

Deconstruction of Violence in Jacob's Testament (Genesis 49)

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The putative blessings of Jacob in Genesis 49, “one of the oldest pieces of Hebrew poetry which we possess,”⁽¹⁾ have been studied from the perspective of historical-traditional research *ad nauseam*. As a collection of well-integrated independent tribal sayings,⁽²⁾ the poem supposedly traverses from the pre-monarchic time to the rise and fall of the Judean monarchy. The blended nature of the passage displays a plethora of redactional layers—each loaded with a mine of historical clues that could yield gold or fold in exegetical studies. The purpose of this article is not to retread the well-trodden path. Instead, it explores a rhetorical effect from the composite nature of the text of Genesis 49, or a surplus of meaning that flows out of the textual totality larger than the sum of its parts, and its implications on the biblical-theological reflection on violence.

I. Genesis 49: A Composite Text of Dissonance and the Theme of Violence

The last words of Jacob in Genesis 49 give expression to the hope and despair of a parent for his offspring, whose names function both as the biological children of Jacob and as the eponymous tribes of Israel. As a text anchored in the patriarch's deathbed, the external shape of the passage is beguilingly simple. It conjures an impression of a unified collection of the dying father's words for each of his twelve children: Reuben (vv 3-4), Simeon and Levi (vv 5-7), Judah (vv 8-12), Zebulun (v 13), Issachar (vv 14-15), Dan (vv 16-17), Gad (v 19), Asher (v 20), Naphtali (v 21), Joseph (vv 22-26), and Benjamin (v 27).

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Even though it does not pose any particular challenge to break down Genesis 49 into discrete units of patriarchal sayings, Jacob's testament maintains a certain sense of literary synergy. The individual sayings "make less sense as isolated statements,"⁽³⁾ and together they offer a significant perspective upon the repeated, if not as much discussed, theme of violence.

In Genesis 49, violence, an impact-rich category for the rise and fall of the tribes of Israel, brings down some and elevates others. In the midst of the patriarch's blessings and curses, violence is put forth as a coveted means of immediate efficacy, but almost in the same breath its ultimate futility is laid bare. Genesis 49 weaves a text of dissonance, whose ambivalent posture toward violence facilitates a cautious reflection on the presumed effectiveness of violent means in the affairs of life and history.

In the early stage of interpretation, the subject of violence in Genesis 49 received little attention, as the chapter was regarded as a case of predictive prophecy. The redactional note in 49:1 presages the announcement of "the latter things" (*'ahārīt hayyāmīm*),⁽⁴⁾ and much exegetical energy had been expended on the question as to whether or how the details of the passage could be brought into agreement with later incidents in the history of Israel. The matching exercise of harmonization that failed to produce a convincing scenario of historical reconstruction turned a blind eye to the process in which violence was being divested of its luster as a tool to shape future.

In the contemporary exegesis interpreters have approached Genesis 49 as a more nuanced piece of poetry than a clear case of perfect prophecy. They conclude that the chapter is a mixture of the description of the past and the prescription for the future. This temporal hybridity stirs up colorful exegetical possibilities, creating a set of onerous tasks for translators, as Raymond de Hoop repeatedly points out in his massive study of Genesis 49.⁽⁵⁾ De Hoop takes the literary context as a trustworthy guide to translation, but the context can only be set through the interpretive process involved in translation, let alone that Genesis 49 largely lacks contextual data. The poetic ambiguity is further enriched by the nature of the Hebrew language that does not specify the time of the verbal

tense, while showing readily whether the action is complete or incomplete. The temporary uncertainty in Jacob's testament is to remain as an exegetical challenge, but in the midst of the poetics of ambiguity, the passage amalgamates the disastrous past induced by violence with the future clouded by violence.

As part of the modern historical critical study, Genesis 49 has benefited from the form critical studies that promise access to the meaning of the text through the discernment of its genre and *Sitz im Leben*, a recurring text-shaping context in life. Genesis 49, which Hermann Gunkel considers "the most important chapter in the Old Testament" for the study of earliest history of Israel,⁽⁶⁾ has seen a flourish of form critical titles including blessing, testimony, oracle, and testament. These form critical observations offer varying degrees of insight into the role the theme of violence plays in Genesis 49.

