

I've Got Twelve More Things To Say

Genesis 49:1-33 March 8, 2023

Fantasy tales often have a scene where the heroes receive specific items that come into play later. Tolkien fans remember the gifts Galadriel gave to the Fellowship of the Ring. In the land of Narnia, Father Christmas bestows each of the Pevensie siblings a weapon and a piece of equipment.

As a youngster, I would think about which items I'd want to receive if I was in the story. I mean, Aragorn gets the Elfstone. Sam gets a wooden box. Of course, you learn that box was full of earth from Galadriel's orchard and a seed with a silver shell which would grow into the "only Mallorn [tree] west of the mountains and east of the sea."¹

In Jacob's final moments, he gives each of his sons a parting word. His messages apply not just to their immediate families, but far into the future when the people of Israel would grow into a great nation of tribes. Jacob's last speech is the first long-form poem in the Bible.² Let's take a look.

Genesis 49:1-2 - Then Jacob called his sons and said, "Gather around, and I will tell you what will happen to you in the days to come. ²Come together and listen, sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel:

Both of Jacob's names are used in this poem. These men were more than just sons of Jacob, they were part of *Israel* - the special, consecrated family through whom God was going to send the Deliverer of all mankind - the peculiar people through whom all nations would be blessed. Each of these men would have to decide if they believed what God said and live accordingly.

Jacob used the phrase "in the days to come." This term is used over a dozen times in the Old Testament, always in a prophetic context.³ It looks all the way forward to the Messianic Kingdom, but it can also speak of things that were future to the speaker but past to us. Jacob's vision intermingles elements from the conquest of Canaan all the way into the Millennium.⁴ That is a common feature of Biblical prophecy - where there will be a more immediate, partial fulfillment, but also an ultimate fulfillment at the end of the age.

Did the sons *want* to hear this prophecy? Do *we*? God gives prophecy because He loves to reveal Himself and because He does all He can so people might know Him and believe Him and go His way. We are invited to listen in to God's forecast of the future just as Jacob's sons were.

Genesis 49:3-4 - ³Reuben, you are my firstborn, my strength and the firstfruits of my virility, excelling in prominence, excelling in power. ⁴Turbulent as water, you will not excel, because you got into your father's bed and you defiled it—he got into my bed.

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien *The Lord of the Rings, The Return of the King, "The Grey Havens"*

² Gordon Wenham *Word Biblical Commentary Volume 2: Genesis 16-50*

³ Andrew Steinmann *Genesis: An Introduction And Commentary*

⁴ Carl Armerding *The Last Words Of Jacob: Genesis 49*

Reuben joins the sad list of firstborns ruined by sin alongside Cain, Ishmael, Esau, and Er. He had a lot of potential. He excelled in prominence and power, but he lacked character. He sinned with Bilhah and we remember how he put the lives of his own boys as collateral in Genesis 42.

God cares about *character*, not *capability*. He doesn't need your prominence or your power or your talent. He's looking for humility. He's looking for Godliness. It is men and women of character that He lifts up and causes to excel.

Jacob describes Reuben as "turbulent." The term can mean reckless behavior,⁵ instability, and wildness as much as weakness.⁶ Reuben was spiritually unstable and his life spiraled out of control. Spiritual stability is important. The New Testament talks to us about this - about the importance of not being blown about in our spiritual lives - about being rooted and anchored in the truth.

This prophecy came true. Reuben's tribe would produce no prophets, no priests, no judges, no kings.⁷ The only famous Reubenites were Dathan and Abiram, who rebelled against Moses.

Genesis 49:5-7 - ⁵ Simeon and Levi are brothers; their knives are vicious weapons. ⁶ May I never enter their council; may I never join their assembly. For in their anger they kill men, and on a whim they hamstring oxen. ⁷ Their anger is cursed, for it is strong, and their fury, for it is cruel! I will disperse them throughout Jacob and scatter them throughout Israel.

