

HAVE SONS, WILL TRAVEL

GENESIS 46:1-27 FEBRUARY 1, 2023

According to the World Migration Report, in 2022, one in every thirty people on planet earth can be described as international migrants - living in a country where they weren't born.¹ Since 1970 the United States has been the main country of destination for international migrants. National Geographic writes, "People...choose to immigrate for a variety of reasons, such as employment opportunities, to escape a violent conflict, environmental factors...or to reunite with family."²

The descendants of Abraham were nomads but this time they weren't just moving to a new grazing area - they were going international. The famine that threatened their survival would wear on for five more years and, after more than two decades, Jacob was going to reunite with his son, Joseph.

In this last great move of Genesis, God appears once more to speak, to make promises, to give encouragement, and to accomplish His good purposes in the lives of His people. He shows that He is just as involved with them as He was when He was hanging the planets on their axis in Genesis 1.

Genesis 46:1 - Israel set out with all that he had and came to Beer-sheba, and he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac.

Jacob would never again see the Promised Land. He pauses in Beer-sheba to worship God and offer sacrifices. It seems he had hesitation, even fear, about leaving the Canaan. We remember how he had only left before when he had to run for his life. On his way out he was worried about when he'd be able to come back to this land of theirs. So many years later, the Lord appeared to him and said, "Get back to your native land."

It makes sense that they would stop in Beer-sheba. It was not only the southern border of Canaan,³ it was also where Isaac had settled. Before crossing *out* of the land Jacob looks around. There is the altar his father built. There is the tamarisk tree Abraham planted and the well he dug. For generations, God had connected the future of this family with this land. Now they are making a *major*, long-term move. Was this the right thing to do? Jacob *must* have been thinking about that prophecy God gave so many decades before.

Genesis 15:13 - "Know this for certain: Your offspring will be resident aliens for four hundred years in a land that does not belong to them and will be enslaved and oppressed."

Was this all a mistake? This move could be a terrible mistake if it's not ordained by God. As they wait and listen, the Lord arrives to reveal and comfort and instruct.

¹ <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/wmr-2022-interactive/>

² <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/resource-library-united-states-immigration>

³ Gordon Wenham *Genesis 16-50 Word Biblical Commentary Volume 2*

Genesis 46:2-4 - ²That night God spoke to Israel in a vision: "Jacob, Jacob!" he said. And Jacob replied, "Here I am." ³God said, "I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. ⁴I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you back. Joseph will close your eyes when you die."

I wonder if when the Lord called his name, Jacob thought, "Are we fighting again? Is this gonna be a rematch of that all-night wrestling session we had thirty years ago?" But in Jacob's hour of apprehension and uncertainty, the Lord spoke words of kindness and direction. He said, "I'm still with you, this is part of the plan, you don't have to be afraid."

In fact, God makes it clear to Jacob that *He* has taken responsibility for their future. He makes three "I will" statements. Kenneth Mathews writes, "The patriarchs' God is an 'I will' God."⁴

The Lord said, "I will make you into a great nation." It would've been hard to see how this could happen. How could this family become a nation when they were houseguests in another kingdom? Yes, they several dozen, but what is that compared to the empire Esau had built for himself or the clans of Ishmael? How could they become a nation when they could *barely* even cooperate a short time ago? But with God it was possible. Turn the pages to Exodus 13 and the people of Israel came out of Egypt *millions* strong.

The Lord said, "I will go down with you." Jacob *knew* God was with him wherever he went,⁵ but he needed this reminder. God is always with us. He has attached Himself to you. That reality is so different than the gods of Egypt or Canaan that people around Jacob worshiped. Those gods were 'territorial.' They were confined to the hills or to the lowlands or to national boundaries. Think of Poseidon, Greek god of the sea. You want to go on land? You're going to have to talk to someone else. But the God of Abraham, the God of the Bible, He is not bound to a location. He binds Himself to His people. He comes to us with a covenant of love and peace. And even when we make mistakes, He remains faithful. His love does not abate. The covenant is still on.

God said, "I will bring you back." That was true, but Jacob would come back as a dead man. That reminds us that many of the promises God has made will not be fulfilled in this life, they wait for us after we step through death into eternity. And second, God's work doesn't end with us, it continues through our families and through *His* family all over the earth. So, the question is: Is my life helping to spiritually benefit those that will come after me? Am I part of the ongoing work of the Gospel?

