

# **GENESIS**

## **A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY**

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

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## THE HOUSE OF GOD (*GENESIS 35*)

According to the book of Hebrews there were two kinds of priests in Biblical history. The first was Melchizedek, who was “without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life.” (Hebrews 7:3) Jesus was also a priest “in the likeness of Melchizedek,” “by the power of an indestructible life.” (Hebrews 7:15-16) In other words, their priesthood was not based on their descent from Abraham, but by their appointment in power from the hand of God himself. They were the priests of the Abrahamic Covenant.

The second type of priest was the Levites, and they *were* descended from Abraham. Their appointment came by genealogy only. But in the larger picture, the Levites represented the entire nation of Israel. In Exodus 4:22, God called the whole nation “my Firstborn son”, and as you would expect, the Father intended to bring his son out of slavery and oppression and back to himself. The two would live together as Father and son. But since the entire nation couldn’t live in God’s House (the Tabernacle, and later the Temple), God assigned the Levites to represent the whole nation, and *they* came into God’s House. Every head of family knew that he had a representative standing before the throne of God ministering in his name. It was Family living together in the Temple.

The priest’s responsibility was to “set the Table” for the Feast of God’s people, for the descendants of Abraham to gather around the Throne of God for their sustenance – for Life.

That Family relationship in God’s House started here in Genesis 35.

**The House of God** – God told Jacob to “go up to Bethel and dwell there.” Bethel, remember, is where Jacob first met the God of Abraham and received the promise of the Covenant. Jacob at that time realized that “this is the House of God!” (Genesis 28:17) This statement reflects two things: not only was God there with him, but Jacob also saw that this particular spot was God’s intended location for a House for his Family. God wanted to live with Abraham’s descendants *here* on earth, in the Promised Land, and the two would be Father and Son. It would be a unique kind of life, something that other nations had never experienced. Being in touch with God means spiritual realities and treasures would be woven into one’s life so intricately that they would be a

foundation for life, a goal, a standard, an eternal presence that everyone would know and draw from daily. As he blessed Jacob, so God would bless all of Jacob’s descendants.

But the Father/Son relationship goes both ways. The Israelites were to “love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:5) What else would the Father expect from his own Son? That means they would also commit themselves to the relationship: they would obey their Father in all things, they would glorify their God, they would help build his Kingdom on earth, they would shun the evil ways of their pagan neighbors, and they would spend quality time with the other Family members in God’s presence. As they did

all these things from the heart, they would show their pedigree – they would truly be sons and daughters of God.

So God’s command to Jacob to “go up to Bethel [*the House of God*] and live there” was his way of planting his Family right where he wanted them, and introducing them to the kind of relationship he intended there to have with them.

**Purification first** – One doesn’t come before the only God, especially into his House, with sin in one’s hands or heart. The first order of business, therefore, was to get rid of foreign gods from the camp. Worshiping false gods *always* means the presence of sin. Not only do false gods allow and promote sin, the whole concept of a false god is based on a wrong attitude for worship. We saw this in the story of Cain: instead of coming in humility to God to get rid of our sin, we come to him to bargain for what we want from him. God will never honor sacrifice and worship like that. And when we’re worshiping false gods, that means we’re in bad company. So Jacob had to instruct his family that they would do this God’s way, not the ways they learned from their pagan neighbors.<sup>1</sup>

And in the same way our lives, before we met God, or especially before we came into his presence, involved living in a polluted world. Our daily experiences, the people we know and live with, the culture we live in, and our own indwelling sinful nature, are all sources of spiritual rebellion, ignorance and filth. This world we live in is a filthy place, as far as God is concerned.

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<sup>1</sup> In other words, Israel *did not* get its religion from their pagan neighbors as the Liberals so confidently assert. Israel rejected other religions.

So Jacob instructed his family to “purify yourselves” – heart and mind – to get rid of the stench of the world so as not to offend God. That would involve, of course, “putting aside the world,” “crucifying the flesh,” and “setting your minds on things above.”

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. (Psalms 24:3-4)

Finally, Jacob told them to “change your garments.” Evidently they didn’t look like God’s children. The purpose of clothing (besides covering our nakedness) is to make a statement about who we are and the world we want to be part of. If you want to be a whore then you will dress like a whore and people will expect that you *are* a whore when they see you. But if you want to be a child of God then you must reflect his glory. You have to look like part of the Family. We have to be “clothed in righteousness” for one thing, and the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5) should be characteristic of our behavior, if we are truly one with the Son of God. In other words, the image of the Son should be clear to see in us.

