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The Family of Abraham: Part 39—The Testament of Jacob

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I discuss Genesis 49 and Israel's prophetic statements concerning his twelve tribes.

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Transcript

Welcome back to this, the 39th in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. Today we're beginning the final week of this series and we've arrived at what is arguably the hardest chapter in the whole of the Bible to interpret. There are so many linguistic and other conundrums in here of interpretation that there is little chance that what you hear in the next while is going to be entirely correct.

A lot of it is going to be just my supposition, where my mind leans at the moment, and there will be many things that people who are far better commentators and linguists than I could ever be will differ with me sharply upon. So, with that said, let's get into the chapter. The chapter here is the Testament of Jacob, where Jacob blesses and declares the future concerning his sons.

We have a few other instances of something similar to this in scripture. At the end of Moses' life, in Deuteronomy chapter 33, there is a poem concerning the tribes of Israel. In the end of David's life, there is a psalm as he looks back upon God's deliverances over the course of his life.

There might also be some parallels with the Song of Deborah in Judges 5, with the roll call of the tribes. And then also Noah's judgment upon his sons in Genesis chapter 9, and what follows in chapter 10 with the 70 nations. There is a foreshadowing of the future within that occasion, and there is the same thing here.

And so there is a larger background of biblical material that we can use comparatively to get some greater sense upon what is taking place here. And perhaps the useful for that is Deuteronomy chapter 33, which is the nearest in form and content to this specific passage. There is some more immediate background in Genesis chapter 29 to 30, of course, as the children of Jacob are born and they are given names at their birth, names that represent something of their identity and their implied destiny.

We've already commented upon that on previous occasions. So Reuben is associated with the unloved wife who is noticed by God. Will he recognise the same thing about his brother Joseph? So he's given the name Reuben.

The Lord has looked upon my affliction, that therefore my husband will love me. Will he look upon the affliction of his brother Joseph? Simeon, because the Lord has heard that I am unloved, he has therefore given me this son also. And again, Simeon, the question is, will he exercise that same recognition towards the unloved brother? The Testament of Jacob contains blessings and curses or judgments.

But yet the judgments are primarily upon the first three. After that, the messages are generally fairly positive. And as we look a bit further, I think there are things to bear out the division of this into three followed by nine.

And I'll explain that as we go along. This is the seed of the nation, the nation in embryo. And the destiny of these different tribes is for the first time being considered as the destiny of tribes, not just a series of brothers, but the start of a people group.

And so this is the origin of the nation and the judgments concerning the sons here. Look towards what will happen to them in the future. There's prophetic significance.

Gather together that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days. There is looking forward to some future events that will befall these different tribes and something about their longer term significance. Some of the events that will define the life and identity of these different groups within Israel.

There is also a casting of judgment upon some of the tribes, judgments that seem to be effective. So the judgment concerning Reuben, as we'll see, seems to be effective in

later history and judgments upon other sons seem to have a similar character. We've looked through a number of cases of blessings in the book of Genesis, and these blessings are generally presumed to be effective.

So the blessing upon Jacob rather than Esau is presumed to be effective. The blessing that we see upon Joseph, Joseph being favoured, again, it's presumed to be effective. Things with Abraham and Isaac and then Isaac, the presumption that if he were to bless Esau, all those things would have been true of Esau.

There is a sense of prophetic proclamation of what will happen in the future, but also in that act of proclaiming, there is some sort of effectual force to what is being said. There are the summons to here, to gather together, and Jacob is the individual father, but Israel is the official father of the nation. Israel represents Jacob in his character as the head of the people.

Gather together and hear you sons of Jacob, Jacob the individual father, and listen to Israel, your father. This is Israel, the official title of the whole nation. The ordering of the tribes is interesting.

They're ordered Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph, and Benjamin. Now, you may notice a few unusual details in that. So, it is ordered according to the Leah and then the handmaids and then Rachel, but there are some slight changes.

So, the order of Issachar and Zebulun is mixed up and then Dan, Gad, Asher, and Naphtali. You'd usually expect to have Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher. So, you have the two sons of Bilhah flanking the two sons of Zilpah.

So, there is an unusual order here and it's surprising in some respects, but I think as we look through it, we may begin to see some of the rationale for this. There's a reference to Judah's kingship, but there's no clear intimation of Levi's priestly role and this has led to questions about where to date this particular text. What particular events is it looking forward to? Now, again, as I think we look through, there will be some clues as to that, but there are many points where we're unclear and again, this is one of the interpretive conundrums of this passage.

This passage is a really tough passage. There are many questions, mostly the questions, the philological and linguistic questions that are posed because there are very unusual words here. There's some word plays, other things like that and we need to pay attention to all of those things if we're going to stand a chance of understanding what's being spoken of.

So, they're ordered according to Leah, the handmaids, and Rachel. Dan and Naphtali, both sons of Bilhah, they flank the two sons of Zilpah. They're situated according to their

settlement, arguably.

So, moving from south to north, from Dan to Zebulun, Issachar, or Dan to Gad, Asher and then Naphtali. And there are four sons that are particularly focused upon within this account. Reuben, and then Joseph, and then Yahweh.

And we see that in the four sons of Simeon, Judah, and Joseph in chapter 29 and 30. Each one of them is associated with the name of the Lord, Yahweh. And Gordon Wenham points out this, which I think is a good observation.

And as we look through the story, I think it bears out the significance of these characters. These characters are the prominent ones and most of the chapter is devoted to those four characters. The destiny of the people hangs upon these characters in particular, how these characters play out.

Judah and Joseph are particularly singled out. Judah will be the dominant tribe in the south and Joseph, of course, will be the dominant tribe in the north. And as we've looked through the story of Genesis, again, we've noticed that these two are set up in a sort of diptych, that they're juxtaposed from chapter 37 onwards.

