

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

Genesis Part 6 - Isaac, Jacob and Joseph

Homework / Further Research:

- Melchizedek, King/Priest of Salem (to whom Abram offers the Bible's first tithe) is considered a "heavenly figure" in some Jewish contexts.
- Compare 11QMelchizedek from Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls describe Melchizedek as "Elohim" as in Psalm 82 – also present of convening the "divine council") with Second Book of Enoch (which has a miraculous Melchizedek birth), then read the Melchizedek narratives in Psalm 110; Hebrews 5-7.
- Why? Jesus and Melchizedek share a typology (e.g., heavenly figures combining the kingly and priestly orders). Jesus is not in the ancestry of Levi (the Levitical order), but of the lineage of Judah. This acts theologically as critique and resistance to bloodline preference.

I. The Burial of Abraham

(NRSVUE) Genesis 25:1, 5-6 Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. ² She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. ⁵ Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. ⁶ But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country.

A. Abraham has children with Hagar and Keturah.

1. Yet, the specialness of Isaac continues to be a narrative.

(NRSVUE) Genesis 25:8-9 Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, old and full of years, and was gathered to his people. ⁹ His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah

B. Isaac and Ishmael bury Abraham.

1. The cave of Machpelah.

a. Meaning: double, folded, twice, or double cave, folded cave, twofold place.

b. Significant Imagery: Two sons, Two lines, Two futures, One father.

II. Isaac and Rebekah

(NRSVUE) Genesis 25:21-23 Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife because she was barren, and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. ²² The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. ²³ And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other; the elder shall serve the younger."

A. Esau and Jacob

1. Isaac favors Esau. Rebekah favors Jacob.

a. Twins – but Esau is firstborn ("birthright").

2. Rebekah and Isaac conspire to "steal" Esau's birthright.

B. Parallels with Abraham and Sarah (**the World OF the Text**).

1. Barrenness and Sibling Rivalry.

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- a. Sarah – barren; Rebekah – barren.
- b. Divine intervention – creates a child of promise and brotherly feud.
- c. Notice the continuation of firstborn critique (e.g., Abel, Isaac, Jacob).
- C. The critique of Firstborn birthright blessing.
 - 1. Abel, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are not firstborn.
- D. The Critique of Favoritism.
 - 1. Favoritism leads to fracture.
 - a. Abel’s offering; Abraham favors Isaac; Isaac favors Esau, Rebekah favors Jacob; Jacob favors Joseph.

III. Brotherly violence / Favoritism (The World OF the Text, con’t).

Summary (skipping ahead 4 chapters) – Jacob steals Esau’s birthright, and is running from Esau. He finds work at Laban’s house and falls in love with his daughter, Rachel. But, Laban wants him to marry Leah (the older daughter). Laban deceives Jacob into marrying Leah and offers Rachel if Jacob will work for him seven more years.

A. The Origins of Violence

(NRSVUE) Genesis 29:31-35 When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. ³² Leah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Reuben, for she said, “Because the Lord has looked on my affliction, surely now my husband will love me.” ³³ She conceived again and bore a son and said, “Because the Lord has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also,” and she named him Simeon. ³⁴ Again she conceived and bore a son and said, “Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons”; therefore he was named Levi. ³⁵ She conceived again and bore a son and said, “This time I will praise the Lord,” therefore she named him Judah; then she ceased bearing.

(NRSVUE) Genesis 37:3-4 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children because he was the son of his old age, and he made him an ornamented robe.^[a] ⁴ But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him.

1. Joseph is the firstborn of Rachel. This favoritism fuels the brothers’ jealousy and ultimately leads to Joseph being sold into slavery. Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin, her second son. After Joseph disappears, Benjamin becomes Jacob’s emotional center. When famine strikes, Jacob resists sending Benjamin to Egypt, saying:

(NRSVUE) Genesis 42:38 But he said, “My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should come to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol.”

2. Notice, Joseph and Benjamin are the sons of Rachel. Jacob speaks of them as his only sons.

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IV. Names as Theology, Etiology (how beliefs came to be).

Keep in mind our methodology of Post-Critical Naivete – where sacred principles in a story are not at the mercy of historical accuracy.

A. In Genesis, names are rarely incidental. They often function as *interpretive commentary* on the narrative itself. The Primeval History (Genesis 1–11) and the Ancestral Narratives (Genesis 12–50) are deeply shaped by meaningful names that act as theology.

