

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

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JACOB BLESSES JOSEPH (*GENESIS 48*)

At the end of his life Jacob had one more important task to accomplish. He stood at the end of a story that started over 230 years previous to him, when God called Abraham and gave him the Covenant Promises. Those Promises were a Family treasure; it was an inheritance that was passed down through the generations – not to the sons whom the fathers thought would inherit it, but to the sons who were chosen by God and made *able* to inherit it. The Covenant involves a spiritual life with God in eternity. Only by faith can a person understand and use the spiritual treasures that God gives his people.

We've seen that Joseph is the Designated Heir of the Covenant, much to the family's surprise; once again the privilege didn't go to the biological firstborn but to the spiritual firstborn, the son chosen by God and not by man. By this time people are starting to get the idea about how God works in his Kingdom. Now is the time for the "official transfer" of the Family inheritance from one Heir to the next.

The Heir calls his heir – Jacob knew that his time had come, and so he called Joseph to him. By now the heirs of the Abrahamic Covenant had a clear understanding of what that Covenant entailed, and its importance for not only themselves but for generations to come. And they also knew that it was their responsibility to pass on the inheritance rights to the next heir in line – the *right one*. Not everyone would inherit the Promises, even of Abraham's line – Ishmael was rejected as well as Esau. Jacob has learned also that the Family is separated into those who rule and those who are ruled; and once again, man may think he knows to whom the leadership should go, but God overrules. "For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7) This principle first laid out in Genesis would continue to guide the history of Abraham's descendants, for example in the LORD using Moses to lead out the Israelites, letting only the second generation (not the first) enter the Promised Land, and God's choices of Gideon and David and Solomon to be

Israel's leaders. And as God chooses his spiritual heirs, the people of God follow in faith.

Now that it was clear who the LORD's choice was for the Designated Heir, Jacob finalized the legal transfer between him and his son Joseph.

God Almighty appeared to me – Jacob is referring to the time recorded in Genesis 35 when he was on the way to see his father Isaac before his death. He received three promises: "I will make you fruitful and multiply you," "I will make of you a company of peoples," and "I will give this land to your offspring" – and they are all in 35:11-12.

God Almighty is the Hebrew *El Shaddai* (*The God of plenty*), and Jacob of all people knew how richly God blesses his people and takes care of all their needs, beyond what they can imagine. The Father knows how to take care of his son in all ways, in all circumstances. And yet Jacob knew that this has all been just the beginning; the Covenant wasn't simply a localized affair for Abraham's immediate family. Jacob had the faith to see far beyond his

own situation to uncounted generations, and a life far richer and of greater extent than the Family had experienced so far. “They were longing for a better country — a Heavenly one.” (Hebrews 11:16) Even the land of Canaan would only be the start of a greater inheritance for a much larger Family than the physical generations of Abraham.

So while his eyes of faith were fixed on the future, Jacob put the whole thing on the table, so to speak, before his son to prepare Joseph to receive his father’s legacy. They both knew what was at stake, they both knew what God had given their Family, they both knew what Joseph was being given by his father. This business was much bigger than they were. This was not just the Family of Abraham but the Family of God.

Your two sons are mine – Jacob claimed both sons of Joseph for a reason: since Joseph was the Designated Heir of the Family, he became in God’s eyes the true, spiritual firstborn of Jacob and therefore was entitled to a “double portion” of the inheritance of his father. See Deuteronomy 21:17 for the law concerning the rights of the firstborn son: “He shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the firstfruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his.” So when the Israelites entered the Promised Land over 400 years later, each of Jacob’s sons would inherit a portion of the land; *but Joseph would inherit two portions* – one through each of his two sons. By counting Joseph’s sons as “reckoned as mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are mine,” Jacob lifted the two boys up to the legal status of the other sons of Jacob.

