

# **GENESIS**

## **A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY**

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

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## CHOSEN TO RULE (*GENESIS 37*)

As the nature and complexity of the Covenant gets worked out over time, we see different aspects in different men's lives. No one person was chosen to experience, or illustrate, the full scope of the Covenant. God made the Covenant with Abraham and his descendants; thus we know now that being related to Abraham is crucial for our own spiritual standing with God. Isaac was the heir of Abraham; now we know that the line follows those born of the power of the Spirit, not of the flesh. Jacob struggled to get the Firstborn's inheritance and, for his faith, was rewarded with the rich treasures of Heaven; so now we know whose inheritance the children of God are really after.

Now it's time to change actors, so to speak, to work out a new aspect of the Covenant. Joseph was not the oldest son of Jacob, yet he was chosen to play a role that will reappear at crucial times in Israel's history, as well as in the New Testament. It's a new enough concept that it had to be worked out separately from the stories of the other three men of Genesis. Joseph is the *Designated Heir* to whom all the rest of the Family must submit in order to come under the protection and care of the Covenant. The Family isn't going to like this arrangement at all; but they will all be forced to admit that God has chosen his own ruler of the Family.

**Joseph's task** – Joseph was about to become the head of the Family of Abraham.

There are multiple aspects to what Joseph was about to do; we can put it all under the heading of the *Designated Heir*. For one thing, Joseph was God's choice for the job; not even his father, let alone his brothers, expected that the LORD would choose Joseph for this role. But Joseph's character matched the requirements for the position. And the entire Family would eventually bow their knees to the Designated Heir if they wanted to survive. Nobody was going to like this situation, which means that God had to literally drag everyone into compliance with his plan; it would be a long, drawn-out affair before everyone understood what God required here.

Joseph's role as the Executor of the Estate was plain to see at every stage of the journey. His dreams revealed the necessity of his role as ruler of the Family; Joseph was selected to monitor his brothers' work; he managed Potiphar's house; he ran the Egyptian prison; he was Pharaoh's second-in-command over all

Egypt, and he eventually took charge of Jacob's entire family in their move to Egypt under his protection and care.

A man who has this kind of responsibility is going to be prepared for the job; the Covenant requires no less. Thus Joseph's sterling quality in contrast to everyone else's faults and weaknesses – including his father's. There will be critical moves to make, which means he will need wisdom and the mind of God. A lot of people must be humbled, so Joseph endured hard discipline to enable him to make tough decisions and put the requirements of the Covenant above family loyalty, even while maintaining that love for the Family – for whom it is all done.

There were two critical foundation stones in the history of Israel's beginnings as recorded in Genesis: *first*, that God made a Covenant with Abraham and his descendants. The sequence of events from Abraham to Isaac and to Jacob created the Family. The *second* momentous stage of their history is here in the story of Joseph – it is here that the Family

makes a pivot, as it were, swinging from its existence as a wandering, homeless Family to the creation of the Nation of Israel. This was the political side of the Plan of God. The sons of Jacob were being taken to Egypt to grow and prosper into the Twelve Tribes who would then return to Canaan to claim their inheritance. And Joseph was the enabler of that critical point of change in their history.

**Loved by his father** – Jacob has previously shown a spiritual sensitivity that helped to guide him in making the right decisions. He went after Esau's birthright, he followed his mother's advice to get Isaac's blessing, he understood the significance of the encounter with God at Bethel, he stood back to let the LORD deal with his scheming uncle Laban in his own way, he wrestled with the man in the night to get the inheritance of the Firstborn.

Now, it seems, Jacob was favoring his next to youngest son Joseph as his spiritual heir. The text says that "Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age." And Jacob favored Joseph by giving him special gifts. Later we are told that Joseph was "handsome in form and appearance" (Genesis 39:6), and he was the son of Jacob's favorite wife Rachel. But it's interesting that Jacob passed over his other sons to favor the one who will prove, over time, to be of far better character, wisdom and skills than the others. At the very least, Jacob trusted Joseph's judgment more than that of the other sons. It turned out that Jacob unerringly (no doubt with spiritual sensitivity) chose the son to whom God gave dreams – the son who was specially skilled by God to secure the terms of the Covenant, to insure the future state of the Family of Abraham.

