

General Comments on Genesis 49

Difficulties with Translation and Interpretation

Interpreting the intent and meaning of Jacob's deathbed father's blessings is problematic, for several reasons: difficult Hebrew making for problematic translations, obscure natural symbolism, poetical phraseology, and mixed moralizing.

Commentators usually interpret the statements as more about the tribe than the individual person, as either predictions of the tribe's future or as retrojection, on the assumption the text is a compilation of older fragments collected and edited based on intervening tribal history. This approach is based on reading v. 1 as a statement of prediction, with possible eschatological implications, and v. 28 as a summative.

When reviewing various commentators, there is little consistency in interpretive approach, even in how the individual commentator address the separate statements to each son. They are typically taken one by one with the presence or absence of related or corroborating text elsewhere in the Bible. The Rabbinical commentaries on this chapter are particularly divergent in their interpretations, as documented in Neusner's Genesis Rabbah.

When translating the text to English, modern Jewish scholars (e.g., Fox, Alter, Sarna) all note there are several instances of difficulty in reading the Hebrew of this chapter. As such, there are notable differences between translations.

However, all modern translations present v. 2-27 as poetry with staggered lines. Doing so makes it easier to see the poetical phrases in the texts, for example verse 2:

and hear, ye sons of Jacob;
And hearken unto Israel your father.

The obvious parallels are "hear...hearken" and "sons of Jacob...Israel your father". Reviewing a modern translation will make it easier to see the intentional poetic parallels.

Precedents

With respect to the institution of father's blessings, there are two precedents. First is Noah's blessings and cursing of his sons in 9:25-27. Second is Isaac's blessings to Jacob and Esau in ch. 27, which was problematic in and of itself,

given Jacob and Rebekah's deception, and the unintentionally inspired outcome, despite Isaac's wishes. There is nothing to suggest Abraham formally blessed Isaac, as 25:1-11 suggest he dealt with any questions in inheritance or family position by literally sending all other potential heirs away, some with gifts.

The Lord blessed Jacob when He renamed him Israel in 35:9-12, telling him he will have many nations and kings in his lineage. This is likely Jacob's authoritative inspiration for the blessings given to Judah and Joseph via Ephraim.

In the Latter-day Saint canon, there is also D&C 107:45-56 where in the context of the patriarchal order of the priesthood it is discussed that before his death Adam blessed his posterity and predicted their futures, but no details of the blessing are given.

Regarding the natural symbolism and poetic imagery, the precedents are the Lord's curse on the serpent in 3:14-15, the angel's blessing of Ishmael in 16:11-12, and the dreams which Joseph interprets in ch. 40-41. Each of these instances use metaphorical comparisons of humans to animals.

The present case of Jacob's final testaments to his sons is clearly the longest example of ancient Semitic poetry thus far in the Torah, and it is combined with the longest set of father's blessings and curses. Given the number of Jacob's sons, it is natural the text would be lengthy when compared to the predecessors.

Historical or Eschatological?

The opening verse of the chapter has Jacob gather his sons so he may tell them "that which shall befall you in the last days", which clearly encourages an eschatological, or "end times" reading. However, most of Jacob's statements to the individual sons have no obvious text that would lend itself to a reading that is predictive of future events, let alone fall into an eschatological setting. The clear exceptions would be Judah and Joseph. But, given the statement in v. 1, this leads the reader to automatically look for predictive readings on the assumption they are.

However, the KJV translation of the Hebrew regarding "the last days" in v. 1 is not good. According to Nahum Sarna:

Hebrew *be-'aharit ha-yammim*, like its Akkadian counterpart

ina ahrat ume, means simply "in the future," without precise definition. In the Torah the phrase is used in a context of historical time, but in prophetic literature the phrase became a technical term for the "end-time" (*eschaton*), when the historical process would reach its culmination and God's grand design for the human race would be fulfilled. (JPS Torah Commentary on Genesis, page 332).

This appearance is the first usage of the Hebrew phrase in the Law of Moses. It additionally appears in Num. 24:14, Deut. 4:30, Deut. 32:29. In the Prophets, it appears in Jer. 23:20, Jer. 30:24, Jer. 48:47, Jer. 49:39, Eze. 38:16, Dan. 10:14, Hosea 3:5, Micah 4:1. When comparing the usage in context it is clear, as noted above, there is a difference in the way Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea and Micah use the term.

