

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001

ANCIENT PROPHECIES AND YOU

Genesis 49:8-21

By

Steven J. Cole

October 12, 1997

© Steven J. Cole, 1997

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, © The Lockman Foundation

October 12, 1997
Genesis Lesson 81

ANCIENT PROPHECIES AND YOU Genesis 49:8-21

I have always found it curious that both Christians and non-Christians are fascinated with prophecy. When I was in the Coast Guard, one evening as I sat on the bridge radio watch, the chief came up to get some paperwork and saw that I was reading the Bible. He was a raw, foul-mouthed pagan, but he said to me, "You ought to read 'Revelations.' It's really _____!" (He used a word I won't repeat, which meant that it was good reading). People who are not informed always call it "Revelations" [plural], instead of "The Revelation" [singular] which is the title. But I thought it interesting that this man was intrigued by the very prophecy that predicts his impending doom if he does not repent!

To be interested in prophecy is good, since much of the Bible is prophetic. But the point of Bible prophecy is not to speculate on various details, such as the identity of the antichrist or the date of Armageddon. The point of prophecy is to motivate us to purity and holy zeal for the things of the Lord in light of His soon coming.

We need to exercise some caution when we study biblical prophecy. While God has revealed His future program in the Scriptures, our human limitations often prevent us from understanding it clearly until after the fact. For example, the first coming of Christ was specifically revealed in many prophecies in the Old Testament. After the fact, we can see very clearly that the Christ had to suffer and then enter into His glory (Luke 24:26, 46). But the wisest Jewish scholars of Christ's day and even His own disciples missed this major theme of the Old Testament prophecies! It was only when the risen Savior taught them about these things after the fact that they began to understand. Thus we need to be careful, in reference to Christ's second coming, not to be overly dogmatic about the specifics and miss the reason those prophecies were given, to move us to greater purity and hope.

When you come to Jacob's prophecies regarding his sons (Genesis 49), you have to ask, "What was the purpose of these prophecies for these men?" Most of them did not live long enough to see them fulfilled. Judah is predicted to become the leader, with his father's sons bowing down to him (49:8). But in his lifetime, Judah and his brothers continued to bow down before Joseph (50:18). So why did Jacob reveal these things to his sons? Another important question is, "Why did Moses think these prophecies significant enough to record them in Genesis, as the fledgling nation was about to enter Canaan?" With those questions answered, we may be able to answer the relevant issue for us, namely, "How do these prophecies apply to us?"

I found this section difficult to study because commentators interpreted the specifics of these prophecies differently. Those who ventured to apply them to modern readers had, at times, opposite interpretations and applications. Some said that Zebulun was in danger of worldliness because of living near Sidon; others said that he would be strong because of his great location on the trade route. Some said that Issachar was lazy and indifferent; others said that he was a hard worker. Some said that Dan was deceptive like a snake; others said that he was strong through cleverness and subtlety.

I can't preach with conviction on things that are speculative or uncertain. To be powerful enough to dislodge sin from my heart and yours, an application must clearly come from the text of Scripture. For that reason, I'm not going to go into a lot of detail on what each of these prophecies mean. You can read the commentaries if you want that. Rather, I'm going to attempt to answer the broader questions of what these prophecies meant to Jacob's sons and to Moses's readers, and from that to draw some applications for us.

WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF THESE PROPHECIES FOR JACOB'S SONS?

As I mentioned, none of the sons of Jacob lived to see the fulfillment of these prophecies. They all died in Egypt. So why did Jacob give them these words? The text gives us some clues: Verse 28 states that these were blessings appropriate to each man. Furthermore, verse 1 states that these blessings were predictions of

what would befall each son in the future, which implies beyond their lifetimes. From these clues we can draw some broad purposes for Jacob's words to his sons.

First, these words showed Jacob's sons that God was going to build their families into tribes and those tribes into a nation. Furthermore, from the tribe of Judah would come a ruler to whom would be the obedience of the peoples (49:10). So Jacob was *raising their vision* from their current circumstances--a bunch of families trying to survive in Egypt-- to show them God's plan for history and how they and their families fit into that plan.

