

## Genesis 48

### Limits of the Text

The deathbed scenes of Jacob begin in 47:29 and run through 50:14. Chapters 48 and 49 are related scenes—both contain the blessings of Jacob—but each is its own logical unit of text. Chapter 48 begins with “after this,” a marker of time, and contains the adoption and blessing of Joseph’s two sons. In chapter 49, the scene switches to the blessings of Jacob’s sons.

### Interpretation

The background to this text is the failing health of Jacob. Knowing death was imminent, Jacob made Joseph swear not to bury him in Egypt (47:29). The events in chapter 48 occur “some time after this” (HCSB).

In the first movement of the text, Jacob adopted Joseph’s sons.

48:1 After this, Joseph was told, “Behold, your father is ill.” So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.<sup>1</sup>

48:2 And it was told to Jacob, “Your son Joseph has come to you.” Then Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed.

Joseph, still busily working for Pharaoh, learned that his father’s health was deteriorating. So he took his two sons to see their grandfather; Waltke estimates that they would have been about twenty years old at this time.<sup>2</sup> Jacob revived himself enough to sit up in bed.

Moses’ use of the name Israel implies that there would be national implications for the events which took place,<sup>3</sup> and indeed there were. Two new tribes were about to be added to the newly forming nation.

48:3 And Jacob said to Joseph, “God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me,

48:4 and said to me, ‘Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.’

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from ESV unless specified otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> Waltke, 595.

<sup>3</sup> Mathews, 873.

Why did Jacob recount the story of his first meeting with God? The promises of God to Jacob form the basis of Jacob's authority for extending the blessing to others.<sup>4</sup> "The point of Jacob's recollections of the promises here is that as heir to those promises, he had the right to decide to whom they would go with his blessing."<sup>5</sup> Thus Jacob "has the authority to adopt Joseph's offspring."<sup>6</sup> The connection between these can be seen in the "and now" at the start of 48:5.

Note where Jacob puts the emphasis: The actions of God. God makes promises, and God fulfills his promises. Jacob was dying in Egypt; he could legally lay claim only to a very small piece of Canaan and physically to none of it. But because he trusted in the promises of God, he believed his descendents would inherit it sooner or later.<sup>7</sup>

48:5 And 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.

48:6 And the children that you fathered after them shall be yours. They shall be called by the name of their brothers in their inheritance.

In these verses, Jacob declared his intention to adopt Ephraim and Manasseh.

Why did Jacob adopt them? This adoption predicts Jacob's blessing in 49:22-26, where he gave the birthright to Joseph (1 Chr 5:1-2); the adoption essentially gave Joseph a double portion of the inheritance. The adoption put Joseph's sons on the same level as his own sons; they would receive an equal portion of the inheritance, just like Reuben and Simeon would. (Actually, because the birthright came to Joseph, they preceded Reuben and Simeon in importance.) Any other sons that Joseph might have would be considered grandsons and receive their inheritance from Ephraim and Manasseh.

48:7 As for me, when I came from Paddan, to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan on the way, when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)."

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<sup>4</sup> Mathews, 874.

<sup>5</sup> Hughes, 542.

<sup>6</sup> Mathews, 874.

<sup>7</sup> If Jacob had been paying attention, he would have known it would be much later (15:13).

Why did Jacob recall the death of his wife, Rachel? This verse provides the rationale for the adoption. Mathews states that if Rachel, his favorite wife, hadn't died prematurely, Jacob believed she would have given him more sons to share in the inheritance.<sup>8</sup> Waltke arrives at a similar conclusion, but believes it is set up by a contrast. Joseph had the possibility of having more children, whereas Jacob did not after Rachel died. In either case, Jacob adopted the boys to take the place of those he could not have by Rachel.

48:8 When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, "Who are these?"

This question seems a bit out of place. Why did Jacob ask who they were when he had already spoken their names (48:5)? Because of his failed eyesight (48:10), it may be that Jacob did not realize they were in the room. But more likely this was the formal start of the adoption event, ritualistic words given when a child was presented for adoption.<sup>9</sup>

48:9 Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." And he said, "Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them."

