



Genesis - Chapter Forty Nine

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

II.c Genesis 37:1-50:26 - Jacob's Descendants (continues)

Summary of Chapter Forty Nine

The main part of this chapter contains some remarkable prophecy about how the descendants of Jacob's sons will develop as various tribes and provides a strong indication that the Messiah will come from the line of Judah. It also confirms Joseph and his descendants as a group that will outshine his brothers.

Following his pronouncements to his sons, Jacob provides details of where he is to be buried - in the same cave that contained the remains of Abraham, Isaac, their wives and Jacob's wife Leah. Following this, Jacob died.

II.c.xvi Genesis 49:1-28 - Jacob's Last Words to His Sons

Close to death, Jacob pronounces on each of his sons a blessing that, reflecting something of their past actions, tells how their descendants will prosper in the future. Passing from oldest to youngest, with one exception, Jacob clearly anticipates that Judah and Joseph will outshine their brothers in importance; together their blessings make up about half of Jacob's speech. The pronouncements are presented using poetic imagery and language, sometimes with wordplays, which occasionally make them difficult to interpret precisely.

¹ Then Jacob called his sons, and said: 'Gather around, that I may tell you what will happen to you in days to come.

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

Genesis 49:1-2

After blessing Joseph and his two sons, Jacob summons all his other sons together in order to indicate their future destinies. Jacob's words are viewed by the narrator as being more than mere wishes; there is a predictive element to them, for they concern days to come, that is, in the distant future, sometimes translated 'in the latter days', which is an expression for the future beyond the horizon, for example: <<*So now, I am going to my people; let me advise you what this people will do to your people in days to come*>> (Numbers 24:14), <<*In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in time to come, you will return to the LORD your God and heed him*>> (Deuteronomy 4:30), <<*In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it*>> (Isaiah 2:2), and: <<*Daniel answered the king, 'No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or diviners can show to the king the mystery that the king is asking, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has disclosed to King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen at the end of days*>> (Daniel 2:27-28a), which sometimes refers specifically to the time of the Messiah: <<*Afterwards the Israelites shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king; they shall come in awe to the LORD and to his goodness in the latter days*>> (Hosea 3:5).

- ³ 'Reuben, you are my firstborn,
my might and the first fruits of my vigour,
excelling in rank and excelling in power.
- ⁴ Unstable as water, you shall no longer excel
because you went up on to your father's bed;
then you defiled it — you went up on to my couch!

Genesis 49:3-4

Although Reuben as the firstborn ought to be preeminent, his special standing within the family is forfeited because of his shocking behaviour with Jacob's servant concubine, Bilhah; refer to the comment made on 35:22-23.

- ⁵ 'Simeon and Levi are brothers;
weapons of violence are their swords.
- ⁶ May I never come into their council;
may I not be joined to their company —
for in their anger they killed men,

and at their whim they hamstrung oxen.

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.

Genesis 49:5-7

Jacob's pronouncement regarding Simeon and Levi centres on their violent disposition. Undoubtedly, this relates back to their treatment of the men of Shechem whom they massacred on account of the humiliation of their sister Dinah (Chapter 34). Distancing himself from their fierce anger and cruel wrath, Jacob indicates that their descendants will be scattered throughout the other tribes. As a result, their strength will be dissipated, preventing them from bringing destruction on Israel. In fulfilment of this, the Levites, whose inheritance will be their ministry at the sanctuary, receive 48 cities distributed throughout all the tribal areas, refer to Numbers 18:23-24 and 35:1-8, and Joshua 21:1-45; and the Simeonites obtain land within the territory taken by Judah, as detailed in Joshua 19:1-9. These arrangements prevented either tribe from dominating the rest.

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.

9 Judah is a lion's whelp;
from the prey, my son, you have gone up.
He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion,
like a lioness – who dares rouse him up?

10 The sceptre shall not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until tribute comes to him;
and the obedience of the peoples is his.

11 Binding his foal to the vine
and his donkey's colt to the choice vine,
he washes his garments in wine

and his robe in the blood of grapes;
12 his eyes are darker than wine,
and his teeth whiter than milk.

