

Sermon 2, Until Shiloh Comes, Genesis 49:8-12

“If ‘Judah and his [eleven] brothers’ at the beginning of the genealogy recalls Israel’s constitution as a nation of twelve tribes, the Messiah and his eleven worshiping brothers bring to fulfillment Israel’s reconstitution as a nation of nations.” — Steven M. Bryan¹

Proposition: Jacob’s end-time blessing of Judah clearly draws a picture of a divine, resurrected, Messianic ruler.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, this passage sounds deliciously poetic and mysterious. It makes chills run down my spine sometimes, and my soul thrill. But what does it mean? I never really gave that question much thought until I read Chen’s comments on it, and then sat down to outline the passage for this sermon. What I hope to show you is that Jacob’s blessing of Judah clearly depicts for us a divine, resurrected, heartthrob, a lion-like figure, a ruler with a robe dipped in blood, or at least in wine.

I. When: The Latter Days, v. 1

To understand this passage, we must first understand the time period to which the blessing refers. Almost all English versions use some kind of neutral variant like “the future” or “the days to come” to translate the Hebrew phrase here, but the KJV gets it right with its “the last days.” This blessing is not about some period in an unspecified future during ordinary history. It is specifically about the time in the future when God acts decisively to bring about the age to come. The things mentioned in this blessing will happen at the end of the present age and the inauguration of the coming age. Chen spends a long time arguing for the eschatological

¹ *Cultural Identity and the Purposes of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 138.

significance of the phrase, but I'm not going to detain us with those arguments here. Suffice it to say that the eschatological reading coheres so perfectly with the obvious meaning of the text that we don't need to spend extra time showing that this passage is, in fact, talking about the age of Messiah. It clearly does that; the words used in vv. 8-12 don't really have another possible referent.

II. Who: A Divine, Resurrected Ruler, vv. 8-12

So let's dig into it. What does Jacob say when he blesses Judah? Perhaps the first thing to notice is that this blessing differs radically from the previous blessings. Reuben, Simeon, and Levi simply have their sins remembered in front of everyone. But none of Judah's sins are remembered here. Instead, the attributes of Joseph, the most upright of the sons, seem to be systematically transferred to him. And the whole blessing seems overwhelmingly positive, far more so than any of the others except the one for Joseph.

Anyway, that said about the blessing as a whole, let's see what exactly Jacob says.

A. Praise & Worship, v. 8

He begins with the theme of praise and worship. Now, I deliberately juxtapose those two words because they are something of a cliche in the contemporary American church. But they are most certainly here in the text. "Judah" means something like "praised." And so Jacob starts with a pun: "You are the one your brothers will praise." Now, this sounds pretty impressive. Even of Joseph, the one who dreamed that the others would bow down to him, nothing like this is said. Praise is an extremely common term throughout the Psalms, and it is constantly applied to Yahweh and only to Yahweh. Indeed, the next time "you will be praised" (this exact form of the verb) appears in the Bible is Psalm 67:3, "Let the peoples praise You, O God; Let all the peoples praise You." The verb appears 133 times in the Bible, and though I did not check every reference, I'm pretty sure that the only time it does not certainly refer to praising God is in God's speech in Job 40:14, "Then I, even I, will praise you, for your strong hand has delivered you" (Job 40:14 CEB). Even there it is more likely to be translated "confess" as in ESV: "Then will I also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can save you" (Job 40:14 ESV). Regardless, this verse is clearly a counterfactual that proves the rule: Praise is reserved for Yahweh. It belongs only to Him.

And so what in tarnation is Joseph doing to receive praise from his brothers? I am happy to say "Good job, Abel," to my little brother. But I'm not about to say "Let the peoples praise you, O Abel, yes, let all the peoples praise you." As with the last text we looked at, here we see another piece that doesn't fit, a piece that clues us in that we need to look below the surface of the text. We are not simply dealing with a statement about Judah ben Jacob, one of the 12 patriarchs of Israel who impregnated his own daughter-in-law. We are dealing with a prophecy that refers to a descendant of Judah, an extremely notable descendant who will receive the same sort of praise that is normally reserved for Yahweh.

