# On Reading Genesis 49

In response to an earlier version of the paper, the organizers asked me to elaborate the five points about poetry that I make. When I read a shorter version of the paper in Durham, I will thus concentrate on the middle section which makes those points.

2Assemble and listen, sons of Jacob, הִקָּבְצוּ וְשִׁמְעוּ בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב

 listen to Israel your father. וְשִׁמְעוּ אֶל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲבִיכֶם:

3Reuben: you, my firstborn, רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹרִי אַתָּה

 my strength and the initiation of my vigor, כֹּחִי וְרֵאשִׁית אוֹנִי

Excellence in high position  **יֶתֶר שְׂאֵת**

 and excellence in strength. וְיֶתֶר עָז

4Turbulence like water: you are not to excel, פַּחַז כַּמַּיִם אַל תּוֹתַר

because you climbed your father’s big bed. כִּי עָלִיתָ מִשְׁכְּבֵי אָבִיךָ

Thereby you polluted— אָז חִלַּלְתָּ

 one who climbed my couch! יְצוּעִי עָלָה

5Simeon and Levi, brothers, שִׁמְעוֹן וְלֵוִי אַחִים

 their blades tools of violence: כְּלֵי חָמָס מְכֵרֹתֵיהֶם

6In their council my person is not to come, בְּסֹדָם אַל תָּבֹא נַפְשִׁי

 in their congregation my soul is not to join. בִּקְהָלָם אַל תֵּחַד כְּבֹדִי

Because in their anger they killed someone, כִּי בְאַפָּם הָרְגוּ אִישׁ

 in their pleasure they hamstrung an ox. וּבִרְצֹנָם עִקְּרוּ שׁוֹר

7Cursed their anger because it was strong, אָרוּר אַפָּם כִּי עָז

 their outburst because it was tough! וְעֶבְרָתָם כִּי קָשָׁתָה

 I will divide them in Jacob, אֲחַלְּקֵם בְּיַעֲקֹב

 disperse them in Israel. וַאֲפִיצֵם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל

8Judah: you, יְהוּדָה אַתָּה

 your brothers will confess you. יוֹדוּךָ אַחֶיךָ

Your hand on your enemies’ neck, יָדְךָ בְּעֹרֶף אֹיְבֶיךָ

 your father’s sons will bow down to you. יִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לְךָ בְּנֵי אָבִיךָ

9A lion cub, Judah גּוּר אַרְיֵה יְהוּדָה

 (from prey, son, you’ve gone up): מִטֶּרֶף בְּנִי עָלִיתָ

He has bent down, lain, like a lion, כָּרַע רָבַץ כְּאַרְיֵה

 like a cougar – who would rouse him? וּכְלָבִיא מִי יְקִימֶנּוּ:

10The staff will not leave from Judah, לֹא יָסוּר שֵׁבֶט מִיהוּדָה

 the scepter from between his feet, וּמְחֹקֵק מִבֵּין רַגְלָיו

Until there comes tribute to him עַד כִּי יָבֹא שׁילה [שִׁילוֹ קרי]

 and the obedience of the peoples to him. וְלוֹ יִקְּהַת עַמִּים

11Tying his donkey to a vine, אֹסְרִי לַגֶּפֶן עירה [עִירוֹ קרי]

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

He has washed his clothing in wine, כִּבֵּס בַּיַּיִן לְבֻשׁוֹ

 his garment in grape-blood: וּבְדַם עֲנָבִים סותה [סוּתוֹ קרי]

12Darker of eyes than wine, חַכְלִילִי עֵינַיִם מִיָּיִן

 whiter of teeth than milk. וּלְבֶן שִׁנַּיִם מֵחָלָב

13Zebulun: towards the shore of the seas he will dwell, זְבוּלֻן לְחוֹף יַמִּים יִשְׁכֹּן

 towards the shore for ships, him, וְהוּא לְחוֹף אֳנִיּוֹת

 his flank at Sidon. וְיַרְכָתוֹ עַל צִידֹן

14Issachar: a donkey, sturdy, יִשָּׂשכָר חֲמֹר גָּרֶם

 lying among the sheepfolds. רֹבֵץ בֵּין הַמִּשְׁפְּתָיִם

15He has seen a resting place, how good it was, וַיַּרְא מְנֻחָה כִּי טוֹב

 and the region, how beautiful. וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ כִּי נָעֵמָה

