

A Summary Of Jacob's Last Words To His Sons

by: Hugo Bouter

Genesis 49

The order of Jacob's sons in Genesis 49

As appears from the table below, the order of their blessings in the last words of the patriarch is only partially identical with their order of birth:

	Genesis 29, 30, 35 (birth)	Genesis 49 (blessing)
1.	Reuben (Leah)	Reuben
2.	Simeon (Leah)	Simeon
3.	Levi (Leah)	Levi
4.	Judah (Leah)	Judah
5.	Dan (Bilhah)	Zebulun
6.	Naphtali (Bilhah)	Issachar
7.	Gad (Zilpah)	Dan
8.	Asher (Zilpah)	Gad
9.	Issachar (Leah)	Asher
10.	Zebulun (Leah)	Naphtali
11.	Joseph (Rachel)	Joseph
12.	Benjamin (Rachel)	Benjamin

In blessing his sons, Jacob first addressed the sons of Leah, putting Zebulun before Issachar. Then the sons of the maids follow, of whom Naphtali is the one mentioned last. Both sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid, are given a place between the two sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid. Finally, we have Joseph and Benjamin: the two sons of Rachel, the wife whom Jacob loved more than Leah and for whom he served his father-in-law Laban another seven years.

This order agrees with the rules of the birthright as they were set down by Moses later on (Deut. 21:15-17). For the son of the loved wife could not be favoured at the expense of the firstborn, who was the son of the unloved. The fact that Reuben did forfeit his birthright was entirely his own fault. He had gone up to his father's bed and committed adultery with Bilhah, his

father's concubine and therefore he was deprived of his privileges (Gen. 35:22; 49:3-4; 1 Chr. 5:1-2).

The position linked with the birthright went to Judah, the fourth son of Leah (Simeon and Levi were passed over because of their violence against the inhabitants of Shechem). The wealth linked with it, however - the firstborn was entitled to a double portion of the inheritance - went to Joseph, the first son of Rachel, the loved one. Or rather it went to Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's sons, whom Jacob had blessed previously and more or less adopted as his own sons (Gen. 48). Thus Ephraim and Manasseh obtained a place of their own among the tribes of Israel (Deut. 33:17). So we see that both Judah and Joseph are given a prominent place in the blessings of Jacob, Judah receiving the position of a ruler and Joseph the wealth laid up for the firstborn.

It is also remarkable that - unlike Ishmael in the story of Abraham - the sons of the maids do not take a separate or inferior place here, but are blessed together with the other sons of Jacob. Of Ishmael God said that the son of the maid should by no means be an heir with the son of the free woman (Gen. 21:8-21). From this principle Paul draws the conclusion that there is a clear distinction between Jews and Christians, between people in slavery and people who are free (Gal. 4:21-31). They are separately blessed. But in the blessings of Jacob the distinction between Israel and the Church does not play a role. While Abraham is the "father" of both a heavenly and an earthly offspring, Jacob is more especially the progenitor of Israel after the flesh. Jacob's twelve sons give a complete picture of God's earthly people. In accordance with God's governmental ways they are blessed together, for in Scripture the number twelve is always connected with God's rule over all His people.

Now if the order of Jacob's sons in Genesis 49 is determined neither by the order of their birth nor by the order of their mothers, what principle is used here? The answer is that prophetic and spiritual factors are taken into account as well, which render these blessings a splendid picture of the history of Israel until the last days.

A prophetic history of Israel and of the world

I am convinced that this chapter also gives a brief outline of man's history as a whole, because this is really centred around Israel. In the first three sons we see how natural man failed right from the beginning. Reuben was guided by his lusts, while Simeon and Levi used means of violence. These two evils, inner corruption and outward violence, have been the two principal evils ever since the fall of man. Time and again, these things can be found in both the history of mankind and that of Israel. The sin of Adam and Eve was their lust, the sin of Cain his violence, and they had to be driven out of God's presence. The judgment of the flood was caused by the subsequent corruption and violence that filled the earth.

But after the flood there was no apparent improvement. Man wanted to make a name for himself and started worshipping idols; we also hear about Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord. Then, with the calling of Abraham, God made a new start in that He separated a nation from the other nations in order that it should serve Him and belong to Him alone. However, Israel's history too, was one of sad failure, in the wilderness as well as in the Promised Land. Corruption and violence marked the last chapters of the Book of Judges and the first chapters of First Samuel. But then God brought relief through king David, whose birth is mentioned in the Book of Ruth.

This period in Israel's history is reflected in Jacob's prophecy concerning Judah, the royal tribe, where nothing but praise is heard (Judah means "praise"). It was a Golden Age for Israel, when the nations around them were subdued. The words of Jacob about Shiloh (meaning "he who brings rest") probably refer in the first place to Solomon, the king of peace. But it is obvious that they reach far beyond him, as is shown by the words that the sceptre would not depart from Judah until the arrival of Shiloh, to whom the obedience of the peoples would be.

