Chapter Four

The "Shiloh" Reference in the Prophecy Concerning Judah in Genesis 49:8-12

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I am pleased to contribute to this Festschrift in honour of Professor Zamani B. Kafang, whom I have known as a dear friend and colleague for over 30 years. I have chosen to write this article from the book of Genesis in the Pentateuch, which is the oldest tradition of the biblical canon and the foundation for the rest of the Bible. Professor Kafang is a prolific scholar and writer, who loves tradition because it provides consistency and stability. Thus, I desire to contribute on the subject of the identity of "Shiloh" in the book of Genesis.

Key words: Shiloh, Prophecy, Genesis, king, ruler, Ephraimite, Judah

Introduction

The blessing of Jacob upon Judah, as found in Genesis 49:8-12, has long been a source of interest and controversy in the field of Old Testament exegesis. More particularly, the reference to *šîlōh* in Genesis 49:10 has given occasion to considerable discussion throughout the centuries. The meaning of this difficult term (*Shiloh*) has remained an enigmatic problem for scholars. W. L. Moran has called it "the most famous *crux interpretum* in the entire Old Testament."[174] This section has received a lot of attention and is regarded as a Messianic prophecy by both Christians and Jews. The words in this section (vv. 8-12) are extremely difficult to determine. This may be due to the combination of poetry and prophecy, which results in a rich figurative language that in some places makes it very difficult to determine the meaning. But, I think that the enigmatic nature of the section is a deliberate device of the author.

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[174] W. L. Moran, "Gen. 49:10 and Its Use in Ez. 21:32", *Biblica* 39 (1958), 405-425.

Shiloh has generally been understood as a Messianic reference by most ancient commentators, Jewish or Christian.[175] The goal of the present study is to attempt to define more precisely the identity or exact meaning of *šîlōh* (*Shiloh*) in Genesis 49:10. I will begin by making brief references to the context of Genesis 49:10, i.e., vv. 8-9 and vv.11-12. But the study will centre on Genesis 49:10, in trying to understand the meaning of "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs" (NIV). The phrase "one to whom it belongs" is the translation of the Hebrew word *šîlōh,* which in the English version of NKJV is simply left untranslated as *Shiloh*. The word *Shiloh*, in which the exaltation of Judah and the blessing of the nations, find their epitome, is the single, most important concept in v. 10. John Peter Lange captures the sentiment of it all when he says: "This is the central vision, come from the central feeling, and around it all the rest are gathered. They are to it as the historical frame to the picture. All their importance comes from it...."[176]

After considering the context of Genesis 49:10, I will then deal with some possible interpretations that have been suggested by some scholars. It is impossible and not necessary to deal with all of the possible interpretations that have been suggested by scholars. I will examine the Hebrew text, by which the interpretations would be evaluated before I give my conclusion. I approach this study with the understanding that Genesis 49:10 (and its immediate context) is a messianic passage.

The Context of Genesis 49:10

It is generally agreed that Judah is the first of the brothers to receive a blessing. After Jacob eliminated the older brothers as rightful heirs of the blessing, he then foretold a future for the tribe of Judah. As the section

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[175] Some quotations from the ancient versions are found in Samuel H. Turner, *A Companion to the Book of Genesis* (New York: Wiley & Putman, 1841), 371-74. Talmudic comments are cited in Paul Isaac Hershon, *Genesis: With a Talmudic Commentary* (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1883), 470-72.

[176] John Peter Lange, *A Commentary on the Holy Scripture: Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical*, Vol 1, translated by Taylor Lewis and A. Gosman (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1872), 651.

on the blessing of Judah is the central portion of Genesis 49, likewise verse 10 of this section is the most significant verse of this section.

In verses 8 and 9, Jacob acknowledges the future supremacy of his son Judah. In v. 8, he is described in the imagery of a victorious warrior who returns home from battle and is greeted by the shouts of praise from his brothers.[177] Judah will be praised for always being victorious. His enemies will not be able to escape him. He will pursue and overtake them. The picture itself is taken from that of actual battle. Here then, we have the strength and victory of Judah given as a reason for the praise, homage and respect to be given to him by all his brothers. In verse 9, we find that Judah is referred to as a lion. The image of the victorious warrior is extended with the picture of Judah as a young lion (cf. Num. 24:9; Rev. 5:5). Judah is a veritable lioness, who cannot be opposed: "Who dares to arouse him?" (v. 9d). As a lioness rests in proud repose with the prey safe in the den, who would venture to stir her up in order to occasion fresh conflict?

