A History of Interpretation of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33

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Controversy over Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 arose mostly during the past century. Previously these two chapters were unanimously understood as the words of Jacob and Moses, respectively. Today that is the case only among conservative scholars.

The rise of critical scholarship in the 19th century led to a reinterpretation that is accepted today by most critical scholars.[1] Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 are thought to contain individual sayings, written at different times and places by different authors. The sayings originally circulated in oral form as folk literature and were then gathered in collections. "We may assume," write Cross and Freedman, "that groups of blessings, ascribed to Jacob and Moses, and perhaps others, circulated orally in the period of the Judges."[2]

The first doubt that Genesis 49 was spoken by Jacob was raised in 1788 by Hasse.[3] Two years later Heinrichs published the first thorough investigation of this subject.[4]

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[1] For the history of interpretation until 1965, this writer is indebted in part to H. J. Zobel, *Stammesspruch und Geschichte: Die Angaben der Stammessprache van Gen 49, Dtn 33 und Jdc 5 uber die politischen rind kultischen Zustande im damaligen "Israel"* (Berlin: A. Topelmann, 1965), pp. 1-3.

[2] Frank M. Cross and David Noel Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1950), p. 77, n. 1.

[3] Johann Gottfried Hasse, "Neue Uebersetzung des Abschieds-gesangs Jakobs, 1 Mos. XLIX," *Magazin fur die biblisch-orientalische Litteratur und gesammte Philologie* (1788), pp. 5-16.

[4] Johann Heinrich Heinrichs, *De audore atque aetate capitis Geneseos XLIX com-*

In the 19th century critical scholars unanimously agreed, mainly
through the work of Graf and Kohler, that both chapters were
vaticinia ex eventu, prophecies after the fact. In 1857 Graf pub-
lished his study of Deuteronomy 33,[5] and Kohler's study of Genesis 49
came 10 years later.[6] At that time, however, the two chapters were
considered unified compositions, each from a single author.

Collections of Oracles

After the beginning of the 20th century, the chapters came to be
considered collections of oracles that had first circulated indepen-
dently. Two early voices presaged this development. Renan men-
tioned the idea that Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 were not unified
passages.[7] Land also understood Genesis 49 as a collection of oracles.[8]
Gressmann further developed this perception shortly after the turn
of the century. His assertions led to the interpretation of each pas-
sage in the two chapters individually.[9]

Critical scholars today generally consider that there is no liter-
ary unity in the chapters, nor is there any certain historical occasion
when the sayings were collected. Pfeiffer suggests that Genesis 49
was inserted into Genesis by a redactor in the sixth or fifth century, a
decision he apparently based on the allegedly late phrase in verse 1,
"in days to come."[10] Noth writes that "the Blessing of Jacob and the
Blessing of Moses probably are not part of the Pentateuchal narra-
tive but are special pieces which were inserted quite late."[11] Some
scholars think that some of the sayings in their original form are

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mentatio (Gottingen: I. D. G. Brose, 1790).

[5] Karl Heinrich Graf, *Der Segen Mose's (Deuteronomium c. XXXIII) erklart*
(Leipzig. Dyk,1857).

[6] K. Kohler, *Der Segen Jakob's mit besonderer Berucksichtigung der alten Version en
und des Midrasch historischkritisch untersucht und erklurt: Ein Beitrag zur
Geschichte des hebraischen Alterthums wie zur Geschichte der Exegese* (Berlin: J.
Benzian, 1867).

[7] Ernest Renan, *Histoire generale et Systeme compare des Langues Semitiques*
(Paris: Imprimerie imperiale, 1855), p.112.

[8] J. P. N. Land, *Disputatio de carmine Jacobi Gen. XLIX* (Leiden: J. Hazenberg,
1858).

[9] Hugo Gressmann, "Die Anfange Israels (Von 2. Mose bis Richter und Ruth) uber-
setzt, erklart und mit Einleitung versehen," in *Die Schriften des Altes Testaments*
(Gottingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1914).

[10] Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row,
1941), p. 277.

