



SESSION OBJECTIVE: GENESIS 47:29-49:33

To learn about the beginnings of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Tribes, Clans, and Family Names

One of the things I appreciate most about J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* is the inclusion of actual, historical practices, one of which, is kinship tribe or clan names. Prominent Hobbit families had very well-known and affluent names, and to be born into one of them granted an individual distinct social advantages. Prominent Hobbit families included: Baggins, Boffin, Bracegirdle, Brandybuck, Burrowes, Chubb, Grubb, Hornblower, Proudfoot, Sackville, and Took. Tolkien presented a world in which kinship mattered, and family names were associated with specific practices and geographic locations. Of course, these sort of family ties are historically grounded in actual human history, and can be traced all the way back to the Old Testament.

Throughout our study in Genesis, we have seen how the family of Abraham has been blessed and multiplied, just as God promised (Gen. 12:1-3). Specifically, we learned how Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, "wrestled with God and with men, and prevailed," and was thus renamed, "Israel" (Gen. 32:28). Now, at the end of his life, we see how Israel's family branches out into 12 tribes which each become known for their geographic locations and specific practices. After asking Joseph to not allow him to be buried in Egypt, but instead to bury him in Canaan with his fathers (Gen. 47:29-31), Israel blesses each of his sons, and it is in these blessings that we learn what each of these tribes will be like.

Ephraim and Manasseh

Before Jacob blesses his sons, chapter 48 reveals that Jacob also will bless Joseph's Egyptian born sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Jacob does not, however, bless them as his grandsons, but rather his sons (Gen. 48:5). It is not that Jacob intends to bless all of Joseph's offspring that come after these two, but only these two (Gen. 48:6). As the recipient of the Abrahamic blessing, Jacob's claim to Joseph's two sons guarantees that they will receive an inheritance after Jacob dies. These two will be formulated into the twelve tribes in place of Joseph.

There is yet another demotion of the firstborn over the second born, as there was with Isaac over Ishmael (Gen. 17:20-21), as well as Jacob over Esau (Gen. 25:23). Now Ephraim will receive the benefits of the firstborn, though he was younger than Manasseh (Gen. 48:19). There is some irony in this passage. Joseph was the youngest of the brothers when he began dreaming prophetically, and it was clear that his father Jacob favored him well above the rest of his brothers (Gen. 37:3). Now, Jacob is favoring Joseph's younger son, and Joseph is upset by it. It might be that Joseph learned what kind of resentment builds from this sort of favoritism, but it is more likely that he has forgotten about the tendency for God to choose the younger to rule over the older in Abraham's family. Joseph has, after all, been away for nearly 17 years.

EPHRAIM

Ephraim begins as a smaller tribe than Manasseh, but by the time of Moses is already predicted to be larger (Deut. 33:17). After the death of Moses, the people of God are led by, "Joshua, son of Nun" (Josh. 1:1), a descendant of the tribe of Ephraim (Num. 13:8). Ephraim was very loyal to the first king of Israel, Saul. Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin, and Benjamin and Ephraim were friendly because they are both so-called, "Rachel tribes." Ephraim, the son of Joseph, would have been the full-blood nephew of Benjamin. They, however, were not friendly with Judah, which was the only tribe loyal to David initially. Ephraim is routinely used synonymously with the northern kingdom of Israel (Is. 7:2), likely because the first king of the northern kingdom (after the split) was King Jeroboam, a descendant of the tribe of Ephraim (1 Kgs. 11:26).

MANASSEH

Manasseh is one of the essential tribes in the beginning of Israel's existence. This is in part evidenced by the fact that the three capitals of the northern kingdom all fell within its tribal area: Shechem, Tirzah, and Samaria. Manasseh included other major cities as well such as Megiddo, Taanach, Jezreel, Dor, and Beth-shan. In Judges 5, the song of Deborah lists 10 tribes of the northern kingdom, and notably Manasseh is not one of them. However, the mysterious tribe of Machir is named. Some scholars have posited that Machir may have been an archaic reference to Manasseh, while others believe it was a tribe that eventually overtook Manasseh.

The Other Tribes

Below is an outline of the other descendants of Jacob, and the blessing they receive from him.

REUBEN

Reuben is seen as the strongest and most preeminent of the sons because he is the firstborn (Gen. 49:3). However, he is also seen as "unstable water" (Gen. 49:4). This conveys the idea that he is unpredictable, rash, and makes bad decisions. One such decision is what ultimately costs him his birthright; the sexual interaction with this father Jacob's concubine, Bilhah. Because Reuben committed such an act, it would have been improper for her to return to Jacob, thus ending her ability to produce sons for him. It might have also been seen as an attempt to wrestle away Jacob's authority, as Absalom did to David when he took 10 of David's

concubines (2 Sam. 16:20-22). Either way, he is removed from the preeminent position, and the last historical moment his tribe is mentioned is during the Assyrian exile brought on by Tiglath-pileser (1 Chron. 5:6).