But he has bent his shoulder to the burden, וַיֵּט שִׁכְמוֹ לִסְבֹּל

 become a conscript servant. וַיְהִי לְמַס עֹבֵד

16Dan: his people will govern דָּן יָדִין עַמּוֹ

 as one of the clans of Israel. כְּאַחַד שִׁבְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

17May Dan be a snake by the road, יְהִי דָן נָחָשׁ עֲלֵי דֶרֶךְ

 a viper by the path, שְׁפִיפֹן עֲלֵי אֹרַח

One that bites the horse’s heels הַנֹּשֵׁךְ עִקְּבֵי סוּס

 so its rider falls backwards: וַיִּפֹּל רֹכְבוֹ אָחוֹר

 18for your deliverance I have waited, Yhwh. לִישׁוּעָתְךָ קִוִּיתִי יְהוָה

19Gad: an attacker will attack him, גָּד גְּדוּד יְגוּדֶנּוּ

 but he himself will attack their heel. וְהוּא יָגֻד עָקֵב

20From Asher: rich his bread, מֵאָשֵׁר שְׁמֵנָה לַחְמוֹ

 and he, one who will give a king’s delicacies. וְהוּא יִתֵּן מַעֲדַנֵּי מֶלֶךְ

21Naphtali: a hind set free; נַפְתָּלִי אַיָּלָה שְׁלֻחָה

 it gives fawns of the fold. הַנֹּתֵן אִמְרֵי שָׁפֶר

22A son, a wild donkey, Joseph, בֵּן פֹּרָת יוֹסֵף

 a son, a wild donkey: בֵּן פֹּרָת

Its daughters by a spring, עֲלֵי עָיִן בָּנוֹת

 it has stridden by a terrace. צָעֲדָה עֲלֵי שׁוּר

23People made things bitter for him and fought, וַיְמָרֲרֻהוּ וָרֹבּוּ

 archers were hostile towards him. וַיִּשְׂטְמֻהוּ בַּעֲלֵי חִצִּים

24But his bow stayed firm, וַתֵּשֶׁב בְּאֵיתָן קַשְׁתּוֹ

 his arms and his hands were agile, וַיָּפֹזּוּ זְרֹעֵי יָדָיו

From the hands of the Strong Man of Jacob, מִידֵי אֲבִיר יַעֲקֹב

 from there, the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel, מִשָּׁם רֹעֶה אֶבֶן יִשְׂרָאֵל

25From God, your Father, so he will help you, מֵאֵל אָבִיךָ וְיַעְזְרֶךָּ

 and Shadday, so he will bless you, וְאֵת שַׁדַּי וִיבָרְכֶךָּ

With blessings of the heavens above, בִּרְכֹת שָׁמַיִם מֵעָל

 blessings of the deep lying below. בִּרְכֹת תְּהוֹם רֹבֶצֶת תָּחַת

Blessings of the breasts and the womb, בִּרְכֹת שָׁדַיִם וָרָחַם

26your father’s blessings— בִּרְכֹת אָבִיךָ

They have been stronger than the blessings of those who conceived me, גָּבְרוּ עַל בִּרְכֹת הוֹרַי

 beyond the desirable things on the age-long hills. עַד תַּאֲוַת גִּבְעֹת עוֹלָם

They will come on Joseph’s head, תִּהְיֶיןָ לְרֹאשׁ יוֹסֵף

 on the brow of one set apart among his brothers. וּלְקָדְקֹד נְזִיר אֶחָיו

27Benjamin: a wolf who will maul, בִּנְיָמִין זְאֵב יִטְרָף

 in the morning will eat prey, בַּבֹּקֶר יֹאכַל עַד

 and towards the evening will divide spoil.” וְלָעֶרֶב יְחַלֵּק שָׁלָל

Coincidentally and amusingly, some while ago Raymond de Hoop and Jean-Daniel Macchi both published substantial monographs on the Testament of Jacob in the same year.[[1]](#footnote-1) Between them the volumes come to well over a thousand pages. Both were concerned to discuss the many detailed exegetical problems in the poem and also to establish its origin.

On the question of origin they came to quite different conclusions. De Hoop located the key stages in the creation of the chapter in the pre-monarchic and Solomonic period, while Macchi argued systematically for its origin in the Persian period. Both scholars present plausible cases for their conclusions; both are able to do so because they necessarily construct a big picture from a small number of dots. In both cases one is tempted to infer that the critical traditions from which the scholars come play a key role in generating the big picture. That is, the one issues from the mid-twentieth century tradition of dating things in the united monarchy, the other from the late-twentieth century tradition of dating things in the Persian period (it is dispiriting to have to think that our views on critical questions may thus mainly reflect the traditions within which we work, and it makes one wonder what we think we are doing when we undertake this kind of study, and whether we should simply acknowledge that the origin and background of Genesis 49 is a mystery).

