

# **GENESIS**

## **A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY**

***THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB***

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## JACOB RETURNS HOME (*GENESIS 32-33*)

After spending twenty-some years away from home, it's important that Jacob return and take his place as the head of the Family. The Heir of the Covenant has learned a lot through his experiences: he has met the God of Abraham and Isaac; he has experienced the LORD's faithfulness; he has received abundant blessings from the LORD, more than he would have imagined possible, as a result of the Covenant promises, in spite of what his relatives tried to do to him.

He is a changed man. If Abraham had to learn about faith (Romans 4), Jacob had to learn about holiness and what walking with God will entail in this world. And he is about to learn more, and receive more blessings, because the LORD isn't finished with his training yet. Returning home won't be easy, since there is some unfinished and unpleasant business there still waiting for him – his brother Esau from whom he took the family inheritance.

So far Jacob has simply stood back and watched the LORD bless him and solve his problems, sometimes through miracle and sometimes through the efforts (unsolicited) of others. But it's time to bring him to spiritual maturity: the Family of God prospers, the Kingdom of God grows, through the concerted efforts of God *and* man. The Heir has to *want* – with a passion – the same thing that God wants.

**The angels** – It says that the angels met Jacob when he left Canaan (Genesis 28) *and* as he returned to Canaan.

Angels are messengers of God, servants of God who carry out his will on earth.<sup>1</sup> Here at the border of the Promised Land, Jacob saw for himself the activity of God in the land that he would inherit. In other words, the resources from Heaven will be there when he assumes the role of head of the Family. He named the place *Mahanaim*, which means “two camps” – signifying God's camp and his own camp, both of them getting ready to move into the land. This was to be a coordinated effort between God and man.

One thing that would impress him was the importance that God put on this

project. We aren't told anything at all about what exactly God was doing with Canaan and its inhabitants; but since we know from the rest of Scripture that God raises up nations and tears others down, and brings both good and bad on all the peoples of the earth, we can conclude that he was doing the same with the Canaanites – preparing the land for the eventual takeover by the children of Abraham. “And they [*the Twelve Tribes*] shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” (Genesis 15:16) God works over time, through history, through and around the works and will of man, to accomplish his purposes.

And Jacob will realize how important a role he himself played in this work that God was so intent on accomplishing. This was his inheritance that God was preparing for him and his Family. Jacob

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<sup>1</sup> See Hebrews 1 for more explanation of this concept.

had experienced the continuous supply of God's blessings for the last few decades. And he had learned that what God has for his people: he himself will provide – in his own ways. Here, with the activity of the angels revealed to him, Jacob saw the powers of Heaven at work in the land as he entered it.

And since angels were involved in the work, that means there's a spiritual treasure in store for the Family, not simply the works of men and the natural outcome of historical events. The hand of God disrupts history, raises the stakes to eternal issues, introduces spiritual treasures and powers into what would otherwise be only a natural course of events. The foundations were being laid here for the future Nation of Israel, the Presence of God living among his people on earth. Obviously Jacob had become part of something big; his own role would be crucial for the generations to come – including the life of the Church.

**News about Esau** – For his part, Jacob had no intention of fighting Esau. His instructions to his servants were clear about that: be conciliatory toward Esau, and make sure that he understands I mean him no harm but good.

Jacob was in the dark about what would happen upon his return; all he knew was that, because of the last encounter with his brother, Esau hated him and has vowed to kill him. (Genesis 27:41) The news that Esau was bringing 400 men with him only strengthened Jacob's fear that there might be trouble ahead.

What Jacob didn't know for certain was *how* Esau would approach him – very likely in anger over what had happened. Esau had already demonstrated the fact that he despised the Covenant that was given to his

forefathers (Genesis 25:34) He had no regard, and put no value on, the Promises that God had given to Abraham and his family. That appeal would never work with him. Therefore he would willingly kill Jacob in his anger over being cheated out of the headship of the family and the physical property of Isaac.

**Jacob's prayer** – This is the second recorded prayer that we have from Jacob. There are several elements in it that show his deepening understanding of the spiritual standing he now had with Abraham's God.

*First*, he called on God by that Name – “O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac.” He understood now that the Covenant that he inherited from his forefathers was not only a blessing to him in terms of this world's goods, but was also laying the foundation for the future descendants of Abraham – as the Promise described it. Esau only wanted flocks and herds; Jacob was getting hold of the bigger picture, the wider scope of the treasures of Heaven, that the angels that he saw at Bethel were working on.

*Second*, he homed right in on the command that God gave him. Faith, as his grandfather Abraham had learned, doesn't venture forth on its own authority, seeking its own goals. It seeks not what we want, but what God wants for us. Only in obedience to God's Word, and seeking what God specifically promised there, would Jacob be successful.