Genesis 49:8-12

Judah receives a long and positive blessing from his father, permeated with statements that highlight positive qualities of leadership. As with the other blessings, Jacob's remarks project the personal qualities that Judah has already displayed onto his future descendants. Remarkably, while royalty has been associated chiefly with Joseph from Chapter 37 onward, Judah is portrayed as being held in high esteem by his brothers – his father's sons shall bow down before him. More than this, the nations will bring tribute to him, and to one of his descendants shall be the obedience of the peoples. In these words Jacob predicts the great empire of David, and the greater kingdom of Christ, the second David. This sets the tone for the chief aspect of messianic expectation in the OT; the way that Abraham's blessing will come to the Gentiles will be by the ultimate heir of David reigning and incorporating the Gentiles into his benevolent empire. This explains why the installation of Jesus as the Davidic king is so important in the NT, with the implication that the long-awaited time of enlightening the Gentiles has finally arrived; see, for example, Matthew 28:18-20, Romans 1:1-6 and 15:12.

By way of emphasising Judah's potential royal status, he is compared to a lion. In addition, one of his descendants will hold a sceptre and ruler's staff, the symbols of kingship.

If the phrase until tribute comes to him is taken to mean <<*until Shiloh comes*>> (v.10 KJV), then it could be an allusion to the departure of the ark of the covenant from Shiloh in the time of Samuel, when the tribe of Judah, in the person of David, replaced the tribe of Ephraim as Israel's leading tribe; refer to Psalm 78:59-72, which summarises the events recorded in the books of Samuel.

He washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes. Associated with the future Judahite king is a time of prolific grape harvest. The picture presented here accords with later statements that link the Davidic dynasty with agricultural prosperity, for example: <<*May there be abundance of grain in the land; may it wave on the tops of the mountains; may its fruit be like Lebanon; and may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field*>> (Psalm 72:16), and: <<*On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name, says the LORD who does this. The time is surely coming, says the LORD, when the one who ploughs shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains*>>

shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them, says the LORD your God>> (Amos 9:11-15). The royal line of Judah culminates with Jesus Christ, as shown in the genealogy recorded in Matthew 1:1-16.

- 13 'Zebulun shall settle at the shore of the sea;
he shall be a haven for ships,
and his border shall be at Sidon.

Genesis 49:13

Zebulun is listed here before Issachar, although according to 30:17-20 Issachar was born before Zebulun. Since Zebulun's territory did not actually extend to the Mediterranean Sea (as confirmed by Joshua 19:10-16), Jacob's remarks are difficult to interpret. Yet major trading routes from the coast, which lay about 10 miles or 16 km to the west, ran through the tribal region of Zebulun, providing an outlet to the sea, and involvement by Zebulunites in the coastal commerce of exporting and importing, and thus living in Sidon by the sea, may be the substantive fulfilment of Jacob's poetic words. Furthermore, if the name Sidon, one of Phoenicia's leading cities, is used here as a collective term to refer to Phoenicia in general, then the statement that his border shall be at Sidon is quite apt.

- 14 'Issachar is a strong donkey,
lying down between the sheepfolds;
15 he saw that a resting-place was good,
and that the land was pleasant;
so he bowed his shoulder to the burden,
and became a slave at forced labour.

Genesis 49:14-15

Although Jacob's blessing of Issachar emphasises the strength of his descendants, it also indicates that like a donkey they will be forced to work for others, but precisely what situation is envisaged is unclear.

- 16 'Dan shall judge his people
as one of the tribes of Israel.
- 17 Dan shall be a snake by the roadside,
a viper along the path,
that bites the horse's heels
so that its rider falls backwards.
- 18 'I wait for your salvation, O LORD.

Genesis 49:16-18

Jacob sees in Dan and his descendants both positive and negative attributes. Their snakelike behaviour is later reflected in their assault on the unsuspecting inhabitants of Laish, as recorded in Judges Chapter 18.

Dan shall judge. The name Dan is a play on the Hebrew word judge, refer to 30:6.

I wait for your salvation, O LORD. Jacob's pronouncements are interrupted here by a brief prayer that highlights his concern for his descendants. Without divine deliverance they will not survive.

- 19 'Gad shall be raided by raiders,
but he shall raid at their heels.

Genesis 49:19

The descendants of Gad, located in the region of Gilead, east of the Jordan River, will be attacked by raiders. Of necessity the Gadites will become skilful warriors who use stealth to fend off the invaders. In Hebrew, Gad sounds like the terms raiders, Hebrew *gedud*, and raid, Hebrew *gud*.

- 20 'Asher's food shall be rich,
and he shall provide royal delicacies.

