

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM – PART X

JACOB'S FAREWELL AND PROPHECIES OF THE FUTURE

I. Seventeen years after the encounter with Pharaoh, Jacob knows he is dying and summons Joseph first for final instructions regarding his burial and then for a blessing.

A. Joseph and Jacob have apparently not seen much of each other, and Jacob does not know what his sons look like. Despite the alliance, there is a separation between father and son, on Jacob now must overcome.

B. At the first meeting, Jacob first insists that Joseph bury him in Hebron, where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah are buried. Abraham first purchased this land as a burial site for Sarah, and thus staked the first claim in the Promised Land. Through Jacob's burial there, the ground will again be consecrated by the dead, and preserved for the Hebrew people during their four centuries in Egypt.

- Noteworthy, Jacob wants to be buried with his ancestors and with Leah, not with Rachel his beloved but apparently pagan wife. He now seems to recognize that his first responsibility is with his heritage.

- As with Abraham's insistence on purchasing the land for Sarah, Jacob here wishes to claim the land, not by conquest or economic activity, but rather by the heritage between the living and dead that lasts through the ages.

C. Then, apparently a little while later, when Jacob is very near death, Joseph returns to him with his sons.

1. Jacob says that the sons of Joseph will be his along with his other sons.

2. At one level, this declaration is favorable, for Ephraim and Manassah will each receive an inheritance, creating a double inheritance for the family. However, at another level, bypassing as a son and claiming his sons directly is an indication that the political and even semi-pagan role of Joseph will have no part in the Chosen People. That may be a temporary accommodation, but in the end, no tribe will be named for it.

3. In the blessing, he reflects upon Rachel dying near Bethlehem en route to the home of Isaac. The odd thing is that she died giving birth to Benjamin, not Joseph; and it is thus not clear why that event is connected to blessing Joseph's children. It may be that they are making up for the additional children he would not have by Rachel.

D. Jacob then blesses the sons, Ephraim and Manassah, but showing independence from Joseph while doing so.

1. Joseph does show Jacob proper reverence in presenting his sons for a blessing and bowing before Jacob. But Joseph wants the elder son Manassah to receive the higher blessing with Jacob's right hand. Jacob goes out of his way to reverse his hands, giving the younger Ephraim to receive the higher blessing.

- Jacob is among other things showing independence from Joseph and from human wisdom generally. The primogeniture that generally prevailed in Egypt will not be the standard among God's Chosen People.

2. Jacob says that from Ephraim will come a multitude of nations, as many nations came from Abraham. The tribe itself became the capital of the Northern Kingdom after the breakup of the kingdom in 922 B.C. When the Northern Kingdom was destroyed by Assyria in 722 B.C., the tribe of Ephraim, with all the northern tribes, was mostly destroyed, with only portions returning, and not to their native land. However, the natives who were left in the area roughly covered by the land of the tribe Ephraim would mix with Assyrians, keep some but not all of the Jewish rituals and law, and become the Samaritans. After the Southern Kingdom (often called Judah) was exiled in 586 B.C. but then allowed to return in 538 B.C., the Samaritans wanted to help the Jews rebuild the Temple, but they were not allowed because they did not keep the full law and had intermixed with pagans. That event started a centuries long feud that continued into the time of Jesus. If Samaria is considered to be the successor of Ephraim, they may stand in for all of the nations that would come to the new Israel, the Church.

3. Jacob then gives to Joseph "Shechem," which could be translated a double portion or a double shoulder (or burden.) Shechem is the place of violence where Levi and Simeon led the brothers to avenge the violation of Dinah by destroying

the town. At one level, Jacob means that the town is in the land that Ephraim will inherit, a land that will be marked by violence as one king after another tries to take control in the Northern Kingdom. There may be a symbolic meaning, i.e. that the political power represented by Joseph will ever be marked by violence

II. Jacob then called all of his sons to receive their final instructions, predictions, blessings, and to some degree curses.

A. He refers both to the character of each son and to "the end of days," literally mean the long future of Israel. However, by extension, it could refer by analogy to different types of people in the Church, founded upon the twelve Apostles who represented the twelve tribes (although not one from each tribe), people who will be blessed, cursed, or in between. See St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 67; St. Rufinus (an Italian monk of the fourth and fifth centuries), The Blessings of The Patriarchs

B. Jacob first addresses Rueben, the first born. He praises Reuben for his strength, but then says that he forfeited leadership because of his lust. It is one among many lessons from Scripture, especially from the Books of Sirach and Wisdom, that an immoral man or a man who respects not his family should not be a leader of nations.

