

The Family of Abraham - Part 39—The Testament of Jacob

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[0 : 00] Welcome back to this, the 39th in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. Today we're beginning the final week of this series and we've arrived at what is arguably the hardest chapter in the whole of the Bible to interpret.

There are so many linguistic and other conundrums in here of interpretation that there is little chance that what you hear in the next while is going to be entirely correct.

A lot of it is going to be just my supposition, where my mind leans at the moment, and there will be many things that people who are far better commentators and linguists than I could ever be will differ with me sharply upon.

So with that said, let's get into the chapter. The chapter here is the Testament of Jacob, where Jacob blesses and declares the future concerning his sons.

We have a few other instances of something similar to this in Scripture. At the end of Moses' life, in Deuteronomy chapter 33, there is a poem concerning the tribes of Israel.

[1 : 05] In the end of David's life, there is a psalm as he looks back upon God's deliverances over the course of his life. There might also be some parallels with the song of Deborah in Judges 5 with the roll call of the tribes.

And then also Noah's judgment upon his sons in Genesis chapter 9 and what follows in chapter 10 with the 70 nations. There is a foreshadowing of the future within that occasion, and there is the same thing here.

And so there is a larger background of biblical material that we can use comparatively to get some greater sense upon what is taking place here. And perhaps the most useful for that is Deuteronomy chapter 33, which is the nearest in form and content to this specific passage.

There are some more immediate background in Genesis chapter 29 to 30, of course, as the children of Jacob are born and they are given names at their birth. Names that represent something of their identity and their implied destiny.

We've already commented upon that on previous occasions. So Reuben is associated with the unloved wife who is noticed by God. Will he recognize the same thing about his brother Joseph?

[2 : 25] So he's given the name Reuben. Reuben, the Lord has looked upon my affliction, therefore my husband will love me. Will he look upon the affliction of his brother Joseph?

Simeon, because the Lord has heard that I am unloved, he has therefore given me this son also. And again, Simeon, the question is, will he exercise that same recognition towards the unloved brother?

The Testament of Jacob contains blessings and curses or judgments. But yet the judgments are primarily upon the first three. After that, the messages are generally fairly positive.

And as we look a bit further, I think there are things to bear out the division of this into three followed by nine. And I'll explain that as I go along.

This is the seed of the nation, the nation in embryo. And the destiny of these different tribes is, for the first time, being considered as the destiny of tribes.

[3 : 25] Not just a series of brothers, but the start of a people group. And so this is the origin of the nation and the judgments concerning the sons here.

Look towards what will happen to them in the future. There's prophetic significance. Gather together that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days. There is a looking forward to some future events that will befall these different tribes.

And something about their longer term significance. Some of the events that will define the life and identity of these different groups within Israel.

There is also a casting of judgment upon some of the tribes. Judgments that seem to be effective.

So the judgment concerning Reuben, as we'll see, seems to be effective in later history.

And judgments upon other sons seem to have a similar character. We've looked through a number of cases of blessings in the book of Genesis. And these blessings are generally presumed to be effective.

[4 : 30] So the blessing upon Jacob rather than Esau is presumed to be effective. The blessing that we see upon Joseph, Joseph being favored again, it's presumed to be effective.

Things with Abraham and Isaac and then Isaac. The presumption that if he were to bless Esau, all those things would have been true of Esau. There is a sense of prophetic proclamation of what will happen in the future.

But also in that act of proclaiming, there is some sort of effectual force to what is being said. There are the summons to hear, to gather together. And Jacob is the individual father.

But Israel is the official father of the nation. Israel represents Jacob in his character as the head of the people. Gather together and hear, you sons of Jacob. Jacob, the individual father.

And listen to Israel, your father. This is Israel, the official title of the whole nation. The ordering of the tribes is interesting. They're ordered Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph and Benjamin.

[5 : 42] Now, you may notice a few unusual details in that. So, it is ordered according to the Leah and then the handmaids and then Rachel.

But there are some slight changes. So, the order of Issachar and Zebulun is mixed up. And then Dan, Gad, Asher and Naphtali. You'd usually expect to have Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher.

So, you have the two sons of Bilhar flanking the two sons of Zilpah. So, there is an unusual order here. And it's surprising in some respects.

But I think, as we look through it, we may begin to see some of the rationale for this. There's a reference to Judah's kingship. But there's no clear intimation of Levi's priestly role.

And this has led to questions about where to date this particular text. What particular events is it looking forward to? Now, again, as I think we look through, there will be some clues as to that.

[6 : 45] But there are many points where we're unclear. And again, this is one of the interpretive conundrums of this passage. This passage is a really tough passage. There are many questions.

Mostly, the questions, the philological and linguistic questions that are posed. Because there are very unusual words here. There's some word plays, other things like that.

And we need to pay attention to all of those things. If we're going to stand a chance of understanding what's being spoken of. So, they're ordered according to Leah, the handmaids, and Rachel.

Dan and Naphtali, both sons of Bilhar, they flank the two sons of Zilpah. They're situated according to their settlement, arguably. So, moving from south to north.

From Dan to Zebulun, Issachar, or Dan to Gad, Asher, and then Naphtali. And there are four sons that are particularly focused upon within this account.

[7 : 44] Reuben, and then Simeon and Levi as the pairing. And Judah and Joseph. And in the birth of Reuben, Simeon, Judah and Joseph in chapter 29 and 30, each one of them is associated with the name of the Lord, Yahweh.

And Gordon Wenham points out this, which I think is a good observation. And as we look through the story, I think it bears out the significance of these characters.

These characters are the prominent ones. And most of the chapter is devoted to those four characters. The destiny of the people hangs upon these characters in particular, how these characters play out.

Judah and Joseph are particularly singled out. Judah will be the dominant tribe in the south. And Joseph, of course, will be the dominant tribe in the north. And as we've looked through the story of Genesis, again, we've noticed that these two are set up in a sort of diptych.

That they're juxtaposed from chapter 37 onwards. The events happening to Joseph and then the events happening to Judah. And those two characters, for instance, the contrast between Judah's relationship with Tamar and Joseph's relationship with, or nun relationship with, the wife of Potiphar.

