

Genesis 49:1-33 **Blessing and Death**

The time for Jacob to be “gathered to my people” (v. 29) had come. And Jacob knew it. So, he had summoned his favorite son Joseph and begged him to see to it that he would be buried in the family cave back in Canaan. After hearing Joseph promise to do so, Jacob had then adopted Joseph’s sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, as his own. This made them full partakers of the inheritance of the promises of land, seed, and blessing that was foundational to the covenant relationship of the patriarchs with God. Then Jacob had blessed the young men, but in doing so departed from the established social custom of giving the greater blessing to the firstborn. Instead it was Ephraim, not Manasseh, who had received the greater portion. Finally, Jacob had bequeathed to his favorite son, Joseph, double the portion of the promised land in Canaan. Though Jacob owned no more than a burial cave in that faraway land, he knew his God and he trusted that *El Shaddai* would fulfill His promises.

Now, at the end, Jacob gathered all of his sons about him, and to each he spoke the word of God regarding their past and their future. Jacob had blessed Pharaoh (Genesis 47:7, 10) and he had blessed Joseph (Genesis 48:15). He had also blessed Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48:20). So, now was the time to bless each of his sons in turn. Since there is no dialogue recorded in this narrative, we can see it as something done entirely according to Jacob’s own will. That is, there was no solicitation of the blessing by his other sons. Instead, they had been called there to hear from their father with a strict command. “¹Jacob summoned his sons and said, ‘assemble yourselves, so that I may tell you what will happen to you in the days to come.

²Gather together and listen, sons of Jacob;
Yes, listen to Israel your father” (v. 1-2).

These blessings were prophetic in nature. That is, they combined the features of both the present (sometimes even the past) and the future. And while there is no “and the word of the Lord came to Jacob,” there is no reason to think that this was simply Jacob taking unto himself the prerogative of speaking about the future of his sons and their respective tribes. Rather, as had happened when he had blessed Ephraim and Manasseh, Jacob had received from God the gift of knowing what God intended. Just as Jacob’s life had begun with prophecy (Genesis 25:23), so now it ended with prophecy.

Jacob’s Prophecy

Reuben

Jacob began with his firstborn, Reuben.

³Reuben, you are my firstborn,
My might and the beginning of my strength,
Preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power.
⁴Uncontrollable as water, you shall not have preeminence,
Because you went up to your father’s bed;
Then you defiled it - he went up to my couch” (v. 3-4).

Jacob’s comments for the tribe of Reuben linked privilege with accountability. He began with the compliments expected for the firstborn. Reuben was Jacob’s “might and the beginning of my strength.”

This was a reference to procreative abilities. That is, it was Reuben who, according to the social customs of primogeniture, was endowed with rights of carrying on the family line. He possessed honor and preeminence. But Reuben had forfeited that privilege because of his uncontrolled passions. Though Scripture gives no details about the affair, it succinctly states that “it came about, while Israel was living in that land, that Reuben went and slept with his father’s concubine Bilhah, and Israel heard about it” (Genesis 35:22). This was so clearly an offense that no other commentary by the biblical writer was necessary.

This trespass, as disturbing as it was, was made even worse by the fact that Reuben had committed the act in his father’s own bed. “Now the sons of Reuben, the firstborn of Israel (for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father’s bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, the son of Israel; so he is not enrolled in the genealogy according to the birthright” (1 Chronicles 5:1). Thus the rashness of Reuben’s act, described as “uncontrollable as water” [think of a rushing river] (v. 4), cost him and his tribe their place in the hierarchy of Jacob’s sons and their place in the promises of God.

To quote Spiderman [who stole the line from the French National Convention of 1793] “with great power comes great responsibility.” Or as Christ said, “from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more” (Luke 12:48).

Simeon and Levi

Jacob then turned to Simeon and Levi.

“Simeon and Levi are brothers;
Their swords are implements of violence.
May my soul not enter into their council;
May my glory not be united with their assembly;
For in their anger they killed men,
And in their self-will they lamed oxen.
Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce;
And their wrath, for it is cruel.
I will scatter them in Jacob,
And disperse them among Israel” (v. 5-7).

As with Reuben, Jacob looked to the past and recalled an incident of which he did not approve, namely the attack on the men of Shechem in retaliation for Shechem’s attack on Dinah (Genesis 34:25-30). As he had done at the time, Jacob again renounced their actions, disassociating himself from any part in it (v. 6). So disturbed was Jacob by this event, even many years later, that he could only speak of Simeon and Levi in the third person. It is not ‘your’ but ‘their’ actions. Included in Jacob’s accusation is the fact, unmentioned in the original account, that Simeon and Levi had cruelly lamed the animals of the town so they would no longer be able to function as beasts of burden.

