

Genesis 49: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 49 Simeon and Levi are brothers. Weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their counsel. O my glory, be not joined to their company.

For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. 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. 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.

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 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.

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

[1 : 49] Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea, he shall become a haven for ships, and his border shall be at Sidon. Issachar is a strong donkey, crouching between the sheepfolds.

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 labour. Dan shall judge his people, as one of the tribes of Israel.

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. I wait for your salvation, O Lord.

Raiders shall raid Gad, but he shall raid at their heels. Asher's food shall be rich, and he shall yield royal delicacies. Naftali is a doe let loose, that bears beautiful fawns.

Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring. His branches run over the wall. The archers bitterly attacked him, shot at him, and harassed him severely.

[2 : 59] 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.

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.

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.

Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey, and at evening dividing the spoil. All these are the twelve tribes of Israel.

This is what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each with the blessings suitable to him. Then 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, in 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.

[4 : 16] There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife. There they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife. And there I buried Leah. The field and the cave that is in it were bought from the Hittites.

When Jacob finished commanding his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people. Genesis chapter 49 is one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the whole Bible.

There are so many different words and expressions in here whose meaning is unclear, that many of our remarks upon the passage will have to be speculative. Jacob is here at the end of his life, pronouncing in a poetic form judgments and blessings upon his children.

This pattern of a poetic testament is also found in the story of Moses and in David. David ends his life with a poetic statement concerning his legacy in 2 Samuel chapter 22, and Moses does the same in Deuteronomy chapter 33.

We also see poetic judgments concerning the tribes in Judges chapter 5 in the Song of Deborah. And Noah has something similar in his judgments upon his sons in Genesis chapter 9.

[5 : 29] There's a foreshadowing of the future. This is the seed of the national destiny. And there's a prophetic significance to what he's declaring. This is what will befall you in the latter days.

The judgments that he casts seem to be effective concerning them too. There's a summons to here. Not just Jacob, the individual father, but also Israel, the official father of the nation.

This is Israel speaking as a people, as the representative of the whole nation and its destiny. The tribes are ordered as follows. Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, and then Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali.

And finally, Joseph and Benjamin. The order here is Leah, followed by the handmaids, followed by Rachel. The one interesting detail is that Zebulun and Issachar are switched in order.

Dan and Naphtali are both sons of Bilhar, yet occur on either side of the sons of Zilpah. Incidentally, they also frame two brothers from a different mother in 1 Chronicles 2, verse 2, where they are found on either side of Joseph and Benjamin.

[6 : 39] There's a great deal of wordplay in this chapter, but also lots of uncertain and unusual words and expressions. Four sons are particularly focused upon.

Reuben, Simeon, paired with Levi, Judah, and Joseph. And these four sons, or these five sons, are associated with the name of Yahweh in Genesis chapter 29 and 30, where we read about the birth of the sons and the names that are given to them and the meanings attached.

The destiny of the people hang on these four or five sons in particular. But of these sons, Judah and Joseph are particularly singled out. Judah will be the dominant tribe of the nation in the south.

Joseph, represented by Ephraim and Manasseh, will be the dominant tribe in the north. And notice the way that the two are juxtaposed, both in the contents of the blessings concerning them, and just in the space that is given to them, and the ways that they frame the chapter more generally.

This is not the first time that they have been juxtaposed. We saw this also in places like chapter 38 compared with chapter 37 and 39. There is a structure to be observed here.

[7 : 50] There are three disqualified sons, as it were, the three firstborn, Reuben, Simeon and Levi. And then there are the other sons. And those sons appear in a book-ended structure.

So it begins with royal Judah, who's the king who tears prey, and it ends with royal Benjamin, who's the king who tears prey. Next, it speaks of Judah as associated with donkeys and sons.

And then it has royal Joseph at the other end, associated with themes of a warrior donkey. Then there's Zebulun, the animal that lies down and has dominion.

On the other side, there's Naphtali, the active animal. Issachar, then. Good land for food. Asher, good land for food at the other end. Then there's Dan getting into the centre.

There's the serpent biting the heels. And on the other side, there's Gad, the goads at the heels. And in the very middle of this whole pattern is that statement, I wait for your salvation, O Lord.

[8 : 50] It sums up something greater that's going on here. Going through the blessings one by one, it begins with Reuben. And there are ten statements which refer back to Reuben's sin in Genesis chapter 35.

He loses his birthright on account of this, something that's referenced in 1 Chronicles chapter 5. It's described as frothy like water. There's a shift also to he. So it begins by addressing Reuben directly, but then shifts to addressing the larger group, telling them what Reuben has done.

There's no mention of this previously in a public discussion. Nothing has been said about what Reuben did. But now his father is revealing his crime to others. And there's something similar to the judgement upon Ham here, perhaps.

At his deathbed, Jacob is making clear that this son has been disqualified. There are devastating consequences of the attack that he made upon his father. He lacks all prominence afterwards.

