

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 9

The 12 Tribes of Israel

There are parts of the Old Testament that absolutely inspire me. Familiar stories, parts of Isaiah, and the Psalms and Proverbs are among them. I especially like the book of Nehemiah. In years past, I have been guilty of simply “skipping over” some parts that I found boring or that I did not understand. I would get especially frustrated by the long lists of names in genealogies, and wonder, why are they in here? Who cares what these guys’ names are. That is the wrong attitude. One of the passages I have previously skipped over in my study is today’s lesson, The Blessings of Jacob, Genesis 49.

In our lesson today, in Mark’s absence, we will study the plan that God had for Jacob’s 12 sons, who eventually became the 12 tribes of Israel. Genesis 49 is often called the “Blessing of Jacob.” I have also seen it described as the “the testament of Jacob” because it is much like Jacob’s Last Will and Testament. We are skipping over the story of Joseph, but we will come back to it and study Joseph as a unit when Mark returns. To understand fully, we must start the story in Genesis 48.

JACOB + JOSEPH / EPHRAIM + MANASSEH

At this point in the story, Jacob¹ is ill, at the end of his days, and he knows it. Joseph is told and he comes to visit, bringing with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Jacob “rallied his strength” when he heard they had arrived and sat up in bed. I have always pictured Jacob, lying on his deathbed, barely able to talk or move. Hebrews 11:21 states, “By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff.” Evidently, tough ‘ole Jacob “rallied” and got out of bed and leaned on his staff to give these blessings!

Jacob tells Joseph that both Ephraim and Manasseh will “be reckoned as mine,” which elevates Joseph’s inheritance to double, normally given to the firstborn, Rueben. Joseph arranges his boys to receive Jacob’s blessing with Manasseh, the oldest, on the right, and Ephraim on Jacob’s left. Jacob, the former trickster conman, has one more trick up his sleeve: He crosses his arms and gives the firstborn blessing to Ephraim.

¹ Jacob’s name has been changed to Israel in Genesis 32, but both names are used interchangeably afterward. We will just use “Jacob” to be consistent.

(Genesis 48:17-20) When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him, and he took his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. And Joseph said to his father, "Not this way, my father; since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head." But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations." So he blessed them that day, saying, "God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh." Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh.

This seems to have become a family tradition. Ephraim receives the birthright due Manasseh, as had Jacob over Esau and Isaac over Ishmael. Jacob goes on to say that "his younger brother will become greater than he" in verse 19.

Ephraim grows to be the strongest tribe until David becomes King, from Judah. Israel's leaders, after the death of Moses, Joshua and Samuel, were both from the tribe of Ephraim. Ephraim's territory included the centers of early Israel worship, Shechem and Shiloh.

Manasseh ends up with a very large territory on both sides of the Jordan. During the time of the wanderings in the desert, Manasseh was a dominant tribe. Manasseh, the king mentioned in 2 Kings, was the son of Hezekiah, who was from Judah.

WHY WAS IT 12 TRIBES?

Twelve is a very important number throughout scripture. No one knows why of course, but we can have fun guessing! Maybe because there are 12 months in a year and that is a good, complete number representing a cycle of life? There are numerous examples in scripture and this is only a partial list. There are 3 examples right in the book of Genesis; Ishmael had 12 sons. (Gen 25:13-16) Nahor, who was Abraham's brother, had 12 sons (Gen. 22:20 -24), and Joktan fathered 12 sons, noted in Gen 10:26 (there are 13 names listed, one was a girl - Sheba).

- 12 disciples of Jesus
- 12 legions of angels mentioned in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:53)
- 12 basketfuls left after Jesus fed the five thousand (Matt. 14:20)
- 12 gates of heaven with the names of the 12 apostles of the Lamb engraved on them with 12 angels guarding them (Rev. 21:8)

- New Jerusalem is 12,000 stadia (1400 miles) long, high and wide in a shape symbolic of Holy of Holies (Rev. 21)
- New Jerusalem has 12 foundations: each foundation symbolically constructed as a reminder of either the twelve apostles or the twelve tribes of Israel (maybe both?) Rev.21
- New Jerusalem's walls are 144 cubits thick (12x12) Rev. 21
- Inside the New Jerusalem, the tree of life (growing next to the water of life flowing from God's throne) bears 12 crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month (Rev. 22)
- The Lamb is described as standing with the 144,000 (12 x 12,000) after the beast from the sea and from the earth (for example, the Antichrist and the false prophet) have revealed themselves. (Rev. 14:1-5). In Rev. 7, it further explains that 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes will be saved and sealed.

