

OpenTheo

The Family of Abraham: Part 38—The Blessing of Joseph's Sons

May 9, 2019



Alastair Roberts

I discuss Genesis 48 and Jacob's faith in blessing the sons of Joseph.

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>. You can see transcripts of my videos here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/list-of-videos-and-podcasts/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

If you have enjoyed these talks, please tell your friends and consider supporting me on Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>. You can also support me using my PayPal account: <https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>.

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Welcome back to this, the 38th in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. Today we're looking at chapter 48 of the book of Genesis in which Jacob blesses the two sons of Joseph. This chapter is part of the extended coda of the book of Genesis in which the events leading up to and involving the death of Jacob are discussed.

Once again, we see a reference to the death of Jacob and his promise or his expectation that Joseph will bury him in the land of Canaan. We also see here his blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh. When reading this chapter, we also need to read it alongside the rest of the book and the larger Jacob saga.

It will help us to understand some of the other events within the story. It sheds light

upon them and they in turn shed light upon it. Joseph hears that his father is sick and with his other brothers, presumably, he goes to the bedside.

He brings his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, Manasseh being the oldest and Ephraim the younger of the two, and Jacob is told that Joseph is coming to him and he sits up on his bed. Now, this story may seem to be quite unnecessary. It's just a deathbed blessing account.

It's not specifically part of the main plot of what's taking place in Genesis. But yet, when we read the story of Jacob or the character of Jacob recounted in the book of Hebrews, what is the one event that stands out from his whole life? He's had this vast story that covers almost the entire second half of the book of Genesis. And yet, what is the one event that stands out? It's the event within this chapter.

In chapter 11 verse 21 of Hebrews, we read, By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph and worshipped, leaning on the top of his staff. And then of Joseph, by faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel and gave instructions concerning his bones. What is the significance of this event that the author of Hebrews should so foreground it within his account of the faith of Jacob? What is it that makes it stand out? Well, it sheds light upon the events of the rest of the story.

It's an event in which, again, we see some of the themes of the rest of the story brought to a sort of resolution. Or there is a restatement of these themes in a powerful way. Reading through this, Jacob recounts his own story.

In preparation for blessing Ephraim and Manasseh, he recounts his own story. And so this is a recounting of his story that leads up to his recognition of Ephraim and Manasseh as the ones who will particularly represent him in certain respects. Jacob said to Joseph, God Almighty appeared to me at Luz, which was later called Bethel, in the land of Canaan and blessed me, and said to me, behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a multitude of people and give this land to your descendants after you as an everlasting possession.

So he recalls the events of chapter 29, which we've discussed, the events in the vision of the ladder, and then God's statement to him that he'll be blessed. This is an event that he recalls as he passes on that blessing. We've seen in the story of the family of Abraham this succession of blessing.

So at points, there is this recalling of the father. Isaac is blessed on account of his father Abraham. Jacob is blessed on account of Isaac and blessed according to the fear of Isaac, that name for God.

And here we have the blessing of the sons of Jacob, of the grandsons of Jacob, according

to his blessing. So there's a passing on of the blessing from generation to generation. And now your two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine.

As Reuben and Simeon, they shall be mine. Reuben and Simeon being his two oldest sons. Your offspring, whom you beget after them, shall be yours, and they will be called by the name of their brothers in their inheritance.

But as for me, when I came from Paddan, a Rachel died beside me in the land of Canaan on the way, when there was but a little distance to go to Ephrath, and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath, that is Bethlehem. He recalls not just God's blessing of him, but this return to the land, and this return to the land in which Rachel died on the way. This journey in which Rachel died in chapter 35, this journey she's dying on the way, not having reached somewhere.

And maybe this is a theme that we see towards the end of this book. There are a number of deaths, the deaths of Jacob and Joseph most prominently, that are expecting a further destination. They're looking towards a greater, going towards some other inheritance.

They're within the land of Egypt, but they're hoping to be brought up into the land of Canaan. And in the same way as Rachel died before reaching the destination of Ephrath, died on the way, they are in some sense dying on the way, dying in the land of Canaan. And they're in Egypt, but that's not going to be their final resting place.

So maybe there's something going on there. Israel saw Joseph's sons and said, who are these? And Joseph said to his father, they are my sons whom God has given me in this place. And he said, please give them to me and I will bless them.

Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age so that he could not see. Then Joseph brought them near to him and he kissed them and embraced them. And Israel said to Joseph, I had not thought to see your face, but in fact, God has also shown me your offspring.

So Joseph brought them from beside his knees and he bowed down with his face to the earth. And Joseph took them both, Ephraim with his right hand towards Israel's left hand and Manasseh with his left hand towards Israel's right hand and brought them near him. This should remind us of a previous account.