Joseph gave the required response, and in so doing he gave credit to God for his sons, recognizing that they were a gift. It's the same answer Jacob had given to Esau (33:5); Joseph shared his father's faith in God.<sup>10</sup>

48:10 Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see. So Joseph brought them near him, and he kissed them and embraced them.

48:11 And Israel said to Joseph, "I never expected to see your face; and behold, God has let me see your offspring also."

Because Jacob was old, he could not see. Because he could not see, Joseph assisted him by bringing his children right to him. Jacob lovingly hugged and kissed his grandsons, and perhaps he also used this time to verify who they were, remembering how he had deceived his own father (27:21-27). This act of affection was also part of the adoption ritual.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mathews, 875.

<sup>9</sup> Mathews, 876. We do the same at weddings: "Who gives this woman to this man?"

<sup>10</sup> Waltke, 597.

<sup>11</sup> Waltke, 598.

Jacob recalled the events of 37:32-35, where he believed his son was devoured by a fierce animal. Instead of mourning for Joseph, he had seen his grandchildren from Joseph.

48:12 Then Joseph removed them from his knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth.

The text can be translated “removed them from between (or near) his knees.” “It is highly unlikely that a bedridden, dying old man had twenty-year-old boys on his knees.”<sup>12</sup>

Why did Joseph bow down here? He accepted his father’s adoption of his sons. “This surprising act of humility by the Egyptian ruler acknowledges the superiority of his father’s mediation of God’s promises.”<sup>13</sup> In so doing Joseph displayed great faith. By giving his sons to Jacob, he removed all chance of them inheriting his position as viceroy in Egypt.<sup>14</sup> He identified his sons with the covenant people of God instead of the ruling people of Egypt.

In the second movement of the text, Jacob completed the adoption by blessing Ephraim and Manasseh.

48:13 And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel’s left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel’s right hand, and brought them near him.

48:14 And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands (for Manasseh was the firstborn).

After bowing down before his father, Joseph had to once again bring his children forward. He carefully positioned his older son by Jacob’s right hand, but by crossing his hands, Jacob blessed the younger over the older.

48:15 And he blessed Joseph and said,

“The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,  
the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day,  
48:16 the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys;

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<sup>12</sup> Waltke, 598.

<sup>13</sup> Mathews, 878.

<sup>14</sup> Hughes, 546-7.

and in them let my name be carried on,  
and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac;  
and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.”

Why does the text say that Jacob blessed Joseph? The blessing itself is clearly directed to the boys. Joseph said, “God bless the boys” and “in them let my name be carried on.” And 48:20 says, “He blessed them.” Joseph was used as a family name, as a representative head of his sons.

The blessing contains three parts, three petitions that Jacob asked of God. In the first petition Jacob formally requested God to bless the boys.

What do the three titles for God signify? Why does Jacob give them? As he has done before (35:3), Jacob described God in terms of what he had done. First, this was the God before whom his father and grandfather walked. God blessed the family when they walked before him, when they trusted and obeyed him. Jacob expected his grandsons to do the same. Second, this was the God who had been his lifelong shepherd. David related to God in the same way (Ps 23). It refers to God’s provision, which includes nourishment, guidance, and protection. Third, this was the Angel who redeems. This verb describes what a kinsman redeemer did, setting his family free from difficulty or danger; “it is used for buying someone out of bondage, marrying a deceased brother’s widow, paying off debts, avenging the family, and the like,”<sup>15</sup> but here it probably has the sense of protection. When used of God, it refers to his standing up for and vindicating his people (Is 43:1-3).<sup>16</sup> Jacob wrestled with the Angel of God (32:24-28; Ho 12:4), and immediately after God protected him from his brother Esau.

In the second petition Jacob asked that the family name continue in them. This was an act of identity. Much like a wife assumes the name of her husband, so these boys would assume his name and the names of their ancestors. This identity is related to the promises of God, which were given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In the third petition Jacob asked that the boys would have many descendents.