[11] Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Pren-
tice-Hall, 1972), p.185, n. 518; see also p. 18, n. 54.

from the early period of the Judges, others as late as the time of David or Solomon or later, but all of them are considered to be *vaticina ex eventu.*

None of the sayings is assigned to any of the major literary sources of the Pentateuch, though Genesis 49 used to be assigned to J because of its antiquity and Deuteronomy 33 to E. In 1898 Holzinger was the first to reject the identification of the collector of Genesis 49 with one of the familiar literary sources.[12] Noth comments about Genesis 49, "To attribute it to J . . . cannot be proven literarily any better than the assignment of the 'blessing of Moses' to E. It survives as special material."[13]

According to Kittel, J is still considered by some to be the collector of the sayings in Genesis 49, perhaps the one who wrote verse 2.[14] Verses 1b and 28a are also generally considered to be editorial. If J wrote verse 2, then the Yahwistic redactor wrote verses 1b and 28a, as Gunkel suggested, when he incorporated the entire chapter into the narrative of P.[15] P ends at verse la and begins at "and this is what," or at "blessing each one," or, according to Noth, at verse 29.[16]

Kittel thinks the collector is unknown, apparently since the order of the tribes seems to be much older than J, and he thinks J only inserted the chapter into its present place.[17] Von Rad concurs.[18] Speiser thinks of J as the collector and inserter.[19] Since insertion of the sayings into Genesis is often attributed to J, the chapter is generally considered to have taken final shape in the 10th century B.C.

Whereas Genesis 49 is commonly considered to reflect a southern point of view and is therefore often thought to have been edited, collected, and or inserted by J, Deuteronomy 33 is considered to demonstrate a northern point of view.[20] For example in Deuteronomy 33 Ephraim is the royal tribe, and in verse 7 the return of Judah is

[12] H. Holzinger, *Genesis*, Kurzer Handkommentar (Freiburg, 1898), p. 264.

[13] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions,* p. 18, n. 54.

[14] Hans-Joachim Kittel, "Die Stammesspriiche Israels; Genesis 49 und Deuteronomium 33, traditionsgeschichtlich" (Berlin: Diss. theol., Kirchl. Hochschule, 1959), pp. 1, 39.

[15] Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, 5th ed. (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1922), p.478.

[16] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, p. 14.

[17] Kittel, "Die Stammesspruche Israels," p. 133.

[18] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), p. 421.

[19] E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1964), p. 371.

[20] C. J. Labuschagne, "The Tribes in the Blessing of Moses," *Old Testament Studies* 19 (1974): 98.

wished for,[21] though both of these conclusions have been challenged by critical scholars.

Eissfeldt writes that Deuteronomy 33 clearly divides into two parts: the psalmlike hymn in verses 2-5, 26-29 and the collection of sayings in verses 1, 6-25.[22] More recent critical research considers the psalmlike framework to be of independent origin,[23] though some disagree and others have expressed caution.[24] Kittel thinks the Deuteronomist may have written verse 1 and the superscriptions, revising many of the texts in order to express his theology.[25]

Some have characterized the chapter as a poem, rather than a collection of tribal sayings,[26] comparing it with a hymn of war such as Judges 5.[27] Most admit that there are many archaic grammatical and linguistic features, giving the impression of a great age. Most critics, however, consider that these features are deliberate throwbacks to an earlier period.

The Context of the Chapters

Critical scholars generally consider both chapters to be unrelated to the surrounding chapters, a factor that suggests their later insertion into the text. For example Brueggemann thinks there is no evident connection between Genesis 49 and the context of 48:1-50:14, the materials dealing with the death of Jacob. It was simply customary to insert a blessing in the narrative at the death of a great leader.[28] Noth agrees.[29] Deuteronomy 33 is said to have been inserted into the Book of Deuteronomy sometime in the seventh century.[30]

However, Labuschagne writes convincingly for taking Deuteronomy 31:1-33:29 as "one coherent composition on the theme: the final

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[21] C. Steuemagel, *Deuteronomium und Josua* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1900), p. 123.

[22] Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 227.

[23] Kittel, "Die Stammesspriiche Israels," p. 1.

[24] Labuschagne, "The Tribes in the Blessing of Moses," p. 98; G. von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p. 208.

[25] Kittel, "Die Stammesspriiche Israels," p. 132.

[26] E.g., Labuschagne, "The Tribes in the Blessing of Moses," p. 98.

[27] J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), p. 305.

[28] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 365.

[29] Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, p. 209, n. 564.

[30] Kittel, "Die Stammesspriiche Israels," p. 133.

arrangements made by Moses before his death."[31] He thinks that
Deuteronomy 33 is part of a section that deals with three themes: the
death of Moses and his succession by Joshua, the law as Moses' le-
gacy, and Deuteronomy 33 as Moses' final charge.[32] Correspondingly
the record of Jacob's words at his deathbed unites Genesis 48-50.

