

Genesis 48-49

In this chapter we come to the end of Jacob's life and witness his final actions as the patriarch of the clan.

The chapter begins with two stories concerning Joseph's two sons. In the first story, Joseph (who had had children in Egypt) brings his twin sons, Manasseh and Ephraim to Jacob; Jacob first adopts them and then blesses them. Jacob makes it clear that his grandsons' inheritance will be equal to his sons (which is why scripture refers to the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim). The second story is very Jacob-like. When Joseph arrives with the boys, Jacob has them brought to him to bless them. After Jacob embraces them, Joseph aligns the boys so that the elder, Manasseh will receive the blessing and the promise. Jacob however, will have none of that. He intentionally switches his hands and blesses the younger, Ephraim. Just as Jacob stole the promise and blessing from his older brother Esau, now he steals them from the older grandson and gives it to the younger. When Joseph objects, Jacob (now Israel in this story), tells him that while the elder son will lead a great nation, he will not be as great as the younger.

Jacob then proceeds to speak a word of good or ill over each of his sons, according to his understanding of their natures. Here they are in order. Reuben, will lose his preeminence because he had the audacity to sleep with one of his father's concubines. Simeon and Levi, because of their violent tendencies and violent actions, will be divided and scattered among the other brothers. Judah shall be praised, and the other brothers will bow down to him and his clan. There is also a hint that from Judah will come kings who will rule the people. Zebulun will be prosperous and will have an extensive holding of land on the coast. Issachar and his tribe will soon lose their independence to other nations (in this case the Canaanites). Dan and his tribe will bring justice to their people and will be valiant warriors. Gad, who resides east of the Jordan, will be victorious in defending his tribe's land from raiders and other nations. The tribe of Asher will become known for its abundant harvests. Naphtali and his tribe will become a people steeped in freedom. Joseph receives the longest of the blessings (presumably given then to Ephraim) which includes blessings from God that will last longer than the mountains. Benjamin, the youngest, is to be one who devours prey and divides the spoils.

Jacob's final request is that he be buried in the same field as Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah. This is the field that was purchased from the Hittites, at Machpelah. He then breathes his last and "was gathered to his people."

Reflections: One of the most fascinating things about the Jacob stories (perhaps minus the Joseph tales) is its earthiness and its remarkably candid description of Jacob's imperfections. Jacob is not some cartoon character who always gets things right and for whom things always work out. He is a man who is ambitious, deceitful, two faced, who wrestles with God, and at the same time, is one who works hard, trusts in God (sometimes) and is grateful for what he has received. In other words, he is very, very human. This realization ought to give us hope; hope that God can and will use us even in the face of our imperfections. That God will call us to great things, even when we have not always been God's best child. These stories are also a reminder that the great story of God's promise never ends. That it is an ongoing journey across time and territory.

Questions:

1. What was your favorite Jacob story? Why?
2. How do you see yourself like Jacob and unlike Jacob?
3. How do you bless those who come behind you?