

Parashah 12

Vayechi

ויחי

“He lived”

Genesis 47:28 – 50:26

Torah Together



This is the last *Torah* portion in the Book of Genesis, completing the life stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. It is helpful to remember that Moses wrote Genesis and yet he was born many years after the events recorded in the book. All the stories of Genesis had been handed down among the Israelites by word of mouth from generation to generation until Moses was finally tasked with writing them down at the end of his life. These stories are complete, complex, and detailed and yet present a consistent picture of the character of our God. The uniqueness of the Book of Genesis stands as a testimony to the existence of our God.

1. Jacob Blesses Joseph's Sons - 47:28 - 48:22

a) How many years did Jacob live in Egypt? When did the famine end? Why do you suppose he stayed in Egypt so long?

Jacob arrived in Egypt at age 130 and died at 147 => 17 years in Egypt. The famine had about five years to go when he arrived, so he lived in Egypt for 12 years beyond the famine. God evidently did not tell Jacob to go back to Israel and Jacob would have wanted to stay near his son Joseph.

b) What oath did Joseph take at Jacob's request? Why do you think Jacob wanted this? Why do you think an oath was requested rather than a simple promise?

Jacob requested that Joseph take a vow to bury him in the cave at Machpelah in Hebron where Abraham, Isaac, Sarah, Rebecca, & Leah were buried. Jacob wanted to demonstrate to his sons that he was committed to God's promise of their inheritance of the land of Israel. An oath was required so that Pharaoh would allow Joseph to do this. Otherwise the Egyptians might have been offended that Jacob did not wish to be buried in Egypt.

c) As Jacob prepares to bless Joseph's sons, he recalls when God appeared to him at Luz. What details does Jacob omit that may be significant? (see **Genesis 35:11-12**)

Although he recalled the promise of the land and that a community of nations would come from his descendants, Jacob omitted the phrase "kings will come from your body." This is because the kings of Israel would come from the line of Judah, not Joseph.

Jacob's Burial Place

Before his death, Jacob requested that Joseph swear on oath that he would transport his bones back to Canaan to be buried at **Machpelah** (see description on page 33), along with his father and grandfather. Throughout his life, Jacob never let go of God's promise to him that the land of Canaan would someday belong to his descendants. Even though he knew he would die in Egypt, Jacob chose to demonstrate his commitment to God's promise by requesting that his permanent resting place be in the land that God had promised to him.

The Double Portion

In this passage, Jacob essentially adopts Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as his own, making them like Reuben and Simeon. This then assures that Joseph receives the double portion of the inheritance that Jacob leaves to his sons. This has significant implications that will be seen when the Children of Israel reach the Promised Land as described in the books of **Numbers**, **Deuteronomy**, and **Joshua**.

The Future of Ephraim and Manasseh

By crossing his arms when he blesses Ephraim and Manasseh, Jacob essentially puts the younger son before the elder, just as happened in his life (**Genesis 27**). This implies that Ephraim will be "doubly blessed" over his brother, Manasseh. As history unfolds, Ephraim does indeed become the dominant tribe in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Some believe that Ephraim is a type of the New Testament Church, representing the "Lost Children of Israel."

d) In verses 5 & 6, Jacob essentially adopts Ephraim and Manasseh. What does this do to Joseph's portion of the inheritance? (Notice the order of the names.)

By counting Ephraim and Manasseh as his sons, Jacob essentially doubles the share of his inheritance to Joseph, thus the double blessing. He mentions "Ephraim & Manasseh ... Just as Reuben and Simeon" implying that Ephraim and Manasseh will take the place of his first and second born sons, respectively.

e) As Jacob blesses Ephraim & Manasseh, what does he do with his hands that concerns Joseph? What was the significance of this act? Can you recall other cases in which the status of the first-born has been overridden? What do you think this means?

Jacob crosses his arms so that Ephraim, the younger, is blessed with his right hand and Manasseh with his left. Thus the second born replaces the first born, just like Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Esau. This also happened with Joseph and Reuben. God's will prevails.

f) Analyze the blessing that Jacob pronounces over Ephraim & Manasseh. How has this blessing been realized in the history of Ephraim & Manasseh?

Both have "increased greatly", perhaps Ephraim more than Manasseh. Later, the northern kingdom, composed mostly of Ephraimites, was called Israel.

2. Jacob Prophecies over his Sons - 49:1-28

a) What act of Reuben's caused him to "no longer excel"? What do you know about the subsequent history of this tribe that bears this out? (e.g., see **I Chronicles 5:1-2**)

The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh chose to settle in the region east of the Jordan river in the area that came to be known as Gilead. Their history was filled with wars and eventually they were dispersed when the northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians in 732 bce.

b) What acts of Simeon and Levi caused Jacob to curse their anger and their fury? How were their descendants “scattered in Jacob and dispersed in Israel”?