*Third*, this was a different Jacob from the one who started out from his father's house years ago. He was humbled; he felt himself unworthy of God's goodness; he recognized the amazing kindness and faithfulness that the LORD

had shown him over the last twenty years.

What he asked for was in keeping with the Promises that God had made to him: protection from a threat against the very blessings that he had received from the LORD. In other words, it was a threat against the Covenant itself. What Jacob had received from Abraham's God was now in danger.

In other words, Jacob had learned how to pray. True prayer targets the true God by his Name, focuses on what God wants for us (the Covenant Promises), seeks no glory for self, but only glorifies the amazing mercy and goodness of God who takes care of his people. Jacob was maturing in his walk with God.

Though he feared what his brother might do, he still finished his prayer with confidence that the "kind and faithful" God he has learned to trust over the years would protect him. In other words, the threat was real, the Covenant was at stake, so the answer will have to come from God alone; only the LORD could change the heart of his brother. Jacob knew what God had promised to do for him, he just didn't know how it would happen. Now is the time, he pleads with God, for a miracle – since God had never reneged on his promise to bless his servant.

**Jacob's strategy** – Some commentators have faulted Jacob for putting his wives and children out in front to bear the brunt of Esau's attack, instead of leading from the front himself. This is the same tiresome accusation of cowardice that has been repeatedly leveled against his forefathers! But that can't be true in light of the prayer that he just made. If he really thought that God would let him down and that Esau would murder his

family, he wouldn't have put them in front.

Instead, we know exactly what he was thinking: by sending first a very generous gift, he hoped that would pacify Esau and make him more friendly and willing to talk instead of fight. He knew his brother well. We don't know how much property Isaac had while living in Canaan, the inheritance that Esau missed out on because of Jacob's scheming; but this gift that Jacob was offering him now may have come close to what Esau thought he was cheated out of. Esau probably had no idea of the history of Jacob while he was away from home, and had no idea of the wealth he had accumulated; for all he knew, his rascal of a brother was finally coming back to claim Isaac's property. Little did Esau know that Jacob didn't need that property! And since property was the only thing that Esau cared about, the strategy worked; he was impressed and pleased with the gift.

**Wrestling with God** – It wasn't Esau that Jacob needed to fight with. There was another Firstborn that he had business with first.

First of all, it wasn't necessarily an angel, as we understand the term, with whom Jacob wrestled. If it had been, the passage would plainly say so. In Genesis 32:1 we are told that Jacob met מלאכים on the way into Canaan; this Hebrew word, technically, means "messengers." The same word forms the name of the last Hebrew Prophet in the Old Testament – *Malachi*, "my messenger." What confuses students is that Hosea (12:4) tells us about Jacob striving with an "angel," (*Hebrew: מלאך*) which of course is only one English translation of the Hebrew *messenger* again. \_Just to make sure we don't get

the wrong idea, Hosea 12:3 says that Jacob “strove with *God*.”

The idea of a messenger speaks more to its *function* than to its *nature*. When we use the word “angel” we think of the cherubs and seraphs who surround the throne of God, as Isaiah saw in Isaiah 6; and the “angels” (*Greek*: ἄγγελοι) that we see serving God in the book of Revelation. But a messenger could be anybody, including a prophet, whom God sends out on an errand. For instance, it says that Jacob himself sent out “messengers” (*malachim*) ahead of his entourage to meet Esau.

But in this passage we are specifically told it was a *man* who was struggling with Jacob, the same generic Hebrew word for “man” (*Hebrew*: אָדָם) that is used all through the Old Testament. The word *malachim* isn’t used here. This was the most profound thing that happened to Jacob, aside from his conversion, and it forms a crucial aspect of the concept of the Covenant.

*First*, the fact that it was a man – and yet Jacob later claimed he had seen God – brings us into the doctrine of the Trinity. Why would God appear as a man? For one thing, the eternal and spiritual God would not grapple with Jacob in a wrestling match; there would be no possibility of Jacob surviving the encounter, let alone be hopeful for a match of strength. Next, almost every Bible student in history has had the feeling that this man was a pre-Incarnate appearance of the Son of God; it seems to most that this is the only reasonable explanation for this unique situation.

*Second*, the reason that God would put himself on Jacob’s level, so to speak, was to bring Jacob into the Mission, to make his contribution to the working out of the Covenant just as important and as

necessary as God’s part. In other words, God was making Jacob a partner – or, to put it another way, the Father was treating Jacob as a *son*, and the two of them together were going to work this out.

*Third*, if this was indeed the Son of God in the form of a man, we are witnessing the eternal purpose of the Father: to include man in on the life of the Trinity, as Paul tells us in Ephesians.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:3-7)

In other words, God decided that the life of the Trinity was to include Man – and the method of bringing mankind into that relationship was, first of all, for the Son of God to become a Man himself. By that means, in him, the rest of us can enter into the Son’s relationship with the Father in Heaven. Whatever belongs naturally to the Son is now man’s, by virtue of our union with him.

