EXPLORING BIBLE PROPHECY
from GENESIS to REVELATION

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Genesis is the book of beginnings. It tells the story of the beginnings of the human race and the Hebrew nation. It also lays the foundation for the beginning of biblical prophecy. Genesis offers a rich tapestry of prophetic promise, predominantly messianic prophecy. The first book of the Bible fires an attention-seizing opening salvo of messianic prophecy of both the figure of the Messiah Himself as well as the magnificent messianic age to come. Indeed, Genesis establishes the template from which all other prophetic expectations spring. Specific, temporal prophecies are assuredly found within the pages of this foundational volume, but the majority of prophetic action in this text concerns vast, enduring themes that span protracted timetables, such as the Abrahamic Covenant, Israel’s future hope, and, of course, the aforementioned promised Messiah.

The Lord, after creating Adam as the pinnacle of His creation, executes His initial command. The instruction contains both divine consent and prohibition, blessing and warning, stretching the limits of Adam’s yet untapped moral capacities. Adam would be allowed unlimited access to the fruit of every tree within the Garden of Eden, with the sole exception of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” The command concludes with the conditional warning that death would result from violation of the prohibition (2:16-17).

Eventually, both Adam and Eve succumb to the serpent’s temptation. They willingly disobey the Lord’s command by eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Although Adam and Eve thought the fruit would give them the satanically promised divine ability to comprehend good and evil, as Walvoord points out, neither of them realized that eating the fruit would result in their “knowing the good without being able to do it and knowing the evil without being able to avoid it” (Walvoord, Prophecy Knowledge Handbook, p. 20). Instead of the anticipated instant wisdom, they experience immediate shame, guilt, and alienation from one another and God (3:6-13). As God had promised, from that moment onward, death would plague Adam and his progeny (3:19; 5:5).

Genesis 3:15 foresees a coming Messiah, born of a woman, who will defeat Satan. This earliest and foundational messianic prophecy is found a mere three chapters into the Bible.
Following the moral failure of Adam and Eve and in conjunction with the explanation of the harsh and enduring consequences wrought by their disobedience (3:6-13,16-19), this *proto-evangelium* ("first gospel") provides hope for the redemption of the fallen human race. It proclaims the coming of a Savior who will enter the human race and defeat the power of Satan.

The Lord declares war on the motivating cause of Edenic sin, the serpent (Satan), who is identified by the apostle John as “the serpent of old” (Revelation 20:2). In the Lord’s curse on the serpent, we see an initial glimpse of the divine plan for humanity’s redemption. This passage contains far more than the mere origin of the antagonistic relationship between mankind and snakes. It is the theological explanation for the conflict between good and evil. A descendant of Eve would be born who would successfully wage holy war against Satan and his offspring. Although both holy warrior and evil adversary will sustain punishing injury (to heel and head, respectively) in the conflict, the damage dealt to Satan will prove fatal.

The bruising of the Savior’s heel is especially insightful in relation to the bruised heels and torn flesh of crucifixion victims. Although the identity of God’s chosen warrior is shrouded in mystery, this individual will be the offspring of a woman—a prophetic reference to the virgin birth of Christ.

The New Testament clearly teaches that the Messiah’s resurrection will most assuredly signal the final victory over Satan (Revelation 20:10). Indeed, the apostle Paul encourages the believers in Rome that God would shortly crush Satan underneath their feet (Romans 16:20).

In light of the aforementioned prophecy concerning the promise of an ultimate deliverer for humanity, Eve’s reaction to the birth of her firstborn son, Cain, is not surprising. Most versions of Scripture add additional words to this text (“with the help of,” NIV, NASB, RSV or “from,” NKJV) in an attempt to make the translation clearer. While this is certainly an interpretively and grammatically valid decision, such an addition is not grammatically necessary and actually detracts from the messianic implication of the Hebrew text. The simplest reading of the text sees the Hebrew particle *et* as the accusative indication of object. The text of Genesis 4:1 would then have Eve stating, “I have obtained a man, the Lord” (Hebrew, *et-YHWH*).

