

Genesis 49 – Jacob’s Dying Blessings

Review

Last time, we saw that Jacob, knowing he would soon die, called his son Joseph and Joseph’s sons Manasseh and Ephraim to his side. Jacob claimed Manasseh and Ephraim as his own sons and blessed them, giving Ephraim the preferential blessing despite Manasseh being Joseph’s firstborn. We briefly looked at the confusion in subsequent listings of the tribes of Israel caused by Jacob’s counting Joseph’s sons as his own and patriarchs of tribes in their own right. We also looked at the symbolism of the right hand in God’s Word.

Jacob Blesses His Sons



After blessing Joseph’s sons Ephraim and Manasseh, Jacob called all his sons to his side and blessed them.

1Then Jacob called his sons and said, “Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come.

2“Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob, listen to Israel your father.

Genesis 49:1-2 (ESV)

Jacob/Israel pronounced both specific blessings, and some specific prophecies about his sons before he died. We may be hard pressed to consider some of these pronouncements as blessings rather than chastisements as we shall soon see.

To better understand the prophetic aspect of Jacob’s blessings, it will be helpful to refer to this tribal Allocation of Canaan map.

Allocation of Canaan

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Reuben

***3“Reuben, you are my firstborn,
my might, and the firstfruits of my strength,
preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power.***

***4Unstable 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!*** Genesis 49:3-4 (ESV)

This “blessing” starts out pleasant enough. We can imagine Reuben and his brothers standing beside Jacob’s bed expecting Jacob to pronounce the “standard” blessing of the firstborn on Reuben. Perhaps Reuben may have been a little haughty expecting to receive the traditional “double portion” blessing from his father that he had waited for all his life. How crestfallen he must have been when Jacob continued.

We have already seen that Reuben never really stepped into the leadership role his position as firstborn placed upon him. Instead, Judah took the lead in the negotiations with Joseph when the brothers first came to Egypt. In fact, Judah had been the main instigator of the plan to sell Joseph into slavery in the first place. Jacob realized Reuben’s shortcomings and formalized in his prophecy concerning Reuben what all of them already knew.

We first learned about Reuben’s defilement of Jacob’s marriage bed in Genesis 35.

***22a While Israel lived in that land [near Bethlehem], Reuben went and lay with
Bilhah his father’s concubine. And Israel heard of it...*** Genesis 35:22a (ESV)

That incident is only mentioned in that verse and here in Genesis 49. We have no way of knowing whether Jacob had ever told anyone about it or whether he had kept it to himself throughout all the intervening years. Whether or not the other brothers had been previously aware of Jacob’s reasons, they were certainly startled by Jacob’s sudden blunt chastisement of Reuben and apprehensive about what unpleasantness Jacob’s “blessing” upon each of *them* might contain.

Simeon and Levi

***5“Simeon and Levi are brothers;
weapons of violence are their swords.***

***6Let my soul come not into their council;
O my glory, be not joined to their company.
For in their anger they killed men,
and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen.***

***7Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce,
and their wrath, for it is cruel!
I will divide them in Jacob
and scatter them in Israel.*** Genesis 49:5-7 (ESV)

Jacob didn’t bother to precede his chastisement of Simeon and Levi with any pleasantries. Recall that it was Simeon and Levi who led the murderous vengeance upon the city of Shechem after its prince raped their sister Dinah (Genesis 34). There is no Biblical record apart from here in Genesis 49 of Simeon and Levi having hamstrung oxen; however, they clearly demonstrated their vengeful spirit and uncontrolled rage at Shechem, so I wouldn’t put them above abusing animals.

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Look at the Allocation of Simeon map.



Allocation of Simeon

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When the Israelites conquered the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua nearly 500 years after Jacob’s death, the land was divided by lot into inheritance allocations. Simeon’s allotment was in the Negev desert surrounding Beersheba. Notice that Simeon’s allotment was surrounded by the land of Judah (Joshua 19:1-9). This is what Jacob prophesied about Simeon in Genesis 49:7 when he said, ***“I will divide them in Jacob.”***

The descendants of Levi became the priesthood of Israel. Consequently, they received no tribal allocation when the land was divided.

