

## How Should We Understand the Rich Symbolism in Jacob’s Blessings of Judah and Joseph?

An Old Testament KnowWhy<sup>1</sup> for Gospel Doctrine Lesson 12: “Fruitful in the Land of My Affliction” (Genesis 40-45) (JBOTL012A)



Figure 1. Harry Anderson: *Jacob Blesses His Twelve Sons*

**Question:** Some of the most significant prophecies in scripture regarding the posterity of Jacob are found in the blessings of Judah and Joseph in Genesis 49. However much of the poetry in the blessings is difficult to understand. How should we understand the rich symbolism of these verses?

**Summary:** The Hebrew manuscripts of Jacob’s blessings of Judah and Joseph present difficult problems in translation, since they contain several obscure and archaic terms and phrases.<sup>2</sup> Some important passages (e.g., “until Shiloh comes” [49:10]; “Joseph is a fruitful branch” [49:22]) have been particularly troublesome, leaving translators with few options outside of “conjectural emendation”<sup>3</sup> to reconstruct the text. This approach may result in translations of key phrases that differ significantly from what is contained in the LDS edition of the Bible. Adding to the difficulties of interpretation of these blessings is that we have no direct help from modern scripture. Surprisingly, while Joseph Smith made substantive changes in the wording of the blessings of Ephraim and Manasseh in Genesis 48 and in the testament of Joseph in chapter 50, he made no significant changes to Genesis 49.<sup>4</sup> And, apart from brief restatements of a few lines from Jacob’s words to Joseph in an 1833 blessing of Joseph Smith’s father, we have no other known allusions to the specific content of Genesis 49 in the teachings and history of the Prophet. The intent of this article is to make this chapter — arguably “the most difficult segment of the Book of Genesis”<sup>5</sup> — more understandable for LDS readers. More importantly, it is hoped that this understanding will lead us to a greater dedication to our own responsibilities as the posterity of Israel.

## The Know

In what is sometimes called the “Testament of Jacob,” we find the familiar pattern of the patriarch, prophet, or king bestowing a final blessing upon his children or people.<sup>6</sup> Citing Jacob’s testament as a model for later generations, Joseph Smith said: “An evangelist is a patriarch, even the oldest man of the blood of Joseph or of the seed of Abraham. Wherever the Church of Christ is established in the earth, there should be a patriarch for the benefit of the posterity of the Saints, as it was with Jacob in giving his patriarchal blessing unto his sons.”<sup>7</sup>

Although at least one verse is devoted to each of the twelve sons of Jacob, the blessings of Judah and Joseph — the progenitors of the dominant tribes of the later southern and northern kingdoms — are of special significance. “The Testament to Joseph is of extraordinary length, equaled only, and significantly, by that to Judah. Lavish blessing is showered upon Joseph, the name here standing for Ephraim and Manasseh together.”<sup>8</sup>

The language used in Jacob’s testament marks it as one of the oldest parts of the Bible. According to Gordon J. Wenham, “It may indeed go back in some original form to Jacob himself, but its present form is later than the patriarchal age.”<sup>9</sup>

Following an introduction, commentary will be provided on key phrases from the blessings of Judah and Joseph. The English translation of these difficult verses comes from Ronald Hendel, perhaps the foremost living scholar of the Hebrew text of Genesis.<sup>10</sup>

### Introduction (Genesis 49:1)

**1. Then Jacob called his sons, and said: “Gather around, that I may tell you what will happen to you in days to come.”**

*that I may tell you what will happen to you in days to come.* Although some of Jacob’s blessings talk about past events (e.g., the sins of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi; the triumph of Joseph), they “are essentially predictions of the future — the future of both the individual sons and the tribes that will spring from them.”<sup>11</sup>

Nahum Sarna observes: “Jacob’s has not been a happy life and he cannot but reflect on his deep disappointments over his three oldest sons. Yet now, as death nears, a better future rises before his inner eye. This future is tied to Judah and Joseph, and these two he addresses directly (the others, with the exception of the first-born Reuben, are only spoken about).”<sup>12</sup>

*days to come.* The King James Version translation “the last days” is misleading. Although in later, prophetic passages of the Old Testament the Hebrew phrase *be-’ahurit ha-yamim*, came to have the more specific meaning of “the last days” (= end-time, *eschaton*), here in Genesis it has the indefinite, general meaning of “in the future.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, the time frame for the situations described in the blessings vary: some of the future events will have their fulfillment in Old Testament times while others will occur much later — including, it appears, as part of the wrapping up scenes of the earth’s history.

As is the case with modern recipients of patriarchal blessings, some sons receiving seemingly dire oracles eventually will find hidden blessings. For example, in Genesis 49, Levi is “cursed” and destined to be scattered in Israel. However, rather than violent dispersion, the prophecy of scattering turns out to anticipate the commandment for some of the Levites to dwell in smaller

groups within each city of Israel rather than as a single tribal body in a territory of their own. As the lineage designated for certain priesthood responsibilities, Moses reveals in a later tribal blessing that the Levites are to discharge the sacred responsibility to “teach ... Israel [God’s] law.”<sup>14</sup>

### **The Blessing of Judah (Genesis 49:8-12)**

Bible scholar Robert Alter introduces Judah’s blessing as follows: “Up to this point, Jacob’s testament to his first three sons has actually been nothing but curses. Rashi neatly catches the transitional force of ‘Judah, you...’ when he notes, ‘Inasmuch as he had heaped condemnations on the previous ones, Judah began to back away and his father called to him with words of encouragement, ‘Judah, you are not like them.’”<sup>15</sup>

As described in more detail below, themes of kingship in Judah’s blessings also have application to the coming of the Messiah through his lineage — for example, the call for “praise” of Judah (a term generally reserved for God Himself), allusions to the metaphoric “lion of Judah” — a name of Christ, the title “Shiloh” — another name for the Messiah, and the imagery of king appared in a red robe washed as if in “blood.”

