

## Genesis 49:1-28

### Limits of the Text

The blessings of Jacob upon his sons forms a single literary unit. It is introduced with Jacob's command for his sons to gather (49:1) and concluded with a summary statement by the narrator (49:28). His instructions for his burial and his death (49:29-33) belong with the next unit.

### Interpretation

Chapter 49 can be a difficult chapter to teach. It's a series of prophetic blessings that Jacob gave to his sons. It's easy to get lost in the details, trying to figure out how each prediction was fulfilled, and hard to keep an overall sense of the purpose of the chapter and its application for the church. In this regard, Sailhammer helps us when he says, "Jacob's last words to his sons have become the occasion for a final statement of the book's major theme: God's plan to restore the lost blessing through the offspring of Abraham."<sup>1</sup> Knowing that his people are about to enter four hundreds of bondage, times of great difficulty, God used Jacob to remind and encourage his people that he would certainly deliver them in the future and return them to the promised land. Moses, the narrator, was doing something very similar for the children of Israel, as they prepared to fight their way into the Promised Land. For both groups, however, final and ultimate blessing, restoration of what was lost in the fall, could only come through the King from Judah, the One who will take the scepter and the ruler's staff (49:10). This redemptive message is still appropriate for God's people today. Though we may have times of great difficulty in our lives, God reminds and encourages us today that he will deliver us and bring us to the promised land, heaven. Jesus, the Lion of the tribe of Judah and our King, saved us from sin by his death on a cross, and he will ultimately restore us to a perfect, pre-fall relationship with God our Father in eternity.

This text has a variety of literary forms:

- It is a series of blessings, one for each son, like the blessing Jacob received from his father (27:26-29). In general, the blessings concern military victory and economic prosperity.

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<sup>1</sup> Sailhammer, 274.

- It is a series of prophecies (aka oracles). God supernaturally enabled Jacob to know what would “happen to you in days to come.” Some of these prophecies are short and difficult to interpret, even with the advantage of hindsight.
- It is a poem, the longest poem in Genesis; it begins in 49:2 and runs through 49:27. Being a poem, it is full of imagery; not everything should read literally.
- It contains a prayer in 49:18 asking for God’s help.

Although all sons are blessed, all sons are not blessed equally. Jacob spent the majority of his attention on Judah and Joseph, the focal points of the blessings, but very little time on sons of the concubines.

49:1 Then Jacob called his sons and said, “Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come.”<sup>2</sup>

At this point Jacob was knew he would not live much longer. So he commanded his sons to gather round, as he had something to tell them. Jacob gave his blessings openly to all of his sons at once; this birthright would be given, not stolen.

49:2 “Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob, listen to Israel your father.

The poem starts in this verse, and it is the introduction of the poem.

49:3 “Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power.

49:4 Unstable 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!

The title of firstborn indicates that Reuben should receive the birthright. With that title went the accolades of might and strength, dignity and power. Reuben should receive a double portion of the inheritance as well as the family leadership.

But like turbulent waters which are unstable and uncontrollable, Reuben was reckless and impulsive;<sup>3</sup> this was a reference to Reuben’s character. He went up

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<sup>2</sup> All quotes from ESV unless specified otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> Swanson, DBLH 7070.

to his father's bed and couch, which are the physical locations where sex occurred and thus are metaphors for having sex.<sup>4</sup> When there, he defiled them. This was a reference to Reuben's actions in 35:22 where he slept with Bilhah, his father's concubine, in a bid for power.

His character led to his actions, and his attempt to wrestle the family leadership away from his father cost him the very thing he was after. Reuben would not have the preeminence, the high status that he was due in the clan due to his birth position.<sup>5</sup> Reuben joined a long line of eldest sons (i.e., Cain, Ismael, Esau, and Er) who lost their position because of sin.<sup>6</sup> His lack of preeminence continued into history; "no prophet, judge, priest, or king comes from this tribe."<sup>7</sup>

Reuben's blessing doesn't really seem like much of a blessing, so much so that Waltke calls it an antiblessing, similar to the one Esau received (27:39-40). "However, in terms of the nation's destiny these antiblessings are a blessing. By demoting Reuben for his turbulence and uncontrolled sex drive, Jacob saves Israel from reckless leadership."<sup>8</sup>

49:5 "Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords.  
49:6 Let 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.  
49:7 Cursed 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.

