

Genesis 46: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 46 Then Jacob set out from Beersheba.

The sons of Israel carried Jacob their father, their little ones, and their wives, in the wagons that Pharaoh had sent to carry him. They also took their livestock and their goods, which they had gained in the land of Canaan, and came into Egypt, Jacob and all his offspring with him, his sons and his sons' sons with him, his daughters and his sons' daughters, all his offspring he brought with him into Egypt.

Now these are the names of the descendants of Israel who came into Egypt, Jacob and his sons, Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, and the sons of Reuben, Hanok, Palu, Hezron, and Carmi, the sons of Simeon, Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jachin, Zohar, and Shul, the son of a Canaanite woman, the sons of Levi, Gershon, Kohath, and Merari, the sons of Judah, Ur, Onan, Shelah, Perez, and Zerah, but Ur and Onan died in the land of Canaan, and the sons of Perez were Hezron and Hamel, the sons of Issachar, Tola, Puva, Job, and Shimron, the sons of Zebulun, Sered, Elon, and Jaliel.

These are the sons of Leah, whom she brought to Jacob in Paddan and Ram, together with his daughter Dinah, all together his sons and his daughters numbered thirty-three. The sons of Gad, Ziphion, Haggai, Shuni, Esbon, Eri, Erodai, and Erelai, the sons of Asher, Imna, Ishva, Ishvi, Beriah, with Sarah their sister, and the sons of Beriah, Heber, and Malkiel.

These are the sons of Zilpah, whom Laban gave to Leah his daughter, and these she brought to Jacob, sixteen persons. The sons of Rachel, Jacob's wife, Joseph, and Benjamin.

[2 : 29] And to Joseph in the land of Egypt were born Manasseh and Ephraim, whom Asenath, the daughter of Potipharah, the priest of On, bore to him. And the sons of Benjamin, Bela, Bekah, Ashbel, Gerah, Nehman, Ehai, Rosh, Mupim, Hupim, and Ard.

These are the sons of Rachel, who were born to Jacob, fourteen persons in all, the sons of Dan, Hushim, the sons of Naphtali, Jaziel, Guni, Jezer, and Shilam.

These are the sons of Bilhah, whom Laban gave to Rachel his daughter, and these she brought to Jacob, seven persons in all. All the persons belonging to Jacob who came into Egypt, who were his own descendants, not including Jacob's son's wives, were sixty-six persons in all.

And the sons of Joseph, who were born to him in Egypt, were two. All the persons of the house of Jacob, who came into Egypt, were seventy. He had sent Judah ahead of him to Joseph to show the way before him in Goshen, and they came into the land of Goshen.

Then Joseph prepared his chariot and went out to meet Israel his father in Goshen. He presented himself to him and fell on his neck, and wept on his neck a good while. Israel said to Joseph, Now let me die, since I have seen your face, and know that you are still alive.

[3 : 53] Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's household, I will go up and tell Pharaoh and will say to him, My brothers and my father's household, who were in the land of Canaan, have come to me.

And the men are shepherds, for they have been keepers of livestock, and they have brought their flocks and their herds and all that they have. When Pharaoh calls you and says, What is your occupation? You shall say, Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our fathers, in order that you may dwell in the land of Goshen.

For every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians. In Genesis chapter 46, Jacob goes down to Egypt. On the way down to Egypt, he stops at Beersheba, which is just on the borders of the land, and God appears to him at Beersheba, as he appeared to Isaac at Beersheba in chapter 26.

He identifies as the God of Jacob's father, much as he identified himself as the God of Abraham to Isaac. There is a chain of divine grace following all the way through this story.

By identifying himself as the God of the person's father, God shows that he is the one who has been faithful through generations. He is the one who has led Abraham.

[5 : 07] He is the one who has led Isaac. And now he is the one who is going to lead Jacob. He calls to Jacob, Jacob, Jacob. And the response is, Here I am. I will bring you down.

And then I will bring you up again. You singular. He will be made into a great nation within this space. Jacob is the individual, but he is also Israel, the nation. And the way that he is addressed here is similar to the address that God gives to Abraham in chapter 22 before the binding of Isaac. Jacob is going to have to descend with his family into a realm that is not their own, a realm that is one in which they may feel very vulnerable. He is going to have to enter into something akin to a state of death and then trust God to raise him up again.

That instruction, fear not, is an instruction that's given both on this occasion and also when God speaks to his father Isaac at Beersheba. The promise is that God will bring them out and that the journey won't be completed until after the Exodus.

This theme will become more prominent as we go on, particularly as we read about the burials of Jacob and of Joseph. He has also promised that Joseph will close his eyes.

[6 : 20] And that is a great assurance to him. A promise that he will be finally able to rest, that he will have physical contact with his son once more. At the end of chapter 37, he spoke of descending in mourning to Sheol.

And then when he hears the news that Joseph is alive, his spirit revives. Now he has promised that he will truly be able to rest, that Joseph will close his eyes for him, that he will be able to rest in peace, having fulfilled his full journey of his life.

Now at this point, we have something that may be a little surprising. We have a list of the names of the descendants of Israel just at this great moment of charged emotion. We have a genealogy.

It all seems very anticlimactic. Why on earth would that be put here? Let's think about it a bit more.