At this point Jacob's sons have proved to be problematic for their father: Simeon and Levi massacred a Canaanite village and put the family at risk; Reuben slept with his father's concubine; Judah has had a scandalous family affair of his own. We aren't told anything of the others, but if their character is anything like what we are about to see in this chapter, perhaps we can assume that the elderly Jacob

was hoping for a new start in his young son. As it turned out, Jacob's choice was indeed God's choice (finally!). The spiritual headship of the Family was about to pass from Jacob to Joseph.

**Joseph's dreams** – His dreams centered on his dominance over the rest of the family. He told his brothers about his first dream of their sheaves bowing down to his sheaf; later Joseph told his father that even Jacob would bow down to his own son.

Nobody of course at this stage understood what that was going to look like, so naturally they took offense at his "arrogance" to presume that he would rule over them. In fact, we are a bit surprised at Joseph's seeming naïveté as he makes his family angry at him. But there are two facts to keep in mind: *first*, Joseph didn't make these dreams up. God gave him the dreams. It's not naïveté here but a child-like faith in the Word of God. "Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' we also believe, and so we also speak." (2 Corinthians 4:13) If people don't like God's Word, Joseph can't justly be blamed; shooting the messenger is not the solution. We now have the benefit of knowing the end of the story: it turned out exactly as God predicted, which means the family should have listened to him – it would have made things much easier if they had.

Or rather we should see this in a different light: due to man's disobedience, God works his perfect will. Though the brothers sinned against Joseph, the result was that God used this sin to save the Family through Joseph. Given the fact that man is always sinning against God (that's all that God has to work with in us!), part of God's strategy is to turn that sin around for man's redemption.

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience

the many will be made righteous.  
(Romans 5:18-19)

*Second*, we're going to see in Joseph's character, as it develops over time, that his passion for God's glory trumps everything – including loyalty to his family. He isn't trying to win *their* approval; he wants God's approval. He loves his family (that will be evident later in the tears he sheds over his family's humiliation), but he knows that he will best serve his family by *doing God's will*, even though that will often *look* as if he is turning against his family. A person who is this determined to follow God, and not the dictates of family, will appear as though he doesn't care about them. "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." (Matthew 10:37) A hard saying, but it illustrates what love for God really means: we do his will even when our family refuses to follow. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Matthew 10:34) This was the kind of man that God needed for this special task.

The interesting thing to notice here is that even Jacob will bow down to his son. This was perhaps the most offensive part of the dreams in the family's opinion, since the youth are always obligated to honor and serve the elders. We will observe this detail later in the story; for now we should learn that *everyone* must bow to the Designated Heir. The Covenant ignores the lines of the natural family. It will be a hard lesson for everyone to learn, but a necessary one. Jacob has received his riches, but *everyone's* survival will hinge on his or her humility before the Heir because of his special position before God. God has not given his inheritance directly to each and every Family member; rather he has given it to the Heir alone, and the rest get their share *through him*.

**The brothers' plot** – Actually it's amazing to see Joseph's brothers plotting his death. One would think that family loyalty would "cover a multitude of sins."

What triggered their act of hatred was Joseph's mission of "spying" on them. Jacob sent his son out to see what the others were doing; evidently (based on previous experience) the father didn't trust his sons.

There are two ways to react when one's sinful nature is being probed like this: either in humility, sorrow and repentance; or as Joseph's brothers reacted – to hate the judge. Let's consider the details. Jacob had every right to check up on his sons; after all, the herds belonged to him. Joseph was a good judge of performance; it was unfair to blame him if he called the shots right. The brothers, on the other hand, had a history of mismanagement and failing their father. Just the fact that they hid their failures from their father instead of being open to him showed their character flaws.

But there's something deep in human nature going on here. We all of us love darkness instead of the light.

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. (John 3:19-20)

*We do not want anybody – even God – prying into our hearts and minds.* We want the freedom to do as we please, and we don't want any interference in our lives. This is so contrary to the principles of Creation (that the Judge examines us all and holds us to his standards) that it has caused an unending war between God and man all the way since Genesis 3. God is the Judge, and he *must* examine us to see if we measure up to the standards he has for us. If we avoid the light, if we blame him for interfering, if we refuse to be held to God's standards, we not only miss the whole point of our responsibility to him, we will never be able to cooperate with him or please him in anything we do.

