

- b. The Hebrews writer moved quickly from Isaac to *Jacob* (11:21). Jacob was Abraham's grandson, and the heir of the covenant in his own generation. But more than that, he was the central figure in the emergence of the nation of Israel, which nation is the focal point of the balance of the Old Testament scriptures. For this reason, it's not surprising that Jacob's life dominates the Genesis record, spanning more than half of its fifty chapters. Abraham was the nation's first forefather, and Isaac its second, but it was Jacob who became the man *Israel*, and it was his twelve sons who became the heads of Israel's twelve tribes. God had promised innumerable descendents to Abraham, and He reiterated that promise to Isaac, but it was Jacob who began to see that promise realized as God gave him twelve sons through whom the covenant household became a great nation as vast as the stars of the heavens and the sand of the seashore (cf. Genesis 15:6, 22:15-17, 26:1-4, 28:10-14, 32:9-12 with 1 Kings 4:20-21).

God had seen to it that Jacob received his father's covenant blessing, which reflected the fact that He'd had chosen *him*, rather than Esau, to be the progenitor of the Israelite nation. Henceforth, Yahweh identified Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exodus 2:23-4:5, 6:1-8; etc.). Thus Jacob, like his father before him, sought to bless his own sons as he, too, approached the end of his life. This blessing is recorded in Genesis 49, but the Hebrews writer focused on the blessing that Jacob bestowed on his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48). This focus on Joseph's sons seems strange at first glance, especially given Judah's preeminence among Jacob's sons. Judah was the son chosen by God to be the forefather of the promised messianic seed (Genesis 49:8-10); surely that made him a more appropriate choice for the Hebrews writer in showing Jacob's faith by his blessing of his covenant offspring.

But a closer look at this blessing and its significance and eventual outcome shows why the writer made it the issue in his treatment of Jacob's faith.

- 1) First, Jacob blessed Ephraim and Manasseh *as his own sons* (Genesis 48:1-5). He blessed them just as he did his twelve sons; indeed, Ephraim and Manasseh enjoyed a kind of preeminence in that Jacob blessed them *before* he blessed his natural sons. The Chronicler later observed that this action amounted to Jacob bestowing on Joseph's sons the status and rights of the *first-born*. The Genesis account suggests this by mentioning Reuben and Simeon (Jacob's first two sons), but the Chronicler was explicit: Joseph's sons supplanted Reuben as first-born (1 Chronicles 5:1-2).
- 2) Thus Joseph obtained both the *birthright* and a *double portion* in the covenant inheritance (Genesis 48:22). Unlike his brothers, he enjoyed two places among Jacob's twelve sons who would become the twelve tribes of Israel. (The way this worked is that God took Levi and his offspring to be His priests. As such, Levi's household was entirely set aside to God, and so had no tribal inheritance like the other brothers.) Thus the nation of Israel was reckoned under Ephraim and Manasseh, not Levi and Joseph.

Faith involves perceiving as real and present what doesn't yet exist (11:1). And the more remote and less likely that future outcome, the greater the faith. Indeed, faith is at its greatest when it believes God for what is seemingly *impossible*. This was the faith of Abraham when he believed God for *both* the fruitfulness of his covenant heir and the obligation to slay him as a sacrifice of worship, and this was the faith of Abraham's descendents when they believed God for His promise to restore David's regal house, even after He had cursed it and cut it off (cf. Jeremiah 22:24-30 with 1 Samuel 7; Amos 9:11-15; Ezekiel 34, 37; etc.).

So Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh attested a vision that transcended natural order and expectations. These sons of Joseph were henceforth no longer grandsons of the covenant patriarch, but sons. And not merely sons, but first-born sons. Though last in Jacob's line (at that point), Ephraim and Manasseh were now *first* in it. Even more, Manasseh's natural status as Joseph's first-born was overturned as Jacob bestowed that status and right on *Ephraim*, just as Isaac had done with Jacob many decades earlier (Genesis 48:8-20).

But there are two even more profound dimensions to Jacob's faith as it expressed itself in blessing Ephraim and Manasseh.