1. Primeval History (Genesis 1–11)

- a. Adam *adamah* (ground/soil) → the human is earth-creature.
- b. Eve *ḥayah* (life) → “Mother of all living.”
- c. Cain “created.”
- d. Abel “vapor” “breath,” “vanity.” Abel’s life is literally a vapor.
- e. Nod – “wandering,” → Cain, the murderer becomes the wanderer.
- f. Seth – “appointed/placed.” God has “appointed” another offspring.
- g. Noah – “rest.”

2. Ancestral History (Genesis 12–50) The narrative shifts from universal humanity to a particular family.

- a. Abram - “Exalted father” to Abraham - “Father of many/multitude.”
- b. Hagar, Ishmael & El Roi - Hagar, “stranger/sojourner” even “foreigner” (notice Abram is also an alien in a foreign land – consider the implications of a patriarchal narrative that neglects to condemn the slavery of Hagar (a foreigner), yet portrays Abram as “exalted” (who is also a foreigner). Redeeming the text is realized in Ishmael, or “God hears;” in Hagar’s naming of God, El Roi “God who sees.” Here the theology deepens: the outcast is seen, the oppressed is heard, these names act as resistance to patriarchy.
- c. Jacob → Israel, Jacob - “heel” and “supplanting.” He grasps Esau’s heel at birth. After wrestling with the Divine, he is renamed Israel — “one who wrestles, strives with God.” The individual becomes a people. The trickster becomes the struggler. Israel’s identity is forged through the wrestling.

B. The names don’t just label characters — they *advance theology*.

1. Why Naming Raises Questions.

- a. The presence of meaningful names and etiological storytelling raises questions about how Genesis is doing history—but it does not automatically settle whether the characters were “real.”
- b. Genesis 1–11 → mythic / archetypal
- c. Genesis 12–50 → ancestral narrative with possible historical core

C. World BEHIND the Text: ANE (all predating the Hebrew Bible’s oral and written traditions).

1. Israel inherited a common ancient storytelling culture. Genesis 1–11 especially resembles ANE mythic storytelling.
 - a. Epic of Gilgamesh, Atrahasis Tradition, Sumerian King Lists, Canaanite Context, Egyptian comparanda (all predating Genesis) - names align with narrative function and the characters’ names often encode their role in cosmic drama.

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V. Redemption in protest and reversals of fortune.

A. Redeeming Leah from the Patriarchal System.

1. Leah is treated as a commodity or property. Side note, those who argue biblical marriage to resist marriage equality (e.g., Q+ marriage) have not engaged deep study of biblical marriage.
 - a. Though unloved, she is the one through whom God opens the womb first.
 - b. Rachel, the beloved wife, initially remains barren.
 - c. Leah names her fourth son Judah saying, “This time I will praise the Lord” (Genesis 29:35). Importantly, Judah — not Joseph (Rachel’s son) — receives the royal blessing in Genesis 49. That already elevates Leah’s line above Rachel’s in terms of kingship. So, the Hebrew Bible itself performs a quiet reversal: the overlooked wife becomes the matriarch of the royal line.
 - d. Davidic Kingship arises from Judah (Leah). The unloved wife becomes mother of kings.
2. Jesus comes through Judah and David (Leah’s line).
 - a. Jesus comes through the “unloved” wife’s lineage.
 - b. The one who longed for love becomes ancestress of Jesus.
3. This fits a larger biblical pattern of reversal:
 - a. Younger over elder.
 - b. Barren over fertile.
 - c. Weak over strong.
 - d. The rejected becomes included.
- e. Leah’s story becomes one more instance of God choosing what appears secondary or unwanted to bring about redemption.
- f. Leah and Jacob are buried together in the cave of Machpelah (Genesis 49:31), not Rachel. In death, Leah occupies the place of covenant matriarch.
4. A Theological Pattern
 1. If we zoom out, Leah’s trajectory mirrors a recurring biblical theme:
 - a. God sees the unseen. Hears the unheard. Elevates the lowly.

VI. The World IN FRONT of the Text.

A. Decision Time

1. The ancestral history justifies patriarchy.
2. The ancestral history offers a critique of patriarchy and redemption for the oppressed.
3. Which interpretation will be yours? And, what might this say of your image of God?
