# Genesis 49: Translation

1Jacob called his sons; he said, “Gather together so I may tell you[[1]](#footnote-1) what is to befall[[2]](#footnote-2) you in days to come.[[3]](#footnote-3)

2Assemble and listen, sons of Jacob,

 listen to Israel your father.

3Reuben: you, my firstborn,

 my strength and the initiation of my vigor,

Excellence in high position

 and excellence in strength.

4Turbulence[[4]](#footnote-4) like water: you are not to excel,

 because you climbed your father’s big bed.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Thereby[[6]](#footnote-6) you polluted—[[7]](#footnote-7)

 one who climbed my couch![[8]](#footnote-8)

5Simeon and Levi, brothers,

 their blades[[9]](#footnote-9) tools of violence:

6In their council my person is not to come,

 in their congregation my soul[[10]](#footnote-10) is not to join.

Because in their anger they killed someone,

 in their pleasure they hamstrung[[11]](#footnote-11) an ox.[[12]](#footnote-12)

7Cursed their anger because it was strong,

 their outburst because it was tough!

 I will divide them in Jacob,

 disperse them in Israel.

8Judah: you,[[13]](#footnote-13)

 your brothers will confess you.

Your hand on your enemies’ neck,

 your father’s sons will bow down to you.

9A lion cub, Judah

 (from prey, son, you’ve gone up):

He has bent down, lain, like a lion,

 like a cougar[[14]](#footnote-14) – who would rouse him?

10The staff will not leave from Judah,

 the scepter from between his feet,

Until[[15]](#footnote-15) there comes tribute to him[[16]](#footnote-16)

 and the obedience of the peoples to him.

11Tying[[17]](#footnote-17) his donkey to a vine,

 the offspring of his she-donkey to a choice vine,

He has washed his clothing in wine,

 his garment in grape-blood:

12Darker of eyes than wine,

 whiter of teeth than milk.[[18]](#footnote-18)

13Zebulun: towards the shore of the seas he will dwell,

 towards the shore for ships, him,

 his flank at Sidon.

14Issachar: a donkey, sturdy,

 lying among the sheepfolds.[[19]](#footnote-19)

15He has seen a resting place, how good it was,

 and the region, how beautiful.

But he has bent his shoulder to the burden,

 become a conscript servant.

16Dan: his people will govern[[20]](#footnote-20)

 as one of the clans of Israel.

17May Dan be[[21]](#footnote-21) a snake by the road,

 a viper by the path,

One that bites the horse’s heels

 so its rider falls backwards:

 18for your deliverance I have waited,[[22]](#footnote-22) Yahweh.

19Gad: an attacker[[23]](#footnote-23) will attack him,

 but he himself will attack their heel.

20From[[24]](#footnote-24) Asher: rich his bread,

 and he, one who will give a king’s delicacies.

21Naphtali: a hind[[25]](#footnote-25) set free;

 it gives[[26]](#footnote-26) fawns[[27]](#footnote-27) of the fold.[[28]](#footnote-28)

22A son,[[29]](#footnote-29) a wild donkey,[[30]](#footnote-30) Joseph,

 a son, a wild donkey:

Its daughters by a spring,[[31]](#footnote-31)

it has stridden[[32]](#footnote-32) by a terrace.[[33]](#footnote-33)

23People made things bitter for him[[34]](#footnote-34) and fought,[[35]](#footnote-35)

 archers were hostile towards him.

24But his bow stayed firm,

 his arms and hands[[36]](#footnote-36) were agile,

From the hands of the Strong Man of Jacob,

 from there, the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel,

25From God, your Father,[[37]](#footnote-37) so he will help you,

 and Shadday,[[38]](#footnote-38) so he will bless you,

With blessings of the heavens above,

 blessings of the deep lying below.

Blessings of the breasts and the womb,

26your father’s blessings—

They have been stronger than the blessings of those who conceived me,[[39]](#footnote-39)

 beyond the desirable things on the age-long hills.

They will come on Joseph’s head,

 on the brow of one set apart[[40]](#footnote-40) among his brothers.

27Benjamin: a wolf who will maul,

 in the morning will eat prey,[[41]](#footnote-41)

 and towards the evening will divide spoil.”

