

Genesis 47:27-48:22 – Israel Blesses Ephraim and Manasseh

Review

Last time, we saw that the Israelites settled in the land of Goshen as directed by Pharaoh because Goshen was quite suitable for such nomadic herdsmen. Nevertheless, the famine in Egypt and Canaan continued for another five years. In that time Pharaoh and Joseph nationalized the entire economy of Egypt. First the Egyptians gave Pharaoh all their money for food, then their livestock, and finally their land. Finally, Joseph established a statute under which all the people of Egypt (including Joseph's Hebrew family) became the servants of Pharaoh. They were allowed to live on Pharaoh's land and work it but were required to give one fifth of the land's produce to Pharaoh.

Jacob Blesses Joseph and His Sons

²⁷Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen. And they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied greatly. ²⁸And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years. So the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were 147 years.

²⁹And when the time drew near that Israel must die, he called his son Joseph and said to him, “If now I have found favor in your sight, put your hand under my thigh and promise to deal kindly and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt, ³⁰but let me lie with my fathers. Carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burying place.” He answered, “I will do as you have said.” ³¹And he said, “Swear to me”; and he swore to him. Then Israel bowed himself upon the head of his bed. Genesis 47:27-31 (ESV)

Of course, all of us die, but Genesis 47:29 causes me to wonder how Israel knew he was about to die. Did he suffer from some terminal illness? Perhaps, Israel in pondering his inevitable death as we all do now and again, decided he needed to get his affairs in order beginning with what we euphemistically call his “final wishes.”

The burying place Israel spoke of to Joseph was the Cave of Machpelah near Hebron which Abraham had bought from Ephron the Hittite (Genesis 23) as a burial place for his wife Sarah. Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah were later buried there.

Genesis 47:29-31 is the second mention of swearing an oath by placing a hand under the thigh of the person to whom the oath was sworn. The first (and only other) mention of this odd practice was when Abraham made his servant swear not to take a wife for his son Isaac from among the Canaanites. (Genesis 24:1-9)

¹After this, Joseph was told, “Behold, your father is ill.” So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. ²And it was told to Jacob, “Your son Joseph has come to you.” Then Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed. ³And Jacob said to Joseph, “God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, ⁴and said to me, ‘Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.’ Genesis 48:1-4 (ESV)

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It had been well over a century since **אֵל שָׁדַי 'ēl šaday** first appeared to Jacob in his dream of the stairway leading up to Heaven at Luz (Bethel) (Genesis 28) and twenty years later when He appeared there to reiterate this promise and His renaming of Jacob as Israel after he returned to Canaan from Paddan-aram (Genesis 35). Yet the memory of those encounters was still clear in Jacob's mind even as he lay on his deathbed. Jacob recounted God's promises at Bethel to his son Joseph to ensure that memory of them didn't die with him.

5And now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are. 6And the children that you fathered after them shall be yours. They shall be called by the name of their brothers in their inheritance. Genesis 48:5-6 (ESV)

Jacob's blunt claim upon Joseph's sons as his own is striking and had momentous consequences. Up until this time, the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were clear – Jacob's own sons. But from this point on, Ephraim and Manasseh became patriarchs of their own tribes of Israel. These tribes took their place in the censuses, the encampment, and the marching order of Israel during the 40-year wilderness wandering. Ephraim and Manasseh each received their own allocation after Israel's conquest of the land of Canaan. In fact, Manasseh received two – one on the east of the Jordan and one on the west.

Later Biblical listings of the “twelve” tribes are quite muddled. Sometimes Joseph is listed with Ephraim and Manasseh tacitly included under their father's name. Sometimes Ephraim and Manasseh are listed separately with Joseph himself not listed. Yet the number of the tribes of Israel is always considered to be twelve rather than thirteen or fourteen.

Sometimes Levi is excluded from the list, particularly in the listings of the allocation of Canaan because the Levites were a priestly tribe and did not receive their own inheritance. The lands allocated to the Levites were taken from within the allocations of the other tribes.

In Revelation 7, the listing of the 144,000 sealed servants enumerates 12,000 from each of twelve tribes. In this listing, Dan and Ephraim are excluded but strangely Joseph is listed and so is Joseph's eldest son Manasseh.

ASIDE – Beginning with the Babylonian captivity the tribal identities of most Jews became blurred. Recall from the book of Nehemiah that considerable care was needed to reestablish the genealogies of those who were to assume priestly duties in the rebuilding of Jerusalem. This problem was compounded in 70 AD when the Romans destroyed the temple effectively bringing the priestly order to an end. The remainder of the people were banished from Jerusalem and subsequently dispersed around the world. Finally, when virtually all the Jewish genealogical records of Europe were destroyed during the Nazi Holocaust much of the Jewish corporate memory of their tribal identity was destroyed with them. Consequently, today few Jews know their tribal ancestry.

7As for me, when I came from Paddan, to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan on the way, when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). Genesis 48:7 (ESV)

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It's strange to find this story of Rachel's death sandwiched into the middle of Jacob's dying blessings. Perhaps he just wanted to remind Joseph of his continuing love for his mother and grief over her death these many years later.

8When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, "Who are these?" 9Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." And he said, "Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them." 10Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see. So Joseph brought them near him, and he kissed them and embraced them. 11And Israel said to Joseph, "I never expected to see your face; and behold, God has let me see your offspring also." 12Then Joseph removed them from his knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. Genesis 48:8-12 (ESV)

The placement of these verses is also a bit odd, since Jacob had spoken of Ephraim and Manasseh earlier in the story. For some mysterious reason, God apparently chose to tell Moses the story in this order so that he could commit it to writing. Of course, the narrative order isn't important, but the order of the telling still seems a little odd. Nevertheless, it is heartwarming to envision this final intimate meeting between the dying man and his son and grandsons.