Holiness is a life-style. Either we are devoted to this world and live in sin and death, or we are devoted to God and his world. Wherever our hearts lie, it will be evident to others where we really stand by the way we talk and act. That’s why a true conversion requires that we turn completely around from the direction we have been going in life and start walking in the opposite direction – toward God. The fear and love of God require it from us.

Here are three requirements that were expected of God's Family before they could come into his House: get rid of your foreign gods, purify yourselves, and change your garments. We will find that these same rules will apply later on in Israel's history as the Law laid down the requirements for the priests to enter into the Temple. And since God never changes, we should expect to meet those same requirements before we as Christians can enter into God's presence. (Colossians 3:1-17)

**The Terror of God** – The only reason that the Canaanites would want to “pursue the sons of Jacob” was to plunder them; Jacob's Family was obviously rich. But God gave them their treasures, so God stepped in to protect them. And the usual way that God used to make his presence known to men was through angels. Seen or unseen, the messengers of God brought the power of God to the situation, and people fell down or drew back in terror at their presence. Jacob knew that he was protected by these angels because he had seen them in his vision (Genesis 38) ascending and descending between Heaven and earth at this very spot.

This again is a prelude to the way God would protect his people on the way from Egypt to the Promised Land, screening them from the marauding nations along the way. Angels are “ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation.” (Hebrews 1:14) As the Apostle Paul told us, there are “rulers ... authorities ... cosmic powers over this present darkness ... spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12) The battle for the Kingdom of God on earth involves more than men and nations. Jacob's Family would require a protection “not of this world”

(John 18:36) – spiritual weapons that will bring down strongholds – because the goal is spiritual.

And besides all this, what Jacob was about to do was not something that the pagans could participate in, nor could they be allowed to interfere with it. There were those who were allowed in, and those who were kept out, by God's direction.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. (Psalms 1:5-6)

**The altar** – Students usually think of an altar as simply a designated platform upon which to offer a sacrifice and say some prayers. But we need to look at the bigger picture and all the elements of the ceremony.

*First*, the altar at the Temple later in Israel's history was the gathering point of the entire nation. People would bring their sacrifices – different kinds of animals (edible ones!), bread, wine, and oil, and the priests would put these things on the altar inside the Temple courtyard. Now if the Temple was God's House, and the priests represented the firstborn sons of every family in the nation (see Numbers 3:40-43), then what is it that we see here? It's the Family of God gathering in his presence to enjoy a meal together – Father and Son. All the items of a regular meal are put on the altar; everyone ate of the food. It was even called a “pleasing aroma” to God himself (Genesis 8:21; Exodus 29:18; as well as many other passages).

*Second*, the sacrifice that we Christians are interested in is the

sacrifice of Jesus Christ, made to forgive us of our sins and reconcile us to God. Hebrews tells us that whenever we come to God,

... you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the Heavenly Jerusalem ... and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:22,24)

His body and blood are on the altar in the House of God in Heaven. Remember that he told us that “My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.” (John 6:55-56)

*Third*, what is the great event that all of God’s people are looking forward to?

Many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven. (Matthew 8:11)

The Family will gather around the table (*the altar*) in God’s House and feast on the sacrifice that the Father has provided for his children – a meal that the Father considers a “pleasing aroma.”

It’s very appropriate, then, that the LORD brought Jacob back home with his Family and, right away, they sat down at God’s table to enjoy a feast in God’s House (Bethel). Since the Family was all together now, living in the Promised Land, they could start a tradition that would last till the end of time. Not only did the Jews enjoy the Feasts at the Temple, but also the Christians as heirs of the Covenant sit down together around the Table to feast on the sacrifice

that God has provided for them – till Christ returns. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

**The Nurse** – When Abraham sent back home for a wife for his son Isaac, the story says that Laban and the family “sent away Rebekah their sister *and her nurse*” with Abraham’s servant. (Genesis 24:59)

Now the nurse – named Deborah – died on the way back home to Isaac’s location. Probably the Jewish commentators are correct in surmising that she was sent out to tell Jacob in Paddan-aram that it was OK to return home, that Esau wasn’t going to be a problem anymore.