The most common designation of blessing for the chapter has proven to be the most problematic. The concluding redactional remark in v 28 declares that "this is what their father said to them when he *blessed* them, *blessing* each one of them with a suitable *blessing*"⁽⁷⁾ (emphasis added). The redactor's note functions as the basis of the commonly assigned title of the blessing of Jacob for Genesis 49:1-27. Yet, even a cursory reading invites a question, as some parts seem to border on curse than on blessing. As Gerhard von Rad points out, "This collection of aphorisms is commonly called 'Jacob's blessing.' But this designation is not quite apposite, for the twelve are not really blessed."⁽⁸⁾ E. A. Speiser concludes that "[t]he traditional designation of this poem as the 'Blessing of Jacob' is a misnomer,"⁽⁹⁾ unless one makes a theological disclaimer that all blessings are inherently mixed. In the forty-ninth chapter of Genesis the blessings are unevenly distributed and smack of "political propaganda to advance some tribal claims at the expense of others."⁽¹⁰⁾ It appears that Genesis 49 is anything but blessing. Neither a 'testimony' nor an 'oracle' yields additional significant exegetical insight or jibes all too well with the narrative framework of the poem. Above all else, the category of testament caters best not only to the narrative context, but also to the contents of the sayings.⁽¹¹⁾ While a blessing commonly anticipates benevolence, the testament of the patriarch relieves

the speaker of such a constraint of the genre.⁽¹²⁾ In a testament that invites the patriarch to express his heart-felt matter, Jacob, the perishing patriarch, presents a delicately balanced picture of the utility and futility of violence in the lives of his children in his parting words of testament.⁽¹³⁾

II. Genesis 49 in the Narrative Context

Many commentators sidestep the task of dealing with the chapter in their study of the Joseph Narrative, as they set aside the passage as an anomaly that has a tenuous relationship with the surrounding narrative world.⁽¹⁴⁾ The thesis of this article suggests a solution to the redactional conundrum, as it points out that violence does not only constitute a recurrent theme in the testament of Jacob in Genesis 49, but also links the chapter with the rest of the patriarchal narrative (Genesis 11-50), as well as with the Joseph Narrative (Genesis 37-50).

Other parallels of tribal sayings in Judges 5:14-18 and Deuteronomy 33 are admittedly better informed by their context. Whereas Genesis 49 stands out for its uneven pronouncements on the brothers that interrupt the novella of Joseph, Judges 5:14-18 commends the participation of Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir (Manasseh), Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali or condemns the non-participation of Reuben and Gilead (Gad, the other half of Manasseh, Dan, and Asher) in Deborah's war for the confederacy of Israel in Judges 4. For its surrounding chapters Deuteronomy 33 provides a theological underpinning, as it narrates how God made the settlement possible in order to "rally the nation anew around the banner of the Mosaic institutions, and to awaken in it a fresh and vivid consciousness of the happiness implied in its being Jehovah's people."⁽¹⁵⁾ Genesis 49 does not appear to have any comparable connection with the surrounding chapters.

Nonetheless, the poem in chapter 49 has a series of connecting points with the early parts of the book of Genesis. Some of Jacob's sayings clearly refer to early parts of the patriarchal narrative (Reuben, Simeon and Levi), and possibly to the other parts of the Joseph Narrative (Judah and Joseph). Sometimes Jacob's testament does not display a smooth narrative connection with the

immediate context of the Joseph story or the larger context of Genesis 12-50 (for example, Benjamin). Virtually all of the identifiable links with the previous parts of the book of Genesis, however, involve previous incidents of violence.

As it recalls the previous situations of conflict, Genesis 49 approaches the issue of violence as an area in which each tribe has to assume responsibility for its conduct of brutality. The poet brings this point to light by leaving Jacob's testament in Genesis 49 virtually devoid of theological intervention except in the oracle for Joseph.⁽¹⁶⁾ The chapter contains no mythical rendition of divine rescue from disaster or a divine retribution for moral failure, preserving a distinctive feature of the Joseph Narrative, in which God reveals the divine will only through visions and dreams and remains within the limits of the conversations among the *dramatis personae*. Even with its prominent theological emphasis, the saying for Joseph (vv 22-26) continues to confine the deity to the patriarch's lips and to keep God away from intruding into the narrative matrix. The children or the tribes of Israel will reap the consequences that their own violent actions are bound to bring to them. In the poem of Genesis 49, which "seems to be intended to be a high point of the *tōlēdōt ya'āqōb*..., if not the whole book of Genesis,"⁽¹⁷⁾ Jacob's testament metes out praise or blitz to the eponymous children of Israel out of its strategic location in the Torah.

III. Violence Condemned

The presentation of the children of Israel in Jacob's testament is dictated by the mixture of the order of their birth and the order of the birth mothers of the children of Israel, namely Leah, Zilpah, Bilhah, and Rachel (29:31-30:24; 35:16-18). Four of the Leah tribes, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah make the top of the list following the order of their birth. The Rachel tribes of Joseph and Benjamin appear at the end in the same way.

The order of birth is not strictly observed in the passage, however, as the poem features Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, and then Naphtali, while their births would put them in the order of Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, and Zebulun.⁽¹⁸⁾ The reason for transposition may have been purely poetic, for the

present order forms a chiasmic structure in the sequence of Dan (born of Bilhah), Gad (born of Zilpah), Asher (born of Zilpah), and Naphtali (born of Bilhah) within the outer ring of Leah's children in the front and Rachel's at the end.⁽¹⁹⁾ The fact that the sequence of the wives of Jacob makes a chiasmic structure in the order of (1) his first wife and her maid and (2) his second but favorite wife preceded by her maid shows that the redactor is familiar with the marriages of the ancient Figaro.