Related questions arise from the detailed studies of the sayings within Jacob’s Testament. More than one commentator on Genesis observes ruefully that there is nothing like a scholarly consensus on the interpretation of aspects of the chapter (with no sense of irony over the fact that anyway one generation’s scholarly consensus is the next generation’s out-of- date misconception). A major reason why de Hoop’s study occupies 695 pages is that he seeks to consider all the scholarly suggestions about the detailed interpretation of the chapter. Amusingly, he fails; Gary Rendsburg in his review of the monograph[[2]](#footnote-2) notes two of his own studies that de Hoop doesn’t mention. But how can we make progress in understanding the Testament if there are so many possibilities?

In relation to both questions, the dating one and the exegetical one, we reduce the problem by taking more account of the fact that the Testament of Jacob is a piece of poetry and a piece of rhetoric.

 My translation assumes that the Testament is rhythmic poetry and that it works with the conventions of Hebrew verse in mostly comprising a series of short self-contained sentences that divide into two parts with two or three or four stresses in each part; we could haggle over some of the details as well as over the framework assumption, though I don’t they affect the burden of my paper. I will refer to the parts of a line as cola. The second colon commonly restates the first or complements it or explains a question raised by it or simply completes it. In Genesis 49 there are two or three tricola, and there is also one colon with five stresses, as the Masoretes punctuate it. In the translation I have worked with the Masoretic Text’s punctuation in the sense that I have followed the way it uses maqqephs and thus the way it generates the rhythm in the lines. I’ve resisted the temptation to revise this aspect of its punctuation even though a bit of revision could produce a text that is neater and would thus please me more. While most lines are syntactically self-contained, some involve enjambment, where either a line is syntactically incomplete or it leads into another line that cannot stand on its own.

While the sayings about individual people and about the clans that trace their ancestry back to these individuals all take poetic form, beyond that feature they vary. They differ in how far they focus on the individual and how far they focus on the clan, and they differ in length from two or three cola to eighteen or nineteen. The length of the Judah and Joseph sections coheres with the prominence of these individuals in Genesis 37—50 and with the prominence of these clans in Israel, but for the other sayings there is no evident explanation for the variation in length. Perhaps the variety reflects their being of separate origin among the clans, or perhaps a single poet composed them in their varied forms.

Poetry in the Hebrew Scriptures switches easily between the second person and the third person; in Genesis 49 the switch happens within the Judah and Joseph declarations (the Reuben declaration is second-person, the others are entirely third person). Using the second person means that rhetorically the poetry directly addresses the people named. Using the third person means that it speaks about these people to others who are listening because the declaration has significance for them, and/or it puts the people who are the subjects into the position of seeming to overhear statements that are actually about them. For related reasons Jacob himself can switch between speaking as “I” and referring to himself as “he.”

These rhetorical features relate to a question that intrigues me. Whatever the poem’s date, how do we think it was delivered to people and received by them? It’s less of a question if Genesis and prophetic books came into being through the work of Second Temple scribes working like us in our studies; if their work was then read by anyone else, it was presumably by other scribes or by people studying like students studying Torah in a yeshiva. But if somehow the message of the prophets and the stories in Genesis, for instance, reached ordinary people, how did they reach them?

I assume that in some way written text and oral communication complemented each other. And I infer from the rhythmic nature of Hebrew poetry that the messages were chanted in some way, and I invite my students to imagine prophets like Amos as like rap artists, which helps the imagination in this connection. One of the features of rap is that artists can vary the number of words in a line as long as they keep the rhythm going. The analogy with rap thus helps one to see how prophets could have chanted their messages while varying the length of lines and cola – they just had to keep the rhythm going. Did someone rap Jacob’s Testament?

Simeon and Levi, brothers,

their blades tools of violence:

In their council my person is not to come,

in their congregation my soul is not to join.

Because in their anger they killed someone,

in their pleasure they hamstrung an ox.

Cursed their anger because it was strong,

their outburst because it was tough!

I will divide them in Jacob,

disperse them in Israel.

I have a vivid memory of listening as an undergraduate to Gwynne Henton Davies declaim Isaiah’s song about the vineyard, in his preacherly Welsh Hebrew, and I won’t mind if my students remember my rapping Amos.

