Jacob Blesses His Sons

Last week we discussed how Jacob gave a special blessing to Joseph’s sons, an honor not given to his other grandsons. As we previously studied in chapter 32, while God gave Jacob the new name Israel after they wrestled all night, Jacob continued to be mostly referred to by his original name. We saw the exception to that in chapter 48 as he was mostly named Israel. It is significant that he is referred to by both names early in chapter 49. The chapter begins with Jacob calling his sons to his side as he was near death. He calls his sons sons of Jacob and tells them to listen to their father Israel. What follows is in part personally addressed to each son and partially Jacob’s prophecy about the 12 tribes of Israel so he is speaking to them as their father as well as the father of the future nation of Israel. He begins with Reuben who was his first son born to Leah. He initially says that Reuben excels in honor and power then tempers the blessing with reproach for Reuben’s sin. Reuben had forfeited his birthright as first born by laying with Bilhah who was Rachel’s maidservant (see 30:3). As we discussed last week, Reuben’s birthright was taken away and given to Joseph’s sons (see 1st Ch 5:1-2).

Next Jacob addresses Simeon and Levi together (all others addressed individually). The reason for this is they together killed an entire village of men as retribution for the rape of their sister. They compounded their sin by using God’s sacred rite of circumcision as a subterfuge to disable the men they killed (see chapter 34). Jacob makes the puzzling statement “I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel”. Ellicott’s commentary notes that the tribe of Simeon dwindled from 59,300 men to 22,000 and they eventually were absorbed into the tribe of Judah. The Levites were disbursed among the other tribes because they were the tribe of the priesthood and did not receive an allotment of land for themselves.

Jacob then moves on to Judah upon whom he bestows a rich blessing. This was not because Judah deserved it, indeed he was a sinful man as evidenced by his sordid affair with Tamar who was his son’s widow (see chapter 38j). The reason for this honor is that Jesus descended from Judah (see Matt. chapter 1 and Luke chapter 3 for the genealogy of Jesus). Jacob predicts that the scepter (the mark of a ruler) would not leave Judah until it passed to the one to whom it belongs. The KJV makes it clear that this is Jesus with the statement “until Shiloh com”. David Guzik noted that from David through the Herods, prince from Judah was over Israel even during captivity. The mention of clothes washed in wine refers to the abundant land the tribe of Judah occupied and is also symbolic of clothes being washed white by the blood of Jesus. Jacob calls Judah a lion and in Revelation 5:5 Jesus is called the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.

Jacob then addresses the following sons: Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher and Naphtali. As we previously noted, there is no dialogue or action related to these sons mentioned in the Bible and Jacob’s prophecy about their heritage is brief and addresses mainly the territories their tribes would occupy.

Guzik notes the following:

Zebulun’s tribe would occupy land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee.

Issachar is a strong donkey. Issachar was a large tribe - third in size according to the Numbers 26 census. Because of their size and abundance, they were often targets of oppressive foreign armies who put them into servitude. Thus, they became a band of slaves.

Dan shall judge his people: The tribe of Dan did judge his people. They supplied one of the most prominent of the Judges, Samson. Dan shall be a serpent by the way. But Dan was a troublesome tribe. They introduced idolatry into Israel (Judges 18:30) Jeroboam set up one of his idolatrous golden calves in Dan and later Dan became a center of idol worship in Israel.

Gad: He shall triumph at last. Gad supplied many fine troops for David (1st Chron 12:14)

Asher: He shall yield royal dainties. This would be a rich tribe. In Deut. 33:24 Moses prophesied “Asher is most blessed of sons, let him be favored by his brothers and let him dip his foot in oil.”

Naphtali is a deer let loose. The KJV adds “he giveth goodly words”. Naphtali's land was in a key portion near the Sea of Galilee, the region where Jesus did much of His teaching and ministry.

Joseph is a fruitful vine. As fitting for his favorite son, Jacob’s blessing for Joseph was the longest and most generous promising the blessings of the heavens above. He also refers to Joseph as the prince among his brothers.

Benjamin is a ravenous wolf. Guzik notes this tribe had a reputation for fierceness in battle.

After blessing his sons, he instructed them to bury him in the family burial plot Abraham had purchased in Canaan. The chapter ends with the death of Jacob who Guzik noted was the last of the great patriarchs.