***8. Judah, your brothers shall praise you;  
your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;  
your father’s sons shall bow down before you.***

*Judah, your brothers shall praise you.* Bible scholar Nahum Sarna provides context for this inspired declaration: “The slow, almost imperceptible, rise of Judah has already been subtly insinuated into the Joseph story... Here it receives formal recognition and confirmation.”<sup>16</sup>

The Hebrew verb for “praise” is a pun on the name “Judah.”<sup>17</sup> In the Hebrew Bible it is almost always used for God Himself, but perhaps the usage here anticipates the coming of the Messiah from the line of Judah. Robert Alter translates “praise” as “acclaim” “because what is involved is recognition of Judah’s royal status.”<sup>18</sup>

*your father’s sons shall bow down before you.* According to Westbrook, this phrase signals “the legal transfer of clan leadership to Judah. Though Joseph has received the double portion of the inheritance (since Ephraim and Manasseh both inherited shares among Jacob’s sons, Genesis 48), Judah will be the administrator of the undivided inheritance.”<sup>19</sup> However, as with the competing claims of the descendants of Nephi and his brother Laman,<sup>20</sup> the issue of birthright may have remained a matter of dispute. For example, 1 Chronicles 5:2 asserts that “the birthright was Joseph’s.”



Figure 2. Lion of Judah on a Bezael Ceramic Tile, Moshav Zkenim Synagogue in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Israel, 1926–1928. Photograph by Yair Talmor<sup>21</sup>

**9. Judah is a lion's whelp;  
from the prey, my son, you have gone up.  
He crouches down, he stretches out  
like a lion, like a lioness — who dares rouse him up?**

*Judah is a lion's whelp.* Sarna sees imagery of the young lion as “a metaphor of strength, daring, and unassailability.”<sup>22</sup> The lion became a favorite symbol in later Jewish art and literature.

*He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion, like a lioness — who dares rouse him up?* According to Wenham,<sup>23</sup> Judah is pictured “like a lion that seizes its prey, returns to its den, and dares anyone to challenge it. ... This image foreshadows the military triumphs of David and gave rise to the messianic title “The Lion of Judah.”

*He crouches down.* Additional wordplay is evident, contrasting Judah with Reuben. “This [phrase uses] the same verb that is used above for Reuben’s act of sexual violation, but here it refers to the lion springing up from the prey it has slain.”<sup>24</sup>

**10. The scepter shall not depart from Judah,  
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,<sup>25</sup>  
until tribute comes to him;  
and the obedience of the peoples is his.**

*The sceptre shall not depart from Judah ... until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of peoples is his.* This prophecy is fulfilled both in the kingship of David and also that of Christ, the “Son of David.”<sup>26</sup>

The King James Version translates the second part of this sentence very differently than what is given here: “until Shiloh come and unto him shall the gathering of the people be.” In recognition

of the disparate readings of the Hebrew for this passage, Everett Fox admits: “The phrase is an old and unsolved problem for interpreter and translator alike.”<sup>27</sup>

Because the meaning of the Hebrew *yavo ' shiloh* “is wholly obscure; neither the subject of the verb nor the meaning of *shiloh* is clear,” many translators take *shiloh* “as a combination of *shai*, ‘tribute,’ and *loh*, ‘to him,’ [as in Mendel’s version given above.] Several ancient versions understand it as in late Hebrew *shello*, ‘that which belongs to him,’ that is, until he obtains the monarchy.”<sup>28</sup>

In support of the traditional translation of “Shiloh” as a title, LDS readers will note that JST Genesis 50:24 asserts, in a parenthetical aside, that “Messiah ... is called Shilo.” Although support for a messianic interpretation of the term “Shiloh” is found nowhere else in the Bible, texts from Qumran, in the Targums, and in rabbinic literature support this reading.<sup>29</sup>

Bible scholar James Kugel gives a valuable summary of the history of Jewish interpretation relating to a messianic understanding of Genesis 49:10.<sup>30</sup> Extracts from this summary are included as an appendix to this article.