But we aren’t told anything about Rebekah’s death – where or when. The deaths of Abraham’s wife Sarah, and Jacob’s wife Rachel, are recorded, most likely because the story at the time was focused on their husbands and what they were going through. Rebekah probably died while Jacob was still with his uncle Laban.

Deborah would have been special to Jacob, being sort of a surrogate aunt and someone close to his mother. By the fact that she got special mention, and a burial place at the hands of Jacob, meant that she also (like others related to Abraham) benefited from the Covenant Promises.

**“Your name is Israel”** – The name Israel, as we’ve seen, means “he struggles with God.” God first bestowed the name on Jacob in Genesis 32 when Jacob wrestled with the “Man” for the rights of the Firstborn Son.

His homecoming, therefore, represented a lifetime of struggle for those Inheritance rights – and finally winning them in the end. They could sit down to the Table in God’s House and

enjoy the blessings of his Inheritance at the hands of his Father in Heaven.

By now he had his twelve sons (Rachel was pregnant with Benjamin) and the future of the Nation of Israel was before him. His part of the struggle was over. The burden of the responsibility of the Family would now pass to his son Joseph.

**God Almighty** – God’s command to Jacob to “be fruitful and multiply” followed the Name that God identified himself with: God Almighty. The Hebrew is *El Shaddai*, the God of plenty and prosperity and fullness. This same command was given to Adam and Eve, to Noah, to Abraham, and to Isaac. The idea is that the resources needed for Jacob’s Family to turn into “a nation and a company of nations” would come from Heaven, not from earth. It would be a miraculous occurrence, not a natural one. Therefore it would take on the likeness of the Heavenly Jerusalem and not something that this world is used to seeing. It would be unstoppable.

Notice that God was talking about the future here, not the present. In order to see the future works of God, we need faith – the ability to see and live in the presence of God.

Therefore not only was Jacob seeing his own Family’s future, he saw the history of the Old Testament stretching out before him for the next 2000 years. And since we are told specifically that Abraham saw the day of Christ himself (John 8:56), we can assume that the same vision was given to Jacob, since he inherited the same Promises, and particularly since he had struggled for that Firstborn Son’s inheritance rights.

This connection between Jacob and Christ strengthens the claim of the

Apostle that the Gospel was first given to Abraham and the Patriarchs. What they saw – the relationship between Father and Son, the Treasures of Heaven, the life of faith, and the House of God – has been and always will be the same hope of the people of God no matter when they lived in history or where they live in the world. It’s what we see in the future that keeps us following the LORD now in this world.

**Terror from God** – It would be gratifying to see modern critics of the Patriarchs transported back in time to witness for themselves the honor that God gave his people, and experience the terror of the power of God as he protected them! The reputation of the Family had been building up over the last two centuries (starting with Abraham) and there were stories about how this Family’s God did miracles on their behalf, and laid waste to anybody who crossed their path. And given the fact that there were angels coming and going in the area (see Genesis 28), there was undoubtedly a feeling in the air that the wicked found unaccountably oppressive.

There was going to be a special meeting between God and his people that he didn’t want any of the local pagans to interfere with, with their polluting influences. So the pagans kept their distance.

**The House of God** – Other religions are content to talk *about* their gods because they can’t produce one. The startling reality about the true God is that he reveals himself to his own children; they are eyewitnesses of his glory and reality. The LORD repeatedly came to Jacob in person and proved to him that he was still there, still guiding his son by the hand step-by-step toward the goal, and

still intended to give Jacob the Covenant Promises. Instead of having to trust that these things might happen, Jacob communed directly with his God and *knew* they would happen.

This was the same God that his forefathers had. The promises that God had made to Abraham, guaranteed by a solemn oath, were the same promises that the LORD now was repeating to Abraham's descendant. In fact, this is a sign that one is worshiping God the way he/she needs to: God is the same yesterday, today, and forever; the promises have never changed, the Mission has never changed; Jesus and the New Testament hasn't changed a single thing about Abraham's Inheritance but rather fulfills it. Anyone who thinks the Mission has changed doesn't understand what the Christ came to do among us.

