

Blessing for Joseph's Sons (Gen. 48:1–22)

By Jacob D. Gerber

As Jacob continues to make preparations for his impending death, he must extend blessings to his children. Just as his father, Isaac, blessed both him and Esau (Gen. 27), Jacob must pass on the patriarchal blessings to his own children. Before Jacob blesses all his children, however, Jacob will first extend a special blessing to Joseph—or, rather, to Joseph's own children. In an extraordinary step, Jacob adopts Joseph's two children as his own, putting them on equal footing as their uncles for the inheritance that will be received by their descendants after them. Joseph's descendants will not have only one share of the inheritance, but two, through the respective tribal heads of Ephraim and Manasseh. Through this story, we see the gracious way that *God extends unmerited favor to his people*.

Past Grace (Gen. 48:1–7)

The phrase “after this” (or, “after these things”; v. 1a) appears throughout Genesis to mark significant breaks between the narratives (e.g., Gen. 15:1; 22:1, 20; 39:7; 40:1).¹ In this case, the break seems to be, on the one hand, a break of *time* from the events from Genesis 47:1–28, which summarizes seventeen years (cf. Gen. 47:28). On the other hand, the last few verses of Genesis 47:29–31 seem to take place at the end of those seventeen years, so “after this” seems to make a break of *theme*. At the end of Genesis 47, Jacob was considering his own future. Now, Jacob is considering the future of his children after him, the whole nation of Israel.²

When Joseph hears the news that his father is ill, he goes to visit Jacob with his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (v. 1b). Significantly, Manasseh and Ephraim are listed in v. 1 in their birth order; however, by v. 5, Jacob will speak of them in reverse order, as “Ephraim and Manasseh,” indicating their priority.³ We must understand that Joseph is not simply taking his children for one last visit to see their dying grandfather. Just as Jacob understood the importance of collecting the blessing from his dying father, Isaac (Gen. 27), so Joseph understands the importance of seeking the blessing from Jacob for his sons after him. Joseph's intentions will be clear when he becomes deeply frustrated to find that his father has given his right-hand blessing to Joseph's younger son (v. 17–18).

It is important, though, to recognize Joseph's faith in this. Although Joseph possesses all the wealth and treasures of Egypt (cf. Heb. 11:26), he seeks a blessing from his dying father who owns little more real estate than a burial plot. In observing this, John Calvin writes, “Whenever, therefore, Satan shall try to entangle us with the allurements of the world, that he may draw us away from heaven, let us remember for what end we are called; in order that, in comparison with the

¹ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 229.

² Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:872–73.

³ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 628.

inestimable treasure of eternal life, all that the flesh would otherwise prefer, may become loathsome.”⁴ Throughout Joseph’s life, whether he is poor and miserable, or rich and powerful, he never loses sight of the fact that the heavenly, spiritual promises of God surpass anything and everything in this world.

When Jacob hears that Joseph has come, he summons his strength to sit up in his bed, and to speak to Joseph (v. 2ff). To begin, Jacob recounts the covenant blessings that God had given to him, particularly when God blessed him at Luz (v. 3). God appeared to Jacob twice at Luz, which Jacob renamed Bethel (Gen. 28:19). The first appearance was when Jacob dreamed a vision of a ladder reaching from heaven to earth, on his way as he departed from Canaan to go to Paddan-aram (Gen. 28:10–22). For a variety of reasons, however, it is clear that Jacob is talking about the second appearance of the Lord, when he returned from Paddan-aram to come back to Canaan (Gen. 35:6–15). First, the earlier story does not actually include the word “appeared” to describe God’s presence to Jacob, while that word does appear in Genesis 35:9. Second, the promises Jacob quotes in Genesis 48 more closely align with God’s words to Jacob in Genesis 35.