Within the constraints of the order of their birth and birth mothers, there seems to be another consideration in the presentation of the sons of Israel. The disqualification of Reuben from the prestige of the firstborn and the condemnation of Simeon and Levi on the ground of their violent behavior stand out in contrast with the elevation of Judah, as the poet sets out to “discredit Judah's three older brothers and, in doing so, to explain Judah's ultimate position of authority of among them.”⁽²⁰⁾

When the first triad of brothers, Reuben, and Simeon and Levi, is evaluated, Jacob's touchstone is the nature of violence they perpetrated in their life. It is in the sayings for these brothers that violence is condemned in terms that couldn't be clearer.

The oldest son Reuben is celebrated as the first born (*bēkōrī*) that represents the father's vigor and strength. The repetition of ‘excelling’ (*yeter*) in the next stich, “excelling in rank and excelling in power” (*yeter šē'ēt, wēyeter 'āz*) highlights the overflowing of ascendancy Jacob enjoyed with the birth of Reuben or the same expected of the firstborn son, but the celebration lasts merely for only one verse. The son, who is supposed to rise up, is now condemned as “unstable as water,” which portrays him as untrustworthy, chaotic, and threatening. The positive word of excellence *yeter* is deconstructed in a word play that features a verb from the same root of the verb ‘to excel’ *ytr*, as Jacob says, “... you shall no longer excel (*'al-tōtar* from *ytr*).”⁽²¹⁾

Jacob's burst of displeasure is apparently in reference to Reuben's act in lying down with Bilhah, his father's concubine, in Genesis 35:22. John Marshall Holt cites one of the legal texts from Nuzi that may offer a parallel to

the incident. The Nuzi text contains the testimony of Tarmiya, to whom his aged father gives his female slave, possibly his concubine, Zululi-Ishtar. Holt cites the passage as an example of “the warm and loving side” of Mesopotamian fathers, but the perimeter of testimony itself suggests that this is a rather extraordinary case.⁽²²⁾ Reuben’s case, however, has no prior arrangement of care by the father. The note of desecration that incriminates Reuben’s action is altogether absent from the Nuzi text.

The laconic way in which Reuben’s advance to Bilhah is reported in Gen 35:22 may indeed show “the writer’s horror at it” and refusal to “pander to the prurient by going into sensational details.”⁽²³⁾ The narrator adds a terse notation that “Israel heard” without offering any ethical evaluation or expression of displeasure on the part of Jacob.⁽²⁴⁾ Does Jacob’s silence suggest fear?⁽²⁵⁾ Gordon Wenham posits a parallel in David and Joab in 1 Kings 2; however, the Deuteronomistic Historian of 1 Kings does not offer a reason for David’s delayed recompense, either. While the emotional state of violated fathers remains unknown, one can only imagine a picture of parents torn between the demand of justice and the doting of their issue. As if this were a family secret they won’t take to the grave, both make a call for remedy at their deathbed, turning it into an issue later generations have to deal with.

In Gen 49:4 Jacob condemns Reuben’s act that can be construed as a challenge to the parental and patriarchal authority that disrupts the order of the universe. The father’s assessment is expressed in the choice of the word *hillaltā*, which commonly refers to the pollution of the sacred.⁽²⁶⁾ Reuben’s action demands redress, so he is divested of the status of the firstborn. Violence has such a canceling power that the firstborn’s blessing is thereby undone.⁽²⁷⁾

In the last portion of the oracle in v 4, the MT suddenly introduces a third person speech (“because *he* went up to my bed”), as if “Jacob turned from addressing just Reuben to all his sons.”⁽²⁸⁾ The LXX and other versions have removed the sudden shift in the personal pronoun by making it an address to the second person; however, the shift in pronouns in the MT has a dramatic effect—whether originally intended or not—of having Jacob shun Reuben theatrically

and exposes his guilt publicly.

The sayings for Simeon and Levi follow those of Reuben naturally—both in the order of birth and in the nexus of violence that bridges the two sayings. The violent nature of Simeon and Levi is presented as an action of *'aḥîm* “brothers.” While it is a rather peculiar note in the light of the fact that all of the twelve are brothers, the designation underscores the collective nature of their act of violence. Up to this point in the book of Genesis, Simeon and Levi have been singled out as a pair only once before, and that was over the incident of violence in and to Shechem. Now Jacob singles them out again as “brothers”—as a gang—in order to recall the violent acts perpetrated by the two conspirators in the massacre of Shechem in Genesis 34.

