

Genesis 48: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 48 Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are, and the children that you fathered after them shall be yours. They shall be called by the name of their brothers in their inheritance.

As 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.

When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, Who are these? Joseph said to his father, These are my sons whom God has given me here. And he said, Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them. Now 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. And Israel said to Joseph, I never expected to see your face, and behold, God has let me see your offspring also.

Then Joseph removed them from his knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand towards Israel's left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand towards Israel's right hand.

[1 : 43] And he brought them near him. And 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.

And 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, The 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. When 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 remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. And Joseph said to his father, Not this way, my father, since this one is the firstborn. Put your right hand on his head.

But 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.

[2 : 52] So 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.

Then 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. Moreover, 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 continues the extended coda of the book of Genesis, and it's important to read this against the backdrop of the rest of the book. Half of the book of Genesis is given to the story of Jacob and his sons, and here we're coming to the end of that story and the summing up of its themes.

And there is a retrospective flavour to this chapter that I think is particularly important to reflect upon. The story of the blessings of the sons of Joseph is singled out as a paramount example of Jacob's faith in Hebrews chapter 11 verse 21.

You can think of all the different things that happened to Jacob in his life, and yet it's this particular event that stands out to the author of the book of Hebrews. In verse 21 we read, This chapter concerns a pivot point in the story.

[4 : 20] Jacob is no longer going to be the patriarch, he's about to die, and Joseph is about to take his place as the leader of the brothers. And then he's looking towards those who will succeed, the sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh.

And this shares light on the rest of the story because Jacob recounts his own life experience in his blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh, and his selection of them as those who will particularly represent him.

He recalls the events of chapter 29, the meeting with God at Bethel, and there's a chain of blessing, a passing on from generation to generation. We can see this in the story of Isaac, where he's blessed for the sake of Abraham.

You can see it in the story of Jacob, where he is blessed by the fear of Isaac. So there's a chain from one generation to another. And as he blesses the sons of Joseph, Jacob is looking back upon his own life and the way that God has led him.

He takes the sons of Joseph and declares that they will be like Reuben and Simeon to him. They will be adopted, as it were, as his sons, not just his grandsons, but as those who will represent him more directly.

[5 : 30] When we think about the tribes of Israel, Ephraim and Manasseh are counted among the tribes, even though they're the grandsons of Jacob rather than his sons. Why is this?

It's because Joseph receives the firstborn portion. And as the firstborn portion, he receives a double portion. And that double portion is that each of his sons receives a full portion.

This is described in 1 Chronicles chapter 5. The sons of Reuben, the firstborn of Israel, for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, the son of Israel, so that he could not be enrolled as the oldest son.

This is why we do not have a tribe of Joseph, except on rare occasions. We have a tribe of Ephraim and Manasseh, and those tribes stand for Joseph. They are Joseph's tribes.

In preparing to bless the sons of Joseph, Jacob recounts the story of his life and the way that God has led him to that point. He recalls his return to the land and Rachel's dying on the way before reaching Ephrath or Bethlehem.

[6 : 36] Now there's a common theme between Rachel's story and Jacob's story. He's going to die before reaching the promised land. He has asked Joseph to promise that he will bury him within the promised land, but he's going to die outside of the land.

He's going to wait until he's going to be brought into the land. And in the same way as Rachel, he's going to die on the way. And the experience of Joseph and his brothers will be the same. They're going to die on the way.

They're going to have to wait to be brought into the promised land. His eyes are dimmed. He uses expressions like, who are these? And there seems to be some sort of repetition of themes of the blessing scene in Genesis chapter 27.

It's that episode that hangs over the whole story of Jacob to this point, the switching around of the two sons. But yet here there seems to be a reaffirmation of that in some ways. He switches the older and the younger.

Something similar happened in chapter 38 as the two sons of Judah, Perez and Zerah, switched order as they came out of the womb, reminding us of Esau and Jacob and reaffirming the switch of the two.