*11. Binding his foal to the vine  
and his donkey’s colt to the choice vine,  
he washes his garments in wine  
and his robe in the blood of grapes;*<sup>31</sup>

In connection with the future coming of the Messiah in glory, Joseph Smith prophesied that “Judah must return, Jerusalem must be rebuilt, and the temple, and water come out from under the temple ... and all this must be done before the Son of Man will make His appearance.”<sup>32</sup> Verse 11 portrays the subsequent age of messianic rule as “one of astonishing plenty.”<sup>33</sup>

*Binding his foal to the vine... he washes his garments in wine.* The medieval Jewish scholar ibn Ezra explained the gist of the verse with clarity: “The yield of his vineyards will be so abundant that his ass can turn aside to the vine and he won’t care if it eats the grapes.’ This explanation jibes nicely with the next image of washing garments in wine<sup>34</sup> — the wine will be so plentiful that it can be treated as water.”<sup>35</sup>



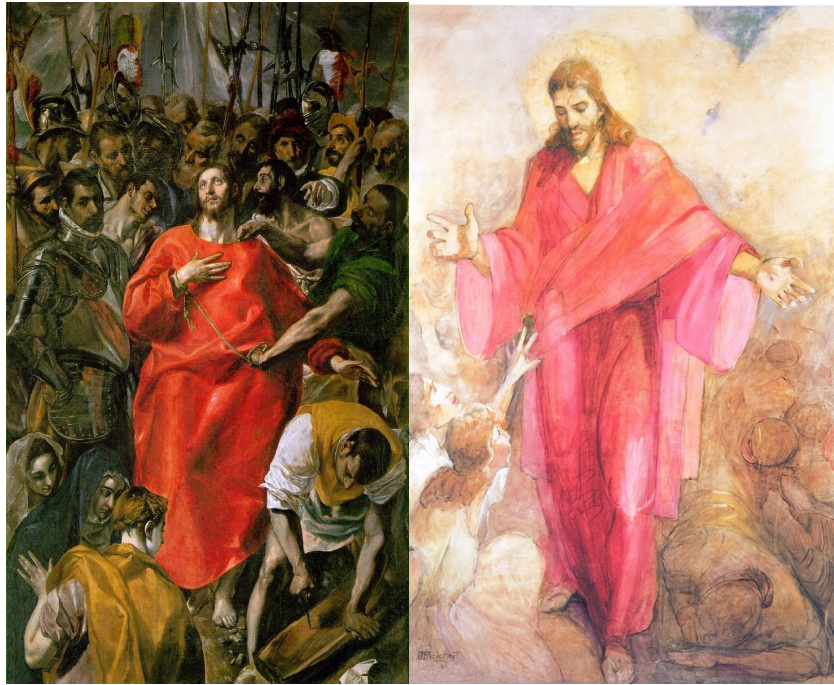


Figure 3a, b. Doménikos Theotokópoulos (*El Greco*) (1541-1614): *The Disrobing of Christ*, 1579. Minerva Teichert (1888-1976): *Christ in a Red Robe*, 1946.

*his robe in the blood of grapes.* This phase may refer to the “stained garments of those engaged in the manufacture of wine”<sup>36</sup> A poetical reference to the same idea is found in Isaiah 63 as part of a messianic passage. Ancient readers would have recognized the connection between “blood of grapes” and the blood of the people “trampled in my fury” and “sprinkled upon my garments.” They would have also recognized red as a symbol of the “glorious ... apparel” of kings:<sup>37</sup>

- 1 Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah? this that is glorious in his apparel, travelling in the greatness of his strength? I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save.
- 2 Wherefore art thou red in thine apparel, and thy garments like him that treadeth in the winefat?
- 3 I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment.
- 4 For the day of vengeance is in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is come.
- 5 And I looked, and there was none to help; and I wondered that there was none to uphold: therefore mine own arm brought salvation unto me; and my fury, it upheld me.
- 6 And I will tread down the people in mine anger, and make them drunk in my fury, and I will bring down their strength to the earth.

In D&C 133:47-50, the Lord is also appareled in red:

- 47 And he shall say: I am he who spake in righteousness, mighty to save.
- 48 And the Lord shall be red in his apparel, and his garments like him that treadeth in the wine-vat.
- 49 And so great shall be the glory of his presence that the sun shall hide his face in shame, and the moon shall withhold its light, and the stars shall be hurled from their places.

12. *his eyes are darker than wine,  
and his teeth whiter than milk.*

*his eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.* Sarna explains: “The phrases express an ideal of beauty: sparkling eyes and shining white teeth.”<sup>38</sup>



Figure 4. Yoram Raanan: *The Blessing of Jacob's Sons*

### **Joseph's Blessing (Genesis 49:22-26)**

Though different in its specific promises, Joseph's blessing matches that of Judah in eloquence and prophetic insight. Hendel<sup>39</sup> notes that the repetition of the “numerous titles of God ... make Joseph's blessing a powerful one.” In addition, the “repetition of ‘bless’ and ‘blessings’ (six times in vv. 25–26) creates a dense poetic texture in which God's blessings of fertility emanate from the cosmic domains (heaven, the deep, mountains, hills) and the female body (breasts, womb) onto Joseph's head, crowning him with blessings.”

22. *Joseph is a fruitful bough,  
a fruitful bough by a spring;  
his branches run over the wall.*

*Joseph is a fruitful bough ... by a spring.* Some modern translations render the difficult initial phrase of verse 22 as “wild ass” rather than a “fruitful bough.” “The main argument for the ‘wild

ass' is that it preserves the animal imagery [in the blessings of other brothers], but there are several other tribes in the poem that have ... no animal icons. A link between *porat* and the root *p-r-h*, to be fruitful, is less of a grammatical stretch, and is encouraged by Joseph's play on that same root in naming his son Ephraim."40

Similar imagery recurs in Psalm 1:3: "And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season." And, in an 1833 blessing by Joseph Smith of his father, the latter is promised "the blessings of Joseph," including that "he shall be a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well."41