While Reuben’s breach of conduct in chapter 35 has gone without any clear comment up to chapter 49, the collective violence committed by Simeon and Levi had been commented in 34:30. In response to what the two brothers and conspirators had done, Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, “You made me turbid. You made me fetid to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites. I am few in number. If they are united against me and attack me, my family and I will be destroyed” (translation mine). Strikingly, Jacob’s assessment of their violent act is not based on any ethical standard. Their conduct is foolish in terms of external relations and foolhardy from a strategic viewpoint. It is rather the two brothers who make an effort to find a justification of their action as a revenge for their sister’s honor (34:31).⁽²⁹⁾

It is not strategic savvy or defensible justice that Genesis 49 is concerned with. The two brothers are condemned squarely for violence, which has a cosmic, far-reaching impact like the violence that filled the earth in the Flood Narrative.⁽³⁰⁾ What they have used in the violent act, *mēkērôtêhem*, whose interpretations vary from the swords (Wenham) to some mercantile ware (Alter), is presented as an incriminating piece of evidence. Mitchell Dahood speculates that the instrument of violence may refer to the knife of circumcision, as he finds an allegorical reference to the stratagem the two brothers used to immobilize the warriors of Shechem. In that case “Simeon and Levi may be said to have

turned the circumcision-knives, which were meant to be instruments of peace and union, into tools of violence.”⁽³¹⁾ Simeon and Levi are colluded and corrupt in violence.

As if spelling out their charge, their weaponry is further defined as paraphernalia of violence (*kēlē ḥāmās*). The Hebrew word for violence, *ḥāmās*, has a much broader semantic range than the English word ‘violence’ does, and carries a strong ethical connotation referring to “cold blooded and unscrupulous infringement of the personal rights of others, motivated by greed and hate and often making use of physical violence and brutality.”⁽³²⁾ It does not only refer to specific acts of violence, but also draws out the debilitating ambience of terror.

Jacob places the two brothers/conspirators into one fold, only to cast them away as one. The two share the will and weapons of violence. They are in the same council (*sōd*) and the same assembly (*qāhāl*). As a pair they are joint captives of anger and rancor. Jacob’s words in 49:6 (translation mine) are permuted to underscore the charge.⁽³³⁾

bsdm 'l-tb' npšy

bqhlm 'l-ṯhd kbdy

ky b'pm hrgw 'yš

wbršnm^c qrw-šwr

As for their council I don't want it!

About their gathering I am not happy!

In their anger they murdered humans.

At their whim they hamstrung oxen.

As they are united in their act of willful violence guided by unrestrained anger, they are joined in their condemnation and excommunication. Jacob pronounces, “Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce” (v 7a). The ultimate result of angered violence is their dispersion, which mirrors the state of their union in the perpetration of violence. When Jacob says, “I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel” (v 7b), the outcome of their violence is not only presented as a punishment of individual perpetrators, but also as determinants of the future

identity of the tribes. Violence has a far-reaching impact.

Nearly all commentators connect these words with later developments in the tribal history of Simeon and Levi. In the standard historical rendition, Simeon is absorbed into Judah and all but disappears, and Levi becomes the tribe without settlements (Deut 18:1-2). Levi's role is praised in Deut 33:8-11, but it has been a matter of debate whether the landless state of Levi has to do with their religious vocation, or the tribe becomes the house of priests once they were uprooted and dispersed.

The curse on the three brothers is a shocking exception to the very shape of the patriarchal narrative, for the dominating motif in Genesis 37-50 is the extension of boundless forgiveness that covers all sins of the past and provides for the well being of the future. As Claus Westermann observes, "When crime and punishment appear in chapters 12-36, the theme is never expressly that of crime leading necessarily to punishment."⁽³⁴⁾ Against this background, the condemnation of the three brothers for acts of violence in Genesis 49:3-7 makes a stark case of justice in the patriarchal narrative context of Genesis 12-50.

IV. Violence Exposed

As Jacob turns to Judah, the poetic mood shifts drastically. The section on this celebrated son of Jacob represents one of the longest sayings in the chapter, and in combination with the portion on Joseph, it takes up the space that adds up to one third of the passage. With the wings of the sheer length of the passage Judah soars. His valor is praiseworthy. His destiny is secure, as "we have a glimpse of the embryonic nation—with the Judah and Joseph tribes destined to have preeminence in the south and north respectively."⁽³⁵⁾ The poetic pointer illumines the house of Judah.

The impeccable encomium for Judah in chapter 49 seems to be completely oblivious to the acts of violence in which Judah participated against Joseph in chapter 37. One could argue that the selfless act of Judah in chapter 44 covers all sins of Judah, and the historical critical exegetes attribute a Judean pro-monarchic ethos to this patriarchal saying. Neither contextual pardon nor

ideological burden, however, has left the saying for Judah void of references to violence, as the following paragraphs will demonstrate.