So far so good. But notice the other thing that is typically exclusively reserved for Yahweh, or at least for kings. I speak, of course, of the father's sons bowing down. This is a clear reference back to Joseph's dream, and it was already fulfilled when the brothers came into Egypt

to buy grain and bowed before Joseph in order to get his favor. And yet here it is again, applied to Judah, or better, to his perfect descendant. Why? For the same reason that they praise Him — because He is Yahweh. You could say simply that the descendant is going to be a king who feeds the world like Joseph, and that would be true — but it wouldn't be going far enough. If a single individual is receiving praise and worship from God-fearing Hebrews, the signs point clearly to that individual being Jehovah.

B. Victory, v. 8b

The second thing to see about this blessing of Judah is that Judah, or rather his descendants, are promised victory. Judah lived and died a small-time sheepherder, with petty adultery and his own set of marriage problems with Canaanite women. He did not exactly have a bunch of enemies. But here, the promise is that his hand will be on the neck of his enemies. What does this idiom mean? It's hard to say exactly, since it appears only here in Scripture. But clearly it doesn't mean that the enemies will beat him; quite the opposite. It means, apparently, that he will have his enemies by the throat. In other words, this Judahite is going to be an incredibly powerful and victorious warrior. Not only does He receive praise and worship; He also takes His enemies by the throat with ease.

C. My Son, v. 9b

Furthermore, for the first and only time in the book of Genesis, Jacob proceeds to call Judah "my son." Yes, Jacob uses this title all the time — but exclusively to refer to Joseph, and then, after Joseph's disappearance, to Benjamin. But suddenly Judah too has this title of favor. Clearly, this Judahite is going to be a Son. Just as we saw in Gen. 22 with the death of the only son, so this Judahite shares in that Messianic title.

D. The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, v. 9

Well, the rest of v. 9 speaks of this Judahite as a lion, "the Lion of the Tribe of Judah" as Revelation 5 has it. This description of the Judahite as a lion has two major components from the previous context of Genesis, plus an unprecedented reference to the resurrection.

1. The Torn Robe of Joseph and the Prey

The first component from the previous narrative in Genesis references the "prey," literally, "the torn." The word appears four times in the narrative, each time describing Joseph's purported fate as "torn" by a wild animal. Probably the best equivalent in idiomatic English would be to say that Jacob says his son has been "shredded to shreds" by some evil beast. Later on Benjamin is also described with this word "torn," in Genesis 49:27. Anyway, Judah, or the Judahite to whom the blessing refers, is described as tearing, as one who has prey. Again the reference to mighty warriorhood comes to the fore. Forget his hand on his enemies' neck; it is almost as though Jacob says "His fangs are in his enemies' neck." This Judahite is not someone you would want to meet in the grasslands.

2. Going Up and Down on Jacob's Ladder

The next two words refer to going up and down, a theme that surfaced previously with respect to Jacob's ladder. Jacob, in other words, uses these incidents from his own life to bless his son. The word for "up" is the same, but Gen. 28 has a different word for "down." Regardless, there is a

clearly a thematic echo here. This Judahite is reminiscent in some way of Jacob's ladder. We know that ultimately Jesus is the bridge between Heaven and Earth, the only way to get from here to there. Jacob seems to be hinting at something like this as he portrays the Judahite as one who "tears" and then goes up, bows down, and then lies down. Again, it's poetry, so we should expect it to say much in little. Jacob is referring to the normal behavior of a lion, with the symbolic overtones that apply this behavior to a man who is also praised and worshiped as Yahweh. One hardly needs a hyperactive imagination here to apply the verbs to actual incidents in the life of Christ:

Goes up = the Ascension

Bows down = Prayer in Gethsemane

Lies down = Goes into the tomb, dead

Call it fanciful if you will. Obviously the incidents are not in chronological order, but in poetic order. But whatever Jacob means by comparing this Judahite to a lion who lies down, he ends with a plaintive question: "Who will raise him?"

