

TORAH PORTIONS

PARASHAT VAYECHI

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION

GENESIS 47:28-50:26

Parashat Vayechi / פָּרָשָׁת וַיָּחִי

In this week's guide...

COMMENTARY: join Rabbi Jason in his examination of a vital Messianic prophecy that many people don't even know exists! This deep dive unpacks the prophetic connections between Jacob's final blessing and the political climate leading up to the time of the Messiah (and after!). This is a perfectly-timed article for those still celebrating the Twelve Days of Christmas.....

1

NEW TESTAMENT TIE-IN: explore the implications of Bible translation. At the outset of this week's *parsha*, we're allowed to eaves drop on a very profound and meaningful conversation between the (dying!) patriarch Jacob and his beloved son, Joseph. Jacob's concern about the handling of his remains concludes with an odd comment that might be skimmed over. Uncover the significance of a staff in the Ancient Near East, its appearance in the New Testament, and its application for our lives today.....

2

HEBREW WORD STUDY: learn the deeper meaning of evil, well, the Hebrew word that's translated as "evil" in our English Bibles. Like "good," this terminology has a broad range of meaning and is vulnerable to a lot of subjective interpretation. This study sets out to bring some clarity and understanding to a crucial concept!.....

4

OVERVIEW

This week we reach the conclusion of Genesis with *Vayechi* (Hebrew for "and he lived"). This *parsha* opens by framing Jacob's time in Egypt in the larger context of his entire life. These final chapters are filled with the Patriarch's final words—first to his grandsons (whom he adopts) and then to those who would form the Twelve Tribes of Israel. One of the most well-known and powerful lines in all of Scripture appears towards the end of *Vayechi*, "you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20 NKJV).

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FUSION GLOBAL WITH RABBI JASON

Weekly Torah Portion – *Parashat Vayechi* / פָּרָשָׁת וַיֵּחֶи

Genesis 47:28-50:26

COMMENTARY

by Rabbi Jason Sobel

In Genesis 49:10, we read,

“The scepter will not depart from Judah,
Nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,
Until Shiloh comes,
And to him *shall be* the obedience of the peoples.” (NASB)

Genesis 49:8–12 is one of the Bible’s most significant messianic prophecies. These verses contain the Shiloh prophecy, which provides insight into the lineage of the promised messianic Seed, some of the key signs that will accompany the Lord’s anointed, and the time frame for the coming of the Messiah. On his deathbed, Jacob gathered all his sons to bless them and to reveal to them what would befall “in the last days” (*cf.* Genesis 49:1).

After Jacob assembled his sons, he began to prophesy over each of them. When it came time to bless his son Judah, Jacob gave a seminal prophecy about the Messiah as we read in the opening verse. This unusual prophecy has several key words that need to be defined to understand it accurately. The first term, *shevet*, is usually translated as “scepter.” In Hebrew, it means “tribe” and is best translated as “tribal rod.” Each of the leaders of the twelve tribes had a tribal rod that represented tribal identity and leadership. This prophecy tells us something important about the identity of the promised Seed of the woman who will defeat the serpent (*cf.* Genesis 3:15). He will be a King from the tribe of Judah.



The second key word is *umechokek* (מְחֻקָּק) usually translated as “the ruler’s staff” but is best interpreted as “the judge’s staff” or “lawgiver’s staff.” When a king sat on his throne, he was exercising both political power and judicial authority. It was common practice for a king to rest his judge’s staff on his knee. Today this would be analogous to the judge’s gavel.

The third key term is Shiloh, as in “until Shiloh comes” (Genesis 49:10). The Jewish commentators and rabbis understand this as a reference to the Messiah. For example:

The transmission of dominion shall not cease from the house of Judah, nor the scribe from his children’s children, forever, **until Messiah comes.**ⁱ

“Shiloh” clearly refers to the Messiah but can also be interpreted as “the one to whom it belongs,” as in the power and authority of kingship given to the Messiah. Let me paraphrase Genesis 49:10 to provide a clearer understanding: **Tribal identity and judicial authority will not cease from Judah until the Messiah, the one to whom these legitimately belong, comes. And people from every nation will acknowledge and obey Him as King.**ⁱⁱ

Senufo scepter – Ivory Coast (late 19th c.)