That means that our modern church is guilty of serious crimes of omission and distortion when it ignores the message of the Patriarchs, particularly when it claims that Jesus himself changed the message. If God were to come to one of us, he would promise us nothing different from what he promised the Patriarchs. Jesus and the Apostles were all agreed on that.

But there's something else critical about this encounter between God and Jacob. The particular geographic location wasn't as important as the event that was occurring. The meeting between God and Jacob was called **Bethel** (*Hebrew*: בֵּית-אֵל), the "House of God." Eventually the entire land of Canaan would be the home of God's people; and the Temple would be built on the site of Jerusalem (about 12 miles south of the town of Bethel). But as Jesus explained it later, whenever the

Father and the Son meet, that's where the House of God is – no matter where you happen to be on earth. Wherever I am, I can meet with the Father.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (Psalms 23:5-6)

Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. (Psalm 24:6)

Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth. (John 4:21-24)

*He is "my strong habitation where unto I can continually resort." I am a pilgrim in the world, but at home in my God. In the earth I wander, but in God I dwell in a quiet habitation. (C. H. Spurgeon)*

And revelation from God, the Truth, doesn't happen anywhere else but in the House of God. The Spirit of Truth brings God's children into the House to their Father where they hear from his own lips the Truth, and they believe it because they can see the one revealing it

to them. Our faith is not a matter of hearsay or philosophy or academia, but “the very words of God.” (See Romans 3:2; Hebrews 12:22-24; 1 Peter 4:11)

So far the presence of God had been a terror to the Canaanites in the area as Jacob moved his family toward Bethel. But at Bethel, when Jacob saw and heard God, there was no terror there: it was the Father coming close to his son, reassuring him, reiterating the Promises of his Inheritance. On the outside were enemies; but inside the House was Family, with peace and love and prosperity.

It was after this encounter that Jacob called the place, “Bethel.” He understood the character of the encounter.

**Rachel’s death** – As Jacob moved away to his father Isaac’s home in Hebron, Rachel gave birth to her second son, and died in childbirth. (Leah, who bore more sons to Jacob than Rachel did, was buried with the other Patriarchs in the field at Machpelah – Genesis 49:31).

Rachel was Jacob’s beloved wife, the woman he wanted in the first place. An additional factor was that Rachel gave Jacob his son Joseph, who was his favorite son. It shouldn’t be any surprise that Jacob made a special monument – a pillar – in Rachel’s honor.

But let’s put some historical events together. First, Jacob’s favorite son Joseph had his favorite grandson Ephraim (see Genesis 48:8-20). And Ephraim’s descendants (along with Manasseh’s) later inherited the lion’s share of the Promised Land – about 47%.

The tribe of Ephraim later became a bitter disappointment to the LORD when they turned their backs on Jerusalem, the

Temple, and on David’s descendants on the throne. Ephraim and the other Northern Tribes set up their own gods, beginning at Bethel, and fell into rebellion and wickedness. God had to punish them eventually and send them into Exile into Assyria.

A voice is heard in Ramah,  
lamentation and bitter weeping.  
Rachel is weeping for her children;  
she refuses to be comforted for her  
children, because they are no more.  
(Jeremiah 31:15)

But the Prophet Jeremiah predicted the day when Ephraim in particular would be restored and brought back to her God.

For thus says the LORD: “Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, O LORD, save your people, the remnant of Israel.’ Behold, I will bring them from the north country and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, the pregnant woman and she who is in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with pleas for mercy I will lead them back, I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble, for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. (Jeremiah 31:7-9. *The entire chapter is the expression of deep love of the Father toward his son*)

This prophecy of Rachel weeping over her children (her descendants) was picked up by the Apostle Matthew and applied to the site where the Christ would be born. Herod killed all the

children two years old and younger in the town of Bethlehem, where Rachel's pillar stood, and "then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah." (Matthew 2:17)

Jesus' parents, you will remember, were not from Bethlehem, but they traveled there fulfilling the prophecy that the Christ would be born there. Thus Jeremiah's other prophecy came true – that salvation *came to* the Tribe of Ephraim, God's "firstborn."

So the pillar marked the spot where salvation would appear for Jacob's Family. Everything that Jacob did (as recorded in Genesis) had far-reaching consequences to our faith, all down through history.

