

GENESIS

Lesson 45 - Chapters 49 and 50 (End of Book)

Last week we were close to finishing up Genesis 49. This week we will complete Genesis 49 and 50, and conclude our study of Genesis.

Joseph was the 11th son of Jacob, and last time we looked carefully at the prophetic blessing given to him, which would be handed off to his sons Ephraim and Manasseh. And, this because Ephraim and Manasseh.....but primarily Ephraim.....would be the representatives of Joseph's tribe. That is, within a few years of Joseph's death, any reference to a tribe of Joseph would diminish, until the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh thoroughly replaced it. In the future Biblical writings, where Joseph is mentioned, the words will be accompanied with the comment that the rod of authority for Joseph is in the hand of Ephraim.

RE READ Gen. 49:27 - end

Lastly, we come to Benjamin. And, a total of ONE verse is dedicated to the blessing of Benjamin. If we really need any more proof that it is the Holy Spirit guiding these blessings, then Benjamin's should be all that we require. For, Jacob's second favorite, and youngest, son was given a blessing that was anything but flattering even though we have been shown in Scripture that Jacob carefully protected and fawned over Benjamin. Benjamin was characterized as a predator... a wolf... viscous and merciless. And, this would prove to be true.

Benjamin had a rather schizophrenic future. Though it would have contact with, and even play a part in, the royalty of Israel, Benjamin was also ferocious and stiff-necked. Much of the outcome of the descendants of Benjamin had to do with their between-a-rock-and-a-hard spot territorial tribal allotment: for they were placed in the unenviable position as a buffer state between Ephraim and Judah. Further, the rather narrow strip of land they occupied that both the major north-south, and east-west, trade route highways passed through the territory of Benjamin. Sometimes we get these incorrect mental pictures of these multi-thousand man ancient armies scampering over hilltops like mice, and blazing new trails as they went. Not true. As any military man can tell you, wars are fought around and over and by means of the major highways of a nation, because the well-established roadways where the armies had to travel. The roadways were placed where they were because there was water available and the terrain was friendlier. Even back in the days of Abraham wagons and carts were in use and so there needed to be a rather flat and wide trail to accommodate the rather fragile wheel and axle mechanisms of those early wooden vehicles.

Those trade routes that crossed through Benjamin also likely produced a valuable source of income for Benjamin; in the form of Benjamin attacking and plundering those merchant caravans. For remember, one tribe pillaging another and taking what they needed to increase their own wealth and serve their own needs is the very essence of the tribal system. And, it remains so to this day.

As might surprise you, the Holiest City in all of the land was in THEIR territory; yes, Jerusalem was originally in the territory of Benjamin, not Judah, as many assume. Many other important Israelite cities were also within the boundaries of Benjamin: Mizpah, Ramah, Gibeon, Bethel, and even Jericho.

It is now well established that these various 12 tribes of Israel had battles amongst themselves: but perhaps no tribe was considered as ferocious and self-serving as Benjamin. One excellent example of Benjamin's characteristics is found in the book of Judges, at a particularly bad time for Israel when the Bible says of the condition of the Holy Land: "... every man did that which was right in his own eyes". Benjamin was right at the center of a terribly chaotic series of wars between the tribes of Israel. In the city of Gibeah, an incident occurred that was eerily akin to when Lot was in Sodom and the townspeople wanted to have homosexual sex with the two Angels that had come to bring God's judgment upon Sodom. The crux of the matter was that a man from the tribe of Ephraim was temporarily staying in Gibeah, when he took in a traveler as a guest in his home. The Benjamite men in Gibeah demanded that the traveler be given to them so they could ravage him. The elderly man from Ephraim offered his daughter and his concubine. They took his concubine, and nearly killed her. After they returned her nearly dead, the man considered his concubine so defiled as to be worthless to him. So he allowed her to die on his doorstep, cut her corpse into 12 pieces, and sent those pieces along with a message to each tribe of Israel. And, the other tribes of Israel were so outraged, that they gathered together and sent an army against Benjamin to punish it. Now, as an aside, we can see here the terrible, unholy condition of the tribes of Israel in the time of the Judges, that would see the mutilation by this man of his own concubine as not only a justifiable act by him, but also see that all the blame rested upon Benjamin who had ruined her as just a routine matter.

When the battle began, Benjamin devastated the coalition army for the first two days. Interestingly, part of the reason that Benjamin was succeeding was a combination of ferocity, and that they had a group of deadly accurate stone slingers who killed 40,000 people in the ensuing battle. By the way, all of these particular soldiers were left-handed, a trait that was common among members of the tribe of Benjamin.

In the end, the coalition army finally got the upper hand and annihilated the tribe of Benjamin..... nearly to the point of extinction. The tribe of Benjamin never fully recovered.

One of the most famous O.T. men of Benjamin was Saul; often called the first King of Israel. While I don't want to get technical, there is disagreement among both Jewish and Christian scholars as to whether he really ought to be viewed as the first King of Israel, or whether he was simply the last Judge, albeit a centralized Judge that attempted to rule over more than his own tribe. He was never really accepted by all of Israel as a King, and his reign was absolute, never-ending turmoil. But, more important, God anointed Saul as the kind of King the people wanted (the kind He cautioned against), so failure was the result of his reign.