[9 : 03] But other things have been suggested about here, that at certain points the animal symbolism might be related to signs of the zodiac. And put together with Deuteronomy chapter 33, we might understand the ordering of the tribes around the tabernacle.

And in other occasions where you have them ordered, like the gates of the city in Revelation or in Ezekiel. And the order of the tribes in Numbers.

There are ways in which that picture can be filled out. And I think there's a promising theory there. But I would want to have a lot more time to devote to that to explain how it could be substantiated and what still needs to be filled in.

So, James Jordan has suggested chiasm in the final nine of, or the final half of the list here, of the final nine sons.

So, the first three sons, you have Reuben, Simeon, Levi. And they're all disqualified in some way. There's a judgment upon each one of those. But it's primarily the testament of Jacob is one of blessing.

[10 : 13] And it's the nine sons that follow that are particularly spoken of in that way. So, there's a parallel between Royal Judah as the king who tears prey. And on the other hand, Royal Benjamin, the king who tears prey, as the wolf.

And then there's Royal Judah, resting donkey's sons. And then Royal Joseph as the warrior donkey. And symbolism and the poetry has a number of parallels within those two accounts. Zebulun, animal that lies down and has dominion. Naphtali, active animal. Asher, good for food. And good land for food. And then Issachar, good land for food.

Dan is the serpent biting the heels. Gad goads at heels. And so, at the very heart of this, you find this statement, For your deliverance I wait, Lord.

And that statement maybe is a sort of capstone of this whole structure. Now, that's one way of looking at it. I think this is a helpful way of structuring the material.

[11 : 12] It helps us to understand why it's organised in this particular way. It also helps us to recognise that perhaps the first three are, in a very real sense, disqualified.

And so, they do have statements made concerning their future. But the blessings really focus upon the final nine. And that final set of blessings is one that brings together the destiny of the people within this larger chiasm, which has as its heart this prayer to God.

So, let's get into the details of the particular sons. It begins with Reuben. Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength. The excellency of dignity and the excellency of power.

Unstable as water, you shall not excel. Because you went up to your father's bed. There you defiled it. He went up to my couch. Now, I've already noted on a previous occasion that the language here is more technical at some points.

You have in Deuteronomy chapter 21, verse 17. He shall acknowledge the son of the unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength.

[12 : 27] The right of the firstborn is his. So, Reuben is the firstborn. He's the beginning of the strength of Jacob. There are ten statements made concerning him here.

The first seem very positive. They're stating his role as the firstborn, his power, his strength, things like that. But then the later part refers back to his sin in Genesis chapter 35, where he tries to usurp his father by lying with his father's wife, Bilhah, the handmaid.

At that point, he loses his birthright, which is referenced in 1 Chronicles 5. Now, the sons of Reuben, the firstborn of Israel, he was indeed the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, the son of Israel, so that the genealogy is not listed according to the birthright.

Now, as you read through the account of Genesis, you'll see that that event doesn't seem to be spoken of until this point. But yet, Joseph and his sons have been blessed in the previous chapter, and the blessing of both the sons of Joseph suggests a firstborn status that's enjoyed by Joseph now, that he is being given the double portion, and the double portion is that his two sons are taken as Jacob's own, as Reuben, Simeon, or Levi.

Now, interesting on that front that he mentions as Reuben or Simeon. Now, Reuben and Simeon are two disqualified brothers, and so you have Ephraim and Manasseh seem to take the place of the two oldest sons of Jacob.

[14:07] The statements concerning Reuben might also remind us of the judgment upon Ham. If you look in the book of Leviticus, and Leviticus chapter 18, in Leviticus 18 verse 8, the sin of the nakedness of your father's wife you shall not uncover.

It is your father's nakedness. So, that lying with the wife of the father is an uncovering of the nakedness of the father, which is Reuben's sin. Also, if you look back in chapter 9, the sin of Ham was uncovering his father's nakedness.

So, there's a similarity between the character of Ham and the character of Reuben. Both of them are disqualified in some sense. And there's also, at the end of this, there's a shift from a statement made, a series of statements made to Reuben, to a statement that's in the third person.

He lay with, or, let's see, I've lost my place. He went up to my couch. Now, who is that made to? It's made to the brothers more generally, that they learn something about their oldest brother at this point.

The firstborn has defiled his father's couch. He has uncovered his father's nakedness by lying with Bilhah. And so, he's disqualified. And the father informs the other sons about this fact.

[15:31] Now, it's not clear that the sons would have known this. And maybe he's left this to this last point, just before he's going to die, to announce this particular sin that Reuben has committed.

Because he knows that Reuben is someone who's trying to usurp his place. And he's afraid of Reuben. As we read through the story of David, maybe we can see similar things with David's relationship with Joab.

Well, it's only at the very end of his life that he tells Solomon that Joab needs to be dealt with.

Because Joab is this bloodthirsty man. And David is too entangled with him.

David is too weak relative to Joab to deal with the Joab problem. And so, his son has to deal with that. And maybe in a similar way here, he's telling the sons at a point where he can't deal with it.

But they will be able to keep Reuben out of any high office. He's described as unstable as water or frothy as water. Again, it's not entirely clear what this is meaning.

[16:31] But it may be some reference just to the fact that he's unstable and that he is not committed. I think it's unstable in the sense of being treacherous, that he's someone who cannot be relied upon.

He's like frothy water surrounding jagged rocks, perhaps. I don't know. But this language, as it's used elsewhere, would suggest a sort of treachery that's associated with that frothy water.

The devastating consequences of the attack upon the father are coming out here, that he does not excel. All the things that he would seek, the firstborn status in the family, the status of dominance within that particular household, he loses all of that.

And Reuben loses, lacks any prominence afterwards. There are no judges. There are no kings.

There are no prophets that come from Reuben. And no priests, of course, either.

So Reuben is really cut out in many respects. He has the firstborn, he is the firstborn, but he loses all firstborn status. And it's a very serious judgment.

[17:48] Next, we have Simon and Levi. Again, as in the case of Reuben, there are 10 statements made concerning them. And once again, we see he is talking about them rather than to them.

And the brothers are spoken of as confederates within warfare. Again, there's uncertainty about wording here. We've had the frothiness in the previous occasion. Uncertainty of the words of weapons, instruments of cruelty are in their habitation, some have read.

