

## **Joseph, Judah and Jesus: Revisiting Genesis 37-50**

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### **Introduction**

It is the position of this paper that the last thirteen chapters of Genesis highlight not only Joseph, but also Judah—both of whose lives are types of Christ, albeit in different ways. Not only are the noble attributes of Joseph’s life reflected in Jesus, but Jesus is also the “Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Rev 5:4).” Contra some claims of careless “redacting,” the Judah narratives are rightly and evocatively found within the Joseph cycle. Familiarity with the Genesis narratives creates the possibility of missing or overlooking the theology embedded in the shape, structure, and content of them.<sup>1</sup> Thereby continuing study is valuable.

Twice on Resurrection Sunday, Jesus spoke of a foundational hermeneutical principle for interpreting canonic texts. First on the road to Emmaus, with two disciples: “beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:25-27). Then back in Jerusalem: “He said to His disciples: ‘These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.’” The narrator pointedly continued: “He

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, it might even be argued that such literary features are part of the nature of divine inspiration. The aesthetic aspects of biblical narratives rightfully deserve more attention. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011) and John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995).

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opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (Luke 24:44-45).

Jesus obviously was referring to the Old Testament, the first testament of which 40% is narrative writing. This paper will explore a major Genesis narrative cycle in light of the risen Christ’s directive. Multiple scholars and commentators have noted that the final thirteen of the fifty Genesis chapters highlight Joseph’s life with details that prefigure the Messiah. Dozens of parallels have been recognized.<sup>2</sup>

Interspersed within what is called the “Joseph cycle” are narratives of Joseph’s half-brother Judah. Many critics have decided that these chapters are misplaced or carelessly redacted into the Joseph narratives.<sup>3</sup> Yet Jesus’ twice-repeated remarks on Resurrection Sunday suggest that modern critiques of supposedly careless, unschooled Genesis redactors is flawed.

“Beginning at Moses,” as Jesus suggests, the fifty Genesis chapters survey a vast amount of time, some 2,500 years. This “narrative time” slows down considerably with the last thirteen chapters focusing on Joseph—and Judah. This narrative “slow down” is in itself a significant marker in Hebrew narrative studies, indicating the narrator’s focused attention.

Others who criticize any “reading of Jesus back into the Old Testament” are also mistaken if Jesus’ directives are taken seriously—for He insists that the Old Testament is about Him. The authorship of the Pentateuch has long been argued. This paper assumes Mosaic authorship, with the Pentateuch being a primary part of Scripture’s system of truth, allowing Messianism as a possible motif.

The first divine promise after sin in Genesis 3:15, hints of further revelation about the Promised Seed as history continues. Following this, a key passage setting direction for the subsequent patriarchal record is the

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<sup>2</sup> A number of these will be highlighted below.

<sup>3</sup> For over a century critical studies have denigrated the historical integrity and literary manifestation of Old Testament narratives, including what I am calling the Joseph-Judah “cycle.” See, for example, Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, revised edition (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1972); Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982); James McKeown, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

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divine announcement to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3. Everything that follows will be related to this major promise in some way:

- Go to a land I will show you;
- I will make of you a great nation (v. 2a);
- I will bless you (v. 2b);
- I will make your name great (v. 2c);
- You will be a blessing (v. 2d);
- I will bless those who bless you (v. 3a);
- I will curse those who curse you (v. 3b);
- All the families of the earth will be blessed through you (v. 3c).

Later, the patriarch Jacob and his clan are in Egypt and have been given the best land there—but God’s promise of land to Abraham’s seed was not fulfilled. Although Jacob’s offspring were increasing,<sup>4</sup> they were not in the promised land. Thereby, Jacob’s poetic prophetic blessings on his sons at the end of his life are very significant: as the book of Genesis comes to its close, these blessings foretell the future of the Abrahamic covenant.

Jacob’s introductory words for these blessings include the phrase “the end of days” (Gen 49:1; see also Num 24:14; Deut 31:29)—a phrase pointing to the future—and “can portray the Messianic future.”<sup>5</sup> With this in mind, one can more fully understand Jacob’s major poetic segment in Genesis, for it reveals what is ahead for the covenant people “in the end of days.” This suggests that Jacob’s poetic discourse is “eschatological,” as John Sailhamer notes: “The author [of the Pentateuch] shows throughout his work an intense interest in past events. His repeated and strategic return to the notion of ‘the last days’ . . . reveals that his interest is in the future as

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<sup>4</sup>“But the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them” (Exod 1:7).

<sup>5</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 31.