The curse Jacob pronounced on the tribes of Simeon and Levi followed the normal biblical formula (Genesis 3:14) and was announced as if he were God. Jacob would “scatter them . . . and disperse them” (v. 7). This, unsurprisingly, was exactly what happened, in that the tribe of Simeon was eventually integrated into the tribe of Judah (Joshua 19:1-9), and the Levites were never given any share of the land

but rather were divided up among the remaining tribes upon entering the promised land (Numbers 18:23-24).

Judah

The second longest prophecy/blessing was reserved for Judah.

⁸“As for you, Judah, your brothers shall praise you;
Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;
Your father’s sons shall bow down to you.

⁹Judah is a lion’s cub;
From the prey, my son, you have gone up.
He crouches, he lies down as a lion,
And as a lion, who dares to stir him up?

¹⁰The 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.

¹¹He ties his foal to the vine,
And his donkey’s colt to the choice vine;
He washes his garments in wine,
And his robes in the blood of grapes.

¹²His eyes are dull from wine,
And his teeth white from milk” (v. 8-12).

With the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, Jacob had framed his prophecy/blessing with the memory of past wrongs. Not so with the tribe of Judah. Though Judah had played a major role in the selling of Joseph into slavery and the consequent deception of Jacob, no mention of those offenses is found here. Instead, speaking directly to Judah, Jacob announced that the tribe of Judah would be praised by his brothers and would hold a place of prominence among them. Indeed, any of his brothers who opposed him would be vanquished (v. 8).

Having spoken *to* Judah, Jacob then spoke *about* Judah, and in doing so used animal imagery as the metaphor. Judah was seen as maturing from a ‘cub’ to a crouching lion, perhaps representing Judah’s own maturity throughout the years. The lion was a feared beast (Proverbs 30:30), but more importantly it was the symbol for royalty in Middle Eastern cultures at this time. It later became a symbol used by Solomon (1 Kings 10:18-20) and was a biblical reference to Christ (Revelation 5:5).

Jacob described Judah as a ruler. The references to the ‘scepter’ and ‘staff’ clearly implied the instruments used by kings. That the tribe of Judah would provide kings was historically realized in King David (2 Samuel 7:8-16). But it was also another foretelling of the Messianic line. The reference to ‘Shiloh’ is more problematic, however. The Hebrew text has different meanings of the word and, therefore, different interpretations. While some see this as reference to a specific place (there was a Canaanite town of Shiloh where the tabernacle resided until 1050 BC), the most common reading is that it was a generic term for ruler [“to whom it belongs” is a literal translation], that may be applied either to King David or to the Messiah.

The concluding verses in Jacob's prophecy/blessing related to wealth and prosperity. The metaphor of the grape harvest was often used in Hebrew culture to depict affluence. So extravagant was God's blessing to be upon the tribe of Judah that his descendants could tie their colt to the vine, where the animal would eat not only the grapes but the vine itself. Indeed Judah's descendants would have so much wine that they could use it to wash their clothes.

Not surprisingly, many Christian writers, beginning with the Church Fathers, saw in this prophecy/blessing to the tribe of Judah a foreshadowing of Christ. Specifically Chrysostom, in his *Homilies on Genesis*, connected the reference to the vine with the New Testament statement of Christ that "I am the true vine" (John 15:1). Also the reference to his garments being stained with "the blood of grapes" (v. 11) was seen by Ambrose in his work, *The Patriarchs*, as depicting Christ's death on the cross.

Zebulun

For the first time in this narrative, the birth order is ignored. Zebulun was the sixth son of Leah and the tenth son overall. Yet, though Zebulun was preceded in birth order by Leah's fifth son, Issachar (Genesis 30:17-20), nevertheless both here, and in the Mosaic blessing (Deuteronomy 33:18-19), Zebulun came first. Perhaps this was because the land Zebulun received was more strategically located, being in northern Israel where invading armies, particularly from Assyria, might attack.

"Zebulun will reside at the seashore;
And he shall be a harbor for ships,
And his flank shall be toward Sidon" (v. 13).