Now, could this be weapons of violence? Are there swords? Or are there circumcision swords? Or is there trade? Or are there wedding feasts?

All of these things have been suggested. And it would seem, whatever it refers to, most likely to reference chapter 34 of the book of Genesis with the rape or the seduction of Dinah and then the vengeance of Levi and Simeon and the way that they cause trouble for their father.

That they're described here as having hamstringed an ox. Again, we don't know what these words mean exactly. It could be tore down ramparts.

[18:59] These are other suggestions. In chapter 34, verse 30, we see, So, the hamstringing of the ox, some have suggested, it's playing on the terminology there is a play on the similar sounding words in chapter 34, verse 30.

And the ox in question is Jacob himself. He's the ox that leads the nation associated with the high priest later on. But they've hamstringed an ox.

They've made it difficult for Jacob within the land. They've caused trouble for him. And maybe that's what it's referring to. What the weapons of violence are, I'm not certain.

It could be a reference to their involvement in circumcision and using that as a weapon against the Shechemites. It could be a reference to wedding feasts.

The wedding feast being, well, the wedding feast would usually be held in the house of the bridegroom, but they use that wedding feast as a means of violence.

[20 : 28] They try and regularise the wedding or the relations between Shechem and Dinah. And through that, they exercise vengeance against them.

Now, that's perhaps what's being referenced. They're divided into two tribes. The two tribes are divided from each other. Now, that maybe is what's being referred to by the dispersal or division of the tribes, that they're no longer going to be a pairing, that they're separated from each other. Others have seen within this a reference to the diminution of the numbers of the tribes or a number of the people within the tribes.

And also, maybe a reference to just the fact they're scattered in different places. Simeon becomes an enclave of Judah. And so Judah's given this larger land, and then Simeon is given its inheritance within Judah.

Now, we see that in Joshua chapter 19, 1 to 9. That might be part of what's going on, that they're scattered. They don't have a land fully of their own.

[21 : 31] Rather, they have an enclave of Judah. They're notably excluded in Deuteronomy chapter 33. All the other tribes are mentioned, but Simeon is not.

And so Simeon maybe is a small tribe, a small tribe that is, as we look through the story of Numbers, I think we see something similar. In Numbers 1, 23, we see that the tribe of Simeon has 59,300 people at the beginning of the book of Numbers.

By the end of the book of Numbers, in 26, 14, it's 22,200. They've been knocked down considerably, and they're a significantly smaller tribe at the end.

Maybe that's what's being referred to. We see similar drops in Simeon's numbers in the book of 1 Chronicles. Levi, in Joshua 13, verse 14, is divided.

They have the inheritance. The inheritance that they have is not a specific territory, but rather they're given the inheritance of the sacrifices. In 13, verse 14, or Joshua 13, 14, in that chapter we read, if I can find it.

[22 : 50] My Bible doesn't want to open to this page. Only to the tribe of Levi he had given no inheritance.

The sacrifices of the Lord God of Israel made by fire are their inheritance, as he said to them. So they have no inheritance within the land. They're dispersed. They're given 48 cities within the land, but they're given no set territory.

And so maybe the dispersal is the fact that Simeon has no land that's truly their own. They're within an enclave of Judah. And that Levi has these different cities that are scattered around.

And so their might cannot be congealed in one place. And they're held in check in some ways.

They're separated from each other, and then they're placed in situations where they cannot amass power.

Maybe that's what's being referred to. The pair is broken up. And further thing that we should notice is in the book of Numbers, chapter 25, the Levite, Phineas, ends up killing Zimri, a leading Simeonite, when Zimri is sleeping with a Midianite woman.

[24 : 01] And then after that, there is a raiding of the Midianites and taking plunder and all these sorts of things. And that story has very close parallels with the story of Genesis 34.

And so the story of Judah, of Levi and Simeon in chapter 34 of Genesis has a new form of story played out in Numbers 25 and 31, which suggests that their destiny is still being worked out.

And on that story, they find themselves on different sides. Levi and Simeon are both associated with violence and cruelty. But yet that violence ends up being turned to different purposes.

Levi becomes associated with violent zeal. If we look through the story of the Exodus, Moses is a Levite. He's someone who uses violent zeal to judge Israel.

He's the one who strikes the enemies of the Israelites. And he's the one who ends up leading them out of the land with the rod. We also see the Levites at Sinai.

[25 : 16] They kill 3,000 of their brethren in zeal, violent zeal, after the rebellion concerning the golden calf. So in all of these stories, I think you're seeing the violent zeal of the Levites being

turned for good.

So the violent zeal of the Levites becomes not the violent zeal by which they avenge Dinah, but the violent zeal by which Israel will be set free from Egypt, by which the faithfulness of Israel will be jealously guarded.

And so the Levites become, as it were, the standing army of God. They're the army that surrounds the tabernacle. They're the palace servants. They're the praetorian guard, as it were, of God's palace.

Now, Simeon has a different fate and there's a divergence of paths at this point. So they're similar, but then there's a division. One case it's turned to good and another case it seemed to have very negative consequences.

Read Genesis 34 alongside Numbers 25 and 31. See all the parallels and then think what this suggests about the diverging destinies of the tribes of Levi and Simeon.

[26 : 31] Judah comes next. Judah is a play upon the name of, there's a play upon the name of Judah. Judah, your brothers praise you. Of course, Judah comes from praise in chapter 29.

And she conceived again and bore a son and said, Now I will praise the Lord. Therefore, she called his name Judah. And Judah is praised. Earlier on, we've seen Judah's name being connected with confession.

Judah, confession, praise, these sorts of things. Later on, we see another play on your hand. So all of these things are playing on the name Judah. And the different words there are all Hebrew plays upon that term.

Judah the lion has triumphed. And now he has his prey, as it were, between his legs. He's experienced military success. It's the lion of the tribe of Judah, the king of the beasts, above all the others.

And as we look through this chapter, we'll see Judah has pride of place. And on the other side, we have Joseph. These are key characters that flank.

[27 : 40] The whole central part of this blessing is flanked by, on the one hand, Judah, and on the other hand, Joseph and Benjamin. And Joseph and Benjamin have symmetry with Judah.