At this point, then, it becomes evident that the survival of the Family must be put into more capable hands. If we wondered about the other brothers' qualifications for carrying on the Covenant responsibilities, this story clears away all doubts. The whole problem of mankind, remember, is *sin* – and hiding it and killing the Son who came to expose it is *not* the way to deal with it! (Matthew 21:33-42) In fact God's method of dealing with their sin is to finally bring the son into confrontation with his brothers (later in Genesis), faithfully and with determination exposing all their actions as well as their hearts.

**Reuben's plea** – Reuben pleaded for Joseph's life. In fact, his plan was to restore the boy to his father and frustrate the brothers' plot to do away with him. We aren't told whether this was Reuben's way of getting back into his father's good graces – it's an enticing idea, particularly since Reuben was the oldest and, naturally speaking, the son who stood to inherit the family estate.

Being the eldest, he would naturally have a more authoritative vote than the others – this saved Joseph from being destroyed. But it didn't earn him the Firstborn rights. The descendants of Reuben *were* included in the land division later in Canaan, but Joseph had the preeminence over him: his two sons each inherited part of the Promised Land.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Twelve Tribes through Scripture*

JACOB'S SONS	TWELVE TRIBES IN CANAAN	TWELVE TRIBES IN REVELATION
<i>Reuben</i>	<i>Reuben</i>	<i>Reuben</i>
<i>Simeon</i>	<i>Simeon</i>	<i>Simeon</i>
<i>Levi</i>	<i>Judah</i>	<i>Levi</i>
<i>Judah</i>	<i>Dan</i>	<i>Judah</i>
<i>Dan</i>	<i>Naphtali</i>	<i>Naphtali</i>
<i>Naphtali</i>	<i>Gad</i>	<i>Gad</i>
<i>Gad</i>	<i>Asher</i>	<i>Asher</i>
<i>Asher</i>	<i>Issachar</i>	<i>Issachar</i>
<i>Issachar</i>	<i>Zebulun</i>	<i>Zebulun</i>
<i>Zebulun</i>	<i>Manasseh</i>	<i>Joseph</i>
<i>Joseph</i>	<i>Ephraim</i>	<i>Manasseh</i>
<i>Benjamin</i>	<i>Benjamin</i>	<i>Benjamin</i>

Levi & Joseph  
missing in this list

Dan & Ephraim  
missing in this list

**Selling their brother** – When the brothers sold Joseph into slavery, they had no idea that the mantle passed from their father to Joseph, and *not* to them. They thought they were securing their own genealogical rights; in reality, the headship of the family now passed to Joseph, who (in spite of appearances) was moving to a position where he could do much more than they could do to preserve the Covenant Family. In doing away with him, they insured his success.

They sold Joseph to some Ishmaelite traders, which was a spiteful irony on their part. Ishmael was the son of Hagar, and deliberately cast out of the family of Abraham and denied rights to the estate – despite his being older than Isaac. So selling Joseph to Ishmael's family was like denying him the rights to the Family inheritance, as happened to Ishmael. And the sons of Ishmael were no doubt delighted to sell one of the descendants of Abraham as a slave in Egypt.

Joseph's destination, however, was telling: once again, God is going to use Egypt to equip his people with the resources they need. Not that Egypt knew about this strategy, nor did they care. The Exodus was not the only time that God's people "plundered the Egyptians" (Exodus 12:36) – Abraham plundered them, and now Jacob and his family are about to plunder them. God intends to make his people rich at the Egyptians' expense and beggar Egypt in the process.

Another work of God going on in this story is that he is getting his servant away from his brothers – far away. If Joseph had stayed in the area, he wouldn't have gotten far with his brothers or his father, not with the dreams he was having. His progress would have been impeded every step of the way by his own family. But by removing him to Egypt, God prepared him in an amazing way – a miraculous way – to achieve a great thing, the one pivotal act that will turn the Family into a Nation. This reminds us of the statement that Jesus made about his own removal from earth: "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go

<sup>1</sup> Notice in the book of Revelation (7:4-8), Joseph still has the preeminence, since he as well as his son Manasseh are listed among the Twelve Tribes.

away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.” (John 16:7) In going away – into another world – to be crowned King of kings, Jesus is now situated to gather his Family around him. Remaining here in this physical world would have severely limited his options to provide a new spiritual world for all his brothers and sisters; his Kingdom is not part of this world. (John 18:36) The Designated Heir must draw his resources from a different spring.