In Genesis 34, Simeon and Levi butchered the men of Shechem. It was a shocking event, unsanctioned by the Lord. According to Jacob, there seemed to be an element of pleasure in it. They delighted in violence. It was a whim and fancy for them.

Jacob was right when he said they would be scattered throughout Israel. The Levites, of course, would live in cities throughout the other tribes. Simeon's portion was within the territory of Judah and was slowly absorbed. At the end of the wilderness wandering Simeon was the smallest and weakest of the tribes. They're not included Moses' blessing of the tribes in Deuteronomy 33.

But then, why does the tribe of Levi seem to fare so much better? These brothers give us a great object lesson: Two sinners, both deserving of their father's curse. But even though they were both guilty, there was a chance for redemption.

In Exodus 32, there is a moment where Moses calls out, "Whoever is for the Lord, come to me." And all the Levites gathered around him.⁸ They stood for the Lord *despite* what their brothers were doing. So, God redeemed that tribe. He changed their future from cursing to blessing. Simeon did *not* make that stand, and so went their way without that tribal redemption.

⁵ Kenneth A Mathews *Genesis 11:27-50:26*

⁶ Derek Kidner *Genesis*

⁷ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

⁸ Exodus 32:26

Now remember, all the sons of Jacob heard these words. Jacob is laying all this sin and judgment out on the table. "I thought this was a blessing ceremony?" It's rough for the first three sons. Now Jacob turns to Judah - the one who had the idea to sell Joseph into slavery. The one who had all that unpleasantness in chapter 38 with Tamar. What would Jacob say to *him*?

Genesis 49:8-9 - ⁸ Judah, your brothers will praise you. Your hand will be on the necks of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down to you. ⁹ Judah is a young lion—my son, you return from the kill. He crouches; he lies down like a lion or a lioness—who dares to rouse him?

Jacob's words for Judah are full of blessing and praise and greatness. Jacob identifies him as the kingly ruler not only of Israel, but all the peoples of the world.

Why did he get blessing when his older brothers got cursing? The difference between them was *repentance*. We've seen how Judah was transformed in heart and life because he repented and decided to go God's way.

Biblical Hebrew has five different terms for lion.⁹ Jacob uses one here that means the king of the beasts. Much of what he has to say about Judah is, in fact, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the King of Kings, the One Whose reign will never end.

Genesis 49:10-12 - ¹⁰ The scepter will not depart from Judah or the staff from between his feet until he whose right it is comes and the obedience of the peoples belongs to him. ¹¹ He ties his donkey to a vine, and the colt of his donkey to the choice vine. He washes his clothes in wine and his robes in the blood of grapes. ¹² His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth are whiter than milk.

Is it a prophetic problem that after *starting* to reign as kings, the sons of Judah were deposed and exiled into Babylon? Ezekiel references the lion being captured and "put in a Babylonian zoo."¹⁰

The answer is that the *right* to rule has still not departed, and the greatest Son of Judah is going to return one day to take what belongs to Him and to establish His forever Kingdom on the earth.

When He does, there will be so much abundance that you could park your donkey next to the vine and not even worry if he ate a ton of the grapes.¹¹ There will be a worldwide overflow of bounty, specifically pictured here by wine and vineyards.

This gives us a powerful perspective on that first miracle Jesus worked in Cana when He turned water into wine. It wasn't just kindness to the people at a wedding. He was demonstrating that, not only was He the Lamb of God, He was also the Lion of Judah - the One Who fulfills Jacob's prophecy. And He was giving us a tiny glimpse of what His Kingdom will be like.

⁹ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

¹⁰ Wenham

¹¹ Mathews

Derek Kidner says this about verses 11 and 12: “Every line of these verses speaks of exuberant, intoxicating abundance: it is the Golden Age of the Coming One.” There is a deliberate excess in the Lord’s Kingdom, where we say goodbye to sweat and thorns and are met with extravagant feasting with the greatest King.¹²

Genesis 49:13 - ¹³Zebulun will live by the seashore and will be a harbor for ships, and his territory will be next to Sidon.