- 1) First, the two tribes descended from them would eventually rebel against Yahweh and His chosen king. Indeed, Ephraim was preeminent among the ten tribes that formed the northern kingdom of Israel, so much so that this ten-tribe alliance is frequently referred to under the name *Ephraim* (cf. Isaiah 7:1-9, 11:11-13; Ezekiel 37:15-19; Hosea 5:1-15; etc.). Thus Ephraim, along with the whole house of Israel in the north, was eventually consigned to God's judgment and retribution at the hands of the Assyrian forces (2 Kings 17:1ff; cf. Hosea 4-5, 9:1-3, 10:1-7; etc.)

Yet God's purpose looked beyond that judgment and desolation to reconciliation, restoration and ingathering – all to be accomplished in connection with the messianic Servant promised by His prophets (cf. Hosea 11:1-11 with Isaiah 11:1-13; Jeremiah 31-33; Ezekiel 37:15-28). Yes, Ephraim would become a recalcitrant covenant-breaker, but Yahweh would yet bring to pass the blessing He ordained for Ephraim – the blessing Jacob spoke to as his own faith in the God who is faithful.

- 2) But even more than the future unfaithfulness and rebellion that would mark their descendents, these boys were sons of an *Egyptian* mother (Genesis 41:50-52). And not only was their mother Egyptian, she was the daughter of an Egyptian *priest* who apparently presided as high priest over the worship in the temple at On, one of the great cities in Lower Egypt. Many believe On refers to the city of Heliopolis ("the city of the sun" mentioned in Jeremiah 43:13), because it was an important sacred site for the worship of the sun-god *Ra* (later, Amun-Ra), who many believe was the chief deity in the Egyptian pantheon.

*Whatever the specific nature of Potiphara's priesthood, Ephraim and Manasseh possessed a pedigree that was antithetical to the covenant heritage of their father and uncles. And now Jacob was bestowing on them the status of first-born among Yahweh's covenant household. He was supplanting the first son of his own wife – the Abrahamic covenant matriarch – with the offspring of an Egyptian daughter of a pagan high priest. **Could a less likely and more outrageous circumstance be imagined?** Certainly not by Joseph's eleven brothers.*

Almost certainly Jacob didn't himself fully grasp the ultimate significance of his actions, but the Hebrews writer left no doubt that he acted *in faith*. In some measure, God had enabled Jacob to glimpse His design for the future – the future that had the Abrahamic household at its center – and the patriarch must have sensed that his blessing of Joseph's sons played a key role in that design.

- For many centuries to come (and even in the immediate future – Exodus 1-2), Egypt would continue to oppose God and His covenant people, even to the point of becoming synonymous with such opposition (ref. Psalm 89:10; Isaiah 51:9-14; Revelation 11:1-8).
- Yet that hostile, pagan nation, too, would finally succumb to God's intent to make Abraham the father of many nations and peoples (ref. Isaiah 19:19-25; cf. Psalm 68:31-32; Zechariah 9:9-10).

In what must have seemed a great irony, Jacob found himself ending his life, not in the promised land, but a distant, pagan one. Even so, he believed the God who had promised, and he affirmed his faith by his prophetic blessing on Joseph's sons (48:3-5). As he had previously charged Joseph, Jacob now, on his deathbed, charged all of his sons to return his body to the land Yahweh had pledged to him, just as He pledged it to Abraham and Isaac before him (cf. Genesis 47:27-31, 49:28-33 with 28:10-15). Dying in his bed, Jacob recognized that he was appointed to die in Egypt, in a place and circumstance far removed from the expectation he had derived from Yahweh's covenant oath to him. But as he had blessed Ephraim and Manasseh (and his other sons) in faith, so he drew his last breath still holding tightly to the same faith. The eyes that were closing in death worshipped his God, seeing what was not yet seen; Jacob knew that he would not live to see it, but he was fully assured that Yahweh would prove faithful. One day, He would fulfill His promise of universal blessing through Abraham's seed.

*“They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of Yahweh as the waters cover the sea. Then it will come about in that day that the nations will resort to the root of Jesse, who will stand as a signal for the peoples; and His resting place will be glorious. Then it will happen on that day that the Lord will again recover the second time with His hand the remnant of His people, and He will lift up a standard for the nations, and will assemble the banished ones of Israel... Then the jealousy of Ephraim will depart, and those who harass Judah will be cut off; Ephraim will not be jealous of Judah, and Judah will not harass Ephraim.” (Isaiah 11:9-13)*