The Purpose of the Chapters

THE PURPOSE OF GENESIS 49

In the traditional view, the opening verse of Genesis 49 states
Jacob's purpose: "so that I may tell you what will befall you in the
days to come." However, Westermann claims with insufficient war-
rant that this statement can refer only to verses 10-12 and possibly
verse 26b and that the opening verse reflects the understanding of an
editor at some later time.[33] Kittel states that the sayings, other
than verses 10-12, refer to events of the past or present and that the
sayings are therefore *vaticinia ex eventu*, not prophecy.[34]
The traditional view is represented by Stigers, who calls the
chapter a treatise on the future lives of the tribes as an outgrowth of
the present character of each son. The animal comparison is well
suited as a predictive device, based on the character of the individ-
ual son. Jacob predicted how things would turn out for each of his
sons and their descendants, should they continue to display the
character they had displayed thus far.[35] Leupold concurs, calling
the chapter a "purely ideal portraiture of the peculiarities of the
different tribes." In addition, however, the sayings predict various
aspects of the occupation of Canaan in general terms.[36] Keil and
Delitzsch speak of two factors--the character of the sons and the
land of Canaan--tying the latter to God's promise to Abraham,
Isaac, and Jacob. The element of blessing is noted in the closing verse,
in which Moses wrote, "This is what their father said to them when
he blessed them. He blessed them, everyone with the blessing ap-

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[31] Labuschagne, "The Tribes in the Blessing of Moses," p. 97.

[32] C. J. Labuschagne, "The Song of Moses: Its Framework and Structure," *De Fructu
Oris Sui*, ed. I. H. Eybers et al. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), pp. 91-92.

[33] Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, 3 vols. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1974),
1:278.

[34] Kittel, "Die Stammesspriiche Israels," p. 115.

[35] Harold G. Stigers, *A Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publish-
ing House, 1976), p. 325.

[36] H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House;
1942), 2:1164.

propriate to him."[37] In view of the presence of Jacob and the many
references in Genesis 49 to the land of Canaan, this chapter is best
seen as both prophecy and blessing to sustain Israel's faith during
the years in Egypt.

      The major objection to viewing the chapter as a blessing is the
mild rebuke in verses 14-15 and the two severe rebukes in verses 3-4
and 5-7. Praise and rebuke are said to alternate randomly, because
the independent sayings were gathered together into no particular
order. This objection leads many to prefer another title for the chap-
ter, "The Testament of Jacob," rather than "The Blessing of Jacob"
(and correspondingly, "The Testament of Moses," for Deut. 33).[38]
However, while most think of Genesis 49:14-15 as a mild rebuke,
that view has been challenged, most recently by this author.[39] Gene-
sis 49 can be seen as arranged by the speaker to set forth two initial
rebukes, one of Reuben and one of Simeon and Levi, followed by words
of praise for the rest of the sons.

      Westermann thinks that the rebukes are the result of the later
editing of the chapter, which resulted in prophetic language of
judgment being incorporated into verses 3-4 and 5-7, as well as pious
marginal additions at verses 6ab and 18. This language would have
the purpose of rejecting dependence on man's strength and recognizing
that help comes from Yahweh alone.[40] Kittel agrees, seeing the
chapter as a section that fits the priestly theology of salvation. It
was incorporated here to show that the history of Yahweh with His
people was the history of the salvation of Israel.[41]

      While Genesis 49 itself does not speak of the sojourn in Egypt, its
placement at this point in the story of Israel has a significant pur-
pose. Kittel calls the Joseph history the connecting link between two
themes, the promise to the patriarchs and the Exodus from Egypt.[42]
He correctly feels that the chapter bridges the gap between the 12
sons and the 12 tribes. It answers the question, How did the tribes
come from the sons?[43] Westermann agrees but says that the purpose

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[37] C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 3 vols., Commentary on the Old Tes-
tament in Ten Volumes (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., n.d.), 1:389.

    [38] Robert Davidson, *Genesis 12-50*, Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cam-
bridge University Press, 1979), p. 301.

    [39] Joel D. Heck, "Issachar: Slave or Freeman? (Gen 49:14-15)," *Journal of the Evan-
gelical Theological Society* 29 (1986): 385-96.

    [40] Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 278.

    [41] Kittel, "Die Stammesspriiche Israels," p. 115.

    [42] Ibid., p. 120.

    [43] Ibid., p. 125.

of Genesis 49 in the narrative is also political. The chapter is designed to present the tribes as unified from ancient times, not some loosely connected amphictyony. The sayings were inserted into the narrative at the time when the tribes were organizing themselves into a united nation, and the chapter was collected in order to substantiate that organization.[44] Or, as Brueggemann writes, the chapter "intends to be political propaganda to advance some tribal claims at the expense of others,"[45] thereby unifying the tribes under certain leadership.