So the Heir of the Eternal God was now in human form – an unimaginable leap across the chasm between God and man – and Jacob has hold of *that* – the Incarnation, done for our sake. He saw the great Heir of God face to face, and *that’s* the inheritance he wanted. He was beginning to understand what the Covenant is really all about. “But for

you who fear my Name, the Sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.” (Malachi 4:2) The Son of Righteousness was shining in Jacob’s world, and he reached out for that. He wanted nothing less than to have the eternal Son’s rights, the Son’s access to the Throne of Heaven, the Son’s position of wisdom and power and authority at the Father’s right hand. It was an astonishing opportunity, and it was being put into his hands by the grace of Abraham’s God.

*Fourth*, why would God require Jacob to wrestle for a blessing? *Because what Jacob wanted belonged to the Son, not to him.* The inheritance of the Firstborn wasn’t his by rights, no more than was Esau’s birthright. Jacob wasn’t even capable of relating to God the Father as the eternal Son does. What he wanted was not only beyond *his* reach as a creature, but we have all forfeited a relationship with God since we rebelled against him. “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” – and sinners have absolutely *no* rights to it. Only the eternal Son has the right of inheritance to the fullness of God as the Covenant describes it; only the eternal Heir, the Perfect Son, can enjoy the glory of God.

Jacob started out life by grasping his elder brother’s heel and, symbolically, trying to secure those inheritance rights for himself. (Genesis 25:26) And now he was doing the same thing – taking hold of the Elder Brother of the human race and struggling to get his Inheritance. Jacob struggled with both man *and* with God, in the same way, for the same end – for something that he had no right to, but which was offered to him by the grace of God if he wanted it. Strength to strength – the brothers

struggling over the family treasure. The fact that Jacob wrestled with the Firstborn for the Family inheritance shows that the “man” really was the pre-incarnate eternal Son who was the rightful Heir of God. Jacob wouldn’t be wrestling with anyone else for that inheritance; no angel has those inheritance rights.

It was an amazing boldness, actually. It was the same thing that the Canaanite woman did with Jesus – she claimed the inheritance that rightfully belonged only to the children. She proved her claim by her faith, and by her persistence, showing her spiritual descent from Abraham, the father of the faithful. And Jesus relented and gave it to her because she proved herself a true heir. (Matthew 15) So he counsels us all to do – see Luke 18:1-8.

**Touching his thigh** – The Son was blocking Jacob’s way to those inheritance rights, in effect saying “You can’t have what I have,” until one single thing became plain to see – Jacob’s overwhelming passion to have what God promised him: the inheritance of the Firstborn. First, Jacob wasn’t going to give up on God’s promise. But more important than that, he could see this special Man – the Son of God within our reach – who *does* have the Covenant inheritance. So, he reasoned, God *does* want it for man! Evidently the barriers between God and sinners can be repaired, in this Man at least, and there *is* a way open to the rest of us to eternal life. Jacob was seeing the argument for the Incarnation.

The wrestling match was simply an accommodation to cover for Jacob’s disadvantage of being a man. The commentator Matthew Henry pointed out that, if Jacob hadn’t realize it before,

he knew immediately that he was not dealing with an ordinary mortal when the man simply touched his thigh and the leg got thrown out of joint. He was a man with the power of God. But Jacob had seen enough: if this was the *Son* of God, and if this is what the Covenant is all about (the Promises that were legally passed on to Jacob), then he was not giving up until – by God’s grace if not by human effort – the man blessed him with the rights of sonship.

**The Name of Israel** – There has been some confusion about this passage over the centuries. The KJV renders it this way: “Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a *prince* hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.” On the other hand, the ESV says this: “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have *striven* with God and with men, and have prevailed.”

The reason the KJV uses the word “prince” is that the Hebrew word here (שָׂרָד) has two meanings, according to the lexicon. It’s actually a case of homonyms (two words having the same spelling, but having different meanings) – and older translations preferred the second meaning: “to rule, to have dominion.” But more recent translations prefer the first meaning: “to persevere, to struggle.”

Both meanings fit the situation. Obviously Jacob was struggling to get what he wanted from this man. But the fact that the Son of God appeared in a form that Jacob *could* struggle with, shows God’s intentions of including Jacob – and all of his descendants – in on the affairs of state, the work of the Kingdom of God on earth. Jacob wanted to be a Son of God from now on, an Heir of the Father in Heaven; and that would

give him and his posterity the right to rule at the Father’s right hand. See Jesus’ promises to that effect in Revelation 2:26 and 3:21, as well as Matthew 19:28. His promise in Matthew 18:18-19 also shows the shared authority that God’s people will have with the Son of God.