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well.”<sup>6</sup>

Sailhamer also helpfully discusses how narrative and poetry linkages illumine both the final shape and understanding of Genesis: “The technique of using a poetic speech and a short epilogue to conclude a narrative is well known in biblical literature and occurs frequently within recognizable segments of the Pentateuch itself.”<sup>7</sup> With such literary techniques, the Pentateuch thereby links the past to the future: “That which happened to God’s people in the past portends of future events.”<sup>8</sup> Past events work as pointers to future events, while future events are written to remind the reader of the past.<sup>9</sup>

In Genesis 38, near the end of his life, Jacob adopted Manasseh and Ephraim, giving them equal shares in the family line as his legitimate seed. B. J. van der Merwe notes that this “adoption of Joseph’s two sons by Jacob can be seen as equivalent to giving Joseph the double portion of the family inheritance the first-born was entitled to (see Deut 21:15-17 and 1 Chr 5:1).”<sup>10</sup>

In Genesis 49, Jacob pronounces final blessings on all his sons,<sup>11</sup> including prophecies of what will happen to them and their descendants in

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<sup>6</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, Library of Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 37.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 37-44.

<sup>10</sup> B. J. van der Merwe, “Joseph as Successor of Jacob,” in *Studia Biblical Et Semitica*, ed. Theodoro Christiano Vriezen (Wageningen, Nederland: H. Veenman En Zonen N.V., 1966), 221-232.

<sup>11</sup> It is notable that Jacob does not refer to the birthright in the oracles, merely alluding to it in the account of how Ephraim was preferred above Manasseh (48:5, 13-20). In 1 Chronicles 5:1 it is stated that the birthright was given to Joseph’s sons. Verse 2 explicitly stating that Joseph received the birthright:

“Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel—he was indeed the firstborn, but because he defiled his father’s bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, the son of Israel, so that the genealogy is not listed according to the birthright; yet Judah prevailed over his brothers, and from him came a ruler, although the birthright was Joseph’s.”

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days to come. These blessings especially spotlight Judah and Joseph for they are the recipients of the longest blessings. Jacob's blessings on his other sons are shorter.

Judah can be seen as Jacob's successor and the true heir with Genesis 49:8-12 outlining Judah's leadership and kingship, including Shiloh, Messiah, who will be one of his descendants:

Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise;  
Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;  
Your father's children shall bow down before you.  
Judah is a lion's whelp;  
From the prey, my son, you have gone up.  
He bows down, he lies down as a lion;  
And as a lion, who shall rouse him?  
The scepter shall not depart from Judah,  
Nor a lawgiver from between his feet,  
Until Shiloh comes;  
And to Him shall be the obedience of the people.  
Binding his donkey to the vine,  
And his donkey's colt to the choice vine,  
He washed his garments in wine,  
And his clothes in the blood of grapes.  
His eyes are darker than wine  
And his teeth whiter than milk (Gen 49:8-12).

Joseph's blessing is equally lengthy with Joseph portrayed as a ruler among his brothers, also including hints of eschatological messianic significance.

Joseph is a fruitful bough,  
A fruitful bough by a well;  
His branches run over the wall.  
The archers have bitterly grieved him,  
Shot at him and hated him.  
But his bow remained in strength,  
And the arms of his hands were made strong  
By the hands of the Mighty God of Jacob

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(From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel),  
By the God of your father who will help you,  
And by the Almighty who will bless you  
With blessings of heaven above,  
Blessings of the deep that lies beneath,  
Blessings of the breasts and of the womb.  
The blessings of your father  
Have excelled the blessings of my ancestors,  
Up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills.  
They shall be on the head of Joseph,  
And on the crown of the head of him who was separate from  
his brothers (Gen 49:22-26).

The lives of both Joseph and Judah are obviously linked throughout the final chapters of the book of Genesis, in what could be called the “Joseph/Judah cycle.” Theologically, these chapters continue to broadly disclose divine oversight in the lives of the Genesis patriarchs (i.e., 17:7; 21:22; 24:40; 26:3-4, 24, 28; 28:15; 31:3; 48:21), plus pointing to future salvation—especially through the lives of Joseph and Judah. First, a consideration of Joseph.

**Joseph**

Introduced in Genesis 37 as one of Jacob’s twelve sons, Joseph’s life is presented as a leading patriarchal figure as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been. In fact, Joseph occupies more space in Genesis than any patriarch. Joseph’s two sons also received equal status with Jacob’s other sons as progenitors of the twelve Israelite tribes, as noted above. Moreover, because of Joseph’s leadership in Egypt, the promised divine blessings to the nations through Abraham’s seed (Gen 12:1-2; 22:18) begin to be fulfilled. There are also numerous narrative details about Joseph’s life which correspond with the New Testament narratives of Jesus.