C. Jacob then addresses Levi and Simeon, saying that his spirit will not join in their violence and that they will be dispersed in the land. They were the ones who led in attacking and wiping out the town of Shechem to avenge the assault upon Dinah. Then Jacob condemned that sort of violence mostly because it would cause trouble for the family under those circumstances. Here he condemns it for the future as well.

1. The futures of the two tribes would be very different. The tribe of Simeon would take land in the far south of the country of Israel. However, by the time of the kings in the eleventh century B.C., that tribe seems to have vanished.

2. The tribe of Levi, by contrast, would become the priestly tribe. Originally, all of the families of Israel were meant to be priestly. However, after the golden calf incident, the tribe of Levi rallied to Moses and slaughtered thousands of the idolaters. Moses then consecrated them as the priestly tribe who would lead the prayers and sacrifices of the Chosen People. Part of the idea may be that their violent tendencies must be rechanneled into sacred purposes, first involving the animal sacrifices and then unbloody sacrifices of prayers

and finally the Mass.

D. Jacob blesses the descendants of Judah, who will become the line of kings.

1. He receives blessings of conquest and prosperity, the latter symbolized by milk and wine. There is also the symbolism of a donkey and a colt tied to a vine, a symbol of peace and prosperity, as opposed to the war horse and chariot. See Micah 4:1-4; Zech. 9:9-10. Jesus would fulfill this image by coming into Jerusalem on a mule, with palm branches waved around Him.
2. David will be of the line of Judah, and the symbol of royalty will be the lion. The Book of Revelation would describe Jesus as both the conquering lion and the lamb who was slain, innocent unlike Judah but like him willing to bear the burden of sins. In the meantime, Judah, because he learns to take responsibility gains the royalty for his tribe.

E. The prophecy for Zebulun is geographic and economic, and not clearly good or bad. It reflects the fact that that nation would be near the Sea. It was actually on the Sea of Galilee, but the prophecy seems to refer more to the Mediterranean Sea, often called at the time the Great Sea. That tribe did not settle on the Mediterranean Sea itself, but did seem to engage in a fair amount of commerce with the sea-faring peoples, such as those of Tyre and Sidon.

F. The prophecy for Issachar is mixed. On the one hand he receives the good land. On the other hand, perhaps because of his prosperity and the resulting laxness, he descends into bondage. Some Church fathers, seeing a more positive side, see him as an image for all who are willing to serve God and others because they see the everlasting prosperity in heaven. See St. Ambrose, The Patriarch 6:30-31.

G. The prophecy for Dan is also strange. On the one hand, Jacob says he will be a judge. On the other hand, he says that he will be as a serpent whose bites at the heel of a horse will cause the rider to stumble.

1. One could see him as being blessed as a judge who will defend his people; for Samson, the most famous figure in the Book of Judges would. In that case, the serpent represents cleverness as fending off enemies.
2. On the other hand, one could see him as a corrupt judge that causes his people to falter.
3. The tribe of Dan was supposed to be in the western part of the Promised Land. But the Book of Judges ends with that tribe migrating north and becoming the northernmost part of the kingdom.

- There may have been some implication that that tribe mixed with the authorities of the world.

H. The prophecy for Gad is brief and reflects a fighting future, for good or ill. That tribe would in a way represent the persecuted faithful throughout the centuries.

- I. Asher by contrast is seen as enjoying prosperity and providing for the kings. At one level, it was near trading centers on the Mediterranean Sea and therefore may have enjoyed prosperity, which it shared with kings of Israel and other nations. On a more spiritual level, it is a call for prosperity in the Church to be given to her king.

- J. The prophecy for Naphtali reflects a graceful mobility. It is noteworthy that they and Zebulun were the first countries to fall to the Assyrians. However, being in what would be the north, their lands were the first to receive the gospel. See Matt. 4:12-16.

K. The final blessing is given to Joseph, a blessing of family and prosperity, which reflects the hope that the political and religious powers will again cooperate to bring about a new creation.