The events happening to Joseph and then the events happening to Judah. And those two characters, for instance, the contrast between Judah's relationship with Tamar and Joseph's relationship with, or none relationship with, the wife of Potiphar. Other things have been suggested about here that at certain points the animal symbolism might be related to signs of the zodiac and put together with Deuteronomy chapter 33, we might understand the ordering of the tribes around the tabernacle and in other occasions where you have them ordered, like the gates of the city in Revelation or in Ezekiel and the order of the tribes in Numbers.

There are ways in which that picture can be filled out and I think there's a promising theory there, but I would want to have a lot more time to devote to that to explain how it could be substantiated and what still needs to be filled in. James Jordan has suggested a chiasm in the final set, in the final nine of, or the final half of the of the list here of the final nine sons. So the first three sons, you have Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and they're all disqualified in some way.

There's a judgment upon each one of those, but it's primarily the testament of Jacob is one of blessing and it's the nine sons that follow that are particularly spoken of in that way. So there's a parallel between royal Judah as the king who tears prey and on the other hand royal Benjamin, the king who tears prey as the wolf and then there's royal Judah resting donkey sons and then royal Joseph as the warrior donkey and symbolism and the poetry has a number of parallels within those two accounts. Zebulun, animal that lies down and has dominion.

Naphtali, active animal. Asher, good for food and good land for food and then Issachar, good land for food. Dan is the serpent biting the heels.

Gad, goads at heels. And so at the very heart of this you find this statement, for your deliverance I wait, Lord. And that statement maybe is a sort of capstone of this whole structure.

Now that's one way of looking at it. I think this is a helpful way of structuring the material. It helps us to understand why it's organized in this particular way.

It also helps us to recognize that perhaps the first three are in a very real sense disqualified and so they do have statements made concerning their future but the blessings really focus upon the final nine. And that final set of blessings is one that brings together the destiny of the people within this larger chiasm which has as its heart this prayer to God. So let's get into the details of the particular sons.

It begins with Reuben. Reuben you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength. The excellency of dignity and the excellency of power.

Unstable as water you shall not excel because you went up to your father's bed, there you defiled it, he went up to my couch. Now I've already noted on a previous occasion that the language here is more technical at some points. You have in Deuteronomy chapter 21 verse 17, he shall acknowledge the son of the unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double portion of all that he has for he is the beginning of his strength.

The right of the firstborn is his. So Reuben is the firstborn. He's the beginning of the strength of Jacob.

There are 10 statements made concerning him here. The first seem very positive. They're stating his role as the firstborn, his power, his strength, things like that.

But then the later part refers back to his sin in Genesis chapter 35 where he tries to usurp his father by lying with his father's wife Bilhah, the handmaid. At that point he loses his birthright which is referenced in 1st Chronicles 5. Now the sons of Reuben, the firstborn of Israel, he was indeed the firstborn but because he defiled his father's bed his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, the son of Israel, so that the genealogy is not listed according to the birthright. Now as you read through the account of Genesis you'll see that that event doesn't seem to be spoken of until this point but yet Joseph and his sons have been blessed in the previous chapter and the blessing of both the sons of Joseph suggests a firstborn status that's enjoyed by Joseph now, that he is being given the portion and the double portion is that his two sons are taken as Jacob's own as Reuben, Simeon or Levi.

Now interesting on that front that he mentions as Reuben or Simeon. Now Reuben and Simeon are two disqualified brothers and so you have Ephraim and Manasseh seem to

take the place of the two oldest sons of Jacob. The statements concerning Reuben might also remind us of the judgment upon Ham.

If you look in the book of Leviticus and Leviticus chapter 18, in Leviticus 18 verse 8, the sin of the nakedness of your father's wife you shall not uncover, it is your father's nakedness. So that lying with the wife of the father is an uncovering of the nakedness of the father which is Reuben's sin. Also if you look back in chapter 9 the sin of Ham was uncovering his father's nakedness so there's a similarity between the character of Ham and the character of Reuben.

Both of them are disqualified in some sense and there's also at the end of this there's a shift from a series of statements made to Reuben to a statement that's in the third person. He lay with or let's see, lost my place, he went up to my couch. Now who is that made to? It's made to the brothers more generally that they learn something about their oldest brother at this point.

The firstborn has defiled his father's couch, he has uncovered his father's nakedness by lying with Bilhah and so he's disqualified and the father informs the other sons about this fact. Now it's not clear that the sons would have known this and maybe he's left this at this to this last point just before he's going to die to announce this particular sin that Reuben has committed because he knows that Reuben is someone who's trying to usurp his place and he's afraid of Reuben. As we read through the story of David maybe we can see similar things with David's relationship with Joab where it's only at the very end of his life that he tells Solomon that Joab needs to be dealt with because Joab is this bloodthirsty man and David is too entangled with him.

David is too weak relative to Joab to deal with the Joab problem and so his son has to deal with that and maybe in a similar way here he's telling the sons at a point where he can't deal with it but they will be able to keep Reuben out of any high office. He's described as unstable as water or frothy as water. Again it's not entirely clear what this is meaning but it may be some reference just to the fact that he's unstable and that he is not committed.

I think it's unstable in the sense of being treacherous that he's someone who cannot be relied upon. He's like frothy water surrounding jagged rocks perhaps. I don't know but this language as it's used elsewhere would suggest a sort of treachery that's associated with that frothy water.

The devastating consequences of the attack upon the father are coming out here that he does not excel. All the things that he would seek, the firstborn status in the family, the status of dominance within that particular household, he loses all of that and Reuben lacks any prominence afterwards. There are no judges, there are no kings, there are no prophets that come from Reuben and no priests of course either.

So Reuben is really cut out in many respects. He is the firstborn but he loses all firstborn status and it's a very serious judgment. Next we have Simeon Levi.

Again as in the case of Reuben there are 10 statements made concerning him and once again we see he is talking about them rather than to them and the brothers are spoken of as confederates within warfare. Again there's uncertainty about wording here. We've had the frothiness in the previous occasion.