What about the many exegetical questions in Genesis 49? I don’t suggest that the appeal to poetry can solve all the questions about them, and specifically not the enigmatic *‘ad kî yābō’ šîlōh*; in the translation I follow what Rashi calls the midrashic interpretation – Rashi himself goes with the Targum in taking the literal interpretation to be a messianic one.

But in connection with the poetic nature of the Testament, I make five comments. And in connection with each of them I note other examples, which come from Jeremiah because I happen to be working on Jeremiah at the moment.

First, poetry may not be syntactically neat; it may be allusive and elliptical. It may not provide grammatical links between phrases and it may thus leave the audience to provide them if it is to understand the lines. That requirement is then one of the ways in which the audience has to involve itself with the message, and it means we should resist the suggestion that we need to tidy the text up and make it easier to read. Thus Jacob’s comments about Reuben, *excellence in high position, excellence in strength*, and then *turbulence like water*, hang loosely onto the description of Reuben that precedes and that follows. In content, the two phrases about excellence belong with what precedes and the phrase about turbulence belongs with what follows, which is the way the Masoretes have divided the verses. Jacob’s point is that despite the excellence of Reuben’s position and his energy, Reuben’s turbulence means he will not *excel* in the future. But in form, the three noun phrases belong together. The form and the meaning thus work against each other. Typically, poetry sucks us into one direction, then discomforts us.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In Jacob’s closing line about Reuben, his curt condemnation refers to Reuben polluting his bed. The plural word for “bed” suggests its size, and the repetition of the verb “climbed” draws further attention to the impressive nature of this bed; normally one lies “down” on a mat on the floor. But within this final line about Reuben, Jacob moves from second person to third person, in a way that doesn’t strictly clash with Hebrew or English grammar but is nevertheless subtle and requires close attentiveness. It does tempt scholars into emending it.

Jeremiah, too, can be elliptical, and in Jeremiah, too, an odd implication of poetry’s elliptical nature is to make one more respectful of the text as it comes down to us, and resistant to the temptation to rewrite it. In connection with some particular elliptical words (8:13), William McKane comments, “since their sense is so suspect, they should be deleted.”[[4]](#footnote-4) My reaction is the opposite: if a line’s sense is difficult, it deserves close attention.

Jeremiah’s declaration about a woman surrounding a man (31:22) is an example. It may be an aphorism, which as such then parallels the elliptical nature of many aphorisms in Proverbs, whose puzzling nature derives in part from our not knowing their context and background. In a study of Ecclesiastes, Elsa Tamez includes a list of Hispanic aphorisms which can seem obscure to someone from a different background, but she has the cultural background that enables her to explain them for the reader.[[5]](#footnote-5) In connection with the Scriptures, attention to the language of elliptical texts against the background of related texts may be illuminating. In the line about a woman surrounding a man, Jeremiah’s reference to Yahweh creating a new thing could properly make one think about the significance of that language in Isa 40 – 55. And Jeremiah’s use of the verb *šābab* could properly make one think of his own use of the verb *šûb*. For the modern student of Jeremiah, reading in light of modern thinking about women and men can produce interesting results in the interpretation of this declaration, though they may not be results that Jeremiah would recognize. Yet perhaps one should recognize that speaking elliptically gives the audience permission to discover things from one’s words that one did not put there. The point parallels the observation that once something is put into writing and is put out there, the author loses control of its meaning. The great advantage of prose is its capacity for precision and clarity, but it thereby sacrifices suggestiveness. The great advantage of poetry is the reverse. How wise of God to inspire both prose and poetry within the Scriptures!

The affect of allusiveness on a poem’s original hearers may be to encourage attention, so that the audience is more deeply affected by the message when it becomes more explicit or direct. In his message about Egypt, Jeremiah begins

Get ready breastplate and shield,

 advance for battle….

Why have I seen –

they are shattered,

they are falling back. (46:3-5)

While the actual scriptural text provides people with an introduction telling them that the poem is about Egypt and that it relates to the imminent battle of Carchemish, Judahites listening to Jeremiah in the temple courtyards might initially have no idea of what it refers to, though they might be aware that a decisive event was imminent and might know that its result would be decisively important for them. Yahweh is then giving them some insight about it. But Jeremiah does not make clear who is commissioning these warriors, whether it is he, or their commander, or Yahweh – though it doesn’t matter too much; the point is the actual commission. Nor does Jeremiah make clear whose warriors are being commissioned or whose warriors are running for their lives – for instance, Babylon’s, or Egypt’s. And which way the listeners understood it would make a difference to their potential response. Some people would be glad to hear of the comeuppance of the Egyptian army and king that had defeated and killed Josiah. On the other hand, it was the Egyptians who had put Jehoiakim on the throne, and official Judahite policy was likely pro-Egyptian, and people who were inclined to see the Egyptians as potential allies and supporters would not welcome the idea of an Egyptian defeat. So the message works with the allusiveness that often characterizes prophecy when it expresses itself in poetry. And it makes people listen and requires them to listen on if they are to get the point. The exhortation compares with some other exhortations to Judah itself ()4:5-6; 6:1-6, which are ironic in a different direction as they urge Judah to prepare to be attacked.