Joseph:

- is favored by his father;
- is given a vision of the sons of Israel worshipping him;
- his brothers conspire to kill him as he comes to serve and save them;

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- is unsuccessfully interceded by Reuben, as Pilate later does for Jesus;
- is eventually thrown into a pit, sold for 30 pieces of silver through the mediation of Judah (whose name, in Greek form, would be Judas);
- his coat is dipped in blood, the blood of a goat (the animal linked with atonement in Leviticus), and presented to Jacob, Joseph's father;
- goes to a "far country" and determines to be faithful to God—just as Jesus went to a "far country" and was faithful to His Father;
- finds safety in Egypt (as did baby Jesus);<sup>12</sup>
- prospers in all that he does because God is with him; throughout his ordeal in exile as the narrative states, "the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love (39:21, ESV);
- fights strong temptation and wins;
- is falsely accused of wrong-doing and unjustly punished, remaining faithful despite terrible suffering;
- is positioned between two criminals in Genesis 40: one a baker—a maker of bread; the other a cupbearer—a server of wine;
- prophesies the salvation of one and the death of the other—just as Jesus will promise salvation to one of the criminals on the cross
- is finally vindicated in Genesis 41, emerging from prison with a new face and new clothes (41:14)—as does Jesus;
- is hailed as good news for the nation: Pharaoh says, "Can we find a man like this, in whom is the spirit of God?" (41:37); it is the same with Jesus;
- is exalted to the right hand of the highest authority (like Jesus), with emissaries sent before him, crying out to all who hear, "Bow the knee!" (41:43).

The world came hungry to Joseph and found that he was the only one who can provide food that satisfies. The same is found in Jesus, the Bread of Life, in a far greater and more lasting way—with the result of blessing for

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<sup>12</sup>As Sarna observed, Joseph's residence in Egypt signals the beginning fulfillment of the prophecy made to Abraham: "Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own" (15:13).

a starving world—in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham.

Joseph:

- feeds the nations, and then, after contacted by his brothers seeking food in the major famine, he is reconciled with them—perhaps behind Paul’s argument that the salvation of the Gentiles will, after a time, lead to the salvation of Israel (Rom 9-11);
- later looks back and says to his brothers who persecuted him: “You meant this for evil, but God meant it for good, that many should be saved.” (50:20) As Jesus looks back across human history, including His betrayal and crucifixion, He will also display the same mercy: “He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, For He shall bear their iniquities.” (Isa 53:11);
- fulfills Jacob’s final blessing: “The archers attacked him, shot at him, and were hostile toward him” (Gen 49:23). The Hebrew word used here for “attacked” (*satam*, “try to do him in”), is found only six times in the OT, and three of them involve Jacob in some way (Gen 27:4; 49:23; 50:15).<sup>13</sup> The verb appears to refer to both feelings of animosity and active hate. Keil and Delitzsch note that this verse uses the prophetic perfect (the perfect consecutive), describing the future as already come.<sup>14</sup> If so, the suffering aspects not refer to Joseph’s past but to some future events, connecting with Jacob’s earlier reference “in the last days” (Gen 49:1). Thereby aspects in Jacob’s oracle would draw attention to past events and at the same time foreshadow/anticipate later events—a future antitypical Joseph.
- was a blessing to his father, his brothers who hated him, and his entire tribe—also Egypt and all the famine-ravaged countries. Gordon Wenham points out that “blessing” is one of the key words of Genesis,

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<sup>13</sup> The other three are in Job 16:9; 30:21; Ps 55:4.

<sup>14</sup> C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, trans. James Martin, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, Great Britain: T&T Clark, 1872), 406.



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occurring some eighty-eight times. In Genesis 49:25-26, the usage has brilliant emphasis. The root occurs six times (verb: 1 time; noun: 5 times), underscoring that “the God-given blessings of the future will far outshine those already experienced.”<sup>15</sup> Deuteronomy 33:13-17, contains Moses’ blessings which refer to Jacob’s blessings on his sons. In this passage the same word *nazir* is used to describe Joseph, but now an explanation has been included, describing Joseph as a king who would not only rule over his brothers, but have power and influence over the entire world.<sup>16</sup>

The *Pulpit Commentary* also refers to several ways that Joseph was separate from his brothers. The Messiah, the eschatological Joseph, will be similarly separate, but in a far greater sense:

1. In his father’s love: Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons. So was Jesus the only begotten and well-beloved son of the Father (Gen 37:2; John 3:16).