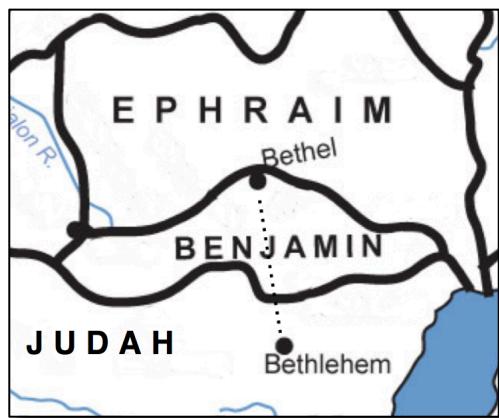
This was quite a concession for Jacob to make. Years before, when Joseph told his father that “the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me” (Genesis 37:9), referring to the fact that even Jacob would acknowledge Joseph as the Designated Heir of the family, everyone (including Jacob!) was offended. And yet in God’s providence this was exactly how it turned out. Remember, however, that “his father kept the saying in mind.” (Genesis 37:11) After watching God repeatedly overturn the plans of man in his own life, Jacob wasn’t putting the thing beyond the realm of the possible. But now Jacob is willing and ready to designate his son Joseph as the “firstborn of God” – the son chosen by God for the rights and privileges of the firstborn son (thereby circumventing his eldest son Reuben). The Abrahamic Covenant requires sons who are *spiritually* capable and attuned to God’s will and purposes.

As for me ... – Verse 7, at first glance, appears not to fit in with the flow of the story here; in the middle of talking about Joseph’s sons and their inheritance, Jacob stopped to refer to the sad event of losing his wife Rachel.

But the clue is the phrase “As for me ...” (ESV) It’s as if he were saying, “By the way, while we’re talking about inheritance in the Promised Land ... there is a special place where I buried my heart – your mother.” Jacob had always loved Rachel more, and her loss left a sharp edge in his soul that never left him. By pinpointing on the map where he lost her, he was telling his son to make sure that place would never be forgotten.

And Jacob’s wish about honoring his wife Rachel’s memory was fulfilled. Rachel died while giving birth to the last

of Jacob's sons, Benjamin; "and I buried her there *on the way* to Ephrath" – which we are told was modern day Bethlehem.



As you can see from this map, Rachel died and Benjamin was born in the area later given to the tribe of Benjamin – as Jacob was making his way south from Bethel, "when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath." So Joseph made sure that Benjamin's portion included that burial location.

Faith versus sight – The story makes the point of telling us that Jacob's eyes were weak, and he couldn't see very well. This is why Joseph thought his father was confused about which of his two sons would the greater blessing; and yet Jacob, admitting his eyesight was poor, nevertheless overruled Joseph's protest. Jacob knew that this transaction did not depend on sight, but rather on spiritual insight.¹

Contrary to the opinions of many modern scholars, the Patriarchs were not primitives or ignorant fools. Jacob knew full well what the Covenant was all about. He wasn't following his culture's primogeniture rules, nor was he creating

a new custom or family tradition for later generations to emulate. He was following God's leading. Finding the spiritual Firstborn had always been the Family procedure since the day that Abraham heard the voice of the LORD and followed him to Canaan. Passing on the inheritance rights was not man's doing; it was all by God's will and design, for his purposes alone, to unfold as he sees best – even if man can't see the purpose or design in any of it yet. True faith hears and obeys and trusts in God's Word alone, not in our own ideas or emotions.

But there was more than a legal transaction at work here. We see Jacob's heart as Joseph brought his two sons near to his father, and Jacob "kissed them and embraced them." We don't have any record of Jacob doing this with any of his other children or grandchildren. Not that he wouldn't have, but the point of *this* scene was to show how special Joseph was to Jacob and Jacob's love for his descendants and his determination to see them blessed with the treasures he himself possessed. The descendants of these two boys would play a critical role in the life of Israel for centuries to come.

Jacob's love for Ephraim would take on a national dimension later when the LORD showed the same love for the wayward nation of Israel – because of his love for Joseph:

Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 31:20)

¹ Did he remember his father Isaac's failing eyesight and how he and his mother took advantage of that to overrule Isaac's lack of spiritual insight? (Genesis 27)

Only a Father would grieve so deeply over the sins of his son; only a Father – in his steadfast love – yearns to have his rebellious son come back to him. If ever Israel wondered if they could expect the LORD to show compassion on them after their idolatry and immorality and rebellion, they had only to look to this story in Genesis, at their national birth, so to speak, and meditate on Jacob's love for their ancestor. They were special in God's eyes – the favored son.