The Interpretation of Symbolic Numbers

1. The number of unity, independence, solitary, the number of God
 2. Division or separation
 3. Divine fullness God, the trinity, the number of God
 4. World, creation
 5. God's grace
 6. The number of man, one less than 7 – therefore, imperfect (mark of the beast is 666)
 7. Fullness, perfection, completeness, sacred number of the covenant between God and man
12. Governmental perfection or rule

The most common explanation for “why 12?” I have read is that 3 is the number for God. 4 is the number for the earth. $3 + 4 = 7$, the complete number. $3 \times 4 = 12$, the number for governmental rule. It can be fun to speculate on numbers in the Bible. When I was attending Southwestern Seminary, I first heard the word “Gematria.” Gematria is assigning numerical values for letters in the Hebrew alphabet. It is done in other languages as well. If you spell out Nero's name in Hebrew, then add up the numbers, they add up to 666! (*see page 144 in Davis's book. Ha! See that? 144 is 12 times 12!) Someone I knew in class who wrote “Kissinger” in Hebrew in the 1970's and it added up to 666 also! (Henry Kissinger was National Security Director and Secretary of State for Richard Nixon.)

Dr. John J. Davis, Th.D. Professor of OT and Hebrew at Grace Theological Seminary:

The system of symbolic numbers, as used in the Christian church must be regarded as a post-Apostolic development. Most of the meanings adopted today for the symbolic numbers (above) are those that were proposed by the Church Fathers. It is rather interesting that not one New Testament writer ever pointed back to the significance of a symbolic number occurring in the Old Testament. (Emphasis mine) This seems rather strange if the phenomenon was so apparent. Many other types and symbols are alluded to in the New Testament and explained, but never numbers... It is our conclusion that the mystical or symbolical interpretation of numbers has little place in a sound system of hermeneutics.²

Biblical Numerology is prevalent in the mystical Jewish religion of Kabbalah, popularized in recent years by Madonna and other celebrities. God's word is his revelation to us. I do not think He wanted to keep secrets, or limit parts of his revelation to a select few. God's word is The Divinci Code!

The Bible is full of metaphors, symbols, and poetry, and clearly the number 12 is important and shows up in the Bible many times. But when you assign mystical or theological value to numbers, or letters of the alphabet, there is no end to the speculation. For example, this is the NT of course, but why did Matthew omit some names and arrange his chronology into 3 groups of 14 each, corresponding to three periods of Israel's history? We just don't know.

THE BLESSING OF JACOB

This is a prophetic oracle. What Jacob says about each son is partly due to their natural character and partly by the divine promise that the Lord gave to him and his father and grandfather, Abraham and Isaac. John Phillips says that these oracles can be viewed either *dispensationally* or *dispositionally*. We are going to view them dispositionally in this lesson.³

² Davis, John, Biblical Numerology, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids MI, 1983, pp121 – 124.

³ The way a dispensational view might be explained is: Rueben, Simeon and Levi give the history of Israel down to the advent of the Messiah. Judah gives a sketch of the Messiah's appearing and rejection. Zebulun and Issachar set forth the dispersal of Israel and the long subjection to the Gentiles. Dan foreshadows the appearing and kingdom of the Antichrist. Gad, Asher, and Naphtali depict the moral character of the elect in the last days. Joseph and Benjamin foreshadow the second coming and triumphs of Israel's Messiah.

“As Jacob looked at his sons, their traits of disposition gave him a clue to their destinies as tribes. He knew their strengths, weaknesses, histories and characters. The Holy Spirit enabled him to project the lines of their personalities into the future and predict their future as tribes.” They can also be interpreted dispensationally, that is, Jacob foresaw the various dispensations of time in God’s dealings with mankind insofar as those dispensations had a direct bearing upon his people.⁴

Genesis 49:1: “Then Jacob called his sons and said, ‘Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come.’”

The Hebrew is hard to translate in this section, according to all the books I read. I certainly am not a student of Hebrew, so it would be wrong to assume we can have all our questions answered and everything about this prophetic oracle will be nice, neat, and understandable. Let’s concentrate on what we can know:

1. These “blessings” are prophetic, “days to come.” God gifted Jacob to foretell something about the future of each son.
2. They are blessings. Genesis 49:28: “This is what their father said to them as he *blessed* them, *blessing* each with the *blessing* suitable to him.”
3. They are appropriate. The blessings fit. They are neither unfair, nor unwise.
4. They have long-term effects. They apply to the descendents of the sons as well as the sons themselves.⁵

Reuben

Reuben was the firstborn, and as such, was due 3 privileges in his inheritance over his brothers. He was due a double inheritance, the priestly function, and the royal kingdom. He lost all three, separately, to his brothers because of the sin of sleeping with his father’s concubine, Bilhah. It was a terrible sin, one that his father, Jacob, never forgot. Reuben was not all bad; he had some good character traits. In Genesis 37:21, he is the brother who “rescued” Joseph from being killed and suggested putting Joseph into the pit. Later, Reuben returned to the pit to pull Joseph out and learned that his brothers had sold Joseph to Midianite traders, on the suggestion of Judah.

