

# BREAD OF LIFE TORAH STUDIES

"I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger ..." John 6:35

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## GENESIS 46-48

### CHAPTER 49 – Jacob blesses his sons

49:1 And Jacob called his sons and said, "Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the end of days<sup>1</sup>: "Come together and listen, you sons of Jacob, and listen to Israel your father."

According to rabbinic tradition and writings, the original purpose of the gathering was to reveal the mystery of the end of days and the time of Messiah's coming. For example, it is written that:

They thought that he would reveal to them everything that is destined to come about in the final messianic period. However, after it was revealed unto him, it was concealed from him.<sup>2</sup>

Jacob's parting message to his sons was a mixture of praise, critique, and blessing. He focuses on a future time when the tribes must purposely *gather together*. He uses two Hebrew verbs that represent this coming together. He tells them: *become a single group / reconcile yourselves*. There must not be any inner jealousies, hatred, or rivalries. Following the call to unity, he also calls them to *listen*—again mentioned twice. Jacob goes on to speak of their uniqueness—prophesying diversity within a unified Israel. Jacob blesses each son (tribe) individually according to its own character and ability. Each tribe has something to contribute to the unified national mission according to their particular gifting.

Remember that Jacob had received an earlier word from the LORD: Genesis 28:14 *...in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed*. We will just focus here on the two most prominent blessings: Judah and Joseph, although there are also some interesting details in the others you might like to consider.

#### Judah's Blessing – 8-12

The Messiah is really the focus of Jacob's blessing over Judah.

- Judah's name signifies *praise* (Gen. 29:35)
- It is interesting that his fathers' sons will bow down to *him*. That was the dream of Joseph. Surely a clue that both speak of the one Messiah.
- *A lion cub is Judah* – Jesus is designated as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah in Revelation 5:5 "*The Lion of the tribe of Judah... has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll.*" He went out as the sacrificial Lamb, but will return as the Lion of Judah.
- *The scepter shall not depart from Judah* –The *scepter* is the symbol of kingship. Judah will be the royal tribe, from which King Messiah will come.

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<sup>1</sup> The Jewish commentators generally agree that the End of Days refers to the Messianic era.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel's Bible Commentary*, p633.

- *Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet* – this speaks of him being the law-giver. Messiah will have theocratic rule.
- *Shiloh* means to be at rest, prosper, to be at ease. All the ancient scholars recognized that “*Shiloh*” spoke of Messiah. *Rashi* wrote, “. . . until *Shiloh* comes, that is King Messiah, whose is the Kingdom.” (see Ezek 21:27) The primary biblical source for the belief that the Messiah will come in the distant future is contained in this verse.<sup>3</sup>
- *To him shall be the obedience of the people* – the Hebrew word translated ‘obedience’ contains the meaning of submission, cleansing, purging, from a root word meaning ‘blameless’. “He will be the prince of peace in the sense that the definitive character of his mission will be peace and universal harmony. Then the scepter of Judah will no longer reign only over his own nation, but over the gathered nations.”<sup>4</sup>
- *He ties his foal to the vine, And his donkey's colt to the choice vine.* “Choice vine” denotes a sense of bright ‘redness’, piercing to the sight; a vine yielding the richest, choicest wine, a noble vine. This verse speaks of extraordinary abundance and peaceful wellbeing. Jesus said “I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser.” (Jn 15:1). His first miracle, according to John, was turning water into wine at the Wedding Feast at Cana.
- Mt. 21:5: *Behold he comes riding on a donkey, a colt the foal (son) of a donkey* – depicts the Triumphal Entry – the only time Christ allowed himself to be heralded as king. (see also Zech 9:9) A donkey was a humble animal for a king to ride. Of course, this happens only a few days before he shed his blood, in the ultimate act of humility, for the redemption of the world.
- *He washes his garments in wine, And his robes in the blood of grapes* – repetition is used here for emphasis – this depicts Messiah coming in judgment – see Isaiah 63:1-4; Rev. 19:13-16.

**Q. How do we correlate the peace, abundance and submission of the people in the earlier verses, with the final judgment depicted here?**

### **Joseph's Blessing –22-26**

We can clearly see that, on every point, the blessing on Joseph relates to Messiah Yeshua.

- 22 “*Joseph is a fruitful bough, A fruitful bough by a well; His branches run over the wall.*” This abundant ‘vine’ will have its own water source, and its fruitfulness will reach far beyond the boundaries of Israel; “fruitful” here has the same root as the name *Ephraim*, which means ‘double fruit.’ (see 41:52).
- 23 He will be the victim of slander and ongoing attacks and be hated by his enemies;
- 24-25 His strength will come from God the Father;
- 24 He is the ‘shepherd’ and the ‘stone’ of Israel;
- 25-26 Blessings from God Almighty shall flow upon his head;
- He will be set apart from his brethren.