1. The cohortative makes explicit that a final clause follows the imperative. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. While the form *yiqrā’* is the same as that of “and he called” earlier in the verse, one should presumably derive this word from BDB’s *qāra’* II, a byform of *qārāh*, though perhaps the expression invites the brothers to think in terms of their destiny “summoning” them. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Literally, “in the latter part of the days.” LXX has “the last of the days,” Vg “the last/newest days.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. LXX takes the hapax *paḥaz* to denote Reuben’s willful turbulence, but v. 4 is making a transition to talk of his fate (Vg, Tg). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Bed” is plural, perhaps pejorative (cf. Lev 18:22; 20:13) (cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 331). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For this meaning of *’āz* here, see BDB. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “My couch” in the parallel colon does double duty as also the object of the first verb (cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 331). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The final colon is an unmarked relative clause (Ehrlich, *Randglossen* 1:243) in which the verb can therefore be third person (see JM 158n, GK 144p), like an English sentence such as “you are one who climbs,” not “you are one who climb.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Mᵉkērōt* comes only here; but a derivation from *karat* seems plausible and makes a good link with 34:13-29. See *DCH*, which also notes the possible meanings counsel, weapon, staff, and beguilement: and if the word could be understood as having any of these meanings, they would not be inappropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. While *kābōd* usually means “honor,” sometimes (e.g., Ps 30:12 [13]) it seems to be an alternative form to *kābēd* and to refer anatomically to the liver but metaphorically to the inner person, like words such as heart in English; *nepeš* in the parallel colon helps clarify the meaning of *kābōd*. The masculine noun is preceded by a feminine verb from *yāḥad* whose gender may be assimilated to that of the verb in the previous colon. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *‘Āqar* (piel) recalls *‘Ākar* in 34:30 (C. M. Carmichael, “Some **Sayings** in Genesis 49,” *JBL* 88 [1969]: 435-44 [435-36]). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Given that Gen 34 does not refer to hamstringing oxen, Vg, Sym, Tg take *šûr* to be the other *šûr* meaning “wall” which comes in v. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The extraposed pronoun anticipatorily emphasizes the subsequent verbal suffix (GK 135d) and also draws attention to a paronomasia: “You, as Judah (*yᵉhûdāh*), are one whom people confess (*yôdûkā*). “You are what your name means” (Westermann, *Genesis 37—50*, 227). Indeed, the “Jews” are etymologically the Judahites: Judah gave them their name (cf. Tg). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. We do not really know how to distinguish the different Hebrew words for lion. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Or “ever”: R. C. Steiner (“Four Inner-Biblical Interpretations of Genesis 49:10” [*JBL* 132 [2013]: 33-60) sees this ambiguity subsequently picked up by Nathan, Ahijah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The obvious translations of this colon are “until Shiloh comes” or “until he comes to Shiloh” (cf. recently S. Frolov, “Judah Comes to Shiloh,” *JBL* 131 [2012]: 417-22) but it is not obvious what they might refer to. I follow what Rashi (*Br’šyt*, 546) calls the midrashic interpretation that *šîlô* (K *šhlh*) needs redividing and repointing as *šay lô* (“[until there comes] tribute to him”); cf. the discussion in de Hoop, *Genesis 49*, 122-39 (and see R. C. Steiner, “Poetic Forms in the Masoretic Vocalization and Three Difficult Phrases in Jacob’s Blessing,” *JBL* 129 [2010]: 209-35 [219-24]): he thinks the repointing is unnecessary). It would not be surprising if the rare word *šay* had got lost from the colon, and the change generates good parallelism with the next colon. LXX implies *šellô* “[until there comes] what belongs to him,” which also provides good parallelism with the next colon, and has similar implications. Rashi himself follows Tg in assuming that the literal interpretation is “until the Messiah comes”; Ibn Ezra (*Genesis*, 430) assumes it refers to David himself—Judah will be in the lead until then (e.g., Num 10:14). The New Testament does not refer to v. 10, though v. 11 is significant in Mark 11 in connection with the story of Jesus’s Messiah-style entry to Jerusalem (see e.g., D. Krause, “The One Who Comes Unbinding the Blessing of Judah,” in J. A. Sanders and C. A. Evans [eds.], *Early Christian interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997], 141-53; S. P. Ahearne-Kroll, “Genesis in Mark’s Gospel,” in Moyise/Menken [eds.], *Genesis in the NT*, 27-41 [34-37]). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *’Ōsᵉrî* is an anomalous but not unparalleled construct of the participle (see Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 655-56). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. LXX “dark from… white from” makes poorer sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Or among the saddlebags or campfires: *mišpᵉtayim* comes only here and in Judg 5:16. Whereas etymology supports “campfires” (see BDB), the parallelism in Judg 5:16 supports “sheepfolds”; while de Hoop (*Genesis 49*, 151-56) argues for “saddlebags.” As in v. 5, if the word could be understood as having any of these meanings, they would not be inappropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. LXX, Vg take “his people” as object rather than the subject, but this understanding makes poor sense and eliminates the parallel with other verses that begin with an extraposed noun. Further, they take the verb *dîn* with words meaning “judge,” which gives a misleadingly judiciary meaning to the verb. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. GK 109k sees this *yᵉhî* as an example of a jussive form that is really yiqtol in significance, but jussive meaning fits in the context of a number of wishes and prayers in the testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. On such quasi-stative verbs, see GK 106g. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. More precisely, a gang of attackers. *Gᵉdûd* comes from the root *gādad* whereas the two succeeding verbs come from the byform *gûd*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. LXX, Vg lack the odd “from” and LXX may attach the *m* to the end of the previous line, making explicit that the heel is “their heel.” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For *’êlāh* LXX implies *’ēlāh* “oak’ (cf. 35:4), but Aq has “deer.” [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The masculine participle takes its gender from the word for the clan rather than from the word for “hind.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. I take *’imrȇ* as not from *’ōmer* “saying” but from the hapax *’immēr* denoting a baby animal such as a lamb (*HALOT*, 67b), though the audience might be reminded of the “sayings” of Baraq and Deborah in Judg 4—5: Baraq was a Naphtalite and maybe Deborah was, too, even though she was working in Ephraim, and Midrash Tehillim on Ps 22 (whose introduction refers to a hind) puts two and two together and infers that she is the hind set free (see W. G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959] 1:297). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. LXX, Vg take *šeper* as an Aramaism meaning “beauty”; I take it as an Ugariticism or Akkadianism meaning “fold” (see S. Gevirtz, “Naphtali in ‘The Blessing of Jacob,’” *JBL* 103 [1984]: 513-21). But the existence of the Aramaic word would add to the paronomasia possibilities suggested by the previous note. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. BDB takes *bēn* as an anomalous construct; JM 96Eb would provide a rationale, though it does not treat this word as an example, and LXX, Vg, Tg take it as absolute. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. LXX, Vg, Tg then take *pōrāt* as a participle from *pārāh* qualifying *bēn* and meaning fruitful, but the form is anomalous and the feminine is odd. More likely *pōrāt* is a noun. If it denotes a fruitful tree, its “daughters” would be its branches, but *bānôt* never elsewhere refers to plants, only to human beings and animals (cf. de Hoop, *Genesis 49*, 184). See further the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The translation reverses the Hebrew word order (“by a spring its daughters”: this colon and the one that follows thus work abca’ rather than abcb’), which in English generates an even more elliptical impression. MT’s accents associate “by its spring” with the preceding words; the line is then a neat 3-3-3 tricolon, but one even harder to construe. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Vg takes the daughters as the subject of the apparently singular verb: see the comments in GK 44m; JM 42f. But if *pōrāt* is a feminine noun (see the earlier note), it can be the subject, which fits regular grammar and makes sense in the context. SP has *ṣ’ry* (“little”) for *ṣ‘dh* and LXX implies something similar (cf. Tal, *Genesis*, 203\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Šûr* can mean a wall and *šûrāh* a row of fruit trees (see BDB, *DTT*), which together suggests a terrace. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. They “embittered him,” not in the sense that they made him feel bitter but that they made his life bitter: cf. *mārar* piel in Exod 1:14 (Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 557). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. LXX implies taking *wārōbû* as from a byform of *rîb* (SP reads a form from that verb) or as trading on the similarity between *rîb* and *rābab* “shoot,” which is much rarer but is signaled by the parallel colon and by v. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Literally, “the arms of his hands.” [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. LXX, Vg have “God of your father,” but “God” is *’ēl* not *’ĕlōhê* and there are no parallels for *’ēl* *’ābîkā* as a construct phrase (none at all for *’ēl* as a construct in Genesis, and not many elsewhere). See comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. “From” carries over from the previous colon (cf. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, on the passage), though the *’et* is odd. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. LXX “of the steadfast mountains” suggests reading *hārê* for *hôray* and linking it with *‘ad* in the next colon (cf. *harărê* in Deut 33:15); either way, it draws attention to a paronomasia between *hôray* *‘ad* and *gib‘ōt‘ôlām*. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. A *nāzîr*: “there is no need to invent the meaning ‘prince’” for the word(G. Meyer, “*nzr*,” in *TDOT* 9:306-11 [308]). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. For the rare *‘ēd*, LXX presupposes *‘ôd* “still.” [↑](#footnote-ref-41)