Since Reuben had been disqualified, the birthright would naturally fall to the next-in-line, which would be Simeon and then Levi. But Jacob passed over them as well, noting they were violent, angry, and willful. Neither of these brothers were suitable to lead the family.

When he spoke about their violence, Jacob was referring to a particular event, the genocide of the men of Shechem while rescuing their sister Dinah(34:25-26). Simeon and Levi were Dinah's brothers (which is why they were so concerned for her honor [34:31]); they put the men of the city to death by the sword, and given the scope of the massacre it is quite reasonable to believe they were angry.

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<sup>4</sup> Mathews, 886.

<sup>5</sup> Swanson, DBLH 3855.

<sup>6</sup> Wenham, quoted in Waltke, 605.

<sup>7</sup> Waltke, 605.

<sup>8</sup> Waltke, 603.

There is one difficulty in this interpretation, the clause “they hamstrung oxen.” In 34:28 it states exactly the opposite; the sons of Jacob “took their flocks, herds, and donkeys, as well as everything in the city and in the surrounding fields.” There are (at least) three suggestions for harmonizing these texts. One suggestion is that there is an error in the Hebrew text, and the words should be emended to similarly spelled words, which would change the meaning from “hamstrung oxen” to “uprooted walls.” The idea would be they pulled down the city walls. A second suggestion is that “oxen” is used figuratively; “oxen” should really be “bull” (since the noun is singular in the Hebrew, not plural), and it refers to a leader or a prince. So perhaps bull refers to Hamor or Shechem (meaning they were rendered powerless by Simeon and Levi), or perhaps it refers to Jacob (meaning he was hampered by his sons). The third suggestion is that they literally hamstrung the oxen sometime after they were captured; perhaps at a later date the sons realized that being good shepherds didn’t make them good cattlemen. This is the simplest explanation and to my mind the most likely. “Thus by merism<sup>9</sup> (human and animal), Jacob condemns their wanton attitude toward life.”<sup>10</sup>

Their actions had two results. The first result was that Jacob called a curse down upon them. He asked God himself to use his divine power to punish his own sons. Jacob lacked the spiritual leadership to punish his sons at the time (35:30), but he certainly never forgot their sin. The second result was that Jacob divided and scattered them. There are two possible interpretations for these verbs. One interpretation looks ahead to their part of the land inheritance. It has been noted that Simeon’s land was surrounded by Judah’s and eventually subsumed by it, and Levi received no land, only cities scattered throughout the other tribes.<sup>11</sup> The other interpretation is more immediate and looks to the birthright; Jacob was refusing to give the birthright to these two sons.

Waltke also calls the blessings of Simeon and Levi antiblessings. “By cursing the cruelty of Simeon and Levi, he restricts their cruel rashness from dominating.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “A merism is a figure of speech by which a single thing is referred to by a conventional phrase that enumerates several of its parts” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merism>.

<sup>10</sup> Mathews, 887.

<sup>11</sup> Mathews, 889.

<sup>12</sup> Waltke, 603.

The next blessing is for Judah; it is the second largest blessing (in terms of the number of words). Jacob used four different images in this blessing, all of which have some connection to the idea of kingship.

49:8 “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.

The first image is of a victor. Judah will have victory over his enemies, even his brothers will bow down to him. The idea of a hand being on the neck of one’s enemies was a symbol of conquest;<sup>13</sup> it “meant that the enemy was overcome, having succumbed to the superior power of the victor.”<sup>14</sup>

In what sense did (or will) Judah’s brothers bow down to him? Didn’t they bow down to Joseph instead? Certainly Jacob’s words here remind us of his own words to Joseph (37:10); this was probably not accidental. Just as Joseph’s brothers bowed down to Joseph, so the descendants of the brothers would bow down to descendants of Judah.<sup>15</sup> This was a prediction the Davidic dynasty.

49:9 Judah 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?

