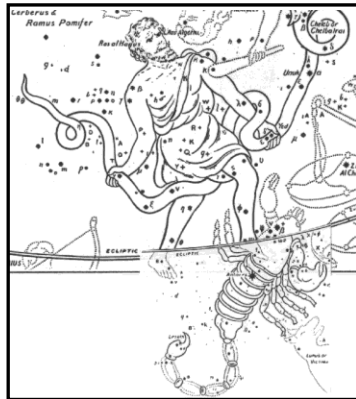


A Boot to the Head

*Behold, the sun, the moon,
and eleven stars were bowing down to me.
(Gen 37:9)*



¹ Now Then Jacob called his sons and said, "Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come.

² "Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob, listen to Israel your father.

³ "Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power.

⁴ Unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it-- he went up to my couch!¹

⁵ "Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords.

⁶ Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen.²

⁷ Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel.

⁸ "Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you.

¹ "Water shall flow from his buckets" (Num 24:7). This "appears more expressly as an allusion to the standard of Reuben, the "man with the river," Aquarius pouring water from his pitcher; and if one be a reference to a standard, the others may also well be." See "The Mysterious Bible," Nov 2013, <http://themysteriousbible.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-12-tribes-of-israel-and-zodiac.html>, last accessed 5-11-2015.

² The Targum of this verse reads, "In their counsels my soul found no pleasure; and in their gathering together at the city of Shekem to destroy it, they were not favourable to my honour; for in their anger they slew kings with princes, and in their wilfulness they sold Joseph their brother, who is compared to the ox" (Gen 49:6 Jerusalem Targum). On Joseph and the ox see also next note.

⁹ Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him?

¹⁰ The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

¹¹ Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes.

¹² His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.

¹³ "Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships, and his border shall be at Sidon.

¹⁴ "Issachar is a strong donkey, crouching between the sheepfolds.

¹⁵ He saw that a resting place was good, and that the land was pleasant, so he bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant at forced labor.

¹⁶ "Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel.

¹⁷ Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a viper by the path, that bites the horse's heels so that his rider falls backward.

¹⁸ I wait for your salvation, O LORD.

¹⁹ "Raiders shall raid Gad, but he shall raid at their heels.

²⁰ "Asher's food shall be rich, and he shall yield royal delicacies.

²¹ "Naphtali is a doe let loose that bears beautiful fawns.

²² "Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall.

²³ The archers bitterly attacked him, shot at him, and harassed him severely,

²⁴ yet his bow remained unmoved; his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel),

²⁵ by the God of your father who will help you, by the Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that crouches beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb.

²⁶ The blessings of your father are mighty beyond the blessings of my parents, up to the bounties of the everlasting hills. May they be on the head of Joseph, and on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers.³

²⁷ "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey and at evening dividing the spoil."

²⁸ All these are the twelve tribes of Israel. This is what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each with the blessing suitable to him.

Genesis 49:1-28

A Boot to the Head

The lawyer begins, "As executor of Mr. Muldoon's estate, I have been empowered to read Mr. Muldoon's Last Will and Testament. If we are all seated, I shall proceed with the reading. 'I, Arthur Durham Muldoon, being of sound mind and body do hereby divide up my considerable estate as follows: To my overly emotional sister Jenny --who grubbed with her husband Hank, grubbed for everything they could get from me and then shed crocodile tears when I needed sympathy; to Jenny I leave... a boot to the head.'" ⁴★Bonk!★ "Ow!"

³ "And of Joseph he said ... A firstborn bull-- he has majesty, and his horns are the horns of a wild ox; with them he shall gore the peoples, all of them, to the ends of the earth; they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh" (Deut 33:13, 17).

⁴ Frantics, "Last Will And Temperament," *CBS Records* (1984).

I first heard this comedy sketch on the Dr. Demento Show when I was in Jr. High. It humorously tells the story of a family of ingrate losers who show up for the reading of their rich deceased brother's will, only to find that all he leaves them with are several boots to the head. Genesis 49 tells a similar story, without any boots to the head. Well, maybe one. It records the last words of Jacob who calls his sons together and gives each of them a direct prophecy about their future.