Uncertainty of the words of weapons, instruments of cruelty are in their habitation some have read. Now could this be weapons of violence? Are there swords or their circumcision swords or is there trade or are there wedding feasts? All of these things have been suggested and it would seem whatever it refers to most likely to reference chapter 34 of the book of Genesis with the rape or the seduction of Dinah and then the vengeance of Levi and Simeon and the way that they cause trouble for their father. That they're described here as having hamstrung an ox.

Again we don't know what these words mean exactly. It could be tore down ramparts. These are other suggestions.

In chapter 34 verse 30 we see then Jacob said to Simeon Levi you have troubled me by making me obnoxious among the inhabitants of the land among the Canaanites and the Perizzites and since I am few in number they will gather themselves together against me and kill me. I shall be destroyed my household and I. So the hamstring of the ox some have suggested it's playing on the terminology there is a play on the sound similar sounding words in chapter 34 verse 30 and the ox in question is Jacob himself. He's the ox that leads the nation associated with the high priest later on but they've hamstrung an ox.

They've made it difficult for Jacob within the land. They've caused trouble for him and maybe that's what it's referring to. What the weapons of violence are I'm not certain.

It could be a reference to their involvement in circumcision and using that as a weapon against the Shechemites. It could be a reference to wedding feasts. The wedding feast being well the wedding feast would usually be held in the house of the bridegroom but they use that wedding feast as a means of violence.

They try and regularise the wedding or the relations between Shechem and Dinah and through that they exercise vengeance against them. Now that's perhaps what's being referenced. They're divided into two tribes.

The two tribes are divided from each other. Now that maybe is what's being referred to by the dispersal or division of the tribes that they're no longer going to be a pairing that they're separated from each other. Others have seen within this a reference to the diminution of the numbers of the tribes or a number of the people within the tribes and

also maybe a reference to just the fact they're scattered in different places.

Simeon becomes an enclave of Judah and so Judah's given this larger land and then Simeon is given its inheritance within Judah. Now we see that in Joshua chapter 19 1 to 9. That might be part of what's going on that they're scattered they don't have a land fully of their own rather they have an enclave of Judah. They're notably excluded in Deuteronomy chapter 33.

All the other tribes are mentioned but Simeon is not and so Simeon maybe is a small tribe a small tribe that is as we look through the story of numbers I think we see something similar. In numbers 1 23 we see that the tribe of Simeon has 59,300 people at the beginning of the book of numbers. By the end of the book of numbers in 26 14 it's 22,200.

They've been knocked down considerably and they're a significantly smaller tribe at the end. Maybe that's what's being referred to. We see similar drops in Simeon's numbers in the book of first chronicles.

Levi in Joshua 13 verse 14 is divided. They have the inheritance that they have is not a specific territory but rather they're given the inheritance of the sacrifices. In 13 verse 14 or Joshua 13 14 in that chapter we read if I can find it my bible doesn't want to open to this page only to the tribe of Levi he had given no inheritance the sacrifices of the Lord God of Israel made by fire are their inheritance as he said to them.

So they have no inheritance within the land they're dispersed they're given 48 cities within the land but they're given no set territory and so maybe the dispersal is the fact that Simeon has no land that's truly their own they're within an enclave of Judah and that Levi has these different cities that are scattered around and so their might cannot be congealed in one place and they're held in check in some ways they're separated from each other and then they're placed in situations where they cannot amass power maybe that's what's being referred to the pair is broken up. And further thing that we should notice is in the book of numbers chapter 25 the Levite Phineas ends up killing Zimri a leading Simeonite when Zimri is sleeping with a Midianite woman and then after that there is a raiding of the Midianites and taking plunder and all these sorts of things and that story has very close parallels with the story of Genesis 34. So the story of Judah of Levi and Simeon in chapter 34 of Genesis has a new form of story played out in numbers 25 and 31 which suggests that their destiny is still being worked out and on that story they find themselves on different sides.

Levi and Simeon are both associated with violence and cruelty but yet that violence ends up being turned to different purposes. Levi becomes associated with violent zeal if we look through the story of the exodus Moses is a Levite he's someone who uses violent zeal to judge Israel he's the one who strikes the enemies of the Israelites and he's the one who ends up leading them out of the land with the rod we also see the Levites in

Sinai they kill 3,000 of their brethren in zeal violent zeal after the rebellion concerning the golden calf so in all of these stories I think you're seeing the violent zeal of the Levites being turned for good so the violent zeal of the Levites becomes the not the violent zeal by which they avenge Dinah but the violent zeal by which Israel will be set free from Egypt by which the faithfulness of Israel will be jealously guarded and so the Levites become as it were the standing army of God they're the army that surrounds the tabernacle they're the palace servants they're the praetorian guard as it were of God's palace now Simeon has a different fate and there's a diversion of there's a divergence of paths at this point so they're similar but then there's a division one case it's turned to good another case it seemed to have very negative consequences read Genesis 34 alongside numbers 25 and 31 see all the parallels and then think what this and what this suggests about the diverging destinies of the tribes of Levi and Simeon. Judah comes next.

Judah is a play upon the name of there's a play upon the name of Judah. Judah your brothers praise you. Of course Judah comes from praise in chapter 29 and she conceived again and bore a son and said now I will praise the Lord therefore she called his name Judah and Judah is praised.

Earlier on we've seen Judah's name being connected with confession. Judah confession praise these sorts of things. Later on we see another play on your hand so all of these things are playing on the name Judah and the different words there are all Hebrew plays upon that term.

Judah the lion has triumphed and now he has his prey as it were between his legs. He's experienced military success it's the lion of the tribe of Judah the king of the beasts above all the others and as we look through this chapter we'll see Judah has pride of place and on the other side we have Joseph. These are key characters that flank the whole central part of this blessing is flanked by on the one hand Judah and on the other hand Joseph and Benjamin and Joseph and Benjamin have symmetry with Judah.