SIMEON AND LEVI

The coupling of Simeon and Levi together might be a nod to their violent revenge against Shechem for the rape of their sister Dinah (Gen. 34:25). That they were blood brothers to Dinah (all children of Leah) explains their outrage over the rest of the siblings. Jacob recognized their propensity towards violence in this act of revenge, in that they even killed the cattle in Shechem (Gen. 49:6). Jacob's curse to them is to, "scatter" them (Gen. 49:7). This is likely a nod to the reality that they will not inherit any land. The Levites are not apportioned any land but instead are spread out in all of the territories as the priestly tribe (Num. 35:1-8). Simeon likewise does not receive land, but does stay in land that was the inheritance of Judah (Josh. 19:1-9; Jdg. 1:3).

JUDAH

Much has already been said of Judah throughout this study. Judah is one of the most blessed sons of Jacob, namely because of the implications of its political power as the bearer of the king's scepter (Gen. 49:10). This eventually comes to pass after the kingdom is split and the new southern kingdom becomes known as the kingdom of Judah. Though small, it will be the treasured kingdom. The northern kingdom is eventually carried off into Assyrian exile in 722 BC, but the southern kingdom remains under the protection of Yahweh because of their occasional Godly kings. They suffer the same eventual fate, however, in Babylonian exile in 597 BC. This captivity came to an end in 538 BC after the Persian king, Cyrus, issued an edict allowing the Jews to go back to their land and rebuilt their temple. The reference of Judah being a, "lion's cub," in verse 9 is later connected to Jesus in Revelation 5:5, where Jesus is recognized as, "the Lion of the tribe of Judah." Judah is the tribe that eventually ushers in the Messiah, as demonstrated by the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:2-3).

ZEBULUN

Although Issachar preceded Zebulun in order of birth by Leah as her fifth and sixth sons, (Gen. 30:17-20), he is mentioned first here and in the blessing of Moses (Deut. 33:18). Zebulun's territory is a landlocked territory that is positioned up against the sea, hence Jacob's words: "Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships" (Gen. 49:13). Zebulun was also able to take on more of its designated territory because it was mostly comprised of virgin country with no major cities (Josh. 19:10-16). Though a smaller tribe, Zebulun proved itself worthy in battle against both the Canaanites and the Midianites (Jdg. 4:6, 6:35). Zebulun's territory becomes a point of interest again in the New Testament. After the death of John the Baptizer, Jesus withdrew from Galilee and settled in Capernaum, "which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali" (Matt. 4:13).

ISSACHAR

Issachar is called, "a strong donkey," in verse 14, but this perhaps doesn't quite capture the full image being conveyed. Literally, they are a, "rawboned beast." The idea presented here is that of a lean, bony frame hardened by difficult labor. It does convey the idea of being strong because of the labor it is subjected to. An extra-biblical letter from the so-called Amarna texts (1400 BC) speaks of men working at forced labor in a town called Shunem within the territory of Issachar, further proving Jacob's words to be true. Issachar is second only to Judah in their offering for the dedication of the tabernacle (Num. 7:18-23). They are also one of the tribes that bless the people of Israel on Mount Gerizim (Deut. 27:12).

DAN

Dan's name means, "judge," and so it is not surprising that Jacob says, "Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel" (Gen. 49:16). When the Israelites first entered Canaan, Dan settled on the western coast, but could not fully control the territory due to the Philistines in the area. Eventually Dan migrated north and

took the city of Laish, though it became known as Dan after their settlement (Jdg. 20:1). The most prominent people to come from the tribe of Dan were Samson and Oholiab (Ex. 31:6).

GAD

Gad's name means, "good fortune," and yet his blessing seems like almost a reversal of what his name indicates. Raiders will raid Gad, likely because of where the tribe ends up. They, along with Reuben and half-Manasseh, end up in the Gilead regions, sandwiched between the Moabites to the south, the Ammonites to the east, and the Arameans to the northeast. Because of their constant subjugation to war, they became very skilled warriors (1 Chr. 5:18). That he will, "raid at their heels" indicates that those who raided Gad are reeling and retreating, being vulnerably attacked from behind.

