for an entire night. From this struggle, Jacob emerges alive but wounded at the hip and ready to acknowledge his imperfection and be forgiven for it. Jacob goes to his brother Esau, embraces him and asks for forgiveness. God then gives Jacob the name 'Israel' and makes him the father of the twelve nations of Israel.

**ESAU** Esau is an irresponsible character who, gripped by hunger, sells his most precious possession, his birthright, to his brother for a bowl of lentils. Regretting his decision, Esau seeks revenge on his brother. Eventually, however, he forgives his brother and they reconcile.

*Irresponsible* The Bible tells us that Esau was the favorite of his father, Isaac, to whom this good hunter often brought back game from which Leah made good soups. However, Esau was an irresponsible man who proved his father wrong for counting on him to continue his legacy. Esau never fully appreciated the importance of his birthright. For a plate of lentils, he sold this right to his brother Jacob.

*Vengeful* Having sold his birthright to his brother Jacob for a mere plate of lentils, Esau feels betrayed and broods over his revenge. He spends days hiding in the desert hills with his archers, spying on Jacob's movements, waiting for the right moment to kill his brother. Esau attacks Jacob during the Council of Nations, but Jacob manages to escape. Esau finally reconciles with his brother after the latter comes to ask his forgiveness.

*Forgiving* Esau, Jacob's brother, has sworn to feed his brother "poisoned soup" as punishment for stealing his birthright. Esau, who has been stalking his brother for a long time, finds the right moment to unleash the arrows of his archers on him during the Council of Nations. However, when Jacob escapes and comes to beg for Esau's forgiveness, the latter opens his arms to his brother and forgives him.

**DINAH** Dinah, Jacob's daughter, is a naïve and daring character. She ventures into the hostile land of the Canaanite tribes and falls into Shechem's trap. She speaks in front of men without asking permission. This gets her into trouble, and she's called a fool as a result.

*Naïve* Some versions of the Bible say that Dinah was kidnapped by Prince Shechem while visiting the daughters of Hamor's clan. In Sissoko's adaptation, Dinah appears to be flirting with Shechem when he chases after her and kidnaps her. The image we are given of Dinah in each case is that of a girl, if not naive, at least daring and reckless, venturing into enemy territory, unaware of the dangers she was running into.

*Bold* When Hamor calls Dinah a loose girl and a manipulator, who has seduced his son, leading him to sully the bloodline by sleeping with her. Dinah refuses to silently take in the Canaanite king's insults. She replies harshly that his language is unworthy of a leader. Indeed, Dinah's direct language and boldness to speak up among men have her brothers dismissing her as "not of sound mind".

**HAMOR** Hamor is a proud but conciliatory character. Although he has an intimate attachment to his Canaanite culture, he is willing to compromise for the sake of peace between peoples. He accepts the conditions imposed by Jacob's sons for his people and Jacob's people to become one.

Proud Hamor is proud of his Canaanite blood and ancestral practices. He resents the fact that his son, Shechem, is infatuated with Dinah, the daughter of Jacob the circumcised, who worships the God of Abraham and not the Canaanite gods. He insults Dinah, accusing her of leading his son into the path of perdition. He refuses to speak to his son.

*Conciliatory* When his son implores him to ask Jacob for Dinah's hand in marriage for him, though angry with Shechem, Hamor goes to Dinah's parents laden with gifts. He accepts Dinah's parents' requirement that his men be circumcised in order for his son to enter marriage with her. When Jacob's sons betray their word and attack and decimate Hamor's clan, the Canaanite chief is the first to call for a council so that people of all nations can coexist peacefully.

## THEMES

**Gender** *Genesis* contains stereotypes associated with the female gender, notably those of deception and promiscuity. Dinah, the daughter of Jacob the shepherd, is kidnapped by Prince Shechem of the Canaanite farming tribe, who rapes her. Shechem's father, Hamor, and even Dinah's mother, Leah, wife of Jacob, blame Dinah. Hamor accuses Dinah of having tricked his son with one of those schemes common to young girls of ill repute, and of having thus soiled the blood of his descendants. Hamor refuses to speak to his son because of the dishonor he has brought to his clan, and Hamor withdraws to his tent. As for Leah, Dinah's mother, rather than going after her daughter's kidnapper and rapist, she accuses Dinah of frivolity and dishonor. Leah is inconsolable and refuses the gifts brought by Hamor to ask for Dinah's hand in marriage for his son. Leah laments that no gift will restore the family honor stained by Dinah's error. Here, Dinah is not seen as the victim. On the contrary, she is the one to blame for being kidnapped and raped. Traditional wisdom would have it that it is Dinah who seduced and led Shechem into evil, because Dinah, as a young woman, represents evil.

