

**Gen. 35:16** They set out from Bethel; but when they were still some distance short of Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor. <sup>17</sup> When her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, “Have no fear, for it is another boy for you.” <sup>18</sup> But as she breathed her last—for she was dying—she named him Ben-oni;<sup>d</sup> but his father called him Benjamin.<sup>e</sup> <sup>19</sup> Thus Rachel died. She was buried on the road to Ephrath—now Bethlehem. <sup>20</sup> Over her grave Jacob set up a pillar; it is the pillar at Rachel’s grave to this day. <sup>21</sup> Israel journeyed on, and pitched his tent beyond Migdal-eder.

<sup>d</sup> Understood as “son of my suffering (or, strength).”

<sup>e</sup> I.e., “son of the right hand,” or “son of the south.”

**RASHBAM: Benjamin.** That is, *ben yamim* (“son of days,” a son of old age). For the shift between *n* and *m* in this word, compare “at the end of the days [*yamin*]” (Dan. 12:13).

**KIMHI: For she was dying.** And knew it; she had no hope of living. **Benjamin.** “Son of the right hand,” that is, beloved because born in his old age: “Grant Your help to the man at Your right hand, the one You have taken as Your own” (Ps. 80:18).

**RASHI: Ben-oni.** “Son of my affliction.” **Benjamin.** It seems to me this name must mean “son of the south.” When one comes from Aram-naharaim, Canaan is to the south; and indeed, though *yamin* elsewhere means “right” (as opposed to “left”), we find it used for “south” as well: “North and south—You created them” (Ps. 89:13). “Benjamin” is spelled fully here, with a second *v*, to point to this meaning.

**NAHMANIDES: Ben-oni.** Son of my affliction. **Benjamin.** I do not understand Rashi’s comment about the land of Israel being south of Aram-naharaim. Aram is *east* of Israel; remember that “Jacob resumed his journey and came to the land of the Easterners” (29:1). Balaam too said, “From Aram has Balak brought me, Moab’s king from the hills of the East” (Num. 23:7). Jacob crossed over the Jordan, which is to the east of Israel, and was returning via Edom, which is to the south of Israel, meaning that Aram is southeast of Israel. Israel is farther *north*. Bethlehem is indeed in the south of Israel, but Benjamin was born north of that, between Bethlehem and Bethel. If he was born in Mount Ephraim, that is certainly in the north of Israel: “the house of Joseph shall remain by its territory in the north” (Josh. 18:5), but even if he was born in the territory of Benjamin, that too is not in the south: “The boundary [of the Benjaminites] on their northern rim began at the Jordan; the boundary ascended to the northern flank of Jericho” (Josh. 18:12). Either way, it makes no sense to call him “son of the south.” What I think is that his mother intended *oni* to mean “my affliction,” but his father turned it into *oni*, “my strength,” as in “My might and first fruit of my *vigor*” (49:3); “Fresh *vigor* to the spent” (Isa. 40:29). For the right hand (*yamin*) symbolizes strength and success: “Your right hand overpowers Your foes” (Ps. 21:9); “The right hand of the LORD is exalted! The right hand of the LORD is triumphant!” (Ps. 118:16); “A wise man’s mind tends toward the right hand” (Eccles. 10:2). That is, Jacob fully intended to call him by the name his mother gave him, as is normally done, but he translated the name into a more favorable one. I don’t know what Genesis Rabbah means by saying that Benjamin is Hebrew for Ben-oni—both names are Hebrew, like the names of all of Jacob’s sons—but they are alluding to what I have said, that Jacob put a good spin on the name.

**BEKHOR SHOR: His father called him Benjamin.** Despite Rashi, Babylonia really is north of Israel; as Jer. 1:14 warned, “From the north shall disaster break loose.”

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Nahum Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS Torah Commentary)

**18. Ben-oni** The name has been almost universally understood to mean “son of my sorrow.” It could also be “son of my vigor,” a euphemism for “son of my debility”—that is, “his birth drained my strength.”

**Benjamin** Jacob either reinterprets ben-’oni or replaces it by a more auspicious name. The meaning could be, “son of my right hand,” the right being a symbol of dexterity, power, protection. Another rendering is “son of the south,” that is, “the one born in the south.” Such a meaning, suggested by Rashi, finds analogy in the Mari texts, which refer to tribal confederations of DUMU *Meš-yamina*, “sons of the south, Southerners,” as opposed to DUMU *Meš-sim’al*, “sons of the north, Northerners.” A third possibility, put forward by Rashbam, takes *yamin* for *yamin*, “days,” so that Benjamin would mean “son of my old age.” In 44:20 he is called “a child of his old age.” This is the interpretation given in the Testament of Benjamin 1:16 of Second Temple times. In the Samaritan Pentateuch the name is regularly written “Binyamin.”

Benjamin is the only son born in Canaan. In terms of tribal history, this means that it was the last to become part of the Israelite tribal league. The traditions represented by the account of Benjamin’s birth must be very ancient and not retrojections from later history for the simple reason that here Joseph and Benjamin are brothers, “Rachel tribes,” whereas after the settlement period Benjamin was adjacent to, and its fortunes politically bound up with, Judah, rather than with his fraternal Joseph tribes.

K.-D. Schunck (trans. Phillip R. Callaway), “Benjamin,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*

**BENJAMIN** (PERSON) [Heb *binyāmîn* בִּנְיָמִין; *binyāmin* בִּנְיָמִין]. BENJAMINITE.

1. The youngest son of Jacob (Gen 35:18) and, as such, a designation for an Israelite tribe and its territory. Accordingly, the tribe’s members or the inhabitants of the tribal region are called Benjaminites.

#### A. Name

This name signifies “son of the righthand side” or “son of the south,” that is, the one dwelling on the right or to the south. This designation for the tribe of Benjamin (or its members) can be understood only from the geographical perspective of this tribe in relationship to another geographical or ethnic entity. It is very probable that this name reflects the close connection between the tribe of Benjamin and the influential tribe of Ephraim settled to its immediate north. Since Ephraim, together with the tribe of Manasseh, was subsumed under the rubric “house of Joseph” during the monarchy, it is also clear why Benjamin usually appears alongside Joseph in the tribal lists (Gen 35:24; 46:19, 21; 1 Chr 2:2) and why the fictive tribal ancestor is Joseph’s only full brother who receives special treatment; thus Benjamin plays a special role in the Joseph novella (Gen 42:4, 36; 43:14–16, 29, 34; 44:12; 45:12, 14, 22).

Judah explains to Joseph:

**Gen. 44:25** “Later our father said, ‘Go back and procure some food for us.’<sup>26</sup> We answered, ‘We cannot go down; only if our youngest brother is with us can we go down, for we may not <sup>a</sup>show our faces to the man<sup>a</sup> unless our youngest brother is with us.’<sup>27</sup> **Your servant my father said to us, ‘As you know, my wife bore me two sons.**<sup>28</sup> But one is gone from me, and I said: Alas, he was torn by a beast! And I have not seen him since.<sup>29</sup> If you take this one from me, too, and he meets with disaster, you will send my white head down to Sheol in sorrow.”

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