

Parashah Forty-Four

Genesis 48:1–49:27; Isaiah 43:1–7; John 16:25–33

notes by Tim Hegg

A Company of Peoples

Our portion describes the final days of Jacob’s life, and his passing of the covenant blessings to his sons. Someone told Joseph that his father was ill (this is the first time illness is mentioned in the Bible). Joseph thus goes to his father, taking along his sons Menasheh (מְנַשֶּׁה) and Ephraim. When the bed-ridden Jacob was aware that Joseph had arrived, he gathered his strength and sat up in his bed. Here, via the inspired text of Scripture, we are given the opportunity to witness this most important event in the life of Israel, as he passes the covenant blessings on to his descendants.

The first thing Jacob does is recount the blessings of the covenant confirmed to him by the Almighty (cf. Gen 35:9–12, cp. 28:3). The promises initially given to Abraham and passed on to his son Isaac were confirmed to Jacob as well. Most interesting in this context is the phrase “a company of peoples” (קְהַל עַמִּים, *k’hal ‘amim*), “May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples” (Gen 28:3). In Gen 35:11, the phrase is slightly different: “a company of nations” (קְהַל גּוֹיִם, *k’hal goyim*) are promised to come from Jacob. The two phrases are surely synonymous, but what do they mean? How is it that Jacob will comprise a multitude of peoples/nations?

In Gen 35:11, the promise is given: “a nation and a multitude of nations will be from you” (מִמֶּנִּי, *mimeka*). The wording is a bit different in our text (48:4): “and I will make you into a company of peoples” (וַיַּתִּיחַ אֱלֹהִים לְקַהֵל עַמִּים, *un’tatiycha lik’hal ‘amim*). It would seem that the latter text defines the means by which a multitude of nations will “be from” Jacob. It is by divine appointment: God will make (literally “appoint” or “place”) Jacob into a company of peoples.

But how will this be accomplished? How is it that God would make Jacob into a *kehilah* (congregation) of peoples? The answer to this question encompasses the fulfillment of the final blessing of the Abrahamic covenant: “in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen 12:3). God, by His own sovereign power, would draw people from every people-group and graft them into the family of Jacob. Here, in seed form, is the method of blessing God had determined: the nations would not be blessed apart from Israel, but by joining Israel. Paul speaks to this very reality (Eph 3) when he writes that God had revealed this plan in its fullness to the

Apostles. The Gentiles would be drawn in by faith, and would be blessed as “fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Messiah Yeshua through the gospel” (Eph 3:6). God’s promised blessing upon all of the families of the earth would be fulfilled as they shared the covenant blessings promised to Abraham. It was in this way that Jacob would become a “congregation of peoples/nations.”

The scene of our *parashah* is a moving one. Aged Jacob is close to death, yet in his final days he would bestow a blessing of immense proportions upon the sons of Joseph. His words are clear (v. 5) “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.” Since Jacob’s eyes had grown dim, he had to ask who the lads were who had accompanied Joseph to the bedside of his father. Having been told that they were Ephraim and Manasseh, he invited them to come closer, placing them upon his knees (cf. 48:12). This is more than familial gestures: in the Ancient Near East, adoption was demonstrated by placing a child upon one’s knees. For instance, when a concubine gave birth to a child, that child might be reckoned as the adopted child (and therefore the legal child) of the wife. This was the case with Bilhah, for Rivka instructs Jacob: “Here is my maid Bilhah, go in to her that she may bear on my knees, that through her I too may have children” (Gen 30:3). To “bear on my knees” is language reminiscent of the widely attested Ancient Near Eastern custom of placing a child upon the knees as a ceremony of legitimation or adoption (cf. Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* [JPS, 1989], p. 207). So here is the amazing fact of our *parashah*: Jacob adopts the two sons of Joseph. Born from an Egyptian mother, they gain equal status with the other sons of Jacob through adoption. From that point on they were no longer reckoned as the sons of Joseph, but as Jacob’s sons (i.e. Joseph’s brothers), and thus coheirs of his inheritance along with his own naturally born sons. They gained this status, not through physical lineage, but by appointment—by the sovereign election of the father of the clan (Jacob).