2. In his personal character: Joseph did not take part in his brothers’ evil. So was Jesus found without sin (Gen 37:2; Heb 4:15).

3. In his communication with heaven: Joseph was the receiver of dreams and keeper of Divine secrets. So was Jesus filled with God’s spirit, and knew His Father’s will (Gen 37:5-11; 40:12-22; John 1:14).

4. In his suffering: Joseph was hated, sold, and practically given over to death by his brothers. So was Jesus hated and rejected by his brothers, and suffered death (Isa 53).

5. Joseph became a savior of starving people. So was Jesus the Savior

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<sup>15</sup> Gordon Wenham, *Genesis: Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 2, David Allen Hubbard (Editor), Glenn W. Barker (Editor), John D. W. Watts (Series Editor), Ralph P. Martin (Series Editor), 486.

<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew word used here includes power over the nations. The same root is used in 1 Kgs 22:11; 2 Chr 18:10; Dan 8:4, in connection with extending the boundaries of the land for control and ruling. This was God’s plan when Israel entered Canaan, also His long term plan that His kingdom would fill the entire world (Gen 12:1-3; Exod 19:6).

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for mankind (Gen 41:41-44; Rev 11:15).<sup>17</sup>

Also, in a deeper, spiritual sense, Joseph:

- by the strength of his faith under severe testing and suffering,
- by his morally pure character, and
- by the saving of his people

typifies the One who perfectly demonstrated the same to obtain for humanity an eternal redemption.

Joseph is a prophetic type in the truest sense of the word, with dozens of resemblances between his life and that of Christ. Even more, many of Israel's leaders were from Joseph's tribe:

- Joshua, a descendant of Joseph, became leader of Israel after Moses' death, and led God's people into the Promised Land; more than half of the land of Canaan was possessed by the two tribes of Joseph;<sup>18</sup>
- In the book of Judges, three of the twelve named judges were from the tribe of Joseph (Deborah, Gideon and Abdon);
- Samuel, last judge before the kingdom period, was also from Joseph's tribe;
- later, when the Davidic Kingdom split into two parts, Judah with Ephraim represented God's people.

Yet all these were far from being rulers over the whole world. The messianic undertones in Joseph's blessing would ultimately be fulfilled by the eschatological Joseph, the Promised Seed, the coming Messiah who will truly rule all nations.

The covenant name of God, *Yahweh*, occurs in the Joseph narratives in

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Whitelaw, *Genesis and Exodus*, The Pulpit Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 1:634-535.

<sup>18</sup> Although they were the largest tribes having 15 percent of the total number of Israelites according to Numbers 26, this was not in proportion to the half of the landmass they were given.

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39:5, 21, and 49:18.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Joseph's successes in Potiphar's household made plain that the Lord God of Israel was with Joseph, for "The LORD *blessed* the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph" (v. 5). This was a partial fulfilling of Abraham's divine promise that: "All peoples on earth will be *blessed* through you (12:1-3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). Joseph became one of the channels of divine blessing. He himself came to recognize that his suffering brought about salvific blessings which he described to his brothers (45:5-7):

But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For these two years the famine has been in the land, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. And God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

Despite the severe suffering Joseph endured, he realized that God had sent him on a divine mission: "to preserve. . . a remnant" and "to save your lives by a great deliverance" (v. 7b; NIV text note, "save you as a great band of survivors"; cf. NRSV).<sup>20</sup> He nobly disrupted the sinful cycle of hatred, revenge and retaliation which erupted after the Fall in Eden, instead graciously perceiving a wider meaning in what had happened: "God sent me ahead of you" (45:5, 7). Though wrongly treated, he realized that his life had the purpose of saving others. He had been a divine gift to a leading foreign power, revealing God's benevolent purposes toward those outside

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<sup>19</sup> For the most part in the Joseph narrative, the name *Elohim* is employed, as might be expected, by the speakers in a non-Israelite setting—often when *Elohim* occurs, it is in the speech of the participants. The narrator includes minimal overt references to the intervention of God. Rather, he works with innuendoes and hints of God's sovereignty, showing that although God's presence is not directly disclosed in Egypt, He is still very much at work in the nation.

<sup>20</sup> The language "remnant" [*se'erit*] on earth" is unique, but the word group *s-'r*, meaning "to be left over, remnant," is widely used in the OT to indicate a nation's surviving residue (e.g., Jer 25:20; Amos 9:12). "[O]n the earth" sets the family descendants in a broader context.

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Abraham's seed. Joseph's role as a savior from starvation is a type of the salvation of nations that the Abrahamic promises spoke of (e.g., 12:3), along with the salvific "bread of life" promised by Jesus—for many peoples benefitted from Abraham's divine promise of blessing (41:41, 43).