The tribal saying for Judah (vv 8-12) is presented in three components: saying #1 in v 8, saying #2 in v 9, and blessing in vv 10-12. The first saying for Judah in v 8 begins with the blessing of his elevation over his brothers with word play on the name of *yěhūdāh* and the action of his brothers in *yôdūkā*.⁽³⁶⁾ The royal claim to the praise of the subjects of the kingdom is immediately followed by the image of subjugation and prostration in v 8b.

your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;
your father's sons shall bow down before you.

While this is a common ancient image of the royal prowess, the picture is not exactly that of a king of peace, as it alludes to the threat of violence—the thumb that presses down the enemy of the throne and supports the regime. Homage is paid, but only under duress.

In the second saying, Judah is compared with a young lion, a predator. Jacob says to Judah, “from the prey, my son, you have gone up” (v 9a). The JPS does not balk at the idea of a violent king in feeding frenzy, as it renders, “On prey, my son, have you grown” (v 9a). The lion, “the king of beasts” (JPS), is often featured as royal image in the ancient Near East, and the leading motif behind the picture is none other than violence. Robert Alter adds to the violent implications of this verse, when he posits the possibility that the image of lion in this verse may refer to the wild beast that tore Joseph in 37:33.⁽³⁷⁾

The patriarchal blessing in v 10 is arguably the most debated passage, and the standard translations are beguilingly smooth, as one can in the following example in the NRSV.

The scepter (*šēbeṭ*) shall not turn away from Judah,
nor the staff (*měhōqēq*) from his feet,
until *Shilo* (*šilō*) comes
and the obedience of the peoples belongs to him.

Amongst many interpretive possibilities, *šēbeṭ* and *měhōqēq* are usually rendered as ‘scepter’ and ‘staff,’ items of royal insignia,⁽³⁸⁾ but the root of the two words

evokes the nuance of military power wielded by the commander in chief.⁽³⁹⁾

Many interpreters regard verse 10b as the “most famous *crux interpretum* in the entire OT,”⁽⁴⁰⁾ as it features someone or something called *šīlō*. Targum Onkelos reads it as “the Messiah,” about which most Targumim agree.⁽⁴¹⁾ Ibn Ezra takes it as the reference to the destruction of Shiloh, which is followed by the choice of the tribe of Judah and the house of David (cf. Psalm 78; 1 Sam 3:19-4:22; Jer 7:12-15).⁽⁴²⁾ William Moran parses it as the combination of *shai* (tribute) and *lo* (to him).⁽⁴³⁾ Stephen Mitchell proposes the reading of *mō šlōh* along with the possibility of the connection with Akkadian *šēlu*, “ruler.”⁽⁴⁴⁾ These diverse proposals point to the political system of tributary mode of production, and they share a common denominator, namely, the people’s longing for a messianic redemption. From the animal figures that feature a donkey instead of a horse in v 11, the sixteenth century Italian rabbi Ovadiah Sforno repeats the same longing that “he will become king in peace” (cf. Zech 9:9).

Even though the picture of the prince of peace is guided by the Judean royal ideology, the verse, even in its sanitized form, permits the images of royal violence to bleed through the pages. The latter half of verse (v 11b) is the cases in point.

He washes his garment in wine;

His vesture, in blood of grapes.

These images have been cited for the abundance of wine, but the choice of words in the metaphor stops short of easing the violent image of dipping in blood (cf. 37:31). The next stich in v 12a (“his eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk”) is commonly taken as a reference to the vigor of the king in line with the court language fit for a king, and Wenham cites as a parallel an Arabic proverb of “red with wine” as an image of wealth;⁽⁴⁵⁾ however, until the modern practice of red-eye flights, eyes darker than wine or red with wine have no way of escaping the suspicion of drunkenness (cf. Prov 23:29).⁽⁴⁶⁾ Elsewhere in the Bible, the root of *hkl* behind *hakilī* ‘dark’ is more often associated with confusedness than with luxuriance. The last phrase of ‘whiter than milk’ may be relatively straightforward as the note of royalty and abundance, but the

juxtaposition of red eyes and white teeth makes the royal image ambiguous at best.⁽⁴⁷⁾

In spite of the indicators of violence in the text of Genesis 49, commentators have not always been keen on associating violence with kingship in the images presented in this poem. At times, there is even a tint of fascination among the commentators, who may not always have been immune from the attraction of the royal ideology. The monarchy is often praised for bringing prosperity and security to Israel, but the biblical land is no stranger to abuses and oppressions from the throne throughout the monarchic period. The poem in Genesis 49 sketches the luster of violence that reveals the dark side of the monarchic system.

V. Violence Deconstructed

The next sets of oracle hurry through Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, and Naphtali, poking puns at their names. Unsurprisingly, poetic images are not crystal clear, leaving room for a double-edged interpretation. On the one hand, their portion can be summarized in a few sentences; on the other hand, it is not free of troubles.