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One of the amazing mysteries revealed by interpreting Genesis 49:10 in this manner is that it provides the time frame for the First Coming of the Messiah. This verse prophetically discloses that Judah will not lose judicial authority and tribal identity until the Messiah arrives. It appears that Judah lost judicial authority sometime between 6 B.C. and A.D. 30. Based upon rabbinic understanding, the Messiah had to come between A.D. 30 AD—which is forty years before the destruction of the temple, the exact time Jesus' ministry began—and A.D. 70, which is when the official genealogical records were destroyed (tribal authority was lost) and the Jewish people were exiled.

But there's more! Another way to interpret Shiloh is based on the Hebrew phrase “a gift unto him” (*shai lo*). As the Psalmist wrote, “**Let all surrounding Him bring tribute [shai] to the One to be feared**” (Psalm 76:11b LEB). This interpretation suggests the gifts that kings and world leaders would offer as tribute to King Messiah.

“Nations will come to your light,
kings to the brilliance of your rising.
The wealth of nations will come to you.
They will bring gold and frankincense,
and proclaim the praises of *ADONAI*.” —Isaiah 60:3,5-6

This prophecy (as well as Psalm 72:11) was partially fulfilled when Jesus was born and the wise men, kings from the East in the Christian tradition, came to visit Him and presented Him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh in recognition that *Yeshua* was the messianic King of Israel (cf. Matthew 2:11). The Messiah, Son of David will be much greater than King David, His ancestor, for He will not just rule over Israel, but all the nations of the world will acknowledge His kingship and will serve honor Him with their wealth.

These verses foreshadow *Yeshua* Messiah's second coming. He will reign as the sovereign king of the universe. Genesis 49:11–12 refers to the judgment and salvation of the Second Coming of Messiah. *Yeshua*, the Prince of Peace, will reign as King of Kings for ever and ever (cf. Revelation 5:5–14; 11:15).



NEW TESTAMENT TIE-IN

by Staff Contributor

This week's Torah portion brings Jacob's long and illustrious (if not complicated) life to a conclusion. From his contentious relationship with Esau to the drama of his two wives to his supernatural encounters, there is much to be said about the life of this patriarch. Yet drafting the “Hall of Faith,” the writer of Hebrews selected a rather obscure moment from Jacob's biography: “**By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and he bowed in worship while leaning on the top of his staff**” (Hebrews 11:21).

That verse in Hebrews links back to a verse at the beginning of *Parashat Vayechi*:

As the time of Israel's death drew near, he called for his son Joseph and said to him, “If I have found favor in your eyes, please put your hand under my thigh and show me faithful kindness. Please do not bury me in Egypt. When I lie down with my fathers, you must carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place.”

So he said, “I myself will do according to your word.”

“Swear to me,” he said. So he swore to him. Then Israel bowed down in worship on the head of his staff. —Genesis 47:29-31

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Depending on the translation you use, that final phrase—the one picked up in Hebrews 11—might say that Jacob bowed his head on the “head of his bed” (e.g., ESV, KJV, NLT, et al). Translational discrepancies like this—“staff” vs. “bed”—are complicated for those of us lacking expertise in the Bible’s original languages to sort out. But there is something (aside from Hebrews 11) to be said for translating this word as staff. Jacob knew he was coming, not just to the end of his life, but his “journey.” It’s almost as if two staffs serve as bookends for Israel’s story in Egypt.

Centuries after this scene we read about in *Parashat Vayechi*, the “staff” would come to play a prominent role in Israel’s eventual liberation. The staff was how God revealed the **authority** He vested in Moses and Aaron. From the opening scenes in which that rod became a devouring serpent (*cf.* Exodus 7:10-12) to the life-saving water that gushed forth from the rock at Meribah (*cf.* Exodus 17:5-7), the staff was quite literally, instrumental. The “budding” of Aaron’s rod (*cf.* Numbers 16-17) is the most explicit biblical link between the staff and authority.