Joseph also lived the ideal life span of one hundred and ten years, according to the Egyptian viewpoint. This also adds to the high esteem the Genesis narratives give him.<sup>21</sup> He lived to see his offspring down to the "third generation," his great-grandchildren. Such long life was considered a precious gift from God (eg., Ps 128:6; Job 42:16).

He obviously was aware of the covenant promises, for drawing near to the end of his life, Joseph stated, "I am about to die" and then (*'anoki met*) predicted the Israelites' return to the promised land. He obviously was aware of the covenant promises and thereby made request for his final internment.<sup>22</sup> His identity and that of his two sons was linked to the divine covenant—not merely to their high Egyptian position. Although Joseph would not live to participate in the return, he confidently declared that the Lord "will bring you up." This phrase became the customary phrase to describe the redemption of God's people out of Egypt (e.g., 1 Sam 12:6; 2 Kgs 17:36; Jer 16:14-15; 23:7-8; Hos 12:13[14]).

Joseph's last words also anticipate the Book of Exodus, the final word of Genesis being "Egypt." Slavery will happen under Egyptian rule (Exod 1:8). However, the narrator included Joseph's positive belief of the future: the covenant family will survive the tragic ordeal and return to the land that God promised Abraham (Gen 15:16).

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<sup>21</sup> Joseph's age of one hundred ten years also matches the life span of Joshua (Josh 24:29; Judg 2:8), successor to Moses, who must have overseen the final journey of Joseph's sarcophagus (Exod 13:19). Both of their burials in Canaan are recorded in the same passage (Josh 24:29-32). Joseph and Joshua become the bookends of Israel's sojourn in Egypt. Furthermore, Joshua's name is the Hebrew "version" of "Jesus."

<sup>22</sup> These final words of Joseph point to the future when he repeated the prediction that the Lord would save them. And when that happened, they must transport his "bones" with them. This request, expressing Joseph's faith, was not forgotten, for the narrator penned: "And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had placed the children of Israel under solemn oath, saying, 'God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here with you'" (Exod 13:19).

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Another oft-repeated OT phrase, “Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (and its variations) occurs here for the first time. This naming of the three patriarchs also connects Genesis with Yahweh’s later dialogue with Moses, commissioning him to fulfill what Joseph predicted (Exod 3:6, 15, 16; 33:1). The Joseph narratives subtly point toward the future.<sup>23</sup>

**Judah**

According to Jacob’s Judah oracle (Gen 49:8-11), Judah will also have leadership over the nations and among his brothers. The promised seed will also come from his line. But this need not be critiqued as contradictory with the Joseph narratives. Instead, dual connections are being laid out.

The story of Judah’s incident with his daughter-in-law Tamar, following immediately after the sale of Joseph and his arrival in the Egyptian house of Potiphar, seems to be misplaced by many critics. Yet, chapter 38 chronologically follows chapter 37, clearly indicated in the introductory formula “at that time” (38:1), serving to connect the Judah-Tamar episode to the broader issues of Abraham’s divine promise. It also shares linguistic and thematic parallels with the preceding chapter.<sup>24</sup>

More importantly, both Judah and Joseph’s lives demonstrate the same foundational theology: divine providence working through sinful human history—with sinful acts “redeemed” within salvation history. The chiasmic structure of Genesis 38 underscores this, its apex highlighting the irregular sexual encounter between Judah and Tamar. This liaison will provide an ancestor of David—and hence of the Messiah, the Savior of the world:

- A Judah’s sons and Tamar (38:1-11)
- B Tamar’s prostitution with Judah (38:12-26)**
- A Judah’s sons with Tamar (38:27-30)

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<sup>23</sup> The “remnant theology” of the prophets (eg., Isa 4:3; Mic 2:12; Jer 31:7; Zech 8:11-12) envisions a future day of Israel’s final restoration to the land in eschatological fulfillment (eg., Amos 9:11-15; Mic 7:12; Zech 10:10), suggesting the importance of *se’erit* as “remnant” in Genesis.

<sup>24</sup> The same words *haker na* “know” (37:32), “determine” (38:25), “determine” (38:25); the same reference to a *se’ir izzim* or *gedi’ issim* “young goat” (37:31; 38:17).