The second image is of a lion. The lion was a symbol of royalty throughout the ancient Near East,<sup>16</sup> including Israel (Eze 19:1-9; 1 Ki 10:18-20). This image became a title for King Jesus; he is the Lion of the tribe of Judah who has conquered (Re 5:5).

49:10 The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

The third image is of a king. The scepter symbolizes a monarchy; the staff symbolizes either military authority or lawgiving authority.<sup>17</sup>

The most difficult part of this verse is the Hebrew word *shiloh*, which is translated in the ESV as tribute; indeed, “the meaning of the Hebrew is arguably

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<sup>13</sup> Waltke, 607.

<sup>14</sup> Mathews, 891.

<sup>15</sup> Hughes, 552.

<sup>16</sup> Mathews, 891.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, 349.

the most debated in Genesis.”<sup>18</sup> This is the only place this word is used in the Old Testament, and its exact meaning is unknown. Mathews has summarized the four main interpretive options.<sup>19</sup>

The first option is that *shiloh* refers to a literal town named Shiloh. There was such a town in Ephraim. Joshua had his headquarters there (Jos 18:1), and Eli the priest the served there (1 Sa 1:3). The meaning would be that the king would rule from Shiloh. There are two difficulties with this option. The first is that these two Hebrew words, though similar, are not spelled identically. The second is that there is no known period of time when a ruler of Judah ruled from Shiloh, neither historically (especially not David) nor eschatologically.

The second option is that *shiloh* refers to a literal person. This option is simply transliterating the Hebrew to English and making it a title. The meaning would be that the one to come, the future Messiah, would have the title of Shiloh. This is how the NASB95 and NKJV translate it. The benefit of this option is that it fits the context of a king nicely. The difficulty is that this word as a title for the Messiah occurs nowhere else in Scripture; ultimately it’s just a guess.

The third option is that *shiloh* is actually two common Hebrew words, *shay* and *loh*.<sup>20</sup> The meaning is “tribute to him,” and has the idea of gifts given to a powerful ruler. This is how the ESV translates it. The benefit of this option is that it fits very nicely with its parallel in the next line.

The fourth option is a textual variant; that is, some of the old manuscripts have the word *shelloh* instead of *shiloh*. This variant has the idea of “to whom it belongs,” meaning the scepter shall not depart from Judah until the one to whom the scepter belongs comes. This is how the NET, HCSB, and NIV translate it. The benefit of this version is that Eze 21:27 has almost the exact same expression, and the meaning is more clear in that verse.<sup>21</sup> The difficulty of this option is that if *shelloh* is the original word, there is no explanation for how the variant *shiloh* was created.

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<sup>18</sup> Waltke, 608.

<sup>19</sup> Mathews, 893-6.

<sup>20</sup> There were no vowels in ancient, written Hebrew, so knowing exactly where to break the words can be difficult.

<sup>21</sup> Eze 21:26 refers to the removal of a crown. Eze 21:27 says, “It will not be restored until he comes to whom it rightfully belongs” (NIV).

Modern English translations are divided among the second, third, and fourth options; every translation listed here (except the NKJV) lists the alternatives in their footnotes. In other words, it's impossible to be dogmatic as to which option is right. But no matter which one is right, all three of these have a similar idea: There will a kingship or a monarchy that comes from Judah. This will last until a time when another king comes, one who has the obedience not only of Israel but also of all the nations. The fulfillment of this prophecy began with the reign of King David and the Davidic dynasty, it lasted until Jesus came, and it will ultimately be realized in millennial reign of King Jesus. "The intimation of an idealized permanent, universal reign must also look to the perfect eschatological figure, David's Greater Son."<sup>22</sup>

49:11 Binding 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.

49:12 His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.

The fourth image is of a prosperous husbandman. He is so wealthy and the harvest so successful that he doesn't mind if his donkey munches on his best vines or if his slaves use wine instead of water to wash his clothes. His eyes are dark from drinking this high-quality wine, and his teeth look white, perhaps from drinking milk.

This picture may refer to David and particularly his son Solomon, but it may be best to understand these two verses as a continuation of the thought from the end of 49:10. When the future king comes and all nations are obeying him, his reign will be incredibly wealthy.<sup>23</sup> Thus 49:11 depicts the reversal of the fall—the ground is no longer cursed (3:17)—and 49:12 is an image of the Messiah.

