

Genesis 49:1-33, No. 75
“The Testament of Jacob”
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Text Comment

- v.1 “...in days to come” literally “in the latter days,” a phrase that only appears in prophetic contexts. Jacob was giving a prophecy here.
- v.4 Once again in Genesis, the eldest son (as before Cain, Ishmael, Esau, and Er) lost his privileged position because of his sin. The incident referred to is found in 35:22. Upon the death of Rachel, Reuben, Leah’s son and Jacob’s firstborn, sought to ensure that he would assume leadership of the family. He did it in the pagan way, by sleeping with his father’s concubine, Bilhah, treating his father, Jacob, as though he were as good as dead. Jacob’s long and eerie silence about the episode was now broken with this curse and judgment. [Wenham, 472] In v. 3 we hear what might have been; in v. 4, the ruin of such hopes. In confirmation of Jacob’s words, Israel’s later history betrays no trace of Reuben’s original primacy. The tribe settled in the Transjordan, outside the actual borders of Canaan, and faded out of the national history: *no prophet, judge, or king came from Reuben.*
- v.7 Simeon and Levi are mentioned together because Jacob remembered their treacherous attack on the Shechemites in revenge for the rape of their sister Dinah. Jacob called them “brothers” here in the sense of “allies” or “confederates” in their scheme. Brutality and vengeance are not qualities to be desired in a ruler, so these two are disqualified. Simeon largely disappears as a significant tribe, but Levi, of course, is elevated later to great importance as the tribe of the priesthood.
- v.12 We looked at this text briefly in our consideration of Judah’s spiritual renewal in chapter 44 and in connection with our observation that he, alone among all the brothers, had come to the point where he was willing to lay down his life for another, his brother Benjamin, even for Benjamin who had been up to that point his enemy in the family, his father’s favorite son as the second son of Rachel. Judah, we said, was the true hero of the Joseph story, and now comes the seal of that: his reward in the testament of his father Jacob. He is lavishly praised in striking contrast to the first three sons mentioned. [Sarna, 333] Judah had come to care deeply for the happiness of his father, and now it was Jacob’s happiness to prophesy the greatest things of all for his fourth son. The other brothers would bow down to him; he would go in conquest of his enemies, a fierce lion that seizes its prey and dares anyone to challenge it (perhaps a prophetic reference in the first place to the military conquests of King David) – remember in 36:31 we learned that the final editing of the book of Genesis did not take place until there were kings in Israel – and the readers of the book then would surely have thought of David, the “lion of Judah” as he came to be known. In v. 10 we learned that Israel’s kings would come from Judah. There will also come a great king from Judah, that is the Messiah. This is confirmed in the promise that the obedience of the nations will be his and, in v. 11 by this

characteristic description of the prosperity of the Messiah's kingdom: there will be such a superabundance of grapes no one will care if the animals eat their fill and such an abundance of wine that one can wash one's clothes in it. This description of the Messiah's reign is like that given later in Isaiah and the other prophets.

- v.21 The remaining sons of Leah and the two concubines are spoken of much more briefly. These verses are full of translation problems and questions of interpretation that, to this point, no one can answer with any certainty. The tribe of Zebulun was, for example, not given land by the seashore when Canaan was divided among the tribes by Joshua. The descendants of Issachar apparently would prefer to be serfs on good land rather than shepherds or herdsmen in a poorer part of the country. But, it is not known for sure how that prophesy was fulfilled. Dan apparently was being depicted as a weaker tribe, as we would guess from Judges, but its military victories would benefit the entire nation. Jewish commentators long took the reference to the viper as a prophecy of Samson, who was a Danite. The Gadites, according to 1 Chronicles 5:18 (12:8), were famed for their military prowess. Most of the statements about various sons and their descendants employ puns on the name. The saying about Gad is one long pun: v. 19, for example, consists of six words in the Hebrew and four of the six include the letters "gd" that make "Gad."
- v.26 Joseph's blessing is much longer as befits his place in the narrative. As had already been said earlier (48:22), Joseph was given the rights of the first born (a point made explicit in 1 Chronicles 5:1-2). "Blessing" is one of the key words in Genesis, occurring some eighty-eight times. Here, in the finale of Jacob's last words, the root occurs six times (the noun five times and the verb once). The God-given blessings of the future will far eclipse the blessings already experienced [Wenham, 486].
- v.27 The contrast between the young and helpless Benjamin we have known in the narrative to this point and the ravenous wolf is striking. The reference seems clearly to be to Benjamin's later military exploits. Ehud, the Benjamite delivered Israel from the Moabites; and Saul and Jonathan were Benjamites, both great warriors.
- v.28 "Blessings" is, of course, a generalization as not all these prophecies are promises of blessing.
- v.33 Just a few things to notice – "bury *me*," it's always the Bible's way, not "bury what used to be me," "bury *me*." Still *me*, it's not what used to be Jacob, they were to bury Jacob – one very good reason not to burn him up. And then, "gathered to his peoples" almost certainly refers to Jacob's soul being reunited to the souls of his forefathers in the afterlife. The phrase is separate from the idea of burial and, in any case, here explicitly the burial occurs long after Jacob was gathered to his people, because Jacob's body was taken to Canaan for burial.