What a great thing that Jacob stopped to worship and inquire of the Lord. Of course *Jacob* wanted to go see Joseph, but did *God* want him to go? He was making a major life decision here, and it's a very good thing that he waited on the Lord for God's opinion and direction. He was able to receive encouragement and certainty and better promises, along with the peace of God.

⁴ Kenneth A. Mathews *Genesis 11:27-50:26*

⁵ Genesis 35:3

Genesis 46:5-7 - ⁵ Jacob left Beer-sheba. The sons of Israel took their father Jacob in the wagons Pharaoh had sent to carry him, along with their dependents and their wives. ⁶ They also took their cattle and possessions they had acquired in the land of Canaan. Then Jacob and all his offspring with him came to Egypt. ⁷ His sons and grandsons, his daughters and granddaughters, indeed all his offspring, he brought with him to Egypt.

The family didn't exactly do what Pharaoh suggested. In chapter 45, Pharaoh said, "Don't worry about your belongings." But could they really show up to Egypt with no stuff? "Hey, we're here. We need a place to stay. Also clothes. Also tools. Also furniture. Also toothbrushes."

We're told in verse 5 that the sons took Jacob and the wives and kids. Jacob is 130 years old, hobbled by his wrestling match with the Lord. In those earlier scenes it was *Jacob* who "took" his family and moved them across rivers and over the hills and through the woods. But he's not as strong as he had been. He was the decider, but the sons are the operatives. As they move together, we see a beautiful picture of gracious cooperation. We see young and old, weak and strong all moving together. No one is complaining about the pace or the seating arrangements. It's a good reminder of how a spiritual family can work together, sharing responsibility, being mindful of each other's strengths and weaknesses. Everyone has a spot and a role as we all journey onward.

The rest of our passage tonight is a list of Jacob's family members. Let's take it all at once and then pull out a few thoughts.

Genesis 46:8-27 - ⁸ These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt—Jacob and his sons: Jacob's firstborn: Reuben.

⁹ Reuben's sons: Hanoch, Pallu, Hezron, and Carmi.

¹⁰ Simeon's sons: Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jachin, Zohar, and Shaul, the son of a Canaanite woman.

¹¹ Levi's sons: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari.

¹² Judah's sons: Er, Onan, Shelah, Perez, and Zerah; but Er and Onan died in the land of Canaan. The sons of Perez were Hezron and Hamul.

¹³ Issachar's sons: Tola, Puvah, Jashub, and Shimron.

¹⁴ Zebulun's sons: Sered, Elon, and Jahleel.

¹⁵ These were Leah's sons born to Jacob in Paddan-aram, as well as his daughter Dinah. The total number of persons: thirty-three.

¹⁶ Gad's sons: Ziphion, Haggi, Shuni, Ezbon, Eri, Arodi, and Areli.

¹⁷ Asher's sons: Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, Beriah, and their sister Serah. Beriah's sons were Heber and Malchiel.

¹⁸ These were the sons of Zilpah—whom Laban gave to his daughter Leah—that she bore to Jacob: sixteen persons.

¹⁹ The sons of Jacob's wife Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin.

²⁰ Manasseh and Ephraim were born to Joseph in the land of Egypt. They were born to him by Asenath daughter of Potiphera, a priest at On.

²¹ Benjamin's sons: Bela, Becher, Ashbel, Gera, Naaman, Ehi, Rosh, Muppim, Huppim, and Ard.

²² These were Rachel's sons who were born to Jacob: fourteen persons.

²³ Dan's son: Hushim.

²⁴ Naphtali's sons: Jahzeel, Guni, Jezer, and Shillem.

²⁵ These were the sons of Bilhah, whom Laban gave to his daughter Rachel. She bore to Jacob: seven persons.

²⁶ The total number of persons belonging to Jacob—his direct descendants, not including the wives of Jacob's sons—who came to Egypt: sixty-six. ²⁷ And Joseph's sons who were born to him in Egypt: two persons. All those of Jacob's household who came to Egypt: seventy persons.

The number of the group is controversial for a few reasons. First of all, it's clear that the names listed do not include *all* of Jacob's descendants. For example: verse 7 we're told that Jacob brought daughters, plural, to Egypt but only one daughter is named. We're told that Leah's group was 33 people, but count it as many times as you want, there are only 32 names of living people. Some count Leah herself as part of the group, but we'll be told in chapter 49 that she's dead and buried. Plus, Bilhah, Rachel, and Zilpah aren't included in their counts. It gets more complicated when you get to Acts chapter 7 and Stephen says that 75 people were in the group, not 70.

So what's going on here? Does the Bible play fast and loose with numbers? If *this* isn't a literal number, why should we believe the 7 days of creation, or the 1,260 days of the Great Tribulation discussed in Revelation 11 and 12 are literal?

There are times when the Bible uses numbers figuratively and there are times when it uses numbers literally. If we have no indication or contextual reason to see a number as figurative, we should interpret it as literal. But, if the text is giving us clear signals that a number might be understood as approximate or figurative, that's ok. It's not a trick or a failure of Scripture.

Here's an example: How many tribes of Israel are there? Twelve, right? In Numbers 17, God tells Moses, "Take one staff from them for each ancestral tribe, twelve staffs from all the leaders of their tribes." But there *aren't* 12 tribes, there are 13 tribes. In Numbers 2 and 3 God tells the people how they are to camp in their tribes around the Tabernacle. Four on the north, four on the south, four on the east, four on the west, one in the middle. That's 13.

This text gives us many clues that the number 70 can be understood in an approximate or typological sense. Not only are the daughters not all accounted for, but we're specifically told the daughters-in-law who were part of the group weren't counted in this 70.

Eric Burrows writes, "*The number 70 is used principally to denote natural groups of individuals in a family, human or divine...the number 70, signifying the ideal totality of an earthly or divine family, is found in several different cultures.*"⁶

⁶ Eric Burrows *The Number Seventy In Semitic Nova Series, Vol. 5 (1936)*

Nahum Sarna writes, “*There is no way of satisfactorily solving the problem and reconciling the differences unless 70 is understood here to be a typological rather than a literal number. It is here used, as elsewhere in Biblical literature, to express the idea of totality.*”⁷ The idea is that *no one* from the family of faith was left behind - they *all* made the trip.

When we come to a number like the seven days of creation or the seven years of Tribulation, those are meticulously given with the rending of hours, weeks, months, and years so that we understand the precision of that timing. So, if someone tries to throw this 70 number at you as a contradiction in Scripture, you can know it’s not a contradiction, there’s a context to understand and the Bible is very up-front about it. And when someone says, “The numbers in the Bible are all figurative, so there’s no literal seven-year Great Tribulation,” you can know why *that* is different than *this*.

Going through these names it’s interesting to see what an assorted group it was. All of them were connected to God through Abraham, but some came from an Aramean background, some came from an Egyptian background, some came from a Canaanite background. Some grew up in favored status, some grew up unappreciated. Jamin was named “lucky,” Hushim was named “hasty.” Elon means “Oak,” Gershon means “Outcast.” Becher means “Young camel,” Tola means “Little worm.” Eri means “Worshipper of Jehovah,” Ashbel means, “Worshipper of Baal.” Muppim means “Anxieties,” Jahleel means “Hope of God.”⁸ There was great variety, just like you’d expect in a real group of 70 or so people.

The list shows that God takes all kinds. He wanted them *all* to be a part of His drama of redemption. But not all of them *would* follow Him in that plan. By the time of Numbers, some of these lines don’t exist anymore.⁹ From others would come servants in the Lord’s house and judges and kings and craftsmen and poets and prophets. One commentator remarked that these verses are a kind of inventory for the trip.¹⁰ But you know what’s so great? The inventory isn’t stuff, it’s *people*. It was the people that mattered to God, not the cargo. Not the gold or the jewels or the herds they had accumulated. It was these people. And they *each* counted, just like *you* count to the Lord. You may not come from the favored family, you may have a background of questionable circumstances, but to the Lord, you’re a son or a daughter that counts. He can bring power and praise and testimony and glory from your life just like He could bring David from Hezron, Ehud from Gera, or Samuel from Ephraim.

As you migrate through life, seek the Lord for His direction. He has a definite opinion on where He wants you to be and when He wants you to be there. He’s going to be with you every step of the way, making great spiritual fruit in your life that can have a lasting impact long after you’ve stepped into eternity. Wait on Him, listen to Him, follow after Him.

⁷ Nahum Sarna *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*

⁸ See Wenham & *The Exhaustive Dictionary Of Bible Names*

⁹ Specifically the line of Becher. See Andrew Steinmann *Genesis: An Introduction And Commentary*

¹⁰ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*