

Subversive God

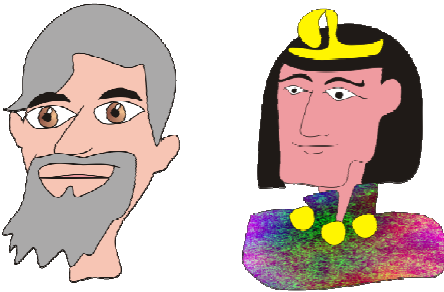
The Patriarchs in Genesis 25-50

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Shechem Hamor

Dinah



Jacob

Joseph

Preaching The Second Half of Genesis

This series picked up where my 2004 series on Abraham (Gen 12-25a) left off. In some ways, this is an artificial break-point; certainly, the project of preaching Genesis 25-50 with any overarching integrating idea is challenging. The 10-part “toledoth” or “generations” structure of Genesis proposed by Waltke is perhaps an indication of a subtle and intricate structure covering the whole of Genesis... overlaid by the structure of each “These are the generations of...” section. In summary, while each sermon worked well in itself, and while there remains the overarching Abrahamic Covenant theme, I struggled to come up with a convincing “meta-theme” for the section.

My best attempt at a key idea was derived from Grant Thorp’s paper “Deception – The Key to Genesis” published in an early edition of *Perspective* – now online at www.perspective.org.au. Grant’s suggestion that the staggering sequence of deceptions play a key structural part in the narrative, culminating in Joseph’s statement that what “you meant for evil, God meant for good” is very helpful. Rebecca, Jacob, Laban, Jacob’s sons, Tamar, and finally Joseph are all masters of disguise, deception, and goat-and-garment

driven fraud. And ultimately, God keeps his promises despite them rather than because of them. This thought found its way into the title of my series – “Subversive God” – though I wish I’d called it “Meet the Parents.” The bible study booklet I produced for the series is prefaced by Grant’s article.

Other Key Ideas

As mentioned, in a narrative sweep this broad, a number of key ideas will be evident. For example, in the article [Then Israel Bowed Himself...](#) (Genesis 47:31) *JSOT* 28.4 June 2004, Raymond de Hoop suggests the plot of the Joseph narrative revolves around the question “Before whom do the brothers have to bow? Joseph? Or Judah?” Usefully, he makes the point that a narrative like this should be interpreted in the light of the timeframe of the narrator rather than the timeframe of the narrative itself; so, the political machinations of an Israel caught in the tribal tensions between later Israel and Judah may well be reflected in the text. At the very least, the groundwork is being done for the future positioning of the tribes – especially in the details deathbed blessing scene in chapter 49.

There are other clues that the deathbed blessings are significant – for example, in the way they tie up narrative loose ends, and make value judgements on episodes as far back as chapter 37, and the actions of Simeon, Levi and Reuben. Arguably, a major thrust of the storyline is to account for the blessing of Judah as the father of future kings. Raymond de Hoop counters this in his article with the suggestion that Genesis 47:31 pictures Jacob bowing himself before Joseph, and assigning him the role as “tribal head.” Bizarrely enough, the words rendered “bowed before the head of the bed” by the NIV can also be translated “bowed before the head of the tribe.”

Character Study?

A five week series on a long narrative like this presents many preaching challenges - particularly in approaching the text with a Biblical Theology. This is a narrative which makes surprisingly few value judgements; there is much argument over almost every episode. For instance, is Isaac doing the right thing or the wrong thing by attempting to bless Esau, his firstborn? Correspondingly, is Jacob then justified in his deception, or not? (Surely, all he’s doing is attempting to bring about what God said would happen at his birth?)

While mindful of Goldsworthy’s long standing critique of character-study preaching, there are enough clues in the narrative to show that we should look for character development at key points. Jacob and

Judah are key examples of this... Jacob's night-time wrestling match which leaves him limping and broken is somehow a bigger picture of the point he has arrived at in his struggle with God. Judah's offer to give himself in place of his brother Benjamin is in a sense the climax of the Joseph story. So, in treating the narrative thoroughly, there are things to be observed here.

More tenuous, perhaps, is the analysis of Jacob as "father" in the troubling Dinah narrative. Waltke helpfully points out the proliferation of "relational tags" through the section – Dinah, for instance, is always called "Dinah, his daughter," while Jacob is repeatedly "Jacob, her father." And yet perhaps this is a subtle indication that the whole family dynamic of the first Israel was horribly flawed. Polygamy, a favoured wife, concubines, the repeated cycle of favouritism of one son over others, and the visiting of prostitutes, all stack up into a horrible parody of the "one woman + one man = one flesh" scenario painted by Genesis 1. Perhaps there's an intentional message woven into the texture of the text here. In any case, I was convinced enough about this to fly the family issue in talk 3.

Heading for Jesus

In each talk I tried to take a distinctive trajectory towards Jesus, in keeping with the main points of the narrative.

In talk 1, the fact that every character revealed such unpleasant flaws, and that "nobody did right" led forward to the conclusion that the only "hero" was God's relentless plan to bless the world, and that Jesus was the promised seed who would finally bring that about – against all the odds.

In talk 2, the meeting place with God is the "stairway to heaven." Although Jacob thinks he can become the self made man, there's no blessing until he wrestles with God and is humbled. The place we meet God is Jesus, the one on whom the angels ascend and descend. Self made men and women are unwelcome.

In talk 3, the focus on "Family Matters" leads to the conclusion that because of Jesus, we are part of a better family; partly because we were in the process of appointing elders, but also because of the good textual fit, I argued that our church leaders should model a more faithful fatherhood than Jacob. In Christ, we are to be a better Israel than the first.

Talk 4, which covered the fall and rise of Joseph as the saviour for God's people had a dual focus. Just as God brought the salvation of many from Joseph's unjust treatment, we are saved by the injustice done

to Jesus. So, from Romans 8:28f, we should continue in faith through the bad times, not being surprised by them, or asking "where is God." As demonstrated by Jesus, God can work in surprisingly good ways through surprisingly bad events.

Finally, in talk 5, the coming line of Kingship through Judah was the link-point to Jesus. It's only when Judah comes to the point of giving himself for his brother that we see glimmerings of kingship. Jesus shows what this looks like much more clearly. We should model our ambitions on his.

References and Resources:

I used John Sailhamer, [The Pentateuch as Narrative](#), extensively. It's a superb book; he is always alert to narrative nuances and connections, even when the connections lie chapters ahead.

Late in the series I began to use Bruce Waltke's [Genesis](#); also superb, and very alert to literary analysis and narrative structure.

I also dipped into various journal articles, especially from JSOT – eg Raymond de Hoop, [Then Israel Bowd Himself...](#) (Genesis 47.31) *JSOT* 28.4 June 2004, as cited earlier. I was surprised to find a number of key passages covered in depth in quite recent editions.

I worked hard to illustrate this series with powerpoint displays, partly as a way of helping people find their way through the jungle of names and places. Faces of each key character were displayed on the screen, as a way to help people track who's who. It usually worked well. If you want the images, they're available at www.mpc.org.au/jacobpics.zip (3.3MB)

Reactions

These were some of the longest talks I've given at mpc, mainly due to the fact that I was attempting to cover large tracts of narrative each week. Sometimes it didn't work. But I don't think the series would have benefited from doing smaller chunks in more weeks. Coupled with weekly studies (available on mpc.org.au) which covered the passages more thoroughly, the series has generated more than usual interest and reaction.

Outlines

Talk 1

No Heroes Here
Genesis 25:19-28:9 1.

1. Looking for a Hero

2. Meet the Cast

- Isaac
- Rebekah
- Uncle Laban
- Jacob and Esau

3. Follow the plotline

- Getting in a Stew Part I (25:19-34)
 - selling the birthright
 - Isaac revisited (Gen 26)
- Getting in a Stew Part II (27:1-40)
 - stealing the blessing
 - life on the run (27:4-28:9)

4. The real hero...

- God's relentless plan to bless the world
- the "seed" who brings blessing
- Jesus, the blessing, and you

Talk 2

Stairway to Heaven Genesis 28-32

1. Getting what you deserve

2. Stairway to Heaven (28:10-22)

3. Grasper Out-Grasped (Gen 29)

4. Meet the Kids (Gen 29:31-30:24)

5. Spotting the Sheep (30:25-43)

- outwitted outwitted?
- But only by God!

6. Heading Home Humbled (Gen 31-32)

- prepared for the worst (32)
- a humble prayer (32:9-12)
- the wrestling is over (32:22-32)

7. Implications

Talk 3

Family Matters Genesis 34-36

1. Super Nanny...

2. Wrong place, wrong time...

- Camping too close

3. Danger signs...

- Dinah in Danger (34:1)
- the danger of too little reaction (34v5)
- the danger of being absorbed (34v9,20)
- the danger of over-reaction (34v24-27)

4. To Bethel – at last! (35v1-4)

- but sadness and disgrace (35:8f, 22)

5. Consequences (Gen 49)

- stripped of blessing

6. Building a better Israel

- Jesus, Israel and Us
- Especially our leaders! (1 Tim 3)

Talk 4

Bad Plans, Good Outcomes Gen 37-50

1. Disaster stories

- where is God?

2. Meet the Dreamer... (Gen 37)

- the coat (v3)
- the dreams (37:4-11)
- the plot
- the sale

3. Two Steamy Bedroom Scenes

- Judah and Tamar (Gen 38)
 - sleep with me?... "Yes"
 - Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen 39)
 - sleep with me?... "No!"
- Flee sexual immorality

(1 Cor 6)

- betrayed and in prison

4. Another Dreamer

- Pharaoh's Dreams (Gen 41)
coming famine

- Joseph In Charge

- his brothers bow

5. Surprising Saviours

- the God who can bring good results from bad circumstances (Romans 8:28f)
- trusting Jesus, a hopeful future

dearly loved children and LIVE A LIFE OF LOVE, just as Christ LOVED US... and GAVE HIMSELF UP FOR US as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Talk 5

Meet the King Maker Genesis 37-50 revisited

1. Making a leader for God's people

- who would you choose to start the family line of kings for God's people?

2. Following the story of Judah

- "let's sell him" (Gen 37)
- deceiving dad
- "come to bed with me" (Gen 38)

3. A brother re-met

- the famine
- setting the Benjamin trap

4. Looking for King Material...

- Judah's speech before Joseph
- take me instead! (v33)
- a promise of future rule (Gen 49)

5. The ultimate sacrificial King

Ephesians 5; verse 1. "Be imitators of God, therefore, as