Jacob called Reuben “unstable water.” The picture is water boiling over in a pot. God let Jacob know that Reuben’s character was not destined for leadership. His

⁴ Phillips, John, *Exploring Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, Kregal Publications, 2001, pg. 360.

⁵ Moore, Beth, *The Patriarchs*, Lifeway Press, 2005, pg. 231.

tribe helped a rebellion against Moses and Aaron by a guy named Korah (Numbers 16). Later, there was a great battle against Jabin, the King of Canaan, and the victory is noted in the Song of Deborah and Barak, but of Reuben's tribe the poem asks, "Why did you sit among the sheepfolds, to hear the whistling for the flocks, among the clans of Reuben, there were great searchings of heart." (Judges 5:16) There are no noteworthy leaders from among Reuben's tribe in Israel's history. Poor Reuben!

Simeon and Levi

Reuben's costly sin was lust. For these two, it was cruel violence. This pair is noted together and their anger is cursed. Shechem, the son of Hamor, raped their sister and without recounting the sordid details, Simeon and Levi killed Hamor and Shechem, plundered their city, and then took Dinah back home. Since they were violent and angry, Jacob said (vs. 5, 6) "weapons of violence are their swords, let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company." Jacob goes on to say, "cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel." (vs. 7)

In both cases, Jacob says that they will be scattered. Simeon received territory, but it became the smallest tribe, according to the census taken in Numbers. Judah surrounded it Judah (see Judges 19:1). Simeon eventually disappeared as a distinct tribe, being absorbed by Judah. The tribe of Simeon does not show up in the blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy 33, or in the song of Deborah and Barak in Judges 5.

Things turned out differently for Levi. Levi was not given a distinct territory, but his tribe was scattered, just as Jacob prophesied, to 48 cities within Israel.

Deuteronomy 33:9 is the blessing of Moses and says, "and of Levi....For they observed your word and kept your covenant. They shall teach Jacob your rules and Israel your law."

"Levi is a great example of God's grace. He did not end up getting a land inheritance and his descendents were scattered as punishment for his cruelty. It is only the grace of God that can transform the cruel Levi into the priestly tribe they became."⁶

⁶ McGee, J. Vernon, *Thru the Bible Commentary Series Genesis 34 – 50*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991, pg 164.

Zebulun

Zebulun is the sixth son of Leah. Jacob says that Zebulun shall dwell by the shore of the sea. I am not sure how that all works out because his tribe did not end up right next to the sea. It does say in Deuteronomy 33:19, in the blessing of Moses, that “they draw from the abundance of the seas.” Zebulun’s location on trade routes enabled them to do business with the Phoenicians to the east, and provide imported goods to the people to the west. They were a brave tribe whose warriors had great reputations. (1 Chronicles 12:33) Deborah and Barak praised the men of Zebulun for rallying and fighting Sisera in Judges 5:14–18.

Isaachar

Isaachar is the 5th son of Leah. Jacob called him a strong donkey, which does not sound like a nice compliment to us, but in OT times, Kings rode on donkeys (see 1 Kings 1:38). The tribe of Isaachar picked their territory 4th in line and ended up with a fertile land between Zebulun and the Jordan River. They did not produce any Bible heroes and seemed content to work hard and produce from the soil.

Dan

Dan was the firstborn of Bilhah, who was Rachel’s maid. His name means “to judge.” He is called a serpent by Jacob, which does not sound good and indeed it was not! They were originally given the fertile land bordering the Mediterranean in Philistine territory (see Joshua 19:40–48), but they were not able to drive the Philistines out, so they traveled north to get more land and conquered the defenseless people of Laish. “It was far from Sidon; and they had no dealings with anyone.” (Judges 18: 1 – 29)

The tribe of Dan was not wholly devoted to the Lord and 200 years later, King Jeroboam set up one of his idolatrous golden calves in Dan (2 Kings 12:28 – 30). Dan is left out of the genealogies in 1 Chronicles 2–10 and the tribal listing in Revelation 7:1–8. The tribe is mentioned in Ezekiel in chapter 48. One of the Bible heroes, Samson, came from Dan.