Zebulun’s land was 10 miles from the shore. Coastal trade routes flowed through it.¹³ It’s also possible that Jacob is referring to the tribal land in the Millennial Kingdom, described in Ezekiel 48.

Genesis 49:14-15 - ¹⁴Issachar is a strong donkey lying down between the saddlebags. ¹⁵He saw that his resting place was good and that the land was pleasant, so he leaned his shoulder to bear a load and became a forced laborer.

It’s unclear whether this is positive or negative. We hear “forced laborer” and that seems bad, but there’s no reference to sin. 1 Chronicles speaks positively of Issachar.¹⁴ Jacob may mean they became very hard workers. The *Organization for Economic Co-operation And Development* ranks the USA as 7th hardest working among their 38 member countries. Mexico is ranked as number 1, with the average worker clocking in 337 more hours each year than the average American.¹⁵

Genesis 49:16-18 - ¹⁶Dan will judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. ¹⁷Dan will be a snake by the road, a viper beside the path, that bites the horse’s heels so that its rider falls backward. ¹⁸I wait for your salvation, Lord.

Jacob sees a lot of trouble on the horizon for some of his sons. He pauses to pray for the Lord’s salvation, reminding himself and his boys that no matter how strong they were, they needed the Lord’s protection and provision and intervention if there were going to survive.

Interestingly, verse 18 is the first and only use of the word “salvation” in Genesis, and it is the *last* use of the name Yahweh.¹⁶ There is one place and only place only to find salvation.

Genesis 49:19 - ¹⁹Gad will be attacked by raiders, but he will attack their heels.

One reason Gad would have so much trouble is because they decided to settle *outside* of Canaan in what scholars call the Transjordan. They would be attacked by the Ammonites, Moabites, Arameans, and Assyrians. As a result, they became skilled guerrilla fighters, but at great cost.¹⁷

¹² Kidner

¹³ *ESV Study Bible Notes*

¹⁴ 1 Chronicles 12:32

¹⁵ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/hardest-working-countries>

¹⁶ Steinmann

¹⁷ Waltke

Genesis 49:20 - ²⁰ Asher's food will be rich, and he will produce royal delicacies.

When Moses gives a list of blessings to the tribes in Deuteronomy 33, he calls Asher the *most* blessed and *most* favored among the brothers. And, it's true, they became super wealthy in the land. But, money can't fix everything - especially spiritual problems. As a tribe they were unable to drive out the Canaanites and so they simply settled among them.¹⁸ Disaster was the result.

Genesis 49:21 - ²¹ Naphtali is a doe set free that bears beautiful fawns.

Naphtali is described in terms of fruitfulness and growth. Moses would later say, "Naphtali, enjoy[s] approval, full of the Lord's blessing."¹⁹

Finally, we get to Joseph - Jacob's favorite. We have to imagine that Joseph must have wondered what his dad was going to say. Because, even though he had been given the birthright in the last chapter, he just heard Jacob say that *Judah* was going to be the ruler of Israel and the world. That would've been a strange thing to hear when you, Joseph, are *actually* one of the world's most powerful rulers and when you think your tribe is going to be the preeminent one.

Genesis 49:22-26 - ²² Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine beside a spring; its branches climb over the wall. ²³ The archers attacked him, shot at him, and were hostile toward him. ²⁴ Yet his bow remained steady, and his strong arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, ²⁵ by the God of your father who helps you, and by the Almighty who blesses you with blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep that lies below, and blessings of the breasts and the womb. ²⁶ The blessings of your father excel the blessings of my ancestors and the bounty of the ancient hills. May they rest on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the prince of his brothers.