We have the ravenous wolf connected with the ravenous lion and then we have Judah as the connected with donkeys and other things like that and Joseph connected with donkeys. Holding those two alongside each other I think we see a symmetry that frames all the others within. He has military success he's someone who's associated with king and rule and there's a symmetry between Judah and Joseph.

Now it says your father's children shall bow down before you. Judah is having a similar similar things will happen to Judah as were foretold happening to Joseph in chapter 37 that his dream would seem to refer just to Joseph but now we see a very similar thing to Judah and these two characters held alongside each other throughout the chapters from 37 onwards I think we can see again they are held alongside each other here they're the two chief tribes they frame the middle section. Note the statements that are given to

both Judah and to his brothers and so the statements Judah you your hand your father's children etc and then there are statements he etc and so Judah is being told things and then the brothers are being told things about Judah so we need to recognize both of these dimensions.

Partly it is about Judah himself his destiny partly it is also the other brothers having to recognize the standing that particular brothers should have within their group. They are to regard him in the light of this and treat him as the lion that he is. A descendant of Judah will always be the king and there's also a movement here from the lion's whelp to the mature lion the lion who has taken the prey the lion's whelp the young lion and then the scepter won't depart from him and it says the scepter shall not depart from Judah nor a lawgiver from between his feet.

What does between his feet mean? It could be seen as an image of the lion with his two feet outstretched and his prey between. Now that image might be suggested earlier on but I don't think that's what is being referred to here the feet are referring to his private parts this is his generative organs so he is producing children they're not going to depart from the number of his children as it were until Shiloh comes. Now Shiloh is a term that has there's probably more questions about these verses here than just about any other verses in the book of Genesis so I do not really know what to make of them completely but let me give you a few suggestions.

Shiloh could be a reference to the place but it's a slightly different word and it would seem to be it would not really make much sense it's not entirely clear how that would work. Could be until tribute is brought to him again that's a possible reading and I think there are some merit there is some merit to that others have suggested until he comes whose it is again possibilities but as we look through I think there might be more things going on in the blessing of Judah and we'll get back to that in a moment. It's a mention of rule over the peoples in and to him shall be the obedience of the people is that a reference to the gentiles in this place and Judah seems to stand in some ways for the entirety of the people later on if you look in the book of Numbers and you look at the prophecies of Balaam he talks about Jacob and Israel he says God brings him out of Egypt he has strength like a wild ox he shall consume the nations his enemies he shall break their bones and pierce them with his arrows he bows down he lies down as a lion and as a lion who will arouse him blessed is he who blesses you and cursed is he who curses you again in the fourth one it says in verse 17 of chapter 24 of Numbers I see him but not now I behold him but not near a star shall come out of Jacob a scepter shall rise out of Israel and batter the brow of Moab and destroy all the sons of Tumalt in these cases I think we're seeing something that harkens back to the blessings upon Judah but Judah really stands for the whole nation at this point that the destiny of Judah is also the destiny of the people as a whole and so there might be some reference to some messianic figure that's coming in the future the star or the scepter that's going to arise so that's one possibility of what's taking place but note some possible references back to

the previous narrative and perhaps the most thought-provoking person I've read on this is Colin Carmichael and James Jordan has also written some stuff on this too think about the imagery that's given within this passage the staff and the sons are mentioned in chapter 38 the scepter might be connected with the staff as we commented on chapter 38 I observed that the scepter was lost or the staff was lost to Judah and what did the staff represent the staff represented his rule his authority and he gave that to Tamar as collateral until he would give her a kid think about that just hold that in your mind and the staff is connected with the scepter it's the sign of Judah's rule and the scepter departed from Judah in chapter 38 until the kid was sent and who did the kid represent the kid represented Sheila and is there a connection between Shiloh and Sheila I think there quite possibly is other things to notice what is the vine the vine might be associated with Israel with Jacob as we go through the story of the Old Testament and in Eden and the New their imagery of the vine is associated with Israel and let's pay attention a bit more to that that there is a series there are a series of statements here that could play back the story of Judah as we've read it in chapter 37 onwards Judah is a lion's whelp from the prey my son you have gone up he bows down he lies down as a lion as a lion who shall rouse him how about reading it like this Judah is a lion's whelp from the prey of my son you have gone up he bows down he lies down as a lion and there's a lion who shall rouse him the scepter shall not depart from Judah nor a lawgiver from between his feet until Shiloh comes and to him shall be the obedience of the people so he went up from the prey of Joseph the son of Jacob and so maybe this is a reference back to that story perhaps and let's just work this out a bit further binding his donkey to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine he washed his garments in blood and his in in wine and his clothes in the blood of grapes so there's a connection between wine and blood there's a connection between washing garments in wine or blood the blood of grapes and then there's two donkeys there's the donkey and the donkey tied to the vine and the donkey's colt to the choice vine what could this be referring to and Callum Carmichael suggests that the vine might be a reference to it's partly Jacob's line but it's also to Tamar.

Tamar is the palm tree and there there is arboreal imagery there and then Jacob is associated with that the line of him carried out through this tree this palm and the washing of garments in wine again we've seen garments that are washed in red blood in chapter 37 and presumably Judah was at the forefront of that Judah was the one that led the plotting of the brothers and so as we look back at that chapter maybe we're seeing some of these themes played out here let's fill it out further there's the donkey and the son of the she-ass and donkey in that place has pretty much the same word as er and onan has a similar sort of sound to the end of the word for she-ass so is there something going on here let's put together some of the pieces so we've already seen that going up from the prey of the son and that's Joseph being presumably killed and then he goes down and he and at that point bows down lies down as a lion it's a lion who shall rouse him and then this binding of the donkeys these children of a Canaanite woman and so

there's the donkey is someone who's not fully a member as it were someone who seems to be more on the periphery and someone who's part of the life of Israel but maybe more as a stranger you think about Hamel as an ass or the wild ass of Ishmael and we'll get to this imagery more later on in the chapter but maybe the donkey is a reference to the daughter of a the son of a Canaanite woman and so we have two of these again reference to the son of a she-ass so maybe that's specifically a reference to Shua or Bathshua the daughter of Shua in chapter 38. Putting these things together he has a similar experience as I've commented in chapter 38 to Jacob himself Jacob is given this bloodied garment this garment washed in the blood presumably of his son and then there are these two sons that abound to the vine and they die and maybe there is a reference there to what happens to Joseph then falls upon Judah as well the death of the favoured sons and then he has to send off that other son finally the kid to get back anything and so eventually he has Perez and Zerah through Tamar. Now that's Callum Carmichael's suggestion I think there's something there there's likely something significant.