This particular prophecy/blessing is difficult to reconcile with future events. The future of Zebulun was clearly located by the Mediterranean, and even the specific seaport of Sidon was mentioned. Yet, the territory Zebulun received in the conquest did not border the sea. It was landlocked (Joshua 19:10-16). Perhaps the best way to understand the text then is to consider that the economy of Zebulun was reliant upon trade routes that passed through its territory. Sidon later became a significant Phoenician trading port, and the tribal allotments to Zebulun were transversed by trade routes to the interior of the Middle East. Thus the affluence of Zebulun was a result of the sea.

Early Christian writers, recognizing that though Jesus was of the tribe of Judah by birth, was of the tribe of Zebulun by residence. Nazareth was within Zebulun's tribal boundaries. They saw much in the prophecy associating Zebulun with the sea and Jesus' interest in fishermen, boats, and the Sea of Galilee.

Issachar

Speaking next of Issachar, Jacob said,

¹⁴Issachar is a strong donkey,
Lying down between the sheepfolds.
¹⁵When he saw that a resting place was good
And that the land was pleasant,
He bowed his shoulder to carry burdens,
And became a slave at forced labor" (v. 14-15).

In Jacob's prophecy/blessing for Issachar, he seems neither attractive nor fortunate. He was described as a lazy donkey who laid about until forced to do manual labor. Yet, this may be interpreted in two ways. The prevailing view is that the tribe of Issachar eventually put their desire for comfort ahead of all other things and eventually became subject to other peoples as a result of that foolishness. That is, eventually they were overcome by the Canaanites of the Jezreel valley where their territorial allotments were located. Such an interpretation is in alignment with other such narratives in Genesis. Eve "saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes" (Genesis 3:6). Lot, "raised his eyes and saw all the vicinity of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere" (Genesis 13:10). Esau put his stomach before his birthright (Genesis 25:29-34).

However, some have noted that nowhere in the Old Testament *does* Issachar become subject to local Canaanite rulers. There is evidence for such conquests from historical sources outside of Scripture, but even they are vague and unclear. Curiously, when the account is given of the failed attempts to drive out the Canaanite lands during the conquest (Judges 1:27-36) the tribe of Issachar is not mentioned, though the tribes of Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan are. Indeed, the song of Deborah (Judges 5:15) praises the warriors of Issachar.

Thus the competing (though minority) interpretation is to take the word 'slave' as a metaphor for a hardworking, diligent laborer. With such a reading, this prophecy for Issachar can be seen in a more promising light.

Dan

Jacob's blessing/prophecy of the tribe of Dan is much more promising.

¹⁶Dan shall judge his people,
As one of the tribes of Israel.

¹⁷Dan shall be a serpent in the way,
A horned viper in the path,
That bites the horse's heels,
So that its rider falls backward.

¹⁸For Your salvation I wait, Lord" (v. 16-18).

The tribe of Dan experienced both great successes and great failures. Though they were the second most populous tribe of the Israelites during the exodus and conquest (Numbers 2:26; 26:42), they failed to conquer their allotted lands (Judges 1:34). A Danite was a main supervisor in the construction of the tabernacle (Exodus 31:6), yet it was a Danite who blasphemed the name of the Lord (Leviticus 24:11). Though the Danites experienced God's blessing in a victory over the Canaanites at Laish (Judges 18:27-29), they immediately turned to idolatry (Judges 18:30-31). Perhaps the most famous member of the tribe of Dan, Samson (Judges 13:2), was notorious both for his great victories over the Philistines as well as for his being conquered by a cunning woman.

This tension exists in the prophecy/blessing as well. He is a judge of his people, but also a serpent and horned viper. He is given authority, but must wait for the salvation of the Lord. As a judge, the wording used implies that the tribe of Dan was a defender, rather than the accuser of the people. Thus this element was one of praise. But more concerning is the metaphor of the serpent. Much has been made of the fact

that of all the animal imagery used in this entire Jacob speech, only the serpent lives alone. And in fact, the territory that Dan received was at the northern end of Canaan at a great distance from the center of Israel. More importantly, perhaps, is that the image of a serpent that bites its unsuspecting victims can be seen as either a protector against invaders or as the devious serpent in the Garden. His biting at the heel also reminds the readers of Jacob grasping at Esau's heel during their birth (Genesis 25:26).

Gad

When Jacob turned to Gad, he spoke of military action.

“As for Gad, a band of raiders shall attack him,
But he will attack at their heels” (v. 19).

