

Gleanings in Jacob's prophecy - Genesis 49

This chapter is not without its particular interest and difficulty. In order to fully appreciate it as is the case with all prophetic passages, we must have an understanding of Bible prophecy. There is also the need to observe the "things that differ." We begin with a few preliminary thoughts which can be a basis for further meditation on the entire Chapter.

The historical aspect

Jacob and his twelve sons are bonded in Egypt. Their redemption as the people of God and the covenanted Promised Land are still future. The revered patriarch was near death and so he calls his sons to his side to reveal "what shall befall" them in their last days or "in the end of days." In so doing he blesses them and, at the same time, provides us with a prophetic sweep of the future of the nation of Israel. But not just of Israel but of those connected with it as well.

The structural aspect

There are a number of things to note here. First, the prophecy in this chapter is *tribal*. There is a particular prophecy for each son or tribe. Second, the prophecy is also *national*. It deals with *all* twelve tribes. This is brought out in the titles "sons of Jacob" and "Israel your father." The former refers to the nation *physically*; the latter to the nation *spiritually*, because the nation was born at Peniel out of a spiritual encounter in which Jacob prevailed. It was from this point that we hear the expressions "the children of Israel" and "the God of Israel." Third, the order in which Jacob blesses his sons is not according to their order of birth. Yet, it observes the chronology in regard to Reuben and Benjamin – the first and the last, and we will be careful to note in passing the Spirit's reference to our Lord as "the Alpha and Omega," the first and last, in the book of Revelation.

The prophetic aspect – and the inspiration of scripture

This prophetic passage like other prophetic portions in Scripture contains "near" and "distant" elements. There is that which *has* been fulfilled and is now part of history; and that which *will* be fulfilled as part of future history. It is here that our basic knowledge of Bible prophecy and dispensational truth is vital. For example, much of the prophecy concerning Reuben and Levi has been fulfilled. But when we come to Judah we find that a good deal of that prophecy awaits a future fulfilment in the Day of the Lord.

The broad scope of the prophecy is given by the expression "last days" or more precisely, "the end of days" as noted above. It stands in contrast to the "beginning of days" and so points to the time of the termination of things relating to Israel. This does not invalidate the "near" and "distant" elements noted above. It simply means that there is in this passage prophecy that transports us to an end time – one that concerns *all* Israel in that end day. We find this marked in Jacob's blessing to Judah.

The prophecy begins with **Reuben** and immediately brings into view the Greatest Son of Israel – the Firstborn, Jesus of Nazareth. It concludes with **Benjamin** – the son of my right hand and we see in Him the beloved of God the *Father*, who will set up a kingdom, the Millennial Kingdom, and deliver it up to God. "Then cometh the end, when He shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power" (1 Cor

15:24). He is the Alpha and Omega – the beginning and the end. Between Reuben and Benjamin we get **Judah**. In Judah we have Christ as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, the One who “hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof” (Rev 5:5). These seven seals when opened will unleash the terrors of the Tribulation on earth.

Reuben – favour, failure and forfeiture

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

Favour

“Reuben, thou art my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power.” His name *reh-oo-bane* means “behold a son,” which is indicative of his place in the order of birth as the firstborn son to Jacob. As such he was entitled according to birth the privileges and responsibilities of the firstborn son, which we may outline as follows:

- *Possession* – right of a double portion. (If a father had three sons then his estate would be divided into four equal parts with the firstborn receiving two parts).
- *Priesthood* - representation
- *Power* – rule

Failure - Genesis 35:22

“And it came to pass, when Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine: and Israel heard it.” Jacob in last days pronounces the judgment. “Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel; because thou wentest up to thy father's bed; then defiledst thou it: he went up to my couch.”

Forfeiture -1 Chronicles 5:1

“Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel, (for he was the firstborn; but, forasmuch as he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given unto the sons of Joseph the son of Israel: and the genealogy is not to be reckoned after the birthright.” Joseph received the birthright as to possession – double the portion in his sons Ephraim and Manasseh. Levi received the priesthood. Judah given the power to rule.

Joseph received the double portion which was not according to birthright; but the statement “the genealogy is not according to birthright” goes beyond Joseph to the tribe of Judah and therefore to Christ, as we shall see. “Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual” (1 Cor 15:46).