[7 : 49] We also see here that grandsons are being named as sons in the same way as Perez and Zerah were named as sons. Joseph is displeased by the switching of the order of his two sons.

He thinks that they should be blessed in the order of their birth. But Jacob insists this is the way that it must be done. He blesses Joseph through Ephraim and Manasseh.

As I noted earlier, this is how Joseph receives the double portion. There's a threefold character to Jacob's blessing. The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked.

The God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day. The angel who has redeemed me from all evil. So on the one hand, God is the one whom he serves, depends upon, fears, is oriented towards, prays to and relates to as father and as the God of his fathers.

And then there's God who is the one who provides throughout his way, who directs his path, who gives life and strength and all that he needs. And then finally, God is associated with the angel, the one who redeems in times of need and distress, the one who is the kinsman redeemer in many respects, the one who sticks closer than a brother.

[9 : 02] And this is important within Jacob's life. He says, In them, let my name be carried on. His name being Israel. Later on, when the kingdom is divided, it's through Ephraim and Manasseh that the name of Israel is continued.

And then there's also this promise that people will bless through them. This draws our mind back to the promise made to Abraham when he's first called, that he would be a blessing and that through him, all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

What did the author of Hebrews see here then that made this passage stand out as such a singular example of the faith of Jacob? Perhaps it is because here, Jacob affirms all that God has been doing in his life.

He looks back on his life and he sees God's hand throughout it all. He's able to see, even in the struggles and the difficulties and the other things that he experienced as obstacles at the time, that God's hand was present.

He recounts God's dealing with him in the events of Bethel, God's preservation of him from all the things that assaulted him and the way that the angel was with him in that. He believes also that there is a legacy to be passed on and he passes on a blessing that he himself has received.

[10 : 17] He reaches that point in his race where the baton is to be handed on to the next generation. He has fought the fight, he has finished the race and he has kept the faith and he's passing something on.

His has been a difficult life. His life has been painful and miserable and a struggle in many respects. But yet, he's able to see God's hand in it, he's able to see a blessing in it and he's able to see in the next generations that this blessing will be continued and born by others still to come.

As we have already noted at the end of the previous chapter, he insists that he will be buried in the land and he says that again here. It's important for him that his destiny is there.

He is dwelling in Egypt as a sojourner. His story has not yet fully ended. He has to be returned to the land. And the blessing that he gives also speaks to God's consistency, that God is one who does not change.

The same God who has been with him will be with the sons of Joseph. He wrestled with the angel but yet recognized that the angel is the one who redeemed him from all evil.

[11 : 26] He also recognizes in the angel his true father, his true brother, the true one that has been faithful to him even as the males in his family were struggling against him or causing him difficulty whether they were his sons, whether they were his father, whether it was his uncle or whether it was his brother.

All these men were against him but yet the angel as his kinsman redeemer was with him throughout and was protecting him and guiding him. He reaffirms also the promises given to Abraham and passes them on to some people who will succeed him.

What is the land that he refers to at the end here? He wants Joseph to bury him in the land but also wants Joseph to know that he is a sojourner too. So he gives Joseph a portion of his land within the land of Canaan.

That portion seems to play upon the word for Shechem perhaps. But where is this land? It's land that he took with his sword and his bow from the Amorites but there's no mention of this in the actual text previously.

I think it's most likely part of the land that he purchased near Shechem and so he fought for the land and he also purchased it most likely. In Joshua chapter 24 verse 32 we read As for the bones of Joseph which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt they buried them at Shechem in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money.

[12 : 55] It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph. So the way that this land is described there would seem to be some common features between it and the land that's given to Joseph.

A question to consider. Jacob is presented to us as an example of faith in Hebrews chapter 11 specifically with reference to this event. What are some of the things that we can learn from the example of Jacob when it comes to speaking about our own life stories and God's involvement in them?