This grammatical understanding, while not held by the Septuagint (Greek translation of the original Hebrew text), is shared by the other ancient Jewish sources. For example, both the ancient Aramaic *Jerusalem Targum* and *Targum Jonathan* paraphrase this text to read, “I have gotten a man, the angel of YHWH.” Fruchtenbaum (*Messianic Christology*, p. 16) notes that the discussion of this verse within the Midrash on Genesis reveals ancient rabbinic interpretive discomfort with accepting the plain, unembellished grammatical construction of the text. He argues that “Eve has clearly understood from God’s words in Gen. 3:15 that the serpent will be defeated by a God-man. She obviously thinks that Cain is Jehovah. Her basic theology is correct: Messiah would be both man and God….She has assumed that Cain, her first child, was the promised God-man.”

**THE “RAPTURE” OF ENOCH**

*Genesis 5:24*

The narrative of *Genesis* briefly introduces the reader to Enoch, a man whose lifestyle is characterized by a deeply intimate relationship with the Lord (“Enoch walked with God”). Without warning, the text abruptly records that Enoch “was not, for God took him” (5:24). In contrast with the
text’s matter-of-fact citation of the death of a plethora of Enoch’s ancestors (5:1-20), the Lord uniquely allows Enoch to avoid the experience of death, taking him directly into the divine presence, no doubt, to better enjoy their advanced level of fellowship.

The absence of the specific term “rapture” in the English Bible in no way invalidates the presence of the concept within both Testaments. Genesis 5:24 is a small gem tucked away in the midst of a sea of genealogy that should be treasured as a potent preview of the church’s “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13), the experience the New Testament promises for one unique generation of believers—those who are alive when Messiah returns (1 Corinthians 15:51-55; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Early humanity’s continued messianic expectation is again evident with the birth of Noah. Lamech, Noah’s father, has great yet incorrect expectations of his son, mistakenly identifying Noah as the divinely promised yet shadowy messianic figure (3:15). While not meeting Lamech’s hope of providing mankind “rest from our work…from the ground which the Lord has cursed” (5:29), Noah would, nonetheless, prove a savior of sorts, representing humanity’s last, best hope within his generation (Genesis 6:8-22).

Some 371 days after first entering the ark (7:11; 8:13-14), Noah, his family, and the animals emerge. Noah’s first recorded action on dry land is to erect “an altar to the LORD,” on which he makes a sacrifice (8:20). This prompts the Lord’s articulation of the central promise of the newly established Noahic Covenant to never again “curse the ground” or “destroy every living thing” through means of flood (8:21-22; see also 9:15). The “everlasting covenant” is made by God without condition, not only with Noah, but also universally, with “every living creature.” The sign of the covenant is, of course, the rainbow (9:16). The promises of this covenant are still in effect today.

Some time later, Noah’s son, Ham, exhibits vulgar disrespect to his father (9:20-24). This prompts Noah to a harsh reprisal of
prophetic judgment against Ham’s future descendants, the Canaanites. The Canaanites would be subservient to the descendants of both Shem and Japheth. This subjugation of the Canaanites is, indeed, seen throughout Old Testament history (one such example of this is found in Joshua 8:27). In contrast to the cursing of Ham’s descendants, Noah subsequently blesses the descendants of his other two sons, Shem and Japheth, who would remain in close geographic proximity and maintain friendly relations (Genesis 9:25-27). The initial descendants of Noah’s three sons and their geographic dispersal is recorded in Genesis 10:1-32.

The Genesis narrative reveals that the Abrahamic Covenant is a complex of unconditional promises that are stated and reiterated over a period of years within a series of six recorded encounters between God and Abraham. Each successive restatement expands upon and enlarges the promised provisions of the primary, central core of the covenant.

The first passage, Genesis 12:1-3, records God’s initial encounter with Abraham, in which He communicates His commission and His initial promised blessings to Abraham. The narrative records the divine instruction for Abraham to leave his home in Mesopotamia and go “to the land which I will show you.” Although the promises contained within the Abrahamic Covenant are unconditional (see below), the establishment of the covenant itself is conditioned upon Abraham’s initial act of obedience to this command. Every provision and promise is contingent upon Abraham’s voluntary abandonment of his home and relocation to the land that God promises to reveal. Without this initial act of obedience on Abraham’s part, the covenant would not have been established, and the Genesis narrative (and world history) would have taken a different turn. However, Abraham is obedient (12:4-6).