This chapter forms a unique style of literature found nowhere else in the Bible. Later Jews took this and created an entire genre called the “**Testament**.” In Testaments, “The ideal figure faces death and causes his relatives and intimate friends to circle around his bed. He occasionally informs them of his fatal flaw and exhorts them to avoid certain temptations; he typically instructs them regarding the way of righteousness and utters blessings and curses. Often he illustrates his words ... with descriptions of the future as it has been revealed to him in a dream or vision.”⁵ The Jews wrote Testaments for all sorts of famous OT saints: Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Solomon, and most importantly for our purposes—the twelve sons of Jacob. Each son gets his own Testament, a full book treatment of each son's last words. These books really served as launching points for creatively passing morals on to children, as well as to help explain things that had come to pass since the days of the ancestor being talked about.

When you look at Genesis 49, it only has a couple of the components of these later Testaments. There is a **death bed scene**, to be sure. He does **predict the future** in many fascinating and important ways. But there is **no story-telling** of Jacob's own past life here, nor is there any real attempt to pass morality on to his sons, even though if anyone in the Bible might have said, “**My sons, look at what a bad boy I was and please don't emulate me,**” it would have been Jacob. So this makes us wonder, what this chapter is here to teach us? The answer is odd, but breathtaking.

Let's note a few things before trying to answer this question. First, look at how **Jacob calls his sons** and what he says. “**Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come. Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob, listen to Israel your father**” (**Gen 49:1-2**). As we can see from his own words, Jacob has something **prophetic** in mind here. Second, the end of the section reads, “**All these are the twelve tribes of Israel. This is what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each with the blessing suitable to him**” (28). This tells us 1. That the focus of the passage is not just one the men as individuals, but also on **the twelve tribes** of Israel. In other words, it has importance for Jews much later than

⁵ J. H. Charlesworth, “Testaments: Introduction,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (New York; London: Yale University Press, 1983), 773.

these sons. 2. Jacob is passing a **blessing** down from himself to his sons. In other words, what he says about each son here is going to come true because he said it. This is in line with what we have seen already in Genesis from Noah and his sons to Isaac and his sons to Jacob and his grandsons. The main blessing of Genesis is the promise of a seed to come, so be on the lookout for this as we continue. Yet, as we will see, some of the things said here are hardly a blessing. They are more like a curse. Nevertheless, the language of blessing is used, and that should be kept in mind.

Finally, before reading the verses in between, we have a few things of note to discuss. First, the **genre is poetry**. Poetry is common in most prophetic writings. That means you look for meaning that goes deeper than the literal level of the words. For example, when it says that “**Benjamin is a ravenous wolf**” (27), Jacob is not cursing his youngest son to be a werewolf, who literally turns into a wolf at a full moon. This is not *Harry Potter* or *Underworld*.

Second, **each of the twelve sons are mentioned by name** (vv. 3-27). 40% of these verses deal with just two sons: **Judah** (8-12) and **Joseph** (22-26).⁶ Therefore, we will save them for last. Third, the blessings appear **roughly in the order of the birth** of the boys.⁷ Finally, almost every boy has attached **some kind of symbol** to his name that will have meaning later in the Bible in numerous ways. This is very important as we will see. Therefore, besides the basic prophecies that are contained in this passage for a son, this symbolism of the names with some kind of animal (Benjamin = wolf; Dan = serpent; etc.) or other object (Reuben = man/water, etc.) is key to understanding what is happening here for the nation as a whole. So there are two levels here: the individual and the nation. We will look at the individuals first, some of which will feel little more than a boot to the head.