Yet, towards the end of O.T. times, we find two members of the tribe of Benjamin rising above that ruinous Benjamite tribal character: Esther, the namesake of the book of Esther, and her cousin Mordecai. The Jewish festival of Purim was established in memory of the brave acts of these two, in saving the Jews from the pagan people's of that time, who were led by a man named Haman.

Other than for Benjamin himself, though, I doubt there is any more famous and influential Benjamite in all the tribal history, than for St. Paul; yes, the Apostle Paul was from the tribe of Benjamin. Yet, it should also be remembered that his saying he was from that tribe was simply a family remembrance; for he also called himself a Jew, which ANY surviving Israelite living in Paul's day would have done. The tribe of Benjamin, as an independent and separate entity, was gone and assimilated by Paul's day, assimilated by the tribe of Judah, and therefore these former Benjamites were called Jews.

And, so we have now completed the blessings of all 12 sons of Jacob: the 12 tribes of Israel. And, we should bookmark Genesis 48 and 49 in our Bibles as a reference, because whether we're studying the O.T. or the New, these blessings explain much of what was going to happen in the centuries following this event, well into a time this is still future to us.

Chapter 49 comes to an end with Jacob commanding his sons that they are to take his body and bury it in the cave back up in Canaan, the one the Abraham purchased, and where Jacob's parents, grandparents, and his own wife Leah lay entombed. Then, Jacob dies.

This paragraph in Genesis 49 is really the first time that Israel is seen as a nation unto itself, rather than just a man (Jacob) with his growing family of 12 sons. In fact, this is the first use of what will become a well-worn Biblical phrase, "the 12 tribes of Israel".

Let's not miss the opportunity to once again notice the mindset of the ancients at work, when Jacob says "I am about to be gathered to my kin.....bury me with my fathers." When we can begin to grasp that 99% of everything happening in the Bible must be read BETWEEN the lines, then we can start to make all the Bible characters the real people, living real lives, under real and everyday circumstances, that they were. It is important that we understand that the

terms used and what the phrases and idioms they employed meant, were based entirely on the era in which they were spoken. They are neither universal nor timeless. This era had its own beliefs and traditions about death and its aftermath. Israel was no different. Jacob believed what all the other Middle Eastern societies believed in.....ancestor worship. In no way did this seem in conflict in having trust in Yehoveh, or His teachings. Those other gods, for other people and other nations, did not seem to be in conflict with Yehoveh's laws and commands. In fact, to this point in the Bible, there has been no mention of an immortal soul living on in Heaven, or any such thing beyond the haziest kind of general statement. Now, in Egypt, and in a few of the other Middle Eastern cultures, elaborate belief systems and complex rituals concerning the dead had been developed. We don't find that among the Israelites, but neither do we find it amongst the bulk of the ancient cultures. Yet, in Israel, we DO find ancestor worship and respect for the dead and an understanding that there IS something beyond the grave, even if it is not fully evident.

Jacob wanted to be buried with his fathers, because if he wasn't he wouldn't be able to be with them after his death. After all, here Jacob was in Egypt, and his ancestors were way up in Canaan. How could his after-death essence commune with his relatives' after-death essences, if they were interred hundreds of miles apart? That was the thinking.

And, notice the last words that end Genesis 49: "...and breathing his last he was gathered to his people." Whoever wrote this down..... and it is usually credited to Moses several hundred years later..... also believed in ancestor worship because it states matter-of-factly that indeed Jacob WAS gathered to his people.

Let's move on to Genesis chapter 50 and conclude our study of the book of Genesis.

READ GEN 50 all

What a heart-rending scene we have here, with Joseph breaking down upon his father's death, and crying and kissing this now empty shell that was Jacob. The, Joseph orders his father's body to be embalmed. This is not now, nor ever, going to be usual and normal Israelite custom, however it did happen from time to time.

As we all know, the Egyptians had perfected the art of embalming the dead. The reason for the embalming was all wrapped up in Egyptian beliefs about the after life. Physical preservation was key in the survival of death by the immortal soul, according to the long established Egyptian cult of Osiris, the god of the underworld.

However, that is not the reason or the circumstance that Jacob was embalmed. The reason was that Jacob's body had to be taken on a substantial and hot journey, to Canaan, to be buried with his forefathers, and if they did not embalm him.....well.....I don't think I need to paint a vivid picture for you. Now, part of the reason that I know that Jacob's embalming had nothing to do with the Egyptian death cult is that the Bible leaves us a subtle message: and it is that Joseph called the PHYSICIANS to perform the embalming. Physicians were not normally embalmers in Egypt; usually, it was the Priests of Osiris who performed this intricate and secretive task. And, this because embalming was a religious practice NOT a medical one, and so was always performed by professional mortuary priests.