Gad, Asher, Naphtali

These three only get two lines each in Genesis 49, so I put them together. We will not spend much time on them, since Jacob did not. Naphtali was Dan’s brother. Gad and Asher were sons of Zilpah (who was Leah’s maid). For some reason,

they are mentioned first. Gad is a raider, Asher will have rich food, and Naphtali is a doe. Naphtali was one of the first tribes to be taken by the Assyrians in 722 BC.

Gad can mean “good fortune,” and this tribe ended up on the east side of the Jordan. It looked like foreign enemies could invade. Raiders shall raid Gad, but he shall raid at their heels, is a play on words on Gad’s name in Hebrew. Gad also can mean troop. Gad’s territory is also called “Gilead” in scripture.

Asher means “blessed” or “happy.” Asher was not able to drive out the inhabitants of their land (Judges 19:24-30). In Deuteronomy 33:24–25, Moses says that Asher’s food would be rich, and that they would have wealth of oil. They did have an abundance of olive trees to produce olive oil. Haifa, an important port city to this day, where the Iranian oil pipelines end, is within their territory.

Benjamin

Benjamin is called a “ravenous wolf” by Jacob. Scholars are not sure what this means. Benjamin ends up with the smallest territory, just to the north of Judah. This tribe has King Saul, Jonathan and the Apostle Paul as its notables. The tribe of Benjamin does get into an all out war with the other tribes at the end of Judges.

Joseph

Joseph, as we have already seen, does not get a tribe named after him. He gets two, and each named after his sons, who were elevated to the same level as Jacob’s sons. As we might expect, Jacob spends the most time talking about Joseph, 19 lines (Judah gets 17 lines.) This is indeed a blessing, confirming Joseph’s special standing among his brothers.

All the major translations start out by describing Joseph as a “fruitful vine” or bough (in the ESV). Evidently, the Hebrew is very difficult to translate in the Joseph passage. The minor tribes and Benjamin are relatively straightforward translations, but this passage is among the most difficult Hebrew in the OT.

There may be a play on words here also. The root *parah* appears in Ephraim, the fruitful one.⁷ As we will learn later on in our study, Ephraim becomes the dominant tribe, until Judah takes over, when David becomes king.

⁷ Leupold, H. C., *Exposition of Genesis*, Baker Book House, 1987, pg. 1194.

There are many difficulties in this translation. I read numerous variations. There are two things abundantly clear. Jacob saves his most lavish blessing for Joseph. He is set apart from his brothers. We will learn a lot more about Joseph next week.

Another obvious point is that these blessings refer to the tribes of Israel, not just the personalities or character of the sons. As with other OT prophecies, the meaning can be difficult.

Judah

Jacob “blasted” the sins of Reuben, Simeon and Levi, the oldest 3 brothers, but did not say anything about the fact that it was Judah who suggested selling Joseph into slavery.

Genesis 37:26 – 27: “then Judah said to his brothers, ‘What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites,⁸ and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.’ And his brothers listened to him.”

What Judah did was disgraceful, but what were his motives? The brothers were ready to kill him, so was this a less severe suggestion to “save his brother?” Or, was Judah just thinking about money? Verse 27 is important. “His brothers listened to him.” Was Judah’s leadership already showing up? At least Judah saved Joseph’s life; and whatever his motives were, as we now know, it was part of God’s plan to save Israel.

Jacob also had nothing to say about Judah’s sin with Tamar in Genesis 38. This was also a disgraceful act. Born of that union were twin boys, Zerah and **Perez**. We will not recount the whole story here, but Zerah stuck his arm out first, a scarlet thread was wrapped around it, but his arm went back into the womb and Perez was born first. Perez’s name means “breach.” One of my previous mistakes in studying the Old Testament was skipping over genealogies as boring and unimportant. I was wrong! Here is a very important genealogy.

Ruth 4:12 – 18

Perez – Hezron – Ram – Amminadab – Nahshon –

Salmon – Boaz – Obed – Jesse – **David** →

⁸ The price was 20 shekels of silver. A shekel was about 2/5th of an ounce. 20 shekels was the common price for a slave, according to the Code of Hammurabi. Today, an ounce of silver is worth about \$18.65. 2/5th would be about \$7.50. So, that means that the brothers sold Joseph for \$150. In the time of Paul the apostle, that amounted to almost 3 years of daily wages, so it was no small sum!

