



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Jacob Blesses His Sons (2)

Genesis 49.8–28

Introduction and Review

1. To reiterate the point made at the beginning of part 1, “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).
2. Several of those difficulties bear on the interpretation of the text, but not all do. And despite the challenges, we can generally discern the points being made in the different stanzas.
3. In order, we will focus on Judah (vv. 8–12), Joseph (vv. 22–26), the other seven brothers besides Reuben, Simeon, and Levi (vv. 13–21, 27), and the summation of the blessing (v. 28).
 - a. In terms of both space and importance, more attention is given to Judah and Joseph.¹

Judah: Wielding the Scepter (49.8–12)

4. Judah, the fourth-born son of Jacob, is the first of the twelve to actually be blessed (see vv. 3–7).
 - a. These verses have been “notoriously difficult in the history of interpretation and the literature is immense” (Mathews 2005, 23,341).
5. In general, we can say two things about vv. 8–12.
 - a. The esteem intended for Judah is accentuated in the first line with the word “praise” (יָדָאָה, *yādāh*), a play on the name “Judah” (יְהוּדָה, *yehūdāh*) (cf. 29.35).
 - b. Early Jewish understanding commonly applied the passage to the Jewish Messiah, evidenced in sources such as the Targums and Dead Sea Scrolls, while Christian interpreters related it to David and Jesus the Christ (Mathews 2005, 23,341). Cf. Pss 2; 89; Isa 11.1–16; Jer 33.15; Amos 9.1–14; Luke 1.32–33; Rom 1.3; Rev 22.16 (Mathews 2005, 22,765).
6. In verse 8, Judah’s “hand on the neck of your enemies” suggests Judean soldiers seizing enemies by the neck as they flee and dashing them to pieces on the ground; cf. conquests in the judges period (Judg. 1.1–21) and battles under the Judean David (cf. 2 Sam 5.6–8; 8.1–14) (Willis 1979, 450).
7. Verse 9 introduces the lion imagery, which was common in the Near East (e.g., Egypt, Mesopotamia, and

¹ The Joseph blessing is the longest in the chapter, though the difference is not as great in the Masoretic Hebrew text (MT). In the ESV: vv. 8–12 include 125 words; vv. 22–26 include 136. In the MT: vv. 8–12 include 77 words; vv. 22–26 include 79.

- later Neo-Assyrian imagery) (Walton 2009, 135–136).
- a. Three of the seven Hebrew words for *lion* appear in verse 9.
 - b. This reinforces and adds to the ferocity idea introduced in verse 8 (cf. Willis 1979, 450).
 - c. It also fits with the imagery in the ancient Near East where the lion was viewed as the mightiest beast (Prov 30.30), as a symbol for royalty (cf. Ezek 19.1–9; Zeph 3.3; 1 Kings 10.18–20), and then especially as a symbol of Judah’s King David and the Messiah (e.g., Rev 5.4; 2 Esdras 11.37; 12.31–32) (Mathews 2005, 23,376).²
8. Verse 10 continues the idea with parallel references to the scepter, staff, reception of tribute, and obedience from the peoples (nations, NET).³ The translations in the NIV and NET are to be preferred.
- a. The scepter and staff were symbols of leadership in the ancient Near East, including Israel (cf. Ps 45.6 [7 in MT] = Heb 1.8; Isa 14.5; Ezek 19.11, 14; Amos 1.5, 8; Zech 10.11).
 - b. Ancient drawings depict kings sitting on thrones holding a staff in front of them between their feet (Willis 1979, 450–451).⁴
9. Though the specifics of the figure have been debated, the parallelism in verse 11—washing his garments in wine and his vestures (robes, NET) in grapes—suggests blue/purple/red clothing associated with royalty (Walton 2009, 136); that comports with the royalty focus of vv. 8–12, though the idea of prosperity suggested by the donkey-vine imagery in v. 11a–b cannot be ruled out.⁵
10. Determining the meaning of verse 12’s two lines has also been a challenge for interpreters.
- a. The translations/notes in the ESV and NET illustrate.
 - 1) ESV: “His eyes are darker than wine, / and his teeth whiter than milk.”
 - 2) NET: “His eyes will be red from wine, / and his teeth white from milk.”
 - 3) NET note on the word translated “red”: “or glisten from.”
 - b. Discussion of line 1: “The adjective חַכְלִילִי (*khakhhlili*) occurs only once in the Bible, its meaning uncertain. A possible Akkadian cognate suggests it means “dark”. The LXX interprets it as ‘glisten’ [χαροποιοί, *charopoioi*]. Others render it “red”. Various translations and interpretations ensue, from an alcohol reference to happiness (e.g., the LXX).
 - 1) “But whatever is going on with the eyes, the point is that Judah will have abundance to partake of” (Harris 2014, 49.12 n. 15).
 - c. Discussion of line 2: Some (e.g., ESV) translate the figures as comparatives, but again the sense seems to suggest it is a symbol of abundance: “the dark or red eyes would be from drinking wine, and the white teeth from drinking milk” (Harris 2014, 49.12 n 16).