How do we make sense of this then is this just a very negative statement about the tribe of Judah? It would seem not to be there are a lot of positive themes within this section we have you are he whom your brother shall praise that's what introduces the whole thing and is that just a negative statement and he was the natural leader of the group? I'm not sure it's just that there are ways in which Judah has redeemed himself by this point Judah is not seen so much as a negative character but as you play back through that story it's as if it's been given a positive spin and so you're hearing the story again but in more positive ways so blood is no longer focused upon wine is focused upon a wine is plentiful and there's washing and wine and this is a far more positive image than we might think of as blood and then the vine and the choice cults the cult and the donkey get associated with the king himself in Zechariah chapter 9 verse 9 rejoice greatly oh daughter of Zion shout oh daughter of Jerusalem behold your king is coming he is just and having salvation lowly and riding on the donkey a cult the fold of a donkey and so it becomes messianic imagery it would seem that this should not just be dismissed as negative what's taking place here rather we're seeing a positive spin upon something that was very negative in the past and so I suggest that's what's taking place the imagery also might remind you of something like the song of songs a land blessed with wine and milk and the beauty of the king associated with that that the king is this romantic figure and the land is associated with wine and milk with milk moving on further there are a lot of questions about that I could not get into all of them within the limited time I have here I'm already going to be having longer time given to this than just about any other passage I imagine the blessing upon Zebulun is again interesting because Zebulun and Issachar are reversed in their order why would they be reversed again an unusual thing that we would be surprised about but yet we see a similar thing in Deuteronomy chapter 33 verse 18 and of Zebulun he said rejoice Zebulun in your and your going out and Issachar in your tents they shall call them peoples to the mountains

there they shall offer sacrifices of righteousness for they shall partake of the abundance of the seas and of treasures hidden in the sand now the interesting thing there a couple of interesting things first of all that Issachar comes under the heading of Zebulun so and of Zebulun he said and then it has Zebulun and it has Issachar under that heading and concerning Zebulun so it seems that they've been paired in some way Issachar and Zebulun and Zebulun has taken the preeminence of the two Zebulun is spoken of as dwelling by the haven of the sea now Zebulun of course his name comes from dwelling it's not the same term but there's a synonym here and as we look through this we'll see a number of plays upon words we've already seen that in the case of Judah and your hand and your brother shall praise you these sorts of things surprisingly Zebulun is associated with the sea but yet Zebulun has inland rather than coastal territory in Joshua chapter 19 10 to 16 in Deuteronomy 33 as I've just read out he's again associated with the sea with Issachar both of them mentioned together Sidon doesn't necessarily refer to the city itself as it's mentioned here his border shall his flank shall adjoin he shall flank Sidon it doesn't necessarily refer to the city itself but to the Phoenicians and so it has dealings with the Phoenicians perhaps what is being referred to by the sea could it be the sea of Galilee some have suggested that sea trade that they're benefiting from the trade with the Phoenicians and their sea merchants again that's a possibility that some have suggested other possibilities that the territory is not set as sharply as we might suppose and there's core territory but there's a lot of movement around so later on we'll see the tribe of Dan migrating north in chapters 9 17 and 18 of judges and it would seem that the tribe Zebulun moved around a bit as well in Josephus's antiquities of the Jews in book 5 he writes the tribe of Zebulun's lot included the land which lay as far as the lake of Gennesareth and that which belonged to Carmel and the sea and so they do seem to have an association with the sea at the time of Josephus it would seem that there is reason to connect them with the sea but we're not exactly sure how the history played out Issachar is a strong donkey lying down between two burdens he saw that rest was good and that the land was pleasant he bowed his shoulder to bear a burden and became a band of slaves he's another strong animal he's settling in a fertile land and there seems to be an ironic play upon his name he's associated with hire and reward but he's spoken of as a band of slaves now it would seem perhaps that he's a that's the tribe of Issachar serves on very good land rather than being a free independent tribe in less fertile land and so they have the benefit of good land and that association with them is something that we'll later on see with Asher so there's some symmetry between Issachar and Asher Dan comes next Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel Dan shall be a serpent by the way a viper by the path that bites the horse's heels so that its rider shall fall backwards I have waited for your salvation oh lord he judges now of course Dan's name means to judge and who is being referred to here is it just Dan more generally or could it be a reference to Samson Samson is a Danite and he's one of the judges of Israel in chapters 13 to 16 of the book of judges he's one of the most prominent and important judges of Israel although he's more of a guerrilla warrior than anything else and that fits into the imagery of the serpent he's a serpent by the way who