First chapter of Matthew: 1 - 16

Solomon – Rehoboam – Abijah – Asaph – Jehoshaphat – Joram – Uzziah – Jotham – Ahaz – Hezekiah – Manasseh – Amos – Josiah – Jechoniah (deportation to Babyon) Shealtiel – Zerubbabel – Abiud – Eliakim – Azor – Zadok – Achim – Eliud – Eliazar – Matthan – Jacob – Joseph – Jesus.⁹

Scripture confirms this in Hebrews 7:14 “for it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah...”

In Genesis 44:32, Judah offers himself as surety for Benjamin. Jacob undoubtedly heard the story and Judah’s character had recovered from his previous youthful sins. Jacob recognized Judah’s leadership when it was Judah who was sent ahead to Egypt to make things ready. (Genesis 46:28) “He (Jacob) had sent Judah ahead of him to Joseph to show the way before him in Goshen, and they came into the land of Goshen.”

It seems that Judah was finally living up to his name, which is similar to the Hebrew word for “praise.” (Genesis 29:35) The first thing Jacob says to Judah in his blessing (this one actually is a blessing) is “your brothers shall praise you.”

God appointed Judah to be the royal tribe, so comparisons to the lion, the king of beasts, is logical. There are numerous OT references to this. If you “want more,” then read Numbers 24:9, Ezekiel 19:1–7, and Micah 5:8. In Revelation 5:5 it says, “Weep no more; behold the Lion of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” Who opens the scroll? Jesus, of course!

Genesis 45:10 begins, “the scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between the feet.” The scepter is a royal symbol. Judah ended up being much more stable politically. The kingdom split after Solomon. Israel had many dynasties and fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC. Judah (along with Benjamin) remained stable, with one dynasty (David’s), but also eventually fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC. Even if more stable, Judah eventually fell, and so “did the scepter depart from Judah?” No! The scepter, the royal symbol does not refer to a political designation, but to the King of Kings, Jesus.

Verse 10 in the ESV says, “until tribute comes to him.” The Hebrew name “Shiloh” in verse 10 has a lot of messianic speculation about it also. The word means “whose it is.” It can also mean relaxation or peace and is similar to “shalom.” Other translations say “until Shiloh comes” or until Shiloh comes to him. Rabbinical scholars took Shiloh to be a name of the promised Messiah, who alone had the right to claim rule over God’s people, Israel.

⁹ After Joram, Matthew omits: Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah and after Josiah, Jehoiakim.

It was the Lion of the Tribe of Judah who rode the donkey down the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem as the crowd cried out, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” Indeed, the scepter did not depart from Judah, the blessed line of the blessed King. It is no coincidence that Judah means praise! Praise Jesus, the King of Kings, who reigns today and forevermore!

CONCLUSION

Hal Ronning who is the Director of the Home for Bible Translators in Jerusalem, Israel says:

The kinds of challenges the people of God faced (in the OT) are not necessarily tied only to their times. As we study the issues they faced (polygamy, brutality, prophecies, etc.), which seem so foreign to us, it is helpful to get behind the specific danger, to the character and nature of the danger involved. In other words, I try to see the extent to which the trials that were faced then, are actually the same trials that we face now, once we get to the root of the nature of the temptation. Though each period may have some difference in the magnitude of one kind of temptation being primary; so our task is to discern what is our main danger today and take steps to invite the Holy Spirit in such a way as to overcome.

What robs away our precious hours in pursuits that are not helpful to the spread of God's rule in our own lives and that of others?”

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “*Then Jacob called his sons and said...*” (Genesis 49:1)

Called = action / said = words. This is how we enrich the next generation with our faith. It is our sacred duty to pass on what we have learned, as we grow in our faith. We need to carefully and prayerfully be confident with our actions and our words to our children, and to our children’s children. 3 John 1:4 “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”

2. “*Judah, your brothers shall praise you;*” (Genesis 49:8)

Judah certainly did not start off praiseworthy. It was Judah, who begged for the life of his youngest brother, Benjamin, and offered himself as a

“hostage.” Like Jacob, Judah recovered and his character had improved. 2 Corinthians 5:17 “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

3. *“They (the Levites) shall teach Jacob your rules and Israel your law;”
(Deuteronomy 33:10)*

Judah recovered from his youthful sins and showed real character later in his life and was rewarded. Levi was condemned. However, later on, his descendents were “blessed” by Moses and gained the priestly responsibilities for the whole nation. Levi’s descendents, the Levites, did not allow their ancestors’ sin to determine their destiny. Our parents certainly have a strong effect on us, but that does not mean we cannot break away and become more and more like Christ. 2 Corinthians 3:18 “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

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Secret numerology message: ☺

77069 49 57 123 777 10
E-mail Mark – Dale taught a good lesson!



THE 12 TRIBES OF ISRAEL