In short, critical scholars see the purpose as encouraging trust in Yahweh at an important juncture in Israel's history by praising some tribes and blaming others. This, they feel, was politically motivated, since Israel needed to become unified by worship of Yahweh.

THE PURPOSE OF DEUTERONOMY 33

Westermann describes Genesis 49 as profane, while he thinks that Deuteronomy 33 is strongly theologized, which points to the conversion of the latter chapter into a cultic function.[46] The more religious tone of Deuteronomy 33 is reflected in the prayer language and the use of the name of Yahweh.[47] It also affects critical views of the purpose of the chapter, particularly those views that speak of cultic use of the chapter and political motivation for the chapter. All scholars hear the religious tone of Deuteronomy 33, but they disagree as to its significance.

The purpose of the chapter is well expressed by Driver: "The aim. . . was 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."[48]

Similarly, Labuschagne calls the chapter a hymn celebrating God's guidance surrounding a collection of sayings about the tribes, stating the position of the tribes in the land Yahweh gave them.[49] The guidance of God in the past (vv. 2-5) and His kingship in the present (vv. 5, 26-29) are certainly celebrated in this chapter, a fact that speaks for a later cultic use.

Since Deuteronomy 33, according to most critics, contains both

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[44] Westermann, *Genesis*, pp. 277-78.

[45] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 365.

[46] Westermann, *Genesis*, pp. 250-51.

[47] Von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, p. 208.

[48] S. R. Driver, *Deuteronomy*, 3d ed., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), pp. 388-89.

[49] Labuschagne, "The Tribes in the Blessing of Moses," p. 98.

praise and blame, and since Genesis 49 differs from Deuteronomy 33 as to who is praised and blamed, some critics see both chapters as politically motivated. Genesis 49 seeks to advance Judah by praising him, while Deuteronomy 33 seeks to advance the Joseph tribes by praising them.[50]

However, all the blessings in this chapter are positive, in part because none of the rebukes present in Genesis 49 have a counterpart in Deuteronomy 33. While the oracle about Reuben and the absence of any mention of Simeon are considered by some to be rebukes, that view is not shared by all. Kittel correctly sees the chapter as a transition from Deuteronomy to Joshua, because the Book of Joshua tells the story of the conquest of the 12 tribes.[51]

According to the traditional view, Deuteronomy 33 is cast in a style reminiscent of the final words of Jacob because Moses is now the leader of Israel and a patriarchal figure. Deuteronomy 33 is a final attempt to impress on Israel the importance of seeking Yahweh's guidance and depending on His strength, as Israel prepares to conquer Canaan. The chapter is cast like Genesis 49 in order to connect the present circumstances with the promise to Jacob of a land. God has kept His promise.

Deuteronomy 33 is entirely a blessing, an expressed wish for success and prosperity, with a possible predictive element only in verse 19, a verse that is textually problematic. The animal comparisons (vv. 17, 20, 22) express the character of three tribes very positively, suggesting that the tribes continue to develop the characteristics of those animals.[52]

The Sitz im Leben of the Chapters

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

The setting, or *Sitz im Leben*, in which the sayings in Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 arose has been a matter of much debate. Jeremias was the first to suggest an original association with the signs of the zodiac,[53] and Zimmern was its staunchest defender.[54] However, Cross and Freedman convincingly rejected this theory:

> Zimmern's speculations about the different tribes and their zodiacal associations are ingenious but entirely unacceptable. It is quite certain

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[50] E.g., ibid., and Steuemagel, *Deuteronomium und Josua*, p. 123.

[51] Kittel, "Die Stammesspruche Israels," pp. 131-33.

[52] Keil and Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, p. 493.

[53] Alfred Jeremias, *Das Alte Testament im Lichte des Alten Orients*, 2d ed. (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1906), pp. 395-400.

[54] H. Zimmem, "Der Jakobssegen und der Tierkreis," *Zeitschrift fur Assyriologie* 7

that the zodiac did not appear in developed form until the Persian period. Even if a few of the elements which were later incorporated into the zodiacal system were known in earlier times, none of the parallels between the signs of the zodiac and the designations of the tribes is at all convincing.[55]

Gunneweg claims that word plays and animal comparisons underlie most of the tribal sayings of Genesis 49 and many of the sayings in Deuteronomy 33.[56] He concludes that the *Sitz im Leben* of both chapters is the celebration of the theophany of Yahweh by the amphictyony. Deuteronomy 33:2-5, 26-29 describes the theophany of Yahweh at Sinai, and the tribes described themselves just as Yahweh did at Sinai. The chapters are human reflections of the God who revealed Himself at Sinai.[57] The correctness of Gunneweg's hypothesis depends in part on the amphictyonic hypothesis, a view not-accepted by many scholars, but a discussion of those issues is outside the scope of this article.