bites the heel he's also associated with wisdom the wisdom of the serpent he's one who tells riddles and he's one who outwits people he tells riddles to the people at the wedding feast and he tells riddles to Delilah now of course he fails ultimately in both of those cases the riddles are discovered and he is he is outwitted at the end but he is associated with the wisdom of the serpent he's also associated with sneak attacks like the serpent by the way he's not something that you see he's a smaller tribe but he can sneak out and he can bite you and this is a tribe that's smaller but still holds its own it's a tribe also Dan migrates north as I've remarked upon in judges chapter 17 to 18 it again he's like the serpent he doesn't have the same strength in controlling a territory but he moves around a bit and he ends up going north the verse that we have in verse 18 interesting questions about this is this part of the blessing of Dan or what does it refer to why is it here what is this something that's spoken about the fate of Dan or is it something that's more general I have waited for your salvation oh lord as we saw in the chiasmic structure this might be the lynchpin the central statement that refers the hope of Israel towards Israel Jacob and Israel as the whole nation towards God's salvation and maybe it's at the heart here because the blessings have symmetry on either side of it it's in the very center it maybe refers to the precarious state of the Danites at the end of the book of judges as they go north perhaps I don't know if you have any suggestions on this or anything else please leave them in the comments below because I do not have a clue about many of the details in here so I'm giving my suppositions and my speculations but some of these things are quite uncertain within the original text Gad comes next again playing upon terms a gad a troop shall tramp upon him but he shall triumph at last and the English translation there the New King James Version which I generally use is playing upon in English play in the troop tramp triumph and that's something that we have in the Hebrew as well and so gad means troop a troop shall come and so there's a troop to tramp and triumph but then there's also a reference to the heels that he shall get at their heels they're a skillful warrior he shall be raided by raiding parties but he shall raid at their heels he will be noted for skillful warriors even if they're preyed upon by other people Asher comes next and Asher bred from Asher shall be rich and he shall yield royal dainties that is Issachar he's associated with good food while Issachar is associated with service Asher is associated with riches so again we have a parallel between the two there's a symmetry perhaps in the tribes of the handmaids so Asher is the second of Zilpah and they're flanked by Dan and Naphtali. Naphtali comes next Naphtali born a doe let loose and gives birth to fawns of the That's what I think is the most likely translation but I'm not an expert in Hebrew and many of the details here have been debated by people far far wiser than I am and who have spent far more time studying the other Semitic parallels things like that. This translation I'm using here New King James has a deer let loose he gives goodly words I think it's more likely to be continuing the the metaphor so you have a deer let loose fawns of the field maybe a reference to domestication that you have this wild deer and then you have the fawns of the field of wild doe maybe this is a reference to Bilhah or maybe a reference to Rachel even.

Joseph comes next. Joseph is compared to either a vine or a wild donkey so my translation says a vine. Joseph is a fruitful bough a fruitful bough by a well his branches run over the wall.

Now another translation is given by Gordon Wenham who says Joseph is a wild ass a wild ass beside a spring his wild colts beside the wall now we've already seen reference to colts and those sorts of themes are connected with the second half of Judah's blessing and so I think we should again Judah and Joseph and Benjamin flank the central section of the blessings the three disqualified sons come first and then there is this flanking of Judah and Benjamin and Joseph. There might be some things that shed light upon this I mean when we think back to the blessing of Jotah of Judah there is vine imagery there and there's donkey imagery so in both cases you could draw some parallels and draw some connections so there are difficulties in just settling upon one. I lean however towards increasingly lean towards the idea it's a donkey and that's referred to here.

There are parallels with Judah the son of the wild she ass and then the whelp of the lion so the son of the wild she ass that is associated with Joseph and then Judah is associated with the whelp of the lion. Word plays taking place here on fruitfulness and Ephraim and then perhaps also on Pharaoh and the Pharaoh and Ephraim they're playing on the same sorts of words and so I think that might be part of what's going on here but why might we fill how might we fill out this image of a wild donkey? In what respect is Joseph like a wild donkey? Who else have we seen compared to a wild donkey in the story of Genesis? Well if we go back to chapter 16 we see, Behold you are with child and you shall bear a son you shall call his name Ishmael because the Lord has heard your affliction. He shall be a wild ass or wild donkey.

His hand shall be against every man and every man's hand against him and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren and this would seem to give some sort of connection with the story of Joseph. As I've remarked upon in the story of Joseph we have a number of occasions where there are clear plays upon the story of Ishmael as he's sent out from Shechem and we have Hagar sent out with stuff on her shoulder and then there's the skin that's used up and there's no water with it there's no water within the well casting down of Ishmael beneath the tree beneath the shrub casting down of Joseph into the pit with no well and then Joseph is given to the Ishmaelites it's the Ishmaelites that sell him into Egypt there's the intervention of Reuben as saying do not lay your hand upon the child there's the sitting at a distance from the child so that they will not see him come to his death. In all of these respects there are parallels between Joseph and Ishmael.

In chapter 39 we see more parallels as Hagar's story seems to be reversed we now have a fairly tyrannical Egyptian mistress and a Hebrew slave whereas previously there was a Hebrew mistress who was fairly tyrannical in her treatment of an Egyptian slave and so now Joseph finds himself in the position of Ishmael he's one who's cast out of the house

as the wife tries to set the house against the servant and get him cast out much against the wishes of her husband and the master of the house. Other things along this line that Ishmael is associated with archery in chapter 21 maybe that helps us to understand more about the archery symbolism as it plays out in this particular blessing. The archers have bitterly grieved him shamed him and hated him but his bow remained in strength and the arms of his hand were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Israel of Jacob.

What could this be referring to? Well who are the archers? I found a discussion of this on our beta really helpful by Emmanuel Shalev and he argues that the archers are the brothers. Now why would you refer to the archers of the brothers? That they are shooting arrows to try and destroy Joseph. Now they're not actually shooting arrows but they seek to destroy him.

And the language here is also something that we see coming up in the next chapter when it says when Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead they said perhaps Joseph will hate us and may actually repay us for all the evil that we did to him and so they hated him and they shot at him and they bitterly grieved him. In all of these ways the way that they're treating Joseph is I think akin to archers. They're trying to destroy.

It's like a gun trying to shoot someone directly and directly kill them. But Joseph is described as having a bow too and what Emmanuel Shalev suggests is that his bow remains taught. He's holding this bow and he does not let fly.

He holds it firm and his arm may be quivering but he's holding it firm and it's because God is strengthening his arm. Now what does this mean? They have shot at him trying to destroy him but he does not shoot back. He has the power to destroy them.