This initial iteration of the covenant contains promises of personal blessing (“I will bless you”) in specific relation to numerous offspring (“make you a great nation”), reputation (“make your name great”) and universal influence (“you shall be a blessing” and “in you all the families of the earth will be blessed”) (12:2-3). This universal influence would extend to divine, retributive justice in regard to how Abraham (and by implication, his offspring) is treated by others (“I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse”).

The first expansion of the Abrahamic Covenant’s promises is revealed in Genesis 12:7. Following Abraham’s arrival in the land of Canaan, the Lord promises that Abraham’s descendants would inherit the land as a gift (“to your descendants I will give this land”). Abraham later identifies this promise as a divine oath, a solemn, unconditional guarantee (24:7).

The second expansion of the Abrahamic Covenant’s promises is contained in Genesis 13:14-17. After Lot departs for richer pastures, the Lord again appears to Abraham and reconfirms His intention to give the entirety of Canaan to Abraham’s descendants. While not providing specifics concerning borders, the Lord commands Abraham that the land, in every direction, belongs to him and to his descendants. Abraham is divinely encouraged to expand his depth of view by walking the length and breadth of the land. One expansion of the covenant promises relayed here is the revelation of Abraham’s personal possession of the land, which had previously only been promised to his descendants. Another expansion is the eternal duration of his offspring’s ownership of the land (“I will give it to you and to your descendants forever”). The Lord also defines the parameters of what He had previously meant by the promise of a “great nation” in 12:2 (“I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth”—13:16).

The third expansion of the Abrahamic
Covenant’s promises is contained in Genesis 15:1-21. Abraham, frustrated by his continued childlessness, is divinely reassured that he will indeed have a physical heir (15:1-4). This is followed by another mention of numerous offspring, like the stars (15:5). In response to a second divine verbal reassurance, this time concerning the gift to Abraham of the land, Abraham requests additional, more tangible assurance (15:7-8).

God then leads Abraham through a solemn covenant ritual designed to remove all doubt. The ritual, described in 15:9-17, corresponds to the ancient Near Eastern covenant practice of blood covenant (Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 57), with one similarity being the cutting of the animals and placing of the severed sections in two parallel rows. However, both parties to the covenant would normally walk between the rendered animal pieces, indicating the mandatory nature of the covenant and the severe penalty for future infraction. In this unique instance, Abraham is rendered impotent, completely passive, and unable to move (15:12). God alone binds Himself to the covenant by passing as “a flaming torch” through the animal pieces (15:17), graphically demonstrating the unconditional nature of the covenant. As Pentecost notes, Abraham is not a participant in the covenant but a recipient of the covenant (*Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 58).

Chisholm sees this ritual as a land grant, marking “the actual transfer of the land to Abraham’s offspring” as well as (by implication) the ratification of the promise of offspring (Chisholm, “Evidence from Genesis,” pp. 41-42). The actual geographic borders of the Promised Land are specified at this time, extending from “the river of Egypt” in the south to “the great river,” the Euphrates, in the north (15:18). In addition, the current inhabitants of the land are enumerated, in prophetic preparation for their displacement (15:19-21).

During this covenant ritual, the Lord prophetically reveals to Abraham that while he would die peacefully at an advanced age, his descendants would be “strangers in a land that is not theirs,” where they would be enslaved and oppressed for 400 years. The oppressor nation would experience divine judgment, however, and Abraham’s descendants would not depart empty-handed. They would return to the Promised Land when the iniquity of Canaan’s current inhabitants had sufficiently ripened (15:13-16). This prophecy would be fulfilled with the nation of Israel’s Egyptian sojourn, enslavement, and exodus, as well as their conquest of the land (recorded in the books of Exodus through Joshua).

The **fourth expansion** of the Abrahamic Covenant’s promises is contained in Genesis 17:1-21. God again appears to Abraham, identifying Himself as God Almighty (Hebrew, *el shaddai*), “the one who grants fertility and life” (Chisholm, “Evidence from Genesis,” p. 42). This encounter adds the requirement of circumcision, a physical sign of the covenant, on the eighth day for Abraham and his male descendants (17:10-14). This is to serve as a vivid reminder, in blood, to every descendant of Abraham of God’s “everlasting covenant” (17:7).