Animal comparisons and word plays are key ingredients in Genesis 49, whereas Deuteronomy 33 displays no word plays (unless some doubtful conjectures are accepted) and only three animal comparisons. Westermann's view that word plays and animal comparisons are evidence of antiquity would suggest the priority in time of Genesis 49 and the appropriateness of the traditional view of the setting of the chapter.[58]

In Genesis 49 there are wordplays in verses 3-4 (preeminent, not be preeminent), 8 (Judah, praise, hand), 13 (probably a play on the root of "Zebulun"), 14-15 (Issachar, man who works), 16 (Dan, judge), 19 (raiders, raid, "the Raider," raid), 20 (probable: Asher, "the Happy One"), 21 (very unlikely: Akkadian *saparru*, "goat"), 22 (unlikely: Ephrath, פֹּרָת, "fruit-tree"). Gunneweg suggests some unlikely word plays in Deuteronomy 33 at verses 7 (Judah, hand), 12 (Benjamin, between), 18 (Zebulun, tents, houses; based on an emendation), and 24 (Asher, "the Happy One," only possible wordplay).[59]

Genesis 49 has animal comparisons in verses 9 (lion), 14-15 (donkey), 17 (snake), 21 (doe), 22 (young calf), and 27 (wolf). In Deuteronomy 33, there are animal comparisons in verses 17 (bull), 20 (lion), and 22 (lion's cub). All the animal comparisons convey positive

(1892): 161-72.

[55] Cross and Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*, pp. 81-82, n. 26.

[56] A. H. J. Gunneweg, "Ober den Sitz im Leben der sog. Stammesspruche," *Zeitschrift fur die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76 (1964): 245-55.

[57] Ibid., p. 254.

[58] Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 276.

[59] Gunneweg, "Uber der Sitz im Leben der sog. Stammespruche," pp. 249-50.

ideas, though most critical scholars do not agree. The sometimes difficult translation of the text affects a writer's views of wordplays and animal comparisons. Those listed here are generally accepted.

THE SITZ IM LEBEN OF GENESIS 49

Lindblom contends that Genesis 49:8-12 is the center of the collection and explains the *Sitz im Leben* of all the sayings. The setting is the time when David lived in Hebron, king of Judah but not over all Israel.[60]

However, Kittel thinks verses 8-12 are not easily thought of as the center of the chapter. He suggests that the comparisons in Genesis 49 are born in battle. Tribes are praised or rebuked on the basis of their participation with the other tribes in battle. He relies on the Song of Deborah in Judges 5 for this interpretation, since that chapter clearly has a battle as its *Sitz im Leben*.[61]

Many other writers find the setting in some event associated with the confederacy of the tribes.[62] Westermann holds this view, rejecting Kittel's thesis as too specific. He thinks the sayings arose on many occasions, when the representatives of the tribes came together for a variety of purposes. The sayings arose individually or in groups and served the purpose of praising or blaming the various tribes. He considers the number 12 an independent element that arose when Israel was becoming unified. The number was intended to be a testimony to that unity.[63] This view, as well as the views of Cross and Freedman, Gunneweg, Kittel, Zobel, and others, is based in part on the amphictyonic hypothesis, a view not shared by all.

Gevirtz's reading of the Blessing of Jacob (Gen. 49:5-7) is representative of the recent interpretations that understand the oracles in this way:

> The persona of Jacob's "Blessing," the dying pater familias, Jacob-Israel, represents a latter-day idealization of a pre-Judaean confederation of Israelite tribes now at the point of its final dissolution in the reign of Jeroboam I. Characterizing Simeon and Levi as perishing birds of prey, he dissociates himself from them, censures their actions, and condemns them to dispersion.[64]

[60] Johannes Lindblom, "The Political Background of the Shiloh Oracle," *Congress Volume, Copenhagen*, 1953, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum, vol. 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1953), pp. 78-87.

[61] Kittel, "Die Stammesspriiche Israels," pp. 76-77, 111.

[62] E.g, Cross and Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*, p. 69; Gunneweg, "Uber der Sitz im Leben der sog. Stammesspruche," p. 26.

