

# HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

A course in Biblical literacy

## How to read... GENESIS

Desi Alexander

*All the pieces of a jigsaw need to be included to get the complete picture. The best reading of Genesis will explain why all the different parts have been included; we should expect that no part is superfluous.*

### What do the following have in common?

Adam; Methuselah; Noah; Abraham; Isaac; Jacob

#### 1. God's promises to Abraham

<sup>15</sup> The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time <sup>16</sup> and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup> I will surely bless (*barak*) you and make your descendants (*zera'*) as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendant(s) (*zera'*) will take possession of the cities of his (their) enemies, <sup>18</sup> and through your offspring (*zera'*) all nations on earth will be blessed (*barak*), because you have obeyed me." (Genesis 22:15–18; NIV text modified slightly; words in italics reflect Hebrew original)

#### 2. The topic of birthright

<sup>27</sup> The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. <sup>28</sup> Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

<sup>29</sup> Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. <sup>30</sup> He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (That is why he was also called Edom.)

<sup>31</sup> Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright (*bekorah*)."

<sup>32</sup> "Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright (*bekorah*) to me?"

<sup>33</sup> But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright (*bekorah*) to Jacob. <sup>34</sup> Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright (*bekorah*). (Genesis 25:27–34).

**Q:** What does this passage say about the attitude of the twins to the divine promises given to Abraham and Isaac?

### 3. Joseph and Ephraim

<sup>17</sup> When Joseph saw his father placing his right hand on Ephraim's head he was displeased; so he took hold of his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. <sup>18</sup> Joseph said to him, "No, my father, this one is the firstborn (*bekor*); put your right hand on his head."

<sup>19</sup> But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants (*zera'*) will become a group of nations." <sup>20</sup> He blessed (*barak*) them that day and said, "In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing (*barak*): 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'" So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh. (Genesis 48:17–20).

**Q: How does this passage pick up motifs found in the previous passages?**

### 4. Judah and Tamar

<sup>6</sup> Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn (*bekor*), and her name was Tamar. <sup>7</sup> But Er, Judah's firstborn (*bekor*), was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death.

<sup>8</sup> Then Judah said to Onan, "Sleep with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to raise up offspring (*zera'*) for your brother." <sup>9</sup> But Onan knew that the child (*zera'*) would not be his; so whenever he slept with his brother's wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from providing offspring (*zera'*) for his brother. <sup>10</sup> What he did was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death also. (Genesis 38:6–10).

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<sup>27</sup> When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. <sup>28</sup> As she was giving birth, one of them put out his hand; so the midwife took a scarlet thread and tied it on his wrist and said, "This one came out first." <sup>29</sup> But when he drew back his hand, his brother came out, and she said, "So this is how you have broken out!" And he was named Perez. <sup>30</sup> Then his brother, who had the scarlet

#### Further reading:

- T. D. Alexander. "Genealogies, Seed and the Compositional Unity of Genesis." *Tyndale Bulletin* 44, no. 2 (1993) 255-70. (available at [https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/tb/genealogies\\_alexander.pdf](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/tb/genealogies_alexander.pdf))
- J. M. August. "The Messianic Hope of Genesis: The Protoevangelium and Patriarchal Promises." *Themelios* 42, no. 1 (2017) 46-62. (available at <http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-messianic-hope-of-genesis-the-protoevangelium-and-patriarchal-promises>).

#### Online resources:

##### TheBibleProject.com:

- <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/gene-sis-1-11/>
- <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/gene-sis-12-50/>