Second, that same line about Reuben from which we started illustrates how Hebrew poetry likes anaphora, which is a posh way of saying it likes repetition. A suspicion of repetition can generate suggestions about emending the biblical text, like a suspicion of ellipsis, but the suspicion is again inappropriate. Anaphora can be a means of heightening impact. *Excellence* in high position and *excellence* in strength, Jacob exclaims about Reuben, and he then goes on that Reuben is not to *excel*, which adds to the devastating implications of his statement. “You would have been worthy of the birthright, the dignity of the priesthood and the kingship,” Pseudo-Jonathan comments. “But because you sinned, my son, the birthright was given to Joseph, the kingship to Judah, and the priesthood to Levi.” The repetition adds to the impact.

A famous example in Jeremiah:

I looked at the earth, and here empty and void;

 and to the heavens, and their light was not there.

I looked at the mountains, and here, shaking;

 and all the hills rocked.

I looked, and here, humanity was not there,

 and every bird in the heavens – they had flown. (4:23-25)

There was no need to repeat the verb *I looked*, but the effect is to keep taking us inside the experience of Jeremiah’s looking and to imagine what he is imagining. The repetition makes it harder for us to be distanced from the scene that Jeremiah portrays.

Third, Hebrew poetry can be sophisticated in its use of paronomasia. In Jacob’s address, Judah, *Yәhûdâ*, is one whom his brothers will confess or recognize or praise, *yādâ*. Dan will govern, *dîn*. Gad will be the victim and the initiator of attack, *gādad* or *gûd*. Paronomasia opens the poet’s eyes and opens the audience’s eyes to things that we might otherwise not see or to links that we would otherwise not make. Judah’s brothers do in due courses recognize him, by recognizing David. Dan had seemed to lose out in the allocation of land to the clans, but in the end he triumphs. Gad, too, has a hard time with the vulnerability of its land east of the Jordan.

Jeremiah is fond of a particular form of paronomasia that uses an idiom whereby one combines the infinitive form of a verb with its finite form and thus emphasizes the actuality of what the expression refers to. But on several occasions he combines the infinitive of one verb with the finite form of a different but similar verb; commentators are then again sometimes inclined to “correct” his formulations. “I will gather and finish them off,” he says (8:13), *’āsōp ’ăsîpēm*; more literally, “in gathering, I will finish them off.” Gathering is an appropriate image in the context, because he goes on to talk about grapes and figs. But gathering is often a sinister metaphor, for death, and thus it links neatly with the verb that suggests bringing about the end of something.

Fourth, Hebrew poetry likes to play with double meanings. So is *turbulence* a critique of Reuben, as the Septuagint suggests, or is it a warning about Reuben’s fate, as the Vulgate and the Targums suggest? Maybe it’s both. In the saying about Simeon and Levi, perhaps something similar applies to the word that I translate *blades*.For this word the Sheffield Dictionary notes four possible alternative meanings: counsel, weapon, staff, and beguilement. If the word could be understood as having any of these meanings, they would not be inappropriate.

The beginning of the Reuben verses note that Reuben inherited an abundance of energy and forcefulness from Jacob because he was Jacob’s firstborn; he is thus the first fruit of his father’s manly strength, *rē’šît ’ônî*. And one could half-expect a first child to be full of such dynamism and vitality, but there are also temptations attaching to the position of number one, and Reuben fell for them. In light of what follows, one might imagine Jacob also being aware of the other possible meaning of *rē’šît ’ônî*, “the initiation of my trouble” (Vg, Aq Sym).

Jeremiah promises,

The waywardness of Israel will be looked for, but there will be none,

 and the wrongdoings of Judah, but they will not be found,

 because I will pardon whomever I let remain. (50:20)

Does Jeremiah mean there is no waywardness to be found because all waywardness will be pardoned? Or is the promise that no waywardness will be manifested, as a result of the creative potential of being pardoned and restored?