Still, there are some key differences between what God said in Genesis 35, and what Jacob relates to Joseph and Joseph’s sons here in Genesis 48. First, Jacob recalls a number of promises about making Jacob fruitful and multiplying him, making him into a company of peoples, and giving the land of Canaan to Jacob’s offspring for an everlasting possession (v. 4). John Sailhamer points out, though, that in Genesis 35:11–12, God issued these promises as imperatives of what Jacob should do. Here, however, Sailhamer notes that Jacob adjusts the form of the verb to emphasize that *God* would cause these promises to come about: “*I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples....*”⁵ Jacob’s emphasis points away from anything that he has done to come to this point in his life, but on God’s faithfulness to accomplish for Jacob what he had promised to do.

Second, the first thing God said to Jacob when he appeared to him back in Genesis 35 was about Jacob’s own name: “Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name” (Gen. 35:10). As Jacob relates this story to Joseph and Joseph’s sons, however, Jacob does not mention how God had changed his name. On this omission, Victor Hamilton writes, “In this way, Jacob minimizes his role and maximizes God’s role in that event.”⁶ Not only does Jacob emphasize God’s work, as we noted above, but Jacob also downplays his own, personal role in this whole story.

Third, Jacob also omits a very important promise from Genesis 35:11: “...and kings shall come from your own body.” The reason for this omission is that Jacob is speaking to Joseph and his sons, but it is from the tribe of Judah that “the scepter shall not depart...nor the ruler’s staff” (Gen. 49:10).⁷ As T. D. Alexander has demonstrated, the books of Genesis through Kings are written as a unified narrative, telling one story about (among other things) the royal expectations for the seed of Abraham.⁸ The coming of kings through Jacob is at the heart of the Old Testament historical

⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:422.

⁵ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 230.

⁶ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 628.

⁷ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 230–231.

⁸ T. D. Alexander, “Royal Expectations in Genesis to Kings: Their Importance for Biblical Theology,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 49, no. 2 (1998): 191–212.

narratives, promised in the book of Genesis, and fulfilled through the rest of the history. Intriguingly, though, this royal expectation overlooks the fact that the very first king over the northern nation of Israel will be Jeroboam, son of Nebat, from the tribe of *Ephraim* (1 Kgs. 11:26; 12:20). After Jeroboam's death, Jeroboam's son, Nadab, also reigned two years (1 Kgs. 14:20; 16:25–32). So, kings *do* come from Joseph; however, the Ephraimite kingship of Jeroboam and Nadab is not what God has in mind when he promises Jacob that kings will come from him. The Ephraimite kingship is great in one sense, but only the royal Son of David will fulfill God's promises of a king for his people.

Although Jacob does not bless Joseph with the kingship, he gives Joseph a different blessing. In v. 5, Jacob adopts Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as his own. The effect of this adoption is to give Ephraim and Manasseh a share of the inheritance on an equal level with their uncles, the brothers of Joseph.⁹ As such, this was also a blessing for Joseph, since Jacob elevated Joseph to his own level; so that “both men are now ancestral fathers of the tribes of Israel that will come from them.”¹⁰ Later, the book of Chronicles explains that this adoption transferred the birthright from Reuben to Ephraim:

[1] 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; [2] though Judah became strong among his brothers and a chief came from him, yet the birthright belonged to Joseph).... (1 Chron. 5:1–2; cf. Gen. 49:4)¹¹

Finally, as we mentioned above, we should notice that when Jacob adopts these boys as his own, he lists them in the reverse order of their birth: Ephraim first, and then Manasseh.

Jacob does not extend this privilege to any other sons that Joseph may have: “They shall be called by the name of their brothers in their inheritance” (v. 6). Ephraim and Manasseh alone will be the recipients of this privilege, gaining an equal inheritance with the other tribal heads of the nation of Israel. Notice, then, that the main benefit of this blessing has to do with inheritance. Furthermore, we should not miss that Jacob does not have any inheritance to give. On his deathbed, he does not own hardly any more real estate than a burial plot. Thus, Jacob's blessing—and the receipt of that blessing by Joseph, Ephraim, and Manasseh—is truly an act of faith that their offspring will have something to inherit in the future: “This expectation is not unlike Jeremiah's purchase of the field at the time of the captivity—he was convinced that they were coming back.”¹² Just as Rachel died before inheriting the land (v. 7), so will Jacob, and Rachel's son, Joseph, and Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:424.