Then, in the next few verses, we're given a series of numbers about the amount of days the embalming process and mourning period occurred, and at first glance they are a little confusing and seem almost at odds with one another. We have two periods mentioned: 40 days and 70 days. Forty days for embalming, 70 days for mourning.

Actually, what we have here is the typical period of 40 days of embalming, followed by the customary 30 day mourning period Hebrews observe.....giving us a total of 70 days.

And, so the brother's complied with their father's wish, and the entire clan, led by Joseph, and except for the smallest children, accompanied by royal charioteers and an armed guard as well, proceeded in what must have been a funeral procession fit for a king the 200 or so miles from Goshen up to the cave at Makhpelah in Canaan.

All of Egypt was, apparently, ordered to go into a period of mourning over Jacob..... a very great honor, indeed, usually accorded only to royalty.

Now, just as we were given a subtle message that Jacob's embalming had nothing to do with Egyptian religious practices, we're also given a hint that things were not calm and peaceful in Egypt at the moment. Because in verse 5, as Joseph goes to Pharaoh to ask permission to journey to Canaan to bury his father (this would just have been a normal and respectful thing for Joseph to do), Joseph says, ".....let me go up and bury my father, THEN I WILL RETURN." Obviously the Pharaoh was a little anxious over Joseph leading this procession of all his primary adult family members back to what was ostensibly their homeland; Pharaoh was concerned that Joseph might not return.

So, while we can certainly see that it was a funeral procession fit for a King, it was also a funeral procession filled with high Egyptian government officials and a sufficient military presence to both protect everyone in their journey but also to ensure that Joseph would return. Let me remind you of two things at this point: 1st, the current Pharaoh of Egypt was NOT an Egyptian he was a Semite. And 2nd, the 7 year famine was over. So, from that standpoint

Joseph was not needed as the overseer of nation's food supply. Rather, Joseph was Pharaoh's right-hand man and a valued ally, of the same genetic stock as Pharaoh.

Now, it is interesting that this chapter not only ends the saga of Jacob's life but of Joseph's as well. And, so, it was necessary to tidy up matters with Joseph's brothers.

After the burial ceremony in Canaan, we're told all returned to Egypt. But, on the way back, the brothers realized that in the chance that their powerful brother Joseph still held a grudge against them for their offenses against him in the past, their father was no longer a hedge of protection against any revenge. Obviously, they STILL didn't understand the condition of Joseph's heart.

When they confronted Joseph with their worries, he gently and mercifully assured them that he not only had no intentions of doing anything but caring for them, that in fact they were but instruments in the hand of God as was he. Wow. I pray that God will make me like Joseph, that I can fully understand that the offenses committed by others upon me could ONLY happen if God allowed them. How often I have looked back upon the trials and sins of my own life, and realized that the blessed place God has led me to could NOT have happened any other way than the way it did. Now, if I can just feel that way for the unresolved things..... things that still hurt, things that I still can't make any sense of, that only God knows why it was necessary.

What a blessed life were Joseph's remaining days; he lived to see his own sons grow and mature, to see his grandchildren born and mature, and to see his great-grandchildren born. When the Bible says that a child was born on someone's knees, as it does here, it simply means that those children were considered that person's own: sometimes symbolically, other times it was literal. In this case, it just meant that Joseph was still the leader of his clan, and those children fell under his familial authority.

Fifty-four years after his father died, Joseph expired at the age of 110 years. It would be good to understand that despite the fact that Joseph had been so well treated and highly thought of in Egypt, he made it clear that Egypt was still just a foreign land to him. So, he made his family promise that when that day came that Israel would finally leave Egypt for the Promised Land, they would take his bones with them. Joseph was then embalmed as per Egyptian custom, and his body placed in a coffin, to await that day he, too, could join his ancestors in the land that God had promised to the Hebrews.

BTW: several scholars have noted that it is highly unlikely that it was actually Joseph's brothers who heard him say "I am about to die.....you shall carry my bones from here..." Joseph was the 2nd youngest of the 12, and died as a very old man. It is unimaginable that his older brothers all survived him. Rather, we find the use of the Hebrew for brother, ach, which

can mean anything from an actual sibling, to a fellow countryman. But, as often as not, it was term directed at a close male family member. Almost for certain at least some of those who were present for Joseph's command to take his bones back to Canaan were grandchildren and Nephews.

One final thing: numbers used in the Bible have much significance. Often they are NOT literal, but symbolic. Particularly when we see round numbers.....like here with Joseph's death at 110.....we need to be aware that it is likely that this is a symbolic number. That said, I also have no doubt that many round numbers were simultaneously literal AND symbolic. So, it's not to say that Joseph didn't die very old, I'm sure he did. The mention of his living to see his great grandchildren born indicates this. But, in Egypt, the traditional number of a full life span was 110 years. For Hebrews, the traditional number was 120 years. In other words, if a person attained that many years, or more, then they had lived a long life, blessed by the gods. Of course, few people actually did.

And, thus ends our study of the Book of Beginnings.....the book of Genesis.