Individual Blessings

Reuben

Let's start with Reuben. Reuben is the oldest, and as such is the “**firstborn**.” He is **preeminent in dignity and power** for this reason (**Gen 49:3**). As the firstborn, he will therefore be likened to a **man** later on in the Bible. You may remember that

⁶ **Reuben** (4), **Simeon and Levi** (5-7) each get a little more playtime because of things we learned about them earlier in Genesis. The other sons have relatively little said about them. See **Gen 35:22** and **ch. 34**. Curiously, these four boys (minus Levi) are the only ones said to have reference to the LORD in their naming earlier on. Reuben: “**Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction**” (**Gen 29:32**); Simeon: “**Because the LORD has heard that I am hated**” (**Gen 29:33**); “**This time I will praise the LORD**” (**Gen 29:35**); Joseph: “**May the LORD add to me another son!**” (**Gen 30:24**).

⁷ **Gen 29:32–30:24; 35:18**. Dan, Gad, Asher, and Naphtali are out of order a little, perhaps in order to form a chiasm: Bilhah (Dan), Zilpah (Gad) ... Zilpah (Asher), Bilhah (Naphtali).

Reuben tried to find a way to save Joseph all those years earlier, but every attempt he made fell on deaf ears. He was not respected. This may be because, he committed a serious sin when he took his father's maid Bilhah ("he went up to my couch"), mother of his brothers Dan and Naphtali (35:22), probably in order to secure the blessing like Ham did.

For this sin, Jacob also likens Reuben to "unstable water" (49:4). So not only is he a man, he is also [water](#). It might better be rendered "foaming water," but the word (*pachaz*) is hard to translate. Someone comments on this link saying, "Does water's slipperiness suggest Reuben's lack of principle? Or do the images of boiling up in a pot, pouring down in a torrent, and foaming up in a storm, suggest Reuben's passion bubbling up and overflowing?"⁸ Whatever the case, Reuben is being deprived of his status because of his conduct. Not much of a blessing, is it?

Simeon and Levi

Jacob then turns his attention to Simeon and Levi. These are the only two mentioned together. It is because of what they did in Gen 34 ... *together*. "Weapons of violence are their swords" (Gen 49:5). These were the brothers who tricked the people of Shechem into being circumcised so that they could massacre them all. Everything Jacob says here is negative. "Let my soul come not into their council." "O my glory, be not joined to their company." "Cursed by their anger." "I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel" (6-7).

This prophecy came true quite literally for both sons. Simeon would inherit land south of Judah, but would soon be assimilated, the tribe being absorbed and losing its identity completely. As for Levi, he is the one who becomes the priest and receives no inheritance of land. Curiously, since his descendants end up doing similar things that Levi did—taking out wicked sinners in the congregation and even being blessed for it (cf. Ex 32:26ff., Num 25:7-13), Jews sometimes saw the act of Genesis 34 as a good, righteous act. But there is no hint of Jacob doing that here. You must never confuse God's grace and use it as a way to justify sin. God blessed Levi, yes. But it was because God was gracious, not because Levi deserved it.

One more thing is worth noting. The Targum here identifies Simeon with Shechem, linking him to a [city](#). It adds that Joseph is an [ox](#), even though Joseph isn't the focus of this prophecy. I'll mention more about this later. Levi is not identified with anything in particular, but his emblem later became the [breastplate](#) with the twelve stones of the priest.

⁸ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 472.

Zebulun (Skipping Judah for a moment)

I'm going to skip Judah for the time being, other than to say that the cursing of the first three sons stops with Judah. We will see why later. We will continue instead with Zebulun. Zebulun is likened to a [ship](#) here ([Gen 49:13](#)). Zebulun would inherit land inland from the Mediterranean, and so the ship identification has stumped scholars. But he does inherit land next to his brother Naphtali who is by the Sea of Galilee. So it reads in Matthew that Jesus “[went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali](#)” ([Matt 4:13](#); cf. [Isa 9:1-2](#)). Originally, before the tribe of Dan moved from its allotment and settled in the north under the shadow of Mt. Hermon, Naphtali/Zebulun would have been the northern most part of Israel (see map below) and the Sea of Galilee would have been the border with the Gentiles. It is not difficult therefore to see Zebulun—small as its land would be, making trade agreements with the Phoenicians of Sidon as Jacob foresees here. Because we skipped Judah, Zebulun's prophecy is really the first positive one we have seen, which is strange for a blessing.

