

These words of Jacob are prophetic blessings (vv 1, 28) addressed to all his sons as one nation, called by the names of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, yet each having its own unique future as a community of nations (Genesis 35:11). Through Jacob God revealed how He would be working out His promises to Israel – to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – in the future. At the Exodus the nation could be encouraged as they saw the first unfolding of these prophetic blessings. The link to the background of some sons can be seen as part of God's focusing on the line of blessing. Three sons are rebuked, setting them aside from receiving the birthright, but the fourth is praised and from him would come the future great ruler.

### **I. Rebuke: Reuben, Simeon and Levi**

#### **1. Reuben**

*Oracle:* Incestuous adultery (Gen 35:22-29) led to the loss of Reuben's birthright as firstborn and the rebuke that he would never excel. Cf. 1 Chronicles 5:1

*Fulfillment:* Joseph through the blessing of Jacob on his two sons displaced Reuben as recipient of the birthright (Genesis 48:5). No great leaders came from Reuben except the infamous Dathan and Abiram (Num 16:1) and the tribe failed to join the battle against Sisera during the time of the Judges (Judges 4-5).

#### **2. Simeon & Levi**

*Oracle:* The cruel and violent zeal of Simeon and Levi (Genesis 34) also kept them from gaining the birthright as 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> born and as rebuke they would be scattered in Israel.

*Fulfillment:* Simeon had become the smallest tribe by the time of the second census Egypt (Numbers 26:14), it was the one tribe missing from the blessing of Moses (Deuteronomy 33), and their land allotment was within the territory of Judah. Levi was scattered in an entirely different way. By rallying for the Lord to Moses's side when others were worshiping the golden calf, they were set apart for God and blessed. They were scattered by being given a special position and cities and pasture lands throughout the country (Joshua 21).

*Lessons:* ▶ An inherited position, "natural" rights, does not guarantee blessing. ▶ Sins catch up with us at some point, underlining our need for a Savior. ▶ Character traits, which may manifest themselves in evil, may also be applied to good. ▶ What may look like a curse (being scattered), may be worked as a blessing by God for those He loves.

### **II. Promise: Judah**

*Oracle:* Judah is promised prominence, domination over his enemies, and a continued line of rulers. The final ruler in that line will be the Messiah. (The NIV translation, "until He comes to whom it rightfully belongs", is supported by the use of the word in Ezekiel 21:27, though many commentators prefer "Shiloh" as a name or title for the Messiah.) The conditions during Messiah's reign will be extremely good, with an overabundance represented by the best of wines and good health.

*Fulfillment:* By the time of the exodus Judah became the largest tribe and the leading tribe. From Judah came King David, the greatest conqueror in Israel's history, and the Davidic line from which came Jesus the Christ, the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev 5:5). His future earthly reign will be over all nations with peace, righteousness and abundance for Israel (cf. Isaiah 65:19-25; Zech 3:10).

*Lessons:* ▶ Judah shows how one's character can change and how blessing can come by God's grace even on those with such a background as his. ▶ We are reminded that God is keeping His promises, e.g., to bless all peoples through the seed of Abraham, and can be assured that those promises concerning His future reign will also be kept.

### **III. Cautious Blessing**

#### **1. Zebulun**

*Oracle:* A more precise rendering of v 13 would be "Zebulun will live toward the coasts of the seas and toward where ships come." Their borders would reach to Sidon, a major Canaanite city in the region now called Lebanon today, but historically known as Phoenicia.

*Fulfillment:* Though not bordering on either the Mediterranean or the Sea of Galilee, Zebulun was positioned between the two with the famous trading route, the *Via Maris* (the way of the sea), going through it, from which the tribe profited from sea trade (cf. Deuteronomy 33:19). Though initially separated from Sidon by the allotment of Asher, that tribe's failure to drive out the Canaanites allowed Zebulun to expand toward Phoenicia as seen in the valley now called the "Valley of Zebulun".

#### **2. Issachar**

*Oracle:* Although traditionally the word to Issachar is considered rebuke, alternate translations with the support of the LXX are decidedly more positive. He is a "strong" donkey (a valuable work animal), loaded with its double burden, but ready to continue work in light of the good land, where he becomes a "laborer who tills."

*Fulfillment:* Issachar finally located on the broad, fertile plain of Esdraelon, especially good for farming. Their industriousness and valor are noted in Scripture (Judges 5:15; 10:1-2; 1 Chronicles 7:2). If "forced labor" and not farming is meant in verse 15, it probably arises from the frequent invading armies of that region.

#### **3. Dan**

*Oracle:* Though son of a handmaid, Dan is still "one of the tribes of Israel" who will judge his people. His actions may be marked by craftiness, deadliness, and the triumph of the small over the great. The comparison to a serpent and a viper may have some negative connotations.

*Fulfillment:* Samson, a Danite, judged Israel and waged a crafty, deadly and nearly one-man battle against the Philistines (Judges 13-16). But Danites also introduced and hosted long-standing idolatrous practices into Israel which contributed finally to their captivity and exile.

God would be at work in each of the sons of Jacob for generations to come granting blessing and censure, but not unrelated to their own choices. God's promises to us often require us to make correct choices as well. But as God has been fulfilling His promises to Israel, so also will He continue to act until He has accomplished all which He had said.