**Patriarchy** *Genesis* is the story of peoples marching inexorably towards their destinies. At the head of these peoples are men who receive their authority directly from divine powers, also male. Thus, Hamor, like all Canaanite princes, governs his people according to the pagan instructions of the Canaanite gods. Hamor's son Shechem is expected to follow in his father's footsteps and preserve this pagan tradition. When Shechem falls in love with Dinah and sleeps with her, Hamor is furious, interpreting his son's gesture as weakness and failure in his role as future helmsman of the clan. For Hamor, Dinah is the she-devil who distracts the hero from his goals. As for Jacob, his authority comes straight from his grandfather, Abraham, who received his blessing from Jehovah, and passed it on to his son Isaac, Jacob's father, before Jacob himself received it. This blessing is passed down from father to son. Although Jacob had one daughter, Dinah, it was Jacob's twelve sons, whom he had with his four wives, who would constitute the twelve tribes of Israel. Dinah, Jacob's eleventh child, is supplanted by her younger siblings, Joseph and Benjamin. Dinah's brothers tolerate her as a wild child. Dinah's mother and Hamor, Shechem's father, see Dinah as a loose girl. The men of The Book of Genesis are princes and heroes, and the women mere accessories or heir producers.

**War/fratricide** The 1990s were littered with wars both inside and outside Africa. In Liberia, Charles Taylor's rebellion succeeded in occupying half the country, executing President Samuel Doe, but splitting into several opposing factions that kept the population in a latent war with disastrous consequences. In Somalia, an inter-tribal civil war pitted President Siad Barré's forces against rebel factions, when a speech by the president inflamed ethnic tensions during a soccer match. The clashes resulted in heavy losses of lives. In Yugoslavia, the Kosovo Liberation Army takes up arms against the Yugoslav government, allegedly to defend the rights of persecuted Serbs in Yugoslavia. This civil war only ended with the bombing of the Yugoslav army by NATO forces. It is against the backdrop of these intra-state conflicts that *Genesis* intervenes, intended to show the absurdity of fratricidal wars from which no one emerges a winner. Sissoko chooses a text from the Old Testament that is shared by Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Insofar as these three monotheistic revealed religions recognize the story of creation (with a few variations) this is proof that all mankind recognizes the same origin, that of the God of Abraham (Ibrahim for Muslims). Since we are all

sons of Abraham, as Sissoko clearly shows when in their greetings the peoples of Jacob and Hamor recall their common thread to Abraham, it makes no sense for mankind to tear each other apart in fratricidal wars.

**Peace** God promises Abraham and his heirs abundance, well-being and, above all, peace. However, this blessing is not to be taken for granted. God leaves people their free will, their ability to choose between good and evil, to stumble and rise again. So, Jacob chooses deception, robbing his brother Esau of his birthright, in order to have the blessing of their father Isaac. Esau, gripped by hunger and driven by the desire to satisfy his greedy impulses, sells his birthright in a purely irresponsible act. Esau, filled with resentment, wanders the desert, brooding over his revenge against Jacob, the deceiver. Jacob's sons deceive and kill their neighbors, the Canaanites, out of sheer pride and arrogance, and sell their brother Joseph to desert merchants out of jealousy. Hamor, Jacob's Canaanite neighbor, firmly entrenched in his cultural and religious superiority, resents the fact that his son Shechem has mingled the blood of Jacob's people with his own. God watches all these pretentious and misguided souls, who desperately seek peace and believe they have it through arrogance and deception. Faithful, however, to his word never to abandon his sons, God saves them, but without imposing a test that will make them humble and grateful when grace comes. To the people of Hamor he imposes the circumcision he had previously imposed on the sons of Abraham, thus bringing Hamor into his grace. Hamor becomes the champion of reconciliation and initiates a council of nations for peace, an event that could be viewed as a first attempt at the United Nations. To Jacob, God imposes a struggle with an Angel, from which Jacob emerges with a limp. On Jacob's sons, God brings down famine and leads them to Egypt, where they reconcile with their brother Joseph and find peace and prosperity. And God removes hatred and resentment from the heart of Esau, a most vengeful brother. Esau reconciles with Jacob, gives his brother peace, and finds peace for himself. The lesson of *Genesis*, then, is that God is at the helm, fulfilling His promise of peace to His children, but not before testing them through their free will, for it is to them to distinguish between what is good for humanity and to pursue it through His blessings rather than through their egotistical compulsions.