For any Israelite reader of Genesis 48 and 49, the testament of Jacob, the patriarch's specific and particular prophecy regarding each of his sons, including his adopted sons, Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh, reported in the previous chapter, would be significant as an account of the origins of Israel's national life. They would read these prophecies of the patriarch, Jacob, and

understand more clearly than we can today, why each of the twelve tribes had the history that it had and why each tribe's defining character was what it was.

And clearly this is the significance of these two chapters at the very end of the narrative of Genesis. They are laying the foundation for the national life of Jacob's descendants. *This is a prophecy of the nation of Israel.* The sons of Jacob are what are called "eponymous ancestors." That is, they gave their name to the nation – these names here, Reuben, Levi, Gad, and the like, are not merely the sons of Jacob, they are the tribes of Israel. This is the interpretation of this material given by the narrator himself in his conclusion in v. 28: "these are the twelve tribes of Israel."

You remember that, at the very beginning of the Abraham material, God promised Abram that he would make of him a great nation. That is the first line of the covenant promise in Genesis 12:2-3. To have a nation one must have *a people*, which is why the seed is such an important subject in Genesis. And by this time in the historical development of the covenant we have twelve sons, each with his family, coalescing into an infant nation. It is still a family, but Jacob can see the nation opening before his failing sight. Twice in the later chapters of Genesis, the word "Israel" is used with the connotation of a national people, most recently in this very context, in 48:20 (also 34:7).

To have a nation one also needs *a land*, which is why the land figures so prominently in the unfolding drama of Genesis – God is promising the provision of a land for this nation he promised would come from Abraham. To have a nation one must further have *a government*, and already here, in Jacob's blessing of Judah, there is reference made to a king, a royal ruler who would descend from Judah. Israel will have kings and then *a King!*

And, finally, to have a nation, one needs some form of *a constitution* or political manifesto. That will come in detail in the next book of Moses with the giving of the Law at Sinai. Up to this point, that constitution is God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It was that covenant that bound this now greatly extended family together in common cause and in a sense of common origin. That origin, of course, was the election of God, and that election imparted to Israel's national life a sacred character. In a much less significant way our Revolution imparted to the American nation a sense of calling and purpose. Nations are like that. There is a sense of sacred origin and common cause that binds a people together under a single government ruling according to a particular ideal. But *this* nation, Israel, had an origin far more sacred and an ideal far more pure, and a government that was appointed by God himself. And that is why the Israel of God – the church of the Lord Jesus Christ – is still in the world today and will be to the end of the age, while all other nations come and go.

In one sense we can divide the OT according to this understanding of Israel as a nation. Genesis through Joshua concern themselves with the seed or the people; with the constitution; and with the land. Judges through Chronicles concern themselves with kingship and the government of the Israelite nation. And alongside the histories of the OT, we have the prophets, whose entire ministry was to summon Israel back to the true and original understanding of her existence as God's people, in the land God promised them, under the law God revealed to them, and under the kings God provided to rule over them according to that law.

In any case, in Genesis 49, we have the end of the book linking up with the chief themes of the earlier part of Genesis and preparing the way for the development of those same themes still further in the next book. It is in this sense, that in Hebrews 11:21 we read that, “by faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Jacob’s sons...” This testament, this blessing, was an act of faith on Jacob’s part because it revealed his conviction that, as God had promised his grandfather, from his seed would come a great nation.