A recurrent example from Jeremiah comes when he comments on the way Judah’s lifestyle is bringing disaster upon it, and adds,

This is your *rā‘â*, because it’s *mār*,

 because it has reached right to your heart. (4:18)

The word *rā‘â* usefully has the ambiguity of the English word *bad*; there is a neat play on this ambiguity in the question why bad things happen to good people. *Rā‘â* covers both the bad things that people do and the bad things that happen to people, and it points to the insight that often the bad things that we do issue in bad things happening to us. The Tanak recognizes that life doesn’t always work out that way, but often it does, and Jeremiah sees this dynamic in Judah in his time. In the comment I quoted, is Jeremiah talking about the people’s bad life or their bad fate? The effect of his language is to make them think about that question and about the implications of the two sides to the meaning of *rā‘â*. His words play on the link between dire behavior or nature and dire trouble – perhaps because he treats direness as one thing, and can move between behavior and fate as aspects of the one thing. The ambiguous nature of his words is heightened by the description of the *rā‘â* as *mār*, as bitterness or as something bitter. There is one other passage where Jeremiah uses the word *mār*, in 2:19, again in association with *ra‘*. Like *ra‘*,bitterness can be a description of the harshness and toughness of wrongdoers or of the harshness or toughness of what happens to them as a result of their wrongdoing. Yet further, in the comment I quoted, Jeremiah has just referred to the rebelliousness that’s expressed in Judah’s wrongdoing, and *rebel* is the verb *mārâ*. Rebellion is bitter in its execution and bitter in its results for the rebel. For Judah, it is so in the way it has *reached right into your heart* or your mind. Is there something dire and bitter about the very heart of Judah’s life? Or is there something dire and bitter about the way the results of its wrongdoing reach the very heart of its life? It would be less confusing for Western readers to think of the dire trouble as being bitter and of the dire behavior or nature as reaching as far as the mind or heart, but Jeremiah does not encourage this distinction. The nature and life of Jerusalem has found its organic outworking in the calamity that has come to it. Actions simply issue in consequences, which are aspects of the same reality.

In Jacob’s Testament, the most complex double meaning comes in the Joseph blessing. This example also takes me, fifthly, into the fact that poetry likes metaphor – indeed, arguably it’s the key feature that distinguishes poetry from rhythmic prose. In Jeremiah, I am inclined to see more of the text as poetry than other interpreters do, but I acknowledge that this distinction between poetry and rhythmic prose is tricky to make. It seems likely that the distinction is sharper in our minds than it was in (say) Jeremiah’s, and that part of our problem is the need to decide how to lay out a written, printed text.

Jeremiah’s poetry makes extensive use of metaphor and simile. It is a major way in which he does his thinking, not just his communicating. Arguably, it is necessarily so. There are few things one can say literally about God and his relationship with us; we are bound to use metaphor in this connection. Metaphor does more than add to the impact of an idea. It makes ideas possible. It makes it possible to think and see things, and it then it makes it possible to communicate them. Metaphor makes it possible to speak about things that we could not otherwise speak of; it also makes it possible to say more about things that we could otherwise speak of, as we speak of one thing we know in terms of another thing that we know. When poetry uses an image, it encourages the listener to reflect on the imagery. It opens up possibilities. Words in prose are more inclined to have tight, defined meaning. Words in poetry are more open.

Jeremiah compares with Hosea in the extravagant profusion of his metaphorical thinking and language.

* God is king, and in different ways both the world and Israel are the people he governs. People must bow down before him. He has a cabinet. He sends messengers. He is commander-in-chief and sends his (heavenly and earthly) armies to bring trouble to rebels. He exercises authority. He makes pacts. He may listen to intercession.
* God is guide. He points out the path for people to walk. They must go after him rather than go after other guides (gods)
* God is master. People must serve him and not other masters.
* God is builder, but also destroyer.
* God is shepherd. He provides.
* God is father. He begets children. He adopts children. Israel belongs to his household. He passes on a domain.
* God is husband. He marries a wife. He commits himself to faithfulness and expects faithfulness. He is lord. He is jealous and he objects to his wife whoring and committing adultery. He divorces.
* God is teacher. He expects attentiveness and obedience.
* God is farmer. He plants vines, olives, and figs. He looks for fruit. He plants trees and fells them. He irrigates or withholds irrigation. He controls access to his garden and resents its invasion and attack. But he can devastate it if it fails to produce fruit. He has a farmhand.