This prophecy concerning Shiloh is therefore a Messianic prophecy. Judah was to have a prominent role until the coming of Christ, though later on this was limited to the kingdom of the two tribes and reduced to an even lesser degree after the return from the Babylonian captivity. To Christ the nations have even now become obedient by the obedience of faith (Rom. 16:26). Yet we have to conclude that this prophecy extends further into the future. Our Lord was rejected and the time of universal peace and prosperity about which Jacob spoke was postponed until Christ's second coming. Then He will reign as the Prince of Peace and His dominion will be to the ends of the earth.

Then we see what happened after the prosperous times of David and Solomon and also after the rejection of the Messiah: assimilation with and subjugation to the nations, ending in complete apostasy. This is shown in type in Zebulun, Issachar and Dan. Here again, the

prophecy has a twofold import, a historical one and a future one. Israel came gradually under the influence of the surrounding nations, which resulted in their subjugation to these nations (e.g., Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia) and in serving the idols.

Here we find Zebulun in connection with "the sea of peoples and nations" (cf. Isa. 17:12-13; Rev. 17:15). Zebulun (meaning "dwelling") was fully orientated towards the nations and to Sidon especially, from which the worship of Baal originated which was brought to Israel by king Ahab (1 Ki. 16:31-33). Issachar (meaning "hire" or "wages") then submitted to forced labour and became a slave. In Dan (meaning "judge") the power of the serpent (that is, Satan) was fully embodied, so that Israel was brought down and rendered powerless. Scripture often connects the tribe of Dan with idolatry (Judg. 18; 1 Ki. 12:29-30). Israel left the one true God and finally rejected the Messiah when He came to them in the form of a Servant. This marked the end of the history of Israel and of the first man in his responsibility. It had become one great fiasco and only the salvation of the LORD could bring relief (v. 18). This salvation was manifested (and seen by faith) in the cross and in the resurrection of Christ.

Then there is also a future aspect in verse 18 regarding the salvation and restoration of Israel. Jacob's short prayer is the turning point of this chapter. After Christ's rejection, the above process of decline and apostasy repeated itself. Israel was dispersed among the nations, having become more and more dependent on them, and this has been their situation until today. Now we come to the future application of these verses. Dan is a type of the antichrist who will reign over ("judge") Israel with the support of the head of the revived Roman empire and of Satan himself (Rev. 13). Idolatry will then reach an all-time high and the faithful remnant of Israel will wait anxiously for the intervention of God's salvation.

At that point God will bring about a change in the lot of His people. In answer to the prayer of verse 18 He will reveal His salvation. Dan marks the absolute low point and from there on Israel's history takes a turn for the better. Gad, Asher and Naphtali show the results of God's salvation in the end time. Gad (meaning "troop") is still being endangered by hostile troops, but in the end he is victorious and drives the enemy out of the land (cf. Mic. 4:14-5:8). Asher (meaning "happy") enjoys an abundance of food and shares it with others. Naphtali (meaning "my wrestling") rejoices in the freedom of the victor and sings the song of salvation.

Finally, Joseph and Benjamin give a twofold picture of the glory of Christ in the millennium. Joseph (meaning "He will add") is a special type of the Messiah who was rejected by His brothers; but exalted by God to sit at His right hand, thereby becoming the Saviour of the world. The Father is pleased with Him and He receives the richest blessings. Benjamin (meaning "son of the right hand") is more typical of the earthly aspect of Christ's reign. At His appearing and the dawn of the Kingdom, Christ will destroy all His enemies. He must

reign until the last enemy, namely death, has been abolished at the end of the Kingdom (1 Cor. 15:24), "in the evening" (Gen. 49:27 NASB), and the millennium will give place to the eternal state.

To sum up, the first three sons of Jacob show us natural man's corruption. Reuben (meaning "see, a son") behaved as an unworthy son, and Simeon (meaning "heard") and Levi (meaning "attached") were brothers in evil. Three sons are special types of Christ and show us how He intervenes: first Judah and finally Joseph and Benjamin. The meanings of their names and of the others have been given already. The third group of three - Zebulun, Issachar and Dan - marks the downward line of Israel's decline and ultimate apostasy (and also the apostasy of the last days). In the last group of three - Gad, Asher and Naphtali - we have an upward line again, and we learn how Israel will be restored and will see the salvation of the Lord. Genesis 49 is a prophetic history, of which several parts have already been fulfilled in the course of Israel's existence, while other parts with an added prophetic value are still awaiting their fulfilment in the end time.

