

JACOB PROPHETICALLY BLESSES HIS TWELVE SONS **(Genesis 49:1-28)**

Jacob had, over a lifetime, become a man of faith. At the end of his life Jacob pronounced a blessing on his twelve sons. Although in some cases these blessings were negative in nature, they all revealed the future for Jacob's descendants based largely on the character traits of these twelve sons and their fitness for leadership. The prophetic nature of these blessings stands out. God knows the end from the beginning. Jacob presents these blessings not strictly according to the birth order of his sons but by family ties—Leah's sons, the sons of his wives' handmaids, and then the sons of Rachel. While some of the details of the fulfillment of these prophetic blessings are lost to history, enough have been recorded to give us confidence in the accuracy of Jacob's statements. A comparison with Moses' predictive blessing in Deuteronomy 33 can be instructive. From this passage we're reminded that because God knows the end from the beginning, we can trust Him with our lives today.

**Jacob's sons by Leah—
leadership flows from character,
with an emphasis on the messianic ruler (49:1-15).**

Jacob begins his prophetic blessings by addressing the six sons by his first wife, Leah. In general terms, Jacob denies positive blessings and leadership privileges based on character flaws in some of his sons, but heightens the position of Judah as the son through whom the royal and messianic line would flow.

Prologue: Jacob invited his twelve sons to hear what God had in store for the future (49:1-2).

Jacob knew that he was about to die, so he gathered his twelve sons to share with them his final words. He announced that he would tell them what would take place "in the days to come." This phrase implies that Jacob was predicting the future. These predictions might have their fulfillment in the near or distant future, some having already been fulfilled historically but some still awaiting their fulfillment in the end times. Those who believe in the supernatural work of God in this world will have no trouble accepting this passage as prophetic, statements actually made by Jacob at the end of his life.

Reuben would lose his position as firstborn because of the instability of his character and actions (49:3-4).

Reuben was Jacob's firstborn son. Normally the firstborn would receive the greatest blessing. Jacob referred to Reuben as his "might" and "strength," and "honor" to his father as his firstborn. However, Jacob then stated that Reuben would no longer hold first place within his family in spite of his position as firstborn. Reuben's character was unstable, like turbulent, boiling water. This character flaw had prompted Reuben to sin

against his father by sleeping with Jacob's concubine Bilhah, the mother of two of Jacob's sons (Genesis 35:22). Although Jacob apparently did nothing about this crime at the time, he now announced that Reuben had thereby forfeited his right as firstborn.

Simeon and Levi would be scattered among the other tribes because of the anger that prompted them to act violently (49:5-7).

Jacob spoke to Simeon and Levi together since they were brothers, both physically and in spirit. These two sons were characterized by violence and anger. They had conspired together to slaughter the neighboring Shechemites and plunder their property (Genesis 34:25-29). For this reason Jacob rejected their counsel and resisted participation in their activities. Jacob pronounced a curse on their anger and cruelty—these were not the ways of God. As a consequence, Simeon and Levi would be scattered among the tribes of Israel. Simeon's tribe was indeed absorbed into that of Judah over time (Joshua 19:1, 9). More nobly, the descendants of Levi were scattered throughout the tribes of Israel as the priestly tribe (Joshua 21:1-3).

Judah would produce the perpetual royal line because of his lion-like courage, culminating in the arrival of the Messiah (49:8-12).

Jacob's blessing on Judah was comparatively extensive. Judah would receive the praise of his brothers and the submission of his enemies. Jacob described Judah as a "lion's cub," a "crouching lion," and an obstinate "lioness." Because of Judah's courage and ferocity his line would produce royalty. "The scepter will not depart from Judah." In fact, the royal line of David came from the tribe of Judah. Jacob then foresaw a more prominent descendant of Judah, the one called "Shiloh," or the one "to whom it belongs," referring to the rightful heir to the royal scepter. Shiloh may be a proper name, a title for the Messiah. The word may come from a root that means "rest" or "tranquility," and the use of personal pronouns points to the identity of this individual as an actual person. Applying this word to the coming Messiah fits the historical interpretation. Jacob prophesied that the Messiah would come from the line of Judah, as indeed Jesus the Messiah did (Matthew 1:1-17; Revelation 5:5-7). The Messiah would secure the obedience of the nations and establish peace and prosperity—symbolized in the imagery of a donkey and a vine. In the day of the Messiah's reign, wine will be as plentiful as water used for washing. The abundance of wine and milk speaks of the prosperity and joy of that future kingdom.

Zebulun would provide safe harbor for ships because of his geographical proximity to the city of Sidon (49:13).

Jacob's prophecy about Zebulun poses the most difficulty in understanding its fulfillment. Jacob stated briefly that the tribe of Zebulun would live by the sea and provide safe harbor for ships, with its border reaching toward the city of Sidon. In reality, Zebulun's allotted territory was completely landlocked, though located in the northern region of Canaan and thereby near Sidon. Either the fulfillment of this prophecy took place historically without any biblical record, took place historically in the sense that

commerce and trade moved regularly through the territory of Zebulun, or will take place in the future.

Issachar would be subdued by others because of his complacent character (49:14-15).

Jacob described his son Issachar as a “strong donkey” who would lie down in a resting place (possibly between two saddlebags or two campfires, or in a cattle stall). Instead of using his strength to profit himself, Issachar would become complacent in his good land and consequently become subservient to others.

