

**Gen. 49:3** Reuben, you are my first-born,  
My might and first fruit of my vigor,  
Exceeding in rank  
And exceeding in honor.

<sup>4</sup> Unstable as water, you shall excel no longer;  
For when you mounted your father's bed,  
You brought disgrace—my couch he mounted!

**Gen. 49:5-7** Simeon and Levi are a pair ...

**Gen. 49:8-12** **You, O Judah, your brothers shall praise ...**

**Gen. 49:13** Zebulun shall dwell by the seashore ...

**Gen. 49:14-15** Issachar is a strong-boned ass ...

**Gen. 49:16-17** Dan shall govern his people ...

**Gen. 49:18** I wait for Your deliverance, O LORD!

**Gen. 49:19** Gad shall be raided by raiders ...

**Gen. 49:20** Asher's bread shall be rich ...

**Gen. 49:21** Naphtali is a hind let loose ...

**Gen. 49:22-26** **Joseph is a wild ass ...**

**Gen. 49:27** Benjamin is a ravenous wolf ...

**Gen. 49:28** All these were the tribes of Israel, twelve in number, and this is what their father said to them as he bade them farewell, addressing to each a parting word appropriate to him.

Jon Levenson, "Genesis," *Jewish Study Bible*

**49.1–28: Jacob's tribal sayings.** Although the prose superscription has Jacob speaking to his sons (v. 1), the content of the poetry that follows applies to the tribes descended from these twelve men. The closest parallel to this collection of tribal sayings is thus Deut. ch 33, in which Moses blesses most of the tribes just before he dies. A more distant parallel is Judg. 5.14–18, in which the judge, Deborah, and her general, Barak, sing of the courage of some of the tribes and the failure of others in a time of military crisis ... Many scholars consider this chapter to be among the oldest portions of the Torah.

Nahum Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS Torah Commentary)

In origin, the collection of aphorisms about the tribes is not a unity, and no inner thread of logic binds the diverse elements together. The individual tribal traditions embedded in the poetry are undoubtedly independent of each other and relate to widely separate and discrete situations ... The literary structure is the product of careful design. The tribal order corresponds neither to the sequence of birth, as recounted in chapters 29–30, nor to any of the tribal lists found elsewhere in the Torah. The six sons of Leah are addressed first and the two of Rachel last. In between come the sons of the maidservants; the two sons of Zilpah, maid of Leah, are inserted between the two sons of Bilhah, maid of Rachel. This yields a deliberate chiasmic arrangement:

LEAH, Bilhah-Zilpah, Zilpah-Bilhah, RACHEL.

Each group is presented in a descending order of seniority. The single exception is Issachar and Zebulun, reversed for historical reasons.

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## REUBEN (vv. 3–4)

On one level, the demotion of Reuben reflects the ideal of leadership in Israel. Those who hold the responsibility of high office must adhere to moral norms. Misconduct that might be overlooked in men of lesser status assumes notoriously magnified proportions when perpetrated by those who rule.

From an historical viewpoint, Reuben's loss of leadership must reflect very early traditions. Since at no period is there any record of the hegemony of this tribe, there cannot be any possible reason for inventing its first-born status. Hence, its consistent place at the head of the tribal lists in the Bible must be an authentic echo of a state of affairs that existed in dim antiquity.

### John Skinner, *Genesis* (ICC)

The 'birthright' of Reuben must rest on some early ascendancy or prowess of the tribe which has left no traces in history. Its choice of a settlement E of the Jordan shows an attachment to nomadic habits, and perhaps an unfitness for the advance to civilised life which the majority of the tribes had to make. In the Song of Deborah, Reuben is still an important tribe, but one that had lost enthusiasm for the national cause. In the Blessing of Moses it still survives, but is apparently on the verge of extinction. It was doubtless exhausted by struggles like those with the Hagarines, but especially with the Moabites, who eventually occupied most of its territory.

### Andrew Tobolowsky, "Reubenite Primacy: New Paradigms, New Answers," JBL 2020

The fact that the tribe of Reuben is so often first in biblical lists of the tribes of Israel attracted a great deal of attention throughout the twentieth century. In the middle of that century especially, scholars broadly assumed that the details of these lists preserved a great deal of information about premonarchic tribal realities. As a consequence, it seemed obvious that Reuben's place at the head of fourteen of roughly twenty-six tribal lists in biblical literature must be an intimation of its historical preeminence at some point prior to the rise of the monarchy in Israel. There was a problem, however. No other element of biblical literature, no other description of the tribes and their realities, depicts Reuben even as an important tribe, let alone the most important. ...

I will argue that the key to understanding Reubenite primacy is the consistent link between the elevation of Reuben and the corresponding elevation of the paradigmatic southern tribes of Judah, Simeon, and Levi in most cases. The tribe of Reuben gained its prestigious position in these lists only as part of a late, southern ideological project to raise the status of the southern tribes within visions of Israel. The service it provides in that connection is to give this southern project the appearance of a northern vision and so enhance its authority for southern and northern audiences alike. Here, Reuben's unimportance, and likely its early destruction, was not a problem but an asset.

Gen 49:1–27	Deut 33:1–29	Judg 5:14–23
Zebulun	Zebulun	Zebulun
Issachar	Issachar	Issachar
Dan	Gad	Reuben
Gad	Dan	Gilead
Asher	Naphtali	Dan
Naphtali	Asher	Asher
		Naphtali

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