

Literary Analysis of Genesis 49:1-33

Genesis 49 records primarily Jacob's blessing of his sons. After a brief narrative introduction to set the stage and tone of the blessings (vv. 1-2), Jacob addresses each son individually, except for Simeon and Levi where he addresses them together. In giving the blessing of the birthright, Jacob passed over his first three sons and gave Judah kingship; but to Joseph, Jacob gave the double portion of the blessing to Joseph.

The order in which Jacob blesses his sons was neither according to their birth order (cf. Gen. 29:31—30:24; 35:16-19), nor according to the listing in Genesis 35:23-26. This has led some to believe Jacob's blessing simply as a "collection of tribal sayings", exhibiting no discernible structure (Westermann, *Genesis*, 1986, III:220). Strikingly, each group of sons is presented in a descending order of seniority, except for one notable exception, Issachar and Zebulun.

The chronological birth order of Jacob's twelve sons is described in Genesis 29:32—30:18. Other lists of Jacob's twelve sons are found in Genesis 35:22-26; 46:8-25; Exodus 1:2-5; Numbers 1:5-15; 2:3-31; 13:4-15; 26:4-51; 34:19-28; Deuteronomy 27:12-13; 33:6-25; Joshua 13:7ff.; 22:34; Judges 5:12-18; 1 Chronicles 2:1—8:40; 12:24-37; 27:16-22; Ezekiel 48:1-7, 23-28, 31-34; and Revelation 7:5-8. **These nineteen passages, plus the one found here in Genesis 49:3-27 exhibit a different arrangement of Jacob's sons in one way or another.**

All sources consulted agreed there is no apparent reason for Jacob blessing his sons in the order in which he did in Genesis 49. What is clear is that, he did not bless them according to their chronological age. Thus, there must be another reason why this order is given.

The literary structure of Genesis 49 betrays itself as the product of Moses' careful artistic design. The six natural sons of Leah are treated first (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar); this could be expected. However, what is unexpected is that, the last two sons are not mentioned in the order their birth. Zebulun, the younger, is listed before his older brother, Issachar.

After the first six sons are blessed, the four sons of the two maidservants, whom Jacob took as wives, are listed in a very strange order. First is the oldest son of Rachel's servant (Bilhah), Dan. Then come the two sons of Leah's handmaid, Zilpah, Gad and Asher in the order of their birth order. After these, Bilhah's second

son, Naphtali, is blessed. Finally, Rachel's two natural sons, Joseph and Benjamin are listed.

Another striking feature of Jacob's blessing, given in a poetic form, is that, it is encased within a prose framework. Jacob's sons assemble around their dying father (vv. 1-2), who, after the prophetic oracle, says he is about "to be gathered" to his people and then he dies (vv. 29-33). This narrative material which forms a parenthesis around the poem lends external unity and cohesion, and provides the appropriate setting for its placement within the Joseph Narrative. All of which—the prose framework and poem together—yields a deliberate chiasmic arrangement.

- A Jacob's sons gather to hear his words (1)
- B Prologue to the prophetic oracle (2)
- C Leah's sons are blessed (3-15)
[Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar]
- D Bilhah's first son is blessed (16-18)
[Dan]
- X ZIPHAH'S SONS ARE BLESSED (19-20)**
[Gad, Asher]
- D' Bilhah's second son is blessed (21)
[Naphtali]
- C' Rachel's sons are blessed (22-27)
[Joseph, Benjamin]
- B' Epilogue to the prophetic oracle (28)
- A' Israel is gathered to his people (29-33)

The above chiasmus implies purpose, and this in turn suggests a central concern or integration point that gives this passage its meaning and direction. If the sons (Gad and Asher) of the least loved wife's (Leah) concubine (Zilpah) are blessed, then surely all of Jacob's sons will be blessed. In addition, since these "lesser" sons are the focal point of the chiasmus, and that this chiasmus is built upon a matriarchal alternating pattern (Leah, Bilhah, Zilpah, Bilhah, Rachel), these two sons (and certainly Zilpah) would have received comfort and encouragement.

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