**Jacob’s sons by Bilhah and Zilpah—
leadership releases blessings, with an
emphasis on divine deliverance (49:16-21).**

Having addressed his sons by Leah, Jacob now turns to his sons by his two concubines, Bilhah (the handmaid of Rachel) and Zilpah (the handmaid of Leah). Jacob’s blessings on these four sons are generally positive, though brief, and open the door for leadership potential.

Dan would provide justice because of his tenacious determination (49:16-18).

The name “Dan” means “judge.” Jacob predicted that the tribe of Dan would serve as a judge to the other tribes. He also described Dan as a serpent who would strike the heels of horses thereby unseating their riders. This description can be viewed as a negative character trait, a treacherous nature that belies intended justice. However, the phrase may refer to Dan as possessing tenacious determination to see justice done. Moses, in Deuteronomy 33:22, casts Dan in a positive light while Judges 18 presents the actions of the tribe of Dan as devious and treacherous.

At this point in his prophetic blessings, Jacob interjects a significant concept. He declares, “I look for your deliverance, O Lord.” Jacob was awaiting the salvation of Yahweh. What prompted this outburst isn’t clear, but midway into his message to his sons Jacob was reminded of his impending death and anticipated deliverance into life eternal. In the very midst of blessings and challenges, the salvation of the Lord is preeminent. Our God is a God of salvation.

Gad would retaliate against attackers because of his prompt responsiveness (49:19).

Jacob warned that the descendants of Gad would be attacked by raiders, but that Gad would retaliate by attacking their heels, that is, giving chase and securing revenge. This brief prediction seems to point to Gad’s ability to respond promptly to crises.

Asher would produce abundant food because of his prosperous position (49:20).

Asher would, by Jacob’s word, be a prosperous tribe. Asher would produce rich (literally “fat”) food, delicacies fit for kings. The land that Asher inherited was, indeed,

productive and prosperous, situated on the fertile northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea (Joshua 19:24-31).

Naphtali would announce good news because of his unusual freedom (49:21)

Jacob described his son Naphtali as “a doe set free.” As such, Naphtali would freely declare “beautiful words” or bear “good news.” Significantly, the land of Naphtali bordered the Sea of Galilee and was the focal point of much of Jesus’ ministry (Isaiah 9:1-2). Good news indeed came from Naphtali.

**Jacob’s sons by Rachel—
leadership overcomes hardships,
with an emphasis on spiritual fruitfulness (49:22-28).**

Finally, Jacob turned his attention to the two sons of Rachel, Joseph and Benjamin. Of course, Jacob had only good things to say about Joseph and, in a brief way, Benjamin as well. Both had or would overcome hardships. Both would exert leadership in some way. Furthermore, Joseph and his descendants would be fruitful, filled with God’s abundant blessings.

Joseph would experience great fruitfulness because of his dependence on God in times of hardship (49:22-26).

Joseph received a lengthy blessing from his father. Jacob said that Joseph would be a “fruitful vine by a spring.” His vines would extend over a wall, implying a far reaching fruitfulness. Joseph had experienced extreme hardship. He had been bitterly attacked by “archers,” probably referring poetically to his being sold into slavery by his brothers. However, in the midst of hardship Joseph had remained steadfast and his arms had been strengthened by the hands of “the Mighty One of Jacob.” Jacob’s God, “the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel,” had been Joseph’s strength. This God was his “father’s God,” “the Almighty” who had blessed Joseph “with blessings of the heavens above” and “blessings of the deep.” In other words, God had blessed Joseph from every angle at every turn in his life, elevating him from slavery to prominence. Jacob declared that his own blessings surpassed those of the everlasting hills. He granted these surpassing blessings down to his son Joseph, saying, “Let all these rest on the head of Joseph” who was a “prince among his brothers.” Jacob acknowledged that he had been the recipient of the richest of God’s blessings and he passed these richest of blessings on to his son Joseph. Joseph had been fruitful in the face of hardship, and his descendants would continue to enjoy God’s blessings.

Benjamin would be known as a fierce warrior because of his destructive tendencies (49:27).

Jacob concluded his prophetic blessing by briefly addressing his youngest son, Benjamin. He described Benjamin as a ferocious “wolf” that devours its prey in the

morning and divides its spoil in the evening. This description may be a negative assessment of Benjamin's traits. Benjamin's descendants did, indeed, act fiercely in defending a wicked crime that took place within their territory (Judges 20:12-16). However, Jacob may have viewed Benjamin's ferocity as a positive trait, the fierceness of a warrior in battle (2 Chronicles 14:8). The tribe of Benjamin did produce the second of the Judges, Ehud (Judges 3:15) as well as the first king of Israel, Saul (1 Samuel 9:1-2). Much later the Apostle Paul described himself as a descendant of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5).

Epilogue: Jacob's blessing on his twelve sons fit their personal character qualities (49:28).

In a concluding bookend to Jacob's prophetic blessing, Genesis 49:28 states that these twelve sons constituted the twelve tribes of Israel (Jacob). Already these families were forming into tribes in the prosperous land of Egypt. Their father, Jacob, had "blessed" them "blessing" them with a "blessing"—three times the idea of blessing is repeated in this verse. God had blessed Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Now God would bless Jacob's descendants, the twelve tribes of Israel. The blessing that each son received was prophetic, a reflection on their character and on the perfect plan of God. God knows the end from the beginning. He would fulfill His grand covenant through the descendants of His chosen family. Because God knows the end from the beginning we can trust Him with our lives today.