Given his sins of selling Joseph and sleeping with Tamar, Judah must have been astonished at the blessing he received; Jacob must have perceived that his repentance was genuine. Although Judah did not receive the birthright, he actually received something far better. (Whether he realized how much better is another matter.) In Judah God would fulfill the promises he made to Abram (12:3, 17:6), Isaac (26:4), and Jacob (28:14, 35:11) that the world would be blessed and that kings would come from their descendents; these promises merge together as they find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, the Savior-King.

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<sup>22</sup> Mathews, 896.

<sup>23</sup> Hughes, 552-3, and Sailhammer, 277.

The blessings of the remaining sons, sans Joseph, are short, cryptic, and often involve a play on words involving the sons' names.<sup>24</sup>

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

The tribe of Zebulun settled in the north, between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea (see the map on the following page). The prophecy is challenging, because Zebulun was actually landlocked; in Joshua's days it did not border either of these seas. There are a few suggestions on how to view this prophecy. One, it might have referred more to Zebulun's trading partnerships with the Phoenicians.<sup>25</sup> Two, it might have referred to its size later in history; during the reign of Solomon, Zebulun's borders extended to the Med.<sup>26</sup>

49:14 "Issachar is a strong donkey, crouching between the sheepfolds.

49:15 He 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.

Issachar settled into some of the best farming land in Israel.<sup>27</sup> The implication of the prophecy is that they failed to drive out the Canaanite inhabitants of the area, apparently enjoying comfort so much that they were willing to be subjugated in order to keep it.

49:16 "Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel.

49:17 Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a viper by the path, that bites the horse's heels so that his rider falls backward.

There are two prophecies concerning the tribe of Dan. They would judge, and they would strike a like a snake. The latter idea seems to be someone small sneakily attacking someone larger. It may be that these are references to Samson, the judge who struck the Philistines by means of trickery.

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<sup>24</sup> Sailhammer, 277.

<sup>25</sup> Mathews, 898.

<sup>26</sup> Waltke, 609.

<sup>27</sup> Waltke, 610.



<sup>28</sup> *Nelsons*, Division of Land Among the Twelve Tribes, Jos 18:2.

49:18 I wait for your salvation, O Lord.

From a literary perspective, the blessings are in the form of a poem, and this is the center line of the poem. Jacob addressed God directly, asking for his help with the enemies he predicted.

49:19 “Raiders shall raid Gad, but he shall raid at their heels.

The tribe of Gad settled east of the Jordan. They were frequently attacked by other countries and were known for their military prowess (1 Chr 5:18, 12:8-15).

49:20 “Asher’s food shall be rich, and he shall yield royal delicacies.

The tribe of Asher settled in the northwest corner of Israel in very fertile land, so fertile he could provide food fit for a king.

49:21 “Naphtali is a doe let loose that bears beautiful fawns.

The tribe of Naphtali settled in the northernmost part of Israel. The reference to a doe let loose is obscure, and interpretive guesses tend to focus on one of two possibilities. It may reflect the idea that there was theoretically no limit to Naphtali’s northern border,<sup>29</sup> or it may be that they would be known for being swift of foot.<sup>30</sup>

The next blessing is for Joseph; as Jacob adopted Joseph’s first two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (chapter 48), this blessing is also their blessing. It is the largest blessing (in terms of the number of words). There are three parts to this blessing.

49:22 “Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall.

The first part of Joseph’s blessing refers to his affluence. He was like a fruitful tree overflowing the enclosure in which he was planted. Joseph certainly provided for his family during the famine by bringing them to Egypt. Waltke suggests that branches running over the wall is a metaphor for the future expansion of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh over their boundaries.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Mathews, 902.

<sup>30</sup> Morris, 659.

<sup>31</sup> Waltke, 613.

49:23 The archers bitterly attacked him, shot at him, and harassed him severely,  
49:24 yet 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),

The second part of Joseph's blessing refers to his past. Joseph's brothers are referred to as archers who attacked him, yet Joseph withstood their attacks. The reason for his ability to withstand is made clear: Joseph was helped by God. In this part, Jacob used three names for God.