We have the ravenous wolf connected with the ravenous lion. And then we have Judah as the connected with donkeys and other things like that. And Joseph connected with donkeys. Holding those two alongside each other, I think we see a symmetry that frames all the others within. He has military success. He's someone who's associated with king and rule.

And there's a symmetry between Judah and Joseph. Now it says, your father's children shall bow down before you. Judah is having a similar, similar things will happen to Judah as were foretold happening to Joseph in chapter 37.

that his dream would seem to refer just to Joseph. But now we see a very similar thing to Judah. And these two characters held alongside each other throughout the chapters from 37 onwards.

[28 : 48] I think we can see, again, they are held alongside each other here. They're the two chief tribes. They frame the middle section. Note the statements that are given to both Judah and to his brothers.

And so the statements, Judah, you, your hand, your father's children, et cetera. And then there are statements, he, et cetera. And so Judah is being told things and then the brothers are being told things about Judah.

So we need to recognise both of these dimensions. Partly it is about Judah himself, his destiny. Partly it is also the other brothers having to recognise the standing that particular brothers should have within their group.

They are to regard him in the light of this and treat him as the lion that he is. A descendant of Judah will always be the king. And there's also a movement here from the lion's whelp to the mature lion, the lion who has taken the prey.

The lion's whelp, the young lion, and then the scepter won't depart from him. And it says, the scepter shall not depart from Judah nor lawgiver from between his feet.

[30 : 02] What does between his feet mean? It could be seen as an image of the lion with his two feet outstretched and his prey between. Now that image might be suggested earlier on, but I don't think that's what is being referred to here.

The feet are referring to his private parts. This is his generative organs. So he is producing children. They're not going to depart from the number of his children as it were until Shiloh comes.

Now, Shiloh is a term that has probably more questions about these verses here than just about any other verses in the book of Genesis.

So I do not really know what to make of them completely, but let me give you a few suggestions. Shiloh could be a reference to the place, but it's a slightly different word and it would seem to be, it would not really make much sense.

It's not entirely clear how that would work. Could be until tribute is brought to him. Again, that's a possible reading and I think there are some merit, there is some merit to that.

[31 : 12] Others have suggested until he comes whose it is. Again, possibilities. But as we look through, I think there might be more things going on in the blessing of Judah.

And we'll get back to that in a moment. It's a mention of rule over the peoples. And to him shall be the obedience of the people. Is that a reference to the Gentiles in this place?

And Judah seems to stand in some ways for the entirety of the people. Later on, if you look in the book of Numbers and you look at the prophecies of Balaam, he talks about Jacob and Israel.

He says, God brings him out of Egypt. He has strength like a wild ox. He shall consume the nations, his enemies. He shall break their bones and pierce them with his arrows. He bows down, he lies down as a lion, and as a lion who will arouse him.

Blessed is he who blesses you and cursed is he who curses you. Again, in the fourth one, it says, in verse 17 of chapter 24 of Numbers, I see him but not now, I behold him but not near, a star shall come out of Jacob, a scepter shall rise out of Israel and batter the brow of Moab and destroy all the sons of Tumult.

[32 : 30] In these cases, I think we're seeing something that harkens back to the blessings upon Judah. But Judah really stands for the whole nation at this point. The destiny of Judah is also the destiny of the people as a whole.

And so there might be some reference to some messianic figure that's coming in the future, the star or the scepter that's going to arise. So that's one possibility of what's taking place.

But note some possible references back to the previous narrative. And perhaps the most thought-provoking person I've read on this is Callum Carmichael.

James Jordan has also written some stuff on this too. Think about the imagery that's given within this passage. The staff and the sons are mentioned in chapter 38.

The scepter might be connected with the staff. As we commented on chapter 38, I observed that the scepter was lost or the staff was lost to Judah.

[33 : 30] And what did the staff represent? The staff represented his rule, his authority, and he gave that to Tamar as collateral until he would give her a kid. think about that.

Just hold that in your mind. And the staff is connected with the scepter. It's the sign of Judah's rule. And the scepter departed from Judah in chapter 38 until the kid was sent.

And who did the kid represent? The kid represented Shelah. And is there a connection between Shiloh and Shelah? I think there quite possibly is. Other things to note is what is the vine?

The vine might be associated with Israel, with Jacob. As we go through the story of the Old Testament and even in the New, their imagery of the vine is associated with Israel.

And let's pay attention a bit more to that. There are a series of statements here that could play back the story of Judah, as we've read it in chapter 37 onwards.

[34 : 37] Judah is a lion's whelp. From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion, who shall rouse him.

How about reading it like this? Judah is a lion's whelp. From the prey of my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion, and as a lion, who shall rouse him.

The 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. So he went up from the prey of Joseph, the son of Jacob.

And so maybe this is a reference back to that story, perhaps. Let's just work this out a bit further.

Binding his donkey to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes.

So there's a connection between wine and blood, there's a connection between washing garments in wine, or blood, the blood of grapes, and then there's two donkeys. There's the donkey, and the donkey tied to the vine, and the donkey's colt to the choice vine.

[35 : 57] What could this be referring to? And Callum Carmichael suggests that the vine might be a reference to it's partly Jacob's line, but it's also to Tamar. Tamar is the palm tree, there is arboreal imagery there, and then Jacob is associated with that, the line of him carried out through this tree, this palm, and the washing of garments in wine, again, we've seen garments that are washed in red blood in chapter 37, and presumably Judah was at the forefront of that.

Judah was the one that led the plotting of the brothers. And so as we look back at that chapter, maybe we're seeing some of these themes played out here. Let's fill it out further. There's the donkey and the son of the Shias, and donkey in that place has pretty much the same word as Ur, and Onan has a similar sort of sound to the end of the word for Shias.

So is there something going on here? Let's put together some of the pieces. So we've already seen that going up from the prey of the son, and that's Joseph being presumably killed, and then he goes down and he, and at that point bows down, lies down as a lion, as a lion who shall rouse him, and then this binding of the donkeys, these children of a Canaanite woman, and so there's, the donkey is someone who's not fully a member, as it were, someone who seems to be more on the periphery, someone who's part of the life of Israel, but maybe more as a stranger.