There is a fascinating detail related to the staff: **testimony**. Ancient shepherds would carve their personal history in them. More specifically, shepherds (who used staffs as defensive weapons) would record their victorious encounters with predators on their staffs. As one writer suggested:

In Bible times, shepherds had a unique way of displaying their testimony. As part of their passage to manhood, each young shepherd was given his own staff. He used that staff not only to shepherd sheep, but also to chronicle the victories of his life. It became a symbol of his testimony carried in his hand.

Beginning at the bottom of the staff, the shepherd made carvings to remind him of pivotal moments in his life. Shepherds are by nature nomadic, moving from place to place in search of pasture land. For amusement, they passed the time at night telling stories around the fire. Their staffs became a central point for their conversations. Pointing to a particular carving on another’s staff, the staff’s owner would be asked to tell the story to which it related. Over and over the shepherds rehearsed their struggles and victories. Although always traveling and with surroundings always changing, one’s testimony remained consistent as a stabilizing force in a nomadic life.ⁱⁱⁱ

Enter the scene of Genesis 47. Imagine that Jacob, knowing that his days were almost over, just had that critically important conversation with Joseph and then glances over at his well-worn, gnarled staff. Carvings or not, Jacob’s mind (i.e., “head”) might have flown back to that dread moment he prepared to meet Esau. In his desperate prayer, he said, “**I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies**” (Genesis 32:10 NASB, *emphasis added*). What a testimony!

In the journey of life, we can easily feel overwhelmed and underequipped. Yet Jacob’s final moments remind us that if we walk in God’s authority and are mindful of our testimony, it’s enough. Scripture declares that we overcome “**by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of [our] testimony**” (Revelation 12:11). In the end, Israel (i.e., Jacob) was a man with a promise and a staff. And that was enough. It had always been enough. This truth makes *Yeshua*’s words in the Gospel even more compelling:

“**And He summoned the twelve and began to send them out in pairs, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits; and He instructed them that they should take nothing for their journey, except a mere staff**” (Mark 6:7-8 NASB, *emphasis added*).



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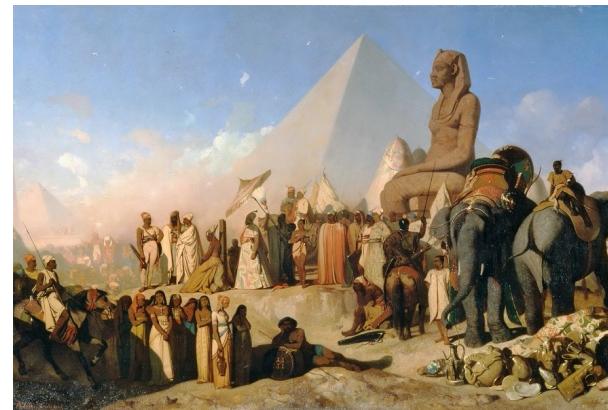
HEBREW WORD STUDY: *ra'ah* (רַעַת) / “evil”

by Staff Contributor

Over the many centuries, people from all walks of life have been inspired (and a bit stunned) by Joseph’s address to his brothers following Jacob’s death: “You yourselves planned evil against me. God planned it for good” (Genesis 50:20). One could argue that Joseph’s brothers not only planned evil (i.e., murder) but committed evil when they sold him into slavery and deceived their father into believing he was dead.

What is the Hebrew word we read in English as “evil”? *Ra’ah* (רַעַת). Its tri-consonantal root is:

- *Raysh* (200) / ר
- *Ayin* (70) / ע
- *Hay* (5) / ה



Meeting Between Cambyses II and Psammetichus III by Adrien Guignet

We find *ra’ah* in the Hebrew Bible more than 300 times. One lexicon defines *ra’ah* as “evil, wickedness, depravity; misfortune, disaster.”^{iv} The term *ra’ah* (in its noun form) can be understood in several basic categories of meaning:

1. **evil (behavior)** — morally objectionable behavior (*cf. Hosea 7:1*).
2. **calamity (event)** — an event resulting in great loss and misfortune (*cf. Jonah 1:7*).
3. **evil (harm)** — that which causes harm or destruction or misfortune (*cf. Amos 9:4*).
4. **evil (quality)** — being morally wrong in principle or practice (*cf. Psalm 28:3*).
5. **misery** — a state of ill-being due to affliction or misfortune (*cf. Jeremiah 44:11*).
6. **discomfort** — the state of being tense and feeling pain (*cf. Ecclesiastes 11:10*).^v