² For example, 2 Esdras 12.31–32, from near the end of the 1st century AD, reads: “And as for the lion whom you saw rousing up out of the forest and roaring and speaking to the eagle and reproving him for his unrighteousness, and as for all his words that you have heard, this is the Messiah whom the Most High has kept until the end of days, who will arise from the offspring of David, and will come and speak with them. He will denounce them for their ungodliness and for their wickedness, and will display before them their contemptuous dealings” (NRSV).

³ Two interpretation issues have been debated: the phrase “between his feet” (see n. 4) and the appearance in the Hebrew of “Shiloh” (שִׁילֹה, *šilyoh*). The latter is translated variously as “tribute” (ESV, NRSV), “to whom it belongs” (NET, NIV, ESV note), “Shiloh” (KJV, ASV, NASB, ESV note), and “he whose right it is” (CSB). Mathews 2005, 23,440, Willis 1979, 451–452, and Harris 2014, 49.10 n. 12 offer good discussions of the options and commend the translation found in the NET and NIV.

⁴ The meaning and significance of the “staff between his feet” imagery has been much discussed. The text note in the NET, which translates “between his feet,” summarizes the debate: “Or perhaps ‘from his descendants,’ taking the expression ‘from between his feet’ as a euphemism referring to the genitals. In this case the phrase refers by metonymy to those who come forth from his genitals, i.e., his descendants” (Harris 2019, 49.10 n 11). See also Mathews 2005, 23,403.

⁵ Mathews 2005, 23,468, suggests that the reference to the donkey tied to a vine indicates prosperity (the owner is rich enough as to not need the produce of the vine), and that the reference to wine and grapes also points to the owner’s wealth.

Joseph: Blessed in All Circumstances (49.22–26)

11. Matching Judah in the south is “the house of Joseph” in the north (Josh 18.5; Judg. 1.22; Zech 10.6).
 - a. Ephraim and Manasseh are the most numerous and prosperous of the northern tribes (cf. Hos 13.1).
 - b. “House of Joseph” could refer to the entirety of the central highlands and northern regions of Israel during Solomon’s day (1 Kings 11.28).
 - c. The first king in north-Israel’s history was Jeroboam I, an Ephraimite (1 Kings 11.26–14.20).
 - d. Ephraimites exercised rule from the capital city of Samaria (Isa 7.9), matching Jerusalem’s prominence in the south (Mathews 2005, 22,768).
 - e. This oracle falls into three parts: Joseph’s prosperity (v. 22), protection (vv. 23–24), and blessings (vv. 25–26) (Mathews 2005, 23, 608).
12. Prosperity—v. 22: “Fruitful bough” metaphor alludes to Joseph’s most prodigious descendant, Ephraim (cf. Gen 41.52) and recalls God’s promise to make Joseph “fruitful” (Gen 48.4) (Mathews 2005, 23,617).
13. Protection—vv. 23–24a–b: the mood of the blessing changes abruptly from prosperity to danger.⁶
 - a. Verse 23 refers to “archers” whose actions are described with three verbs, literally: “they treated him bitterly,” “they shot” arrows (cf. Ps 18.14), and “they hated” (“harassed,” ESV; “opposed,” NET; “with hostility,” NIV).
 - b. “Arrows” is probably figurative for opposition to Joseph, perhaps including slanderous charges (cf. various Jewish sources; also Jer 9.3, 8; Prov 25.18; 26.18–19).
 - c. The archers’ identity is uncertain, referring to all or any of Joseph’s many opponents (Mathews 2005, 23,639).
 - d. Despite the opposition, Joseph would stand strong: his bow would remain steady, and his hands would be skillful (v. 24a–b; NET).
14. Blessings—vv. 24c–25: verse 24 explains that God is the source of Joseph’s survival, a point made more intense by the stacking of a series of divine names and descriptors in vv. 24c–25.
 - a. “The Mighty [“Powerful” NET] One of Jacob” – see Ps 132.5; Isa 49.26; 60.16.
 - b. “The Shepherd” – see Pss 23.1; 80.1; Ezek 34.11–16.
 - c. “The Stone [“Rock” NET] of Israel” – virtually the same title as in Deut 32.4, 15, 18, 30–31, 37; Isa 30.29.
 - d. “The God of your father”—cf. Exod 3.15.
 - e. “The Almighty” [“Sovereign God” NET] (אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי, *el shadday*) – Gen 17.1; 28.3; 35.11; 43.14; 48.3; Exod 6.3 (see Willis 1979, 454–455).
15. Verses 25–26 revolve around the word “bless” (בָּרַךְ, *brk*), which appears six times.
 - a. Repetition of the term stresses “a superabundance of blessings” from God (Mathews 2005, 23,690).
 - b. The remainder of vv. 25c–e and 26 describe the blessings intended for Joseph, including:
 - 1) Common blessings of rainfall and the birth of children (cf. Lev. 26.4–5; Deut 7.13; 28.4, 12).
 - 2) “Blessings of heaven above” and “blessings of the deep that crouches beneath” (“lies below” NET) is an inclusive pairing drawn from creation imagery (Gen 1.1–2; 7.11; 8.2; cf. Deut 33.13) (Mathews 2005, 23,704).
 - c. Verse 26a–c describes the magnitude of the blessings invoked by Jacob, exceeding even the blessings of the “everlasting” [“ancient” Mathews 2005, 23,716] hills” / “age-old hills.”
 - d. Verse 26d–e culminates with a final plea that God will grant the blessings to Joseph who “was set