33But to the tribe of Levi Moses gave no inheritance; the LORD God of Israel is their inheritance, just as he said to them. Joshua 13:33 (ESV)

Instead, the Levites were given cities and surrounding pastureland within the tribal allocations of the other tribes.

1The LORD spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, 2“Command the people of Israel to give to the Levites some of the inheritance of their possession as cities for them to dwell in. And you shall give to the Levites pasturelands around the cities. 3The cities shall be theirs to dwell in, and their pasturelands shall be for their cattle and for their livestock and for all their beasts. Numbers 35:1-3 (ESV)

This is what Jacob meant in Genesis 49:7 when he said that Levi would be scattered in Israel.

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Judah

Jacob’s blessing of Judah is clearly a Messianic prophecy. God had revealed to Jacob His intentions to bring forth a ruler over Israel (and all creation) from the line of Judah – Jesus of Nazareth. Although Jacob did not know the Name of Jesus, he explicitly stated this revelation here in his blessing of Judah.

***8“Judah, your brothers shall praise you;
your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;
your father’s sons shall bow down before you. Genesis 49:8 (ESV)***

Recall from Genesis 37, Joseph’s dream of the grain sheaves foretold that Joseph’s brothers would one day bow before him. As Jacob was giving his dying blessings to his sons, that prophecy from Joseph’s dream had already been fulfilled. In the intervening chapters, as we have seen, Judah had increasingly taken over leadership of the clans of Israel as his father aged. Eventually, Judah’s descendant David would become king over all Israel.

***9Judah is a lion’s cub;
from the prey, my son, you have gone up.
He stooped down; he crouched as a lion
and as a lioness; who dares rouse him? Genesis 49:9 (ESV)***

The lion became the symbol of the tribe of Judah following this pronouncement by Jacob. Of course, the LORD Jesus is also called The Lion of Judah (Revelation 5:5).

***10The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,
until tribute comes [עד שִׁילֹה] to him;
and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Genesis 49:10 (ESV)***

At first glance, it may seem that this part of Jacob’s prophecy has failed. After all, the rule of Judah’s descendant David’s house over all the nation of Israel lasted only two generations – David and his son Solomon. After Solomon died, the kingdom was divided leaving the subsequent kings of Judah to reign over only two tribes (Judah and Benjamin) until finally the kingdom of Judah itself was conquered by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. (1 Kings:12 – 2 Kings 25). Nor has the obedience of all people ever fully been given to the descendants of Judah.

Understanding this verse is problematic as evidenced by the variety of renderings we find in our English language translations.

10The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be. Genesis 49:10 (KJV)

***10The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
Nor a lawgiver from between his feet,
Until Shiloh comes;
And to Him shall be the obedience of the people. Genesis 49:10 (NKJV)***

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***10The scepter will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler’s staff from his descendants,
until the coming of the one to whom it belongs,
the one whom all nations will honor.*** Genesis 49:10 (NLT)

***10The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from
between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience
of the nations shall be his.*** Genesis 49:10 (NIV)

***10“The scepter will not depart from Judah
or the staff from between his feet
until he whose right it is comes
and the obedience of the peoples belongs to him.*** Genesis 49:10 (CSB)

***10“The scepter shall 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.*** Genesis 49:10 (NASB)

Indeed, all these translations except the KJV and NKJV contain footnotes explaining various possible renderings the translation team might have chosen and their reasoning for translating the verse as they did. So, if we’re confused, we’re in good company. Even the teams of professional linguists who did the translations evidently never reached a comfortable consensus.

The key of course, lies in how we understand the Hebrew phrase עַד שִׁילֹה בֹהַד ‘**ad šîlô bô**’. Literally, the Hebrew reads עַד ‘**ad**’ (as far as, even to, until, up to, while) שִׁילֹה ‘**šîlô**’ (he whose it is, that which belongs to him, tranquility) בֹהַד ‘**bô**’ (to go in, enter, come, go, come in).

The ESV renders עַד שִׁילֹה בֹהַד ‘**ad šîlô bô**’ as “*until tribute comes*” and then gratuitously inserts the phrase “*to him*” into the verse just in case we weren’t already confused enough. Other translations render it quite differently.