God fulfilled his promise – Jacob stopped to remark that he was amazed at how things turned out: "I never expected to see your face; and behold, God has let me see your offspring also." But it wasn't just amazement: it's yet another confirmation of his faith in God. The promise *was*, remember, that "I will give the land *to your offspring* after you." (Genesis 35:12) Jacob just didn't realize at the time how literally God would fulfill that promise! *All* of his offspring will inherit the Covenant Promises; their own deaths would not prevent any of their families from inheriting the land. As was true later with the Designated Heir of the Church, "God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it." (Acts 2:24) The Covenant Heirs were learning at every step just how powerful and how literal God's promises are; he has every intention of fulfilling all of them – it's just going to take time. It's designed to unfold across generations. Which means that faith simply follows the LORD and trusts him to keep his Word, one way or another. None of us can predict how he will do the impossible for us.

Joseph bows before Jacob – Before we get too far afield here in appreciating Joseph's crucial role in the Covenant and

its distribution to the rest of the Family, this solemn passage shows the Designated Heir bowing before his father. It's true that Joseph was the Family head now, taking care of the rest of them. But Jacob was never set aside, even when his son rescued the whole Family from disaster and took charge of things. The Covenant was passed from Abraham to Isaac to *Jacob* – and Jacob was the chosen son in his generation because of his desperate passion to have the rights of the Firstborn.

Joseph acknowledged that his rights as the Firstborn came from his father Jacob, the heir of Abraham and Isaac. There's a finality in this Genesis sequence which is the foundation of the Church. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has now revealed his Plan to restore the Son to the Father, and the last man in the sequence turns to his Family and expects them to pass on those treasures that he gave them.

The Heir receives the blessing – Notice that the text says, "And he blessed *Joseph* and said ..." However, the rest of verses 15-16 don't mention Joseph but his sons instead. In other words, Jacob blessed Joseph by blessing Joseph's sons; all that Joseph received from his father would be distributed between his sons, as he naturally would want to see.

The greater blesses the lesser. But a blessing, in respect to the Covenant, involves far more than "I hope things turn out well for you" (or, in today's parlance, "Have a good day!"). A blessing from a Covenant Heir takes on the power and authority of the Firstborn of Heaven himself; the heirs represent the Eternal Son, they speak his Word, they deliver his treasure to the Family.

I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven. (Matthew 16:19)

Heirs have the power and right of granting Heaven's spiritual gifts in their blessing: the knowledge of the true God, the power and wisdom of God, and the open door accessing all the Treasures of Heaven. So this transaction was not merely ceremonial but real: later in her history, Israel did indeed inherit a spiritual life with God *because* they were descendants of Jacob, and heirs of his inheritance. Jacob gave something real to his son and grandsons that time would unfold.

Ephraim the firstborn – The way this story reads, it *looks* as if Ephraim will play the major role among the tribes of Israel in their upcoming history. Ephraim was given the rights of the firstborn (even though he wasn't the biological firstborn), and his descendants (along with Manasseh's) would be the definition by which the other tribes would be measured in their blessings: "By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying, 'God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh.'"

When we read about Ephraim in later Old Testament books, they indeed take a central role in many of the events that transpired in Israel's history. Joshua, for example, was an Ephraimite. The problem was that the people of Ephraim had a bad habit of being on the wrong side. For instance, they fought against Jephthah for pride's sake (and lost) (Judges 12); Jeroboam, an Ephraimite, led the ten Northern Tribes in rebellion against Rehoboam and Jerusalem and set

up a false idol to worship. (1 Kings 12) Over the centuries they became so alienated from God that he sent them many prophets to warn them to return to him – or else incur the extreme penalty. The result was that the LORD actually took away their preeminence and gave it to Judah instead.

He rejected the tent of Joseph; he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim, but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves. (Psalm 78:67-68)

But as a Father who never forgets his own son, and works to bring him back home, the LORD promised to restore Ephraim to fellowship in the days of the Messiah.

Thus says the LORD God:
Behold, I am about to take the stick of Joseph (that is in the hand of Ephraim) and the tribes of Israel associated with him. And I will join with it the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, that they may be one in my hand. (Ezekiel 37:19)

Thus with a checkered history the beloved of God started out well, failed, and yet they were continually called by the Prophets to come back to the God who loved them. Sounds like the Prodigal Son.

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – With this story the genealogical line of the Patriarchs is complete. Jacob knew that the foundation had been laid in the lives of himself and his forefathers for the sake of the Family of God, both in his time and for all time to come. Therefore Jacob told Joseph that "in them [Joseph's sons] let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac."