ASHER

Asher had great fortune and was included in Moses' blessing as well (Deut. 33:24). They provided warriors for David (1 Ch. 12:36), and later formed part of an administrative district of Solomon (1 Kgs. 4:16). After the fall of the northern kingdom, some of Asher responded to Hezekiah's call to revive the Passover in Jerusalem (2 Ch. 30:11). The tribe of Asher makes an appearance in the New Testament in one of its descendants, the prophetess Anna, who rejoiced to see the infant Jesus (Lk. 2:36).

NAPHTALI

Naphtali becomes a blessed tribe. The book of Judges records several narratives emphasizing military and leadership capabilities of Naphtali. During the settlement process, Naphtali did not drive out all Canaanite inhabitants, but instead pressed some into forced labor (Jdg. 1:33). When Deborah led the Israelites against King Jabin of Canaan, the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun were summoned for military duty with Barak, a Naphtalite from Kedesh, as military commander (Jdg. 4:6-10). Gideon called Naphtali's forces against the Midianites and Amalekites (Jdg. 6:35; 7:23). One of the distinctive features of Naphtali in the giving of the tribal inheritances is the absence of a northern border specifically delineated. This unrestricted northern frontier may be why Jacob pictured them as, "a doe let loose" (Gen. 49:21).

JOSEPH

Joseph is obviously blessed, and by reading Jacob's lengthy pronouncements it is clear that Joseph has been favored by God. There is, incidentally, no "tribe of Joseph." The tribe of Joseph is instead seen as two, "half tribes," the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh.

BENJAMIN

Benjamin is appropriately blessed last since he was the youngest son of Jacob. Benjamin had considerable land in the settlement in Canaan, and became well-known for its skilled warriors, and was even noted for its slingers with their traditional left-handed action (Jdg. 3:15; 20:16; 1 Ch. 8:40). Some notable members of the tribe of Benjamin are Ehud, who delivered Israel from the Moabites, as well as Queen Esther (Est. 2:5). Perhaps the biggest name in the Old Testament that descended from Benjamin is King Saul (1 Sam. 9:1). Again, as mentioned above, this lends credence to why Ephraim was in such staunch support of Saul's monarchy. Ephraim is the son of Joseph, who was the full-blood brother to Benjamin. As a result, their tribes shared a closer kinship than that of the others. By far, the biggest name in the New Testament that descended from Benjamin is Saul, later known as the Apostle Paul (Rom. 11:1). Being that he descended from the same tribe as the first king of Israel and that his parents were likely religious zealots, it makes a lot of sense why he would have been named after him.

Burial Request

After giving his blessing to his sons, Jacob's final request to be taken out of Egypt and buried, "in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan (Gen. 49:29-30). This follows the tradition of his father and mother, and his grandfather and grandmother, all of which were buried there, along with Leah (Gen. 49:31).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Genesis 47:29-31. What does Jacob request of Joseph here?

2. Read Genesis 48:1-7. What does Jacob say about Joseph's two sons in this passage?

Day Two

1. Read Genesis 48:8-16. In your own words, describe the events in this passage. What is the content of his blessing to Joseph?

2. Read Genesis 48:17-22. Why does Joseph correct Jacob? What is Jacob's response? What is the blessing of Manasseh? What is the blessing of Ephraim?

Day Three

1. Read Genesis 49:1-12. What is the blessing of Reuben? What is the blessing of Simeon and Levi? What is the blessing of Judah?

2. Read Genesis 49:13-21. What is the blessing of Zebulun? What is the blessing of Issachar? What is the blessing of Dan? What is the blessing of Gad? What is the blessing of Asher? What is the blessing of Naphtali?

Day Four

1. Read Genesis 49:22-27. What is the blessing of Joseph? What is the blessing of Benjamin?

2. Read Genesis 49:28-33. After Jacob blessed his sons, what does he request of Joseph? Who all was buried there as well?
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Week 39 Discussion: Being a Blessing

The last major action of Jacob is to bless his twelve sons. As the heir of the Abrahamic covenant, his blessing mattered, and history bears that out. Talk as a group about how you can be a blessing to others in your life, whether it be family, friends, or church members. Talk as well about how you've been blessed by other people, and the impact it had on you.

1. Icebreaker: What is the biggest blessing you've ever been given by a person? What is the biggest blessing God has ever bestowed on you?
2. What is the biggest blessing you've ever bestowed on someone else? How did it make you feel? How was it received?
3. What are practical ways a parent be a blessing to their children?
4. What are practical ways an individual can bless the body of Christ?
5. What are practical ways an individual can be blessed by the body of Christ?
6. How does blessing others affect you spiritually and emotionally?

Takeaways:

1. Jacob blessed all twelve of his sons, and foreshadows some of the fortunes (or misfortunes) that their tribes will face.
2. Jacob desired to be buried in the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan.

PRAYER REQUESTS: