Manasseh and Ephraim

Many times during my banking career I witnessed managers advocating for promotions for employees whom they supervised. When an employee is considered for a promotion, typically the employee’s manager will prepare a letter of recommendation addressing what the managers feels are the most relevant skills and strengths of the employee. The manager wants to place the employee in the best position to earn the promotion but usually there is another employee competing for the job who has an equally supportive manager. Once the letters of recommendation are submitted, it is out of the hands of the mid level managers as the final decision rests with a senior manager who will view the candidates objectively and sometimes consider criteria the managers had not thought to include. When you are not the one making the final decision events which are beyond your control can dictate the outcome. While a manager may appeal the decision, once the selection is final, both managers are expected to support the decision and facilitate the promotion. In chapter 48 Joseph presents his sons to Jacob for his blessing and experiences an outcome he did not anticipate.

The chapter begins with Joseph being told that his father was ill. He took his sons with him since he knew that it might be the last time they would see their grandfather alive. Jacob began speaking to Joseph by repeating the promise God had made years earlier at Bethel (Luz). Jacob’s family would have the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession and Jacob selected Joseph’s sons to receive an inheritance equal to Reuben and Simeon who were the 2 oldest sons of Jacob. Jacob was effectively adopting Joseph’s sons as his own. This is another indication of Jacob’s favoritism towards Joseph as none of his other grandchildren were so honored. As Joseph presented his sons to Jacob, he was very careful to position them so that Manasseh (the oldest) would be at the right hand of Jacob. Jacob crossed his arms as he placed his hands on the head of his grandsons so that his right hand was on the head of Ephraim then pronounced his blessing on the boys. Joseph objected to this and tried to place his father’s right hand on Manasseh’s head. This was important since the grandson with the right hand on his head would receive the blessing of the eldest son and all accompanying preferments. Warren Wiersbe pointed out that according to Mosaic Law, the eldest son would receive a double portion of the blessing therefore Joseph through his 2 sons’ heirs would receive 2 portions of land when the Israelites returned to Canaan. The son to the right of his father would receive the highest honor (see Matt. 26:64, Rom. 8:34, 1st Pet. 3:22). Jacob acknowledged that Manasseh was the oldest but maintained his preference for Ephraim to receive the blessing of the eldest son. The chapter ends with Joseph bequeathing a parcel of land in Canaan that he won from the Amorites in an unrecorded battle although the land is mentioned as the location of Jacob’s well in John 4:5.

Despite Joseph’s careful preparations in presenting his sons to Jacob to secure his blessing, Jacob thwarted his efforts by crossing his arms to place his right hand on Ephraim’s head. There are 2 similarities to the blessing Jacob received from his father Isaac. First, Isaac’s eyesight was failing as was Jacobs but Jacob’s choice of Ephraim was no accident, he knowingly selected Ephraim. Secondly, the oldest son did not receive the blessing due him. While Jacob secured his blessing by trickery, Ephraim received his with the full knowledge of Jacob. Notice that although Joseph objected to Jacob’s selection of Ephraim, he accepted Jacob’s decision. Although Joseph was a prophet, so was Jacob and he correctly prophesied that Ephraim’s descendants would be more prominent that those of Manasseh. As Moses gave his dying blessing to the 12 tribes, he said such are the ten thousands of Ephraim, such are the thousands of Manasseh so Ephraim was much more prolific as a tribe (Deut. 33:17). They were so prolific that the 10 northern tribes are sometimes referred to as Ephraim. It could be that Joseph was not able to prophecy about the future of Ephraim and Manasseh because he was as objective as was Jacob. He would certainly have preferred to have his eldest son receive the double blessing which was to be expected, however the was ample precedent for the second son to receive the blessing. Abel over Cain, Shem over Japheth, Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau are examples. In each case it was God’s will that the eldest son was passed over.