**Jacob’s mourning** – Again, we must separate what man is doing from what God is doing. The brothers told their father that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast. That plunged Jacob, naturally, into a deep grief.

But in God’s hands this grief, based on the “fact” of Joseph’s certain death, was necessary. There had to be a complete break between Joseph and his father. The next step in the development of the Covenant required a new concept: the Firstborn assumes his role as the ruler by the hand of God alone; he needs nothing in this world to rule over it.

Jacob’s property, of course, would have been divided twelve ways among his sons; but a legal transfer from father to son would have been complicated because Joseph was almost the youngest son and, by rights, wouldn’t have received much. But that’s not the point here. Israel was about to be transformed from a family to a Nation. It was not from Jacob that Joseph must receive what he needed for his critical role; the job required the resources of Heaven. Both men had to see that – particularly Jacob, who only thought in terms of the inheritance he received from his forefathers and that he wanted to pass on to his sons. The resources needed here for Joseph’s task are in God, not in man. Here’s a new concept in the Covenant foundation.

Therefore Joseph had to be dead to his father; there must be, in Jacob’s eyes, no hope in his son anymore. Only then could God introduce a new concept that would satisfy both the physical and spiritual requirements of the situation, way beyond what Jacob could have imagined. It seems like such a cruel

thing to do to Jacob, but it fits the recurrent theme all through Scripture that the foundation of Abraham’s family is in God’s spiritual world, *not* in this physical world. Each generation learned this in some form. The Covenant Promises can’t be based on Jacob’s wealth, but on God’s spiritual treasures. As the new Heir put this world behind him and looked to God, he found what he needed miraculously appearing as he needed it.

**The Point** – As Joseph told his brothers later on (Genesis 50:20), God was guiding this whole situation to his own ends. Everyone was focused on *their* own desires and needs, but God had a bigger Project in view. Only Joseph, however, could see that greater vision – a vision given to him by God at the very beginning. Now the time has come to turn the Covenant foundation work into a new work: the Nation of Israel.

There were all sorts of issues that had to be uncovered and dealt with in Jacob’s family. God had to uncover the hearts of sinners; obviously these brothers had spiritual issues, which would disqualify them for the family headship. God needed more than stubborn sinners to do this job. Joseph, on the other hand, was not only of sterling character – events will prove this – but he was also passionate for God’s glory and Kingdom. Jacob was old, and unable to do what was necessary at this stage of the Family’s progress. The dreams of Joseph exposed alienation in the Covenant Family, and it could only be addressed in a certain way – the way that Joseph would follow later in Egypt.

Joseph’s calling is now very clear: he is to be the head of the Family, the executor of the Covenant estate. Again, events will soon reveal and justify the extent of Joseph’s abilities and authority. The job requires a pure heart, contact with the mind of God, passion for the Kingdom of God, and the necessary skills to achieve the tasks involved. Joseph had all of these, in contrast to the other characters of the story.

In order to achieve this next step of turning the Family into a Nation, there has to be a

clear break from the Family, a conceptual shift. So far the development of the Covenant had created the Family, the Heir of God collectively. But we're not done yet. Now we have to learn that the source for God's works at all stages, particularly at *this* stage of creating a Nation, really is from Heaven; it does not involve simply a transfer of physical resources from father to son, nor will it depend on the family's efforts. Always the new Covenant Heir is put into direct contact with God in order to carry out his part of the project. It is now Joseph's time to do his part as he relies on God alone in a strange land, apart from family. He must walk in a new world to achieve God's purposes. This world contributes nothing to the Heir's rule.