*his branches run over the wall.* During His visit to the Nephites, Jesus Christ taught that they were "a remnant of the house of Joseph," further explaining that their New World home was "the land of [their] inheritance; and [that] the Father hath given it unto [them]."42 It is a common Latter-day Saint teaching that the prophecy of Joseph's branches running over the wall anticipated the eventual arrival of Lehi's family. For example, Orson Pratt taught that Joseph's tribe "should become so numerous that they would take up more room than one small inheritance in Canaan, that they would spread out and go to some land at a great distance. ... Joseph's peculiar blessing ... was that he should enjoy possessions above Jacob's progenitors to the utmost bounds of the everlasting hills. This would seem to indicate a very distant land from Palestine."43

23. *The archers fiercely attacked him;  
they shot at him and pressed him hard.*

*The archers fiercely attacked him.* Sarna comments: "Scripture nowhere else records attacks by archers upon Joseph. Unless this refers to some unreported episode in his life or to attacks on Ephraim and Manasseh by neighboring tribes or Canaanite armies, the phraseology may be figurative. It could allude to the Ishmaelites<sup>44</sup> ..., to the hostility of Joseph's brothers, or to the slanderous accusations of Potiphar's wife with their bitter after-effects. The figure of slander as an arrow is well attested."45

24. *Yet his bow remained taut,  
and his arms were made agile  
by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob,  
by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel,  
25a. by the God of your father, who will help you,*

*Yet his bow remained taut. and his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob.* In other words, Joseph's hands were "given strength by God's hands,"46 allowing him to "withstand the onslaughts of other men's designs — those of his brothers, of Potiphar's wife, and presumably of enemies at court. Some [ancient] commentators believe the expression to be [an indirect reference to] sexual temptation."47

*by the name of the Shepherd.* Translators are divided as to the interpretation of the Hebrew. The King James Version gives the literal translation of "from thence [Hebrew *mi-sham*] is the shepherd," which may have been accompanied by a gesture that "pointed heavenward."48 Alternatively, some manuscripts read *mi-shem* (= "by the name of") reflecting similar usage elsewhere in the Bible and the "idea that the 'Name' of God expresses the essence of His being from which flows help and salvation."49



*25b. by the Almighty who will bless you  
with blessings of heaven above,  
blessings of the deep that lies beneath,  
blessings of the breasts and of the womb.*

*blessings.* The blessings described “consist of rain and dew and abundance of water resources, all of which symbolize fruitfulness of the soil [and] of animals and humans [= ‘breast and womb’].”<sup>50</sup>

The greatest blessing of Joseph — as with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — is his posterity.<sup>51</sup> Note that the “fruitfulness” of Joseph is first described in relation to the birth of Ephraim<sup>52</sup> and later confirmed in Jacob’s prophecy that he would become a “fruitful bough.”<sup>53</sup> Similar associations between “fruit” and “posterity” are featured prominently in connection with Joseph in modern scripture. For example, although references to the “fruit” of the “loins” appears nowhere in the Hebrew Bible, it is found not only in JST Genesis 49:9, 10 but also within ten additional verses in 2 Nephi 3, a chapter that quotes extensively from the Testament of Joseph. Consistent with this emphasis, when Joseph Smith pronounced the blessings of Joseph’s fruitfulness upon his father, there were significant references to his “seed.”<sup>54</sup>

*26. The blessings of your father  
are stronger than the blessings of the eternal mountains,  
the bounties of the everlasting hills;  
may they be on the head of Joseph,  
on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers.*

*The blessings of your father are stronger than the blessings of the eternal mountains.* Some newer translations, such as Hendel’s above, opt to preserve the typical mode of parallelism found elsewhere in the Bible between “mountains” and “hills.” However, the King James Version translates this phrase as “The blessings of thy father have prevailed above the blessings of my progenitors.” JST Genesis 49:9 alludes to this alternative interpretation when it is prophesied that Joseph’s posterity “shall be blessed above thy brethren, and above thy father’s house.”

Elucidating this particular way of understanding the verse, Sarna explains: “[T]he patriarch assures Joseph that the blessings he bestows on him immeasurably exceed what he himself had received from his forebears.” He cautions, however, that “[t]his interpretation ... depends upon a particular understanding of several unique and difficult words and phrases of uncertain meaning.”<sup>55</sup>

*him who was set apart from his brothers.* Sarna translates the Hebrew term given as “separate” in the King James Version and as “set apart” in Hendel’s translation differently — as “leader.” Alter translates it as “consecrated.”<sup>56</sup> All these translations hint at the eventual destiny of the posterity of Joseph and Judah as kings, since the “Hebrew *nazir* may here be ‘one who wears the nezer,’ the symbol of royal power, as in 2 Samuel 1:10 and 2 Kings 11:12.”<sup>57</sup>



Figure 5. Twelfth-century Baptismal Font. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock 58

*Deuteronomy 33:17*

*His firstborn bull [i.e., Ephraim] is his glory,  
wild ox's antlers his horns.*

*With them he gores [pushes] peoples,  
all together, the ends of the earth,  
and they are the myriads of Ephraim  
and they are Manasseh's thousands.*

After summarizing familiar echoes of Jacob's blessing of Joseph, Moses' blessing on his people adds the verse above. In D&C 58:45, similar wording is used to describe the responsibility of the elders of the Church for the gathering of Israel in the last days. LDS scholar Edward J. Brandt explained how the gathering of Israel is symbolized in the twelve oxen on which temple baptismal fonts rest:<sup>59</sup>

In ancient Israel, the ox, "bull," "wild bull," (or "unicorn," as it is rendered in the King James Version) was a type or symbol of strength and power.<sup>60</sup> In addition, the bull and wild bull symbolize the people of Joseph as represented by his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh.<sup>61</sup>

Decades after the tabernacle was dedicated, Solomon built a great temple complex. Included in the temple was a large basin font supported by "the similitude of oxen."<sup>62</sup> ... The oxen were placed in groups of three, with each group facing outward toward a point of the compass, and with the large basin placed upon their backs.<sup>63</sup> ...