Verse 10 continues the picture of the young warrior as a king, who holds the sceptre and the ruler's staff. It speaks of the continuance of the "sceptre" and the "ruler's staff" in the tribe of Judah until the one "to whom it belongs" comes. We shall answer the question later on, "who does it belong to"?

Verses 11 and 12 give us the picture of this ruler or king in his land that is fruitful with abundance of material blessings. In verse 11, the imagery expressed here may be describing the type of material blessings in the messianic kingdom. The image of the donkey tethered to the vines and the washing of clothes in wine is to express the idea of abundance or prosperity.[178] In this king's rule or kingdom, there will be plenty for everyone. Thus, the image of the wine might be a symbol of abundance, prosperity and blessing, that the animals of burden will be tethered to trees bearing good fruit (such as vines) instead of a stake. There is no need to be concerned about the damage done to the trees, because there will be plentiful food and drink in the land. There will be wine as common as water for washing. Verse 12 in an obscure parallelism (e.g., "His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk"), gives us

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[177] John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis", in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 276.

[178] Sailhamer, 276.

more of the picture of the king of Judah with his power and might (cf. Isaiah 63:1-6).

The Hebrew text of Gen 49:10

lō'-yāsûr šēḇeṭ mîhûdâ ûmᵉḥōqēq mibbên raglāyw
"The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
'ad kî-yāḇō' šîlōh wᵉlô yiqqᵉhat 'ammîm
until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his" (NIV).

The Hebrew text has *šîlōh* for the word. The BHS critical apparatus[179] indicates that many Hebrew Manuscripts (hereafter MSS) and the MSS of the Samaritan Pentateuch read *šlh*, whereas the LXX has *hō ápokeitai*, whose Hebrew equivalent, the BHS editors think, is probably *šellōh* or *šellô*. Others have probably *šᵉ'îlōh* or *mōšᵉlōh*. BDB indicates the forms *šilo*, *šîlōh* and *šilōh*, but mentions that it was *šilôn* originally.[180] As to the question which of these readings is the correct one, the MT reading is the *lectio difficilior* and explains the other variants rather than the other way round. The Masoretic Text (hereafter MT) reading must, therefore, be retained. Although one may not agree with all that Moran says in his article, this is his conclusion with respect to the MT reading.[181]

Some Interpretations of *šîlōh*

As far as the meaning and referent of *šîlōh* is concerned, a host of alternative interpretations, some significant and other fanciful conjectures, have been given. William H. Barnes has given us in his study a more detailed diversity of viewpoints as to the referent of *šîlōh* in verse

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[179] K. Elliger and N. Rudolph, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1984), 82. Hereafter known as BHS.

[180] Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 1017. Hereafter known as BDB.

[181] Moran, 411.

10, in the history of its interpretation.[182] According to Barnes, the overall thrust of the history of interpretation of the passage is that it is generally "understood as a Messianic reference by the overwhelming majority of commentators, whether ancient or contemporary, whether Jewish or Christian."[183]

Rashi and the Targum see here the King Messiah.[184] Ibn Ezra on the other hand seems not to be clear on what he understands the word to really mean.[185] He gives three possible translations and suggestions of what he thinks: *Shilia* which means "placenta", *Shalil* means "embryo"; and *shilo* refers to the city.[186] Rashi also gives two other suggestions using the words *shelo,* meaning "belong to him" and *sahi-lo*, meaning "gift to him".[187]

We have an interpretation that says that *šîlōh* is derived from *šîl-lô*, and therefore means "his son". Although, he does not confine it to David, as the Jews of his time did, John Calvin seems to understand it in this way.[188] Keil and Delitzsch discard such a position on the ground that the word *šîlōh* ". . . cannot be traced . . . to the word *šîl* . . . since such a noun as *šîl* is never met with in Hebrew, and neither its existence nor the meaning attributed to it can be inferred from *šîlyâ*, afterbirth in Deut. XXVIII.57."[189]

Another view that has "found considerable favour in the last century"[190] is that which interprets *šîlōh* with the Ephraimite city of that name. Moran's objection to this interpretation is that nowhere in the Hebrew Bible is the city of Shiloh written *šîlōh*; secondly, the *'ammîm* who are to give obedience in the following part of the verse must be no

[182] William H. Barnes, *A Textual-Critical and Historical Examination of the "Shiloh" Reference in the Blessing of Judah, Genesis 49:8-12*, MA Thesis, 1977, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois.

[183] Barnes, 85.