⁶ The verbs in vv. 23–24 describe future events as if they have already occurred (often true in prophetic texts) (Harris 2014, 49.23 n 33).

apart from his brothers.”

Zebulun to Naphtali, Benjamin: A Snapshot of Blessings (49.13–21, 27)

16. While there are interpretation questions in some of these short poems,⁷ the basic point of each is clear.
17. Alexander’s notes in the *ESV Study Bible* are good, short summaries of the blessings to Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, and Benjamin; I am generally summarizing them below (vv. 13–21). (Alexander 2008, 134–135).
- Zebulun—v. 13: Zebulun’s territory did not extend to the Mediterranean Sea, and so this verse is difficult to interpret. Major trade routes ran through the area, however, and Zebulun’s involvement in trade may essentially fulfill Jacob’s words; “Sidon” may be a collective term to refer to Phoenicia in general.
 - Issachar—vv. 14–15: Jacob’s blessing emphasizes the strength of this tribe, but also indicates that, like a “donkey,” its people will be forced to work for others in some undefined capacity.
 - Dan—vv. 16–18: “Dan,” a play on the Hebrew word for “judge” will be cunning against their enemies (like a snake), but, despite their large numbers (second largest tribe in the Numbers censuses; cf. Num 2.26; 26.42) will also be slow to conquer their territory (cf. Josh 19.47; Judg. 18.27–29). Jacob shows his concern by invoking the Lord’s salvation (deliverance) for Dan (cf. Willis 1979, 453).
 - Gad—v. 19: the name “Gad” sounds like the term “raiders” which is repeated in verse 19. Their location made them susceptible to Israel’s enemies and they became skillful warriors who used stealth to fend off the invaders.
 - Asher—v. 20: as a tribe, they would enjoy a prosperous future; their location along the coastal plain of Acco gave them access to fertile land and harbors for trade.
 - Naphtali—v. 21: compared to a graceful doe, Naphtali would thrive, nourished by the rich natural resources of upper Galilee.
 - Benjamin—v. 27: using the image of a ravenous wolf, Jacob says that the tribe of Benjamin would be aggressive warriors; this is borne out in Judg 3.15–30; 5.14; chs. 19–21; 1 Chron 8.40; 12.1–2; 2 Chron 14.8; 17.17–18.
18. The prose in verse 28 concludes Jacob’s deathbed benediction; the emphasis is on the idea “bless” (בֵּרַךְ, *brk*), a form of which appears three times in the verse.

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Works Cited

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⁷ See, for example, the curious statement that “Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea” (Gen 49.13) when the territory allotted to that tribe was landlocked. For discussion of and proposed resolutions of the matter, see Mathews 2005, 23,487ff.; Walton 2009, 136; and Willis 1979, 452.