At this time, in conjunction with the reiteration of the promise of innumerable descendants, the Lord changes Abraham’s name from *Abram* (“exalted father”) to *Abraham* (“father of multitudes”). The covenant blessing is expanded to incorporate not just a single nation to issue forth from Abraham, but “nations,” as well as kings. Reiterated, as well, is the promise of Abraham’s and his descendants’ eternal possession of the land (17:1-8). And another promise is added to the covenant complex—that of a personal relationship with Israel (“I will be their God”—17:8).

The **fifth and climactic expansion** of the Abrahamic Covenant is found in Genesis 22:15-18, in conjunction with the famous narrative of the binding of Isaac, the ultimate test of the faith of Abraham, the father of multitudes (22:1-13). Having been prepared to obediently sacrifice his only son, the son of promise, Abraham is divinely recognized as the worthy recipient of the covenant promises (22:16).

Using the most intensive form of divine oath (“by Myself I have sworn”—22:16), the Lord
restates and ratifies four separate components of the covenant. First, hearkening back to the initial promise of 12:2, the Lord restates His intention of divine blessing. Second, echoing the promises of Genesis 13:16, 15:5, and 17:2-6, God restates His promise of innumerable descendants. Third, summarizing the promises of possession of the land in Genesis 12:7, 13:15, 15:18, 17:8, and with veiled reference to the nations mentioned in 15:19-21, the Lord promises Abraham’s descendants possession of enemy cities. Fourth, hearkening back to the initial set of promises concerning universal influence in 12:3, the Lord reaffirms that all nations would be blessed through the seed of Abraham (22:15-18).

The influence of the Abrahamic Covenant is woven throughout the tapestry of Scripture, from the twelfth chapter of Genesis through the final chapter of Revelation. It forms the foundational basis for every subsequent covenant in the Bible. Absent this covenant (or through the neutering of the covenant through the spiritualization of its promises), Israel’s right to the land is incomprehensible, the messianic age could never be anticipated, and the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles in spiritual union would be unthinkable. Echoes of the Abrahamic Covenant’s celebrated themes of blessing resound from the exodus through conquest, from kingdom to exile, from incarnation to resurrection, and from the nation of Israel to the universal dominion of the Messiah.

The Genesis narrative records three divine prophetic promises concerning the destiny of Ishmael. The first promise is found in 16:7-13. Abraham’s firstborn son is Ishmael, a product of “the man of faith” prematurely taking genealogical matters into his own hands with Sarah’s maid, Hagar. Pregnant and desperate to flee Sarah’s harsh treatment, Hagar encounters the angel of the Lord. This is the first reference within the Old Testament to a physical manifestation of God Himself—that is, a preincarnate appearance of the second person of the Trinity (Genesis 18:1-2; 19:1; 22:11-12; 31:11-13; Exodus 3:1-4; Numbers 22:22; Judges 2:1-4; 5:23; 6:11,16,22; 13:22-23; Zechariah 3:1-2; 12:8).

Hagar is instructed to return to Sarah and to her work, for she would be divinely blessed with innumerable descendants, beginning with the son currently in her womb. His name is to be Ishmael, meaning “God hears” (to which Hagar enthusiastically responds by christening the Lord with a name that means “a God who sees”). Ishmael would live as “a wild donkey,” a roaming, free spirit, hostile by nature and at odds with most of society, experiencing continuous conflict. He would dwell “to the east of all his brothers” (16:7-12). Twenty-one chapters later in the narrative, Ishmaelites are the means by which Joseph, Abraham and Sarah’s great-grandson, is carried off to Egypt (37:28).

The second promise concerning Ishmael is found in 17:20. While Abraham receives divine instruction regarding circumcision, the sign of the covenant, along with an encouraging reminder of his wife’s prophesied pregnancy with Isaac, Abraham expresses concern that Ishmael not be divinely neglected. God responds that He has heard Abraham’s concern that “God hears” (Ishmael) not be overlooked. As Abraham’s son, Ishmael would also experience divine blessing and would become “the father of twelve princes,” who together would flourish into “a great nation” of innumerable descendants (17:20).