So these last chapters, that may seem to the unobservant reader of Genesis something of an anti-climax, are in fact a summing up and a sending on ahead – a summing up of the great themes of God’s word to this point and preparing for their elaboration in the rest of the Bible. What we have in chapter 49, painted admittedly in broad brush, *is a review of Israel’s future*. Jacob spoke of the decline of the tribes of Reuben and Simeon, of the ascendance of Judah, Ephraim, and Manasseh (Joseph), of the rich land the nation would inherit in due time, of the oppression of Issachar, Dan, and Gad, and so on. It is only a very rough sketch of the history that will follow, but it gathers up the expectation of Genesis and casts it into the future where it would be fulfilled hundreds of years later when Israel inherited the Promised Land. God’s blessing *would accompany* his people and they would become that nation God had promised to make of Abraham and his seed.

And, in that way, these two chapters of Genesis paint a picture of the life of the church and kingdom of God for all ages, even our own. We think back over the story of Jacob’s sons, the rivalry, the cruelty, the sins of passion and envy, and then, the grace of God making something pure and good out of all that evil. And we look forward, with Jacob’s prophecy in hand, to the years, the centuries that would follow and see the same. Moments of sterling faith – the exodus, the conquest, the reigns of David, Hezekiah, and Josiah – mixed together with a great deal of unbelief, worldliness, and corruption: the wilderness, the period of the Judges, Saul’s spiritual collapse, the reigns of Jeroboam, Ahab, and Manasseh. We have before us the conquest and Israel’s settlement in the land, but we have also still further in the future, the catastrophic judgment of the Northern Kingdom – the ten northern tribes – and the exile of the southern kingdom.

And there is still more. We have the promise to Judah that a great king would come from his issue, and the Lord Jesus did appear some 1800 years later. But the kingdom of that Lion of the tribe of Judah has not appeared yet in its consummation, such as we see described in vv. 10-12. The obedience of the nations is not yet fully his, and there is not yet the prosperity described in those memorable images of a donkey tied to a grape vine and of clothes being washed with wine. Like so many prophecies of the future in the Bible some of their predictions have come to pass, others await a future day. And so, like believers before us through the ages, we find ourselves between the already accomplished and the awaited consummation.

What we have in Jacob’s blessing of his sons is, in effect, a philosophy of history, an account of how the kingdom of God will make its way through the world – in fits and stages, in triumph and failure – yet all the while the blessing of God will accumulate. The nation being formed out of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is still today being formed, as God in the gospel draws sinners to himself from every tongue, tribe, and nation, drawing them out of the nations into *this* nation.

The Israel of God today a far larger, a far more impressive presence and force in the world than ever it was in Jacob's day. Yet, still today, God's people, like the patriarchs before them await the consummation of the kingdom of God. Generation after generation of the saints are gathered to their fathers, and history rolls on to its appointed end: when, no one knows.

But all of this history is being worked out in and through the lives of individual believers – first these twelve men and then the multitudes of their spiritual descendants, including you and me. That, too, is part of the picture here. For the twelve sons of Jacob are, surely, every Christian, every member of God's covenant family. There are those in the church who, through a want of thorough repentance, never entirely recover from sins committed and from acts of foolishness earlier in their lives, like Reuben. We have our hotheads, like Simeon and Levi, who cause us no end of trouble along the way. Had blogs existed in Simeon and Levi's day, they would have been posting every day! We have had such folk in this church. The church always has people who, like Issachar, are willing to do almost anything to maintain peace and comfort, and people like Gad who are immediately ready for any confrontation. And, of course, there are plenty of us, all of us to some degree, who can see that our lives have been marked, for good and for ill, by our parents and by the atmosphere they created in the home in which we were raised. Think back on Jacob's life: all his sins and failures; his refusal to discipline his children; his perverse refusal to banish the disunity from his household and create among his children a spirit of love and harmony, and his often poor example. No doubt much of what his sons became resulted from the home in which they were raised. Genesis makes no bones about that. And we can see it for ourselves in virtually any Christian life we choose to study.

Just as in Revelation 2 and 3 – very definitely a parallel passage to Genesis 49 – we read of congregations that we can easily find in the church today – indeed, to some degree, every congregation finds itself in those descriptions – so in Genesis 49 we find every Christian. It is not, of course, the sum total of all possible characteristics, but a sampling that reminds us of the motley crew from which God created and still creates the nation he promised to Abraham. We stand much further down the road than Jacob did, but we could say very similar things about our children and their descendants and the lives they would lead and the generations of the church they would form, if, that is, we had the prophetic foresight that Jacob did.