We think about Hamor as an ass, or the wild ass of Ishmael, and we'll get to this imagery more later on in the chapter, but maybe the donkey is a reference to the daughter of the son of a Canaanite woman, and so we have two of these, again, reference to the son of a she-ass, so maybe that's specifically a reference to Shua, or Bath-Shua, the daughter of Shua, in chapter 38.

Putting these things together, he has a similar experience, as I've commented in chapter 38, to Jacob himself. Jacob is given this bloodied garment, this garment washed in the blood, presumably, of his son, and then there are these two sons that are bound to the vine, and they die, and maybe there is a reference there to what happens to Joseph, then falls upon Judah as well, the death of the favoured sons, and then he has to send off that other son, finally, the kid, to get back anything, and so eventually he has Perez and Zerath through Tamar.

[38 : 54] Now, that's Callum Carmichael's suggestion. I think there's something there. There's likely something significant. How do we make sense of this then? Is this just a very negative statement about the tribe of Judah?

It would seem not to be. There are a lot of positive themes within this section. We have you are he whom your brother shall praise. That's what introduces the whole thing.

And is that just a negative statement on he was the natural leader of the group? I'm not sure it's just that. There are ways in which Judah has redeemed himself by this point. Judah is not seen so much as a negative character.

But as you play back through that story, it's as if it's been given a positive spin. And so you're hearing the story again, but in more positive ways. So blood is no longer focused upon, wine is focused upon, and wine is plentiful, and there's washing in wine.

And this is a far more positive image than we might think of as blood. And then the vine and the choice cults, the cult and the donkey get associated with the king himself.

[40 : 03] In Zechariah chapter 9, verse 9, Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion, shout, O daughter of Jerusalem, behold, your king is coming. He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a cult the fold of a donkey.

And so it becomes messianic imagery. It would seem that this should not just be dismissed as negative, what's taking place here. Rather, we're seeing a positive spin upon something that was very negative in the past.

And so I suggest that's what's taking place. The imagery also might remind you of something like the Song of Songs, a land blessed with wine and milk and the beauty of the king associated with that.

That the king is this romantic figure and the land is associated with wine and milk. Moving on further, there are a lot of questions about that.

I could not get into all of them within the limited time I have here. I'm already going to be having longer time given to this than just about any other passage I imagine. The blessing upon Zebulun is again interesting because Zebulun and Issachar are reversed in their order.

[41 : 10] Why would they be reversed? Again, an unusual thing that we would be surprised about. Yet we see a similar thing in Deuteronomy 33, verse 18.

And of Zebulun, he said, rejoice Zebulun in your going out and Issachar in your tents. They shall call them peoples to the mountains.

There they shall offer sacrifices of righteousness, for they shall partake of the abundance of the seas and of treasures hidden in the sand. Now the interesting thing there, a couple of interesting things.

First of all, that Issachar comes under the heading of Zebulun. So, and of Zebulun, he said, and then it has Zebulun, and then it has Issachar under that heading concerning Zebulun.

So it seems that they've been paired in some way, Issachar and Zebulun, and Zebulun has taken the preeminence of the two. Zebulun is spoken of as dwelling by the haven of the sea.

[42 : 08] Now, Zebulun, of course, his name comes from dwelling. It's not the same term, but there's a synonym here. And as we look through this, we'll see a number of plays upon words. We've already seen that in the case of Judah, and your hand and your brother shall praise you, these sorts of things.

Surprisingly, Zebulun is associated with the sea. But yet, Zebulun has inland rather than coastal territory in Joshua chapter 19, 10 to 16. In Deuteronomy 33, as I've just read out, he's again associated with the sea, with Issachar, both of them mentioned together.

Sidon doesn't necessarily refer to the city itself, as it's mentioned here. His borders shall, his flank shall adjoin, he shall flank Sidon.

It doesn't necessarily refer to the city itself, but to the Phoenicians. And so it has dealings with the Phoenicians, perhaps. What is being referred to by the sea? Could it be the Sea of Galilee?

Some have suggested that. Sea trade, that they're benefiting from the trade with the Phoenicians and their sea merchants. Again, that's a possibility that some have suggested. Other possibilities, that the territory is not set as sharply as we might suppose.

[43 : 22] And there's core territory, but there's a lot of movement around. So later on, we'll see the tribe of Dan migrating north in chapters 17 and 18 of Judges. And it would seem that the tribe of Zebulun moved around a bit as well.

In Josephus' Antiquities of the Jews, in book 5, he writes, the tribe of Zebulun's lot included the land which lay as far as the lake of Gennesaret, and that which belonged to Carmel and the sea.

And so they do seem to have an association with the sea at the time of Josephus. It would seem that there is reason to connect them with the sea, but we're not exactly sure how the history played out.

Issachar is a strong donkey, lying down between two burdens. He saw that rest was good and that the land was pleasant. He bowed his shoulder to bear a burden and became a band of slaves.

He's another strong animal. He's settling in a fertile land, and there seems to be an ironic play upon his name. He's associated with hire and reward, but he's spoken of as a band of slaves.

[44 : 25] Now, it would seem perhaps that the tribe of Issachar are serfs on very good land, rather than being a free, independent tribe in less fertile land.

And so they have the benefit of good land. And that association with them is something that we'll later on see with Asher. So there's some symmetry between Issachar and Asher.

Dan comes next. Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. Dan shall be a serpent by the way, a viper by the path, that bites the horse's heels so that its rider shall fall backwards.

I have waited for your salvation, O Lord. He judges. Now, of course, Dan's name means to judge. And who is being referred to here? Is it just Dan more generally?

Or could it be a reference to Samson? Samson is a Danite and he's one of the judges of Israel. In chapters 13 to 16 of the book of Judges, he's one of the most prominent and important judges of Israel, although he's more of a guerrilla warrior than anything else.

[45 : 27] And that fits into the imagery of the serpent. He's a serpent, by the way, who bites the heel. He's also associated with wisdom, the wisdom of the serpent. He's one who tells riddles and he's one who outwits people.

He tells riddles to the people at the wedding feast and he tells riddles to Delilah. Now, of course, he fails ultimately in both of those cases. The riddles are discovered and he is outwitted at the end.

But he is associated with the wisdom of the serpent. He's also associated with sneak attacks, like the serpent, by the way. He's not something that you see. He's a smaller tribe, but he can sneak out and he can bite you.