Thus, we can see that the twelve oxen represent the tribes of Israel and also signify the strength and power on which God has established his work for the children of mankind. Those who are obedient and faithful to their covenants are the covenant family chosen to accomplish God's purposes. They are the ones upon whom his work "rests," just as the temple fonts rest upon the backs of the oxen.

## The Why

The prophecies of Jacob given to each of his sons are echoed, elaborated, and personalized in the patriarchal blessings of individual members of the Church. William James Mortimer further explains:<sup>64</sup>

An essential part of a patriarchal blessing is a declaration of lineage. The patriarch seeks inspiration to specify the dominant family line that leads back to Abraham. The majority of modern blessings have designated Ephraim or Manasseh as the main link in this tracing, but others of every tribe of Israel have also been named. Whether this is a pronouncement of blood inheritance or of adoption does not matter.<sup>65</sup> It is seen as the line and legacy through which one's blessings are transmitted. Thus the blessings "of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" are conferred.

In considering the declaration of lineage in their patriarchal blessings, each member of the Church should understand that in our day, the gathering of Israel is neither geographical nor "political but spiritual."<sup>66</sup> Converts are going "out from among the nations"<sup>67</sup> as they gather into the congregations and stakes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that are scattered throughout the [world].<sup>68</sup> In this way, Zion is being built up in every nation of the earth.

With these considerations in mind, it should be evident that identification of a member of the Church as a son or daughter of Abraham has nothing to do with mistaken ideas about racial superiority or nationalism — indeed the Church has spoken out strongly against such views<sup>69</sup> and its devoted efforts to "teach all nations"<sup>70</sup> is an eloquent witness of God's love for each of His children.<sup>71</sup> Refuting any idea of partiality in priorities for the worldwide gathering of Israel in our day, a local patriarch in the Democratic Republic of Congo recently bore this eloquent testimony: "The children of Israel have been dispersed everywhere in all nations. The blood is completely mixed. Therefore we can say that in every nation there are sons [and daughters] of Abraham who have the blood of Israel. But there is no way to know [the declaration of lineage that is to be made in each blessing] except as it is revealed by the Lord to the patriarch."



*Figure 6. Phoenix Arizona Temple Baptismal Font*

Just as the blessing of Judah will have its ultimate fulfillment in the second coming of the Messiah in His glory, so the greatest prophecies of the blessing of Joseph will come to pass through the gathering of Israel in the last days. This means that the primary significance of the declaration of lineage in one's patriarchal blessing is not in its assertion of eventual, conditional blessings, but rather in its reminder of our immediate responsibilities to assist with that gathering — on behalf of both the living and those who have passed on:<sup>72</sup>

For thou shalt be a light unto my people, to deliver them in the days of their captivity, from bondage; and to bring salvation unto them, when they are altogether bowed down under sin.

*Thanks to Kathleen M. Bradshaw and Stephen T. Whitlock for their careful proofreading and valuable suggestions.*

### **Further Study**

For a scripture roundtable video from The Interpreter Foundation on the subject of Gospel Doctrine lesson 12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwae7UoBkbs> .

### **Appendix: James Kugel's Brief History of Jewish Messianic Interpretations of Genesis 49:10**

[T]he part of Judah's blessing that begins "The scepter shall not depart from Judah ..." could not but attract attention. In context, of course, these lines clearly refer to the future: in time to come, Jacob is saying, the royal dynasty to be established in Israel will come from Judah's offspring and it "shall not depart." And so it was: King David, who established that dynasty centuries after



Jacob's death, was indeed from the tribe of Judah. What Jacob seemed to be predicting, then, was not only that a descendant of Judah — David himself — would end up being king, but also that no one from another tribe would ever take over the kingship.

But, of course, the scepter *did* depart from Judah. Centuries later, the Jewish homeland was conquered by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. The king, scion of the Davidic dynasty, was led away in chains, and never again did a descendant of David sit on the royal throne.<sup>73</sup> ...

[H]ad Jacob been wrong in saying that “the scepter shall not depart from Judah”? *Perhaps not*, perhaps the meaning of these words was not that someone from Judah would always rule Israel, ... but that, on the contrary, no matter how much Israel was dominated by foreign rule, it would eventually regain the rule over its own house, that is, “the scepter shall not depart from Judah *forever*.” ... These words were thus taken as a prediction of the *restoration* of kingship to Judah. ...

[Judah says:<sup>74</sup>]

The Lord will bring upon them factions, and there will be continuous wars in Israel, and my rule shall be ended by a foreign people, *until* the salvation of Israel comes, *until* the God of righteousness appears, so that Jacob may enjoy peace, along with all the nations. He will guard the power of my kingdom forever. For with an oath the Lord swore to me that my kingship will not depart from my seed all the days, *forever*. ...