[63] Westermann, *Genesis*, pp. 251-52.

[64] Stanley Gevirtz, "Simeon and Levi in 'The Blessing of Jacob' (Gen. 49:5-7)," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 52 (1981): 93-128.

According to the traditional view, the *Sitz im Leben* is the last days of the patriarch Jacob, when he called his sons to himself to tell them what would happen to them in the future. This view presents the fewest difficulties.

THE SITZ IM LEBEN OF DEUTERONOMY 33

Much of what has been written under "Preliminary Observations" and in regard to the *Sitz im Leben* of Genesis 49, is also true of the critical view of Deuteronomy 33. The setting of Deuteronomy 33 is some event associated with the confederacy of the tribes, most likely an event in which the unity of the tribes needed to be stressed, probably an event that is cultic in nature and occurring in the seventh century (the alleged critical date of the writing of Deuteronomy).

However, Craigie proposes a traditional setting for the chapter. He writes, "It may well have been recited or sung at some special ceremony bringing to a close the renewal of the covenant in Moab; the tribes, gathered together for the solemn renewal of the covenant, each in turn received their blessing."[65] The strong militaristic thread throughout the chapter points to the time before the entry into Canaan. Craigie says the chapter may have been used later in the worship of Israel, causing some scholars to posit a *Sitz im Leben* in Israel's cultic life. He calls that view a failure to distinguish between an original and a secondary *Sitz im Leben*.[66] Again the *Sitz im Leben* is simply that which the text portrays. The 12 tribes of Israel were ready to cross the Jordan to begin the conquest of Canaan, and Moses spoke these blessings to strengthen them for the effort.

Treatment of Individual Oracles

Gressmann's writings, which led to the individual treatment of the oracles, have been mentioned earlier. Among the first attempts to treat the sayings individually were those of Alt, Taubler, and Lindblom. Alt dealt with the saying in Genesis 49:14-15.[67] Taubler wrote in regard to Genesis 49:13 and Deuteronomy 33:18-19; and Genesis 49:16-20, 27 and Deuteronomy 33:22.[68] Lindblom directed his attention to Genesis 49:8-12.[69]

[65] Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), p. 391.

[66] Peter C. Craigie, "The Conquest and Early Hebrew Poetry," *Tyndale Bulletin* 20 (1969): 82.

[67] Albrecht Alt, "Neues uber Palastina aus dem Archiv Amenophis IV," *Palastinajahrbuch* 20 (1924): 34-41.

[68] Eugen Israel Taubler, "Die Spruch-Verse uber Sebulon," *Monatsschrift fur Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 83 (1939): 9-46.

[69] Lindblom, "The Political Background of the Shiloh Oracle," pp. 78-87.

One of the reasons for individual treatment is the assertion that the sayings arose independently, since the sayings refer to events that were widely separated in time. For the traditional view the variable range presents no problem, since the chapters are predictions and blessings.

Beginning in 1922 scholars noticed that some of the sayings differed from the others. Eissfeldt stated that the sayings on Reuben (Gen. 49:3-4) and on Simeon and Levi (Gen. 49:5-7) were not actually tribal sayings.[70] Scharbert argued similarly,[71] and von Rad likewise recognized the difference between some of the verses.[72] Eissfeldt wrote, "It must have been a favourite device for the individual tribes to characterise one another with short sayings, normally linked with their names; and they may well also have described

Kittel agreed that the texts circulated individually at first, before being gathered into collections. He also wrote of the existence of a genre that could be called "tribal sayings." Kittel's history-of-traditions study showed that the form of certain verses in Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 did not fit the genre "tribal sayings." They were rather to be characterized as "prophetic sayings," offering blessings and curses reminiscent of the later prophetic style.[74]

As a result, Genesis 49:3-4, 5-7, 8, and 25-26 were not to be counted among the "tribal sayings," nor are most of the verses in Deuteronomy 33. Kittel built on the work of Gunkel, who had written earlier of the mysterious manner of expression in Genesis 49, in that some names are not mentioned, some facts are left out, and some phrases are general.[75] He thought this was a characteristic of the oldest prophetic style.

Kittel calls the tribal saying the basic element, or genre, in the two chapters. Tribal sayings are short and precise statements with no traces of editorial reworking. They require no framework for their understanding and exhibit "typical modes of speech" with a certain timelessness. They consist of pure animal comparisons (Gen. 49:9, 21,

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[70] Otto Eissfeldt, *Hexateuch-Synopse* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1922), pp. 22-30.