And this is a tribe that's smaller but still holds its own. It's a tribe also, Dan migrates north, as I've remarked upon in Judges chapter 17 to 18. Again, he's like the serpent. He doesn't have the same strength in controlling a territory, but he moves around a bit and he ends up going north. The verse that we have in verse 18, interesting questions about this. [46 : 38] Is this part of the blessing of Dan? What does it refer to? Why is it here? Is this something that's spoken about the fate of Dan or is it something that's more general? I have waited for your salvation, O Lord.

As we saw in the chiasmic structure, this might be the linchpin, the central statement that refers the hope of Israel towards Israel, Jacob, and Israel as the whole nation towards God's salvation. Maybe it's at the heart here because the blessings have symmetry on either side of it. It's at the very centre. It maybe refers to the precarious state of the Danites at the end of the book of Judges as they go north, perhaps.

I don't know. if you have any suggestions on this or anything else, please leave them in the comments below because I do not have a clue about many of the details in here, so I'm giving my suppositions and my speculations, but some of these things are quite uncertain within the original text.

Gad comes next, again playing upon terms. A gad, a troop shall tramp upon him, but he shall triumph at last. And the English translation there, the New King James version which I generally use, is playing upon, there's English play in the troop, tramp, triumph, and that's something that we have in the Hebrew as well.

[48 : 06] And so gad means troop, a troop shall come. And so there's troop, tramp, and triumph. But then there's also a reference to the heels, that he shall get at their heels.

A skilful warrior, he shall be raided by raiding parties, but he shall raid at their heels. He will be noted for skilful warriors, even if they're preyed upon by other people. Asher comes next, and bread from Asher shall be rich, and he shall yield royal dainties.

Like Issachar, he's associated with good food, while Issachar is associated with service, Asher is associated with riches. So again, we have a parallel between the two.

There's a symmetry perhaps in the tribes of the handmaids. So Asher is the second of Zilpah, and they're flanked by Dana Naphtali.

Naphtali comes next. Naphtali, born a doe, a doe let loose, and gives birth to fawns of the field. That's what I think is the most likely translation.

[49 : 14] But I'm not an expert in Hebrew, and many of the details here have been debated by people far wiser than I am, and who have spent far more time studying the other Semitic parallels, things like that.

This translation I'm using here, New King James, has a deal let loose, he gives goodly words. I think it's more likely to be continuing the metaphor.

So you have a deal let loose, fawns of the field, maybe a reference to domestication, that you have this wild deer, and then you have the fawns of the field, a wild doe.

Maybe this is a reference to Bilher, or maybe a reference to Rachel even. Joseph comes next. Joseph is compared to either a vine or a wild donkey.

So my translation says a vine. Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a well, his branches run over the wall. Now another translation is given by Gordon Wenham, who says Joseph is a wild ass, a wild ass beside a spring, his wild cults beside the wall.

[50 : 28] Now we've already seen reference to cults, and those sorts of themes are connected with the second half of Judah's blessing. And so I think we should, again, Judah and Joseph and Benjamin flank the central section of the blessings.

The three disqualified sons come first, and then there is this flanking of Judah and Benjamin and Joseph. There might be some things that shed light upon this.

I mean, when we think back to the blessing of Judah, there is vine imagery there and there's donkey imagery. So in both cases you could draw some parallels and draw some connections. So there are difficulties in just settling upon one. I lean, however, towards, increasingly lean towards the idea of the donkey that's referred to here.

The parallels with Judah, the son of the wild, she-ass, and then the whelp of the lion. So the son of the wild, she-ass, that is associated with Joseph, and then Judah is associated with the whelp of the lion.

[51 : 43] Word plays taking place here on fruitfulness and Ephraim, and then perhaps also on Pharaoh. Pharaoh and Ephraim, they're playing on the same sorts of words.

And so I think that might be part of what's going on here. But, how might we fill out this image of a wild donkey?

In what respect is Joseph like a wild donkey? Who else have we seen compared to a wild donkey in the story of Genesis? Well, if we go back to chapter 16, we see, behold, you are with child and you shall bear a son.

You shall call his name Ishmael because the Lord has heard your affliction. He shall be a wild ass or a wild donkey. His hand shall be against every man and every man's hand against him, and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.

And this would seem to give some sort of connection with the story of Joseph. As I've remarked upon, in the story of Joseph, we have a number of occasions where there are clear plays upon the story of Ishmael.

[53 : 00] As he's sent out from Shechem and we have Hagar sent out with stuff on her shoulder and then there's the skin that's used up and there's no water within it, there's no water within the well, casting down of Ishmael beneath the tree, beneath the shrub, casting down of Joseph into the pit with no well.

And then Joseph is given to the Ishmaelites, it's the Ishmaelites that sell him into Egypt, there's the intervention of Reuben, saying do not lay your hand upon the child, there's the sitting at a distance from the child so that they will not see him come to his death.

In all of these respects there are parallels between Joseph and Ishmael. In chapter 39 we see more parallels as Hagar's story seems to be reversed.

we now have a fairly tyrannical Egyptian mistress and a Hebrew slave, whereas previously there was a Hebrew mistress who was fairly tyrannical in her treatment of an Egyptian slave.

Joseph finds himself in the position of Ishmael. He's one who's cast out of the house as the wife tries to set the house against the servant and get him cast out, much against the wishes of her husband and the master of the house.

[54 : 27] Other things along this line, Ishmael is associated with archery in chapter 21. Maybe that helps us to understand more about the archery symbolism as it plays out in this particular blessing.

The archers have bitterly grieved him, shattered him and hated him, but his bow remained in strength and the arms of his hand were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob.

What could this be referring to? Well, who are the archers? I found a discussion of this on Aleph Beter, really helpful by Emmanuel Shalev, and he argues that the archers are the brothers.

Now, why would you refer to the archers of the brothers? That they are shooting arrows to try and destroy Joseph. Now, they are actually shooting arrows, but they seek to destroy him.

And the language here is also something that we see coming up in the next chapter when it says, when Joseph's brother saw that their father was dead, they said, perhaps Joseph will hate us and may actually repay us for all the evil that we did to him.