The third promise concerning Ishmael is found in 21:18. It is a reconfirmation to Hagar, discouraged after having been sent away, of God’s promise, previously made to Abraham, that Ishmael not be divinely neglected. God responds that He has heard Abraham’s concern that “God hears” (Ishmael) not be overlooked. As Abraham’s son, Ishmael would also experience divine blessing and would become “the father of twelve princes,” who together would flourish into “a great nation” (21:18). Indeed, Ishmael’s 12 sons are listed in 1 Chronicles 1:28-31.

The apostle Paul later uses Genesis’ account of Ishmael’s birth as typological of the Torah,
in contrast to the typological use of Isaac, the son of promise, in reference to the believer's freedom in the Messiah (Galatians 4:21-31).

Regarding Abraham’s divinely initiated and subsequently aborted sacrifice of his son, commonly known in Jewish tradition as the Akedah, “the binding of Isaac,” the rabbinic teaching has always viewed the willing sacrifice of Abraham, and especially Isaac’s willingness to offer himself, as an act of vicarious atonement throughout the future history of their descendants, the nation of Israel. The righteousness of the patriarchs could be vicariously applied to their descendants in time of spiritual need.

The rabbis were not completely off base when they saw a picture of atonement in Isaac. The events of Genesis 22 are a prime example of what Scripture calls “a mere shadow of what is to come” (Colossians 2:17). Isaac was a prophetic type, a picture, of the Messiah. Jesus was not only the ultimate Israel, the ultimate David, and the ultimate Moses, but also the ultimate Isaac. Both Isaac and Jesus were the sons of promise. Both men had miraculous births. Both were obedient and willing sons who were prepared and ready to lay down their lives at their Father’s behest. Both sons even carried the wood for their own sacrifice.

Both Isaac and Jesus had fathers who were prepared to slay them to fulfill a larger purpose. As Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, so too was God willing to sacrifice His only Son. Yet God did not demand of Abraham what He demanded of Himself. The Lord provided a substitute sacrifice for the son of Abraham, a ram caught in the thicket. However, there was no alternative sacrifice for the Son of God. Jesus became the Lamb of God, slain for the sin of the world (John 1:29). If indeed Christ Himself was the angel of the Lord who called to Abraham, then He was not willing that Abraham slay his son. Yet He was willing to let the Father sacrifice Him on our behalf.

Following the death of Abraham, the Lord appears to Isaac to reaffirm the Abrahamic Covenant with Abraham’s heir, saying, “I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham.” Instructing Isaac to remain in the land of his inheritance, the Lord reaffirms the covenant blessings of His personal presence, numerous descendants (“as the stars of heaven”), universal blessing (“by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed”), and permanent ownership of the land (“to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands”) (26:2-5). The appearance concludes with a reminder of the unconditionality of the Abrahamic Covenant, which was based upon Abraham’s initial act of obedience to God (Genesis 12:4).

Having earlier obtained Esau’s birthright through a trade (25:27-34), Jacob now steals his older brother’s rightful blessing through duplicity and deception (27:1-26). Taking advantage of his father Isaac’s blindness by disguising himself as Esau, Jacob comes before his father. He then receives the prophetic blessing meant for Isaac’s firstborn son, Esau (27:27-29). Isaac’s blessing of Jacob is fourfold: First, blessing is granted in the area of agricultural and economic prosperity. Second, blessing is granted in the area of intercultural relations with other nations and clans. Third, Jacob is granted his father’s patriarchal authority over
Esau and his descendants. And fourth, Isaac transfers the inheritance of the Abrahamic Covenant upon his son by quoting God’s foundational promise of reciprocal blessing and cursing (originally made to Abraham in Genesis 12:3).

Jacob, prior to fleeing the retributive wrath of his brother Esau for the theft of their father’s blessing, is summoned into Isaac’s presence for an additional, final blessing. Whereas earlier Isaac had unknowingly transferred the inheritance of the Abrahamic covenant upon Jacob (27:29), here he grants a blessing to Jacob with purpose and intention. The patriarch petitions the Lord for Jacob and his progeny to receive the “blessing of Abraham,” summarized as the multiplication of Jacob’s seed and possession of the land “which God gave to Abraham” (28:3-4).