We will see the Designated Heir again at critical points in Israel's history. In their need, the group *turns to the One chosen and empowered by God and submits to his authority.*

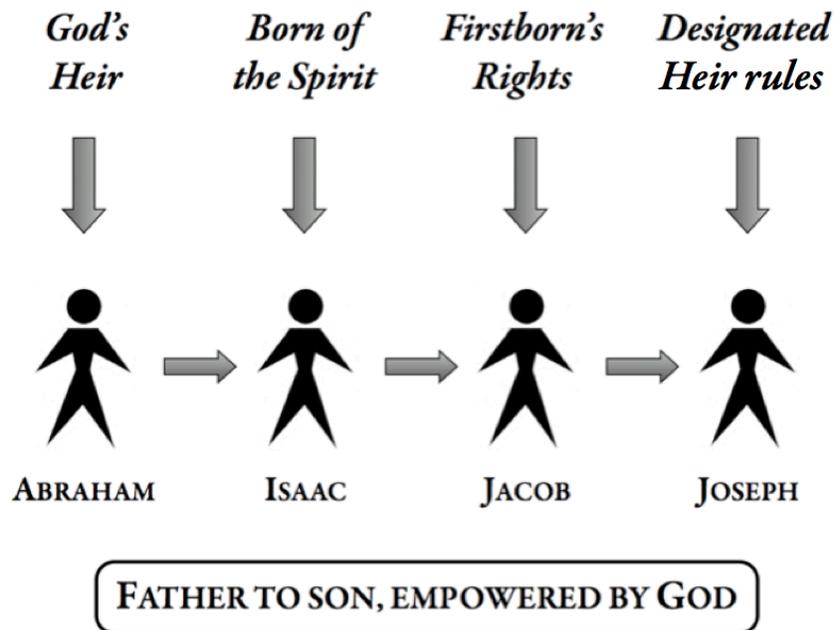
- The family of Adam – *to the Seed*
- The family of Jacob – *to Joseph*
- The Israelites – *to Moses*
- The Nation – *to the Levites*
- The Twelve Tribes – *to David*
- The Jews in Exile – *to Esther and Daniel*
- The Jews – *to Jesus*
- Christians – *to the Son of God*

In each case, the group needs a Designated Heir who will have the necessary spiritual skills, and the pure heart, and the direct contact with God, to “stand in the gap” in crucial times to insure the spiritual prosperity, protection and Covenant blessings for the entire Family.

Commentators all through history have seen Joseph as a “type” of Christ, because so many aspects of Jesus' life and ministry parallel the details of Joseph's life. Strangely, however, the Bible itself doesn't explore the idea of a type going on here. While many other characters in Old Testament history are compared with Jesus, and the Apostles discuss various “types” (see, for example, Romans 5:14 and Galatians 4:21-31) the Bible is silent about connecting Joseph and Jesus.

But if we back up and see the concept of the Designated Heir in the story of Joseph, we suddenly get a model that is used over and over in Old Testament stories as well as in the ministry of Christ. A type, then, is perhaps too small a concept to use here. The Designated Heir, on the other hand, is a *theological role* that Joseph, David and Jesus fulfilled in the Covenant Family. As Joseph moved into a strategic position to take care of the Covenant Family, so Jesus has moved into a strategic position to take care of his Church – and in doing so fulfills the Abrahamic Covenant promises. As Joseph's character and skills gave him success, so Jesus' character and skills enable him to “take care of his own.” And since this is an integral final step of the story of the Covenant, it will instruct us about the present position of the Christ as he rules over Heaven and earth from his place beside the Father's throne.

## GENESIS 38



At each stage of the story of the Patriarchs, God chose his own Heir to receive the Covenant Promises. It all started with Abraham. Isaac, though not the firstborn son of Abraham, became the Covenant Heir by God's decree. Jacob and Joseph were heirs of the Promises by the same decree. Nobody outside of the Family – in fact nobody without the faith of Abraham – will ever inherit the Covenant blessings; they must prove their legal descent from Abraham.

Notice that each Heir was in direct contact with God in order to carry out the next phase of the unfolding of the Covenant. He received spiritual resources from God that enabled him to live in God's presence and overcome the world around him. Everything was kept within the Family, but each event was Spirit-driven. It was that crucial spiritual contact with God that showed they were Abraham's heirs, and it made their own faith in God possible. The fulfillment of the Covenant is a transaction between Heaven and earth; it's never the natural result of this world's resources or ways.

GENESIS 38

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