This demonstrated an even wider reality, namely, that the Patriarchs themselves came to be part of God’s family through similar means: by God’s own sovereign choice to adopt them as His people. Ezekiel 16:1-5 speaks to this very issue, reminding the people of Israel that their birth was from foreign parents (“your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite”). It was God’s prerogative to choose the abandoned child for His own, and to adopt him as His firstborn (cf. Ex 4:22). Thus, the nation of Israel has her covenant status, not on the basis of lineage (the flesh) but

by Divine election. Paul highlights this when he speaks of the “adoption as sons” that Israel possesses (Rom 9:4). But Paul also applies this same privilege of adoption to all who are in Messiah (Rom 8:15, 23; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5). All who are privileged to be covenant members of God’s people, do so, not on their own strength, but through the sovereign, gracious actions of God as a Father Who adopts into His family those He chooses. Only Yeshua has the status of a “natural born son” (the “only begotten of the Father,” John 1:14).

The blessing bestowed upon Ephraim and Manasseh contains yet another important revelation. It appears at first reading that Jacob is “mixed up” about which of the sons is the firstborn. When Joseph situates his sons before Jacob in order to receive his final blessing, he arranges them in their natural order: Ephraim is adjacent to Jacob’s left hand, and Manasseh stands on his right. The firstborn should receive the blessing of the right hand, the symbol of power and authority. But then Jacob crosses his hands, putting his right upon Ephraim, and his left upon Manasseh. He purposefully gives the blessing of the firstborn to the younger of the two! Joseph presumes that his aged father has simply made a mistake, his failing eyesight unable to distinguish between the two. So Joseph protests, and moves to rearrange the hands of his father. But Jacob was not confused: he intended to give the blessing of the firstborn to the younger son.

What is the meaning of this turn about? It is obvious: Jacob’s blessing of the younger over the older follows the consistent pattern throughout the Genesis narrative. Isaac, the second son of Abraham is the chosen son, and it is to Jacob, not Esau, that the covenant is passed. In each case, the choosing of the younger son to receive the greater blessing over the older was to reinforce the important principle of God’s election. Throughout the patriarchal narratives, the covenant blessings come, not by means of natural descent, but by God’s election in each generation. Throughout her history, Israel was to learn that God’s covenant blessings come by His sovereign grace and election, not as an automatic guarantee based upon her people-group status. Surely God has chosen Israel, and the blessings would come to the descendants of Jacob. But these blessings were the result of God’s on-going choice of Israel, not upon her own, innate status. She could never demand God’s covenant blessings—they are always a matter of His grace.

The blessing of Jacob upon the sons of Joseph was clearly worked out in history. Ephraim became the largest tribe of the nation, so much so that in later generations, the nation of Israel as a whole could be referred to simply as Ephraim (e.g., Jer 31:9 where “Israel” and “Ephraim” are used synonymously). Thus, whenever those from the nations are drawn to

faith in Israel's God, they are grafted into the covenant with Israel. In this way, the covenant promise of blessing upon all the families of the earth is constantly being fulfilled. In accordance with Jacob's prophetic blessing, Ephraim (the nation of Israel) would indeed become a congregation of peoples.

The words of Jacob's blessing are filled with significance. He describes God in three phrases (v. 15) – (1) The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, (2) The God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, and (3) the angel who has redeemed me from all evil. The first designation highlights the fact that the covenant made initially with Abraham was passed to Isaac and then to Jacob. In the context of covenant renewal, Abraham is admonished to “walk before Me and be blameless” (Gen 17:1). That Isaac also “walked before God” is Jacob's way of confirming that the covenant was passed to him (cf. also Gen 18:19).

In the second designation, Jacob confesses that he likewise had become the recipient of God's covenant with Abraham, for the God before whom his fathers walked had been his shepherd as well. God had protected him, led him, and fulfilled His word of promise to him. Moreover, in the Ancient Near East, a king was often known as the shepherd of his people, so Jacob's description of God as his shepherd may also highlight the fact that Jacob viewed God as the Great King Who had entered into a covenant of promise with His assigned vassal. This also speaks to the matter of covenant.

The third designation seems surprising. Jacob evokes the blessing of God upon Joseph (as represented by his sons), but he includes “the angel” (מַלְאָךְ, *mal'ach* can also mean “messenger”) as an equal with the God of his fathers. Moreover, “the angel” is the One Who had redeemed him from all evil or trouble. This is obviously a reference to the “man” with Whom Jacob wrestled at Bethel (Gen 32:24f; cf. Hos 12:4), Who changed his name to Israel. It was here that Jacob recognized he had seen God face to face and remained alive. Thus, Jacob blesses Joseph by the God Who had come to him as a man, as One Whose very being is beyond comprehension (cf. Judges 13:18). Here, as in other places in the Torah, we see that the patriarchs were well aware that God had appeared to them in the form of a man. Thus, the incarnation of Yeshua as Immanuel would not have been outside of their expectations as some teach that it was.