[184] *Mikraot Gedolot* (New York: Pardes Publishing House, 1951), on Genesis 49:10.

[185] *Gedolot*, Ibn Ezra on Genesis 49:10.

[186] *Gedolot*.

[187] *Gedolot*, Rashi on Genesis 49:10.

[188] John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), 454.

[189] C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., n.d.), 394.

[190] Moran, 410.

other Israelite tribes, but the people surrounding Israel; and thirdly, the appositeness of Shiloh as the symbol of authority over other Israelites is doubtful.[191] We would say that obedience is to be given to the ruler/king from the tribe of Judah by the "nations" (plural), which extends the boundaries of his rule from the tribes of Israel to include other nations as well (v. 10b). In addition to Moran's objection, Keil and Delitzsch point out another weakness of this position vis-à-vis the meaning and prophetic character of the passage.[192] If we are to understand the passage as saying that the sceptre shall not depart from Judah until he (Judah) comes to Shiloh (and there is no evidence that he had this royal prerogative before the Israelites came to Shiloh), then the promise would have fizzled out before it could ever take effect.

Many ancient and modern versions have adopted the interpretation, which says that *šîlōh* is formed from *'ăšer lô* after abbreviating the *'ăšer* by *š* and then latching it on to the *lô*. That is where the meaning "to whom it belongs" comes from. Moreover, according to this view, *šîlōh* is considered as defective, whereas *šellōh* or *šellô* is taken as the original form. Moran rejects this view primarily on grammatical grounds.[193] Keil and Delitzsch, on the other hand, criticize this view on the basis that *š* as an abbreviation of *'ăšer* cannot be found in the Pentateuch, and therefore, would be unwarranted and meaningless.[194] Another commentator objects: "If we are to interpret 'till *Shilo* comes' to read 'till he comes to whom it belongs', . . . *what* is to belong to Judah's descendants?"[195] After pointing out how the analogous passage in Ezekiel 21:32 (Hebrew) makes the ellipsis clear and the divergent meanings that such an ellipsis has led to, the same writer concludes: "All these views are impossible from the simple consideration that the Hebrew language does not allow an elliptical construction, which omits the chief notion, and creates the most perplexing ambiguity".[196] Thus, although the relationship of Ezekiel 21:27 (English) with this passage is undeniable, it is not tenable

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[191] Moran, 411.

[192] Keil and Delitzsch, 395.

[193] Moran, 409-10.

[194] Keil and Delitzsch, 395.

[195] *A Historical and Critical Commentary on the Old Testament: Genesis XX-L* (A mimeographed copy), 750.

[196] *A Historical and Critical Commentary on the Old Testament*, 750.

to argue that the form of the Ezekiel passage is the form of the original here in Genesis 49:10.

Moran presents his own solution which he thinks "is extremely simple, almost alarmingly so…"[197] He simply divides "the consonantal text" into two, vocalizing them as *šay lōh*, "tribute to him". In doing this, Moran has scriptural support in passages like Psalms 68:30; 76:12 and Isaiah 18:7. But Moran does not only divide the text and revocalize it, he also revocalizes the MT *yb'* as *yûbā'*, which he thinks "is favoured by the better attested use of the *Hiphil* of this verb in connection with the bringing of gifts (Gen. 43:26; 1 Sam. 9:7; 10:27)".[198] He states and tries to rebut two objections to his interpretation: 1) we should expect the verb *yûbal* or *yûbîlû* in the three occurrences of *šay* cited above; and 2) we should expect the following colon on the obedience of the people to precede. Moran answers the first objection by the rhetorical question: "…are we to suppose that the use of *šay* was so fossilized as to be restricted to the verbal stem *YBL*?"[199] I am afraid Moran fails to meet the strength of the objection. If the Hebrew text consistently uses the verbal stem *YBL* with *šay* (as borne out by the three citations where *šay* occurs), then the objection to Moran's position stands as strong as ever. In answer to the second objection to his view Moran says: "And as for the demands of a logical sequence, the conjunction which introduces the following colon does not indicate a chronological sequence; this is indicated neither by the grammar…nor by the word *yiqqᵉhat*."[200] Even here Moran's answer is not as persuasive as one would like it to be. For if "the bringing of tribute" is interpreted as an evidence of "the obedience of the people", then the "chronological sequence" is significant.