Zebulun⁽⁴⁸⁾ is going to have a temporary dwelling (*yiškōn*) on the shore, a place of living ancient Israelites were not particularly fond of.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Issachar will become a man for hire (*'iš šakar*),⁽⁵⁰⁾ who is portrayed as a beast of burden. Dan will be a tribe of judges, as the name suggests in Hebrew; however, even with such a blessing, Dan will not grow into a bigger tribe than others, but will be “as one of the tribes” (v 16). He is portrayed as a horned viper, hidden in the desert, possibly suggesting that the tribe “did not enjoy the security of fortified settlement.”⁽⁵¹⁾ Gad will be raided, but will do *gūd*, ‘attack.’ Gad will not fall easily, but will be embroiled in constant conflicts. Asher will provide delicacies for the palace, but “[i]t is not clear whether this remark is a compliment or a rebuke.”⁽⁵²⁾ Stanley Gevirtz suspects a case of sarcasm in the ‘blessing’ for Asher who is to suffer under the heavy burdens of tributes.⁽⁵³⁾ Naphtali, “a doe let loose that bears lovely fawns,” is commonly taken as an object of mild praise; however, the saying may refer to domestication.⁽⁵⁴⁾ The motley nature of

the sayings for these tribes has to do with their less than prominent status, and functions as a backdrop that enhances the contrast between Judah and Joseph as two competing acmes in Jacob's testament.⁽⁵⁵⁾

After these remarks on other children, Jacob's speech moves to an oracle for Joseph. Jacob's saying for Joseph qualifies unequivocally as a blessing. Karin Schöplin goes as far as to make a case for an earlier tradition-historical stage in which Jacob blesses his favorite son Joseph only.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Again, violence gets a heightened review (vv 22-26), as Joseph's part takes up a rather different tone from the rest of the chapter. It is not surprising that, given the troubles he went through as a youth, Joseph is being presented as one in distress, but remarkable in his ascendancy is that he weathers the violent onslaughts against him and does not initiate violent acts. "They bitterly attacked him; the archers shot at him in a hostile action" (v 23, translation mine), but Joseph surpasses all.

At this point one might expect the praise of Joseph's military prowess to follow, but instead one encounters the most theological discourse among all oracles in Genesis 49. Joseph rises above his brothers—not through violence but in spite of violence—thanks to the shield of God.⁽⁵⁷⁾ The oracle for Joseph introduces the Mighty One of Jacob or Bull of Jacob (*'ābîr ya^caqōb*), the Shepherd (*rō^ceh*), the Rock of Israel (*'eben yiśrā'ēl*), and the God of your father (*'ēl 'ābikā*), and Shaddai (*šaddai*).⁽⁵⁸⁾ Joseph's rather defensive feat or transparently theological investment may not readily qualify him for the throne; however, Joseph's blessings (vv 23-26) stay supreme and surpass those of the house of the king, who has to maintain his royal status with violence.

Lastly, in the order of birth, Benjamin, the youngest among the sons of Israel, comes onto the stage of Jacob's testament (v 27). The oracle for Benjamin is by far the most enigmatic. In an oracle that takes up the space of one verse, Jacob says (translation mine),

Benjamin is a flesh-tearing wolf
In the morning he devours the prey,
And at evening he divides the spoil.

The passage clearly anticipates many warriors who would come out of the tribe

of Benjamin, including the fateful first king Saul and his son Jonathan. Either in the context of the patriarchal history or in the narrower context of the Joseph Narrative, however, the brief saying for Benjamin creates a jarring note, as the oracle does not commensurate with the way he is portrayed up to this point in the book of Genesis. Everett Fox muses, "In this ancient piece of poetry, Yaakov addresses his sons, not as they are, but as they will be. There is little resemblance, for instance, between the Binyamin as the beloved and protected youngest son of the Yosef story and the preying wolf of verse 27."⁽⁵⁹⁾ What can account for the peculiar way Benjamin is characterized?

One could attempt to explain it away by summoning back the presupposition that Genesis 49 represents a haphazard collection of tribal sayings that had floated around until they were collected under the umbrella of the twelve tribes of Israel; however, this solution deprives the redactor of any meaningful role. Rather, the sharply condensed nature of the oracle for Benjamin may have been demanded, as it follows an extensive tribal saying for Joseph, in which the sting of violence was downplayed and the victory over violence was highlighted. In the aftermath of such a rhetorical move, it would not make sense to give a great deal of coverage to violence.

Instead, the oracle for Benjamin offers an element of surprise, as it is far from what the readers would expect from the patriarchal narrative. In Gen 29:27 Benjamin is no longer just the doted youngest brother of Joseph, but a character of brutishness. In response to the image of the ravenous wolf, Westermann says, "Nowhere else in the OT is the wolf spoken of so positively."⁽⁶⁰⁾ His assessment of the value assigned to the metaphor of a wolf, however, seems to be conditioned by the narrative context. The contents of the verse point to another possibility of interpretation. A wolf tearing flesh and devouring prey may be a description of a successful hunt, but at the same time, it is a picture of a predator that evidently had a hungry night. The segment of evening distribution of prey has also been taken as a description of the successful day's work of a hunter. For a wolf devouring prey in the morning and dividing the play in the evening, however, there is no rest.