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Each section of the chiasm also includes a reference to time:

- A “It came to pass at that time” (*wayehi* ... ‘*et*’) (38:1)
- B “in the process of time” (*wayyirbu hayyamin*; lit trans.: “after many days” (38:12)
- B1 “and it came to pass. . . three months after” (*wayehi*. . . *shelosh khodashim*) (38:24)
- A1 “and it came to pass at the time” (*wayehi*. . . ‘*et*’) (38:27)<sup>25</sup>

Judah’s sexual relationship with Tamar is commonly used to defame him. However, this is done without reckoning with Judah’s quoted comment. When Judah learns of Tamar’s pregnancy and condemns her, she returns Judah’s personal possessions to him to identify his involvement. Judah, similar to his descendant David, then humbly acknowledged his guilt in the situation—pointedly declaring that Tamar was “*more righteous*” than he (v. 26, emphasis added). Notably, Judah now does not condemn Tamar’s compromising behavior though earlier having condemned her to death. Instead Judah points out his guilt. What makes Tamar “more righteous” is not what she did, her deceptive prostitution, but Judah’s deceit: “because I did not give her to Shelah my son.”

Even more importantly, with his choice of words, “more righteous,” Judah acknowledged that he had been compromising the messianic seed. Though Tamar had set up the seduction, Judah did not now condemn her morally—even insisting that she was “more righteous.” In narrative analysis it has often been noted that biblical narrative details are drastically minimal, with dialogue quotations often carrying the core issue.

Some ancient rabbis proposed that Tamar had converted to the God of Judah—and this was behind her thinking that Judah was compromising the Messianic line. Thus, she took matters into her own hand, even though in a highly irregular way—and God accepted her seed through Judah.

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<sup>25</sup> Note the parallel between A and A1—both are introduced with the same phrase indicating a vague span of time *wayhi*. . . ‘*et*’—whereas B is introduced in its two subsections with a more specific reference to time “days” (*yammim*) and “months” (*knodashim*), Jacques Doukhan, *Genesis Commentary* (Pacific Press, 2016), 420.

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The fact that Judah never had any further sexual relationships with Tamar indicates that this was a unique and solitary liaison—with the twins becoming linked into Jacob’s later messianic oracle about Judah.

The narrative of Tamar ends with the birth of her twins. The second son became the first, and part of salvation history in the genealogy of David (Ruth 4:18-22)—and thereby the genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:3). Moreover, in Matthew’s genealogy, Tamar is the first of four women, followed by Rahab (Matt 1:5), Ruth (Matt 1:6), and the “wife of Uriah” (Matt 1:6) who precede Mary the mother of Jesus (Matt 1:16). It is highly significant that these are the only women of the Old Testament who are mentioned in this genealogy. Matthew doesn’t include the great matriarchs Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah. The four women listed in Matthew’s genealogy all had very irregular sexual relationships. This could be seen as preparing the way for Mary, who is also presented as an irregular case, being pregnant and yet unmarried.

The Genesis narrator recorded (46:12), along with the Chronicler (1 Chr 2:3-4:23), the offspring of Judah: he has five sons, three by his Canaanite wife, Shua (38:2-5; 1 Chr 2:3) and two by his daughter-in-law, Tamar (38:6, 27-30; 1 Chr 2:4). This historical record makes clear that despite the atypical events involving Perez’s conception, he became the ancestor of Israel’s greatest king (David, Ruth 4:12, 18)—and thence of the messianic line of Jesus (Matt 1:3; Luke 3:33).<sup>26</sup>

The narrative of Judah and Tamar, along with the sexual irregularities of the three other women in the Messiah’s genealogy, are part of the theology that underlies the Joseph-Judah narrative cycle. Namely, that suspicious, even immoral, situations can be turned into good through God’s sovereign blessing (50:20)—taking sinful human acts and redeeming them. He even accepts irregular off-spring as legitimate in the Messiah’s family tree. Just as God wrought salvation history through Tamar and Judah’s problematic relationship, God delivered Joseph and, ultimately, spared

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<sup>26</sup>The birth of Joseph’s children “in Egypt” and the priestly bloodline of his Egyptian wife Asenath (v. 20) provides the historical detail that many of Jacob’s descendants were born outside Canaan.

many lives through Judah's wrongful sale of Joseph. Perhaps the Apostle Paul saw this and was reflecting on it when he wrote: "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom 8:38).

### **Joseph and Judah**

Chapter 39 provides a "re-introduction" to the Joseph narratives, indicated by 37:26 and 39:1.<sup>27</sup> The final paragraph of chapter 39, verses 20-23, renders an appropriate bridge to chapters 40-41.<sup>28</sup> This reference to something in the past pointing forward to necessary new information is a common narrative technique. These chapters (39-41) describe Joseph's ascension in the court of Pharaoh, creating a necessary interval of time in the story of Jacob's family—just as the Judah/Tamar narrative had done.