Before we go on, here is a translation of Gen 49:22 found in the Jewish Bible:

*A charming son is Joseph, a charming son to the eye; each of the daughters climbed heights to gaze.*

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Elie Munk, *The Call of Torah*, commentary on Gen 49:10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

If we compare this to the translation above, which we commonly find in our English translations, we will see that it is very different. So let's have a closer look:

- The word translated “bough” or “vine”, is בֵּן *ben*. There are 4,906 uses of this word in the OT—4,546 times it is translated as “son” or “children” (i.e. sons) and most other times it has to do with people or offspring in some form. It comes from a root meaning “to build” as in ‘build a family’.
- Fruitful is quite a straightforward meaning from פָּרָה *para*, which can mean to grow or increase. However, the Jewish translation gives the meaning “charming”.
- “Branches” or “daughters”? The word is בַּת *bat*—out of 588 uses it is translated “daughter” 526 times, and ‘branches’ only once—here.
- “Well” or “eye”? עַיִן *ayin*—out of 887 uses of the word, it is translated ‘eyes’ 495, ‘sight’ 216; it is also used figuratively to denote mental or spiritual faculties, and is translated as ‘well’ or ‘fountain’ a mere 22 times.
- “Run over”? The Hebrew word means ‘to step, to go on slowly’ or ‘march’, only once, here, is it translated ‘run over’.
- “Wall” is quite straightforward in meaning, i.e. something that goes about, a ‘border’.
- The word “gaze” found in the Jewish translation has no word match, but is most likely used as it relates to eye.

I bring this out to bring to your attention the difficulty in translating Hebrew text. We can see that the translators have used different methods of interpretation—neither is wrong, and seen together, they can actually enhance our understanding of the text. There can be many nuances behind Hebrew words, and it is up to translators to choose the words/focus they see as most appropriate.

Nevertheless, let us look at how Jewish sages have viewed Joseph:

In grandeur of soul and in moral worth, Joseph was superior to Judah. It was he, not Judah, who earned the title of ‘righteous one’, with which Jewish tradition has honoured him. His father calls him here “the crown among his brothers,” the one who wears, unseen by others, the diadem of moral perfection. . . It was indeed the memory of his father that had kept Joseph from sinning, even in Egypt, where he was surrounded by constant temptations.<sup>5</sup>

Neither did he take revenge on his brothers, but was able to forgive. He saw Divine providence at work in his life and experienced God as the Shepherd who led him, even as he had been led by his father. It is truly a beautiful blessing. Sadly though, Joseph’s descendants (Ephraim) fell into sin, causing Hosea, after the destruction of the Temple, to cry: *“Give them, O LORD ... a miscarrying womb and dry breasts. . . Ephraim is smitten, their root is dried up, they shall bear no fruit: yea, though they bring forth, yet will I slay even the beloved fruit of their womb. My God will cast them away, because they did not hearken unto him: and they shall be wanderers among the nations.”*<sup>6</sup>

Jacob effectively split the firstborn blessing between Judah and Joseph—Judah representing authority and leadership; Joseph fruitfulness, righteousness and integrity. Isaac’s blessing over Jacob in Genesis 27:28-29 is important in this regard because it typifies the type of blessing given to the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, Gen 49:22.

<sup>6</sup> Hosea 9:14-17.

firstborn. It is a blessing of fruitfulness and sovereignty over his brothers residing upon one individual. Therefore, when we see here blessings of sovereignty given to Judah and blessings of fruitfulness given to Joseph, we know that the blessing of the firstborn has been split between them. Thus the dying Jacob, at a great distance, saw Messiah as both 'son of Joseph' and 'son of Judah' – in retrospect, we can see this depicting His first and second comings.

We know that the final fulfilment of Jacob's blessings are still ahead of us, as announced by Ezekiel in his messianic vision:

*Ezek. 37:15-28: Again the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 16 "As for you, son of man, take a stick for yourself and write on it: 'For Judah and for the children of Israel, his companions.' Then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel, his companions.' 17 "Then join them one to another for yourself into one stick, and they will become one in your hand. 18 "And when the children of your people speak to you, saying, 'Will you not show us what you mean by these?'—19 "say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "Surely I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel, his companions; and I will join them with it, with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they will be one in My hand." "And the sticks on which you write will be in your hand before their eyes."*

*21 "Then say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "Surely I will take the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone, and will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; 22 "and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all; they shall no longer be two nations, nor shall they ever be divided into two kingdoms again. . . David My servant shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd; they shall also walk in My judgments and observe My statutes, and do them. 25 Then they shall dwell in the land that I have given to Jacob My servant, where your fathers dwelt; and they shall dwell there, they, their children, and their children's children, forever; and My servant David shall be their prince forever. 26 "Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; I will establish them and multiply them, and I will set My sanctuary in their midst forevermore. 27 "My tabernacle also shall be with them; indeed I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 28 "The nations also will know that I, the LORD, sanctify Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forevermore."*

## The Death of Jacob

Before he dies, Jacob again stresses that he should be buried with his fathers in the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron, where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah and Leah were buried. (This is the only reference to the burial of Leah, and there is no mention of her death.)

*When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people*—it was as though he had mastery over his own passing—after blessing each son, his mission on this earth work was complete. Both Abraham and Isaac were said to have 'breathed their last and died'. Whereas Jacob is said to have 'breathed his last and was gathered to his people'. Most commentators understand this to imply that Jacob lives on spiritually because his offspring maintain his heritage. But interestingly, one Rabbi comments:

Jacob had so perfected himself that leaving this life meant no more than removing a coat means to us. His soul simply discarded his earthly raiment – his body – and continued essentially unchanged. In the deepest sense, therefore, death did not exist for him – so he did not die in the conventional sense.

Jacob's final moment was a fulfilment of God's promise (46:4) that *Joseph shall place his hands over your eyes* – i.e. will close them at his passing.