Jacob's statements to his sons do not appear to have long-term predictive or eschatological intent unless explicitly stated. As such, assuming an eschatological reading on the entirety of Jacob's statements is unwarranted.

Various Observations

Calling Jacob's statements in this chapter a "father's blessing" is problematic. Jacob's final words to his sons are mixed: two are positive (e.g., Judah, Joseph), three negative (e.g., Reuben, Simeon, Levi) and seven neutral statements. All of Jacob's statements reflect the behavior of the sons, either good, bad or indifferent. Jacob is not blessing all of them, nor cursing all of them, as each son is addressed separately, with the exception of Simeon and Levi, and by name (probably to avoid the situation he put his father Isaac in when he tricked him out of Esau's blessing) through their own individual blessings. The seven neutral statements appear almost trivial when compared to the other five, with the possible exception of Dan, and are probably intended to be a reflection of those son's largely uneventful lives, at least as far as Jacob is concerned.

The statements to the sons in this chapter do not strictly follow birth order:

Birth Order

Leah
Reuben 29:32
Simeon 29:33

Blessing Order

Leah
Reuben 49:3
Simeon 49:5

Levi 29:34	Levi 49:5
Judah 29:35	Judah 49:8
<u>Bilhah (Rachel)</u>	Zebulun 49:13
Dan 30:6	Issachar 49:14
Naphtali 30:8)	<u>Bilhah (Rachel)</u>
<u>Zilpah (Leah)</u>	Dan 49:16
Gad 30:11	<u>Zilpah (Leah)</u>
Asher 30:13	Gad 49:19
<u>Leah</u>	Asher 49:20
Issachar 30:18	<u>Bilhah (Rachel)</u>
Zebulun 30:20	Naphtali 49:21
<u>Rachel</u>	<u>Rachel</u>
Joseph 30:24	Joseph 49:22
Benjamin 35:18	Benjamin 49:27

For Leah and Rachel the birth order is kept intact by matriarch, but for the handmaids the birth order is not maintained. The grouping is similar to that appearing in the accounting of 35:23-26 where the sons are listed in order by mother.

The ordering of the concubine's children appears to be to collect them all into their own single group, staggering them as B-Z-Z-B, as opposed to listing them by their mother. They are all on the same legal footing, as they are all sons of concubines, and not the offspring of wives, so Jacob treats them as a group.

Jacob's intention appears to be to select one son from each of the three groups as the inheritor of the right of the firstborn among the son's shared mother. Judah is obviously the selection among Leah's sons, Joseph among Rachel's sons, and Dan is the firstborn among the collective concubine's sons. Note each of the three receive an exceptional blessing, where the others receive an explicit curse or an innocuous or ambiguous statement.

In the case of the seven neutral blessings, all of those sons receive no additional background or comment in the book of Genesis aside from their birth in ch. 30 (Benjamin is referenced in ch. 35) or their lineage in ch. 46. We know nothing about these seven men.

How do the sons react to the blessings? There is no recorded reaction from any of the sons, and when Jacob dies, the

only son who appears to mourn is Joseph, who takes the lead and complete control of the entire funeral procession (cf. ch. 50). The sons don't seem to care much one way or the other about the blessing, or even Jacob's death. We don't hear from them until after the funeral, when they inquire about their standing with Joseph afterwards (cf. 50:15-21).

Theology

The theological approach is to read the text as exhibiting the tension between the practical reality of the difficulties of being a parent and the idealistic attempt of that person, in Jacob, trying to be a man of God named Israel. In some ways Jacob was very much a spiritual man who kept his covenants and did the Lord's will. At the same time, Jacob was not a great husband and father. This affected him personally, and everyone in his family. At the end of his life the blessings are mixed and somewhat messy, because his life has been as much. Jacob was not a perfect man, and his children were not perfect. But, the Lord continued to work with him and will continue to work through his family, preferentially blessing those who repent and seek justice.

The common scholarly approach to this chapter is to assume it is of later composition, being a collection of earlier fragmentary texts retold in retrospective, as commentary on the tribes, through their original parents. The text of v. 28 is taken as evidence of this approach, as they are there identified as "tribes" and not sons (and, naturally, they ignore the clear statement in v. 1, attributing the statement to Jacob). This isn't persuasive, as the theological underpinnings of the entirety of Genesis is the tension between the Lord, His people and their individual and collective behavior. These individuals reared their own families, and some of their early behavior affected their families in an eternal sense, specifically the first four sons and then Joseph. Jacob's statements reflect as much, as the actions of people alive now affects the future of their families to some degree, with how much depending on what they do. If they do the right thing by the Lord's definitions, then they are blessed and prospered. If not, then there isn't anything noteworthy to say about them from either Jacob or the Lord's perspective. And that is what Jacob is giving the reader in this text, his understanding of the Lord's point of view.