Joseph would be prince, *not* king. In fact, the term Jacob used for prince is *never* used of a king, but for something or someone set aside for special acts.²⁰ Joseph would have to accept the fact that his line was *not* chosen to rule. Still, his calling was magnificent. We see him described here as a thriving plant, fed by a vibrant stream.²¹ We see that God was on his side giving him strength and victory. We see the word "bless" being used over and over, with Joseph pictured as enduring and on the move and adapting and winning victories. But the throne wasn't for him.

You and I are princes and princesses, but *the throne* belongs to King Jesus. We are blessed, filled, glorified by God, set aside for special acts, but there is One King and it's not us, it's the Lord.

Genesis 49:27 - ²⁷ Benjamin is a wolf; he tears his prey. In the morning he devours the prey, and in the evening he divides the plunder."

¹⁸ Judges 1:31-32

¹⁹ Deuteronomy 33:23

²⁰ Waltke

²¹ Mathews

The tribe of Benjamin was known for their bravery and skill in war. In Judges 20 we see them fighting as a pack and able to hold off the other 11 tribes for a while. They would supply the first king of Israel, but of course, it wasn't *their* place and so his line would not endure.

Genesis 49:28 - ²⁸These are the tribes of Israel, twelve in all, and this is what their father said to them. He blessed them, and he blessed each one with a suitable blessing.

One commentator asked whether the first three sons agreed with verse 28. The truth is, it's a blessing to be told the truth, even if it stings. The truth will set us free.

Now that the poem was over, was everything locked in stone? Were these tribes "destined" to do *only* these things? Joel Heck writes, "*Jacob predicted how things would turn out for each of his sons and their descendants, should they continue to display the character they had displayed thus far.*"²² While some elements were certain, there was still chance for success or for failure, depending on how the families developed in their walk with the Lord. Judah and Levi are our examples.

Genesis 49:29-33 - ²⁹Then he commanded them, "I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my ancestors in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hethite. ³⁰The cave is in the field of Machpelah near Mamre, in the land of Canaan. This is the field Abraham purchased from Ephron the Hethite as burial property. ³¹Abraham and his wife Sarah are buried there, Isaac and his wife Rebekah are buried there, and I buried Leah there. ³²The field and the cave in it were purchased from the Hethites." ³³When Jacob had finished giving charges to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed, took his last breath, and was gathered to his people.

There's a lovely reminder that we have people gathered in love around us here and we have people waiting for us in eternity. As Christians, we are part of an amazing family of God that is being built day by day, where those who have gone before are ready to welcome us home.

After so many years of heartbreak, Leah is finally elevated. But, even here, Jacob couldn't bring himself to call her his wife.²³

This passage is not a prophecy for the Church or for Gentiles except in very limited aspects. But there are a few devotional applications we can make from the broad strokes.

First, we notice that, at the end of his life, Jacob was a blessing machine. He blessed Pharaoh. He blessed Joseph. He blessed Ephraim and Manasseh. He blessed his sons. But, being a blessing did *not* mean that he overlooked or accepted or celebrated their sin. Much the contrary. He delivered the truth in love, and we should too.

²² Joel Heck *A History of Interpretation of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33*

²³ Meir Sternberg *The Poetics Of Biblical Narrative*

Second, when we consider the first three sons and how they received cursing instead of blessing, we have to remind ourselves that it wasn't because Jacob was mad, it was because they had embraced sin. Going back to the analogy at the beginning - in *The Lion, The Witch, And The Wardrobe*, when the gifts are handed out by Father Christmas, Edmund receives nothing because he had given into greed and jealousy. He joined the White Witch and then became her prisoner as a result. In the end he is redeemed, but the cost was high and he forfeited some of those gifts.

Repent of your sin and be set free. Walk with God and receive the overflow of His gifts and power. If you made a mistake in your past, turn from it and be washed by God's life-changing redemption. Move forward with Him toward a glorious future.

The story of *Jacob's* life ends in Genesis 49. The story of *Israel* continues to this day. We look forward to many of these prophecies being fulfilled by our Lord in His Millennial Kingdom, where we will rule with Him, feast with Him, and glory in Him forever.