He has the power in his hand as the second in command in Egypt to destroy his brothers but he is the one who depends upon the God of Jacob and his arm is made strong and he does not execute vengeance and this is something that he's praised for at this point which suggests that Jacob knows what happened between the brothers and Joseph at least in its outline that they shot at him, they hated him and they bitterly treated him but yet he held firm and did not repay in like manner for what they had given to him. Jacob's God is mentioned. It's Jacob referring to his God and his God in the story of Joseph his son that there is a sense that his story is really, his legacy is really carried out in the story of Joseph.

We've already seen him recounting his story in the previous chapter but he sees within Joseph something of the way that he experienced hatred perhaps. We've seen the same language referring to hatred in the story of Esau's relationship to Jacob following Jacob's taking of the blessing. Putting these things together I think we have this understanding perhaps of what is meant by this archery imagery and then maybe connecting that with the fact that Ishmael is an archer and Ishmael is placed at a bow shot from his mother.

Maybe that will help us to fill out the picture. The brothers take a distance from Joseph when he's in the pit as if they're shooting arrows at him and then he ends up becoming an archer in the land of Egypt as Ishmael becomes an archer in the land of Egypt and he becomes strong and yet he does not fire back and maybe that's what's taking place. That's very speculative but see what you can make of it.

If you have any further suggestions please leave them in the comments. God is described as the shepherd and the stone of Israel. He's the shepherd as we look back through chapter 31 for instance.

God is the one who has caused the flock of Israel to multiply, the flock of Jacob, so that Jacob becomes great. Jacob is described as having a flock. He has these four different flocks connected with his four wives and he meets Esau in a way that parallels when he first meets Rachel as she comes as the fourth flock to the well.

So there are four flocks that he leaves the land of Paddan-Moran with and then he meets his brother and God ultimately is the shepherd. He's the one that causes this flock to multiply. He's the one that protects them through the wilderness.

Ultimately he recognises that the angel is the one who has shepherded him all the way. The angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads. So God is the shepherd of Israel or Jacob who is also a shepherd.

Jacob is associated with the shepherd's staff. He's a shepherd. He's the one who multiplies and flocks but and then of course we've seen in these chapters that Israel as they settle in Goshen, they are described as shepherds.

So Israel is described as a nation of shepherds but also Jacob is a shepherd. He's the leader of the nation and God as the leader of the people is the shepherd of Israel. So there is shepherd imagery coming out in a number of different levels here.

He's also the stone of We've noted at various points in the narrative of Jacob the significance of stones. The stone at Bethel where he lays his head where he eventually sets that up as a marker as a stone of remembrance that is connected with the appearance of the ladder. There's the stone that he removes the well to open the well to give water to the flocks.

There is the stone that he places as a covenant sign between him and Laban. There's the stone at Bethel, the second stone that he places and then there's the stone that he places at Rachel's tomb. In each of these cases we have stones that really at the heart of Jacob's story we have stones prominent.

We see also Laban is associated with bricks and so Jacob's stones, Laban bricks maybe there's greater symbolism taking place there. We've seen bricks mentioned in the story of Babel, stones mentioned in the story of Bethel and the connections between Bethel

and contrast between Bethel and Babel are very important. The gate of God and the house of God that's spoken of at Bethel.

Putting those things together I think this is another image of God that God is the rock of Israel. God is also the stone of Israel. He's the one that has been following Jacob all the way.

These key stones that have marked his journey. He can see God in those perhaps and those are images to him or metaphors of God's relationship with him. May profitably unpick that a bit and explore some of the connections that might be drawn there.

There are blessings given to Joseph and by the God of your father who will help you and by the almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb, the blessings of your father have excelled the blessings of my ancestors up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills. They shall be on the head of Joseph and on the crown of the head of him who was separate from his brothers. Now there is some sort of parallelism here.

There are parallels between creation and the woman's body. So blessings of the heaven above and blessings of the deep that lie beneath, blessings of the breasts and blessings of the womb. So the deep is connected with the womb and the heavens are connected with the breasts.

The heavens are associated with rain and life-giving fluid and the breasts are associated with life-giving fluid with milk and maybe this is what refers to land flowing with milk and honey that the milk is the rains that give life to the land. It's as if the heavens are the breasts of the land and the deep of the land is that which life coming up from beneath. Maybe that's part of the symbolism that's taking place here but there's also a poetic thing going on.

So shamayim and shadayim and tehom and rehem, there's play upon the words and so they have similar sounds that helps you to see a poetic parallelism alongside a conceptual parallelism. As you look through the book of Genesis early on particularly in chapter two and chapter three you'll see a parallel between the womb and the earth, between the woman and the land and now I think here you're seeing something more about that. The woman's body and the fertility of the land are connected together.

Benjamin comes next. Benjamin and Joseph are paired as the two sons of Rachel. Benjamin is a ravenous creature like Judah, reminiscent of Judah's blessing.

So Benjamin is a ravenous wolf. In the morning he shall devour the prey and at night he will devour the spoil, divide the spoil. In the earlier part of Judah's judgment, of blessing, we have you are he who your brothers shall praise, your hands shall be on the neck of your enemies, your father's children shall bow down before you.

Judah is a lion's whelp. From the prey my son you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion and as a lion who shall rouse him.

So there are parallels between Judah and Benjamin and there's parallels between Judah and Joseph. So I think Judah is paralleled with those two tribes, the two tribes that are associated with Rachel and Rachel's tribes, Judah, Joseph and Benjamin are both tribes that are associated with some sort of kingship. Judah is associated with the kingship in the south and Benjamin is associated with Saul and then Joseph is associated with the kings of Ephraim.

This is the first mention in this chapter of 12 tribes. All these are the 12 tribes of Israel and this is what their father spoke to them and he blessed them. He blessed each one according to his own blessing.

There is a recognition now that these aren't just sons, these are heads of tribes and the destinies of these people are being foretold in this particular place. So we have three tribes that are specifically associated with some sort of kingship in the future. Earlier on in chapter 35, Benjamin was associated with kings as God prophesied to Jacob that kings would come from his loins and then Benjamin is born.

