

## Messianic expectations in Genesis (part 2): the seed of Abraham

### Setting the scene

We focused our attention on Genesis 3:15 and God's statement to the serpent that the woman's offspring would "strike his head."

We also observed that scholarly discussions of Genesis 3:15 have highlighted possible ambiguity regarding the identity of the woman's offspring.

How might a holistic reading of Genesis shape our approach towards God's pronouncement about the serpent?

### Genesis as genealogy

The Greek term *genesis* does not mean "beginnings."

This Greek term is used throughout the LXX version of Genesis to translate the Hebrew word "*tôledôt*" (see Gen. 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1, 32; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2).

A better translation of *genesis* is "genealogy."

Appreciating Genesis as a genealogy is important for understanding the book's purpose.

### The patriline in Genesis

The patriline of Cain offers no prospect of producing an offspring who will strike the serpent.

Seth is described as "another offspring in place of Abel" (Gen. 4:25), a remark that recalls the reference to the woman's offspring in Genesis 3:15.

The linear genealogy of Genesis 5 consistently names one person in each generation and eventually leads to Noah (5:30-32),

Genesis 6:1-8 offers a panoramic view of humanity.

The linear genealogy in chapter 5 and the narrative in 6:1-8 come to similar endings by highlighting Noah's importance.

The *tôledôt* section of Noah runs from 6:9 to 9:28.

The final episode in the Noah *tôledôt* section establishes that Shem enjoys the status of firstborn among Noah's sons.

Genesis 10 introduces another *tôledôt* section that is about the descendants of Shem, Ham and Japheth.

- Special mention is made of Nimrod, the grandson of Ham, who is credited with establishing a kingdom centred on Babylon, or Babel, to use its Hebrew name (Genesis 10:8-10).

- As a warrior, who establishes a kingdom centred on a godless city, Nimrod's behaviour runs counter to God's plan for humanity.

Genesis 11 introduces another linear genealogy that continues the patriline of Eve's offspring.

The *tôledôt* of Shem ends by mentioning Terah's three sons, Abram, Nahor and Haran (Gen. 11:26).

The story of Abraham's life, which is recorded in Genesis 11:27-25:11, is largely dominated by the issue of his wife's inability to have children.

With Isaac established as Abraham's heir, Genesis 24 records how Rebekah becomes Isaac's wife.

The *tôledôt* section of Isaac runs from 25:19 to 35:29.

Which of the twin boys born to Rebekah will succeed Isaac?

"Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples from within you will be separated;  
one people will be stronger than the other,  
and the older will serve the younger." (Genesis 25:23 NIV)

The twins are far from identical and hostility between them eventually results in Esau threatening to kill Jacob (Genesis 27:41).

"Esau despised his birthright" (Genesis 25:34 NIV).

Jacob inherits the promises:

And God said to him, "I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will be among your descendants. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you." (Genesis 35:11-12 NIV)

The *tôledôt* section of Isaac connects birthright (*bekorah*) and blessing (*berakah*).<sup>1</sup>

There are two *tôledôt* headings recorded in chapters 36, both focusing on Esau's descendants.

- Verses 1-8 record details about Esau's family in the land of Canaan.
- Verses 9-43 shift location to the land of Seir.

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<sup>1</sup> See M. A. Fishbane, "Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle (Gen 25:19-35:22)," *JJS* 26 (1975)

## Joseph and Judah

Joseph's special standing within Jacob's family is recognised when he brings his two sons to Jacob for them to receive the patriarchal blessing of the firstborn.

As the author of Chronicles observes, Reuben's "rights as firstborn were given to the sons of Joseph" (1 Chron. 5:1). He then adds, "though Judah was the strongest of his brothers and a ruler came from him, the rights of the firstborn belonged to Joseph" (1 Chronicles 5:2 NIV).

Later Jewish tradition speaks of a Messiah who is a descendant of Joseph and Ephraim.<sup>2</sup>

The birth of twin boys to Tamar resolves the lack of a firstborn heir for Judah (Gen. 38:27-30).

Readers attuned to how Genesis traces the offspring of the woman will quickly realise that the birth of Perez is significant.

Readers informed by the larger biblical story will also know that Perez is the ancestor of King David, a fact highlighted in the genealogy at the end of the book of Ruth (Ruth 4:18-22).

The blessings pronounced by Jacob in chapters 48 and 49 undoubtedly give pre-eminence to Joseph, confirming his firstborn status and establishing Ephraim as the one through whom the patriline will continue.

Jacob's blessing of Judah in 49:8-12 associates royalty with one of his descendants.

"Until Shiloh comes" in verse 10 possibly alludes to the time of Samuel when the ark of the covenant is moved from Shiloh to Jerusalem, an event that coincides with the appointment of David as king over Israel.

