

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

DR CHARLES VOGAN

JACOB BLESSES HIS SONS (*GENESIS 49*)

Now that the entire family was back together, the time came for Jacob to bless his sons.

In order to get the true picture of what is going on in this chapter, we have to set down some rules first for its interpretation. Most commentaries struggle to make sense of these blessings because they're not seeing them in light of the Covenant. The Covenant with Abraham is the backbone of the entire book; everything relates directly to that. We've already seen that moralisms don't do the book justice. And to focus on each son in this chapter and how he might have illustrated Jacob's blessing over him also sends us off in the wrong direction. The structure of the Covenant has been built up, step by step, in each Patriarch's life until this moment when the final piece is laid down for the foundation of the *nation of Israel*.

Here then are the interpretive rules:

First, the blessing wasn't necessarily targeting a son's personality or characteristics. Here is where students become bogged down over the blessings. Dan, for example, was to bring judgment and justice for his people. But we know nothing about Dan himself. His descendants, however, certainly weren't the only Israelites in the Old Testament known for justice: see, for example, Solomon's reputation for being an amazingly perceptive judge; and David knew his Kingdom rested solely on righteousness and justice. Yet both David and Solomon were from the tribe of Judah. So the blessing wasn't describing only a particular son, but rather the overall principle that the son's blessing would contribute to the welfare of the entire nation. Jacob was describing the building blocks of the future Nation of Israel as a whole.

Second, in the end, all the tribes would benefit from the characteristic that Jacob used to describe each particular tribe. As the Nation came together, the Blessings would be shared among them for the benefit of all. Each blessing contributed to the welfare of the whole.

Third, remember that the blessings were an outgrowth of the Covenant. We've seen a number of crucial aspects of the Covenant in the lives of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. They include the Family inheritance, the nature of the heirs, the means of appropriating the Promises, and the passionate struggle to receive those Promises. They also describe the kind of son that God was creating to bless with his inheritance. At this point, however, *the Promised Son* comes together in the Twelve Tribes and we have to start talking about the Family, the Nation – and in our day, the Church. The Body is made up of different parts, and the Covenant dictates what that Body is and how it will operate as a whole.

Fourth, we need to see the big picture here. This is not the time to slow down and focus on the details of individual sons! We will get nowhere doing that. And that's why students struggle so hard to understand it, because they are determined to somehow see, for example, why the scepter and the ruler's staff applies directly to the man Judah – and yet there is nothing in the Bible to encourage that connection. The blessings weren't local and immediate; Judah and all the other brothers were long dead before the Nation moved into the Promised Land. So the blessings were given to the Twelve Tribes. And yet even that wasn't big enough: the promise about Judah's staff wasn't fulfilled until the time of David (1050 BC), and even then the Kingdom rose and fell over the centuries after that among David's descendants. The final fulfillment came only with the Christ, the Son of God, the descendant

of Judah, assuming the throne over all Creation. Jacob was laying the foundation for millennia.

Fifth, all the blessings would be beneficial. There were a few that appear on the surface to be negative in their thrust – as if Jacob were cursing them instead of blessing them. But we will see that this wasn't so; what appears negative is actually a description of a necessary reality among the people of God.

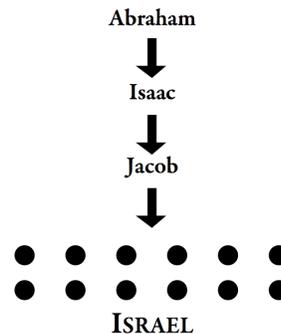
Here is a theological summary of what's going on in this chapter:

_____ **This is the Family that the Covenant creates** _____

Why Jacob? – At this point in the story we may wonder why Joseph wasn't the one distributing the blessings. After all, he was God's Designated Heir, and by God's design he had the rule over the entire Family, including his father Jacob, while they were in Egypt. His dreams had also revealed his father and mother bowing down to his authority.

There are two reasons. *First*, Joseph represented one aspect of the Covenant structure, just as each of his forefathers did. He played his role – the ruler of the Family – and revealed a vital reality that characterizes the Covenant Family all through their ensuing history.

Second, now we have to return to the Abraham-Isaac-Jacob Patriarchal line and see how God wrapped up the Covenant system in preparation for the next step. Each man illustrated an aspect of the Covenant, but now it was time to put the whole thing together and form not just a line of individual men but a foundation, a single system, that encapsulated the Covenant principles.



This act of blessing was a privilege given to Jacob (not to Joseph) as the final major link in the Patriarchal line. In fact the nation that he now had in his twelve sons was going to be named after him – *Israel* – in commemoration of the fact that he struggled and received the full inheritance of the Firstborn son. As soon as the LORD came to rescue the descendants of Abraham from Egypt's oppression, he identified them as **Israel**, "my Firstborn son." (Exodus 4:22)

A Blessing to each son – Jacob followed the birth ages in his distribution of blessings. Each son received a blessing that was "suitable to him." For some of them we can understand a little bit of why it was "suitable" because of some family history that Jacob included; and for some of them we have no idea why it was "suitable." The one thing we do know, however, was that this was the Covenant that he was distributing to them, which means that the suitability would extend far beyond their individual

lifespans and stretch out into the future history of Israel. There as well, the blessing would be “suitable” to the circumstances. In fact it would be good for the entire nation; each Tribe’s blessing would form the foundation of God’s special people both in Israel and in the Church.