No judges, kings or prophets come from the tribe of Reuben, despite Reuben being the firstborn. It moves on to Simeon and Levi. And there are ten more statements. In this case, it's talking about them rather than to them.

[10 : 00] They're spoken of as confederates. They belong together. But there are a lot of uncertainties about the words used here. Some have wondered whether it refers to swords or circumcision swords or trade or wedding feast.

It's not entirely clear. The statement about them hamstringing an ox might refer back to chapter 34, verse 30, being a play upon the sound and the word of Aqar.

In that earlier chapter, it's that statement, you have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land. The tribes of Simeon and Levi are detached from each other.

They're separated. And Simeon ends up becoming the smallest tribe at the end of the book of Numbers. They decrease from 59,300 to 22,200 between Numbers chapter 1, verse 23, and Numbers chapter 26, verse 14.

In Joshua chapter 19, verses 1 to 9, Simeon is assigned an enclave and they're excluded from the blessing in Deuteronomy chapter 33. Levi, in Joshua chapter 13, verses 14, are dispersed to 48 cities.

[11 : 11] Both of them are scattered. And yet they're scattered in different ways. Levi ends up being the priestly tribe. Their scattering becomes a good thing. Whereas on the other hand, Simeon scattering is an enervation of their power as a tribe.

The Levite tendency to violence is harnessed for good. Later on in the story of the Exodus, Levi is the leading tribe. They are the ones that bring forward zeal as that great trait.

They are the ones that are involved at the forefront of the deliverance. And that zeal sets them apart as fitting priests, the sort of people that will exercise zeal on God's account.

There's no such redemption for Simeon. The Levite Phinehas ends up killing Zimri, a leading Simeonite, in Numbers chapter 25. And there seem to be parallels between Genesis chapter 34 and Numbers chapter 25 and 31.

Move on to the blessing upon Judah. There's a play upon the name of Judah and its meaning. Judah, your brothers shall praise you. Judah's name means praise. And there are other plays upon the words around that, playing upon the sound of his name.

[12 : 22] Judah is the lion. He's triumphed and now has the prey between his legs. No one dare touch it. There's a military success being suggested here. The lion of the tribe of Judah, the king of the beasts.

Judah is like Joseph here as well. Joseph is the one that the brothers bow down to. And here, the father's sons bow down before Judah. He is the one who has become the leader of the people.

Again, something that we see in 1 Chronicles chapter 5. Note the statements that are made both to Judah and to the brothers. They are to regard him in the light of this and treat him like the lion that he is.

A descendant of Judah will always be the king. He's a young lion. He's also a mature lion. And the scepter won't depart from him between his feet. It's the realm of generation. He's the one who will give birth to the kings.

Until Shiloh comes or until tribute is brought to him, until he comes, whose it is, we're not sure what that word means. And some have suggested that there's a connection maybe with Shelah or others have with Shlomo, that this is Solomon.

[13 : 28] The rule over the peoples is this referring to the Gentiles. Note the way that Judah stands for the entirety of the people. We can see this in Balaam's prophecy as well, that Judah is the one that will ultimately give his name to the entire nation.

He is the one that stands as the head of the nation. And we'll later on refer to the Judahites as the Jews. That is the name that they take on because Judah is the leading tribe.

Note the reference back to the preceding narrative. The staff and the sons might recall chapter 38. The scepter or the staff had departed from him until the kid was sent.

Does this suggest a connection between Shiloh, that strange word used here, and Shelah, the son that is not given in chapter 38?

Some have suggested so and seen within these statements a subtle reference back to the events of that chapter and the chapter preceding. Washing garments with wine and wine connected with blood.

[14 : 29] That might remind you of the fact that Judah was the leader of his brothers in placing the blood upon the robes of Joseph to disguise the fact that he had gone. And there are also parallels between Ur, his name connected with donkey, and the name Onan with the expression the son of a shias.

There is much more that could be explored about the details of the blessing given to Judah. Is the vine connected with Tamar? Is the shias the daughter of the Canaanite Shua? It's something that we can speculate about.

But even if there are references back to the events of chapter 38, I think they've given us positive spin here. This is fundamentally a blessing. Later on in Zechariah chapter 9 verse 9, for instance, we can see an association between the king and the ass or cult.

We might also see references to the land being blessed with wine and milk and the beauty of the king. Some of the imagery that we find in the Song of Songs. The blessing of Zebulun is interesting because there's a reversal of the order between Zebulun and Issachar.

We see a similar thing in Deuteronomy chapter 33 verse 18. Zebulun's name is connected with the theme of dwelling. And there seems to be a play upon that meaning here.

[15 : 41] Even if it's not the same word, it's a synonym of the meaning of his name. There are questions here about the territory that Zebulun is going to live in, though. Zebulun seems to have inland rather than coastal territory in Joshua chapter 19 verses 10 to 16.

We also see the same sort of thing in Deuteronomy 33, 18 to 20. Sidon needn't necessarily refer to the city itself, but to the Phoenicians. Is this a reference to the living by the Sea of Galilee, to sea trade there?