A second effect of these prophecies on Jacob's sons was to show them that *their character affected their own and their descendants' destinies*. These prophecies were based in part on Jacob's observations of each of his sons over their lifetimes. He knew the strengths and weaknesses of each of these men. Each prophecy takes into account the uniqueness of each son.

We've already seen how the prophecies concerning Reuben, Simeon, and Levi were linked to sins which they had not conquered. Judah's name meant "praise," and Jacob predicts that his brothers will praise him. Zebulun means "dwelling," and he will dwell toward the sea. Issachar means "wages"; the prophecy concerning him has to do with his labor. Dan means "judge"; he will judge his people. Gad sounds like a Hebrew word for troop, or raiders. Four of the six Hebrew words of verse 19 are puns on his name.

Remember, for the Hebrews, names were significant. They often were given as prophecies or hopes for the child's future. Here, in conjunction with Jacob's observations of each of his sons, the Holy Spirit gives him prophetic insight into the direction each son's character would lead each tribe descended from him. So Jacob's sons should have learned that character affects destiny, not only for us, but for our descendants.

Perhaps you're thinking, "That's kind of fatalistic! If God has determined a plan for each man and his descendants, then what can anybody do to thwart it? But, as we saw with Levi, when a man and his family turns to the Lord, even a seeming curse can be turned into a blessing. Jacob predicted that Levi would be

scattered in Israel, and that proved true. But Levi's descendants were scattered as priests who were channels for God's truth to be disseminated among Israel. It was the same with each of these sons and their prophecies. While God's overall plan was fixed, each individual had the opportunity to turn to the Lord and be used of Him in blessing the nations. It's the tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. God's plan is irrevocable, but He gives us moral responsibility, so that we can choose to participate in His plan or turn against it. So within these broad prophecies, Jacob was encouraging his sons and their sons after them to follow in the Lord's ways. The second question is:

WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF THESE PROPHECIES FOR
MOSES'S FIRST READERS?

Moses wrote Genesis for a fledgling nation of stubborn and often unbelieving people who were poised on the edge of Canaan, ready to go in and conquer this land which God had promised to Abraham and his descendants. They were a selfish lot, who easily could have lost the land by getting in foolish squabbles with each other. They were a worldly-minded bunch, who could easily get into the land, settle down to enjoy the material comforts, and forget the Lord and His purpose for them. So, many of the same purposes which these prophecies had for Jacob's sons applied to Moses's readers.

For one thing, Moses wanted his readers to *view their current circumstances in the light of God's plan*. They faced some difficult battles in order to conquer Canaan. It wasn't going to be a piece of cake. If the nation lost sight of God's promise to give that land to Abraham's descendants and to use them to bless all nations through the promised Savior, they could easily have lost heart and settled in a less threatening region. Or, they could have blended in with the wicked Canaanites and God's purpose would have been thwarted.

Once they got into the land, they easily could have started quarrelling over who got which piece of real estate. Moses's reporting of Jacob's prophecies showed Israel that each tribe had a different inheritance from the Lord. So they needed to *be content with His provision* and not fight over who got what.

These prophecies also illustrated an important lesson about *how God works*. Picture Jacob going down the line, from son to son. Reuben is deprived of his right as the firstborn because of his sin. Simeon and Levi are denounced for their violence and anger. Guess who's next? Judah! All the brothers knew the skeletons in Judah's closet. He had been involved in the shameful incident with Tamar (chapter 38). Judah was the one who suggested selling Joseph into slavery, to make a buck and to salve their consciences because they didn't kill him. Reuben, Simeon, and Levi were probably thinking, "We got what we deserved. Now Judah's going to get his!" And Judah was probably thinking, "Oh, no! Here it comes!"