Jacob rejects violence and sexual immorality as behaviors

that impeach a son's standing with their father. Jacob praises hard work and just judgement. As such, Simeon, Reuben and Levi are rejected, and Judah and Joseph are elevated. Some brothers who are not prominent in the Genesis stories are not prominently blessed here, suggesting if you do little or nothing in life, there isn't much to say about your life. Simply being Jacob's son doesn't necessarily result in a noteworthy blessing.

Judah's repentance (ch. 38) and subsequent good works (ch. 44) place him above Reuben. There is nothing in the text suggesting Reuben, Simeon or Levi repent of their bad behavior. Simeon even attempts to justify himself when corrected by Jacob (cf. 34:30-31). Their lack of repentance results in being cursed, instead of blessed.

Comments on Genesis 49

¹And Jacob called unto his sons, and said, Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the last days. ²Gather yourselves together, and hear, ye sons of Jacob; and hearken unto Israel your father.

v1-2 Jacob summons his sons, telling them come to him to he can tell them what is going to happen to them after he is dead (v. 1). They are to gather together and listen to their father (v. 2).

v1 "in the last days", meaning "in days to come" and not the end of times. See the discussion above for explanation.

The New American Standard Bible (NASB) translates it as follows:

Then Jacob summoned his sons and said, "Assemble yourselves that I may tell you what shall befall you in the days to come."

The Jewish Publication Society (JPS translated it as follows:

And Jacob called his sons and said, "Come together that I may tell you what is to befall you in days to come."

v2 Jacob himself rhetorically unites "sons of Jacob...Israel your father". The dichotomy suggests there is the natural man Jacob and the godly man Israel, and he himself recognizes that.

³ Reuben, thou art my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power: ⁴ Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel; because thou wentest up to thy father's bed; then defiledst thou it: he went up to my couch.

v3-4 Jacob rejects Reuben as the leader of the sons of Leah because of the event documented in 35:22. Despite him being the firstborn (v. 3), his bad behavior results in his impeachment (v. 4). Reuben's instability and apparent lack of repentance removes him from eligibility for his father's blessing.

⁵ Simeon and Levi are brethren; instruments of cruelty are in their habitations. ⁶ O my soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine honour, be not thou united: for in their anger they slew a man, and in their selfwill they digged down a wall. ⁷ Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel: I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.

v5-7 Jacob condemns Simeon and Judah for the events of ch. 34. He makes it explicit that they are being cursed (v. 5-6) and their ultimate fate will be that their families will be mixed in among the other son's families (v. 7).

Jacob's rejection of this kind of violence comes after the existential threat he faced from Esau, both individual (cf. 27:41-45) and as a family (cf. ch. 32-33), and also from Laban (cf. 31:22-42). The promises made to Abraham about a great posterity (cf. 15:1-5) are jeopardized by the violence committed by men, and Jacob wants no part of it.

Hostile to the retrojection reading of this chapter is the fact the tribe of Levi ended up being the keepers of the Temple and the bearers of the priesthood because of the zeal of Phinehas (cf. Num. 25). Instead, proponents of that reading focus on the tribe of Levi not being apportioned land, and ignore the apportionment of the Temple. This kind of selective review of the intervening history is why I don't favor the retrojection reading.

⁸ Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise: thy hand shall be in the neck of thine enemies; thy father's children shall bow down before thee. ⁹ Judah is a lion's whelp: from the prey, my son, thou art gone up: he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as an old lion; who shall rouse him up? ¹⁰ The sceptre

shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be. ¹¹ Binding his foal unto the vine, and his ass's colt unto the choice vine; he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes: ¹² His eyes shall be red with wine, and his teeth white with milk.

v8-12 Jacob blesses Judah to be the physical and political leader among the sons (v. 8-10), who will be blessed materially (v. 11-12).

v8 "the neck of thine enemies", David may be referencing this phrase in 2 Sam. 22:41. A clear reference to power over one's enemies.