The territory of Zebulun is not necessarily set as sharply as we might suppose. Josephus in his Antiquities 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.

So it seems to bear out some of the ways that they're being described here. Issachar comes beneath Zebulun, even though that reverses the birth order. He's again being described as a strong animal.

He settles in a fertile land. And maybe there's an ironic play upon his name, meaning wage or hire, in that he's described as a slave or serfs on good land. That's the status that they have in the land that they finally settle.

[16 : 51] Dan comes next, again playing upon the meaning of the name, meaning judge. Dan shall judge his people. Again, it's not entirely clear what this refers to. Could it be with reference to Samson?

Dan is described as a serpent, by the way, biting the heel. Maybe think back to Genesis chapter 3.15. There's a wisdom of the serpent, a sneak attack of a smaller tribe that still holds its own.

Dan is associated later with guerrilla warfare, and they migrate north in Judges chapter 17 and 18. In the central statement of this bookended section, it speaks of waiting for God's salvation.

Maybe this is referring to the precarious state of the Danites. But it's the central statement in that order. Gad comes next. Again, it's playing upon the meaning of his name. A troop shall tramp.

Once again, there's a reference to the heels. They're skilful warriors. Asher, like Issachar, is associated with good food. While Issachar is associated with service, however, Asher is associated with riches.

[17 : 54] Naphtali comes next. He's a doe let loose, giving birth to fawns of the fold. Finally, the penultimate in the list, but paired with Benjamin, who comes next, as both sons of Rachel, and paralleled with Judah on the other end, you have Joseph.

Joseph is compared to a vine or maybe a wild donkey. Some have read it like Wenham. Joseph is a wild ass, a wild ass beside a spring, his wild colts beside the wall.

Parallels there in that reading with Judah, a son of a wild she-ass, the whelp of a lion. The word play upon Ephraim with the reference to fruitfulness. What is the reference to the archers about?

Well, we can think of the archer that's been mentioned previously, which is Ishmael. Ishmael goes down into Egypt and becomes an archer. He's left at a distance of a bow shot from his mother, and those things are probably connected together.

Joseph's story is also spoken of in terms of archers. He's been shot at by his brothers, by all these other forces that have been attacking him, and yet his bow has remained firm.

[19 : 01] What does this mean? That he's been shot at, but he hasn't released his arrows at anyone. He's held back. How has he done that? He's done it because the God of Jacob has made his arms strong.

He's able to resist vengeance. He's able to resist answering violence with violence, giving back what he has been given. He is in a position of considerable authority. He has all the resources of Egypt at his disposal, and his brothers come and kneel before him, and he has complete power over them.

But he holds that arrow and does not let it fly at them. He does not attack them and do to them what they did to him. He has all the power. He shows that he has the power in the ways that he sets up the situation, but he does not take vengeance.

And that, I think, is the way in which we're supposed to understand the archer's imagery there. His bow remains firm. Here, Jacob refers to Joseph's relationship with the mighty one of Jacob.

Again, speaks of the shepherd and the stone of Israel. This language is referring to Jacob's own life and his experience of God. And he relates his own experience of God to Joseph's experience of and relationship to God.

[20 : 15] He sees in his son something of a continuation of his relationship with God and his journey. The God of Jacob has been made known in the story and life of Joseph too.

The blessings that are made to Joseph are also noteworthy. They're associated with fertility and fruitfulness and blessing and life. It refers to the parallels between the creation and the woman's body.

So the blessing of heavens above paralleled with the blessings of the breasts. And then there's the blessings of the deep that crouches beneath. And then the blessings of the womb.

And there's a play upon these words in the Hebrew too. They're sounds. Finally, we have Benjamin. He's described as like a ravenous creature. He's like Judah in this respect. It's reminiscent of Judah's blessing.

Again, this is a kingly tribe. He is a tribe that will lead the people in Saul. The conclusion of this chapter is the first mention that we find in the whole book of Genesis and in the Bible more generally of 12 tribes.

[21 : 17] These are not just 12 sons now. They're 12 tribes with destinies set out before them. Once again, there's a reference to the son's duty to bury Jacob in Canaan.

It's also the first reference that we see to the death of Rebekah, that she died and was buried in the cave of Machpelah. Jacob gathers his sons together at the beginning of this chapter.

And at the end, he is gathered to his people. In chapter 47, verse 28, we learn of the years of his life. This is the sort of thing we'd expect to find in the final statement just before someone dies or after they have died.

But two whole chapters intervene between that statement and the final end of Jacob's life. All of this is playing out the significance of his death and what his legacy is.

And what we see clearly at the end is that his legacy is Israel itself, the 12 tribes. The destiny set before them is a destiny set before them by Israel, the forefather.

[22 : 21] Jacob, the man who has gone through this wrestling with God and man and has prevailed. A question to consider. If you compare this passage to Genesis chapter 29 and 30, the names given to the children as they are born and the meanings assigned to them, and Deuteronomy chapter 33, as Moses blesses the different tribes, what are some of the similarities and contrasts and connections that you notice?