Jacob is referring to the brothers’ revenge on the Shechemites for the rape of Dinah. Levi was dispersed in Israel in their role of priests (they had no territory of their own.) Simeon was eventually absorbed into the tribe of Judah (see Joshua 19:1-9).

c) What do you think is meant by the phrase “your father’s sons will bow down to you”? How did this come about? Can you interpret verse 10? To whom does it refer and when do you think “the obedience of nations” will be his? How has the history of Judah up to today been consistent with Jacob’s prophecy?

The tribe of Judah eventually dominated Israel. The other tribes “bowed down” to Judah when David and Solomon ruled the united kingdom. That the “sceptre will not depart from Judah” refers to Yeshua’s ancestry. It appears that “obedience of nations” to him is still yet to come. After the division of the kingdom, the northern tribes were dispersed into the nations by Assyria (see Hosea) and the remaining Hebrews became known as “Jews” because of the name of the southern kingdom, Judah.

d) Zebulun and Issachar are sons by which mother? Do you know anything of their history that is described in this prophecy?

Both tribes settled in northern Israel as neighbors. Tradition has it that Zebulunites became sea merchants who supported Issachar in their Torah studies. Two hundred heads of Sanhedrins came from Issachar.

e) How does the prophecy given to Dan reflect the meaning of his name? What famous Dannite might be described in verse 17?

The name Dan means “he has judged.” The most famous Dannite was Samson, who single-handedly fought the Philistines with guerrilla-like tactics.

f) What characteristic of Gaddites might be described in verse 19? Do you know anything about their history that bears this out? Can you name a famous Gaddite?

Gaddites were noted warriors. They settled east of the Jordan, but sent warriors along with the rest of Israel to support their efforts (I Chron 12:14-15). It is thought that Elijah was a Gaddite.

g) What seems to be Asher’s specialty in the future?

It would appear that Asher dwells in a very productive region and exports various delicacies. No specific scripture supports this.

Scripture Link

Jacob’s prophecy over Simeon and Levi came about in different ways. **Joshua 19:1-9** describes the land that became the inheritance of the tribe of Simeon. Can you predict what eventually became of the Simeonites over time? **Numbers 18:20** explains how God’s plans for the Levites “dispersed them in Israel.”

History of Judah

King David and King Solomon came from the tribe of Judah and God ordained that Judah would provide the leadership for the nation of Israel. (*Yeshua* was also descended from the tribe of Judah.) So we see that Jacob bestowed the right of leadership of the family on Judah.

History of Joseph

Since Jacob adopted Joseph's two sons as his own, Jacob's blessing would fall on Ephraim and Manasseh. Jacob's words of blessing seem to stress military strength and abundance because of "the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, your father's God." In particular, the Ephraimites developed a reputation in battle as strong warriors and were indeed abundantly blessed with prosperity and growth.

The Right to Rule and the Double Portion

In most cases, the eldest son inherited both the right to leadership of the family and a double portion of the inheritance. In this case, however, Jacob divided these two blessings, bestowing upon Judah the right of leadership and upon Joseph (through Ephraim and Manasseh) the double portion. Some believe that today, these two groups are represented by the Jews (who have leadership in Israel) and by believers in *Yeshua* as God's Messiah (who have been doubly blessed).

h) What do you think Naphtali will be known for?

Two ideas have been suggested. One is that produce grown in Naphtali's region ripens quickly and the other is that warriors from this tribe are swift and nimble (supported by Judges 4).

i) What tribes are the beneficiaries of the blessings given to Joseph? Based on this blessing, what characteristics would you expect these tribes to have in the future? Can you verify that any of them came to pass?

Joseph's blessings would fall to the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. From the text, one would expect them to live in a fertile area and to have a history of brave warriors. These tribes settled in northern Israel, which is very fertile, and they were known to have brave soldiers (See I Chron 12:30-31). One might also expect Joseph's descendants to be most blessed by God. And indeed they are if, as some believe, Joseph's descendants are largely believers in Yeshua.

j) The tribe of Benjamin is compared to a ravenous wolf. Can you name any famous Benjaminites about whom these things might be true? ***Saul was a Benjaminite who conquered Moab, Edom, and Philistia ("devouring prey"). Also, Esther and Mordicai were Benjaminites ("divides the plunder").***

k) Based on these prophecies, which tribe received the right to rule Israel and which one received the double portion and God's blessing? ***Judah received the right to rule Israel, and Joseph received the double portion and the blessing.***