**Betrayal** In most human societies, the eldest child, whether male or female, is expected to assume great responsibilities. Parents expect the eldest to pass on to younger siblings the family and societal values that were passed on to them as the first-born. In the patriarchal societies of the revealed religions of the Middle East, these expectations are often even greater for boys. Thus, in The Book of Genesis, Esau, being the first of Rebekah's twins to emerge from their mother's womb, was for Isaac the one of his two sons who would continue God's promise to their grandfather Abraham to build the people of Israel. So, Esau's selling his birthright for a plate of lentils was the worst kind of betrayal, a betrayal of God. Esau did not stand the test of fortitude. So, even though God had already warned Rebekah during her pregnancy that of her two twins, the first would serve the second, who would be the leader, Isaac and Rebekah banished Esau, the unworthy son. For Esau, however, the greatest betrayal was that of his younger brother, Jacob, who took advantage of a moment of weakness, hunger nagging at him on his return from a fruitless hunt, to make him sell his birthright, whereas his brother Jacob could have shared his pittance with him in exchange for nothing. For Jacob's betrayal, Esau cherished his revenge, promising to serve his brother a poisoned soup.

**Deception** The Bible is full of stories of manipulation and deception. Jacob (lit. 'he who deceives'), father of the twelve tribes of Israel, is not just a hero. He is also an anti-hero, who manipulates his brother Esau and buys his birthright in exchange for a plate of lentils when the latter is starving. Jacob's propensity for deceit is also passed on, to his dismay, to his twelve sons. Jacob's daughter Dinah is kidnapped and raped by Shechem, a Canaanite prince, who later falls in love with her and wants to marry her. When Hamor comes to Jacob to ask for Dinah's hand in marriage for his son Shechem, Jacob's sons demand that the men of Hamor's tribe first undergo circumcision. But this is only a ploy. Jacob's sons attack and decimate Hamor's clan while the circumcised men are recovering and are unable to defend themselves. During the council of nations, convened to find a way of peaceful coexistence, we learn that Jacob's son Judah, so committed to the notion of tribal purity, has been tricked by a woman he considers impure and therefore unsuitable for his son. Disguised as a prostitute, that woman slept with Judah and bore him twins, thus undermining Judah's uncompromising stance on purity.

**Purity** *Genesis* subverts the notion of ethnic purity. The tribes of Jacob, the Israelite, and Hamor, the Canaanite, live side by side, but look at each other with suspicion, theoretically not entering the bonds of marriage. While Jacob worships the God of Abraham, his grandfather (referred to in the Old Testament as Jehovah), Hamor worships idols. So, when Hamor realizes that his son Shechem has slept with Jacob's



daughter, Dinah, Hamor's fury is at its height. Hamor insults Dinah, calling her a whore, and he refuses to speak to his son. Jacob's sons, after demanding that the men of Hamor's clan circumcise themselves in order to seal the marriage between Shechem and their sister, still cowardly attack Hamor's clan, and demand that a non-marriage pact between farmers and shepherds be concluded, which would keep each clan in its place. But oral history, as recounted by the Canaanite storytellers opens gaps in the sons of Jacob's obsession with ethnic purity. The storytellers report that Judah, the unrepentant purist, married Ada, the daughter of the Canaanite Shua, from whom he had three sons, Er, Onan and Shulah. Should Shulah be cut in two to remove the part that his father Judah considers impure? Confounded, Judah has no defense but to claim that Shua manipulated him into marrying his daughter Ada in order to humiliate him.

