

Article of the Month – November 2009

Twelve Missionary Themes in Genesis (7)

By Steef van 't Slot, Ph.D.

This month we continue our series of 12 missionary themes in Genesis and consider

Theme 7: God's Covenant with the Son of the Promise



The theme of the son (Son) is central in the Bible and finds its first full type of Christ in Gen. 15-18, 21, 22 and 24-27, in Isaac. God promised Abraham: ‘...a son ... from your own body will be your heir’.¹ Speaking about *a* son, He did not mention Sarah, as if remaining vague on purpose. Had He been more specific, Gen. 16 and 21 might never have been written. God gives a promise and man seeks how it might be fulfilled. Look at the word ‘perhaps’.² Once man has found how it can be done he starts helping God. Abraham, instead of asking for God’s guidance, listened to his wife. What followed was a family tragedy that will eventually culminate in a worldwide conflict.³ God needs no help to fulfill His promises;

instead, human ‘help’ often hinders His purposes. Maybe He expressed Himself so vaguely, to see how Abraham would deal with waiting periods. This test he failed, as would Jacob later, when he cunningly obtained the right of the firstborn.⁴ Finally, promise *and* recipients, Abraham *and* Sarah, are mentioned specifically:⁵ the covenant line would run via Isaac, not via Ishmael. The table sums up some differences:

<u>Ishmael</u>	<u>Isaac</u>
Ishmael’s birth was not foretold	Isaac’s birth was announced
Son of the flesh	Son of the promise
Conceived after the will of man	Conceived at God’s word
Son of the slave woman	Son of the free woman
Rebellious character (16:12)	Man of God (24:63; 25:21)
Received certain blessings (16:10; 17:20)	Received the full covenant (17:19,21)
Twelve rulers would come from him	Israel would consist of twelve tribes
Became a great nation (25:12-18)	Became blessing for all nations (17:16)
Father of the Arabs	Father of Jews and of all believers
Brought forth Islam	Brought forth Judaism and Christianity
No salvation for Muslims outside Christ	Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ ⁶

¹ Gen. 15:4b

² Gen. 16:2

³ Zech. 12:3

⁴ Gen. 25:31-34

⁵ Gen. 17:16,19,21

⁶ John 14:6; Acts 4:12

Abraham and Isaac are types of God the Father and of His Son Jesus Christ.⁷ In the next generation the line of the promise continues with the younger son, Jacob.⁸ It is remarkable that Isaac, being the younger son of the promise, ignored this principle when it came to blessing his descendants, although God had spoken clearly before the boys were born. He too acted on his own initiative – the consequence being that his household split up,⁹ never to be re-united completely.

Was Isaac's plan a deliberate act of disobedience motivated by temporal and carnal appetites? Of course, the way in which Rebecca and Jacob dealt with it was equally wrong and the result was that they probably never saw each other again after Jacob had fled. After this, Rebecca's name is not mentioned again. Maybe she died before Jacob returned twenty years later.

All sons of the promise, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, were born from barren women, Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel. These women all had to be prayed for in order to conceive, and none of their sons of promise was the oldest. A significant spiritual image lies hidden in this principle. The oldest son is typical for the old life of the NT believers, that which came from the natural birth. The behaviour of Ishmael and Esau runs parallel to what Paul would later describe as the works of the flesh.¹⁰ The youngest son is typical of the new life of the believer, which comes from being born again. This new life is their younger life – it starts later than the old life – and begins after their spiritual birth. None of the boys Isaac, Jacob or Joseph was born by the power of man but exclusively by the promise of God.¹¹ Every believer has these two natures and must make the older serve the younger: to submit the cravings of the carnal nature to the demands of the new life in Christ.¹²

In the last part (37-50) of Genesis the patriarchal promises were not repeated to Joseph: his were the promises God gave him in the two dreams.¹³ Yet, he is the clearest early example of being a blessing to all nations; he saved them from *physical* starvation. This makes him one of the most important types of Christ, the Bread of Life, Who would provide salvation from *spiritual* starvation.¹⁴ Joseph is one of the greatest characters in the book of Genesis.

When blessing Joseph's sons, Jacob gave the more important blessing to Ephraim, the younger.¹⁵ Joseph, by choice, would have made the same mistake Isaac had wanted to make earlier.¹⁶ But Jacob, the third generation since Abraham, finally understood God's principle in His dealings with the son of the promise, namely of the older being less than the younger.

⁷ See Theme #2, as described in my article of March 2009

⁸ Gen. 25:33 & 28:13-15

⁹ Gen. 27 & 28

¹⁰ Compare e.g. Gen. 16:12 and 27:39,40 with Gal. 5:19-21

¹¹ Compare this with John 1:12,14 and 3:3-8

¹² See e.g. Rom 6; Col. 3 and Heb. 12

¹³ Gen. 37:5-10

¹⁴ John 6:33-35

¹⁵ Gen. 48:13-20

¹⁶ Compare Gen. 27 with 48:17-19