In Jacob’s Testament, the first line about Joseph repeats itself, as the Reuben verses do. The repetition gives the audience chance to absorb the intriguing description of Joseph as a son who is *pōrāt*. The Septuagint and the Vulgate and the Targums take *pōrāt* as a participle from *pārâ* that qualifies *bēn* and means fruitful, but the form is anomalous and the feminine is odd. Which makes one wonder if the word is a noun. But *pōrāt* might also make you think of Ephraim. Back in Genesis 41 when Ephraim was born, Joseph already linked his name with the verb *pārâ*: it suggested fruitfulness. Directly or overtly, then, Jacob speaks here of Joseph, but (as Luther put it) Ephraim is hiding between the formulation of his words.[[6]](#footnote-6)

When Jacob then comes to talk about Joseph’s “daughters,” BDB takes the “daughters” to be the branches of that fruitful tree, but *bānôt* never elsewhere refers to plants, only to animate beings. So “daughters” might make people think again about that word *pōrāt* and remember that a *pere’* is a wild donkey, so that a *pōrāt* could be a wild she-donkey who would naturally have daughters. The Joseph clan is a female donkey, then – which is evidently not an insult, not least because donkeys are really important; they are the equivalent of a pick-up truck. And this understanding fits the animal imagery that’s used to characterize many of the clans. The metaphor of daughters might then refer to the villages in Joseph’s territory; they would be equivalent to Judah’s daughters, which appear elsewhere. But within the poem, as young donkeys, they suggest that Joseph (especially in the person of Ephraim) has the energy and agility that ranges free by springs and by the walled terraces that stretch along mountain slopes.

I apologize that outlining those possibilities is complicated and hard to assimilate when it’s presented orally, though in a way that problem is useful because it links with another question that intrigues me. How does one think about the communication of Hebrew poetry with its subtlety, ambiguity, ellipsis, and paronomasia? Whenonelistens to a poem for the first time, one may “get” aspects of it, but one will get more when one hears it again and then again; the same dynamic will apply to reading it by oneself. Did Israelite prophets and poets – or scribes – hope that people would have their words ringing in their heads as they went away and that they might see more of their implications as the words stayed with them? Or did they assume that they themselves would deliver their poems on a number of occasions, so that people might pick up more the second and third time?

In this Testament “Father Jacob” introduces himself as a teacher instructing his sons and laying out the fruit of his insight for them. He thus parallels “Father Solomon” in Proverbs 1—9, who also speaks as a teacher laying out his insight for his sons. The actual authors of these poems hide discretely behind Jacob and Solomon; they draw attention away from themselves and seek to enhance the impact of their teaching by inviting their audiences to collude with them in imagining it on the lips of these key figures. The fact that both teachers speak in poetry makes for some memorability and allows the average line to look at its subject from two angles and to sustain interest. But Solomon’s poetry in Proverbs 1 – 9 works by being simple and univocal. There may be double meanings (the strange woman may be an allegorical figure) but the surface meaning is clear and important. Jacob’s poetry is denser, and it thrives on being equivocal. While Jacob does speak as a father-teacher, in the opening verse of the chapter he announces that he is going to declare what is to happen in days to come, which makes him sound more like a prophet, and prophets often do speak in dense and puzzling ways.

Jacob is as much like Jeremiah as like Solomon. Jeremiah is more puzzling than (say) Amos, he likes paronomasia and ellipse and ambiguity as Jacob does, and he likes animal imagery as Jacob does. I have assumed that some of the impasse over Jacob’s poetry (as over aspects of Jeremiah) derives from the assumption that Jacob surely spoke univocally. And there are advantages in being easy to understand. But it is also possible to make things too easy for people, with the result that they get it at one level but at another level fail to get it, and sometimes the necessity of working hard to understand ultimately helps understanding. When Jacob is difficult to understand, the answer may be to work with the puzzles and the ambiguities rather than seeking to eliminate them. I don’t see why both subtle, elusive poetry and straightforward, plain poetry shouldn’t have been directed at the same people at the same time, as we ourselves may profit from being addressed plainly and univocally, and also elusively and puzzlingly. The Jeremiah scroll alternates between the univocal and the allusive, whether or not Jeremiah himself was responsible for both.