Issachar

This reverses itself again with [Issachar](#). Immediately, Jacob calls him a “[strong donkey, crouching between the sheepfolds](#)” ([49:14](#)). Why a donkey? Is it its stubbornness, laziness, or perhaps exhaustion from hard work? When Issachar came to the Promised Land, he saw the fertile land south of the Jordan on the west and desired it. But as small as he was, he would make an easy target for the Canaanites who would enslave him. The name Issachar is linked to a word “[to pay](#)” or “[a man of hire](#).” Now, he becomes a [slave](#) ([15](#)). There is a wordplay here in the poem.

It is difficult not to have the treachery of the brothers against Joseph in the back of our minds when we see just how negative so many of these “blessings” from Jacob are. But the law, the history, and the prophets of God are unified in their voices. God “[visits the iniquity of the fathers on the children](#).” It is the way of things, even among Christians saved by grace. God still often punishes our sins on earth. Our sins very often find us out and others end up having to pay for them. This does not mean God does not forgive us. It means that there are consequences in this life for what we do. It ought to make you think long and hard about continuing in your own sin. What would you do if you were one of these boys receiving these words from your father on his death bed?

Dan

As each boy lines up to receive his father's words, Dan's time comes next. Dan is the first son born to a handmaid. He stands before his father who lays his old hand on his head and says, “[Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel](#)”

(49:16). It begins well enough. It is a play on Dan's name which Rachel said, "Judged/Vindicated" her through Bilhah (Dan will *din* or "judge"). Dan would have some mighty military victories that would help his people.

That leads to the second part. "Dan shall be a serpent on the way, a viper by the path, that bites the horse's heels so that his rider falls backward. I wait for your salvation, O LORD" (49:17-18). Dan would originally settle land along the Mediterranean in the middle, but it would be forced to flee north. Eventually, it would settle a portion of the land of Bashan, just under Mt. Hermon, the only tribe to do so. Bashan means, "place of the serpent."⁹ Thus, Dan becomes known as the serpent. It would later be home of the giant Og. Thus, his victories in the north would be mighty victories indeed or people's who were profoundly influenced by supernatural paganism.

When we were in Israel, we had a chance to visit a site built by Jeroboam in the land of Dan. This is where he set up two golden calves to emulate the sin of Aaron. Dan would not be free of his own syncretism, and therefore the final yearning, "I wait for your salvation, O LORD," testifies to his longing for redemption. This is the last time "Yahweh" appears as a name in Genesis. Is Jacob foreseeing now the difficulties his sons will have in centuries to come, realizing that they will suffer many things, knowing that they themselves will need future deliverance, beyond the exodus, beyond the exiles, and down into the remote future of the NT itself?

Gad

The poetry perhaps reaches new heights with Gad (vs. 19). Four of the six words in the Hebrew have his name (*gd*) in them: *Gudud yugudennu wuhu yagud aqeb* ("Raiders shall raid Gad, but he shall raid at their heels"). He is predicting more warfare for the people who will settle the Transjordan along with Reuben and half the tribe of Manasseh. Nevertheless, they will have some success. The idea of "raiders" seems to be the root from where Gad would be identified with tents, as those nomadic kinds of people were constantly on the run.

Asher

Asher means "happy" and the prophecy from his father certainly fits his name. "His food shall be rich, and he shall yield royal delicacies" (49:20). Asher would get some of the best land in Israel, the fertile area north of Mt. Carmel and south of Tyre along the Great Sea. Thus, his symbol would later become a palm tree. But is this all positive, or could there be a hint of a rebuke here with a people who would accommodate too much with the princes of and kings of Tyre? Hope-

⁹ Hermon is the home of the Watchers in 1 Enoch, being described as serpentine in appearance in the Dead Sea Scrolls and other places.

fully you are seeing how the names of the sons given so long ago now become part and parcel of many of the prophecies given to their descendants. Names matter.