Chapter 49 continues the theme of Jacob's final blessings, expanded now to the remainder of his sons. Joseph is blessed initially (through the blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh) because through Joseph God has preserved the entire family. Now Jacob proceeds to give a blessing upon his

other sons. But his words are more than a simple blessing—they contain a prophecy of “what will befall” them “in the days to come” (49:1).

Reuben, as the natural firstborn son, had lost his place of pre-eminence as a result of his sin. In attempting to usurp the role of his father, he had forever lost his privileged position.

Simeon and Levi are grouped together because together they instigated the treachery against the males of Shechem. Like Reuben, they had forfeited the right to succeed their father as ruler of the clan, for God’s anointed king establishes the land through justice (Prov 29:4). Levi, who would be chosen as the priestly tribe, had the status of God’s servant to the people, not the position of ruler. The office of king and priest were to be kept separate, finding their unity only in the coming Messiah. Moreover, the weapon of the sword in the hands of Simeon and Levi had been stolen from Esau, who lived by the sword. Jacob’s sword was prayer and the power of God (cf. 48:22) by which God gave him the victory at Shechem.

The blessing of Judah carries the theme of Genesis to its prophetic conclusion. From the beginning of the narrative, the promise of the woman’s seed has lingered in the minds of the readers. Who would this one be? As the story unfolds, it appears that perhaps Joseph is the fulfillment of God’s promise. He emerges as the savior, not only of his own family, but also of the entire world of his day. He is highly blessed of God, and his character is impeccable. Yet the surprise comes when we realize that it is from Judah that the promised One would come. Once again, God’s sovereign election is at work. He has chosen Judah to be the family from whom the Promised Redeemer and King would descend.

The blessing of Judah (49:8–12) has long been considered a messianic prophecy. Targum Onkelos translates v. 10 this way: “The ruler shall never depart from the House of Judah, nor the scribe [or teacher] from his children’s children for evermore, until Messiah comes, whose is the kingdom, and him shall the nations obey.” The other Targums follow the same pattern, specifically including the mention of Messiah as the import of this blessing. It is no wonder, then, that throughout the rabbinic literature, the blessing of Judah is interpreted as ultimately fulfilled in Messiah. Moreover, even the Qumran society understood this passage messianically (cf. 4Q252), interpreting “Shilo” as the “Righteous Messiah.” Thus, from ancient times, this blessing was interpreted as the divine edict by which the legitimate kings of God’s chosen nation would always be from the tribe of Judah, and from the family of David in particular, and would culminate in the final and ultimate King, even the Messiah.

The messianic interpretation of Judah’s blessing hinges on the meaning

of “Shilo” (שִׁילֹה) in v. 10: “until Shilo comes.” The following have been suggested as possible ways of understanding this term:

1. Shilo is a place name, and the phrase should be translated “until he comes to Shilo.” Because the tabernacle was destroyed at Shilo on account of the sins of the priests (cf. Jer 7:12–14), Shilo took on a metaphoric meaning. Those who hold this view would say that the messianic import of the passage is that the Messiah will come to restore that which was destroyed, i.e., the presence of God among His people.
2. The word “shilo” actually is the combination of the Hebrew particle *ש* (a contraction of *אשר*, meaning “which” or “whom”) and the preposition *ל* with 3rd person singular possessive suffix (thus, *לו*, “belonging to him”). Thus, the word is translated “which belongs to him,” and the meaning is “until he comes to that which belongs to him” or “until that which belongs to him comes.” This is apparently the way the Lxx understood the clause.
3. The word Shilo is a personal name derived from the verb *שלה*, *shalah*, “to rest” (cp. Ps 122:6)

Of these, #1 is possible, but one would expect a preposition to designate Shilo as the destination of the one who is coming. The second option has the strength of the Lxx, but it suffers from the fact that the *yod* in *שִׁילֹה* is unexplained. We would expect simply *לוֹש*. Thus, the most consistent interpretation is that the blessing is a prophecy of One who would be characterized by a name based upon the idea of “rest.” Shilo is the One who brings rest. This is how the ancient Sages of Israel understood the word. And indeed, the Messiah comes to bring rest, not only rest from Israel’s enemies, but eternal rest for all who find refuge in Him. Moreover, the fact that His appearance brings about the “obedience of the peoples” is certainly an early prophecy of the manner in which Messiah would fulfill the promise of the Abrahamic covenant, that all of the peoples would be blessed by Abraham’s seed. Paul makes it clear that in one sense, the singular Seed of Abraham is the Messiah, Yeshua (Gal 3:16). Here, then, at the conclusion of the Genesis narrative, the long awaited seed of the woman (Gen 3:15) is revealed: the coming Redeemer would be from the tribe of Judah, and would bring the promised rest, conquering the enemy of our souls, and bringing us into the shalom of His family.