Finally, we need to consider Barnes' view on the interpretation of *šîlōh*. After conducting a thorough-going textual-critical and historical study on the passage under consideration, he elaborates his view in the quotation that follows:

> The present writer has undertaken the textual-critical examination of Gen. 49 to determine what the underling *Vorlage* is for the enigmatic term *šîlōh*. It seems quite evident to him that both the ancient

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[197] Moran, 412.
[198] Moran, 412.
[199] Moran, 413.
[200] Moran, 413.

versions and the Masoretic text bear witness to an original *šlh*; and it must be emphasized, this original reading is to be taken very seriously. The immediate question then is the identification of this *šlh*; the present writer sees three possibilities open at this point: i.) *šlh* refers to the Ephraimite town of the same name, ii.) *šlh* is a contraction for *'ăšer lô* (as the Septuagint apparently renders it), or iii.) *šlh* refers somehow to *Shelah* (*šēlâ*), the third son of Judah. The present writer, along with numerous other commentators, strongly doubts that *šlh* can be identified with the town of Shiloh; both the historical incongruity and the Masoretic orthography make the identification extremely difficult. As has been previously argued, the Septuagintal rendering, while probably witnessing to a Hebrew *Vorlage šlh* seems to be a paraphrase of the Hebrew text, probably influenced by the allusion to Ezekiel 21:32. This leaves only the *Shelah* option to be considered….[201]

I deeply appreciate Barnes' study and unreservedly accept the Messianic thrust of his findings and his own personal view. The problem is one finds it very difficult to pin him down to any one of the views we have discussed so far or those we have not mentioned in our present discussion. From his quotation in the foregoing, it appears that he favours the association with *Shela*, on the basis of "numerous examples of paranomasia between the text of Genesis 49:8-12 and the text of the Tamar narrative in Genesis 38".[202] But, on the same page he says:

> The present writer, therefore, would tentatively opt for the rendering of *šîlōh* as a proper noun, from the root *šālâ*, to be quiet, to be at ease, to prosper; and he would additionally urge readers of the Hebrew text to be fully cognizant of the underlying allusion to and contrast of -Judah's son Shelah with this promised One…."[203]

The result is a "tentative *specific* identification for the *šîlōh* reference in Genesis 49:10" and "a *general* Messianic identification for the reference."[204] If by *specific* and *general* identifications, Barnes' intention

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[201] Barnes, 93-95.
[202] Barnes, 95.
[203] Barnes, 95-96.
[204] Barnes, 96.

is to distinguish between the "multiple fulfilments" and the "final fulfilment" of this Messianic prediction, perhaps the ambivalence might be resolved. But then the historical "multiple fulfilments" aspect becomes a problem in the case of Shelah, for the Messianic prediction is in Genesis 49, whereas the would be historical fulfilment is in Genesis 38. It seems to me Barnes' ambivalence is the result of his hypothesis of an original *šlh* and his desire to keep the *šîlōh* of Genesis 49:10 as a personal reference to the prophesied Messiah.

Conclusion: The Meaning of *šîlōh* in Genesis 49:10

The last alternative is that which retains *šîlōh* as it is, without necessarily understanding it as a personal name of the coming Messiah (cf. Rev. 19:11-13). I agree with John H. Sailhamer that *Shiloh* is not a name as such.[205] Gen 49:10 is predicting the royal Davidic dynasty that will be established in the house of Judah, in the future (cf. Num. 24:9,17; 2 Sam. 7:12-16). But, also that those who will rule from the house Judah, will do so in anticipation of the One "to whom it belongs" (*šîlōh*).[206] That is, the kingship in the house of Judah truly belongs to the Messiah, to whom the "obedience of the nations is his" (v. 10b). And I believe this is an indication of the universal reign of the Messiah in the future.

Some scholars take *Shiloh* as the title/personal name of the Messiah. For example, Keil and Delitzsch understand it as the title of the Messiah "in common with the entire Jewish synagogue and the whole Christian church".[207] Barnes takes *šîlōh* as a personal name of the Messiah referring to the one who brings peace and security.[208] It means 'one to whom it belongs' and what belongs to the Messiah is the kingship that will not depart from the house of Judah. This explanation fits the context of Genesis 49:10 better and I feel comfortable with this view.

Although, the Jews had the tendency of limiting the reference of *šîlōh* to the time of David and Solomon, Christians have taken this as a prediction of Christ, the Son of David, "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Rev. 5:5, 9). This view retains the reading of MT text, which is the more difficult reading.

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[205] Sailhamer, 276.
[206] Sailhamer, 276.
[207] Keil and Delitzsch, 397.
[208] Barnes, 96.