**Memory/past** In difficult situations, people like to turn to memory as a refuge. The past is then mythologized as the golden age, the time when human beings lived in perfect harmony, the time of perfect communicability of consciousness. So, when Benjamin runs to fetch his father, Jacob, because Jacob's people and the Canaanites are on the verge of war, Jacob arrives and tries to calm people's ardor by telling the story of the time of his grandfather Abraham and his father, Isaac. Jacob tells how his father took the virtuous Rebekah as his wife, and of the harmony of Isaac and Rebekah's family. Jacob wishes that people be inspired by the wisdom of yesteryear. This story infuriates Esau, who, hidden in the rocky hills, listens unseen. Esau can no longer restrain himself when hearing Jacob's lies, and cries out his displeasure that in truth their parents, Isaac and Rebekah, were not as virtuous as Jacob says, but dividers who set their children against each other. Esau fires his arrows at the participants of the peace council. Indeed, the Bible records the manipulations of Isaac and Rebekah, which created unhealthy competition and jealousy among their children. Esau's hatred for his brother Jacob was born of this ugly past.

**Reconciliation** Esau, Jacob's brother, banished by his father, Isaac, and his mother, Rebekah, for selling his brother his birthright for a plate of lentils, ruminates on his revenge. During the Council of Nations, Esau's archers shoot their arrows at Jacob's people. Jacob manages to escape and take refuge in the desert. The following night, Jacob wrestles with God, who appears to him in human form. Jacob emerged victorious from this fierce battle. He is joined by his sons, who have gone in search of him, as well as Hamor and Esau, who congratulate him on his bravery and the new name he has received from God—'Israel'. Esau advises Jacob's sons to seek their fortune in Egypt, and to find their brother Joseph, whom they have sold into slavery to desert merchants. Jacob's sons refuse Esau's advice, accusing him of trying to kill their father. Jacob tells his sons, "Listen to his advice; he is my brother." This scene seals the reconciliation between Abraham's descendants. Sissoko's film is elliptical. If he were to give us the details of chapter 33 of The Book of Genesis as recounted in the Bible, we would read this: "... Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming toward him ... Jacob himself went on ahead and bowed to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.... I have seen your face, and it is like seeing the face of God." So, as The Book of Genesis tells us, in every human face, even in the face of the one who shoots his flaming arrows at his brother, there is the face of God. What greater proof could there be of forgiving and reconciliation than to see the face of God in that of one's enemy?

**Redemption** God redeems Jacob in the most paradoxical way to teach mankind that even the most despicable of men can have His grace. Jacob is an envious, cunning and deceitful man. The Book of Genesis is replete with Jacob's deceptions. Jacob deceives his father, his mother, and his brother. Jacob's propensity for deception starts already when he is in his mother's womb, wrestling his twin brother Esau, trying to come out of Rebekah's womb first. This is because the blessing of the God of Abraham always unfurls from God to the first son. If Isaac, who was not the first son of Abraham, inherited this blessing, it is because Ishmael, Abraham's first son, was banished by his father for being mean and undeserving. Thus, Isaac, who received the legacy of Abraham's blessing in the place of Ishmael, was poised to continue the tradition and pass that blessing onto his first-born. Jacob wanted to be that first-born. Jacob wrestled his twin brother, Esau, in their mother's womb for that. And when Jacob failed and came out second, Jacob still coveted Esau's birthright. By way of manipulation, Jacob bought Esau's birthright for a plate of lentils. But God had a lesson to teach Jacob, one of redemption through humility. Through his angel, God wrestled with Jacob a whole night long. And though Jacob survived, God taught him that His blessing is not won through deception but through trial and humbleness. God redeemed Jacob the crook and the supplanter but scarred him. God gave Jacob a limp to stand as both a reminder of who Jacob was and a badge of who

Jacob is henceforward, the father of the twelve nations of Israel. And thus, God made it possible for anyone to get a second, and perhaps more than a second, chance.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can you personally relate to the story of *Genesis*?
2. Why was birthright so important in Biblical days?
3. What is the significance of being the firstborn in your culture? Is there any privilege attached to this condition? Explain.
4. In the present day, would the abduction and rape of Dinah be dealt with the same way? Elaborate.
5. What is the significance of Jacob telling his brother Esau that in his face he sees the face of God?
6. What general lesson does the story of Esau and Jacob teach us?