We can therefore successfully unpack the meaning of this story by matching up the core idea of the blessing with the ensuing reality in the life of Israel.

- **Reuben** – Since he was the natural firstborn son of Jacob, he was in line to inherit his father’s Patriarchal rights. But because of his sin of sleeping with his father’s concubine, he lost priority in the Family. On the surface this “blessing” looks bad; but when you think about it, it’s a mercy reflecting the situation we are *all* in when it comes to our God. Reuben *was* still in the Family and given a portion of the Promised Land *in spite of his sin*. As sinners before God we don’t deserve anything but exclusion and punishment. But since he is a merciful God, the LORD treats us not as criminals but as sons to whom he shows grace and mercy. “For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.” (Romans 5:15) We’re in, but we don’t deserve it.
- **Simeon-Levi** – Another “blessing” that on the surface appears to be negative. The two brothers put Jacob and the Family in a difficult situation with the locals when they slaughtered the men of Shechem to avenge their sister Dinah. And the

Levites would again show their propensity to deal with the wicked by violence later in Moses’ day (Exodus 32, particularly verses 26-29). And this is what the Law is designed to do: punish the evildoer. It’s a necessary element in the community of God’s people. The Law sets forth what righteousness and evil is, and it curses the wicked. Paul himself praised the necessity of the Law, but he warned us against trying to go to the Law to justify ourselves – we will only experience its wrath and its curse if we try. It was, remember, a requirement of the Law that crucified Jesus – which resulted in our salvation. Jacob’s blessing reflected our reluctance to approach the work of the Levites, necessary though it be, because of its sharp edge. And notice that he relegates Levi (Simeon too, but somehow that tribe ended up with some territory in Canaan) to being dispersed in the Promised Land with no land of their own, which is exactly what happened to the Levites according to the specifications of the Law. The Levites had no land of their own; their inheritance was the Temple of the LORD. A true “blessing in disguise.”

- **Judah** – His blessing may reflect the way he dealt with the crisis involving Benjamin in Joseph’s court. Be that as it may, here is a clear prophecy that there must be a king in the future to pull the Nation together, and the king would come from Judah’s line. God’s people would be a *Kingdom*, defined by particular characteristics that David would later lay down as eternal principles of the Kingdom of God.

In the Law of Moses we learn the rules for the people of God as they live under his authority. In David we learn that there must be a man to act as the executor and he will *make* the people come together as a Kingdom according to the Law; otherwise they wouldn't do it on their own (see Judges for numerous examples of this). Here is that foundation stone for the future King.

- **Zebulun** – This son's blessing involved being an interface with the world. As we follow Israel's history after their entry into Canaan, we can easily see on the map that the tribe of Zebulun was located at a major crossroads in the Middle East – between Greece, Babylon and Assyria, and Egypt. Any and all travelers had to go through Israel on their journeys. That meant that Israel had two responsibilities: to keep itself uncorrupted by the world around it, and to be a witness to the nations. The first was crucial to its spiritual survival, and the second crucial to the Mission of God as he sends forth his Word to the world.
- **Issachar** – This son's blessing was that he would *work*. But, as Solomon proposed, "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil." (Ecclesiastes 2:24) Israel would prosper not by sitting back in indolence and waiting for God to do everything for them, but by putting their shoulder to the wheel and being "profitable servants", doing what God expected of them. The grace of God brought them into the Promised Land and ensured the Covenant blessings; but their obedience made their faith in

God mean something: "Faith without works is dead." (James 2:17) "Work to show yourself approved." (2 Timothy 2:15) "Make your calling and election sure." (2 Peter 1:10)

- **Dan** – The name "Dan" means "judge", and it reflects one of the things that God absolutely requires among his people: justice. We moderns require our "freedom" and "rights"; Israel knew nothing of that in God's Kingdom. But justice – that the wicked would get what they deserve, and the righteous what they deserve – that was top priority on God's list. The Prophets were always telling Israel to insure justice in the land. So much so that the description of how justice would be brought about is fascinating: to catch a man running away, how better to bring him down than to bite the horse's heels? The system of justice in the land was to be designed so that there would be no escape for the guilty.
- **Gad** – In this world there will be trouble, and in this son's blessing we see the solution to our troubles: learn war. There will always be enemies attacking us and trying to tear down God's Kingdom. Israel's history was full of trouble, and only men like David knew how to summarily solve those problems. Unfortunately the Church is filled with leaders who want to "love" their enemies and win them over by reconciliation; but Jesus and Paul never endorsed this method of dealing with wolves among the flock. Once we identify who the enemy really is (many "troublemakers" are really ignorant, self-willed sheep), then it's time to

drive the wolves away – if you love the sheep. David taught us this: “Blessed be the LORD, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle.” (Psalms 144:1)