¹⁰ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 630.

¹¹ Kidner, *Genesis*, 224.

¹² Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 692–693.

Present Grace (Gen. 48:8–20)

The next section begins with an important, but surprising phrase: “When Israel saw...” (v. 8). As we will discover a few verses later, Jacob’s eyes are dim (lit., “heavy”) from age, so that he could not see (v. 10). For this reason, some commentators have wondered whether Jacob’s question, “Who are these?”, is an actual inquiry to identify the children standing in front of him. Instead, it is probably better to understand Jacob’s question along two different lines. First, given the formal nature of Jacob’s blessing, this question is likely a formal prelude to the blessing. If so, then this would be similar to the question at a wedding, “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?”, or the question posed at a baptism, “In what name shall this child be baptized?”¹³ In those cases, the pastor is not asking because he does not know the answer; he is asking as a formal introduction of the parties for the act that will follow.

Second, this question echoes the question that Isaac had posed to Jacob himself many years earlier, when Jacob sought the blessing from his father: “Who are you, my son?” (Gen. 27:18).¹⁴ Indeed, there are many elements of this whole section that echo Genesis 27, but with an important difference. While Jacob schemed to steal the blessing from his blind father, Isaac (cf. Gen. 27:1), Jacob, now blind, deals straightforwardly when he extends his own blessing.¹⁵ In response to Jacob’s question, Joseph identifies Ephraim and Manasseh as the sons whom “God has given me here” (v. 9). Interestingly, Joseph makes no mention of his wife’s role in the birth of his children, but identifies God as the giver of his children.¹⁶

In v. 10, the narrator tells us that Israel cannot see. Nevertheless, in the very next verse, Israel tells Joseph that he never exited to “see” Joseph’s face, but that God has let him “see” Joseph’s offspring also (v. 11). This repetition of the word “see” draws special attention to the word, which will be important during Joseph’s reaction to his father’s blessing.¹⁷ After this initial part, Joseph takes his children down from Jacob’s knees, and we read that Joseph bows himself before his father (v. 12). Kenneth Mathews draws attention to the contrast of aged Jacob’s sitting up in his bed (v. 2), compared to Joseph’s bowing down to the earth (v. 12).¹⁸ Important for this narrative is the elevation of Jacob above his son, Joseph, so that even the aged body of the elderly patriarch rises above the greatness of his son during his prime.

Part of the reason that the narrative takes pains to elevate Jacob above Joseph has to do with the nature of the blessing. The superior blesses the inferior (Heb. 7:7), and Jacob is not only greater than Pharaoh (Gen. 47:7, 10), but also greater than the children of Joseph. Another part of the reason has to do with exposing the short-sightedness of Joseph’s (functioning) eyes against the clarity of Jacob’s (blind) eyes. So, Joseph attempts to position his sons in such a way so that the firstborn, Manasseh, will receive the blessing with Jacob’s right hand resting upon his hand, with Jacob’s left hand on Ephraim (v. 13). Israel, however, crosses his hands to put his right hand on the younger brother, Ephraim, with the left hand on Manasseh (v. 14). No immediate explanation is given for why Jacob

¹³ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 634.

¹⁴ Kidner, *Genesis*, 224.

¹⁵ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 693.

¹⁶ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 634.

¹⁷ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:877.

¹⁸ Mathews, 1B:873.

does this; however, Calvin is certainly correct when he writes that we should “infer that the Holy Spirit was the director of this act, who irradiated the mind of the holy man, and caused him to see more correctly, than those who were the most clear-sighted, into the nature of this symbolical act.”¹⁹ There is more to say about this extended theme of “seeing,” but, for the moment, let us first examine the blessing that Jacob gives in v. 15–16.