From this point on, Jacob walked in two worlds: the land of Canaan, and before the throne of God. He knew now that he was the heir of what rightfully belongs to the Son of God; every child of the Covenant is.

**The essence of prayer** – One more point that we have to make here is the fact that this struggle is the very heart and nature of prayer. Prayer is nothing less than *claiming the rights of the Son at the Father’s throne*. It’s taking hold of the eternal Son – for believers, being one with the Son by the work of the Spirit uniting us with him – and approaching the Father as the Son pleading for Heaven’s agenda.

Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my Name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my Name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full. (John 16:23-24)

This is why it’s so important to understand what the Covenant is all about. This is the inheritance that the Father has given to the Son, and he wants his children to be just as passionate about the treasure as Jacob was. Jesus taught us *what* to pray for – Matthew 6:33; and *how* to pray – passionately, never giving up on that agenda of the Heir and his inheritance: Luke 18:1-8.

**The brothers reconcile** – Here is proof that Jacob wasn't behaving as a coward: he gathered his family together and then "went on ahead" to meet Esau face to face.

It's also proof that Jacob's recent history was a complete surprise to Esau; evidently he knew nothing of Jacob's prosperity, not even of his growing family, before this time.

And Jacob's strategy worked: he knew his brother's heart. By proving that he had accumulated wealth enough to spare Esau a munificent gift, he pacified his brother's greed and averted disaster.

Unknown to Esau, however, the physical property was not the greater treasure – the Covenant was. Jacob could have given Esau everything he had and still have come out the winner in the long run. The Promises were safe in the right hands.

Jacob, however, was only going to deal with Esau on the material level. He certainly didn't include him in on the Covenant promises; he offered him nothing of the spiritual side of the Covenant – it was not his to give, and Esau had already proved that he wasn't interested. But we see here again that people who are related to the Covenant Heir prosper as a result of that relationship. The head of the Family is responsible to take care of the rest of the Family, whatever relation they may be.

Notice that Jacob wanted no complications for himself or his Family from Esau's presence or influence. He parted company right away from his brother; he was treating him as if he were one of the Canaanites. It's one thing that he had to live around the Canaanites; but it's quite another problem to have pagans for such close

relatives. Separation from Esau shows Jacob's wisdom in understanding the bad influence he would be on the Family. (See Genesis 25:23 for the prediction of this separation.)

**Settling in Shechem** – As for living around the Canaanites, Jacob was about to get a sharp lesson on the dangers of that situation. He settled down near the city of Shechem, the site of the crisis recorded in Genesis 34. Again, through no action of his own, he was about to become master of the area – but the price would be a plain statement to surrounding communities that there would be *no intermingling* of God's people with idolaters – relatives or otherwise.

**The Point** – What Jacob discovered, what he finally put his finger on, was the eternal aspect of the Covenant, and the high place of privilege and prosperity to which it raises the descendants of Abraham. And this concept of being Heirs of the treasures of Heaven was already a reality in the Son of God, from before the creation of the world.

The problem was that this Inheritance doesn't belong to sinners. Only Jesus Christ is the Perfect Son and has the rights to it. What we deserve is death, not the Inheritance. There are a few of us, however, who will not tolerate the thought that death and eternal punishment is to be our fate. We want better than that; we want to *live*. And to those who whom God has given faith (the ability to see the spiritual world of God), they can see the offer of the Son's Inheritance held out to only those who are willing to struggle for it. It doesn't belong to us, we have no right to it, but we *want* it nonetheless.

All believers who are children of Abraham are called *Israel*, and we all

must take hold of our inheritance – by faith, by prayer, by becoming one with the Son of God and coming into God’s presence in the Holy of Holies with Christ. By rights none of this belongs to us; but by faith we “press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:14)

In fact, a *true* Christian will wrestle with the Son of God for his inheritance – that’s what “being saved in Christ” really means. They reach out to Jesus Christ in their faith, nothing less. Unfortunately the Jews have rarely seen the necessity to do this – they, like Esau, are perfectly willing to settle for this physical world instead because they think the eternal Covenant is all about that. But God’s spiritual children won’t settle for anything less than a place within the Trinity with the Son, experiencing the fullness of the Father as Christ does. It’s a struggle for eternal life while in a world of darkness and sin and death; we are always aliens in a wilderness as we “set our eyes on things above, not on things below.” Life will be much more of a struggle for Christians than for pagans.

So we have actually come full-circle from Creation. God’s original intent was that man would be his son-on-earth, in constant touch with his Father in Heaven, with all the resources and wisdom of Heaven at his disposal as he ruled over God’s Kingdom. Now he’s bringing man back into that model only on a higher level: man’s new position is one with the Son in the Trinity, with access to the eternal treasures of the Father, walking in the Father’s presence with the eternal Son himself. And Jacob could see that. He wanted nothing less than the Son’s full inheritance.

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