In the case of this week’s *parsha*, Joseph makes it clear that his brothers intended to engage in morally objectionable behavior towards him. Of course, the fact that this *ra’ah* was the scheming of his brothers only “adds insult to injury” (as the saying goes). A survey of similar uses of *ra’ah* in Scripture begins with our very first reading in Genesis (*Parashat Beresheet*): “Then *ADONAI* saw that the **wickedness** [*ra’at* / רַעַת] of humankind was great on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their heart was only evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5 *emphasis added*). There are two indisputable facts we can infer from this usage of *ra’ah*. Firstly, evil was present and active in the earth long before Joseph’s experiences with his brothers. Secondly, there is a sobering persistence to evil.



The passage immediately following the above text is *Parashat Noach*—the story of the Great Flood. That great manifestation of divine wrath did not bring an end to *ra’ah*, a claim for which Joseph’s brothers serve as “Exhibit A.”

There is much to be said about evil, of course, but perhaps this contextual analysis can encourage us today. Many of us may be tempted to wallow in self-pity when we suffer as victims of evil. The sulking cry of, “Why me, Lord?” might suggest that there is something unique or distinctive about our suffering. The opening and closing *parashot* of Genesis remind us that beginning with Adam’s sin in Genesis 3, *ra’ah* is the norm for human existence, not the exception. Yet Joseph’s declaration offers us lasting hope: God’s good intentions will prevail every time!

Rabbi Jason & Fusion Global present
HEBREW WORD STUDY

רָעָה

רָעָה / *ra'ah*: n. fem. **bad, evil, disaster, trouble.** *Identifies something as wicked, harmful, or having negative consequences.*

This word *ra'ah* can label men (Num 14:27) or thoughts (Ezk 38:10), but a number of times it is an abstract for the total of ungodly deeds people do, or a person's inner condition which produces such deeds. The term may label a variety of negative attitudes common to wicked people, and be extended to include the consequences of that kind of lifestyle.

In harmony with the contrast between *ra'ah* and *tov* "good," God acts with painful punishment against the *ra'ah* kind of people (over seventy times; particularly prominent in Jeremiah)...On his part, God acts to save man from *ra'ah* (Ex 32:14). And there was advice to the believers on how to keep themselves free from *ra'ah* (Prov 3:29).

taken from the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

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THOUGHTS for REFLECTION

Take some time this week to prayerfully consider and discuss with friends:

- In light of what you studied about the prophetic connections between the "Shiloh prophecy" and the political phenomena in Israel prior to and following *Yeshua's* life, what does this suggest about the nature of Scripture? How does it inform your sense of who God is and how He works?
- Let's take another look at this line from our New Testament Tie-in: "In the journey of life, we can easily feel overwhelmed and underequipped." This raises some provocative thoughts as we enter 2024. Some may feel ill-equipped for the task at hand. Jacob reminds us that if we have a staff (our testimony), it's enough. On the other hand, we might be thinking we totally prepared for success in the new year. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but our hope and confidence must rest in what God has done.

NEXT WEEK'S READINGS: *Parashat Shemot* / פָּרָשַׁת שְׁמוֹת

TORAH

Sunday / Exodus 1:1-17

Monday / Exodus 1:18-2:10

Tuesday / Exodus 2:11-25

Wednesday / Exodus 3:1-15

Thursday / Exodus 3:16-4:17

Friday / Exodus 4:18-31

Saturday / Exodus 5:1-6:1

Prophetic Reading (*Haftarah*): Isaiah 27:6-28:13; 29:22-29:23

New Covenant Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *Tree of Life Version*.

ⁱ In Targum Onkelos Genesis (Brooklyn: Metsudah Publications, 2009), Chapter 49, Sefaria, accessed August 2, 2020, https://www.sefaria.org/Onkelos_Genesis.49?lang=bi.

ⁱⁱ I am greatly indebted to Dr. Michael Rydelnik for first opening my eyes to aspects of this understanding.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rick Clendenen, *Mentoring from the Mountaintop* (Benton, KY: Richard D. Clendenen, 2006), 117.

^{iv} Rick Brannan, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible*, Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

^v Ibid.