Later, during a severe famine, Joseph's brothers begin traveling home after their second journey to Egypt for food—and Joseph's cup is found in Benjamin's sack. The brothers are forced to return to Egypt. Notably, Judah is now the spokesman for the brothers to the Egyptian ruler. They know they cannot clear their name for the cup was discovered in their possession.<sup>29</sup> Judah admits their guilt, but not the charge of thievery for it wasn't true. His remarks suggest he is taking the situation to be a repercussion of their evil crime against their long-lost brother—the

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<sup>27</sup>"So Judah said to his brothers, 'What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?'" (Gen 37:26); "Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there" (Gen 39:1).

<sup>28</sup> Coats, *Forms of Old Testament Literature: Genesis, with an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, paperback, 1984, by George W. Coats (author), Rolf P. Knierim (editor), 270. Coats noted that as the broader narrative stands, "The digression [chapters 39-41] is fully integrated with the preceding and following elements in the Joseph story." As for the relationship of chapters 39 and 40-41, chapter 39 evidences its own narrative structure by the repeated phrase "the LORD was with Joseph and he prospered" and its variations (vv. 2, 3, 23).

<sup>29</sup> "Prove our innocence" is not the first time that the word was in Judah's mind (v. 16). It is the same root word heard in his admission "She [Tamar] is more righteous than I" (38:26).



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mistaken accusation a recompense. With no human explanation for the cup in Benjamin's food sack, Judah declares that God must have "uncovered [*masa*] your servant's guilt" (v. 16a). His language underscored the long-held guilt of the brothers ("we. . . we ourselves"), distinguishing them from Benjamin ("and the one. . .").

After the Egyptian ruler declared judgment (v. 17), Judah "came near to him and said: 'O my lord, please let your servant speak a word in my lord's hearing.'" He poignantly described Benjamin as "a young son born to him [Jacob] in his old age," then detailing the sorrow of their father: his favorite son was dead, and Benjamin was the sole survivor of their mother—Judah emphasizing "and his father loves him" (cf. 37:3).

His empathy for his father reveals noteworthy moral growth in Judah's character, mentioning both the feeble age of Jacob with the specialness of Benjamin. But rather than resenting the affection that Jacob has for Benjamin as Judah had earlier resented Joseph, Judah now appeals to it as a reason for mercy. Pleading for his father's life, Judah urgently disclosed how the imprisonment of Benjamin would result in the old man's death (vv. 18-32).

Even more, Judah dramatically offered himself as a substitute in place of Benjamin (vv. 33-34). Judah desperately pleaded that he could not return (*pen*, "No!") without Benjamin and see his father suffer. Once before Judah saw how the news of Joseph's supposed death broke his father's heart (37:34-35). Now Judah would rather be subjected to slavery for the rest of his life than cause his father's dying grief.<sup>30</sup>

This is astounding. Judah placed his life on the line for the sake of his elderly father, referring to him fourteen times in his speech—two times in his closing comments alone (v. 34). The contrast between Judah's earlier cruel treatment of his brother Joseph and how he acts now in this circumstance could not be more striking, his moral reformation obvious. And Judah's intercessory supplication caused the Egyptian lord to weep (45:1-2).

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<sup>30</sup> "In place of" (*tahat*) translates the same term of Genesis 22:13, which describes the ram offered "instead of [*tahat*] his/Abraham's son."

Judah's plea (vv. 18-34) is part of the longest dialogue in the Joseph-Judah cycle—in fact, the longest dialogue in the Book of Genesis.<sup>31</sup> Judah will also remain the principle spokesman for the brothers from this point onward (v. 3). For example, later when Jacob returned to Egypt with his sons, he sent Judah ahead to meet Joseph and notify him of their imminent arrival in Goshen.

### Summary and Conclusion

When the brothers sell Joseph into slavery and then pretend to their father Jacob that Joseph had been murdered—the catastrophic pattern of breakdown in family relationships that began with the sin of Adam and Eve (Gen 3) continued—even in the “chosen people.”<sup>32</sup>

Divine grace is an extravagant theme in Genesis—God's providential care of his people abounds in spite of their many sinful actions. In this narrative sequence, the twelve sons of Jacob were granted grace in spite of their earlier motives of murder and vengeance. Time and again the sinfulness of the patriarchs put them and their seed—and God's purposes—in peril. Even natural disasters such as famine threatened ruin. However, through all of this, there is one constant: *God remains faithful to his promise*,<sup>33</sup>—obvious also in the Joseph/Judah cycle. Even Joseph recognized that all that happened was used by God to “preserve a remnant on earth and to save lives by a great deliverance” (Gen 45:5-7) as noted above. After their father's death, Joseph again graciously reassured his brothers: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (45:20).