A history of the Church

I am convinced that this chapter also contains important teaching regarding the history of the Church, for the whole of the Old Testament was written for our instruction (Rom. 15:4). Because of the rejection of Messiah, Israel was temporarily put aside and God now has the Christian testimony here on earth. It has failed as much as God's ancient people.

The first four sons of Jacob show the characteristic blessings which God had bestowed originally upon His people:

- (1) The blessing of sonship (Reuben);
- (2) The blessing of the Spirit's guidance and of hearing God's Word (Simeon);
- (3) The blessing of fellowship with God and with fellow-believers (Levi);
- (4) The blessing of worshipping in spirit and truth in recognition of the authority of Christ, who sings God's praises in the midst of His brethren (Judah).

If we follow the history of Christendom we see that these privileges were soon lost sight of. Jacob's sons did not really deserve their beautiful names, and likewise, the life of the Church often contradicted its high calling. Christians have mingled with the world at the price of subjection to the world, as is seen in Zebulun (meaning "dwelling") and Issachar (meaning "hire" or "wages"). Therefore Christ reproached the church in Pergamos with the words: "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is" (Rev. 2:13).

In defiance of its heavenly calling, the Church has become an important outward power here on earth, and

therefore the world and "the woman Jezebel" (i.e. popery) have ruled over it. In Revelation 2 this also culminates in idolatry, which in Genesis 49 is seen in the tribe of Dan. Jezebel's influence is found again in the end time in idolatrous Babylon the great (Rev. 17 and 18). Here nominal Christendom shows itself to be heading for judgment.

In this situation only God can show a way out. Therefore the prayer of those who remain faithful to the Word and the Name of Christ is, "I have waited for Your salvation, O LORD!" Even in the darkest hours there is a victorious remnant (Gad overcomes his enemies). They rejoice in abundant spiritual food (bread from Asher shall be rich) and have struggled out of the grasp of worldly and Judaistic influences (Naphtali is a deer let loose). They will share the glory of Christ who is the Firstborn among many brethren (Joseph is the one who was separate from his brothers, or the one distinguished among his brothers). They will also reign with Him here on earth and sit with Him on His throne (Benjamin shall divide the spoil). Thus the blessings which have been lost sight of in the beginning become the portion of a faithful remnant that is waiting for the full revelation of God's salvation in the second coming of Christ.

Stages of spiritual growth

Apart from this, Genesis 49 contains valuable lessons for ourselves as individual believers. Our history as children and sons of God is not always flawless, as is shown in type in the first three sons of Jacob. The first lesson we learn is that "the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual" (1 Cor. 15:46). In spite of all the privileges granted to us, our old self can be a great hindrance. Although we do recognize Christ's authority in our lives (Judah and Shiloh), we can be enslaved by the world, the law and sin (Zebulun, Issachar and Dan). Our need then leads to the prayer for the intervention of God's salvation: "I have waited for Your salvation" (v. 18). We learn from experience that we cannot expect anything good from ourselves and that only God can bring relief.

The New Testament counterpart of this short prayer of Jacob is the exclamation in Romans 7:24 - "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" But the darkest hour is just before dawn. And just as the prophecy of Jacob takes a turn for the better from this critical point, the believer is blessed once his eyes have been opened to the fullness of salvation in Christ and to the fact that he has been set free from the law of sin and death. So he learns to thank God, for he changes from a slave into a free man, and from a loser into a victor. Romans 8 depicts the Christian's victorious life in the power of the Spirit of God.

Now this is exactly what we find in the next three sons of Jacob. Gad overcomes the enemies besieging him. Asher shows the abundant life which is the victor's

portion. His bread is rich and he yields royal dainties: he is able to let others share in his abundance. The picture is completed by Naphtali, who depicts the freedom and the joy of the believer after the struggle of Romans 7. He is a deer let loose and gives beautiful words. He sings the song of praise of Christian liberty and cries, "Abba, Father!"

This process of spiritual growth finally reaches its height in that Christ Himself is seen in the believer. Living by the Spirit conforms us to the image of God's Son (cf. Rom. 8:14,29). This is shown in type by the last two sons of Jacob, Joseph and Benjamin, beautiful types of the Lord Jesus.

Christ Himself is the climax of our blessing, the crown of our happiness. In Joseph we see Him both in His

rejection and in His exaltation, and our lives should be in agreement with this. On the one hand Christ in His utter humiliation is our model (Phil. 2); on the other hand Christ in His heavenly glory is the goal of all our ambitions (Phil. 3). If He is formed in us in this way, our life will be more and more under the Lordship of the Man at God's right hand, who allows us to partake in the results of His victory (Benjamin shall divide the spoil).

Thus we reach spiritual maturity - which is so often mentioned in the New Testament - and the image of Christ is clearly seen in us (cf. 1 Cor. 3:1-3; Gal. 4:19; Eph. 4:12-16; Col. 1:28).

HB 15-11-2005