But what happened? Jacob pronounced the greatest blessing of all on Judah! Only Joseph's blessing was of equal length, but even it didn't rival the extent of Judah's blessing. Why? Two reasons:

First, it illustrated that *God's choice is according to His grace, not human merit*. If God's choice were according to merit, He would have chosen Esau over Jacob, and Joseph over Judah. But God's choice is apart from human merit so that no one can boast before God. Moses wanted his readers to see that if God chose to give them the best part of the land, so be it. But if He chose to put a tribe in a less favorable part of the land, they should not chafe against His purpose. That He should give them any part of the land was sheer grace, and they shouldn't be envious of their brothers.

Second, at the same time it showed that *when a man turns to the Lord in repentance, the Lord will bless him*. Judah had truly repented of his sin. He confessed before Joseph, "What can we speak? And how can we justify ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants" (44:16). His eloquent, heartfelt appeal to Joseph, asking that he be substituted for Benjamin, had revealed the depth of Judah's repentance. Moses wanted his readers to know that no matter how great their past sin, if they would now turn to the Lord in repentance, the Lord would bless them greatly by His grace.

A final reason Moses shared these prophecies with his readers was to instill in them *the hope of God's salvation through the Messiah*. One would rise up from the tribe of Judah, and to Him would be

the obedience of the people. Even though some great men would come from some of the tribes and do great exploits, true deliverance would come only from the Lord.

That seems to be the thought behind Jacob's sudden prayer in verse 18. He has just spoken of Dan, who would defeat his enemies through subtle power, as a snake bites a horse's heel. That may have recalled to Jacob's mind the early prediction of the seed of the woman who would bruise the serpent's heel (3:15). Or, it could have reminded him of his own deception as the one who grabbed his brother's heel. So he sighs, in effect, "Salvation won't come through the mighty men of Dan. Neither will it come from any man, but only from the Lord." This is the first of 78 occurrences the word "salvation" in the Old Testament. It is the Hebrew word "yeshua," Jesus. Jacob's prayer was finally answered when the angel said to Joseph, husband of Mary, that she would bring forth a son, and that he should call his name Jesus [Yeshua]; for He shall save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21).

Let's move on to the most relevant question:

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THESE PROPHECIES FOR US?

Based upon the purpose of these prophecies for Jacob's sons and for Moses's first readers, it seems to me that the bottom line for us is:

We must choose to cooperate with God's plan
which centers in Jesus Christ.

I want to make four statements about God's plan which apply to each of us:

1. God has a plan for history.

I know, that's obvious. But we lose sight of it so easily in the daily routine and pressures of life. Even as the Lord's people, it's easy to fall into the daily schedule of going to work, taking care of the kids, and dealing with all the hassles of life that we lose sight of God's great purpose for history and how we fit into it. We become spiritually dull, so that we miss opportunities to further God's plan.

We read about war or strife in some far corner of the world and we shrug our shoulders, when we ought to pray for God's

purpose to be done in those places. We hear of missionaries who lack support and we think, "That's too bad." But it never occurs to us that God may want us to cut back on our spending habits and invest in His work around the world. A neighbor shares a problem and we say, "I'm sorry to hear that." But we don't speak up to tell him or her about the Lord Jesus Christ, who wants to transfer him from the kingdom of darkness to His own kingdom where there is forgiveness of sins and hope for eternity.

These prophecies of Jacob remind us that while we may not understand all the details of the plan, God does have a plan. He is moving history ahead right on schedule toward the grand climax when Jesus Christ shall reign supreme, when every knee shall bow to the Lion of the tribe of Judah. We need to live each day in light of God's great plan for history.

2. God has a plan for us within His plan for history.

Each of these brothers was unique. Each had a unique contribution to make to Israel's history. While not all would be as Judah or Joseph, all were essential to God's plan for Israel. They needed to see their roles as complementary, not competitive. I think this comes through in Jacob's word to Dan, that he would "judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel." Why would Jacob say that? Because up to verse 16, he has been speaking of the sons of Leah, one of his two wives. But Dan is the first of the sons of Jacob's concubines. In that culture, sons of concubines didn't enjoy the full status of sons of wives. But Jacob assures Dan that he will have an inheritance and a role as one of the tribes of Israel.