A number of ... prophetic passages seemed to speak of an individual who would bring about or inaugurate this return. Presumably, this individual would be a king in the Davidic line, “a sprout from the stock of Jesse [David's father],”<sup>75</sup> who would once again bring justice and righteousness to his people. This figure came, in time, to be referred to by the Hebrew word *maseah* (“anointed one”), originally a somewhat elegant synonym for ‘king.’ It entered English as the word “messiah.” ...

“Scepter” ... soon came to be understood as a divine codeword for this messiah, the one who would restore Israel's fortunes. ... [A]nother passage, one that also seems to predict the coming of such a king, likewise uses the term “scepter”: “A star will proceed from Jacob, and a *scepter* shall rise from Israel.”<sup>76</sup> ...

In line with this same tendency, interpreters were inclined to see in the phrase “until he comes to Shiloh” a further hint about the coming of the expected ruler. The word “until” seemed to imply that this phrase referred to the *time* when the new ruler would arrive.

But what did the city of Shiloh have to do with all this? There was no obvious connection between this old site of a temple<sup>77</sup> and the future restoration of kingship. Fortunately, the vagaries of the Hebrew writing system, and the rules of Hebrew grammar, allowed for other interpretations.

Kings shall not cease from the house of Judah, nor yet scribes teaching the law from the sons of his sons, until the time that the anointed king comes, *to whom* belongs the kingdom.<sup>78</sup>

The name “Shiloh” does not appear here at all. Instead, these translators apparently understood the same Hebrew letters as “what is his” or “what belongs to him” (*sello*)... Perhaps they were influenced by a similar verse elsewhere in the Bible:<sup>79</sup>

And you, O unhallowed wicked one, prince of Israel, whose day has come, the time of your final punishment — Thus says the Lord God: remove the turban, and take off the crown; this shall not be this [that is, “this shall not remain as it is”]. ... A ruin, ruin, ruin I will make it; even this shall not be, until there comes the one *to whom belongs* [*’aser lo*, literally, “whose is”] the right, and I shall give it.

Lastly, interpreters saw in Jacob’s words to Judah a hint that this king or leader, once he did arrive, would be no mere local potentate; his arrival would be heralded worldwide. Consider the last clause of the Genesis verse:80

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to Shiloh [or ‘until Shiloh comes’], and to him shall be the obedience of *peoples*.

The mention of “peoples” certainly suggested to interpreters some connection between the promised king and other nations of the world. ... [In combination with other passages, this led to the] belief in a messiah who will *rule the world*. ... [W]orldwide conquest might lead to worldwide peace, the same peace spoken of so frequently by Israel’s prophets and visionaries.<sup>81</sup> Perhaps this was another reason for the mention of other “peoples” in Genesis 49:10.

[Judah says:82]

The Lord will bring upon them factions, and there will be continuous wars in Israel, and my rule shall be ended by a foreign people, until the salvation of Israel comes, until the God of righteousness appears, so that Jacob may enjoy peace, along with all the *nations*.

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## Endnotes

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- 1 Used with permission of Book of Mormon Central. See <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/reference-knowhy>.
- 2 E.g., ““The language is enigmatic and allusive, and the meaning is often uncertain” (N. M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 342). The verses also contain “considerable double entendre” (*ibid.*).
- 3 “Shortly and generally put, ‘conjectural emendations’ are apparently changes in the text either by omissions, additions, or alterations, for which there is no authority in the known manuscripts. ... [T]he framers of the text [are required] to reach a decision as between two or more texts, or to arrive at a text that is different from all other known texts. In the last analysis the decision seems to rest upon the ‘individual mind’ of the translator, assuming he is an acceptable translator” (J. R. Clark, Jr., *Why the KJV*, pp. 286-288).
- 4 However, an allusion to Genesis 49:10 that identifies the Messiah as “Shilo” is given in JST *Genesis* 50:24.
- 5 N. M. Sarna, *Genesis*.
- 6 E.g., *Genesis* 27:27-29, 39-40.; 28:1-4, *Deuteronomy* 33:1-26; *Joshua* 23:2-16; 24:1-24; 1 *Kings* 2:1-9; 2 *Nephi* 1-4; *Mosiah* 2-5; *D&C* 107:53-57.
- 7 J. Smith, Jr., *Words*, Willard Richards account, 27 June 1839, p. 6.
- 8 N. M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 342.
- 9 G. J. Wenham, *Genesis* (Eerdmans).
- 10 Hendel has written extensively about the book of *Genesis* (e.g., R. S. Hendel, *Demigods*; R. S. Hendel, *Tangled Plots*; R. S. Hendel, *Shape*; R. S. Hendel, *Poetics of Myth*; R. S. Hendel, *Nephilim*; R. S. Hendel, *Genesis 1-11 and Its Mesopotamian Problem*; R. S. Hendel, *Remembering Abraham*; R. S. Hendel, *Cultural Memory*; R. S. Hendel, *Historical Context*) and is currently preparing a new volume of commentary on the book as part of the *Anchor Bible*



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series. For his detailed analysis of the Hebrew text of Genesis 1-11, see R. S. Hendel, *Text*. For the English translation used in this article, see R. S. Hendel, *Genesis* (HarperCollins).