Shortly thereafter, Isaac’s blessing is confirmed to Jacob by the Lord through a divine reaffirmation of the Abrahamic Covenant. After Jacob departs the land of promise and while he is resting on his journey toward Haran, the Lord appears to him and identifies Himself as “the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.” At this time, Jacob is unconditionally promised inheritance of the land, the multiplication of his descendants (“like the dust of the earth”), universal blessing (“in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed”), and the continued presence and protection of the Lord (28:13-15).

Many years later, in the same location (which Jacob had commemoratively called Bethel, “house of God”—28:19), the Lord appears again to bless Jacob and to reaffirm both the Abrahamic Covenant as well as Jacob’s name change to Israel. Identifying Himself to Jacob as “God Almighty” (Hebrew, el shaddai), the Lord reiterates His unconditional promise of numerous (and royal) descendants (“a nation and a company of nations shall come forth from you, and kings shall come forth from you”). In addition, He reiterates His unconditional promise, made previously with both Abraham and Isaac, of Jacob’s and his progeny’s possession of the land (35:9-13).

This passage, the final patriarchal reaffirmation of the Abrahamic Covenant in the Genesis narrative, is designed to recall God’s specific, confirming appearance to Jacob’s grandfather, Abraham, in Genesis 17:1-8. Chisholm points out striking parallels between the two texts (Chisholm, “Evidence from Genesis,” p. 52). These similarities include the Lord’s identification of Himself as “God Almighty” (35:11; 17:1); the changing of the patriarch’s name (from Jacob to Israel in 35:10 and Abram to Abraham in 17:5); the promise of numerous descendants, including kings (35:11; 17:2,6); and the promise of land inheritance (35:12; 17:8).

This famous passage describes an unforgettable turning point in Jacob’s life, centered within a moment of crisis. Having been long absent from his homeland, the land of promise, and now on its outskirts, Jacob prays, on the basis of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12:1-3; 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-21; 22:15-18; 28:13-15), for divine deliverance from the vengeance of his long-estranged brother, Esau (32:9-11). Having sent the entirety of his travel party on ahead, “Jacob was left alone” (32:24).

Sometime that evening, Jacob has an unexpected visitor. Rather than spending the night in fearful contemplation of Esau’s potentially hostile reaction to his return, Jacob finds himself preoccupied in a wrestling match with this visitor. The match lasted through the night until daybreak (32:24). With dawn approaching and the contest between the two wrestlers ongoing, the mysterious figure
dislocates the socket of Jacob’s thigh, severely disabling Jacob. He then demands that Jacob break off the contest. Jacob, however, continues to cling furiously, unwilling to allow the mysterious figure to depart without giving Jacob a blessing (32:25-26). At some point during the wrestling match, perhaps at the moment of his crippling injury, Jacob realizes that his opponent is no mere man, but the angel of the Lord, a physical manifestation of God Himself—that is, a preincarnate appearance of the second person of the Trinity (Genesis 18:1-2; 19:1; 22:11-12; 31:11-13; Exodus 3:1-4; Numbers 22:22; Judges 2:1-4; 5:23; 6:11,16,22; 13:22-23; Zechariah 3:1-2; 12:8).

The angel of the Lord renames Jacob Israel (“God fights,” or “he who fights [wrestles] with God”), for Jacob, now Israel, had “striven with God and with men and [had] prevailed” (32:28). Israel then receives the divine blessing (32:29). He names the location Peniel (“face of God”), saying, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved” (32:30). This was an unforgettable encounter with the divine in which not only Jacob’s name was changed, but his lifestyle as well.

The name Israel is a double-sided prophetic portrait. On one side is the history of the stubborn, stiff-necked nation of God’s chosen people, “he who fights with God”—a nation that has wrestled with the Lord from their national inception at Sinai. On the other side are the promises of that nation’s God, a deity whose fierce passion and covenant commitment to His people know no limitation and whose ardor for His chosen people guarantees their eventual restoration. He is “the God who fights” tirelessly and unceasingly on Israel’s behalf.