48:17 When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him, and he took his father’s hand to move it from

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<sup>15</sup> The NET Bible, Ge 48:16.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, 144.

Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head.

48:18 And Joseph said to his father, "Not this way, my father; since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head."

Very predictably Joseph moved to correct his father, wanting his older to receive the preeminent blessing. The text noted that Isaac could not see (48:10), so perhaps Joseph thought Jacob was simply making a mistake. Ironically, a younger son who will get the birthright from his older brother wants to make sure his own older son receives the birthright.

48:19 But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations."

Jacob may have been blind, but he "saw" the situation clearly. He "may be losing his sight, but he is not losing his insight."<sup>17</sup> Although Moses doesn't tell us how, somehow God communicated to Jacob that the younger should be blessed first, so he was not dissuaded by his son. "His decision was not arbitrary but was based on prophetic knowledge of the futures of the tribes that would begin with these two young men."<sup>18</sup> Jacob, knowing God's will in this matter, refused to switch his hands. "The patriarch, empowered by God, is greater than the ruler of Egypt."<sup>19</sup>

Here is what the writer of Hebrews says about this event: "By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph and worshiped as he leaned on his staff" (Hb 11:21). Why is this such a big act of faith? "It had taken Jacob a lifetime of divine discipline to learn that he must only speak and do the word of God. Now he dared to trust God and believe his plans were best."<sup>20</sup> In what way was this blessing worship? "To believe God's word, and to base everything in the future upon his word, is worship."<sup>21</sup>

The theme of the younger taking precedence over the older is seen yet again (e.g., Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Perez over Zerah). The culture of the day expected the blessing to go the oldest son, but God is not constrained by culture.

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<sup>17</sup> Sternberg, quoted in Waltke, 598-9.

<sup>18</sup> Ross, 649.

<sup>19</sup> Waltke, 600.

<sup>20</sup> Hughes, 545.

<sup>21</sup> Hughes, 542.

“The blessing of God is based solely on God’s grace.”<sup>22</sup> “God’s grace must never become captive to position or privilege or heredity or expectation or tradition or convention or disposition. God’s grace is sovereign. It cannot be tamed. The economy of grace operates on its own principles—humbling human wisdom and exalting the unlikely, so that the last are often the first, and the first last.”<sup>23</sup>

Although both sons would have many descendents, Ephraim would eventually outnumber Manasseh.

48:20 So he blessed them that day, saying,

“By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying,  
'God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh.' ”

Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh.

Joseph predicted that God’s blessing would be so evident that one day people would say, “May God bless you just like he blessed Ephraim and Manasseh.”

In the third and final movement of the text, Jacob prepared Joseph for leadership of the family.

48:21 Then Israel said to Joseph, “Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your fathers.

48:22 Moreover, I have given to you rather than to your brothers one mountain slope that I took from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and with my bow.”

Jacob turned his attention back to Joseph and prepared him to lead the family. First, he passed on a pair of promises: God will be you and bring you back to Canaan. Both “you’s” are plural, referring to the entire family.

Why did Jacob tell Joseph that God would bring them to the land of his fathers? And when was this fulfilled? Although Jacob knew coming to Egypt was necessary and ordained by God, he also knew God had promised him Canaan, not Egypt (35:12). Jacob was confident in (had faith in) the promises of God. This was ultimately fulfilled in the days of Joshua.

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<sup>22</sup> Sailhammer, 272.

<sup>23</sup> Hughes, 545.

Second, Jacob gave a special piece of the inheritance to Joseph. There are two difficult phrases in this verse. The first difficult phrase has to do with the relationship of Joseph to his brothers. It might be that Joseph is “one who is above your brothers” (so NET, see also NIV), meaning he would be the family leader. Or it might be that Joseph gets “one portion more than your brothers” (so NASB, see also HCSB, ESV, NKJV, and YLT), meaning he got a double portion of the inheritance. Although different, these two amount to nearly the same thing, because Joseph did inherit the birthright (49:22-26), thus he was the family leader and received a double inheritance through Ephraim and Manasseh.