3. Who Will Raise Him?

Despite what your translation says, "rouse" is not what this verb means. The only places where it might mean "rouse" are here and in Num. 24:9, both references to the resurrection of the Messiah. The verb is "raise," and it simply doesn't have the meaning "Wake up." No, this verb means "raise," as in "raise from the dead." The lion of the tribe of Judah, mighty warrior as He is, with his paw on the neck of his enemies, claws out, will fall down dead. Who can raise Him from the dead? Jacob doesn't answer this question. But he nonetheless makes it clear that he hopes for the snake-bitten Seed to be raised.

E. Judah Rules Until a Judahite Comes and Takes Permanent Rule over the Peoples, v. 10

Jacob now reverts briefly to describing the tribe of Judah as the one which will rule in Israel. Other than the first king of Israel, Saul, the other monarchs were from the tribe of Judah and descended from David. This was true right down to the Babylonian captivity and even after, when the Judahite Zerubbabel ben Shealtiel bore rule in a reconstituted Judah. The scepter, the ruler's staff, belongs to this tribe and to this tribe alone. However, this state of affairs is, strictly speaking, temporary. One is coming "to whom it belongs," i.e., one who has a permanent right to the tokens of kingship. The scepter will be his — King of Kings and Lord of Lords, forever and ever. The obedience not just of Israel but of all peoples will be directed to Him. Combined with what Jacob already said about this Judahite being praised like Yahweh, and His military prowess — something clearly right for a king — we can say that this figure is an end-time King who consummates Judahite rule. Again, notice that already, when Israel is hardly more than a hundred people total, Jacob is already looking forward to the day when one of his descendants will rule the planet. How glorious!

F. A Donkey tied to Israel, Yahweh's Choice Vine, v. 11a

The next part of the prophecy is undoubtedly the most obscure line. What does tying his donkey to the vine have to do with the rule of the Judahite? I don't know for sure. What is clear is that

this line associates the Judahite to come with a donkey, the mount of royalty, and also with the vine — one of God's favorite symbols of Israel, as in Isaiah 5. The donkey of this king will be attached in some sense to Israel. Again, this is a poetic way of speaking. It's not that tying your donkey to a vine is a significant Messianic action. Instead, the association of donkey and vine, royal mount and God's own people, is the point. Jesus specifically insists that the donkey colt be untied before being brought to Him for the triumphal entry. But there is nothing about retying it, and nothing about the vine.

G. Treading the Winepress of God's Wrath, Robe Dipped in Blood, v. 11b

What is mentioned for sure, in the book of Isaiah and again in Revelation, is the symbolism of the one who treads the winepress and therefore is clothed in a robe dipped in blood. Can I just say that this union of agricultural and military imagery is chilling and awe-inspiring? The Son of God, the one whom we worship, is a warrior with a hand on His enemies' throats. His clothing is blood-spattered, for He treads the winepress of the wrath of Almighty God.

Just picking grapes for 20 minutes this summer made my daughter's hands quite purple. I can't imagine what three or four days in the winepress would do to the feet and robe. But this is your King.

H. The Fairest of the Sons of Men, v. 12

And oh is he a hearthrob! I can see his face when I hear this line. What a good-looking, desirable, manly warrior is our Jesus! He ain't no Nordic hunk either. He is a dark-skinned Mediterranean man, a lover as well as a fighter, with flashing black eyes and brilliant white teeth. This Christ should turn you on. I say that in the most respectful, holy way possible, but I still say it. None of the other brothers is described in terms of physical appearance. But here, the Judahite who offers wine and milk without money and without price also looks like he indulges in both. He offers milk for babies and wine for adults. He is the fairest of the sons of men; grace is poured upon His lips; He wears a sword and knows how to use it; and His name is called the Word of God.

Brothers and sisters, this Christmas, turn your eyes to the Christ whose eyes are darker than wine and whose teeth are whiter than milk. His is everything a man should be, and if you don't obey Him, He will require it. Fear Him. Love Him. Desire Him. Amen.