First, God is the Mighty One of Jacob. The word "mighty" focuses on God's strength and ability,<sup>32</sup> thus this name refers to God's power to save (Is 49:26). Second, God is the Shepherd, which refers to God's provision. In 48:15 Jacob referred to God as "the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day." Third, God is the Stone of Israel. This exact title appears only here, although similar titles appear elsewhere (2 Sa 23:3; Is 28:16). It refers to God's consistent, sure support.<sup>33</sup>

49:25 by 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.

49:26 The 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.

God's past help of Joseph flows nicely into the third part of Joseph's blessing, which refers to God's future help. As God helped Joseph and Jacob, so he would help his descendants. Note the repetition of the word "blessing" and its cognates, six times in two verses. Here Joseph received the blessing, the birthright of his father. (If this verse is not clear enough, 1 Chr 5:1-2 is very clear: "The sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel (for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph the son of Israel, so that he could not be enrolled as the oldest son; though Judah became strong among his brothers and a chief came from him, yet the birthright belonged to Joseph).")

In particular the blessing for Joseph called for rainfall and offspring. The blessings of heaven above and the deep beneath refer to the separation of water

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<sup>32</sup> Swanson, DBLH 51.

<sup>33</sup> Mathews, 905-6.

at creation (1:6-7), which burst forth in Noah's day (7:11; 8:2), so Jacob blessed Joseph with much rainfall, which would produce fertile crops. The blessings of the breasts and womb refer to having many children. Ephraim became the most numerous tribe in Israel, so much so that the title Ephraim eventually became synonymous with Israel.

In the final verse, Joseph noted that he had been blessed even more than his parents, and he bestowed this blessing upon Joseph. The birthright was given.

49:27 "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey and at evening dividing the spoil."

The tribe of Benjamin is depicted as conquering warriors, so effective that they fight during the day and already have their spoil by night. They were known for their left-handed marksmen (Ju 20:16; 1 Chr 12:2).

49:28 All 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.

So the blessings have been given. For the most part they foretold of military victory and economic prosperity. This would begin with the conquest in Joshua's days, reach a peak during the reigns of David (conquest) and Solomon (prosperity), and climax in the millennial reign of the Messiah-King. Certainly Jacob's sons should have been encouraged that God would return them to the Promised Land. Certainly the children of Israel in Moses' day should have felt the same.

## **The Gospel**

1. What does this text teach us about ourselves? What need or deficiency in our lives does it expose? When going through difficult times, we need to be encouraged, we need a sense of hope. We need to know that God is with us, that God will help us, and that God has a plan for us.
2. What does this text teach us about God? How does it reveal God's grace to meet our need? God knows our needs and meets them. God gives his children promises about his guidance, his help, and his future plans. God has revealed all this and more in his Word.
3. How does this text stand in relation to the gospel? This text predicts the gospel by predicting the coming Son of David who will take his scepter and accept the obedience of all peoples. It is through this King that God redeems mankind, thus enabling guidance and help and ultimately a restoration of the pre-fall condition forever.

## **Textual Outline**

This outline focuses upon the organization of the poem.

1. Introduction before the poem (1)
2. The poem (2-27)
  - a. Jacob called his children together (2).
  - b. Jacob blessed the children of Leah (3-15).
  - c. Jacob blessed the children of the concubines (16-21).
  - d. Jacob blessed the children of Rachel (22-27).
3. Conclusion after the poem (28)

## **Central Truth of the Text**

Moses wrote Gen 49 in order to give hope to the children of Israel that God would bless his people by delivering them and bringing them into the Promised Land.

## Teaching Outline

God has a plan for the future blessing of his people. God wants this church to be encouraged by the fact that he will bless us in the future. From this text in Genesis 49, we will see five promises of future blessing from God.

1. God promises to bless his people by punishing sin (2-7).
2. God promises to bless his people by ruling forever (8-12).
3. God promises to bless his people by giving rewards (13-15, 20-21).
4. God promises to bless his people by giving victory (16-19, 27).
5. God promises to bless his people by giving help (22-26).

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