It should remind us of chapter 27 with the blessing of Isaac, of Jacob. In that case also, there is a patriarch whose eyes are dim who says, who are you my son? And in this case, we have Jacob saying, who are these? Who are these two children? Who are these two people who are being brought to me? Presumably he knows who Ephraim and Manasseh are. He's met them.

He's met his grandsons, but his eyes are dim and he can't see them. And so there's a recalling of that previous event of blessing. There are other things such as the kissing.

And I think within this, we are seeing something of a replay of that previous event. That event that was so pivotal for the whole of the Jacob narrative. We've been seeing the consequences of that one event playing out throughout the entirety of Jacob's life.

It's the event that leads to the breach between him and his brother Esau. Him going to Paddam Aram, the switching of the two daughters of Laban, which is a sort of eye for eye for him. The switching of the younger and the older so that he is given Leah rather than Rachel.

Then we see all the tensions that that leads to in the house of Jacob. Then his favoured son being presented using goats and a coat. Signs of his favoured son being presented to him in his absence.

So he misrecognises his son as having died, being killed by a wild beast. And this whole story is playing out, the consequences of what has happened. And at this point, we have some sort of repetition of it.

A repetition that takes a different form. Not a reversal of it. It's not just an inversion, nor is it a case of a repetition of it with Jacob on the other side of it.

No, Jacob is now the one who, or in some sense, he is on the other side of it, but he's not suffering the consequences in a negative sense. Rather, he's someone who switches the two sons around. And that is noteworthy.

It helps us to read that previous event, not just as a negative event of deception, of unbelief, whatever it is, but it helps us to recognise that there was something appropriate about that. That the mix-up was not a wrong mix-up, but the way that Israel, that Isaac was deceived, was not a good thing. And as we've seen the story and the consequences, Jacob suffered significantly for that.

But yet, the actual switching of the older and the younger was appropriate. And I think at this point, we're seeing something of that theme coming to a rest. That it is appropriate to have those two sons mixed up in the same way in chapter 38, the two sons, where one advances ahead of the other and Perez breaks through ahead of Zerah, his brother.

And Zerah being associated with the scarlet cord around his wrist. Again, that's connected with Esau, I think. Esau and Red, Zerah and Scarlet, these two characters are connected.

But in this occasion, Perez comes out first. And so the descendants of Judah, the grandsons that will be named as his sons, again, interesting connections there, the younger overtakes the older. Or there's a mix-up in the womb.

So the one that seems to be the one that will come out first does not in fact come out first. And in the same way with the two sons of Joseph, here we have, again, grandsons

being named as sons. They're the sons of Israel in this case, the sons of Jacob.

And they're mixed up in a way that affirms the theme of the story of Jacob, that the younger will serve, the older will serve the younger, that the younger will be advanced ahead of the older. And here in Jacob's blessing, there is an act of faith, an act of faith that sees within the entirety of the story, God working out something. And so his action is not just a recognition of how God has blessed him and passing that on.

That is a considerable act of faith. But there's something more to it than that. There's a recognition of God's providence and of God's purpose that has been worked out in this specific act of reversing the two sons.

And so when Joseph sees that he's reversed the two sons, he's angry. It's evil in his eyes. He's displeased by it.

And he seeks to grasp the hand of his father and switch them around. But it cannot be reversed. It's similar to the story of Esau.

In the story of Esau, where we see he wants to have it reversed. Is there any way that you can take back the blessing? But no, it cannot be taken back. It has happened.

It's set in stone. And in this case here, I think there's a similar thing where Joseph wants Jacob to take back the blessing and reverse it, put it in the right order. But no, he affirms it.

That is the way it's supposed to be. So in this blessing, I think we're seeing something of Jacob's faith, that Jacob finally works through all of these events. We saw earlier in his meeting with or his wrestling with the angel in chapter 32.

And then in his meeting with Esau in chapter 33, there's a replaying of the story of the womb and a replaying where the negative themes are set right. And yet, in all of that, he recognises that ultimately he comes out ahead of his brother. And so these stories, this story here, harks back to in the middle of the story of Genesis, the story of the original story of Esau coming out ahead of Jacob from the womb and clutching the heel.

And then all the things that came out from that, not least the blessing in chapter 27 being given to Jacob, rather than Esau, the switching up of the two sons. And this theme of the older son or the younger son being advanced ahead of the older is also something that we see in the story of Cain and Abel, for instance, or Ishmael and Isaac. Or in these stories more generally, I think that is what we're seeing, that the younger son is advanced ahead of the older.

And here that sums up some of the broader motifs that we find throughout the story of Genesis. For Manasseh was the firstborn. The knowing part of that is important.

And he blessed Joseph. That's interesting. He blesses Joseph through blessing his two sons.