Naphtali

Naphtali is likened to a [doe](#) let loose that gives birth to beautiful fawns ([49:21](#)). This is probably the most beautiful part of all Israel, up by the Sea of Galilee where Jesus spent so much time. It is not known if this is a positive reference to the animals of the area, or a veiled negative idea of how Naphtali would one day settle down and assimilate too much with the Canaanite of the land. Or, perhaps it is both.

Benjamin (skipping Joseph)

Because he takes longer, I'll skip Joseph for a moment, and turn to Benjamin. Called "[a ravenous wolf](#)," who "[in the morning devours the prey and at evening divides the spoil](#)" ([49:27](#)), this doesn't seem to fit anything we know about Rachel's last son, nor anything we would think Jacob would say about his second favorite. In Judges we will see Benjamin rising time and time again in mighty ways to deliver Israel: [Ehud](#) ([Jdg 3:15–30](#)); against [Sisera](#) ([5:14](#)); and their savagery at [Gibeah](#), prompting a civil war ([chaps. 19–21](#)). They would become so destructive that they are almost wiped out of existence by God at the end of the book. Of course, two more famous Benjamites rise from the ashes. Both happen to be named [Saul](#)—one a king, one an Apostle. Thus, the futures of 10 of the 12 sons are behind us.

(Returning to) Joseph

Let us now turn our attention to Joseph. Joseph has a longer section, which is especially curious given that he was just blessed for an entire chapter through his own two sons (Ephraim and Manasseh). It is also quite obscure (as are other parts of this poem), difficult to translate and to interpret. To make a long story short, the ESV and most translations liken Joseph here to a [tree](#) or a [vine](#) ([22](#)) with "[branches running over the wall](#)." The image of a righteous man flourishing like a tree planted by a river ([Ps 1](#))¹⁰ would certainly fit with righteous Joseph. It is also important to note that the word "bough" (*parah*) can also mean a [wild donkey](#) (see NLT, TNK, NAB), or more probably, as a few translations (CEB, BBE), the Targum, and Deuteronomy 32 which quotes a verse from this passage—a [bull](#) ([Deut 33:13, 17](#); [Gen 49:6](#) JTE). Since Joseph is divided into his two sons, thus getting a double portion of land, Ephraim ends up having the symbol of the bull attached to him.

Since Joseph wouldn't inherit any land personally, the opposition of "[archers](#)" attacking and shooting at him, harassing him yet him remaining unmoved is

¹⁰ So the Jerusalem Targum of this verse, "[Thee, Joseph, my son, will I liken to a vine planted by fountains of water, which sendeth her roots into the depth and striketh the ridges of the rocks, uplifting herself on high and surmounting all the trees](#)" ([Gen 49:22](#) JTE).

probably talking about Joseph's past in his life that we have read about throughout Genesis. "His arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob" (24). Then Jacob gives Joseph a wonderful blessing (25-26) that extend to all of his life, asking God to help him and bless him greatly from heaven with deep blessings of fruitfulness, blessings that extend even beyond those Jacob himself received. Rain, children, agriculture, a wife ... it's all there.

Indeed, Joseph has been blessed, greatly by God, more than any other man in the book of Genesis, though he had to endure more than any other to get it. Here, two more things are important. First, vs. 26 is essentially quoted in Deuteronomy 33:16. "May they be on the head of Joseph, and on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers" becomes, "May these rest on the head of Joseph, on the pate of him who is prince among his brothers" (Deut 33:16). In other words, Jacob is admitting that Joseph's dream of eleven stars bowing down to him has come true. God has fulfilled his word. I'll return to this dream momentarily.

Second, the ESV has a parenthetical in Gen 49:24, "From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel." Here we have the idea of God as a Shepherd being repeated (see 48:15). But now the title is added that he is also a Stone. Throughout the Scripture, Rock or Stone will be used as titles God takes. But please notice, both of these ideas—Shepherd and Rock—are things told to us of Christ Jesus: The Good Shepherd and the Stone of Stumbling and Rock of Offense who was in the desert with Israel. But somehow, this blessing of Israel is not only from Christ who continually saved Joseph by his mighty hand. It revolves around Christ too, *literally*.¹¹

National Blessings and the Animals of Israel

What do I mean by "literally?" With that, I want to turn to looking now at this passage of Scripture in terms of how it would be such an important foundation of things found later in the Bible for Israel as a nation, beyond the twelve sons to the twelve tribes and *even beyond that*. Because this chapter of Genesis is so important for the rest of the Bible, if we ignore the rest of the Bible, we would not do justice to this chapter. We can't just stay here with Jacob on his death bed. We have the future written down, and we must turn to it for help.