[55 : 37] And so they hated him and they shot at him and they bitterly grieved him. In all of these ways, the way that they're treating Joseph is, I think, akin to archers.

They're trying to destroy. It's like a gun, trying to shoot someone directly and directly kill them. But Joseph is described as having a bow too.

And what Emmanuel Shalev suggests is that his bow remains taut. He's holding this bow and he does not let fly. He holds it firm and his arm may be quivering but he's holding it firm and it's because God is strengthening his arm.

Now what does this mean? They have shot at him trying to destroy him but he does not shoot back. He has the power to destroy them. He has the power in his hand as the second in command in Egypt to destroy his brothers but he is the one who depends upon the God of Jacob and his arm is made strong and he does not execute vengeance.

And this is something that he's praised for at this point which suggests that Jacob knows what happened between the brothers and Joseph at least in its outline. That they shot at him, they hated him and they bitterly treated him but yet he held firm and did not repay in like manner for what they had given to him.

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[57 : 05] Jacob's God is mentioned. It's Jacob referring to his God and his God in the story of Joseph his son. That there is a sense that his story is really, his legacy is really carried out in the

story of Joseph.

We've already seen him recounting his story in the previous chapter but he sees within Joseph something of the way that he experienced hatred perhaps. We've seen the same language referring to hatred in the story of Esau's relationship to Jacob following Jacob's taking of the blessing. Putting these things together I think we have this understanding perhaps of what is meant by this archery imagery and then maybe connecting that with the fact that Ishmael is an archer and Ishmael is placed at a bow shot from his mother.

Maybe that will help us to fill out the picture. The brothers take a distance from Joseph when he's in the pit as if they're shooting arrows at him and then he ends up becoming an archer in the land of Egypt as Ishmael becomes an archer in the land of Egypt and he becomes strong and yet he does not fire back and maybe that's what's taking place.

That's very speculative but see what you can make of it. If you have any further suggestions please leave them in the comments. God is described as the shepherd and the stone of Israel.

[58 : 33] He's the shepherd as we look back through chapter 31 for instance. God is the one who has caused the flock of Israel to multiply, the flock of Jacob, so that Jacob becomes great.

Jacob is described as having a flock. He has these four different flocks connected with his four wives and he meets Esau in a way that parallels when he first meets Rachel as she comes as the fourth flock to the well.

So there are four flocks that he leaves the land of Padamaram with and then he meets his brother and God ultimately is the shepherd. He's the one that causes this flock to multiply.

He's the one that protects them through the wilderness. Ultimately he recognises that the angel is the one who has shepherded him all the way.

The angel who has redeemed me from Israel, from all evil, bless the lads. So God is the shepherd of Israel or Jacob who is also a shepherd.

[59 : 36] Jacob is associated with the shepherd's staff. He's a shepherd. He's the one who multiplies and flocks. But, and then of course we've seen in these chapters that Israel as they settle in Goshen, they are described as shepherds.

So Israel is described as a nation of shepherds, but also Jacob is a shepherd. He's the leader of the nation and God as the leader of the people is the shepherd of Israel.

So there is shepherd imagery coming out in a number of different levels here. He's also the stone of Israel. We've noted at various points in the narrative of Jacob the significance of stones.

The stone at Bethel where he lays his head, where he eventually sets that up as a marker, as a stone of remembrance that is connected with the appearance of the ladder.

There's the stone that he removes of the well to open the well to give water to the flocks. There's the stone that he places as a covenant sign between him and Laban.

[60 : 35] There's the stone at Bethel, the second stone that he places, and then there's the stone that he places at Rachel's tomb. In each of these cases, we have stones that really, at the heart of Jacob's story, we have stones prominent.

We see also Laban is associated with bricks, and so Jacob's stones, Laban bricks, maybe there's greater symbolism taking place there. We've seen bricks mentioned in the story of Babel, stones mentioned in the story of Bethel, and the connections between Bethel and contrast between Bethel and Babel are very important, the gate of God and the house of God that's spoken of at Bethel. Putting those things together, I think this is another image of God, that God is the rock of Israel. God is also the stone of Israel. He's the one that has been following Jacob all the way, these key stones that have marked his journey.

He can see God in those perhaps, and those are images to him or metaphors of God's relationship with him. You may profitably unpick that a bit and explore some of the connections that might be drawn there.

There are blessings given to Joseph by the God of your father who will help you and by the almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb, the blessings of your father have excelled the blessings of my ancestors up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills.

[62 : 11] They shall be on the head of Joseph and on the crown of the head of him who was separate from his brothers. Now there is some sort of parallelism here. They're parallels between creation and the woman's body.

So blessings of the heaven above and blessings of the deep that lie beneath, blessings of the breasts and blessings of the womb. So the deep is connected with the womb and the heavens are connected with the breasts.

The heavens are associated with rain and life-giving fluid and the breasts are associated with life-giving fluid, with milk. And maybe this is what referred to land flowing with milk and honey, that the milk is the rains that give life to the land.

earth. It's as if the heavens are the breasts of the land and the deep of the land is that which life coming up from beneath. Maybe that's part of the symbolism that's taking place here.

But there's also a poetic thing going on. So shamayim and shadaim and tehom and rehem. There's play upon the words and so they have similar sounds that helps you to see a poetic parallelism alongside a conceptual parallelism.

[63 : 23] As you look through the book of Genesis early on, particularly in chapter 2 and chapter 3, you'll see a parallel between the womb and the earth, between the woman and the land.

And now I think here you're seeing something more about that. The woman's body and the fertility of the land are connected together. Benjamin comes next. Benjamin and Joseph are paired as the two sons of Rachel.

Benjamin is a ravenous creature like Judah, reminiscent of Judah's blessing, so Benjamin is a ravenous wolf. In the morning he shall devour the prey and at night he will devour the spoil.

Divide the spoil. In the earlier part of Judah's judgment, blessing, we have you are he who your brothers shall praise, your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies, your father's children shall bow down before you.

Judah is a lion's whelp. From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion and as a lion who shall rouse him. So there are parallels between Judah and Benjamin and there's parallels between Judah and Joseph.

[64 : 26] So I think Judah is paralleled with those two tribes, the two tribes that are associated with Rachel. And Rachel's tribes, Judah, Joseph and Benjamin are both tribes that are associated with some sort of kingship.