[71] Josef Scharbert, *Solidaritat in Segen und Fluch im Alten Testament und in seiner Umwelt, Vol. 1: Vaterfluch und Vatersegen* (Bonn: P. Hanstein, 1958).

[72] Gerhard von Rad, *Das erste Buch Mose: Genesis,* 5th ed. (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1958), p. 421.

[73] Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, p. 67; also see Cross and Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*, p. 77, n. 1.

[74] Kittel, "Die Stammesspruche Israels," pp. 91-95; also see Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 278.

[75] Gunkel, *Genesis*, p. 476.

27; Deut. 33:22), extended animal comparisons (Gen. 49:14-15, 17), and animal comparisons that are part of a fuller saying (Gen. 49:22; Deut. 33:17a, 20). They also include typical descriptions (Gen. 49:13, 20; Deut. 33:6, 23), situation-bound descriptions (Gen. 49:19), and descriptions that are part of a fuller saying (Gen. 49:3, 5, 23; Deut. 33:17b).[76]

Kittel's form critical investigation of the tribal sayings led him to conclude that there were various stages in the transmission of the sayings, each of which is reflected in various forms which the sayings take. Some of the sayings are composite units (Gen. 49:8-12; Deut. 33:8-11), while other sayings, the shorter ones, are complete units (Gen. 49:21; Deut. 33:22). The composite units reflect a later stage in the development of the oracles.[77]

However, there is no certain reason why Moses could not have spoken each saying as it now stands.

Judges 5

In 1941 Grether published a study claiming that part of the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5:14-18) belonged to the genre of "tribal sayings."[78] This study opened the door to a consideration of all three chapters together. The joint doctoral dissertation of Cross and Freedman was one such study.[79]

Later, Zobel built on Grether's work by investigating Genesis 49, Deuteronomy 33, and Judges 5 together, to determine what they say about the historical circumstances of the time. The work of Kittel had distinguished between "typical speech patterns" and "descriptions tied to a situation." Zobel used this distinction to glean historical information from the three chapters.

He concluded that the traditional ideas of the Exodus-Sinai-Conquest are unhistorical and that there were various peaceful immigrations of individual tribes. He dated the collection of the sayings in the time of the Judges, around 1400-1000 B.C. Zobel was the first to study all three chapters together in this manner.[80] While his conclusions about the historical information in the chapters betray his critical presuppositions, his early end for the dating of the sayings sounds Mosaic (something he himself would reject, however).

[76] Kittel, "Die Stammessprüche Israels," pp. 66-75.
[77] Ibid., pp. 79-105.
[78] Oskar Grether, *Das Deboralied: Eine metrische Rekonstruktion* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1941) pp. 54-55.
[79] Cross and Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*.
[80] Zobel, *Stammesspruch und Geschichte*.

The Impact of Ugarit

The discovery of Ugarit in 1928 and the subsequent deciphering of the Ugaritic language laid the foundation for studies that have taken a fresh look at the Hebrew language and the poetry of the Old Testament. Cross and Freedman's dissertation was a study of Genesis 49; Deuteronomy 33; Judges 5; and 2 Samuel 22 (=Ps. 18), with special consideration of the early stages of Hebrew orthography and meter. Their study reflected acquaintance with Ugaritic.

Scholars who noted additional parallels with Ugaritic literature began to publish their findings. From 1953 on, Dahood had a major impact on the study of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33.[81] A major study by Vawter appeared shortly thereafter,[82] and a study by Coppens appeared the following year.[83]

Recently the writings of many scholars, most notably Craigie, have made an impact in this area, particularly in the study of Deuteronomy 33.[84] The commentary of Kidner on Genesis is a somewhat earlier counterpart to Craigie's study of Deuteronomy.[85]

The parallels in Ugaritic literature have pushed the origins of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 back at least to the period of the Judges and are certainly compatible with Jacoban and Mosaic authorship.[86] While it is possible to read too much into such parallels,[87] there can be no doubt that study of Ugaritic literature has helped

[81] Mitchell Dahood, "The Divine Name 'Eli in the Psalms," *Theological Studies* 14 (1953): 452-57; see also "MKRTYHM in Genesis 49,6a," *Biblica* 36 (1955): 229; and "Is 'Eben Yisra'el a Divine Title? (Gn 49, 24)," *Biblica* 40 (1959): 1002-7.

[82] Bruce Vawter, "The Canaanite Background of Gen. 49," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 17 (1955): 1-18.