One interesting thing we may have noticed earlier is that there is no genealogy in Genesis 37.

We read the genealogy of Esau in chapter 36, and then in chapter 37, these are the generations of Jacob, and then Joseph being 17 years old. It just goes straight into the story.

[7 : 27] It seems strange. There seems to be something like a missing stair, perhaps. Maybe we can see this as if there has been a blockage in the pipe. The family of Jacob can only truly appear on the other side of salvation once they've been delivered.

And the genealogy is split between Egypt and Canaan. Some of these children were born in Egypt, Manasseh and Ephraim, and others were in Canaan. And they have to be united. It's a saved family, seemingly lost.

And all this story has to take place before we can actually read about the descendants of Jacob. Because it's only as God has worked to redeem this family that they can be a family in the true sense.

This is a family that has not just arisen from the flesh. This is a family of promise. A family that has been received as if from the dead. So the fact that we have to wait to this point to read about the descendants of Jacob, I think makes sense for that reason.

The genealogies and lists of names that we find in scripture also usually serve a narrative purpose. And as we look at them more closely, we'll often see numbers, structures, literary patterns or details that stand out to us.

[8 : 37] This particular genealogy is structured around the number 7. It's given in the place of Beersheba, which is connected with the number 7, as we've seen earlier on in the book of Genesis.

There are 7 named women within it. There are 70 individuals. And there are different groups of the family. Jacob served for 7 years for both groups.

Leah has 7 7s associated with her. Leah, 33 children. And Zilpa, 16 children. To make 49 altogether. Rachel has 3 7s associated with her.

21. 14 of her own children. And 7 children by Bilhah. There are 70 here. But then there are also 70 nations in Genesis chapter 10.

In scripture we see these numbers 12 and 70 both having importance. There are 12 tribes. And then there are also 70 nations. 70 leaders of the people.

[9 : 37] In Exodus chapter 15, at Elim there are 12 springs and 70 palm trees. These numbers 12 and 70 are important. Likewise in the New Testament, Jesus calls 12 disciples to be apostles and sends out 70 individuals.

Why might we see a connection with this and the story of Noah? Israel is entering into a new ark. Jacob is like a new Noah.

He's bringing his family and his livestock into a realm of safety. And he's descending into this realm awaiting a deliverance that God is about to affect.

So Egypt is like an ark. And Israel will carry forth the mandate of Noah to be fruitful and multiply to fill the earth to bring God's salvation to the world. There are some interesting patterns within this genealogy which James Bajan in particular has drawn my attention to.

Gad, for instance, is the seventh son. He has seven sons. His name has a gematrial value of seven. And there are other things associated with Gad and the number seven.

[10 : 45] Now these sorts of patterns are a means by which the text would be preserved. Because when you have these numerical patterns, you know when a name gets lost. You can remember things a bit better.

There's an order to things. And there's also a proof of preservation. When you have these details, numerical details in place, it helps to demonstrate that nothing has gone missing, that all the details are here.

And so it's one way in which these genealogies with many different names could be better remembered and better preserved. This genealogy restores the wives and their children in their proper order.

In some ways, it may be seen pushing back against the favoritism that has characterized the family to this point. We might also notice that the wives have twice as many children as the handmaids.

Leah has 33 children. Zilpah has 16. Rachel has 14 children. Bilhah has seven. And so there seems to be some implicit comment being made here.

[11 : 49] When they go down into Egypt, they are to introduce themselves as shepherds. As shepherds, they are to be separated from the Egyptians. And this is important to protect the people from just assimilating into Egypt and becoming Egyptians themselves.

There will be a time for them to come back up again. And by being identified as shepherds, they will be kept apart from Egypt. They'll be kept as a distinct people. And in time, they will be able to come up again.

This is so important for this story that they're descending into Egypt in order that they might one day come up again. As shepherds, we might also think of the association that they have with Abel as a keeper of sheep.

That Abel-Cain opposition in Genesis chapter four seems to play out in other parts of scripture. Maybe it's playing out here. Cain is associated with the workers of the land. Egypt becomes associated with the brick kiln.

And Cain is the one whose family is associated with metal work, with working upon the land, with these great buildings of empires, all these sorts of things. So maybe what we see with Israel in Egypt is a proper relationship between the keepers of sheep and the workers of the land.

[13 : 01] The people who are more settled upon the land, who are people of agriculture, who are people of city building, brick making, metal work, etc. There's also a restoration of the theme of keeping sheep.

The story of Joseph began with him keeping sheep with the sons of the handmaids. And now they've returned to keeping sheep together again. The response of Jacob to meeting Joseph is a powerful one.

There's a sort of nunc dimittis here. Now let me die, since I have seen your face and know that you are still alive. Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation. Joseph is the one who will round off the story of Jacob. The eyes of Israel will be closed. They will enter into the deep sleep of death and the deep sleep of Egypt.

Egypt is the grave. Egypt is the womb. Egypt is this deep realm of sleep from which they'll be woken when they're ready and come out of Egypt to go into the promised land.

[14 : 05] A question to consider. Judah is sent ahead of Jacob to meet with Joseph and then Joseph readies his chariot and comes to meet his father. What significance might we see in Judah's part within this movement?