Later exegetical traditions put up a defense on behalf of Benjamin the wolf. In *The Testament of Benjamin* the youngest son of Jacob says, "... and I shall no longer be called a rapacious wolf on account of your rapine but 'the Lord's worker' providing food for those who do good works" (11:1). The pseudepigraphon presents a desperate attempt to wean from the image of the violent one. Targum Onkelos removes the savage image from the picture altogether, as it declares, "(As for) Benjamin, in his land shall the *Shekinah*... dwell, and in his possession (or: heritage) shall the (holy) Temple be built. In the morning and in the afternoon (or: toward sunset) the priests shall offer the sacrifice, and in the (lit. the time of the) evening they shall divide the remaining portions of the residue of the sacred offerings."⁽⁶¹⁾ These later exegetical attempts to rescue Benjamin from being mired in violence only underscore the scandal of violence in Jacob's testament for him. The saying for Benjamin in Gen 49:27 delivers one last word to violence. With all its illusion of abundance, the predatory behavior leaves nothing but an exhausting empty cycle of violence.

VI. Conclusion

The forty-ninth chapter of the book of Genesis does not claim to be a thorough treatise on violence. The somewhat fragmented nature of the sayings may preclude any expectation of a systematic treatment or reflection upon terror, but the interplay of Jacob's words of testament uncovers the upshot of violence. The juxtaposition of violence for success (as in the case of Judah) and violence for trouble (as in the case of Reuben, Simeon and Levi) signals the futility of harming others for material or political gains. It is one who does not add violence to the already violent world that receives the untainted blessing (Joseph). The poem is profoundly aware of the world in which violence is often regarded as a means of expediency, but the last words of Jacob deconstruct violence as an abortive means to get ahead, as they offer a hermeneutic corrective to the notion of God as the sponsor of violence. Such deconstruction of abortive violence may well be the most important legacy left by Jacob's testament in Genesis 49.

Notes

- (1) Skinner, p. 507.
- (2) Zobel, Westermann, and Sarna posit the independent status of the sayings, while Dillmann, Gunkel, Skinner, and Seebass opt for the unity of the poem. While the latter view focuses on the integrated nature of the collection of fragmentary sayings, the unevenness of the words of Jacob mitigates the cogency of the argument of the former.
- (3) Wenham, p. 470.
- (4) The phrase accords a prophetic note with the passage. Cf. Isa 2:2; Jer 23:20, 30:24; 48:47; 49:39; Ezek 38:16; Hos 3:5; Mic 4:1.
- (5) See de Hoop, *passim*.
- (6) Gunkel, p. 478.
- (7) Translation of the biblical verses in this article is from NRSV, unless indicated otherwise.
- (8) Von Rad, p. 421.
- (9) Speiser, p. 370.
- (10) Brueggemann, p. 365.
- (11) Cf. Wenham, p. 468.
- (12) Noah's saying in 9:25 also contains pronouncement of curse on his descendants.
- (13) Gunneweg posits a national covenantal festival for the passage, but the text neither supports nor denies such a use of the passage. Cf. Muilenburg, who cautions "against subsuming too many texts under the rubric of the covenant renewal festival" (p. 6).
- (14) Sarna, 1966, p. 211. His view represents a normative practice, when he excludes the Judah and Tamar episode and Jacob's farewell blessing from the study on Joseph.
- (15) S. R. Driver quoted in Heck, p. 48.
- (16) The parallel deathbed blessing in Gen 28:2-6 sets in high relief the relative absence of theological emphasis in Genesis 49.
- (17) Longacre, p. 23.
- (18) Cf. Dillmann, who argues that the sequence reflects the geographical location of tribes from south to north.
- (19) Sarna, 1989, p. 331.
- (20) Sparks, p. 330. He notes as another peculiarity of Genesis 49 that the supreme authority is given to "not one but two brothers," and contends that the authority of Judah exceeds that of Joseph because of the redactional history of the chapter; however, most scholars are content to leave it as an open question which of the two gets the better end of the deal.
- (21) Cf. Deut 33:6 insinuates Reuben's precarious future.
- (22) Holt, p. 109.
- (23) Wenham, p. 327.
- (24) The LXX adds, *kai ponēron ephanē enantion autou* ("and it looked evil in his judgment").

