

Ponderings in Hebrews

The following is a Messianic Study on

Hebrews 11:21 Jacob

By Paul Cohen, Messianic Bible Teacher.
Brit Chadashah (Sydney)
www.BCSydney.com



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The following *Pondering* studies were published in the Brit Chadashah Newsletter.

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Brit Chadashah; P.O. Box 304; Caulfield South, VIC 3162, Australia

Email: bc@celebratemessiah.com.au

Hebrews 11:21 “By faith Jacob.....”

Jacob is much maligned in the church for being a deceiver, a cheat and dishonourable but God loves Jacob and here in Hebrews 11 he is listed as a hero in the faith. This is the man who **bought the birthright** (Genesis 25:29-34). Contrary to many sermons Jacob did not steal the blessing; he had bought it from Esau for a bowl of lentils and with the birthright came the Covenant promises and blessings (Genesis 27:28-29).

In the Covenant to Abraham God promised three things (Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-18; 15; 17):

1. Fruitfulness, that is many **children**
2. Ownership of the **Promised Land**
3. Through him the world would be **blessed**

This Covenant was passed to Isaac (Genesis 26:3) and now to Jacob.

If I would give a reason why to include Jacob in the heroes of the faith I would have said:

1. Jacob wanted the Covenant and God’s blessing (Genesis 25:29-34)
2. God gave Jacob his prophetic dream (Genesis 28:10-22)
3. God blessed Jacob, even the unbelieving family recognised this (Genesis 30:30)
4. God’s awesome promise that He will protect Jacob (Genesis 31:3)
5. His wrestling match with God and Man (Genesis 32-33)
6. God gave Jacob a new name, Israel (Genesis 35:10)

But the writer of Hebrews does not pick any of these significant moments in Jacob’s life. Hebrews 11:21 states “By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, *leaning* on the top of his staff*.” The author indicated two key actions and one is implied: blessed, worshiped and leaning.

Jacob Blessed.

The blessing of Joseph’s sons is written before the blessing Jacob gave to all his sons (Genesis 49). As Jacob blesses Manasseh and Ephraim (Genesis 48:15-16), he used the Covenantal blessing, the promise God had given to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-18; 15; 17), Isaac (Genesis 26:3-4), and to Jacob (Genesis 28:3). This was part of the Covenantal blessing that is being passed on from generation to generation.

Joseph, being the firstborn of Rachel, not only receives the Covenantal blessing but he also receives a double portion. In this case the inheritance of the double portion will have to wait until they leave Egypt and become two tribes, for both Manasseh and Ephraim each received a portion in the Promised Land. This is the reason that Jacob proclaimed Manasseh and Ephraim as his own sons (Genesis 48:1-6). Jacob in a sense legally adopted Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as his own and so they are to inherit an equal share with Jacob’s other sons. Before this Joseph would have received one portion in the land, now his sons receive a double portion.

There is a prophetic element in the blessing, Jacob, as the rightful owner of the Promised Land, crossed his arms ensuring that the blessing of the first-born did not go to Manasseh but to Ephraim (Genesis 48:12-20). And Ephraim became the largest tribe: sometimes the entire Northern Kingdom of Israel was called by that name (Isaiah 7; Jeremiah 31; Hosea 5). So

Jacob foresaw that God would fulfil part of the Covenantal blessing in the two sons of Joseph (Genesis 48:1, 5, 16, 20).

Jacob, being the owner of the Promised Land, and knowing from history that the time would come when God would bring the Jewish people out of Egypt back to the Land of Promise, he gave Joseph instructions to bury him in the Cave of Machpelah (Genesis 47:29-31; 50:12-14), where his parents and his grandparents had been buried. Their grave in the Promised Land still serves today as a testimony that Israel is the Promised Land, and that it was and still is the inheritance of the Jewish people.

Jacob worshiped the Lord.

As we read Genesis it may be hard to see where Jacob worshiped. So let me trace some of the life of Jacob, who is called the upright man (Genesis 25:27). Many translations will say “*quiet man*” or a “*plain man*”, but that is not what it means. It is Jacob who desired the Birthright and the Covenant that went with it (Genesis 25:31), and we note that Jacob anoints a pillar as an act of worship (Genesis 28:18) and vows to the Lord (Genesis 28:20-22). It is God in response who sent His angels to him as he was about to enter the Promised Land (Genesis 32:9). And when aware of the idols in his household he removed and hid them under the terebinth tree near Shechem (Genesis 35:4), showing his devotion to God. It is then that God bestows the new name ‘Israel’ on him and God renews the covenant with him (Genesis 35:10-15). He sacrificed to the Lord when he came in and when he left the Promised Land (Genesis 31:54, 46:1), and once again God appears to him (Genesis 46:2-4). It should be clear that Jacob loved the Lord.

Jacob leaned on his staff.

This does not only indicate that Jacob was old, but also that he had stopped doing things his way. He no longer is able to rely on his own strength and cunning. It points towards Jacob wholly leaning, by faith, on the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, trusting that He will fulfil all that He has promised. In Malachi 1 it says God hated Esau and loved Jacob. While Jacob did some questionable things, he came to lean wholly on Him. This did not happen with Esau who despised the covenant. *Jacob leaning on his staff*: I find it fascinating that Jacob, who had been a shepherd for much of his life, 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” (Genesis 48:15). Literally it reads “*the God who shepherded me.*” Jacob is now leaning on his staff, symbolically leaning on the Shepherd (Psalm 23). Yes, worshiping the God who will be called by his name, the God of Jacob.

Summary:

“By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, *leaning* on the top of his staff.”

What is the author of Hebrews saying:

1. Jacob blessed others
2. Jacob worshipped the Lord
3. Jacob leaned on top of the Shepherd’s staff, he leaned on God.

Friends, is that not what we ought to do? We should bless others while we are worshipping and relying on the Lord!

May Jacob, the man of faith, inspire us even today.

*Hope this illuminated your understanding
Blessings in Messiah Yeshua
Paul & Sue Cohen*

* Note that in **Genesis 47:31** it says that “Israel *bowed* ... at the head of his **bed**” but in **Hebrews 11:21** it said he was *leaning* on the top of his **staff**. The word מט if rendered מטה (*mittah*) means bed if rendered מטה (*matteh*) signifies a staff; back in the 1st century before the common era the Hebrew speaking Jews read that Jacob was on the head of the bed, while the Greek-speaking Jews had a tradition that he was leaning on the top of his staff. This is reflected in the Septuagint, the Jewish Greek translation, and that tradition is followed here by the author of Hebrews.