Joseph's final demonstration of deference and respect for his father by bowing to the ground before him is also quite inspiring. I sometimes wish I could still do the same before my own father, just to let him know how much I respected him simply because he was my father, despite the many unpleasant encounters that occurred between us over the years.

Reading the ESV rendering of Genesis 48:12, we might infer that Ephraim and Manasseh had been sitting on Joseph's knees, so Joseph needed to remove them before bowing before his father. This seems to make sense. However, the Hebrew text doesn't make this clear. The NLT, CSB, and NET imply that the text refers to Israel's knees, not Joseph's and that Joseph's sons were standing beside Jacob's knees not sitting upon them. Once again, this detail is entirely unimportant but does point up the inherent weakness of human language in precisely expressing our ideas. This is why it is critical for us to seek out the illumination and guidance of God's Holy Spirit whenever we read His Word!

13And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right hand, and brought them near him. 14And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands (for Manasseh was the firstborn).

Genesis 48:13-14 (ESV)

Jacob's blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh is quite ironic. Recall that Jacob had conspired with his mother Rebekah to deceive Isaac into blessing Jacob over his twin brother Esau who was the firstborn (Genesis 27). In previous studies, we discussed the preeminence of the firstborn son over the other children. Traditionally, the firstborn should have received a double portion of the family inheritance. Of course, Jacob himself had violated this tradition, seizing preeminence from his own twin brother by deception. Now here in Genesis 48 he switches the order once again with Ephraim and Manasseh. As we shall see later, Jacob did the same thing in blessing his other eleven sons when he bypassed Reuben's position as Jacob's firstborn son. But we're getting ahead of ourselves again.

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*¹⁵And he blessed Joseph and said,
“The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,
the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day,
¹⁶the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys;
and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers
Abraham and Isaac;
and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.”* Genesis 48:15-16
(ESV)

The Hebrew of Genesis 48:15 is straightforward. It is universally translated as it is in the ESV, saying that Israel blessed Joseph. But this blessing was specifically for Joseph's eldest two sons Ephraim and Manasseh. As we shall see in Genesis 49, Joseph received his own extensive blessing when Jacob blessed his own twelve sons.

Of course, in verse 15 Jacob refers to the triune God **הָאֱלֹהִים 'ělōhîm**. When Jacob said that God had been his shepherd, he not only acknowledged God as his provider and protector, but more importantly as his lifelong guide. The Hebrew **הָרָעָה rā'â** (shepherd) can also mean ruler or teacher. King David speaks of the Lord in Psalm 23:1 using the same Hebrew word and then goes on in pastoral terms to describe God's provision, protection, and guidance.

In Genesis 48:16, Jacob refers to God's angel (**מַלְאָךְ mal'āk** - messenger). I believe this is a reference to God's Holy Spirit through whom God communicated with Jacob over his entire life. When we read of God appearing to Jacob, speaking to Jacob, and even wrestling with Jacob, I believe these were manifestations of God's Holy Spirit. I must admit, I am a little jealous of Jacob in this regard. I wish my own relationship with God's Spirit were as tangible as Jacob's, although God Himself knows that I have wrestled with His Spirit more often than I care to admit.

The Hebrew **נָעָר na'ar** translated as “boys” in Genesis 48:16 refers to any male child from infancy through adolescence. Some other translations render the word as “lads.” Either way, we can safely infer that Ephraim and Manasseh were not yet fully grown at the time Jacob gave them his blessing.

*¹⁷When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him, and he took his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. ¹⁸And Joseph said to his father, “Not this way, my father; since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head.” ¹⁹But his father refused and said, “I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations.” ²⁰So he blessed them that day, saying,
“By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying,
‘God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh.’”*

Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh. Genesis 48:17-20 (ESV)

Throughout God's Word, the right hand is symbolic of power and strength – particularly the strength and power of God's own right hand. Consequently, holding a position at someone's right hand is symbolic of the place of highest honor. Thus, King David said of Christ's honor...

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1b...The LORD says to my Lord:

“Sit at my right hand,

until I make your enemies your footstool.” Psalm 110:1b (ESV)

And speaking of His own coming glorification at His trial before the high priest, Jesus Himself said...

64b...But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Matthew 26:64b (ESV)

So, by placing his right hand on Ephraim to pronounce his blessing, Jacob indicated symbolically that Ephraim would be honored above Manasseh despite Manasseh being the firstborn of Joseph's sons.

The wording of Jacob's blessing in Genesis 48:20 may be a little confusing. Jacob was speaking here of the nation of Israel to come from his descendants, not of his own name. Genesis 48:20 is the first such use of the name Israel to refer to the people rather than Jacob himself.

21Then Israel said to Joseph, “Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your fathers. 22Moreover, I have given to you rather than to your brothers one mountain slope that I took from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and with my bow.”

Genesis 48:21-22 (ESV)

The translation of Genesis 48:21 is somewhat problematic. The Hebrew **שָׂקֵם** rendered in the ESV as “**mountain slope**” means shoulder or back. Some English translations render it simply as portion or portion of land. Recall that this was also the name of the town where Jacob's family first settled in Canaan after their return from Paddan-aram. The land Jacob referred to here may have been somewhere near that town.

Regardless of that, this mention of Jacob having taken the land by force from the Amorites is found only here in Genesis 48:22. Therefore, the exact location of this portion of land Jacob specifically gave to Joseph instead of his brothers remains a mystery.

What's most important in this passage isn't the details about this portion of land, but Jacob's prophecy that God would return Joseph eventually (albeit in death) to Canaan – the land of his fathers.

Looking Ahead

Next time we'll look the blessings and prophecies Jacob pronounced upon his sons before he died.