



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

## Jacob Blesses His Sons (1)

Genesis 49.1–7

### Introduction: Section Structure

1. Genesis 49 completes a unit in which Jacob blesses (a) Joseph's two sons and (48.1–22) and (b) all twelve of his sons (49.1–28). Two sets of burial instructions frame the blessings (47.29–31; 49.29–33).
  - a. The theme word connecting the scenes is “bless” (בֵּרַךְ, *brk*); the verb appears eight times (48.3, 9, 15, 16, 20; 49.25, 28 [2x]; the noun occurs six times (49.25 [3x], 26 [2x], 28) (Mathews 2005, loc 22893).
  - b. Chapter 49 consists of a series of poetic verses (vv. 2–27) framed by prose (vv. 1, 28–33).
2. The chapter is an interpretation challenge: “In many ways, Genesis 49 is one of the most difficult chapters in the entire OT” (Willis 1979, 445). Reasons include the following:
  - a. Every line of the poem presents a textual difficulty.
  - b. The poem contains numerous words that are obscure; a few are unique in the OT.
  - c. Ancient texts/versions often do not agree on the original meanings.
  - d. Though described as a “blessing,” some of the tribes are actually “cursed” (the word appears in v. 7).
3. In addition, it is clear that Jacob is speaking more of the tribes that came from the sons than of the individual sons themselves. Note that the blessings do not follow the birth order.
  - a. Leah's first four sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah (cf. 49.3–12; cf. 29.31–35).
  - b. Leah's fifth and sixth sons are reversed: Zebulun, Issachar (49.13–15; cf. 30.17–20).
  - c. First son of Bilhah, Rachel's concubine is next: Dan (49.16–18; cf. 30.5–6).
  - d. Two sons of Zilpah, Leah's concubine are next: Gad, Asher (49.19–20; cf. 30.9–13).
  - e. Bilhah's second son: Naphtali (49.21; cf. 30.7–8).
  - f. Rachel's two sons: Joseph, Benjamin (49.22–27; cf. 30.22–24; 35.16–18)<sup>1</sup> (Willis 1979, 447).

### The Call to Assemble (49.1–2)

4. Jacob calls his sons together and admonishes them to “listen” (v. 2).
  - a. He will tell them “what shall happen to you in days to come” (v. 1).
    - 1) “The term אַחֲרַיִת (*akharit*) refers to what is after or behind, which by extension can refer to the result, descendants, the hind part of something, or the following time (cf. *HALOT* 36).” The sense

<sup>1</sup> The order also differs from that found in Deuteronomy 33 where Simeon and Issachar are omitted, and the order is Reuben, Judah, Levi, Benjamin, Joseph, Zebulun, Gad, Dan, Naphtali, and Asher (Willis 1979, 447).

- is predictive (Harris 2019, Gen 49.1 n. 2).
- 2) The phrase, literally, “in the end of the days,” is used thirteen times in the OT (Gen 49.1; Num 24.14; Deut 4.30; 31.29; Isa 2.2= Mic 4.1; Jer 23.20=30.24; 48.47; 49.39; Ezek 38.16; Hos 3.5; Dan 10.14), and its Aramaic equivalent is used in Dan 2.28. The meaning in each case has to be determined by the context (Willis 1979, 447–448).
  - b. Note the parallel use of “Jacob” and “Israel” (v. 2).
  - c. Note, too, how these verses display Jacob’s enduring faith: the 4th-5th century preacher “Chrysostom spoke of ‘the eyes of [Jacob’s] mind,’ who although blind physically saw the future by faith (*Hom. on Genesis* 66:9)” (Mathews 2005, 22775).

### Reuben (49.3–4)

5. As the “firstborn,” Reuben should have received the blessing, in accordance with his preeminence in dignity and power (v. 3).
6. But he had proved to be “unstable as water” (“destructive like water” - NET).
  - a. “The Hebrew noun פַּחַז (*pakhaz*) only occurs here in the OT. A related verb occurs twice in the prophets (Jer 23:32; Zeph 3:4) for false prophets inventing their messages, and once in Judges for unscrupulous men bribed to murder (Judg 9:4)” (Harris 2019, Gen 49.4 n. 3).
  - b. The idea of “turbulence” (NIV) approaches the thought here, a graphic description of Reuben’s loss of control over himself in his lust for and adultery with Bilhah (Willis 1979, 448).
  - c. Jacob makes this clear in the last two lines of verse 4.<sup>2</sup>