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<sup>31</sup> It also contains the most extensive use of “second level” quotation (flashbacks), whereby Judah recounts earlier dialogues: he revisits the first encounter of Joseph and the brothers (44:19-24), and subsequent interactions between Jacob and the brothers (44:25-29; cf. 43:2-5; 42:38). Judah's offer of surety for the life of Benjamin is also a second level quotation, “I said, ‘If I do not bring him back. . . I will bear the blame’” (44:32; cf 43:9).

<sup>32</sup> The brothers' reunification in Egypt contrasts with Cain and Abel's earlier sibling strife which resulted in murder.

<sup>33</sup>This theme is probably related to one of the names for God in these patriarchal narratives: *El Shaddai* (17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 48:3); “God Almighty” in many English versions

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Joseph's role as savior of the world from starvation typifies the salvation of the nations that the Abrahamic promises foretold (e.g., 12:3). The Reformer John Calvin saw this: "When [Joseph] reflects that their wickedness had been overruled by the wonderful and unwonted goodness of God, forgetting the injury received, he kindly embraces the men whose dishonor God had covered with his grace."<sup>34</sup>

Jacob's descendants sojourning in Egypt, though in forced slavery (as had Joseph), advanced the blessing God forecast for the nations. The narrator of Genesis never lets readers forget that the adoption of Israel was for the purpose of blessing and salvation to "the world" (41:57; cf. 11:1, 9)—part of the Abrahamic promises in Genesis 12 that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

None of the patriarchs totally fulfilled this promise of blessing to the whole world. Abraham did save his nephew from capture, and mediated for Lot's life when Sodom and Gomorrah were going to be destroyed. Isaac was involved in Abraham's ultimate test (Gen 22). However, his wife Rivkah dominates the Genesis record of their immediate family. Abraham's family had major ups and downs.

Joseph did become a blessing to many. Not only did he save God's chosen people from famine but other nations as well, for "all the countries came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the world" (Gen 41:57). Joseph's earlier dreams can also be seen as pointing forward to Jesus, the anti-typical Joseph who will be worshiped by the saved of the earth. Joseph's forgiveness of his cruel brothers also foreshadows Messianic forgiveness—for instead of taking revenge for the massive debt of sin the world cost Him, Jesus offers forgiveness to anyone who comes to Him for salvation, as reviewed above.

In Genesis 37:31, the narrative records that Joseph's brothers dipped his coat in the blood of a goat (*seir izzim*). In the book of Revelation, a concluding picture of the victorious Rider on the White Horse describes

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<sup>34</sup>John Calvin, *Genesis commentary*, on Genesis 45.

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him wearing a robe “dipped in blood.”<sup>35</sup> The only other mention of a robe dipped in blood in the entire canon is that of Joseph’s robe in Genesis.<sup>36</sup>

More and more commentators are recognizing that the text of the book of Revelation is a major, complex composite of echoes, allusions, references, and quotations from the Old and New Testaments all woven together in a new textual “tapestry,”—revealing, underscoring, tying together, summarizing and expounding canonic content. And in Revelation 5, as noted earlier, a name of the “Lamb as though it had been slain” is “the Lion of the tribe of Judah.”<sup>37</sup>

If taken seriously, the risen Lord’s instruction on Resurrection Sunday to begin with Moses for comprehending the glorious nature of the Messiah’s mission, details in the Genesis narratives can be seen to unfold and undergird His life and mission:

- the suffering Joseph can be seen as a type of the Messiah’s first coming when He suffered and died as the Savior of mankind.
- Judah, of the Davidic kingdom, points forward to Jesus’ everlasting kingdom that will be fully instituted as His Second Coming, when the “Lion of the tribe of Judah” will reign in full glory—until then

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<sup>35</sup> “Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. *He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood*, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written:

KING OF KINGS AND  
LORD OF LORDS” (Rev 19:11-16).

<sup>36</sup> “So they took Joseph’s tunic, killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the tunic in the blood” (Gen 37:31).

<sup>37</sup> “I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it. But one of the elders said to me, ‘Do not weep. Behold, *the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed* to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals” (Rev 5:4-5).

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interceding for the salvation of His earthly family: “Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:25).

The great marvel is that the “Lion of the Tribe of Judah” could and would use the lives of His flawed human children to typify His great salvific work—plus inspire the inclusion of the notably strikingly minimal details in the biblical narratives to reflect this.

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