Jacob gives a threefold invocation, addressing first “the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,” then “the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day” (v. 15), and finally “the angel who has redeemed me from all evil” (v. 16a). Derek Kidner points out that, in each of these invocations, Jacob does not deal with the attributes of God so much as the acts and dealings of God (cf. Ex. 34:6ff).²⁰ Taking the first two invocations together portrays Abraham and Isaac as sheep, walking before God, their shepherd, all their lives.²¹ Although Jacob does not explicitly this point, we should perhaps note that this idea of God’s guarding the rear of his people is the virtuous meaning of his own name, *Jacob*. Where Jacob has been a *back*-stabber much of his life, God has faithfully watched the *backs* of his people. The reference to the “angel” who redeems his people from all evil, both identifies this angel with God, and distinguishes him from God. Although this statement is not as well known as other messianic statements in the Old Testament, Jacob’s blessing almost certainly has in view Christ the Redeemer as the angel of God.²² As the blessing, Jacob asks God to let his own name (along with the name of Abraham and Isaac) be carried on in the boys, so that they grow into a multitude in the earth (v. 16b). In many ways, this is a promise that summarizes all the promises of the book of Genesis for God’s people.²³

In v. 17, though, we read that Joseph “saw” that his father laid his right hand on Ephraim. Just as Jacob “saw” the boys, so Joseph “saw” that his father had put the wrong hand on the wrong boy.²⁴ The language of the ESV for Joseph’s reaction is far too tame: “it displeased him.” Literally, the text says, “and it was evil in his eyes” (v. 17; my translation). Throughout the Joseph narratives, Joseph has been a reliable guide to discern between good and evil. This is one of the few times (the only time?) where Joseph is incorrect in his judgment.²⁵ It is interesting, then, that Joseph reacts according to what he “sees.” Again and again through Genesis, human beings frequently make the wrong decisions when they walk by sight (e.g., Gen. 3:6; 2 Cor. 5:7). In this way, this narrative presents a great irony: “We have seen above, that the eyes of Jacob are dim: but in crossing his arms, with apparent negligence, in order to comply with God’s purpose of election, he is more clear-sighted than his son Joseph, who, according to the sense of the flesh, inquires with too much acuteness.”²⁶

There is one additional layer of irony here. Back in Genesis 27, Jacob had exploited his father’s poor eyesight in order to steal the blessing.²⁷ Jacob should have received the blessing, according to

¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:426.

²⁰ Kidner, *Genesis*, 225.

²¹ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:878–879.

²² Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:428–429.

²³ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 459.

²⁴ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:878–879.

²⁵ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 640–641.

²⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:432.

²⁷ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 232–233.

God's oracle about Jacob and Esau while they were still in the womb (cf. Gen. 25:23). It was right for Jacob to receive the blessing, but he gained the blessing in the wrong way. Furthermore, Joseph's attempts to reverse the blessing follow in the footsteps of Esau, who also sought to reverse the blessing that Isaac had given to Jacob (Gen. 27:34–36).²⁸ Jacob, however, explains that his actions were deliberate. Again and again, the book of Genesis reminds us that God does not extend his blessing according to the value judgments of this world, but according to his grace.²⁹ As Allen Ross writes, "It had taken Jacob a lifetime to learn this truth about God. In his early years he had deceived his blind father for the blessing, but in his duty now of passing on the blessing, he performed in the way that God wanted, blessing the younger over the elder (see the oracle in 25:23)."³⁰

So, Manasseh will also find blessing, but Jacob here puts Ephraim above Manasseh (v. 19–20). This will play out over the remainder of Israel's history; however, this greatness will be substantially hindered, and even reversed. For example, during the first census of Israel in the book of Numbers, Ephraim will outnumber Manasseh in size by a count of 40,500 to 32,200 (Num. 2:18–22). By the end of the book of Numbers, these proportions will reverse, so that Manasseh grows to 52,700, dwarfing Ephraim's small growth to 32,500 (Num. 26:34, 37). In a book fraught with sin and moral decline, presumably this population shift has to do with sin among the tribe of Ephraim. Nevertheless, we should not overlook the fact that the illustrious Joshua was himself from the tribe of Ephraim (Num. 13:8, 16; Josh. 19:49–50). Beyond the days of Joshua, however, the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh are both cited as failing to finish the task of driving out the Canaanites from the land (Josh. 16:10; Judg. 1:27, 29). As mentioned above, two kings of Israel descend from Ephraim (Jeroboam and Nadab; 1 Kgs. 11:26; 12:20; 14:20; 16:25–32). Where Jeroboam could have become a new David,³¹ God cut off his house because of sin (1 Kgs. 14:7–16). Ephraim is indeed greater than Manasseh, but Ephraim as a whole does not live up to their ancestor, Joseph.