Genesis 49:20

Jacob briefly indicates that Asher's descendants will enjoy a prosperous future. Their future territory along the coastal plain of Acco provides fertile land and harbours for trade.

- 21 'Naphtali is a doe let loose
that bears lovely fawns.

Genesis 49:21

Compared to a graceful doe, the tribe of Naphtali will flourish, nourished by the rich natural resources of upper Galilee.

- 22 'Joseph is a fruitful bough,
a fruitful bough by a spring;
his branches run over the wall.
- 23 The archers fiercely attacked him;
they shot at him and pressed him hard.
- 24 Yet his bow remained taut,
and his arms were made agile
by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob,
by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel,
- 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 lies beneath,
blessings of the breasts and of the womb.
- 26 The blessings of your father
are stronger than the blessings of the eternal mountains,
the bounties of the everlasting hills;
may they be on the head of Joseph,
on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers.

Genesis 49:22-26

Jacob reserves his longest blessing for Joseph, confirming his special standing among the brothers. The references to God, using a variety of divine titles, along with the emphasis on blessing, give this pronouncement an added dimension. By describing Joseph as fruitful, Jacob may be subtly alluding to Ephraim, whose name means 'twice fruitful'; refer to the comment made on 41:50-52. In spite of his brothers' hostility toward him, Joseph has survived, sustained by the Mighty One of Jacob, i.e. God Almighty. Anticipating the future, Jacob prays that

Joseph's descendants will experience blessing upon blessing, blessings that exceed those shown to Abraham and Isaac.

Who was set apart from his brothers. Jacob's final remark may compare Joseph to the Nazirites, the holiest laypeople in Israel, refer to Numbers Chapter 6; or it may simply be referring to his leading role among his brothers. He was literally set apart when they sold him into slavery and he rose to the high ranks of governor of all Egypt, but his descendants through Ephraim will become one of the dominant tribes in the Promised Land and, in fact, is the name often given to the ten tribes who separated to form the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

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

Genesis 49:27

Using the image of a ravenous wolf, Jacob reveals that the descendants of Benjamin will be aggressive warriors, for examples: <<*The sons of Ulam were mighty warriors, archers, having many children and grandchildren, one hundred and fifty. All these were Benjaminites*>> (1 Chronicles 8:40), and: <<*They were archers, and could shoot arrows and sling stones with either the right hand or the left; they were Benjaminites, Saul's kindred*>> (1 Chronicles 12:2).

²⁸ All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them, blessing each one of them with a suitable blessing.

Genesis 49:28

Jacob's blessing of his sons emphasises the contribution that each will make to the twelve tribes of Israel. While the unity of the twelve is assumed, the tribes of Judah and Joseph are clearly distinguished from all the others in terms of their leadership role within the nation. This outcome reflects in large measure how Joseph and Judah are portrayed within Chapters 37-50. Beyond Genesis, the tribes of Ephraim and Judah are consistently portrayed as taking the lead, with the latter eventually providing the Davidic dynasty.

II.c.xvii Genesis 49:29-50:14 - Jacob's Death and Burial

Focusing on the death and burial of Jacob, this section falls into two parts. In vv.29-33 Jacob instructs his sons to bury him in Canaan. The process by which the sons fulfil this request is then recorded in 50:1-14. Jacob's desire to be buried in

Hebron reflects his belief that, as God has consistently promised, the future for his descendants will be in Canaan and not Egypt.

²⁹ Then he charged them, saying to them, ‘I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my ancestors – in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, ³⁰ in the cave in the field at Machpelah, near Mamre, in the land of Canaan, in the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite as a burial site. ³¹ There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah – ³² the field and the cave that is in it were purchased from the Hittites.’ ³³ When Jacob ended his charge to his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.

Genesis 49:29-33

In his last instruction to his sons, Jacob asks to be buried with his ancestors in the cave purchased by Abraham from Ephron the Hittite. The account of the cave’s purchase is recorded in Chapter 23 and is commented on there.

The burials of Abraham and Isaac are recounted in 25:8-10 and 35:27-29. While Jacob indicates that Rebekah and Leah were also buried at Machpelah, this information is not recorded elsewhere in Genesis.

Was gathered to his people. This idiom, commonly used in connection with dying, seems to reflect a belief in being reunited with others in the afterlife, or following them eventually into the presence of their Creator.