The blessing of Zebulun precedes Issachar, though Issachar is the older of the two. On this account the Sages teach that it is necessary to provide material means for those who study Torah. Zebulun would be blessed with successful commerce (sea-faring merchants) by which he would provide

Issachar (whom the Sages understood as Torah scholars) with material means so that he could dedicate himself to study. This is at least one interesting attempt at interpreting this text.

Having concluded the blessing upon Leah's six sons, Jacob now turns to the older son of Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant, leaving the blessing of Rachel's sons for the last. Dan, the tribe from whom Samson came, is seen as the one who avenges the enemies of Israel. The final phrase, "For Your salvation do I long, O LORD," is understood by the Sages as the heart-felt prayer of Samson in his struggles against the Philistines.

Next is the blessing over Gad (Zilpah's older son), who went across the Jordan to fight for the land, and retraced his steps only when the victory of the Land had been achieved. Asher was promised agricultural bounty from which he would supply even the king's table. Naphtali is said to be swift like a hind, and the some note that in the war against Sisera, the swift warriors of Naphtali played a significant role in the victory.

Having completed the blessings over the sons of Rachel's handmaidens, Jacob now turns to bless the sons of Rachel. Joseph's blessing is lengthy, and full of praise, for though he was ill-treated by his brothers, he overcame their treachery through his strong faith in God (cf. Gen 50:20). He is described as a "fruitful bough" that grows tall and exceeds the wall of the garden. Indeed, his life of faith and integrity bore much fruit. Though his own brothers sought to destroy him, the Almighty preserved him and made him successful.

Jacob evokes the names of God in blessing Joseph: **1**) "the Mighty One of Jacob," used only here and in later poetic texts (cf. Is 1:24; 49:26; 60:16; Ps 132:2, 5), speaking of the omnipotent power of the Creator; **2**) "Shepherd," emphasizing the divine, royal leadership of God over His people; **3**) "the rock of Israel," where usually the Hebrew word צור, *tzur*; "fortress built upon the rocky heights" is used. Here, however, the common word אֶבֶן, *'even'* is found, and may foreshadow the "rock" from which Israel drank in the wilderness (cp. 1Cor 10:4); **4**) "the God of your father," meaning the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; **5**) Shaddai (שַׁדַּי), meaning the God Who brings children (see comments on *parashah* 14), and who had made Joseph fruitful with offspring. Thus he named his son Ephraim, because God had made him fruitful in the land of his affliction (Gen 41:52). So Jacob acknowledges that all of the blessings that have come upon Joseph are the result of God's favor. In the same way, may we recognize that "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (James 1:17).

The blessing over Benjamin indicates that he is as a wolf who swiftly devours the prey. So Israel's first king, Saul, would be a Benjamite, who in his brief reign conquered Moab, Edom, and Philistia. Likewise, the Sages point to the fact that Mordecai and Esther were also Benjamites who, by God's help, defeated Haman and were awarded his estate (Est 8:7).

As Jacob comes to the end of his earthly sojourn, and pronounces these blessings upon his sons, including his adopted sons Ephraim and Manasseh, we see a man who had come to the firm realization that not only is God sovereign, and working out His appointed plan through the events of this world, but that He is also one Who keeps His word, and faithfully shepherds His people. Though Jacob could summarize the years of his life as "few and unpleasant" (Gen 47:9), yet he had witnessed God's power, and had come to trust in His unwavering faithfulness. He even made plans to have his remains carried to the Land, because he believed that what God had said, He would accomplish (Gen 47:31).

Commenting upon this scene, of Jacob's final words, the writer to the Hebrews says: "By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff" (Heb 11:21). It matters not whether Jacob was leaning in worship upon his bed or his staff (the Hebrew word מטה could mean either, depending upon the vowels that are supplied: מִטָּה, *mitah* = "bed;" מֵטֶה, *mateh* = "rod." The Lxx read "rod" while the Masoretic text has "bed"). What matters is that at the end of his life, the one who had grasped the heel of his brother, was stooping over once again, but this time in a posture of worship to the Almighty. Israel, who is also called Yeshurun (meaning "upright," cf. Deut. 32:15; 33:5, 26; Is. 44:2), teaches us that one who is "upright" is one who has learned to bow in worship. The limping patriarch had learned to live his life in reliance upon God. May we do the same!