Future Grace (Gen. 48:21–22)

Last, Jacob gives blessings to Joseph. First, Jacob affirms that God will be with Joseph, and he adds that God will bring Joseph again to the land of Canaan, "the land of your fathers" (v. 21). Joseph will not be buried in Canaan immediately after his death, as Jacob will be (Gen. 50:12–13). Instead, Joseph's body will be embalmed and kept in a coffin in Egypt, brought back out of Egypt at the Exodus, and then buried in Canaan after the Israelites take the promised land (Gen. 50:26; Ex. 13:19; Josh. 24:32). Furthermore, where the ESV has "mountain slope" here to describe the land is also a place name, "Shechem."³² That is where Joseph is buried: "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. It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph" (Josh. 24:32).³³

²⁸ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 465–466.

²⁹ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 233.

³⁰ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 693.

³¹ Peter J. Leithart, "Counterfeit Davids: Davidic Restoration and the Architecture of 1–2 Kings," *Tyndale Bulletin* 56, no. 2 (2005): 26–28.

³² Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:882–883.

³³ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 466.

How, though, did Jacob come to acquire Shechem himself? Shechem, we should recall, was the site where Simeon and Levi slaughtered all the males, in response to the rape of Dinah (Gen. 34). In that passage, Jacob was furious at his sons for what they had done (Gen. 34:30). Furthermore, Jacob is typically portrayed not as a man given to “sword and bow,” but as a “quiet man, dwelling in tents” (Gen. 25:27).³⁴ Regardless of how that land was acquired, Jacob is now in possession of that land, which he bequeaths to Jacob.³⁵ While Jacob continued to dwell in southern Canaan, in the Valley of Hebron, his sons would sometimes shepherd their flock near Shechem (Gen. 37:12–14).

Discussion Questions

- 1) When Jacob reflects back on God’s kindness toward him at Luz, what specific blessings does he recall from Genesis 35? What are some key differences in how Jacob talks about those blessings now, compared to what we read about those blessings back in Genesis 35? What is the effect when Jacob adopts Ephraim and Manasseh as his own children? How do we see God’s unmerited favor toward Jacob now reflected to Joseph and his sons?
- 2) What does Jacob/Israel “see” (v. 8)? How is it that he can see, when his eyesight is dim because of his old age (v. 10)? What does Joseph “see” (v. 17)? How does Joseph evaluate what he sees? Why does elderly, blind Jacob see this blessing so differently than Joseph, in the prime of his life? Why does Jacob put Ephraim before Manasseh (v. 20)? How do we see Ephraim gaining more greatness through the rest of the history of his tribe?
- 3) What does God promise Joseph in vv. 21–22? Why is the promise important that Joseph will be buried in the land of his fathers? How does Joseph end up finally buried in the land of Canaan (cf. Gen. 50:26; Ex. 13:19; Josh. 24:32)? Where is this “mountain slope” (lit., “Shechem”) that Jacob gives to Joseph (v. 22; cf. Josh. 24:32)? What value will this land have for Joseph during his lifetime? What is the purpose of making Joseph a promise that he will not benefit from during his life?
- 4) What do we mean when we define “grace” as “unmerited favor”? How do we see God’s gracious, unmerited favor toward Jacob and his children after him, in this passage? How does God show gracious, unmerited favor toward us? What does it mean to walk by faith, and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7)? How does this passage portray blind Jacob walking by faith, and Joseph as walking by sight? What is one area where you are being challenged to walk by faith, and not by sight, right now?

³⁴ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 233.

³⁵ Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, 712.