I'm going to try and connect some dots here for us now that might at first seem rather strange and even unrelated. Let's start by remembering Joseph's dream back in Gen 37:9. He dreamed of stars. In the same way that his other dream of

¹¹ I have never been able to escape the idea that there God is also likening himself to the material that idols and shrines were made out of, as both were the "houses" of the gods. In every instance the word appears in Genesis, its context is (a) religious (house of) worship (Gen 2:12; 11:3; 28:11, 18, 22; 35:14), a vital place of meeting ordained by God (29:2, 3, 8, 10), or a place of covenant witnessing (31:45, 46).

wheat was not mere analogy (it pointed to the future famine), this was not a mere analogy. The images themselves were meaningful. We are finally able to see how.

Let's remember the [animals](#) we have discussed as we fast forward a time to just after the Exodus. Israel is out in the wilderness. They have been given the instructions for how to build this movable tabernacle, and these instructions include how they are supposed to—of all things—sleep around it. Numbers 2 describes it all. There were to be three camps on each side and the tabernacle which itself must face the cardinal points (N, S, E, W). Each camp is rallied by a [standard](#) or [banner](#) that represented that tribe (Num 2:1). That banner had the image of the tribe. So Reuben is a man/water, Dan a serpent, and so on. Our chapter is the root of all this.



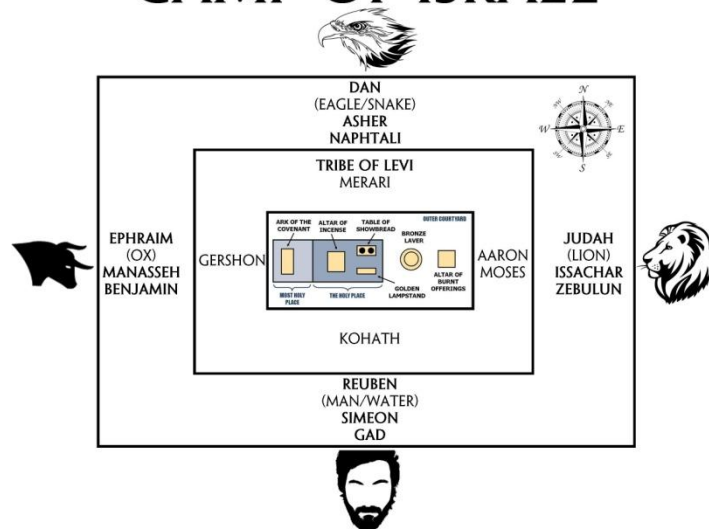
The Banners or Standards of Israel (see fig. 1 handout)

Why would God care about where the tribes sleep in relation to the tabernacle? Curiously, there are four main tribes, one on each side, with two lesser tribes also on a side. Put a compass in your mind. Now, starting in the east where the entrance is and making our way clockwise they are: Judah, Reuben, Ephraim (or Joseph), and Dan. If we go back and look at the symbols (I know we haven't talked about Judah, but you know what his symbol is), these put at the four cardinal points with their respective symbols as: a [lion](#), a [man with water](#), an [ox](#), and a [serpent](#) (see below).¹² It

¹² There is some correspondence between the way the tribes camped and the location of the tribes as they took over the land of Canaan. Notice Dan is north and Manasseh is west. (The desert east of the Jordan was not really part of Canaan, but the three tribes wanted it. Simeon represents therefore the south, leaving only Judah which contains Jerusalem, the city where the temple would be built where you enter from the east).

is important to understand that Dan—the serpent—later came to be associated with the eagle.¹³ I’ll explain why in a moment.