If Jacob’s poetic rhetoric was designed to get some convictions home to people, what were those convictions? If we seek to express the implications of his Testament in prosaic terms, what results? If we can’t know what period it comes from, does the poem itself indicate what it might be designed to do for Israel in *any* of the possible periods? One might say that the question underlying the Testament is, how should Israel think of the situation and experience of the twelve clans? The Testament mediates between the persons of the twelve sons and the destiny of the clans that will grow from them. It implies that their destiny relates sometimes to the action of their ancestors, though also sometimes to aspects of their political situation, and sometimes to factors in their geographical position. Genesis has referred to the actions or experiences of Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Joseph, and Judah. Their actions or experiences are the main background to Jacob’s declarations about the first three brothers, and they are part of the background in connection with Judah and Joseph. For the six brothers who come between Judah and Joseph, Jacob’s declarations relate to the geographical and/or political positions of the clans that will issue from them; it’s also the other consideration that applies to Joseph. For Benjamin the declaration relates to his clan’s later action, though this consideration also applies to Judah.

One way or another, the Testament thus provides some account of the way:

* Reuben fails to have the prominence that one would expect.
* Simeon and Levi disappear geographically from the number of the clans.
* Judah provides Israel with its leadership.
* Zebulun’s territory lies between the two seas.
* Issachar has fine territory in Jezreel but has to submit to the Canaanites there.
* Dan has to fight for territory in the southwest and then in the north.
* Gad has to defend itself from its rivals for territory east of the Jordan.
* Asher has rich country on the northwest coast.
* Naphtali has broad rolling pastures to the north.
* Joseph thrives in a way that manifests the persistence its ancestor showed.
* Benjamin is especially violent, though the comparison with a wolf needn’t be pejorative

Genesis 49 is a highpoint in Genesis, and Genesis as a whole does not simply transcribe events but tells stories that have varying relationships to actual events. One might compare Genesis 49 with Genesis 1, which gives us no information on the literal, concrete process whereby God brought the world into being but does give us information on what God was doing, in bringing the world into being. Or one might compare Genesis 49 with Daniel 11, which expresses itself as talk about the future but is nearly all talk about the past; giving an account of the past in the form of prophecy makes clear that the sequence of events was under God’s control. Much of Genesis 49 reflects the actual experience of the twelve clans, which is projected back into Jacob’s awareness to express how it was not chance but part of a bigger picture, part of a coherent broader story that goes back to the ancestor who gave Israel its name. In Genesis, it was no ordinary human being who passed on what seemed to be revelations from God. It was Israel’s original father figure. Further, while some of Jacob’s words are statements, sometimes he expresses his own commitment or prayers or hopes; and prophecy regularly presupposes the assumption that what actually happens will depend on an interaction between God’s declarations of intent and people’s response to them.

In this connection, what Jacob had to say to each clan was significant for all the clans.

* Reuben needed to learn that one act whereby he grossly flouted society’s proper values in the realm of family and sex could have disastrous results for his clan. The same applied to Simeon and Levi in the realm of violence. (Outside the framework of the Testament, Levi found that God could use its violence and make Levi his servant.) The other clans might be wise to learn from Simeon and Levi’s story.
* The clans as a whole would properly acknowledge Judah for the achievements that stemmed from its violence, and for its marvelous flourishing, and so would the peoples who submitted to Judah. Outside the framework of the Testament, they did submit, in David’s day, though Judah’s hegemony and flourishing did not last, so that for a later audience Jacob’s words would raise the question whether that hegemony and flourishing would return—as prophets said they would.
* There is an overlapping point to be made about Joseph. Joseph the man has already had to deal with hostility but has survived and triumphed through his firmness and agility and the support and blessing of God, which will also issue in blessing in the future that parallels Judah’s. And again, outside the framework of the Testament, they did issue in blessing in the flourishing of the northern kingdom, though this blessing, too, did not last—but prophets again said that it would return.
* Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Asher, Naphtali, and Benjamin would have futures which involved an interaction between their geographical position with its blessings, their political position with its threats, and their personal qualities with their potentials. The lines about these clans include the ones that look least directly relevant to the other clans, but the truth that this fact hints at is that the life and the fate, the blessings and the sufferings, of each clan matter to all the clans. They are a family.

The inclusion of Jacob’s Testament in the Torah implies that it continued to be significant for the people of God. It is indeed a high point in Genesis, a climax to the book, a sometimes enigmatic poem that is animated and vibrant, thought-provoking and suggestive, significant and challenging.

1. R. de Hoop, *Genesis 49* (Leiden: Brill 1999); J.-D. Macchi, *Israël et ses tribus selon Genèse 49* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Journal of Semitic Studies* 47 (2002): 138-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kathleen Scott Goldingay, in a comment on a draft of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (2 vols; reprinted London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 1:189. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *When Horizons Close* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 146-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Lectures on Genesis 45—50* (St Louis: Concordia, 1966), 295. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)