This development is mentioned by the author of Psalm 78 when he speaks of God rejecting the tent of Joseph (Psalm 78:67) and choosing David to be the one who shepherds the nation (Psalm 78:68-72).<sup>3</sup>

- *Genesis was composed to highlight a unique patriline that is associated with the woman's offspring in Genesis 3:15.*
- *Genesis introduces readers to the importance of this patriline, but the narrative anticipates further developments in the future.*

## The blessing of the nations

God says to Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the ground will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3 *my translation*).

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<sup>2</sup> See D. C. Mitchell, *Messiah ben Joseph* (Newton Mearns: Campbell Publications, 2016), 77-94.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this, see T. D. Alexander, "The Regal Dimension of the תלדות־יעקב: Recovering the Literary Context of Genesis 37-50," in *Reading the Law: Studies in Honour of Gordon J. Wenham*, eds. J. G. McConville and K. Möller, LHB/OTS 461 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2007), 196-212; P. Twiss, "A Tale of Two Brothers: The Messiah in Genesis 49," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 33 (2022) 255-67.

“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. (Genesis 17:4-5 NIV)

There are two common misunderstandings about Genesis 17.

Firstly, it is often claimed that the covenant of chapter 17 is substantially the same as the covenant mentioned in chapter 15, which is about the creation of Israel as a nation.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, it is often assumed that the covenant in chapter 17 is primarily about ethnic Israel.

“The fact that the covenant is extended through a ‘seed’ and the inescapable reality that circumcision is conducted on the very instrument of procreation suggests that circumcision is bound up with the recollection of God’s promise to Abraham of a ‘seed’, and more particularly his promise to bless the world through Abraham’s ‘seed’.”<sup>5</sup>

The covenant of Genesis 17 rests on a metaphorical understanding of Abraham’s fatherhood.

As Chris Wright notes, the noun אב “father” is sometimes “used of a variety of social roles that carried authority or exercised a protective or caring function. It could be used of a prophet (2 Kgs 6:21), priest (Judg 18:19), king (1 Sam 24:11), or governor (Isa 22:20-21).”<sup>6</sup>

Jason DeRouchie writes, “It seems plausible, then, to understand Abraham’s fatherhood over the nations primarily as a royal designation by which he and his wife Sarah, the ‘princess’ (17:15), are regarded as the founders of a new dynasty that will climax in a specific, royal descendant who will rule Israelites (both native-born and alien residents) and those from vassal nations.”<sup>7</sup>

Isaac’s blessing of Jacob contains the remarkable statement that he will rule over nations:

May nations serve you  
and peoples bow down to you.

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., P. J. Gentry and S. J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 247-80; A. C. Ho, “A Paragon of Faith?: Doubting Abraham,” *Themelios* 42 (2017) 459-60). For a careful comparison of the covenant in chapters 15 and 17, highlighting their many differences, see P. R. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel and the Nations: The Patriarchal Promise and Its Covenantal Development in Genesis* (JSOTSup 315; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> K. Deenick, *Righteous by Promise: A Biblical Theology of Circumcision* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 45; London: Apollos, 2018), 49.

<sup>6</sup> C. J. H. Wright, “אב (‘ab),” *NIDOTTE* 1, 221. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel and the Nations*, 159.

<sup>7</sup> J. S. DeRouchie, “Counting Stars with Abraham and the Prophets: New Covenant Ecclesiology in OT Perspective,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58 (2015) 459.

Be lord over your brothers,  
and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. (Genesis 27:29 NIV)

God promises Jacob that kings will descend from him (Gen. 35:11).

Joseph tells his brothers that God “made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt” (Genesis 45:8).

Genesis 17 anticipates a future monarchy that is firmly linked to the patriline.

The patriline becomes a source of blessing to others.

Laban, Jacob’s father-in-law, says to him, “I have learned by divination that the LORD has blessed me because of you” (Gen. 30:27).

### **Conclusion**

The patriline in Genesis guides us towards the one who will strike the head of the serpent.

There is the expectation, firstly, that the offspring of the woman will be a king, and, secondly, that through him all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

This provides the basis for a messianic reading of Genesis, even though the language of “anointing” is not used.

Acts 2 concludes with a clear reference to the patriarchal promises being fulfilled in Jesus Christ:

<sup>25</sup> And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’ <sup>26</sup> When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.” (Acts 3:25-26 NIV)

Paul’s discussion in Galatians 3 highlights how the promises were given to Abraham and to his singular offspring, whom Paul identifies as Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16).

Underlying these New Testament passages is the assumption that God’s blessing of the nations comes through Jesus Christ, the one who fulfils the promises revealed in the book of Genesis.

Through an act of treachery, Adam and Eve forfeit their status as God’s vicegerents and the serpent becomes the ruler of this world.

God’s redemptive plan will require a new vicegerent, a truly human king, who will regain control of the earth and bring the nations under his authority.

What God promises in Genesis comes to fulfilment in Jesus Christ.