"thy father's children shall bow down before thee", the original blessing Isaac bestowed on Jacob (cf. 27:29) apparently went to Joseph in 37:5-11, but is now transferred and granted to Judah.

v10 "until Shiloh come", Everett Fox (The Five Books of Moses) translates this verse as follows below and in the footnotes states "Hebrew difficult; others use 'until Shiloh comes.' The phrase is an old and unsolved problem for interpreter and translator alike."

The scepter shall not depart from Yehuda,
not the staff-of-command from between his legs,
until they bring him tribute,
-the obedience of peoples is his.

Robert Alter (The Five Books of Moses) translates the verse as follows below and in the footnotes on "that tribute to him may come" comments, "This is a notorious crux. The Masoretic Text seems to read 'until he comes to Shiloh,' a dark phrase that has inspired much messianic interpretation. The present translation follows as exegetical tradition that goes back to the Middle Ages, which breaks up the work "Shiloh" and vocalizes it differently as *shai lo*".

The scepter shall not pass from Judah,
nor the mace from between his legs,
that tribute to him may come
and to him the submission of the peoples.

The JPS Tanakh translates the verse below and then Nahum Sarna (JPS Torah Commentary on Genesis) comments as follows.

The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet;
So that tribute shall come to him
And the homage of peoples be his.

Hebrew *yavo' shilo* is wholly obscure; neither the subject of the verb nor the meaning of *shiloh* is clear. The present rendering, that of the Yalkut and Lekah Tov, takes *shiloh* as a combination of *shai*, "tribute," and *loh*, "to him." Several ancient versions understand it as in the late Hebrew *shello*, "that which belongs to him," that is, until he obtains the monarchy. Rashbam the word with the city of Shiloh, a very ancient cultic center in Israel situated in the territory of Ephraim. The specific historic reference would be the defection of the ten tribes from Judah with the resultant division of the kingdom, announced by the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh. Judah's hegemony over all Israel will last until the secession of the north.

An early tradition, found in the texts of Qumran, in the Targums, and in rabbinic literature, sees in *shiloh* a messianic title, although no biblical passage supports this. It has even been noted that the numerical value of the consonants *y-b-' sh-y-l-h*, "Shiloh will come," is equal to that of *mashiah*, "messiah": 358.

None of the many interpretations of *shiloh* is without objection, and the term remains an enigma, though the present translation seems to be the most acceptable.

The standard Christian approach to this phrase is accurately summarized by [Robert Jamieson](#) (Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown, Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible, 1871):

Shiloh--this obscure word is variously interpreted to mean "the sent" (Joh 17:3), "the seed" (Isa 11:1), the "peaceable or prosperous one" (Eph 2:14) --that is, the Messiah (Isa 11:10; Ro 15:12); and when He should come, "the tribe of Judah should no longer boast either an independent king or a judge of their own" [CALVIN]. The Jews have been for eighteen centuries without a ruler and without a judge since Shiloh came, and "to Him the gathering of the people has been."

This reading is clearly problematic, as none of the allegedly supporting biblical references have anything to do with the Hebrew term *shiloh*, and it is parochially self-serving in a Christians versus Jews attack.

To be fair, there are Judaic sources who interpret this same reference messianically, but do so in a much different manner and intention (see Jacob Neusner's *Genesis Rabbah*, volume 3, pages 356-358).

v11-12 Obscure natural symbolism. If a donkey or donkey's foal were tied to a grapevine, it would quickly destroy the vine to escape. Perhaps that is the implication: that the peace of Judah's reign as leader of Israel will cause such a pervasive change among the natural world that even donkeys will be passive and easy to entreat (cp. Isa. 11:6-9).

The wine and milk of v. 12 could be a reference to the blessings of abundance that attend a righteous ruler and a covenant-following Israel, cf. Lev. 26:5, Deut. 28:4. See Deut. 32:14 for similar imagery applied more generally to Israel.

13 zebulun shall dwell at the haven of the sea; and he shall be for an haven of ships; and his border shall be unto zidon.

v13 Jacob pronounces an apparently neutral statement on Zebulun. Prior to this passage there has literally been nothing descriptive about the man Zebulun aside from his birth and sons. We know nothing about this man at all.

**14 Issachar is a strong ass couching down between two burdens:
15 And he saw that rest was good, and the land that it was pleasant; and bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant unto tribute.**

v14-15 Jacob pronounces a neutral or possibly favorable blessing on Issachar. Again, we know nothing about Issachar, but this seems to suggest he is a hard worker.