A Brief History of Israel and Judah

Israel's best days as a nation occurred under the reigns of David and Solomon. However, after the death of King Solomon in 930 bce, Israel was divided into two nations: The northern kingdom, composed primarily of ten tribes (the largest of which was Ephraim), was known by the original name of **Israel** with its capital in Samaria. The southern kingdom, composed primarily of Judah and the smaller tribe of Benjamin became known as **Judah** and its capital remained at Jerusalem. By 720 bce, the Assyrians had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, separating the people into small groups and dispersing them to the far corners of the Assyrian empire. Over time, most of these Israelites were assimilated into the surrounding cultures and lost the memory of their history. These became known as the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel. Judah, on the other hand, was not conquered by the Assyrians but later was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 bce. However, Judah was able to maintain their ethnic identity while in captivity in Babylon for 70 years until they were allowed to return to their homeland by Cyrus the Persian. It was these returnees from Babylon that reconstructed Jerusalem along with the Temple that *Yeshua* knew. Today's Jews are primarily descendants of the tribe of Judah.

3. Death of Jacob and Joseph - 49:29 - 50:26

a) Why do you think the Egyptians mourned Jacob's death? What argument did Joseph use to help gain Pharaoh's permission to go to Canaan to bury Jacob?

Joseph was a respected ruler in Egypt and the general population probably knew the story of his family and shared his grief over the death of his father. He told Pharaoh that his father made him take an oath to bury him in Canaan at Machpelah.

b) Describe Jacob's funeral procession.

All of Jacob's family, as well as "all of Pharaoh's officials," went to Hebron, "a very large company." They "lamented loudly and bitterly" for seven days.

c) After Jacob had died, what did his brothers do? Why do you think they did this? What was Joseph's reaction? Why? What did Joseph say to his brothers?

Fearful that Joseph would extract revenge now that Jacob was gone, they lied and said that Jacob had told them to say that he, Jacob, asked that Joseph forgive his brothers. Joseph wept because he had already forgiven his brothers and was sad that they couldn't accept it. Joseph responded with the famous line, "You intended it for harm, but God meant it for good."

"You meant to do me harm, but God meant it for good."

Genesis 50:20

d) At what age did Joseph die? About how long had his brothers lived in Egypt at the time of his death? Why do you think his brothers remained in Egypt so long? What promise did Joseph extract from his brothers before he died? What does this imply about his faith in God's promises?

Joseph died at 110. Jacob and his family probably arrived in Egypt when Joseph was about 40. So they had lived about 70 years in Egypt. Obviously, life was good and they felt no need to return to Canaan. That Joseph wanted his bones taken back to Canaan indicated that he had ultimate faith in God's promise of the land.

Joseph's Brothers inability to forgive themselves

It is clear from the text that Joseph had truly forgiven his brothers for their treatment of him. It therefore saddened him that they seemed not to accept his forgiveness. Perhaps they could not imagine that anyone could truly forgive them for their grievous sin. Basically, they were not able to forgive themselves. Do you know anyone who has this same problem with God's forgiveness?

Joseph's Burial Site

Joseph was much more committed to God's promise for the future of Israel than his brothers were. By extracting this promise from them, he hoped to help keep God's promise alive in their hearts. **Joshua 24:32** records the fulfillment of this promise made to Joseph. The site of Joseph's tomb can still be seen in Israel today.

Digging deeper

1. This *Torah* portion records the end of both Jacob's and Joseph's lives. Summarize the lives of both of these men, listing the major events in their lives. Do you think Jacob was fair in characterizing his years as "few and difficult" (Genesis 47:9)?

Jacob left home when he was in his forties under unpleasant circumstances (his brother Esau wanted to kill him). He worked for his uncle Laban for about 20 years before leaving him in unpleasant circumstances. His favorite wife died giving birth to her second son. He was told that his favorite son had been killed by a wild animal and he grieved for him for over 20 years. It could definitely be argued that Jacob spent the majority of his life in fear and grief.

Joseph was sold into slavery by his 10 jealous brothers at age 17. He spent 13 years as a slave, at least two of them in prison. He became the governor of Egypt at age 30. When he was about 40, he had the opportunity to be reunited with his brothers. He is then reunited with his father, and they lived together in Egypt until their death.

2. This *Torah* portion completes the book of Genesis. Construct a timeline showing the important events from the call of Abram in Ur through the death of Joseph. Such a tool can be used to help recall the events that shaped the lives of the Patriarchs.

The Torah and the Lives of the Patriarchs

The word *Torah* is usually translated to English as "law." However, a better translation is "teaching and instruction." Other than genealogical records, the Book of Genesis is nothing but stories. Can you see how these stories are truly God's "teaching and instruction?"

For further study, see

Haftarah : 1 Kings 2:1-12

Brit Hadashah : Acts 7:9-16; Hebrews 11:21-22;

1 Peter 1:3-9; 2:11-17