- **Asher** – For this blessing we need only look to the description of the Promised Land: “Look down from your holy habitation, from Heaven, and bless your people Israel and the ground that you have given us, as you swore to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Deuteronomy 26:15) Their lives would be rich and prosperous, their food from the King’s table. They needn’t settle for crusts of dry bread and muddy water; the richness of the Word of God, watered by the Spirit, would make them grow like “a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.” (Psalm 1:3)
- **Naphthali** – His blessing was depicted as a doe bearing beautiful fawns. The future of the Nation depended on bearing and raising new generations, lovingly nurtured and instructed in the ways of God. We all know what raising children is like: Mother first dominates the process as she gently but firmly shapes the lives of the children, nurturing and caring for helpless babes. Israel had to take into consideration the training of the next generation: “You shall teach them [*the commands of God*] diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” (Deuteronomy 6:7) Much of Proverbs and Ephesians 4

also reflect this care in raising the next generation of God’s people. Bearing the character of the Son of God himself, we will grow in God’s care through the gifts of the Spirit working together in the Church to become the Bride of Christ, beautifully adorned with the fruits of the Spirit.

- **Joseph** – The Designated Heir has special mention here. Joseph was key to the success of the Covenant in spite of the fact that his beginning years looked as though he had no future in store for him. Jacob gratefully acknowledged his son’s deliverance and rise to power, because without that Jacob wouldn’t even have been here to bless the rest of his sons. Therefore the blessings bestowed on Joseph were full and complete; the richness of the Covenant and all of its Promises rested on this son’s head. The Designated Heir received all blessings and became a fount for the rest of the Family. We will see this again and again down through Israel’s history and as well as in the life of the Church as we depend on Jesus Christ, the Designated Heir.
- **Benjamin** – This blessing seems strange because it looks as if it’s dark and negative, and yet there hadn’t been anything in the story line that would lead us to believe that Benjamin had serious problems or that his father had problems with him. In fact Joseph honored Benjamin continually with abundant blessings over and above what his brothers received. So if we look at it in a positive light, Jacob was saying that Benjamin would be passionate about going after his share (as Jacob himself had proved

to be) – like a hungry wolf that seizes and eats his prey all day long, from morning to night.¹ “Zeal of your house consumes me” may reflect the meaning here. If God’s people approach their religion as if it’s just a cold ritual with little meaning in their lives, they will end up “worshiping” God in his Temple and then going out to play with the gods of the pagans living around them. A Laodicean type of religion. But the Apostle Paul (a Benjamite) showed the kind of passion that God requires of his people: “But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:13-14) He had a flaming passion for the Covenant Promises.

As you can see, the blessings weren’t so much aimed at the individual men as they were to the entire Nation of Israel as it was formed and established in the Promised Land. Each of these blessings reflected what life would be like in the Nation under God.

Bury me with my forefathers – The story ended with Jacob telling his sons to bury him in the cave in the field of Machpelah in Canaan, purchased by Abraham and containing the graves of Abraham and Isaac along with their wives.

¹ It strikes me that the brothers all had a good laugh when their father pronounced this over Benjamin – as if he put his finger on a unique characteristic of his youngest son by likening him to a wolf. Joseph certainly gave him enough to feed on! (Genesis 43:34)

This is extremely significant, and it shows that Jacob had a profound understanding of the importance of the Abrahamic Covenant. God dealt with the three Patriarchs as one: each reflected an aspect of the Covenant and, put together, their stories became one story, one system, one foundation for the Nation of Israel. Jacob knew that his was the last step in a process that stretched from the time of Abraham’s calling down to his own death, a period of 300 years. *This* is the reason for God’s unique name used many times in Scripture:

***The God of Abraham,
Isaac and Jacob***

From now on God would deal with his people according to the Covenant that he constructed through the lives of the Patriarchs. And since Jacob saw the last steps in the process, God’s people would be called by his name: **Israel**. In fact, the name Jacob – as the Nation Israel’s forefather, through whom the blessings of the Covenant were given to them all – shows up more times in the Old Testament than the names of the other two Patriarchs combined. He was the theological ending point of the historical process of the construction of the Covenant.

The Point – In previous stories we learned individual concepts of the Covenant as God introduced them through the three Patriarchs. But here in this chapter we see God putting together a Covenant Nation, characterized by the blessings that Jacob pronounced over his sons. To put it another way, this is the kind of Nation that the Covenant God created. Or to put it in our own context, this is the kind of Church that our Father in Heaven is creating among us. Each of

the blessings of Jacob describes some essential aspect of the life of the Church.

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