The second difficult phrase is the thing that Jacob fought for. What did he fight for and when did he do it? The Hebrew word used here (*shekem*) can refer to a shoulder, the upper part of the back which was a choice portion of meat, or it can also refer to a mountain’s shoulder, “an elevated range of land.”<sup>24</sup> But this is also the word for Shechem, the town where Simeon and Levi massacred all the males in retaliation for the rape of Dinah (34:25-29). “Jacob was giving Joseph either (1) one portion above his brothers, or (2) the mountain ridge he took from the Amorites, or (3) Shechem. The ambiguity actually allows for all three to be the referent.”<sup>25</sup>

If choice #1 was in Jacob’s mind, as the NET and the NIV take it to be, then this text is easily understood; the recipient of the birthright gets a double portion. If choice #2 was in his mind, as a majority of modern texts take it to be, then we are left with unanswered questions. There is no record in Genesis of Jacob fighting with Amorites and conquering mountain slopes. That’s not to say it could not have happened, just that nothing is known about these events. If choice #3 was in his mind, then this text is easily understood. Jacob, as the family head, took Shechem by weapons of war—the sword and the bow are a “common word pair, indicating instruments of war”<sup>26</sup>—through the actions of his sons, Simeon and Levi (34:25-29). This choice makes sense in light of Jos 24:32, where the bones of Joseph were buried at Shechem, which became the inheritance of his sons. John 4:5 also mentions that Jacob gave land to Joseph near Sychar, which was near Shechem. Hughes translates this verse like this: “And I, I give Shechem to you—O one above your brothers—which I took from the hand of the Amorites with

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<sup>24</sup> Swanson, DBLH 8900.

<sup>25</sup> The NET Bible, Ge 48:22.

<sup>26</sup> Mathews, 883.

my sword and my bow."<sup>27</sup> I agree with Waltke that this is the best option, despite the lack of support from English translations.<sup>28</sup>

Regardless of which choice Jacob had in mind, the main point of 48:22 is clear: Joseph received special treatment. The reason for the special treatment becomes clear in the next scene, where Joseph received the birthright from his father (49:22-26).

This chapter prepares the reader for the blessings that will be given to all the sons in the next chapter..

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<sup>27</sup> Hughes, 547.

<sup>28</sup> Waltke, 601.

### **Three Levels of Narrative**

1. Personal History – This is a story about Jacob’s adoption of Joseph’s sons.
2. National History – This is a story about the formation of the twelve tribes of Israel, where the tribe of Joseph is replaced by the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh.
3. Redemptive History – This is a story about God’s preparation of his covenant people for future blessing.

### **The Gospel**

1. What does this text teach us about ourselves? What need or deficiency in our lives does it expose? We have a tendency to live our lives based only on what we can see or predict. We need a God who is faithful to his promises, so we can learn to live life based on those promises, not ourselves.
2. What does this text teach us about God? How does it reveal God’s grace to meet our need? God has been completely faithful to the promises he made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God demonstrates his faithfulness, so that we will learn to trust him.
3. How does this text stand in relation to the gospel? This text reflect a key aspect of our need for redemption through the gospel. We need God’s help to be able to trust God and live accordingly.

### **Textual Outline**

1. Jacob adopted Joseph’s sons (1-12).
  - a. Jacob explained his intentions to Joseph (1-7).
  - b. Jacob initiated the adoption process (8-12).
2. Jacob blessed Joseph’s sons (13-20).
3. Jacob prepared Joseph for leadership (21-22).

### **Central Truth of the Text**

Moses wrote Gen 48 in order to show the children of Israel that Jacob trusted the promises of God and acted accordingly.

## Teaching Outline

God always keeps his promises. God wants this church to trust his promises and live their lives accordingly. From this text in Genesis 48, we will see areas of our lives that we trust the promises of God and live accordingly.

1. We trust the promises of God that concern our families (1-12).
2. We trust the promises of God that concern our future (13-20).
3. We trust the promises of God that concern our leaders (21-22).

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