**Reuben's sin** – Reuben was the firstborn son of Jacob, and by rights would have received double the inheritance that his other brothers would have received. He also would have been the head of the Family once Jacob was gone.

But this sin of incest made that possibility out of the question. The Law of Moses later described the seriousness of the sin and the penalty that it deserved.

If a man lies with his father's wife, he has uncovered his father's nakedness; both of them shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them. (Leviticus 20:11)

Reuben wasn't put to death, but he would later live to regret his action. When Jacob was handing out blessings for his twelve sons, he hedged on Reuben.

Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity

and preeminent in power. Unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it — he went up to my couch! (Genesis 49:3-4)

So the right of the Firstborn son went from the physical firstborn to the eleventh son. This has been the trend from the beginning of Genesis: God always chose his own man for the role of the Firstborn, not the one who was born first physically. God "looks upon the heart." The history shows the stark contrast of character between Reuben and Joseph.

In addition, even though the Patriarchs themselves were sinners (as Scripture says of all of us), their sins were never mentioned in the account. God's intent with them was to bring them into his House as his Family, his Son; and for his Son, he only has grace and mercy and forgiveness and restoration. But there was no such gentleness with Jacob's sons. Reuben's sin was quickly brought to the front and condemned for what it was. We are all too quick to condemn Jacob for his so-called "sins," but the story deals in totally different ways with Jacob and with everyone else. That should be plain to see.

**Jacob's sons** – The Family was now complete.

The number twelve would rule the rest of the Bible. The Twelve Tribes of Israel were represented on Aaron's breastpiece with twelve gems. The Promised Land was divided up into twelve geographic Tribal areas. Twelve loaves of bread were put in the Tabernacle for the Feast, along with twelve bowls of incense and twelve oxen for the sacrifice. Twelve men went on

ahead into Canaan to spy out the land. Twelve stones were put in the middle of the Jordan River to mark their crossing into Canaan. Solomon had twelve officers across the Nation who provided the royal court with daily food, and he also used the number twelve as a measure for parts of the Temple. Ezra assigned twelve priests to carry the Temple's valuables back to Jerusalem from Exile. Parts of Ezekiel's vision of the Temple was measured off by twelves. Jesus chose twelve disciples to start the Church (a number that the disciples were careful to restore when Judas turned traitor). James wrote his letter to "the twelve tribes in dispersion." And in the book of Revelation, there are numerous references to the number twelve as being the perfect number of saints in the Kingdom of God, as well as the measure that God used to mark off his Heavenly City. Twelve foundation stones represent the Apostles, and twelve gates are the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The Tree of Life produces twelve kinds of fruit.

So evidently the number twelve represents the fact that everyone is present and accounted for, and everyone will be there to share in the fullness of the Covenant Inheritance.

**Isaac's death** – At this point Isaac has seen the fulfillment of the Promise that the LORD made to his father Abraham: "I will make of you a great nation." (Genesis 12:2) It was specifically Isaac's marriage to Rebekah that brought about that Promise (Genesis 24), because a nation couldn't happen as long as Abraham's son didn't yet have a wife. It would have been satisfying to the Patriarch to see that the present generation was the result of God's works on his behalf 140 years previous.

**The Point** – Now Jacob's part of the story was almost over. Significant things had happened during his lifetime. *First*, he had a genuine conversion when he met the God of his fathers and heard from his own mouth the Promise of the Covenant Inheritance. *Second*, he was given a large Family who would form the foundation of the Nation of Israel. *Third*, everywhere he went, he was richly blessed by his God (even though he had to struggle for it all the way), and he testified to that fact: "The God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone."

*Fourth*, he particularly struggled with the Firstborn Son and received *those* Inheritance rights. It wasn't this world he wanted (as his brother Esau did) but the next one. For his faith he was rewarded by being made God's Firstborn and heir.

*Fifth*, he saw and understood the significance of the House of God: the meeting place between the Father and his Son, where the two of them sit down together in love and joy and holiness around the table set with a Feast.

In light of this remarkable story of Jacob, it's unfathomable that modern students condemn the man for his lack of faith. God does not richly reward a lack of faith!

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. (Hebrews 11:1-2)

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and

that he rewards those who seek  
him. (Hebrews 11:6)

The facts of Jacob's life point toward  
just the opposite conclusion.

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