The KJV, NKJV (unsurprisingly), and NASB take שִׁילֹה ‘**šîlô**’ as a proper name. This is quite understandable since the ancient Hebrew texts do not use capitalization or punctuation to differentiate proper names from ordinary nouns. These translations use the proper name Shiloh to indicate the One to whom the regal scepter and staff rightly belong – Jesus the Son of God. Other translations spell out the meaning of שִׁילֹה ‘**šîlô**’ with phrases like “*he whose right it is.*”

The salient point all these translations try to emphasize in their own unique ways is that Jacob’s prophecy here does not pertain to Judah nor even to his mortal descendants, but rather to Jesus the Lion of Judah who has retained the right to rule and reign over His creation from time immemorial, continues to do so even now, and will forevermore.

Thus, Jacob’s prophecy did not fail with the breakup of Solomon’s kingdom or the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar. However, neither was the prophecy wholly fulfilled when Judah’s descendant Jesus of Nazareth was born into human flesh.

Most of the Jewish people during Jesus’ ministry on Earth continued to await the final fulfillment of Jacob’s prophecy of Genesis 49:10 even after Jesus was revealed among them. When He came in the form of a humble servant and teacher, He did not fit their expectation of the Lion of Judah to whom belonged the regal scepter and staff of Judah. They didn’t recognize the true nature of Jesus’

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Kingdom, and most people still don’t even today. Far from giving Him their obedience and the tribute that the ESV mentions, the people into whose midst Jesus was born condemned Him to be crucified.

Jacob’s prophecy will ultimately be fulfilled when the Lion of Judah returns to take up his rightful scepter and staff to rule and reign forevermore. Then at last *all* peoples will render to Him the obedience and honor to which He has always been entitled.

***¹¹Binding his foal to the vine
and his donkey’s colt to the choice vine,
he has washed his garments in wine
and his vesture in the blood of grapes.***

***¹²His eyes are darker than wine,
and his teeth whiter than milk.*** Genesis 49:11-12 (ESV)

Jacob concluded his blessing upon Judah with some familiar Messianic symbols. These are intriguing because the later prophecies containing similar symbolism were not spoken until centuries after Moses set Jacob’s prophecy of Genesis 49:11-12 down in writing. This fact provides affirmation that these scriptures are indeed God-breathed, not born out of the imagination of the human writers.

ASIDE - Of course, those who deny the Bible as the Spirit-given Word of God contended for centuries that the reason the prophecies of God’s Word align so well is that early church leaders at the first Council of Nicaea in 325 AD conspired together to “massage” the scriptures to bring them into close agreement so that the Church could solidify its political power. Praise God that specious claim was finally laid to rest with the discovery in 1947 of the Dead Sea Scrolls which pre-date the Nicaean Council by nearly 500 years!

But I digress...

In one of His seven so-called “I Am” statements recorded in the gospel of John, Jesus compared Himself to a vine.

¹“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ²Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:1-5 (ESV)

Thus, Jacob’s prophecy that a donkey’s colt would be bound to the Vine is a foreshadowing of Zechariah’s prophecy which was fulfilled when Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey’s foal.

***⁹Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,***

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on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Zechariah 9:9 (ESV)

Finally, wine frequently symbolizes blood in God’s Word. Jesus used the wine of the last Passover meal He shared with His disciples to symbolize His own blood in which His garments would be soaked the next day to cleanse all humankind from sin.

²⁷And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” Matthew 26:27-29 (ESV)

¹¹Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹²His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. ¹³He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. Revelation 19:11-13 (ESV)

Zebulun

¹³“Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships, and his border shall be at Sidon. Genesis 49:13 (ESV)

Look at the Allocation of Zebulun map.



Zebulun’s tribal allocation in Canaan lay in the Valley of Jezreel northeast of Mt Carmel from the Mediterranean on the west to Mt Tabor on the east. The great port city of Haifa lies in the estuary of the Kishon River at Zebulun’s western end.

However, Zebulun’s northern boundary was many miles south of the Phoenician port of Sidon, so this aspect of Jacob’s prophecy concerning Zebulun may still await fulfillment in the future.