Far down the ages now,
 Much of her journey done,
 The pilgrim church pursues her way
 Until her crown be won;
 The story of the past
 Comes up before her view;
 How well it seems to suit her still,
 Old, and yet ever new.

'Tis the repeated tale
 Of sin and weariness;
 Of grace and love yet flowing down
 To pardon and to bless;
 No wider is the gate,

No broader is the way,
 No smoother is the ancient path
 That leads to light and day.

No sweeter is the cup,
 Nor less our lot of ill;
 'Twas tribulation ages since'
 'Tis tribulation still;
 No slacker grows the fight,
 No feebler is the foe,
 Nor less the need of armor tried,
 Of shield and spear and bow.

Thus onward still we press,
 Through evil and through good;
 Through pain and poverty and want,
 Through peril and through blood:
 Still faithful to our God,
 And to our Captain true,
 We follow where he leads the way,
 The kingdom in our view.
 (Horatius Bonar)

Really? His kingdom in our view? Is it in your view, my view? How often is his kingdom in our view? That is the way of it for the Christian. That was the way of it when Jacob was in the world; it was the way of it for his believing descendants; it was the way of it for the apostles and early Christians; it was the way of it for those who kept a dim light shining through the darkness of medieval Europe; it was the way of it for the generation of the Reformation; it was the way of it before, during, and after the great revivals of Western Christianity, it is the way of it for those who are the inheritance of the great missionary enterprise of the 19th century who are now forming the church in large areas of the world where it never existed until 150 years ago; and it is the way of it today for every Christian and every congregation of Christians, including our own.

And what is our response to that? Well, it should be Jacob's own, which is found in a striking interruption of the narrative in v. 18. "*I wait for your salvation, O Lord.*" Here he was in the midst of the blessing of his sons and his prophecy of the future nation that would come from them. But he interrupted his prophetic survey with this prayer. It came unbidden out of his heart. He had said enough about his sons to realize how many difficulties lay ahead. It was a prayer like Habakkuk's, who knowing that the Babylonians must come to punish Judah, cried out, "Lord, in your wrath remember to be merciful!" Jacob realized how frail his sons were; perhaps he realized how many sinful tendencies they had inherited *from him!* "*I wait for your salvation, O Lord.*"

And, so, today. The church beset with enemies within and without. She is often so weak, so often feckless, so often ineffective, so often embarrassing; far too often very sinful. And each of us the

same! Whether it is old sins that have left their mark, like Reuben's, or a raging temper like Levi's, or a combative and confrontational spirit, like Gad's; it is of this material that God must build his holy nation! "*I wait for your salvation, O Lord.*"

And on we go; each of us individually and all of us together. If Genesis has taught us anything it is that where sin abounds, grace much more abounds, and that the Almighty God, infinite in mercy, *can and will* build a glorious temple out of all this wood, hay, and stubble.

We don't want to be Christians – of whom there are too many – who see only what is right in front of them and who are preoccupied with their own problems and pleasures. We want to be among those who live their lives with eyes upon the big picture, who understand themselves to belong to the kingdom of Jesus Christ making its difficult but triumphant way through this world to its inevitable consummation in the world to come. We want to be among those who intend to push that kingdom forward in every way we can, God helping us. Aware of how Christians so often go wrong, sensitive to our own weaknesses and those of others, but sure of God's blessing promised his people from ancient days and confirmed so magnificently throughout history, supremely in the life, death, and resurrection of the promised King, we wake up each morning conscious of being a living part of this greatest conceivable story, with the greatest conceivable purpose, and the happiest conceivable ending!

And if the day of the donkey being tied to the grape vine is still well beyond us, and if all of us thus must come to the end of our days and be gathered to our fathers, we will tell our children, as Jacob told his,

I shall sleep sound in Jesus,
 Fill'd with his likeness rise,
 To live and to adore him,
 To see him with these eyes.
 'Tween me and resurrection
 But Paradise doth stand;
 Then – then for glory dwelling
 In Immanuel's land.

The best people, the most fruitful people, and the happiest people are always those who live *for the future*. And of all people, Christians have unassailable reasons to do that!