### Simeon and Levi (49.5–7)

7. Next in line of succession after Reuben were Simeon and Levi; they too were bypassed, “essentially disinherited” (Walton 2009, 135).
8. Verse 5.
  - a. They are referred to as “brothers,” not because they were both sons of Levi—the same was true of Reuben and Judah—but, as the context suggests, likely because they conspired to kill the Shechemites who had humiliated their [full] sister, Dinah (Gen 34).
  - b. Their weapons had been “swords” (ESV) or, perhaps better, “knives” (NET), possibly a reference to their circumcision knives used in the Shechem incident.
9. Verse 6.
  - a. In a synonymous parallelism, Jacob declares that he does not want his “soul” and “glory” to have anything to do with the pair.
    - 1) “Soul” (נַפְשׁ, *npsh*) is used here in the sense of the “self” (not the eternal part of a person; Willis 1979, 449).
    - 2) But the second term, “glory” (כְּבוֹד) is more obscure.
      - a) If repointed (i.e., given different vowels), the word can refer to “the heavy internal organ,” specifically the “liver,” which was used interchangeably with “soul” (*HALOT* 2000, 456 s.v. II).
      - b) The liver was sometimes viewed as the seat of emotions and will; “heart” (NET) is the modern equivalent (Harris 2019, Gen 49.6 n. 8). Cf. Exod 29.13, 22; Lev 3.4, 10, 15; etc.
    - 3) The sense is that Jacob is viscerally opposed to being associated with Simeon and Levi.

<sup>2</sup> Notice the change from second person to the third person in the last line; the sense is that, perhaps revealing for the first time, he turns to the others and exclaims, “he went up to my couch!” (ESV).

- b. The reference to the “hamstrung oxen” is a detail not included in Genesis 34.
  - 1) This refers to the cutting of the sinews or tendons on the hind legs.
  - 2) Soldiers in ancient warfare did this to disable horses or other animals to keep them from being used for escape or to reengage the battle. In this case, it would have been to keep the animals from being of any productive use, that is, beneficial for livelihood, by the Shechemites (Willis 1979, 449; Mathews 2005, 23316).
  - 3) Mathews (2005, 23298) is likely correct that Jacob references this previously unrecorded incident as evidence of the brothers’ wanton brutality and devaluing of life.

#### 10. Verse 7

- a. Verse 7 uses a curse formula (אָרַר, *’arur*) to invoke divine revenge against the brothers’ “anger” (אָפ, *’ap*) and “wrath” (עֲבָרָה, *’ebrāh*) or, more specifically against those who committed the anger (Mathews 2005, 23321).
- b. As a consequence, both the Simeon and Levi tribes will be “divide[d]” and “scatter[ed].”
  - 1) When Israel conquered and settled in Canaan, the Levites did not receive land tracts, but forty-eight cities (e.g., Num 18.23–24; 35.1–8; Josh 21.1–45).
  - 2) The Simeonite holdings were within the boundaries of Judah’s territory where their identity was eventually absorbed by the larger tribe of Judah (Josh 19.1–9; Judg 1.3; 2 Chron 15.9).
  - 3) “These tribes for their ruthless cruelty would be eliminated from the power and prestige of leadership” (Harris 2019, 49.7 n. 9)

## Application

- 11. The consequences announced to the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi remind us of the power and consequences of sin.
  - a. Willis summarizes the point in his comments about Reuben: “Because Reuben committed adultery with his father’s concubine Bilhah (35:22), Jacob wrested from him the privileges and blessings that would normally go to a patriarch’s first-born. Therefore, not only he but also his tribe is destined to suffer the consequences of being relegated to an inferior position among Jacob’s sons and in the tribes of Israel” (Willis 1989, 448).
- 12. We can only summarize, but need to remember four facts about sin.
  - a. First, we may have at times undersold the *power* of sin.
    - 1) In Romans, where no less than three-fourths of the 64 occurrences of Paul’s uses of the term “sin” appear, “sin” “appears repeatedly as a personified power” [“Sin”] (cf. Rom 5.12–8.3).<sup>3</sup> Cf. 5.12; 7.8–9 (Dunn 1998, 111–112).
  - b. Second, sin is not just about doing bad things (cf. 1 John 3.4); it is a failure to measure up to the glory of God (Rom 3.23).
  - c. Third, each of us is accountable for our own sin (Ezek 18.20).
  - d. But, fourth, because of its power, our sins have lasting consequences that will affect others (Exod 20.5; 34.7; Num 14.18; Deut 5.9).
- 13. Therefore, we should always take sin seriously.<sup>4</sup>

*March 8, 2026*

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<sup>3</sup> In footnote, Dunn adds that, “of the forty-one references in 5.12–8.3 only a handful clearly have in view the sin act (5.13b; 7.5; 7.13b; 8.3b)” (Dunn 1998, 112 n. 46).

<sup>4</sup> The fact that the death of Jesus was required to effectively deal with sin informs us about its seriousness.

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