That applies to each of us in the body of Christ. Some have one role, some another. Some have one measure of blessing on their lives, some another. But none is without a purpose. Each one complements the other, so that every member is essential for the outworking of God's program. We don't have to be just like each other or do the same thing. It's not more spiritual to be in "full time" ministry as opposed to having a "secular" job. What matters is that you are doing what God wants you to do, in line with His plan for history. Keep your eyes off of others and on the Lord. That leads to the next application:

3. God's plan centers on the person of Christ.

God's plan is not a religious system. God's plan centers on a Person and on our being rightly related to that Person. We are to follow Christ. Jacob's prophecy to Judah points to the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, descended from the tribe of Judah.

First, Jacob predicts preeminence and power for the tribe of Judah, comparing him to a lion. Then he predicts, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" (49:10). Verses 11 and 12 go on to describe in poetic language the abundant prosperity that accompanies the reign of "Shiloh," where wine will be as plentiful as water. This prophecy does not mean that Judah's preeminence would end when Shiloh comes, but rather that it would continue until that time, after which it would continue in Shiloh.

The question is, of course, Who or what is Shiloh? Almost all commentators, Jewish and Christian, recognize this as some sort of reference to Messiah. But there is much debate on the specific meaning of the term. Let me share what seem to be the two best possibilities.

The word may be a contraction of two Hebrew words, meaning "he to whom." Thus the meaning would be, "until he comes to whom it [rightful authority] belongs." This is the way the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament, translated about 200 B.C.) took it and the NIV has adopted it as well. Or, the word may be a proper name for Messiah, stemming from the Hebrew verb meaning "to be quiet or at rest." Thus it would look at Jesus as the Prince of Peace, the only one who can bring peace to this troubled world and rest to our souls, because He alone can reconcile us to God, having made peace through the cross. It is only when we are in obedience to Him that we have rest in our souls.

But however we interpret "Shiloh," the important thing is that we recognize that God's plan involves a Person who is coming to reign. That Person must be descended from the tribe of Judah. Over 300 other prophecies from the Old Testament show that Jesus Christ alone meets the qualifications of being the promised

Savior. Each of us must be rightly related to Him. That leads to the final point:

4. God's plan requires our response if we want to share in His blessings.

In God's time and way, these prophecies about Jacob's sons would be fulfilled, but the individuals within the tribes had a choice about whether they would help to fulfill them through obedience to God or fight against their fulfillment through disobedience.

It's the same with us: God's plan for the ages will be accomplished, but we have the choice either to be involved in fulfilling that plan or in resisting it. The personal history of Judah ought to encourage us. He was a man who had a dismal beginning, but who repented of his sin and inherited a great future. God offers that same blessing to each of us. If we will turn from our sin and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, sent from God in fulfillment of this prophecy uttered by Jacob, God will bless us beyond measure.

Conclusion

Someone recently asked me if I understand the Book of Revelation. I answered, "I don't understand many of the details, but I do understand the main idea, which is that Jesus is coming back and He's going to win big!" Even if you don't understand some of the details of Bible prophecy, such as these words of Jacob, you can clearly understand the big picture: Jesus is Lord, the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5), and when He comes, you'd better be on His side! He is gracious toward every sinner who repents and trusts in Him, but He will be fierce in wrath and judgment toward all who have ignored Him or opposed Him. You can either bow before Him someday in awful judgment or bow before Him willingly now as your Savior and Lord.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have Christians "over-speculated" concerning prophecy? How do we know how far to push prophetic interpretations?
2. How can a Christian in a secular job keep his focus on God's kingdom in the face of daily pressures?
3. How can we relate the dull and routine parts of life to God's plan for us? Are routine things only to be endured for the "more spiritual" times? Why/why not?
4. How can a person find his own "niche" in the body of Christ, neither thinking too highly of himself, nor underestimating what God wants to do through him (see Rom. 12:3)?

Copyright 1997, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.