

The Twelve Tribes And Their Future

HN 24/10/04 pm

Reading: Genesis 49, Mark 13

Study: Genesis 49

Psalms: 145^{2nd}:9-15, 45:3-7, 60:1, 2-5, 6, 7, 119:65-68, 71

Jacob was sick and knew that he would die soon. He was about to be gathered to his people. He called Joseph and got him to swear that he would not bury him in Egypt but would take his body back to Canaan. He also adopted Joseph's two sons as his own and blessed them.

Jacob then called all his sons together to tell them what would happen to them in the latter days. He spoke to them individually in what we might call a 'prophetic blessing'. He blessed each one according to his own blessing. He spoke to them as the twelve tribes of Israel for the first time. What he spoke primarily concerned the future of each tribe in the land of Canaan – still 400 years away.

To modern readers like ourselves all the detail of this chapter is hard to follow and to understand – we are tempted to skim over it. It is made the more difficult because as poetry it is often hard to translate and then for us to grasp all the literary features. We might find it an anticlimax after the lively narrative of the life of Joseph in Egypt.

But the final words of a dying man are memorable and Jacob wants his sons to remember well what he tells them. They are currently sojourning in Egypt but according to the promise of God they must return to Canaan and possess the land God promised to Abraham.

The promise was also that they would become a great nation, the people of God, and that through them God would bless all the nations of the earth. This was the great and wonderful plan of God, his plan for the world he created but which had fallen into sin. From heaven above God sees all things from beginning to end. In his grace he reveals to man what we need to know of that plan.

After Moses had brought them out of Egypt and within sight of the Promised Land, he similarly called the tribal leaders together to bless them with a word of prophecy from the Lord (Deuteronomy 33).

Jesus also spoke to his disciples telling them what will happen in the days to come- in the latter days. Not one stone will be left upon another he said of the mighty temple in Jerusalem. He spoke of trouble and tribulation before his return (Mark 13:26). You will be brought before rulers and kings for my sake said Jesus. You will be put out of the synagogues and they will kill you (John 16:2). Jesus told them these things so that when the time came they would remember what he said.

Jesus did not promise his disciples an easy life after he left them, did he! He did not promise them worldly popularity and prosperity. Yet this is just what most Christians are promised today and what they expect. Is there a need to reconsider the message that we proclaim?

Glancing at this chapter you will notice that much more is spoken to Judah and Joseph than the other brothers. From I Chronicles 5:1, 2 we learn that they were set apart for special honour – 'Joseph

having received the double portion with his two sons adopted by Jacob, and Judah carrying on the line from which came the 'prince'.

Elder brothers

Reuben the first born did not receive the birthright and we learn why from this passage. As the eldest child he reminded his father of his strength in reproduction – just think of the difficulty his forbears had had in bearing children. Excellency of dignity and power surrounded Reuben, until he committed incest with Bilhah his father's concubine.

Reuben defiled the marriage bed of his father. His father heard about it but was silent at the time (35:22). Now, as he is about to die, his hand of judgment comes upon his son. You will not excel he said. You will not get the birthright. You are unstable, like troubled waters.

Jacob was silent all those years but the time for reckoning. The time for judgment had now come. God also may be silent and not judge us immediately for our sin. But he shall not keep silent for ever. Our God shall surely come (Psalm 50). Do not continue on in sin thinking God does not know or does not care. Turn from sin, repent before the Lord that he might lift you up. Do not jeopardize the blessing that is yours in Jesus Christ.

Simeon and Levi were judged for their cruelty, presumably in the massacre at Shechem. Someone has suggested that the weapons they used were like mattocks – because of the Hebrew term used here. They slaughtered men and hamstringed an ox said Jacob. He wanted nothing to do with such violent men and cursed their fierce anger- he did not curse them directly.

The future for their tribes was bleak. They would be scattered in the land. Simeon is not mentioned in the blessings of Moses (Deuteronomy 33). In fulfilment of this word Simeon was given an allotment within Judah (Joshua 19) and his name eventually disappeared. Levi as the priestly tribe was divided in 48 towns throughout the land.

Other brothers

Jacob's words to the other brothers (excluding Judah and Joseph) were brief. There was Zebulun and Isaachar, sons of Leah, and the other four were sons of his concubines. Their sins are not noted in the narratives and no judgments are pronounced here. They are told what will befall them, with particular reference to the land of Canaan.

What is said to them is often a word play on their name, such that with Gad – the whole verse is one large pun. Gad means troop. Gad settled on the east side of the Jordan and was continually at war with the locals.

Zebulun lives by the sea and is a haven for ships. Actually his allotment did not quite reach to the sea (Joshua 19) but he probably had access to the sea. Isaachar is a strong donkey or ass. He will settle in fertile land, but will be enslaved by his neighbours. Dan, meaning judge will be like a viper, biting the heels of horses that come by. Samson was from this tribe – he was rather vicious in his treatment of the Philistines. Asher and Naphtali settled in the north along the rich coastal plain and in the mountains respectively.

Chosen brothers

Judah means praise. This fourth eldest brother related best to his father during the time of the famine crisis. He led his brothers in repentance before Joseph (ch.44). No judgment is pronounced upon him.

Rather he is told he will be the leading tribe and victorious over his enemies. Judah is likened to a young lion, a lion being the symbol of power and authority.

Jacob goes on to tell of a golden age for Judah. Vines will grow in abundance and wine will be plentiful, so plentiful that he will wash his cloths in wine!

I think it is a bit like this in Italy. I remember flying Alitalia some years ago. It was very hard to get a glass of water. All they wanted to give me was wine!

It is interesting to reflect on Jesus' miracle in Cana of Galilee. He provided wine in abundance for that wedding – wine that he made from something as common as water. This was the first of his signs manifesting his glory (John 2).

Joseph is called a fruitful vine – the name Ephraim means fruitful. Joseph had suffered at the hands of his brothers and also in the house of Potiphar. But God was with him enabling him to stand against those attacks. The mighty God of Jacob was his shepherd and his rock.

Joseph would be greatly blessed by the Almighty. 'In a few magnificent words the Old Testament vision of Gods earth with its store of wonders untold is displayed'. Heavenly (rain and sun) and earthly (wells) blessings would be his. He would be blessed with productivity and abundance. He would have many descendants and would come to rule over all the northern tribes. Ephraim became synonymous with the northern tribes. But spiritual blessings are not mentioned. Spiritually this tribe never excelled. Jeroboam came from Ephraim and caused Israel to sin.

Some of the prophecy here points beyond the time of settlement in Israel. The description of Judah as a young lion stands behind the reference to Jesus Christ as the lion of the tribe of Judah in John's heavenly vision (Revelation 5:5). John saw Jesus, the slain lamb upon the throne in heaven.

He was also called the root of David. David of course was a great king that came from Judah. The sceptre will not depart from Judah said Jacob. The sceptre is a mark of royalty. Jesus Christ was born of the seed of David according to the flesh.

Until Shiloh comes. Although this word it difficult to translate it clearly refers to one who is to come. Until he comes to whom it belongs, or until he comes to whom tribute belongs are other translations. It is amazing that Jacob saw to the coming of the great deliverer, even Jesus Christ, just as Abraham saw my day and was glad. John the Baptist spoke to the One coming after him and then declared Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Shiloh has come and all are coming to him. He is now seated on his throne in heaven and every creature which is in heaven and earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea ... are worshipping him saying, blessing and honour and glory and power be to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb for ever and ever (Revelation 5).

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