In addition to this we have the prophecy that Reuben will “not excel.” The biblical record bears solemn witness to the fulfilment of this **near** prophecy. The tribe of Reuben was among the first to be taken into captivity by the Assyrians (1 Chron 5:26). When we note the prophets, kings, priests and mighty men among Israel, not one will be found from the tribe of Reuben. However, when we look down the lists of the insurgent and the indifferent, there we will find Reuben as unstable as water.

Firstly, they *rebelled against the divine priesthood* in the way of Korah. “And they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said unto them, Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the LORD?” The sons of Reuben joined the Levite Korah in rebellion and spoke out against Moses and Aaron. Divine judgment ensued. “And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up together with Korah, when that company died, what time the fire devoured two hundred and fifty men: and they became a sign” (Num 26:10).

There are practical lessons here regarding the intrusion of the flesh in the things of God. We hear the claim “all are holy.” The flesh makes a judgment contrary to God’s design. Their carnal claim was that Aaron and his sons were not the only ones separated unto the priestly work of Lord. It is in one sense the popular cry of ecumenism – “all are holy.” It is also the assertion of democratic “rights” within the professing church – the “rights” of women to rule and teach, and so contradict the divine order. We read too that “men famous and renown” were brought into the service within the sanctuary. “They rose up before Moses, with certain of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty princes of the assembly, famous in the congregation, men of renown.” This is not *idolatry* of which Aaron was guilty with the golden calf; it is *impurity* – defilement of the sanctuary, the house of God and it brings severe judgment. “And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are. That no flesh shall glory in His presence” (1 Cor 1:27-28 cf 1 Cor 3:17).

Secondly, they *rebelled against divine promise*. They sought to circumvent their forfeiture of a double portion in Canaan by seeking it on the other side of Jordan – in the wilderness. There they set up an altar – presumably unto Jehovah, but nevertheless in direct contradiction to the divine pattern, so much so that the children of Israel declared, “What trespass is this that ye have committed against the God of Israel, to turn away this day from following the LORD, in that ye have builded you an altar, that ye might rebel this day against the LORD?” (Josh 22:16). They chose to live outside the place of promise and pattern and, as a result ended up building their own altar within it. This is an all too common occurrence. Many move outside the place of divine promise, set up an altar – a place of worship, call it the house of God and then invite Him to come in and dwell. But His dwelling will always be the place where He places His name. “An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee” (Ex 20:24).

Thirdly, they *rested in their own material prosperity*. East of the Jordan they prospered materially but slumbered in spiritual apathy. They had to be chided by Deborah in regard to their national responsibilities. “Why abodest thou among the sheepfolds, to hear the bleatings of the flocks?” (Jud 5:16). Jabin the king of Canaan needed to be defeated, but the Reubenites vacillated on account of a preferred neutrality and comfort of their prosperity in cattle.

Christ – the distant fulfilment

The Lord of the tribe of Judah is typified as the One in whom all that was lost to Reuben as the firstborn is restored – possession, priesthood and power.

Possession as the Firstborn

The Lord's double possession is seen in part in the physical realm. "Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature" (Col 1:15). We also have it in the spiritual realm. "And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence: (Col 1:18).

Priesthood and Power

Reuben lost the priesthood to Levi – but Levi was scattered and failed. Reuben lost the power of rule to Judah. It can be reasonably suggested that it is in Judah that we see Christ the Messiah taking up what Reuben lost in priesthood and power. For this we look to the blessing of Jacob upon Judah and in particular verse 10 of Genesis 49. "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be." The sceptre speaks of the power of rule, vested in Christ the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Then we have the expression "until Shiloh come." Shiloh was a place – significantly that place where the Tabernacle was set up and the land partitioned among the tribes. But this is not the meaning here, because it was not a time of permanent rest and peace. Neither was Judah the prime power – the object of the gathering of the people. The word Shiloh means "whose right it is." It is essentially Messianic. And what right is this except the right associated with the Messiah in the millennial kingdom – as both King and Priest. "He shall build the temple of the LORD; and He shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon His throne; and He shall be a priest upon His throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both" (Zech 6:13).

All that Reuben lost is gathered up and vested in Christ, the Firstborn – executed as the Lion of the tribe of Judah and so fulfil that blessed prophecy of Him in Benjamin – "the son of my right hand."