



LITERARY ANALYSIS OF GENESIS 47:28—48:22

“The Passing on one’s Faith”

- A Joseph promises to carry Israel back to Canaan (47:28—31)
 - B Joseph brings Manasseh and Ephraim for Israel’s blessing (48:1-12)
 - C Israel crosses his hands to bless the children (48:13-14)
 - X ISRAEL BLESSES JOSEPH** (48:15-16)
 - C’ Joseph’s protest of Israel’s crossing of his hands (48:17-18)
 - B’ Israel blesses Ephraim and Manasseh (48:19-20)
 - A’ Israel’s promise that God will bring the people back to Canaan (48:21-22)
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From Jacob’s life the writer of Hebrews selects the incident from this episode as an example of faith (Heb. 11:21). The reason why Jacob’s action in this episode demonstrates faith is because; he reached out to the future, and believed God’s promise in the face of death. There is irony in Jacob’s blessing in this episode. This incident is comparable to the situation in which he had received the blessing over his older brother Esau (Gen. 27:18-41). Once more, the blessing was given to the younger, but this time, there was no deception or bitterness.

As Jacob began to feel his strength slipping from him and death approaching, he called Joseph to his side. Jacob asked Joseph to swear he would bury him in the cave that was purchased by Abraham. This is an indication of the patriarch’s confidence in God, for he knew that the fulfillment of His promise was in Canaan, not in Egypt (cf. Gen. 15:13-14).

As in this episode, at crucial moments of his life, Jacob’s patriarchhood is reinstated by the name “Israel”. Not Jacob, but Israel draws near to death and blesses Joseph, Ephraim, and Manasseh.

This episode has several parts that contribute to Israel’s deathbed scene, parts that are not easily harmonized as the more critical commentaries indicate. The first part of the deathbed scene is the oath dialogue between Jacob and Joseph (Gen. 47:28-31). Then follows the adoption of Manasseh and Ephraim in a speech by Jacob (Gen. 48:1-7). The third part records the blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen. 48:8-20) with Jacob blessing also Joseph (vv. 15-16). The last two verses form Jacob’s farewell speech. Most of the passage is the words of Jacob—instructing, adopting, blessing, and promising for the future.

The central concern of this episode underscores that Ephraim, the younger son, was given preeminence over Manasseh, the elder. There is an interesting reversal of the scene in which Jacob received the blessing from his father, Isaac, in Genesis 27. Isaac, who was nearly blind, was deceived into blessing the younger son rather than the older. Though nearly blind himself (v. 10), Jacob appeared to be making the same mistake. When Joseph attempted to correct him, however, he stated his intentions clearly: “His younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations (v. 19). The writer reinforces his words by stating further that “he put Ephraim before Manasseh” (v. 20).

We read that “he [Israel] blessed Joseph” (Gen. 48:15, X). This is surprising since the blessing is wholly directed to Joseph’s sons. This does not mean, as some Jewish scholars have claimed, that Jacob pronounced a special blessing on Joseph that is not recorded here. It indicates, rather, that Joseph was blessed in the blessing pronounced on his sons.

When Jacob pronounced the blessing on Joseph’s sons, he wittingly guided his hands so that his right hand was on Ephraim’s head, and his left on Manasseh’s, although Manasseh was firstborn. This was Israel’s decision, in spite of Joseph’s displeasure. Joseph had brought his two sons before his father so that Manasseh would receive the first blessing (v. 13), but Israel crossed his hands. It had taken Jacob a lifetime journey of faith to learn this truth about God. In his early years, he had deceived his blind father for the blessing. However, in his duty now of passing on the blessing, Israel performed in the way that God desired: blessing the younger over the elder. He would not attempt to bless the wrong one, as his father had attempted to do; nor would he handle the blessing dishonestly.

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