**16 Dan shall judge his people, as one of the tribes of Israel.
17 Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder in the path, that biteth the horse heels, so that his rider shall fall backward.
18 I have waited for thy salvation, O LORD.**

v16-18 Dan will be a leader among his people (v. 16), but not a great leader (v. 17) like Judah. Jacob awaits the salvation of

this group of sons to be revealed by the Lord (v. 18), because it has not been revealed to him thus far.

v18 Noah similarly appeals to the Lord in 9:26 and 27 when cursing Canaan, he invokes the blessings of the Lord their God on Shem and Japheth.

In this case with Jacob, it seems likely Jacob is invoking a blessing on Dan as the leaders of this group of sons which he himself is not presently aware of. In the case of Judah, Jacob blesses him to take over the blessing of leadership among the sons of Israel, which was previously granted to Jacob and Joseph. And Joseph is being blessed as inheriting all of the sons of the Gentiles through Ephraim, as was documented in the preceding chapter. However, Jacob has apparently not received any specific revelation concerning Dan's leadership, so he invokes a blessing from the Lord on his behalf.

19 Gad, a troop shall overcome him: but he shall overcome at the last.

v19 Jacob blesses Gad to overcome the adversity he will face, ultimately succeeding. We know nothing about Gad.

20 out of Asher his bread shall be fat, and he shall yield royal dainties.

v20 Jacob apparently blesses Asher with material success. Perhaps he was a skilled baker? We know nothing about Asher.

21 Naphtali is a hind let loose: he giveth goodly words.

v21 Jacob apparently blesses Naphtali with grace and eloquence. We know nothing about Naphtali.

An alternative translation to "he giveth goodly words" is "that bears beautiful fawns". Many English translations off the latter over the former.

22 Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well; whose branches run over the wall: 23 The archers have sorely grieved him, and shot at him, and hated him: 24 But his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob; (from thence is the shepherd, the stone of Israel:) 25 Even by the God of thy father, who shall help thee; and by the Almighty, who shall bless thee with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lieth under, blessings of the breasts, and of the womb: 26 The

blessings of thy father have prevailed above the blessings of my progenitors unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills: they shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of him that was separate from his brethren.

v22-26 Jacob reiterates the blessings from the previous chapter where all of the nations of the earth will be adopted through Ephraim.

v22 The Hebrew is obscure, the verse can be [variously translated](#):

Joseph is a wild ass,
A wild add by a spring
-Wild colts on a hillside. (JPS)

Joseph is a young bull,
a young bull by a spring,
who strides with oxen. (CEB)

Joseph, you are a fruitful vine
growing near a stream and
climbing a wall. (CEV)

Joseph is a growing son,
a growing son and comely to behold;
the daughters run to and fro upon the wall. (DRA)

Joseph is a fruitful tree beside a fountain.
His branches shade the wall. (TLB)

Which reading the translator favors is probably based on how they read the rest of the verses related to Joseph.

²⁷ Benjamin shall ravin as a wolf: in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil.

v27 Jacob's blessing seemingly suggests Benjamin will be successful militarily. But, again, as with the other neutral blessings, we know nothing about the man Benjamin. He does figure in as a hostage in ch. 42-45, but there is no comment on his personality, reaction or response.

²⁸ All these are the twelve tribes of Israel: and this is it that their father spake unto them, and blessed them; every one

according to his blessing he blessed them. ²⁹ And he charged them, and said unto them,

I am to be gathered unto my people: bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, ³⁰ In the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field of Ephron the Hittite for a possession of a buryingplace. ³¹ There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife; there they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife; and there I buried Leah. ³² The purchase of the field and of the cave that is therein was from the children of Heth.

³³ And when Jacob had made an end of commanding his sons, he gathered up his feet into the bed, and yielded up the ghost, and was gathered unto his people.

v28-33 These twelve sons become the twelve tribes (v. 28). Jacob tells them (v. 29) that when he dies he is to be buried in the same cave as his father and grandfather (v. 30-32, cf. 23:17-20, 25:9, 35:29). After completing the blessing, Jacob dies shortly afterwards (v. 33).

v33 "gathered unto his people", the standard description in Genesis of dying and meeting your forebears in the afterlife, cp. 25:8, 25:17, 35:29. Also cp. Num. 20:24-26, Num. 27:13, Deut. 32:50.

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