Later on in Micah chapter 4 and 5, Benjamin and the birth of Benjamin to Rachel and her struggling in birth is associated with the coming of the king and eventually they will reach Bethlehem, although it was on the way to Bethlehem that Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. What happens in the next chapter is we're introduced to Esau and his family and Esau has kings that come from him and those kings come before any kings come to Israel and we saw parallels between the kings of Eden and the kings of Israel, particularly with Saul. Saul of Rehoboth and then Saul in Israel.

There's a parallel between these two that suggests maybe that Benjamin is seen as a parallel to the kingly nation of Eden. That Anna who finds water, finds a well when he's searching for his father's donkeys, that reminds you of Saul who searches for his father's donkeys and that leads to him getting the kingdom. Also you have Saul of Rehoboth and he seems to be quite possibly king at the same time as Saul of Israel.

Putting these things together we have Benjamin, Judah and Joseph all in some sense having kingly destinies to be played out. Once again at the end of this chapter there is a charge that highlights the son's duties to bury Jacob in Canaan. I am to be gathered to my people, bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field of Machphola, which is before Mamre in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field of Ephron the Hittite as a possession for a burial place.

There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife, there they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife and there I buried Leah. The field and the cave that is there were purchased from

the sons of Heth. And when Jacob had finished commanding his sons he drew his feet up into his bed and breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

Once again there's a reference to the cave of Machphola and that was given a lot of attention previously in the story of Abraham and the deal concerning the cave in chapter 23 is given a whole chapter pretty much, the death of Sarah and her burial. This suggests that the laying to rest of them within a land that was promised to them but within a territory within that land that they already came into a possession of, that they had bought, that was truly their own, that that is an event of promissory significance. That one day they'll enter into the full possession of the land but this is their first toehold in the land, that they have the burial place for the family of and we don't hear about the death of Rebekah but she's been buried there presumably when they were settled in that region.

Rachel is not buried there, she's buried on the way to Bethlehem but Leah is buried there and eventually Jacob will be sent back there and Joseph will at one point be brought back to Israel but he is not going to be buried in the same site, he'll be buried up in Shechem. All of this is a very powerful and deep and dense foreshadowing of the life of Israel. It's something that looks forward to the relationship between the tribes on a political stage, not just an interpersonal one.

It looks forward to the relationship between the northern and the southern tribes in perhaps even in the division of the kingdom. It's something that fulfills some of the themes of the juxtaposed characters of Judah and Joseph. It's something that helps us to see the completion of the destinies of Reuben, Simeon and Levi and there are ways in which destinies are turned around at this point.

There are ways in which they are finalised. Reuben has a negative judgment cast upon him and he withers out in many respects, he never becomes prominent. In the case of Simeon, Simeon is dispersed, Simeon does not really gain any strength whereas Levi, the same traits that led Levi to be associated with cruelty and violence end up causing him to be prominent as the priestly tribe, dispersed throughout Israel so that their strength will be used in the right way and so that strength ultimately becomes used not for violence but for not for cruelty, cruel violence but for zealous violence and that zealous violence is something that we see in the story of the Levites at Sinai.

It's something that we see in the story of Moses and it's something that we see also in the story of Phineas and in the story of Phineas we see the contrast between Zimri, a leading Simeonite and then Phineas, a leading Levite. Their ways have parted and although that story is playing out the story of Dinah once more it no longer has the same result. Levi redeems himself and Simeon is judged and at the end of the book of Numbers we see that Simeon has a fraction of the number of people with which he began that book and later on in the story of First Chronicles we see a similar reduction in

numbers.

In the story of Judah we've seen a similar thing. There is a redemption of identity that Judah has his story told out in a shadow. It's a story that is one of shedding the blood of his brother, the prey of the son of Jacob and he rises up from that and he goes down away from his brothers and the scepter will not depart from him until Sheila comes.

Now Sheila, who's Sheila? It could be a reference to Solomon and a play upon the same word there. Maybe that's what's being referred to and the tribute of the nations being given to him. Think about what happens in the story of chapter 38.

Could that be the fact that Hiram or Hira is the one who brings the goat to Tamar? That at that point when Hira finally brings the goat that that is maybe a symbol of the scepter truly being received. I don't know but it's worth reflecting upon. There's so much going on in chapter 38 and this chapter sheds some light back on it.

Looking through the rest of these the story of Joseph is played out again that he's reminded of the faithfulness of God's strength that was given to him so that he did not shoot back and he's being described in a way that recalls the story of Ishmael. He's the brother that was cast out of the family. He's the brother that goes down to Egypt.

He's the brother that becomes an archer. He becomes strong and powerful but he does not let fly his bow and so his arrows from his bow that holds it firm and this is maybe also a charge that he should not do so in the future and we'll see that in the chapter that follows. At the very end of this Jacob is gathered to his father, to his fathers and to his people.

He gathers at the very beginning of the chapter his sons and at the end he is gathered and so there's a sort of book ending of the chapter here and there's also a possible play on Joseph's name. There is so much going on in this chapter I've barely scratched the surface but I hope this gives you some thought. If you have any questions or any thoughts please leave them in the comments because there's so much here and I would love to hear what you make of these these details if you've looked into them.

If you have any questions on any other issues please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you'd like to support this and other videos like it and podcasts please do so using my Patreon or my PayPal accounts. Thank you so much for those of you who support.

You really do make this possible. It enables me to get into the research, to look into these texts and to share them like this. It really gives me an incentive as well.

It's encouraging to know that there are people behind what I'm doing here who are invested in it and really want to help me to do to the best of my ability. Thank you so much and it's a blessing to know that this is not some sort of thing I'm doing by myself

but there are other people who are part of it. Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow with the final chapter of the story of the family of Abraham.

We'll have some more concluding reflections in the days that follow but the final chapter is coming up. God bless. Thank you for listening.