Joseph was Jacob’s eleventh son, but as the firstborn of Jacob’s beloved wife, Rachel, Joseph was clearly his father’s favorite. Joseph’s multicolored coat was an indication that Jacob sought to elevate Joseph to firstborn status (37:3). Certainly the matter of a younger son supplanting elder siblings had durable family precedent with Isaac and Ishmael and with Jacob and Esau.

At the age of 17, Joseph is given two prophetic dreams. In the first dream, the harvested sheaves belonging to Joseph’s brothers bow down before his own sheaf. In the second dream, the sun, moon, and eleven stars bow before Joseph. Joseph’s brothers react to the dreams with hatred and jealousy, for they realize both dreams indicated that Joseph’s whole family would one day prostrate themselves before him in submission (37:5-11).

The brothers’ jealousy and contempt for Joseph leads to his being sold into slavery (37:18-36). The Genesis narrative records how Joseph, over the next 20 years, rose in Egypt from his roles as both slave and convict to eventual ruler of the nation, second only to Pharaoh (39–41). Joseph’s prophetic dreams later found fulfillment when his brothers traveled to Egypt during a famine and, not yet recognizing him, bowed before Joseph to beg for food (42:6).

In the book of Acts, Stephen presents Joseph as a prophetic type of the Messiah (7:9-16). Although Joseph had been rejected by his own family, he had been accepted by foreigners in a foreign land, Egypt, and exalted by God’s hand. Moreover, Stephen argues that Joseph, who eventually had progressed from rejection to exaltation, became the savior of those who had rejected him. Joseph’s brothers did not recognize Joseph the first time they saw him. It was not until their second visit that they recognized their brother (Genesis 42–45). In other words, the sons of Israel did not perceive that their own brother was their savior until their second appearance before him.

Stephen’s parallel is clear: The first time the descendants of the sons of Israel saw Jesus, they likewise did not recognize Him. It will take a second viewing for perception to dawn. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the Jewish people will not perceive that Jesus is their
Messiah until His glory is eminently manifest upon His return.

While Joseph is in prison, two fellow prisoners approach him and ask him to interpret their recent dreams. After the first man, Pharaoh’s former cupbearer, relays the details of his dream, Joseph interprets it as predicting the cupbearer’s restoration to royal favor in three days’ time (40:12-13). Indeed, the cupbearer is later restored to his former position (verse 21).

When the second man, Pharaoh’s former chief baker, relays the details of his dream, Joseph interprets it as predicting the baker’s execution in three days’ time (verses 18-19). As Joseph predicted, the baker is later executed (verse 22).

Two years after Joseph’s successful interpretation of the cupbearer’s and baker’s dreams, he is summoned from prison to appear before Pharaoh to interpret two dreams that puzzled Pharaoh. The cupbearer, who until this time had forgotten about Joseph, had suggested that Pharaoh allow Joseph the opportunity to interpret these dreams. Joseph correctly interprets the dreams to indicate that Egypt will experience seven years of agricultural plenty, which will be followed by seven years of famine. Joseph then makes recommendations as to how the nation could prepare for the next 14 years. Pharaoh responds by elevating Joseph to ruler of the nation, second only to Pharaoh. The text records the occurrence of seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, just as Joseph predicted (41:47-57).

Having joyously discovered that his son Joseph, whom he had believed to be dead for two decades, is alive, Jacob, along with the entire family, emigrates to Egypt to live under Joseph’s munificence. On the way to Egypt, Jacob offers sacrifices to God at Beersheba (46:1). That evening the Lord reassures Jacob of His divine blessing. Jacob is not to be afraid of an Egyptian sojourn, for while Jacob’s family is in Egypt, God would forge them into “a great nation” (46:3). The Israelites’ time in Egypt would be temporary, was for their benefit, and would be divinely superintended (46:2-4). That Jacob understood God’s reassurance concerning the temporary nature of his family’s time in Egypt is evidenced by Joseph’s deathbed request that his bones accompany the Hebrews upon their eventual exodus from Egypt back into the land of promise (Genesis 50:24-25). A special reassurance is that Jacob is about to see his son, Joseph, and that the two would not part again before Jacob’s death (46:4). The narrative of Genesis 46:29 relays how Joseph, riding to meet his beloved father in his royal chariot, is emotionally reunited with his Father.
prophetic content of his remarks by identifying them as revealing what the future holds for his family “in the days to come” (Hebrew, b’acharit hayyamim, “the end of days”—49:1-2).

Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn and heir, was disinherited from the position of family preeminence (49:3-4) because of his affair with Bilhah, his father’s concubine (35:22). The tribe of Reuben would never reassert preeminence throughout Israel’s history.

Simeon and Levi, the next eldest brothers, are treated together (49:5-7). Correctly characterized by their father as violent and angry (34:25-29), they too are passed over for the mantle of family preeminence. Both tribes are predicted to be scattered in the land. Simeon would eventually be subsumed within the larger tribe of Judah, while Levi, as the eventual priestly tribe, would never possess a geographic tribal inheritance. Rather, the Levites would live throughout Israel’s territory.

Judah, the fourth son, is dealt with next (49:8-12). It is Judah, the “lion,” to whom the mantle of tribal leadership is passed. Judah is recognized as being worthy to receive the privileges of the firstborn. (For more on this, see the commentary for 49:10-12.)

The tribe of Zebulun would be “a haven for ships,” enriched by maritime trade (49:13). Although the tribe of Issachar was naturally equipped for hard work, they would not live up to their potential (49:14-15). Dan would provide leadership to Israel (49:16-17). Gad would both be attacked and counterattack (49:19). Asher’s tribal territory would prove abundantly fertile (49:20). Naphtali would be a speedy doe, roaming free (49:21).

Joseph receives a superior, double blessing. The tribe of Joseph would be characterized by prosperity and military capability, broadly blessed in every way. Joseph is “the one distinguished among his brothers” (49:22-26).

Finally, Benjamin is characterized as a tribe of violent warriors (49:27).

The section concludes with the affirmation that every son/tribe was blessed “with the blessing appropriate to him” (49:28).

**Within Jacob’s prophetic blessings of his 12 sons is the promise that Judah’s tribe will rightfully rule (possess the “scepter,” the symbol of royalty—49:10) over the rest of the tribes until a particular moment in history, the coming of “Shiloh” (49:10). The mysterious term Shiloh can be translated as “to whom it belongs” (as it is usually translated in Ezekiel 21:27 concerning the royal crown of Israel’s prince).

Shiloh has traditionally been understood as a messianic title, a pseudonym for Messiah. The first-century Aramaic paraphrases of the Scripture, the Targums, consistently treat this as a messianic prophecy. Targum Onkelos reads, “Kings shall not cease from the house of Judah…until Messiah come, whose is the kingdom” (quoted in Kac 19). The Palestinian Targum likewise reads, “Kings shall not cease from the house of Judah…until the time that is King Messiah shall come, whose is the kingdom” (as quoted in Kac 19-20). Targum Jonathan holds this interpretation of the verse as well, reading much the same as the other Targums, yet adding the expectation that “because of him [Messiah] nations shall melt away.”

In addition, the Midrash, a vast corpus of homiletical commentary, holds this interpretation of the passage (Midrash Rabbah, Genesis XCVII, new version; XCVIII, 8, 9; Midrash on Proverbs, chapter 19, 21, as quoted in Huckel, The Rabbinic Messiah, elec. ed.; see also Santala, Messiah in the Old Testament, pp. 50-53). Furthermore, the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98b), the Jewish oral law, and Rashi, the eleventh-century rabbinic “goliath,” all take Shiloh with reference to “King Messiah” (Kac 20).

The point is patently emphasized through the genealogies recorded within the Gospels—whether through Jesus’ adopted father (Matthew 1:1-17) or his mother (Luke 3:23-38)—that
Jesus belongs to the tribe of Judah. Interestingly, if Jesus had not come prior to the destruction of the temple and the accompanying loss of all its stored genealogical records that would occur a mere 75 years hence, any claims that He had to tribal descent from Judah would have been hopelessly unverifiable. God’s timing for the appearance of Shiloh, the one “to whom it belongs,” was impeccable.