CAMP OF ISRAEL



(see fig. 2 handout)

A lion, a man, a bull, and an eagle. Have you ever heard those four things put together elsewhere in the Bible? We see them show up together in the four living creatures of Ezekiel and Revelation. “As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle” (Ezek 1:10).¹⁴ “The first



¹³ Cf., A. R. Fausset, “The Revelation of St. John the Divine,” in Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, 1877), Rev. 4:8; John MacArthur, *Revelation 1-11 : The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), Rev. 4:8.

¹⁴ Also, “And every one had four faces: the first face was the face of the cherub, and the second face was a human face, and the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle” (Ezek 10:14). The only difference at all is that this passage has “cherub” rather than “ox,” but this is not a big deal, since cherubim were often portrayed in iconography throughout the ancient world as having oxen bodies.

living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight” (Rev 4:7). Strangely, the lion on the right and the ox on the left correspond exactly to the way God had Israel line up in their camp (see above).¹⁵

Let me mention a couple of things about the context in which the living creatures are found. First, Ezekiel sees a wheel full of eyes. John also see lots and lots of eyes. You may have bizarre monsters in your mind, or if you follow some of the strange things I do, you may have heard that Ezekiel saw a flying saucer. Nonsense. The word for “eye” (*ayin*) can also mean “sparkling.” In fact, the word is translated both for “eyes” (Ezek 1:18) and for “gleaming/sparkling” (1:4, 7, 16) in the same chapter! The thought is, these “eyes” represent things that sparkle. Think stars.

Here is where things start to get quite fascinating. Ezekiel is prophesying from Babylon, the origin of astrology and astronomy (in those days, they were not separated out as “science” and “superstition” like we do it). These things have to do with stars. Today most people can’t even see the stars because of the light pollution at night in the cities. We hear little about the them, save maybe in a Hollywood romantic comedy (well, pretty much anyone in Hollywood. They are our “stars” after all), or maybe if you walk into a vegetarian restaurant in Boulder and meet some flighty hippie chick with a bandana, tie-dye shirt, and hair armpits who asks you your sign. But I want you to think about the zodiac for just a moment.

Astrologers use the zodiac to tell people’s fortunes. An archeologist studying—of all things—zodiacs in ancient Jewish synagogues explains that if you know “The exact date and time of one’s birth, and can chart the exact position of the heavenly bodies at that moment, then forevermore one knows what is fortunate, unfortunate, worth doing, worth avoiding, wise, unwise, etc. Our universe, therefore, is fixed and determined. There are no values, no good, no evil and no repentance. We live in a great mechanical machine of a cosmos.”¹⁶ This is pure and simple what the Apostle calls “enslavement” to the *stoicheia* (“elementary principles”) that



Cherubim Iconography

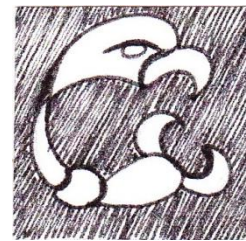
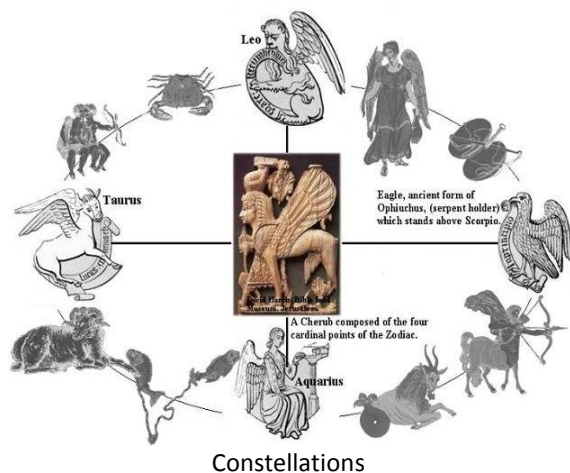
¹⁵ This second Ezekiel passage seemingly lists in a different order. But that passage describes them not as opposites (on the right, on the left), but counterclockwise, beginning with the cherub-bull.

