

Article of the Month – July 2010

Twelve Missionary Themes in Genesis (12)

By Steef van 't Slot, Ph.D.



We now end our series of 12 missionary themes in Genesis. Once again the book's main players appear: six pairs of brothers. Some followed God, others didn't, although salvation was offered to all. The latter suffered great loss.

Theme 12: The Stories of the Brothers

In *Gen. 4* we see that Abel chose to follow God's ways and principles and Cain did not. He sinned and left God's presence.¹ Choices, made on earth, do not change when someone dies. Lewis described this principle vividly.² Earthly choices have eternal consequences.

In *Gen. 9* we read about Ham's sin, but not about repentance, and so he brought a curse over his descendants. A millennium later, seven peoples that descended from him were driven out of the country that God had promised to Abraham. It may look like as if all descendants from Ham were predestined to damnation, but that is not the case. God is good, always searching whom He can save. Some individuals were saved: think about how Rahab joined Israel. Another was Ruth, from Moab, who was saved at her confession. Both women appear in Jesus' genealogy.³ Converted Gentiles were equal to born Israelites. God's laws protected strangers in the midst of Israel.

Gen. 13 & 19 is about Abraham and Lot, brothers in the faith. Lot's greed for wealth brought him down. He left the man of promise (Abraham) and the blessing. He lost almost everything: material possessions, his wife, his moral integrity, and was only just saved. Lot had received a warning:⁴ he was taken captive by kings who waged war against Sodom. Abraham undertook a rescue mission: he brought Lot back to where he (Lot) had chosen to live. If only Lot had recognized God's warning in this pre-judgment, he could have preached God's word to his fellow-citizens, or, if they would not repent, he could have left. His losses could then not have been as big as they were when the cities were destroyed later. This principle still applies today, personally and collectively. May we recognize God's correcting hand in our lives and nations, and act upon it lest something worse happens.⁵ The consequences of Lot's incest, resulting in the birth of Moab and Ben-Ammi (ancestors of the Moabites and Ammonites), were very significant. Both peoples harassed Israel repeatedly in later centuries. It might not have happened, had Lot stayed with Abraham. The choices of one man can have severe consequences for the wellbeing (or the opposite) of the nations.⁶

¹ Gen. 4:16

² C.S. Lewis, 'The Great Divorce', 1946

³ Josh. 2; 6:17,22-25; Ruth 1:16,17; Matt. 1:5

⁴ Gen. 14

⁵ Compare e.g. John 5:14

⁶ Gen. 19; See e.g. Numb. 22-25; 1 Sam. 11; Ez. 22:30

Ishmael didn't go along with his half-brother, the son of the promise, Isaac (*Gen. 16 & 21*); neither did their mothers. Hagar rebelled and later her son. As a result they had to be sent away. Had they submitted, they would have shared in the blessing. Rebellion leads to separation. God sanctioned this because of their heart-attitude towards Sarah and Isaac. Without repentance there could be no reconciliation. Today we should pray for the *conversion* of the Ishmaelites (Arabs), most of whom are Muslims. The separation between Ishmael and Isaac is similar to that between Christ's followers and those who are not.⁷ Without turning to Jesus there is no salvation for them. Animosity between Muslims, Jews and Christians on earth cannot continue in the hereafter. Ishmaelites have to conform to God's way of salvation in Christ. Otherwise they persist in their separation from God. This applies to Jews as well. Neither Muslim nor Jew has to perish. Salvation is offered to them. But who will travel to their lands and tell them? We see hostility in many places, where Muslims persecute Christians as well as Jews. Only Jesus can break those hostile barriers down, and He *died to do so!* Jesus is True Brother Who gave His life, so that all can be reconciled to God and to each other. Jesus Christ alone can do what no Palestinian-Jewish peace-agreement can ever do.⁸

Jacob nor Esau (*Gen. 25 & 27-33*) were holy; both needed salvation. Their destination was determined by choice and behavior, not by God's 'pre'-destination. *Esau* typifies carnal, nominal Christianity i.e. not being born again (despising his birthright). He refused to live up to his parents' standards⁹ and married Canaanite wives. He represents a form of Christianity that neither submits to Christ (typified by Isaac) nor to His Church (typified by Rebecca). *Esau*-Christianity makes its own laws, goes its own ways, which equal non-conformity to the way of salvation. *Jacob* represents a form of Christianity that at first differed little from his brother's, but on whom the promise rested and whose faith at last matured after God's dealings with him. The older was to serve (submit to) the younger. Had Esau been obedient to God's word, he would have been blessed too, but he was indifferent and thought about life on earth only.¹⁰ He refused to submit and separation came. These stories show that natural birth does not guarantee a spiritual inheritance; only promise does. Nobody can claim spiritual birthright based on natural birth, e.g. in a Christian family, church or culture. God has no grandchildren. One only becomes God's child by rebirth. Therefore, the oldest never inherited the promise but the younger did. Spiritually, only our 'youngest life', the new identity in Christ, inherits eternal life. Our old(est) life cannot please God. *Esau*-religion will not see God's Kingdom.¹¹

The separation between Joseph and his brothers (*Gen. 37-47*) shows the one who made it to the throne and saved the land, while the others didn't. The latter needed to be saved and never ruled, although each of them became founder of a tribe, named after them.

In *Gen. 42-45* Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. We recognize Zechariah's words: the brothers weeping about the one they thought they killed,¹² as one day the Jews will weep over Jesus, recognizing Him at His return.

Joseph told his brothers to bring their youngest brother; or they would not see him again. Jesus told us the same: 'But first the Gospel ... must be preached in the whole world ... and *then* the end will

⁷ Gal. 4:21-31

⁸ Gen. 25:18; Eph. 2:11-18

⁹ Gen. 26:34,35; 27:46; 28:6-8

¹⁰ Gen. 32:22-32; 25:23,27,32,34b; 27:40

¹¹ John 1:12,13; 3:3,5-7; Rom. 8:8

¹² Gen. 45:3,4,14,15; Zech. 12:10b

come' (my italics).¹³ The end will not come (at His Return) until all families on earth have heard the Gospel. Not until we bring in the last brother will we see Him again.

¹³ Compare Gen. 44:23 with Matt. 24:14