The tribe of Gad settled in the southeastern portion of the Jordan River Valley, and was compelled to fight constantly against Arameans to the northeast and the Ammonites to their east, as Scripture describes in the story of Jephthah (Judges 11:1-12:7). They also struggled with challenges from the Moabites to their south, as is seen in the Moabite stone of Mesha, King of Moab, from the mid-9th century which proclaimed,

“Now the men of Gad had always dwelt in the land of Ataroth, and the king of Israel had built Ataroth for them; but I fought against the town and took it and slew all of the people of the town as a satiation for Chemosh and Moab [pagan deities].”

The strategy that Jacob seems to be encouraging in his prophecy/blessing is that of resisting a frontal attack by the enemy and instead engaging in guerrilla warfare, the type of fighting particularly well suited to a small tribe of good horsemen who possessed mobility. The tribe of Gad attacked often from the rear, as can be inferred from their attacking “at their heels” (v. 19). The tribe of Gad was resilient and was praised for their ferocity in the song of Moses.

“He lies down as a lion,
And tears the arm, also the crown of the head (Genesis 33:20).

Asher

When Jacob turned to Asher, he focused on agricultural production.

“As for Asher, his food shall be rich
And he will yield royal delicacies” (v. 20).

After the conquest, the tribe of Asher received the land along the western hills of Galilee, from Mount Carmel in the south along the coastal plain to Sidon in the north. This area not only had many fine harbors which allowed Asher to prosper (Judges 5:17), but also was known for the olive trees which grew abundantly (Joshua 19:24-31). This future prosperity was echoed in the Song of Moses.

“More blessed than sons is Asher;
May he be favored by his brothers,
And may he dip his foot in olive oil” (Deuteronomy 33:24).

Though some have suggested that the reference to “royal delicacies” (v. 20) is connected to the fact that the tribe of Asher was unable to drive the Canaanites out of its territory and thus may have been required

to produce food for conquering kings, the overall enthusiasm of the prophecy/blessing belies that interpretation.

Naphtali

Jacob's blessing/prophecy for Naphtali has often been the most challenging to interpret.

“Naphtali is a doe let loose;
He utters beautiful words” (v. 21).

This is generally seen as a positive pronouncement, but the specifics are difficult to determine due to the many different translations of the original Hebrew text. The image is of an unencumbered doe, free to roam and, presumably, procreate. The “beautiful words” (v. 21), which seem out of place in the image of a deer, can refer to a fawn.

We do know that the tribe of Naphtali resided in the hills of northern Galilee, west of the Lake of Galilee and extending northward along the Jordan River (Joshua 19:32-39). It was one of the few areas in Canaan where Scripture does not mention a continued Canaanite presence after the conquest. We also know that the tribe of Naphtali left this protected area to fight alongside Deborah (Judges 4:6, 10).

In the Song of Moses, further detail is given.

“Naphtali, satisfied with favor,
And full of the blessing of the Lord,
Take possession of the sea and the south” (Deuteronomy 33:23).

It may be that while originally pacifist in nature, the tribe of Naphtali eventually moved out of its protected surroundings in the hill country to settle lands further to the south.

Joseph

The longest of the prophecies/blessings quite naturally belongs to Joseph. It falls into three parts, a proclamation of Joseph's prosperity (v. 22), his protection (v. 23-24), and his blessing (v. 25-26). And we must read this not as pertaining to Joseph only, but also to his sons Ephraim and Manasseh, who had recently been adopted by Jacob.

²²Joseph is a fruitful branch,
A fruitful branch by a spring;
Its branches hang over a wall.
²³The archers provoked him,
And shot at him and were hostile toward him;
²⁴But his bow remained firm,
And his arms were agile,
From the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob
(From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel),
²⁵From the God of your father who helps you,
And by the Almighty who blesses you
With blessings of heaven above,
Blessings of the deep that lies beneath,

Blessings of the breasts and of the womb.

²⁶The blessings of your father

Have surpassed the blessings of my ancestors

Up to the furthest boundary of the everlasting hills;

May they be on the head of Joseph,

And on the top of the head of the one distinguished among his brothers” (v. 22-26).

In speaking of his prosperity, Jacob used the common biblical metaphors related to a fruitful vine. The prosperity/procreativity of the tribe of Joseph seem to burst the boundaries established for it (v. 22). Recall that Joseph named his child Ephraim, meaning “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction” (Genesis 41:52). However, many commentators prefer to translate the Hebrew to read “the foal of a wild donkey” since animal imagery is very prevalent in this passage. This seems more likely, particularly when the fact that archers firing their arrows at a grape vine seems puzzling (v. 23).