Judah is associated with kingship in the south and Benjamin is associated with Saul and and then Joseph is associated with the kings of Ephraim.

This is the first mention in this chapter of twelve tribes. All these are the twelve tribes of Israel and this is what their father spoke to them and he blessed them.

He blessed each one according to his own blessing. There is recognition now that these aren't just sons. These are heads of tribes and the destinies of these people are being foretold in this particular place.

So we have three tribes that are specifically associated with some sort of kingship in the future.

Earlier on in chapter thirty-five Benjamin was associated with kings as God prophesied to Jacob that kings would come from his loins and then Benjamin is born.

[65 : 37] Later on in Micah chapter four and five Benjamin and the birth of Benjamin to Rachel and her struggling in birth is associated with the coming of the king and eventually they will reach Bethlehem although it was on the way to Bethlehem that Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin.

What happens in the next chapter is we're introduced to Esau and his family and Esau has kings that come from him and those kings come before any kings come to Israel and we saw parallels between the kings of Edom and the kings of Israel particularly with Saul Saul of Rehoboth and then Saul in Israel that there's a parallel between these two that suggests maybe that Benjamin is particularly seen as a parallel to the kingly nation of Edom that Anna who finds water finds a well when he's searching for his father's donkeys that reminds you of Saul who searches for his father's donkeys and that leads to him getting the kingdom also you have Saul of Rehoboth and he seems to be quite possibly king at the same time as Saul of Israel putting these things together we have Benjamin Judah and Joseph all in some sense having kingly destinies to be played out once again at the end of this chapter there is a charge that highlights the son's duties to bury

Jacob in Canaan 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 in the cave that is in the field of Machphela which is before Mamre in the land of Canaan which Abraham bought with the field of Ephron the Hittite as a possession for a burial place there they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife there they buried Isaac and Rebecca his wife and there I buried Leah the field and the cave that is there were purchased from the sons of Heth and when Jacob had finished commanding his sons he drew his feet up into his bed and

breathed his last and was gathered to his people once again there's a reference to the cave of Machpelah and that was given a lot of attention previously in the story of Abraham and the deal concerning the cave in chapter 23 is given a whole chapter pretty much the death of Sarah and her burial this suggests that the laying to rest of them within a land that was promised to them but within a territory within that land that they already came into a possession of that they had bought that was truly their own that that is an event of promissory significance that one day they'll enter into the full possession toehold in the land that they have the burial place for the family of Abraham and we don't hear about the death of Rebecca but she's been buried there presumably when they're settled in that region Rachel is not buried there she's buried on the way to Bethlehem but Leah is buried there and eventually Jacob will be sent back there and Joseph will at one point be brought back to Israel but he's not going to be buried in the same site he'll be buried up in Shechem all of this is a very powerful and deep and dense foreshadowing of the life of Israel it's something that looks forward to the relationship between the tribes on a political stage not just an interpersonal one it looks forward to the relationship between the northern and the southern tribes in perhaps even in the division of the kingdom it's something that fulfills some of the themes of the juxtaposed characters of Judah and Joseph it's something that helps us to see the completion of the destinies of

Reuben Simeon and Levi and there are ways in which destinies are turned around at this point there are ways in which they are finalized Reuben has a negative judgment cast upon him and he withers out in many respects he never becomes prominent in the case of Simeon Simeon is dispersed Simeon does not really gain any strength whereas Levi the same traits that led Levi to be associated with cruelty and violence end up causing him to be prominent as the priestly!

[70 : 06] dispersed throughout Israel so that their strength will be used in the right way and so that strength ultimately becomes used not for violence but for not for cruelty cruel violence but for zealous violence and that zealous violence is something that we see in the story of the Levites at Sinai it's something that we see in the story of Moses and it's something that we see also in the story of Phineas and in the story of Phineas we see the contrast between Zimri the leading Simeonite and then Phineas a leading Levite that their ways have parted and although that story is playing out the story of Dinah once more it no longer has the same result Levi redeems himself and Simeon is judged and at the end of the book of Numbers we see that Simeon has a fraction of the number of people with which he began that book and later on in the story of 1

Chronicles we see a similar reduction in numbers in the story of Judah we've seen a similar thing there is a redemption of identity that Judah has his story told out in a shadow it's a story that is one of shedding the blood of his brother the prey of the son of Jacob and he rises up from that and he goes down away from his brothers now Shelah it could be a reference to Solomon and play upon the same word there maybe that's what's being referred to and the tribute of the nations being given to him think about what happens in the story of chapter 38 could that be the fact that Hiram or Hira is the one who brings the goat to Tamar that at that point when Hira finally brings the goat that that is maybe a symbol of the scepter truly being received

I don't know but it's worth reflecting upon there's so much going on in chapter 38 and this chapter sheds some light back on it looking through the rest of these the story of Joseph is played out again that he's reminded of the faithfulness of God's strength that was given to him so that he did not shoot back and he's being described in a way that recalls the story of Ishmael he's the brother that was cast out of the family he's the brother that goes down to Egypt he's the brother that becomes an archer he becomes strong and powerful but he does not let fly his bow and so his arrows from his bow that holds it firm and this is maybe also a charge that he should at the very end of this Jacob is gathered to his father to his fathers and to his people he gathers at the very beginning of the chapter his sons and at the end he is gathered and so there's a sort of book ending of the chapter here and there's also a possible play on

Joseph name there is so much going on in this chapter I barely scratched the surface but I hope this gives you some thought if you have any questions or any thoughts please leave them in the comments because there's so much here and I would love to hear what you make of these details if you've looked into them if you have any questions on any other issues please leave them on my Curious Cat account if you would like to support this and other videos like it and podcasts please do so using my Patreon me to get into the research to look into these texts and to share them like this it really gives me an incentive as well it's encouraging to know that there are people behind what I'm

doing here who are invested in it and really want to help me to do to the best of my ability thank you so much and it's a blessing to know that this is not some sort of thing I'm doing by myself but there are other people who are part of it Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow with the final chapter of the story of the family of Abraham we'll have some more concluding reflections in the days that follow but the final chapter is coming up God bless thank you for listening