[83] J. Coppens, "La benediction de Jacob," Volume du Congres, Strasbourg, 1956, *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 4 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957), pp. 97-115.

[84] Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*; also see idem, "The Conquest and Early Hebrew Poetry," and idem, "The Song of Deborah and the Epic of Tukulti-Ninurta," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 253-65; and idem, "Three Ugaritic Notes on the Song of Deborah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 2 (1976): 33-49. See this writer's "The Missing Sanctuary of Deut. 33:12," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984): 523-29, as a further example of the effect of Ugaritic studies on the understanding of the biblical text.

[85] Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967).

[86] The parallels between the Old Testament and Ugaritic literature have been drawn together in Loren R. Fisher, ed., *Ras Shamra Parallels: The Texts from Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible*, 3 vols. (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1972-81).

[87] J. C. De Moor and P. van der Lugt, "The Spectre of Pan-Ugaritism," *Beitrage zur Orientalistik* 31 (1974): 3-26.

support the traditional view of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 and that Mosiac authorship of both chapters is still defensible.

The dissertation of Cross and Freedman is a watershed in the study of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 for another reason. Their work built on Albright's study of the date of the oracles of Balaam. In that study Albright drew conclusions on the basis of orthographic and linguistic criteria.[88] Cross and Freedman concluded that Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 were approximately the same age. "In each are preserved materials which antedate the eleventh century in all probability, and may be considerably older. But the Blessings as a whole reached completed form toward the end of the period of the Judges."[89]

Some years later Albright proposed a scheme for dating 14 ancient Hebrew poems in the Old Testament.[90] The poems were dated in order, or sequence, so this approach is called sequence dating. Using certain stylistic phenomena as criteria and basing the chronology on Ugaritic poetry, Albright proposed a chronology that placed the Song of Miriam (Exod. 15) in the early 13th century and Psalm 29 in

In this scheme, Genesis 49 was dated in the late 11th century, and Deuteronomy 33 was dated in the mid-11th century.[91]

Freedman built on Albright's sequence dating by using the criterion of divine names and epithets. Freedman confirmed the results of Albright's study with some adjustments.[92] Like Albright, he placed Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 in the 11th century, but he considered Deuteronomy 33 the later poem.[93]

As a relative chronology, the system is a helpful addition to the study of these chapters. However, the most that can be said for it is that it provides a relative chronology and a terminus ad quem for the dating of the chapters, the time of the Judges. It does not provide a terminus a quo. One may agree with the general sequence in which Albright and Freedman place the poems without agreeing with the precise dates. One must accept their conclusions with cau-

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[88] William F. Albright, "The Oracles of Balaam," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 63 (1944): 207-33.

[89] Cross and Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*, pp. 6-7.

[90] William F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1968), pp. 1-28, 42-54.

[91] Albright, cited in David Noel Freedman, "Divine Names and Titles in Early Poetry," *Magnalia Dei: The .Mighty Acts of God*, ed. Frank M. Cross, W. E. Lemke, and P. D. Miller, Jr. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1976), pp. 55-56.

[92] Ibid., pp. 56-57.

[93] Ibid., p. 96.

tion, however, for it is possible that there was considerable scribal updating of the text over the centuries, much like the manner in which the New King James updates the language of the King James Version, thereby resulting in later orthographic and linguistic characteristics. Even evidence of a later orthography, therefore, does not rule out the traditional dating of the two chapters. On the other hand the appearance of archaisms in a text does not prove that a particular verse is ancient, since archaic features might be deliberately used by writers to convey the idea of antiquity. This renders many conclusions tentative.

However, archaisms that were misunderstood by later generations of readers, such as the presence of the divine name in Deuteronomy 33:12, are most likely genuine and therefore cannot be so easily explained away.[94]

Summary

There continue to be two major streams of interpretation, the traditional and the critical, with the latter predominating and with each position largely rejecting the other. Among critical scholars, those who follow the Albright-Bright-Wright reconstruction of Israelite history are in the minority. Those who follow the Noth-Alt-von Rad reconstruction of Israelite history with its amphictyonic hypothesis reflect the dominant interpretation of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33.

The text of both chapters, however, is certainly compatible with the traditional reading of their contents as the blessings, or last testaments, of Jacob and Moses.

[94] See Heck, "The Missing Sanctuary of Deut. 33:12," for evidence that the divine name *'Eli*, "the Exalted One," passed out of use among the Israelites shortly after the Conquest, because it was also in use among the Canaanites. The Israelites did not want the worship of Yahweh to be confused with the worship of pagan gods.