11 J. L. Kugel, *Bible As It Was*, p. 275.

12 W. G. Plaut, *Commentary*, p. 311.

13 N. M. Sarna, *Genesis*, Genesis 49:1.

14 Deuteronomy 33:10. See also vv. 8-11.

15 R. Alter, *Genesis*, p. 294.

16 N. M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 335. Sarna continues: “In the wilderness Judah is, by far, the largest tribe: its population increases during the wanderings, as shown by the censuses of Numbers 1:26 and 26:22. The tribe encamps in front of the Tent of Meeting and heads the march (Numbers 2:3, 9; 10:114). Its chieftain is the first to bring gifts for the Tabernacle (Numbers 7:12), and its representative is listed first among those designated to apportion the land (Numbers 34:19).” (*ibid.*, p. 335).

17 See Genesis 29:35.

18 R. Alter, *Five Books*, Genesis 49:8.

19 As summarized by J. H. Walton, *Genesis*, Genesis 49:8.

20 E.g., Mosiah 10:11-17; Alma 20:13.

21 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mosav\\_zkenim\\_003.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mosav_zkenim_003.jpg).

22 N. M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 336.

23 G. J. Wenham, *Genesis* (Eerdmans), Genesis 49:8.

24 R. Alter, *Genesis*, p. 295.

25 Alter translates “staff” as “mace” (R. Alter, *Five Books*, Genesis 49:10): “The Hebrew *meoqeq* refers to a ruler’s long staff, a clear parallel to ‘scepter.’ There is no reason to construe it, as some have done, as a euphemism for the phallus, though the image of the mace between the legs surely suggests virile power in political leadership.”

26 See Matthew 21:9; Mark 12:35-37. Cf. Matthew 9:27; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:15; Mark 10:47-48; Luke 18:38-39.

27 E. Fox, *Books of Moses*, p. 231.

28 N. M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 357. An additional possibility conjectured by the medieval Jewish scholar Rashbam is to identify the word “with the city of Shiloh, a very ancient cultic center in Israel situated in the territory of Ephraim. The specific historic reference would be the defection of the ten tribes from Judah with the resultant division of the kingdom, announced by the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh. Judah’s hegemony over all Israel will last until the secession of the north [i.e., the northern kingdom of Israel]” (*ibid.*, p. 357).

29 Sarna adds (*ibid.*, p. 357): “It has even been noted that the numerical value of the consonants *y-b-’ sh-y-l-h*, “Shiloh will come,” is equal to that of *mashiah*, ‘messiah.’”

30 J. L. Kugel, *Bible As It Was*, pp. 275-282.

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31 N. M. Sarna, Genesis, Genesis 49:11: “Blood of grapes” is a “poetic term for wine (cf. Deuteronomy 32:14). ‘Blood’ (Hebrew *dam*) is also used in Akkadian (*dāmu*) for red wine. In Ugaritic *yn*, ‘wine,’ is paralleled with *dm* ‘*šm*, ‘blood of trees’ (51.III.43f.; cf. IV.38).”

32 J. Smith, Jr., Documentary History, 5:337.

33 G. J. Wenham, Genesis (Eerdmans).

34 We would say “bathe in champagne” (W. G. Plaut, Commentary, p. 309).

35 R. Alter, Genesis, p. 296.

36 N. M. Sarna, Genesis, Genesis 49:11.

37 Isaiah 63:1. “This imagery is suggestive of Judah’s descendants having the blue/purple/red clothing often associated with royalty” (J. H. Walton, Genesis, Genesis 49:11).

38 N. M. Sarna, Genesis, p. 337.

39 R. S. Hendel, Genesis (HarperCollins).

40 R. Alter, Genesis, p. 298.

41 Blessing in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery, Clerk and Recorder, MSS, 18 December 1833, as published in J. Smith, Jr., Teachings, p. 39. The record of the entire blessing reads as follows:

And again, blessed is my father, for the hand of the Lord shall be over him, and he shall be full of the Holy Ghost; for he shall predict whatsoever shall befall his posterity unto the latest generation, and shall see the affliction of his children pass away, and their enemies under their feet: and when his head is fully ripe he shall behold himself as an olive tree whose branches are bowed down with much fruit. Behold, the blessings of Joseph by the hand of his progenitor, shall come upon the head of my father and his seed after him, to the uttermost, even he shall be a fruitful bough; he shall be as a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well whose branches run over the wall, and his seed shall abide in strength, and the arms of their hands shall be made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob, and the God of his fathers: even the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, shall help him and his seed after him: even the Almighty shall bless him with blessings of heaven above and his seed after him, and the blessings of the deep that lieth under: and his seed shall rise up and call him blessed. He shall be as the vine of the choice grape when her clusters are fully ripe: and he shall also possess a mansion on high, even in the Celestial Kingdom. His counsel shall be sought for by thousands, and he shall have place in the house of the Lord; for he shall be mighty in the council of the elders, and his days shall yet be lengthened out: and when he shall go hence he shall go in peace, and his rest shall be glorious; and his name shall be had in remembrance to the end. Amen.

42 3 Nephi 15:12-13. See also R. M. Nelson, Book of Mormon, Gathering of Israel.

43 JD, JD, Orson Pratt, 14:9.

44 Stephen T. Whitlock (personal communication) comments: “Remember when Hagar and Ishmael were driven away it says that God was with Ishmael and he became an archer (Genesis 21:20). ... [I]t seems to me that verse 23 is referring to Ishmael's descendants as fiercely attacking Joseph's. ... [T]his may be both a blessing and a prophecy with multiple layers.” Note also that when Hagar prayed, the child was sitting “a good way off, as it were a bowshot” (Genesis 21:16).