Allocation of Zebulun

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Issachar

*¹⁴“Issachar is a strong donkey,
crouching between the sheepfolds.
¹⁵He saw that a resting place was good,
and that the land was pleasant,
so he bowed his shoulder to bear,
and became a servant at forced labor.”* Genesis 49:14-15 (ESV)

Look at the Allocation of Issachar map.



Issachar’s tribal allocation occupied the upper end of the Valley of Jezreel. This “resting place” is indeed good as Jacob foretold. The valley is wide and relatively level, making it quite suitable for agriculture within a wider region better suited to herding.

Notice that Issachar’s territory was sandwiched between the allocations of the two half-tribes of Manasseh on the east and west banks of the Jordan. So, this is likely what Jacob meant by his pronouncement that Issachar would crouch between sheepfolds.

Allocation of Issachar

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Looking at the history of Issachar, I find no specific mention of forced labor or tribute not shared by the other tribes of Israel during the times of the judges and kings, the Babylonian captivity, or the global diaspora of Israel. Yet the Hebrew text of Genesis 49:15 clearly differentiates Issachar’s “forced” labor from ordinary farm work. This aspect of Jacob’s prophecy concerning Issachar may remain to be fulfilled, or it may simply shine the spotlight on Issachar as a “poster child” for the servitude under which all of Israel has suffered throughout history.

Dan

*¹⁶“Dan shall judge his people
as one of the tribes of Israel.
¹⁷Dan shall be a serpent in the way,
a viper by the path,
that bites the horse’s heels*

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so that his rider falls backward.

18I wait for your salvation, O LORD. Genesis 49:16-18 (ESV)

Jacob’s statement that Dan would judge his people is a play on words. Recall that when Dan was born to Rachel’s maidservant Bilhah, Rachel said, “***God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son.***” (Genesis 30:6) Therefore, she named him Dan (דָּן **dān**) which means a judge. Of the judges of Israel whose histories are detailed in the book of Judges, only Samson came from the tribe of Dan (Judges 13). Although I personally find most of the exploits of Israel’s judges despicable, Samson’s are particularly odious.

Look again at the Allocation of Canaan map.

Dan’s original tribal allocation was on the coastal plain west of Jerusalem and included the port city of Joppa. However, the people of Dan could not hold their territory, so they sent scouts north to find somewhere else to conquer and settle (Joshua 19:47 & Judges 18). Along the way, the scouts lodged with an Ephraimite named Micah who had hired a corrupt Levite to be his own private priest. Micah had a shrine in his house where the Levite led Micah’s family in idolatrous worship.

From Micah’s house, the scouts from Dan continued northward. In the far north of Canaan, near the headwaters of the River Jordan, they encountered a settlement of Sidonians living in peace and prosperity far from the military protection of Sidon in a place called Laish. The scouts reported the vulnerability of this Sidonian outpost to their tribal leaders, advising them to come up in force and seize the territory of Laish for themselves. The tribe of Dan did so, but along the way they stopped back at the house of Micah and took the Levite and the objects from Micah’s idolatrous shrine with them. After overwhelming the unsuspecting people of Laish, they renamed it Dan. They set up an idolatrous shrine there using the idols they had stolen from Micah and employing the corrupt Levite as their priest.

The tribe of Dan became the first children of Israel to fall into idolatry. So, Dan became the viper along the path that Jacob spoke of in his dying prophecy of Genesis 49:16-18, which would bite the horse’s heels and cause its rider (the nation of Israel) to fall backward.

Gad

***19“Raiders shall raid Gad,
but he shall raid at their heels.*** Genesis 49:19 (ESV)

Jacob didn’t have much to say in his blessing of Gad.

The mention of raiders is another of Jacob’s “dad jokes.” Gad’s name גָּד **gād** sounds like the Hebrew word for invade or attack - גָּדַד **gûd**.

Asher

***20“Asher’s food shall be rich,
and he shall yield royal delicacies.*** Genesis 49:20 (ESV)

Jacob didn’t give us much to sink our teeth into here (nyuk, nyuk, nyuk). Matthew Henry, the famous British Bible commentator of the late seventeenth century, postulated that perhaps the food produced

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by Asher when they settled in Canaan may have been extraordinarily fine, and that therefore the tribe of Asher exported their delicacies to other tribes and possibly other nations.