In chapter 5 of the book of First Chronicles, we read, Now the sons of Reuben, the firstborn of Israel, he was indeed the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, the son of Israel, so that the genealogy is not listed according to the birthright. The firstborn would get the double portion. And so Joseph is blessed ahead of Reuben.

He is blessed as if as the firstborn, but he's blessed in a way that gives him the birthright, the double portion. And what that double portion means is that his father takes his two sons as if they were his own sons. And each one of those sons gets a portion.

So Joseph, who's represented by these two sons, gets the double portion. He is the one who's treated as the firstborn. And it's the blessing of the sons has a means of blessing Joseph.

God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has fed me all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads. Let my name be named upon them and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth. That particular blessing is interesting.

There's a threefold character to it. We can think about the blessing of the priest, the Lord bless you and keep you, etc. There's a threefold character to that.

And here there's a threefold character with God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the first part, the second part, the God who has fed me all my life long to this day. And the third part, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil. Could there be a Trinitarian form to this? Perhaps.

Maybe the first part refers to God the father, the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the father, the spirit, the God who has fed me all my life long to this day, and then the son, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil. Perhaps. I think it's quite possible.

I think we should as Christians read these Old Testament passages and recognise within them Trinitarian structures, recognise within them intimations of something that is a fuller revelation that we receive within the new. And as we have that revelation we can look back into the old and maybe see things that people who just had these this revelation might not have seen. Bless the lads, let my name be named upon them.

What does that mean? Jacob's name is Israel and later on we'll see that the northern kingdom of Israel is defined by the tribe of Ephraim and the northern kingdom is called

Israel and Ephraim. It's a tribe that's defined by the youngest, the younger of the two sons of Joseph who is given the firstborn blessing and it's also defined by the name of Israel and so his name is upon Ephraim and in particular and the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh and then the northern kingdom I think bears that more generally. Ephraim is the first among those northern tribes.

Joseph sees this and he's displeased and tries to change it. His father refused and said I know my son, I know he shall also shall become a people and he shall also be great but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations. So he blessed them that day saying by you Israel will bless saying may God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh and thus he set Ephraim before Manasseh.

It might remind us of the story of Abraham where Abraham is told you will be a blessing and in the same way Ephraim and Manasseh will be a blessing for Israel that they will bless by these figures that they will be called for others to be blessed as Ephraim and Manasseh. So looking through this let's think about some of the ways in which the author of Hebrews would have seen deep faith within the story, within the account of this blessing. What is he seeing here? First of all we see the summing up of the themes of Jacob's life, the wrestling for the firstborn position and the way that he recognises that that wrestling has ultimately succeeded, that God has blessed him and God's determination to set him ahead and that that fulfills that first promise that is given concerning him that the older will serve the younger and that reversal of the two is a blessing that affirms what God has been doing throughout his life that there is a point reached here where the themes of Jacob's life, themes that begin when he's back in the womb are affirmed by him and so we recognise a completeness to his life.

Other things that we might notice, we notice the way in which he recounts his own story, the story of God blessing him at Luz or Bethel, the story of the death of Rachel along the way, the way that God has preserved him and that passing on of that blessing that he sees that there is a legacy that will be continued and then he makes twice this statement concerning his body that he wants to be buried in the land of Canaan. The blessing that he gives to the sons as well is a further aspect of his faith that we might see. The same God that has helped him, that has served him on his journey will also assist the sons of Jacob, the sons of Joseph and that blessing of them has that trinitarian form to it.

The way that the life of Jacob is played out is also one that has a different character from others. He has a specific experience of the angel. Now the angel of God presumably met with Abraham at the Oak of Mamre when he came with the other two angels and then later spoke with Abraham concerning the destruction of Sodom but in the story of Jacob there is a very close relationship with the angel.

There are various visions but then there is also this event of the wrestling with the angel. A wrestling with the angel that represents the deep wrestling that had defined Jacob's life to that point. Wrestling with his brother Esau, wrestling with his father Isaac, wrestling with his uncle Laban and all that wrestling is summed up ultimately with a sort of wrestling with God.

But he recognised that the angel had redeemed him from all evil. The one who was supposed to redeem you from all evil was the nearest male relative. And in some ways this is the true brother.

This is the true father. This is the true one that he has been working with all this time. This is the one that has preserved him when all these male relatives that were causing him trouble, bringing him down or oppressing him in various ways.

This is the one that has come to his redemption. This is the one that has come to his aid. The true son, the true brother.

Maybe there's something going on there. And in this broader account then I think we're seeing something of the summation of Jacob's life in an expression of deep faith. A faith in the way that God has led him.