- (25) Wenham, p. 471.
- (26) Wenham calls attention to Exod 31:14; Lev 21:12; 19:12, 9; 21:9 for comparison (p. 472).
- (27) The loss of the birthright by the firstborn sons threads the patriarchal narrative, as Cain, Ishmael, Esau, and Er all lose their status, and their downfall is attributed to their conduct.
- (28) Wenham, p. 472.
- (29) Cf. Graetz, pp. 307-8.
- (30) Cf. Lowery, p. 43.
- (31) Dahood, p. 56.
- (32) Haag, *TDOT* 4:482.
- (33) For the rendering of the verbs in the first two lines, see Rendsburg, pp. 48-50. He derives *tābō* and *tēhad* from the roots of *'bh* 'to desire' and *hđh* 'to rejoice.'
- (34) Westermann, 1980, p. 45.
- (35) Longacre, p. 54.
- (36) Cf. Numbers 2:3; 10:14.
- (37) Alter, p. 295. The idea was first suggested by Rashi. The Hebrew text contains a suggestive verbal association, as Joseph is torn (ṭārōp ṭōrap) and Judah is on the prey (ṭerep).
- (38) The LXX takes the *hapax legomenon* of *mēhōqēq* as a term in parallel with *šēbet* (Rösel, p. 62), and spells out the symbolism in *šēbet* and *mēhōqēq* by translating them as *archōn* ('ruler') and *hēgoumenos* ('leader').
- (39) Etymologically, the Hebrew *šēbet* may be related to the Akkadian *šabātu* meaning 'smite.' The root of *hqq* contains the connotation of cutting and carving.
- (40) Moran, p. 405.
- (41) Aberbach and Grossfeld, pp. 284-86.
- (42) Mitchell, p. 160.
- (43) Moran, p. 405.
- (44) Cited in *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 97
- (45) Wenham, p. 479.
- (46) Carmichael associates the image with love-making, and argues that the saying is making a reference to condemnation of Judah's behavior in Genesis 38 (pp. 443-44).
- (47) The LXX renders *hkklyly* as *charopoi*, introducing the ideas of eyes sparkling with joy. Kapelrud notes that the Greek reading has become authoritative, but argues that the literal translation should be, "His eyes shall be darker than wine and his teeth shall be whiter than milk" (p. 427). He does not dwell on the personality of the king, however.
- (48) Issachar, who precedes Zebulun in birth (Gen 30:17-20), follows, repeating the leitmotif of the ascendancy of the younger in the early history of Israel.
- (49) The tribe of Zebulun is commonly found inland (Josh 19:10-15); however, Gen 49:13 poses no conflict with the tradition, as it alludes to the temporary settlement (*škn*)

alongside the seashore.

- (50) *Genesis Rabbah* 99:10 makes them a hire in the service of Torah.
- (51) Alter, p. 297. Targum Neofiti associates this with Samson, a tragic hero.
- (52) Wenham, p. 482.
- (53) Gevirtz, p. 161.
- (54) Wenham, p. 483.
- (55) Those who played a role in the life of Joseph have received more coverage in the chapter than others (Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, and Naphtali), who appear only in the lists elsewhere in the Joseph Narrative.
- (56) Schöplin, p. 516.
- (57) See Vawter, who has traced the Canaanite background of Genesis 49. For Joseph, he finds “a picture in which Joseph, the young bull, pursued by archers, is protected, appropriately enough, by a mighty One who is the Bull of Jacob, and... his father” (p. 11).
- (58) Traditionally, if imprecisely, rendered as “Almighty.”
- (59) Fox, p. 201.
- (60) Westermann, 1986, p. 241.
- (61) Aberbach and Grossfeld, p. 308. Targumim in the patriarchal tradition, however, are not monolithic in their posture toward Benjamin. Some praise him as the one who first informed Jacob that Joseph was still alive, and others implicate him for assassinating Esau (see Syrén, p. 140).

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ヤコブの祝福（創世記 49 章）における暴力の脱構築

< 要 約 >

ジン・ヒー・ハン

旧約聖書創世記 49 章はイスラエルの 12 の子らへのヤコブの祝福の言葉が綴られている箇所であるが、12 の部族に言い伝えられてきた 12 の独立した伝承によって構成されている。本論考は、こうした独立した 12 の伝承を個別的に分析し考察しながら、その構成上の特質と歴史的意味とを究明しようと試みている。ヤコブの祝福のテキストは、暴力のテーマを中心に展開している修辞学上の断章である。これはヤコブの祝福と呼ばれる箇所であるが、12 の子ら一人ひとりへの直截な評価と審判が記されており、この祝福は多くの子らにとっては同時に断罪でもある。この箇所は暴力というものの本質を開示する断章でもあり、近親相姦の暴力、剣の暴力、裁きの暴力、怒りと敵意の暴力、略奪の暴力の罪性と虚無性が、その修辞学的表現を通じて白日の下に曝されている。

その一つのメッセージは、暴力はしばし時を得て、成功と隆盛を示すもののように見えたとしても、最終的にはまったく非生産的かつ虚無的な結末をもたらすというものである。この断章は、暴力への際立ったアンビヴァレンスを示すものであるが、このアンビヴァレンスは同時に暴力の効能を脱構築する役割を果たしている。