45 N. M. Sarna, Genesis, p. 343.

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46 R. Alter, Genesis, p. 299.

47 W. G. Plaut, Commentary, p. 310.

48 N. M. Sarna, Genesis, p. 343.

49 Ibid., p. 343.

50 Ibid., p. 344.

51 The term “fruitful” is first applied to posterity in Genesis 1:22, and continues through the time of Jacob, when he tells Joseph that God had promised to make him “fruitful” and “multiply” (Genesis 48:4).

52 Genesis 41:52.

53 Genesis 49:22.

54 I.e., “his seed shall abide in strength,” “God ... shall help him and his seed after him,” “the Almighty shall bless him ... and his seed after him, ... and his seed shall rise up and call him blessed” (J. Smith, Jr., Teachings, p. 39).

55 N. M. Sarna, Genesis, p. 344.

56 R. Alter, Five Books, Genesis 48:26.

57 Sarna’s full commentary on this verse in context is instructive:

Rather, “leader.” Hebrew *nazir* may here be ‘one who wears the *nezer*,’ the symbol of royal power, as in 2 Samuel 1:10 and 2 Kings 11:12. Another tradition takes it in the sense of “separated,” a transferred use of its usual meaning. “Nazarite,” meaning the one who took vows of abstinence as detailed in Numbers 6:1-6. This refers to the early relationships between Joseph and his brothers. Since Hebrew *nezer* also means “the hair of the head” (Jeremiah 7:29) — the outward characteristic of the Nazarite, who is not permitted to cut his hair — a word play with *ro’sh* and *kodkod* is probably intended.

58 Plaster cast in the Victoria and Albert Museum (London) of the original of the baptismal font of the goldsmith Renier de Huy (dating to the first part of the 12th century), St. Barhélemy (Bartholomew) Church, Liège, Belgium. See related article by Bryce Haymond at <http://www.templestudy.com/2008/02/26/a-12th-century-baptismal-font-upon-twelve-oxen/>.

59 E. J. Brandt, Why Are Oxen.

60 See Numbers 23:22, n. 22a; Numbers 24:8.

61 See Deuteronomy 33:17, n. 17b.

62 2 Chronicles 4:3.

63 See 1 Kings 7:25; 2 Chronicles 4:4.

64 W. J. Mortimer, Patriarchal Blessings.

65 See Abraham 2:10.

66 E. Ricks, Judah Must Return.

67 D&C 45:71; 133:7.

68 D. T. Christofferson, Come to Zion, p. 37.

69 Church Releases Statement.

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70 Matthew 28:19.

71 President Russell M. Nelson has explained (R. M. Nelson, *Gathering of Scattered Israel*, p. 81):

The choice to come unto Christ is not a matter of physical location; it is a matter of individual commitment. People can be ‘brought to the knowledge of the Lord’ [3 Nephi 20:13] without leaving their homelands. True, in the early days of the Church, conversion often meant emigration as well. But now the gathering takes place in each nation. The Lord has decreed the establishment of Zion [see D&C 6:6; 11:6; 12:6; 14:6] in each realm where He has given His Saints their birth and nationality. Scripture foretells that the people ‘shall be gathered home to the lands of their inheritance, and shall be established in all their lands of promise’ [2 Nephi 9:2]. ‘Every nation is the gathering place for its own people’ [Bruce R. McConkie, in *Conference Report, Mexico City Mexico Area Conference 1972*, 45]. The place of gathering for Brazilian Saints is in Brazil; the place of gathering for Nigerian Saints is in Nigeria; the place of gathering for Korean Saints is in Korea; and so forth. Zion is ‘the pure in heart’ [D&C 97:21]. Zion is wherever righteous Saints are. Publications, communications, and congregations are now such that nearly all members have access to the doctrines, keys, ordinances, and blessings of the gospel, regardless of their location.

Spiritual security will always depend upon how one lives, not where one lives. Saints in every land have equal claim upon the blessings of the Lord.

72 JST Genesis 48:11.

73 Elder B. H. Roberts associated the end of Judah’s dominion with the disappearance of the “last trace of legislative and ... administrative authority” of the Jews that occurred shortly after the the death of Christ (B. H. Roberts, *Rasha the Jew*, pp. 40-41):

If the integrity of the prophecy be regarded, then, since the Sceptre — symbol of the legislative and ruling power — has departed from Judah, the Messiah must have come, and long since come, for Judah has not held legislative authority, nor the Sceptre of power for two thousand years! The last trace of legislative power in the Sanhedrin and all administrative authority departed from Judah with the coming of Jesus, the Christ, and with the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem under the Romans, 70 AD.

74 See H. C. Kee, *Testaments, Testament of Judah*, 22:1-3.

75 Isaiah 11:1.

76 Numbers 24:17.

77 E.g., 1 Samuel 1:3.

78 See B. Grossfeld *et al.*, *Neofiti* or M. McNamara, *Targum Neofiti*, Genesis 49:10.

79 Ezekiel 21:25-27.

80 Genesis 49:10.

81 See, e.g., Isaiah 11.

82 See H. C. Kee, *Testaments, Testament of Judah*, 22:1-2.