In order to understand this foundation that God laid down, we have to take the important theological events from all three Patriarchs and form a complete picture of what the Covenant Promises entail, and what God was doing with his own people through the lives of these men. In other words, the Israelites also embodied within themselves the essentials of the Covenant as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob experienced them. There is a fullness here of what God has planned for his people that can only be captured by taking hold of the entire Genesis account.

This is why God identifies himself to the Israelites as the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” in numerous places throughout the Pentateuch. (Exodus 2:24; 3:6, 15, 16; 4:5; 6:3, 8; 33:1; Leviticus 26:42; Numbers 32:11; Deuteronomy 1:8; 6:10; 9:5; 9:27; 29:13; 30:20; 34:4)² Late in Israel’s history (respecting the Northern Tribes, in fact), the Scripture says that the Covenant still protected the descendants of the Patriarchs even in their rebellion.

Now Hazael king of Syria oppressed Israel all the days of Jehoahaz. But the LORD was gracious to them and had compassion on them, and he turned toward them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them, nor has he cast them from his presence until now. (2 Kings 13:22-23)

Whenever the LORD made it a point to call himself by that name, he was telling Israel to go back to Genesis and

learn *there* what God had given the Family of Abraham. We all have a way of losing our focus in the affairs of life, and it’s extremely useful to use God’s special Name to help us remember what our relationship with him is all about.

And as if to emphasize that the Covenant given to the Patriarchs was *always* spiritual in nature (and the Patriarchs themselves knew that) Jesus taught that what was promised them will be given to the spiritual descendants of Abraham and withheld from his biological descendants who thought they had sole legal right to it.

I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven, while the sons of the Kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. (Matthew 8:11-12)

All the more reason for us to take the story of the Patriarchs seriously for our Christian faith.

Multiply like fish – The phrase “grow into a multitude” (ESV) or “increase greatly” (NIV) is based on a Hebrew word that only occurs here in the Bible (**רַאַת**). Scholars assume that the verb is related to the noun “fish,” (the Hebrew noun uses the same first two letters of the verb), and being the verbal form it would naturally have the idea of multiplying into a multitude like a swarm of fish.³

The phrase ends with “in the midst of the earth.” It was literally true that Ephraim and Manasseh tribes were in the middle of Canaan (*see map below*). What is more interesting, though, is the

² There are also six times in the New Testament where we read this name of God.

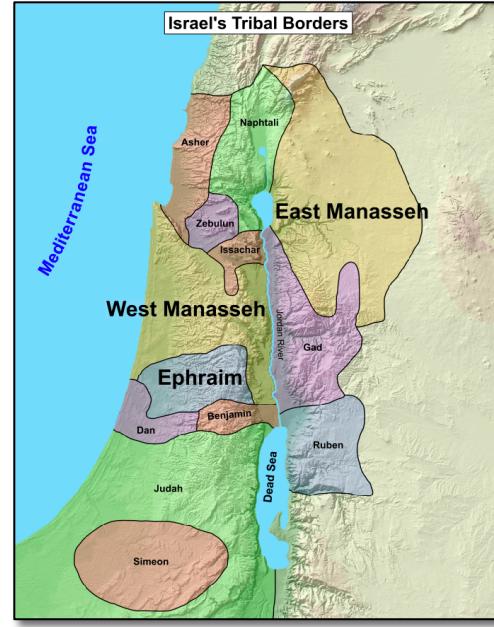
³ The ESV has a footnote offering the translation “let them be like fish for multitude.”

allusion to fish. The ministry of Christ was divided between work around his home area – what was historically known as “Israel,” or Ephraim, in the Old Testament days; and Jerusalem, which was in historic Judah. And when Jesus called his disciples to help and follow him, he used the same imagery.

And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” (Matthew 4:19)

It’s as if he were saying, “Let’s go catch some of those fish that God foretold to our Fathers.” So in fulfillment of the prophecy of Ezekiel 37 (verses 15-23 in particular), the Messiah came back to unite the Ephraimite with the Judaite and make one nation out of them, a “new man” who would once again worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The “fish” of Ephraim who had for so many years lived and multiplied in darkness would be caught in God’s net and brought back home.

Ephraim and Manasseh – When we look at the map of the territories that were given to the Twelve Tribes of Israel, we notice that Ephraim and Manasseh inherited the prime real estate in Canaan – the very heart of the Promised Land. Theirs was the best of the “land flowing with milk and honey” – mountains and plains, rivers and streams, the Sea on the west and the Jordan River on the east, farmland and mountain pastures (no more desert!).