A faith in this core theme of his life. Almost a proto-Trinitarian faith perhaps in the ways that God has been active in different ways within his life. As the one that is the father before whom his fathers have walked.

As the one who has provided for him in everything that he has done. The spirit, the one that provides, the one that gives life. And then in his recognition of God the son perhaps as the angel of the Lord.

Maybe there is something there of a proto-Trinitarian faith that can be seen. And then he's also reaffirming the promises that are made to Abraham. He's reaffirming them by repeating them in a new form that relates to Ephraim and Manasseh.

And also by repeating them. That they will grow to a multitude in the midst of the earth. At the very end of the chapter we have that return to that request that ends chapter 47.

Then Israel said to Joseph, behold I am dying but God will be with you and bring you back to the land of your fathers. Moreover I have given to you one portion above your brothers which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and my bow. What might this be referring to? Well we don't know how this particular piece of land was taken.

Is it referring to the land that was near Shechem? Perhaps it is. If we get to the end of the book of Joshua we read the bones of Joseph which the children of Israel had brought up out of Egypt. They buried at Shechem in the plot of ground which Jacob had bought

from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for 100 pieces of silver and which had become an inheritance of the children of Joseph.

Now that's the very end of the book of Joshua which again should help us to recognize just how significant these themes are of death and burial where the body is buried that he wants to be buried in the land of Canaan but he's doing something more here. He's giving a promise to Joseph that God will bring him back to the land of his fathers. He wants Joseph to bring his body back up to the land of his fathers but he's also reminding Joseph this is the land of your fathers too.

This is where you belong. You may be this ruler in Egypt. You may have great wealth and prominence and significance here but this is not ultimately your home.

You're here as a sojourner no matter how well situated you are ultimately you are going home and that place that you were cast out of at one point in the past you'll return there and you'll be brought there and you'll be buried there and that burial will be an event of completion for possession of the land and that first gift of the land that gift of the land to Joseph at this point I think maybe looks forward to the conquest of the land in the story of Joshua. That portion as well is literally shoulder of the land and shoulder as we've seen in previous episodes is the same word for Shechem. So maybe it's one Shechem.

What does that mean? Maybe a particular part of the territory that he has near Shechem. We saw that earlier in chapter 33 I think it is at the end of chapter 33. He bought the parcel of land where he had pitched his tent from the children of Hamor Shechem's father for 100 pieces of silver.

So we don't hear about the event in which he fought for it but maybe he fought and then paid for the land. I don't know. We don't hear about that event itself so we're left to speculate but the significance of this particular territory I think is important that this is the place in which he will find his first resting place.

Summing up all these themes then what are we to take from this? I think as the author of Hebrews puts it this is a character that is an example to us of faith. Not just an example of someone who is an interesting character from the Old Testament but someone who stands as this great multitude of the people of faith in the Old Testament who witness to us of God. He witnesses to us Jacob of a land that we will return to.

A land that is truly our home. A land that we may feel far from at certain points. A land that even though we are blessed and enjoy great privileges and wealth here, a land that is truly the place to which we belong and we must think of ourselves as sojourners here.

He reminds us also of the way in which we can see God's hand in our lives. The way that God overrules in various circumstances and in all the different events of our lives as we look back on a life that in many respects can be deeply tragic we can still trace the

hands of God's goodness and faithfulness and providence within that life and that's what Jacob does. In the previous chapter he's talked about the tragic character of his life but here he recognises that even in that tragedy God has been preserving him and that God has had his purpose and that ultimately he will be brought home and that request that he be brought to the land and that God will bring Joseph as well out of the land.

That Joseph will ultimately return to the land of his fathers. All of this is a statement of faith, a recognition that one's life is not the end of one's story, one's life in one's flesh. There is a time of this life that will be succeeded by a life after that and in that life after there will be themes that are brought to a completion that are not actually completed within the span of our lives, our earthly years.

This is again an expression of faith and then we see his recognition of God, a recognition of God working in his situation in a number of different ways. That God is the one who is the God of his fathers, the one that he is oriented to as father, as the one that he is dependent upon, as the one that he is in fear of and the one that he serves. A recognition that God is the one that provides for every step of the way, the God who gives life, the God who preserves in situations of famine and need and then that God is the one who redeems, God is the redeemer, the one who is the brother, the son, the one that comes to us in our position of need.

Even when all his male relatives would seem to be against him, God came to his aid. And in this I think we can understand that the author of Hebrews was seeing something of great consequence for people of faith, for Christians. As we read this we can see something about our stories, we can see something about the way that we ought to live, about the way that we ought to think about God, about the way that we ought to trace his hand in our lives.

Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow. If you have any questions please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

If you would like to support this and other videos and podcasts like please do so using my Patreon or my PayPal account. God bless and thank you very much for listening.