Naphtali

***²¹“Naphtali is a doe let loose
that bears beautiful fawns*** [אֵמֶר 'ēmer]. Genesis 49:21 (ESV)

It isn’t clear why Jacob compared Naphtali to a doe set loose. Of course, does produce fawns and are mostly silent except when terrified or startled, but the Hebrew word אֵמֶר 'ēmer at the end of this verse means utterance, speech, word, saying, promise, or command. So, it’s hard to explain why some English translations would render it as *fawns* as the ESV does, except that does mostly produce fawns and never words, so it might make better poetic sense if Naphtali the loosed doe produced fawns rather than words. Nevertheless, Naphtali and his descendants (being people rather than does), would be very hard pressed to physically produce fawns and far more likely to produce words – beautiful or otherwise. Who knows? Perhaps Naphtali’s descendants were the first “furries”... NOT!

I was unable to find any strikingly beautiful words spoken by or about Naphtali in God’s Word. Nor is any of the language in Jacob’s blessing of Naphtali a play on words as some of Jacob’s other blessings of his sons were – unless of course I’m too dense to get Jacob’s dad joke (a distinct possibility).

Joseph

***²²“Joseph is a fruitful bough,
a fruitful bough by a spring;
his branches run over the wall.
²³The archers bitterly attacked him,
shot at him, and harassed him severely,
²⁴yet his bow remained unmoved;
his arms were made agile
by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob
(from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel),
²⁵by the God of your father who will help you,
by the Almighty who will bless you
with blessings of heaven above,
blessings of the deep that crouches beneath,
blessings of the breasts and of the womb.
²⁶The blessings of your father
are mighty beyond the blessings of my parents,
up to the bounties of the everlasting hills.
May they be on the head of Joseph,
and on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers.*** Genesis 49:22-26
(ESV)

Jacob’s blessing on Joseph is truly a pure blessing containing no prophecies of chastisements. It isn’t clear to me what Jacob meant by mentioning archers who had bitterly attacked Joseph. Perhaps Jacob was referring to the travails Joseph had suffered after his brothers sold him into slavery.

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Like Joseph himself, Jacob recognized that the prosperity Joseph found in Egypt through which he had rescued his entire family out of death in the seven-year famine was due entirely to God’s provision and protection.

Benjamin

***²⁷“Benjamin is a ravenous wolf,
in the morning devouring the prey
and at evening dividing the spoil.”*** Genesis 49:27 (ESV)

As we have previously noted, Benjamin and Joseph (being the sons of Jacob’s favorite wife Rachel) were therefore Jacob’s favorite sons. Perhaps Jacob gave slight preference to Benjamin his youngest even over Joseph because Rachel had died giving birth to Benjamin. We have already seen the trouble that Jacob caused in his family and in the later history of the nation of Israel by his favoritism.

In the Bible (and in our own modern mindset) wolves are rarely seen in a positive light. Yet despite our instinctive fear of them, we must surely admit that wolves are “very good at what they do.” Despite our prejudice against them, we must properly view Jacob’s comparison of his son Benjamin to a wolf as praise rather than condemnation.

²⁸All these are the twelve tribes of Israel. This is what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each with the blessing suitable to him. Genesis 49:28 (ESV)

Jacob’s “Final Wishes” and Death

²⁹Then he commanded them and said to them, “I am 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 at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place. ³¹There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife. There they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah— ³²the field and the cave that is in it were bought from the Hittites.” ³³When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people. Genesis 49:29-33 (ESV)

We looked at Abraham’s purchase of the Cave of Machpelah in our study of Genesis 23. It is quite intriguing that even centuries later, the cave was still considered the property of Abraham’s descendants, not only by the Israelites but also by the Canaanites whose lands they would later conquer.

Here in Genesis 49:31 we find the only explicit Biblical reference to the deaths of Rebekah and Leah.

Looking Ahead

Next time we’ll look at the burial of Jacob and conclude our study of Genesis with the death of Joseph.