Between Manasseh (who had land on both sides of the Jordan River) and Ephraim, they were in possession of 47% of the land of Canaan. Joseph indeed was honored as the firstborn son with his double portion!

Following is an analysis of the land areas of each of the Tribes.⁴

TRIBE	AREA (SQ.M.)	% OF TOTAL
Benjamin	195.7	1.6
Zebulun	264.6	2.1
Issachar	294.6	2.4
Dan	340.6	2.7
Asher	751.2	6.1
Ephraim	829.5	6.7
Reuben	872.6	7.0
Naphtali	914.8	7.4

⁴ The calculation of Tribal areas is based on Barry J. Beitzel’s map in his book *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), Map 31: “Tribal distribution of Palestine.” p.100. The analysis of the map, which calculated the area of each tribe, is courtesy of Jeremy Vogan (engineer, BSMET), and was generated using *Dassault Systèmes DraftSight* software.

Gad	1347.4	10.9
Simeon	1605.3	12.9
Manasseh	4993.4	40.2
Judah	5165.5	41.6

Back to Canaan – Jacob knew that Egypt was not the place that God had in mind to give his descendants, no matter what kind of success story his son Joseph had become. “God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your Fathers.” There is true faith here. Nobody knows the mind of God unless they have the Spirit of God revealing to them the spiritual realities of Heaven; nobody knows what a day may bring forth, let alone what will happen in years to come. But when Jacob says with assurance, “The LORD will take you back there” he is seeing something real that God opened up before his eyes. Jacob knew that Abraham’s Family would have their own land, and would build their own House for God to live in, and would live according to their own Law, and would have their own King, and would not be encumbered with having to live in and around a foreign culture. The people of God *cannot* live in a foreign culture and prosper.

One last instruction revealed his desire to pinpoint exactly where he wanted his son Joseph to claim his inheritance in Canaan. Evidently there was a battle in which Jacob had won a particular mountain from the Amorites (verse 22). He wanted Joseph to claim that mountain. It happened to be Shechem – which was dead center in the middle of the Ephraim/Manasseh Tribal inheritance, which itself was in the heart of Canaan. Nothing but the best for his son Joseph and his heirs!

The Point – With Jacob’s acknowledgement of his son Joseph’s

preeminence in the Family – in fact, as the son with the rights of the Firstborn as God sees it, we now have the completion of the story of the Patriarchs. What God did with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and now with Joseph – is the foundation of the Covenant that God has made with fallen man. All the elements are here to fully address man’s deep problems of sin and death and bring the Son home to the Father; in fact, man’s problems can’t be solved in any other way. In other words, here is the Gospel of Christ.

The story shows us very clearly that only the descendants of Abraham have any hope of receiving good things from God. Other gods promise “good” things to their worshipers, but Abraham’s God brings man into full fellowship with him – the relationship of a son to his Father – and lifts him up out of this world into a new spiritual world with a new life.

By transferring the deed of the Covenant over to his son Joseph (and to the rest of the sons in the next chapter) Jacob is finishing the last step of the first stage of the Abrahamic Covenant – which is the contract that describes what God wants to give his children. The second stage will be Israel’s birth as a Nation and taking her into the Promised Land to receive God’s blessings.

The important thing to understand is that we are all, if we are in Christ, heirs of the Covenant of Abraham. What we have studied in these chapters concerns us all. When Jacob blessed Joseph, he was blessing all of us who claim to be Abraham’s spiritual descendants. “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” (Galatians 3:29) Imagine yourself standing there with Joseph listening to the Heir of God’s blessing over you – that’s exactly what’s going

on here. It would behoove us to study, and be thoroughly acquainted with, the inheritance passed down to us by our spiritual forefathers. And since we now know who the Designated Heir of the Covenant is, we can appreciate Paul's statement all the more:

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. (Ephesians 1:3)

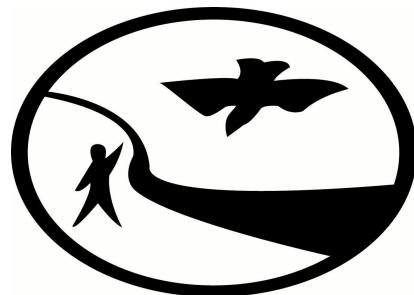
The Father – the Blessing – the Heir – all are described fully in the book of Genesis.

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