In any case, God had protected Joseph. In the language that his attackers ‘provoked,’ “shot at,” and “were hostile toward” Joseph we can only be reminded of his brothers. Yet, God had protected Joseph in the well in the desert, as well as in Potiphar’s house and in prison. We see this in the repeated phrases that identify God as the source of Joseph’s deliverance. “The Mighty One of Jacob,” “the Shepherd,” “the Stone of Israel” (v. 24). And this protection would continue for the tribe of Joseph. If this is read as pertaining to Ephraim and Manasseh, then God’s protection extended to them both during their time of intertribal warfare (Judges 19-21).

Then Jacob described what God would do for the tribe of Joseph in the future. God had protected and God would bless. It was “the God of your father who helps you” (v. 25). The tribe of Joseph would be blessed agriculturally (v. 25), procreatively (v. 25), and positionally (v. 26). The blessings of “heaven above” and the “deep that lies beneath” (v. 25) is creation language and refer to the promise of abundant water for Joseph’s flocks and crops. Blessings of the ‘breasts’ and ‘womb’ (v. 25) refer to the successful birth and nurturing of children. That Joseph would be “distinguished among his brothers” (v. 26) was a sign of position. Though Joseph had been ill-treated as a youth, he had clearly emerged as the head of the family.

We must also note that, at the end of his life, Jacob realized how blessed he had been. Though he had once described his years as “few and unpleasant” (Genesis 47:9), now he acknowledged that his blessings “surpassed the blessings of my ancestors” (v. 26). His wives, his twelve sons, his possessions, and the undeniable presence of God throughout his life were unmistakable.

Benjamin

Finally, Jacob turned to his last son, Benjamin.

“Benjamin is a ravenous wolf;

In the morning he devours the prey,

And in the evening he divides the spoils” (v. 27).

Again we see animal imagery, in this case a “ravenous wolf” (v. 27). The image brings to mind Joseph’s falsified death, but more historically speaks to the role the tribe of Benjamin played in the conquest of

Canaan. Despite the small size of the tribe, Benjamites were noted for their skill and bravery as warriors (Judges 20:14-21; 1 Chronicles 12:2; 8:40). It is not surprising to remember that the first king of Israel was drawn from the tribe of Benjamin (1 Samuel 9:1), anointed at a time of great concern in Israel for the safety of their lands.

The passage concludes without commentary from the narrator. “All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them. He blessed them, every one with the blessing appropriate to him” (v. 28).

The Death of Jacob

Having finished, Jacob gave his sons one final instruction. It related to his burial. Though he had compelled Joseph to swear to take his body to the family tomb in Canaan, Jacob made the request again publicly, before all his sons. Whether he believed that his other sons might object, if Joseph tried to take their father’s body away to Canaan, or whether Jacob simply wanted everyone to know his final wishes we cannot say with certainty.

“²⁹Then he commanded them and said to them, ‘I am about to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, ³⁰in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is opposite Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought along with the field from Ephron the Hittite as a burial site. ³¹There they buried Abraham and his wife Sarah, there they buried Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and there I buried Leah - ³²the field and the cave that is in it, purchased from the sons of Heth.’ ³³When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people” (v. 29-33).

Notice that Jacob recalled details. His mind, even at the end, was still sharp. He remembered the location of the cave and the fact that his grandfather purchased it from Ephron the Hittite (Genesis 23:17-20). He also knew exactly who had been buried there and who had not (Rachel is conspicuous by her absence). To Jacob, this cave was the permanent evidence of the promise of land that he had heard repeated to him so many times in his sojourning. Here, at the end, he demonstrated his unyielding faith that God would keep His promises.

Finally, Jacob “breathed his last, and was gathered to his people” (v. 33). Interestingly, there is no verb “to die” in this description. Instead that language focuses on rejoining. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were together again in eternity.

Takeaways

We can see in the details of these prophecies/blessings the certainty of biblical prophecy. While some passages are difficult to discern, in no place can we see that God’s word through Jacob was unfulfilled. Scripture bears itself true time and again, as eventually the world’s understanding of truth aligns with the biblical record. We can also see that Jacob’s confidence in his God gave him peace and assurance on his deathbed. He could look forward to God’s continuing work in the lives of his children. As believers, we, too, can rest assured that we will not go to meet an offended God Who will continue to work His perfect will in the lives of those left behind.