¹⁶ Walter Zanger, “Jewish Worship, Pagan Symbols: Zodiac Mosaics in Ancient Synagogues,” *Bible History Daily* (Biblical Archaeology Society, 8-24-2014), <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-israel/jewish-worship-pagan-symbols/>, last accessed 5-11-2015.

forced Gentiles to observe “**days and months and seasons and years**” (**Gal 4:7-10**). It is paganism, and Christians are warned against returning to such ideas because Jesus had set them free from such things by his death and resurrection.

Nevertheless, the Bible calls heavenly beings “stars” (**Job 38:7**; **Rev 12:4**). And remember that Joseph had a dream about “stars.” The word for a “star” can also be used for a whole group of stars called **constellations**.¹⁷ How many constellations are there in the zodiac? **Twelve**. How many tribes gathered round the tabernacle? **Twelve**. What is the number at the end of our story today? **Twelve** (**Gen 49:28**).¹⁸

What are the four cardinal constellations of the zodiac, those that line up in a circle at the four points N, S, E, W? They are **Leo** the lion. Opposite him is **Taurus** the bull. Below them is **Aquarius** the man holding water. Above them is, and it depends on which chart you look at, either **Scorpio** (often viewed as an eagle) or **Ophiuchus** (lit: “Serpent-Bearer”)—a man holding a snake (and now you see why Dan had both symbols attached to that tribe).



Scorpio/Eagle

Amazingly, when you look at ancient church art depicting the scene of heaven that John sees in Revelation 4-5 or that he sees in a parallel scene of the new Jerusalem/bride coming down out of heaven (with its twelve pillars of the Apostles), they look awfully similar to Israel camping around the tabernacle.¹⁹

¹⁷ “Indeed, one of the ways to say ‘pagan’ in rabbinical Hebrew is by the abbreviation עובדי כוכבים [ovedei kokhavim u-mazalot, ‘worshippers of stars and constellations’].” Zanger, ibid.

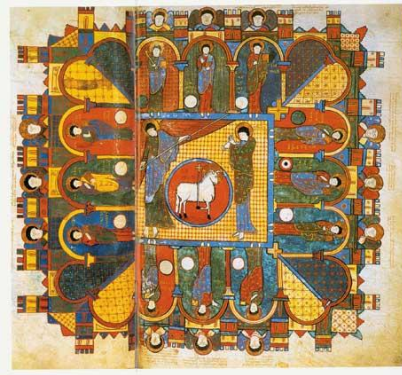
¹⁸ **Twelve** is the number of time: 60 (12 x 5) **seconds**, 60 (12 x 5) **minutes**. 24 (12 x 2) **hours**. Twelve points on a **clock**. Twelve **months** in a year. Twelve **signs of the zodiac** that take us through the year in the heavens (also twelve years in a Chinese “**Earthly Branch**.” None of these would be possible without the circle with has 360 (12 x 30) degrees.

¹⁹ First, these same four animals came as early as the Second Century to represent the Four Gospels: Matthew (man), Mark (lion), Luke (ox/bull), and John (eagle). Irenaeus (ca. 120-202 AD), *Against Heresies* 3.11.8; Au-



Heavenly Jerusalem

Beatus of Liébana (c. 730 – c. 800)
Las Huelgas Apocalypse, Spain 1220 AD
 Purchased by Pierpont Morgan, 1910
 MS M.429 (fol. 140v)



The Heavenly Jerusalem

from the *Apocalypse of Saint-Sever*
 (11th century)



Vision Of The Lamb & The Four Living Creatures

Beatus of Liébana (c. 730 – c. 800)
Las Huelgas Apocalypse
 Spain 1220 AD
 Purchased by Pierpont Morgan, 1910
 MS M.429 (fol. 61v)



The Vision of the Lamb

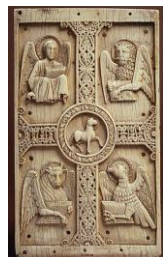
(Apoc. 4: 6 – V: 6-8),
 Beatus of Liébana d. 798
 Spanish, ca. 950 AD
 Pierpont Morgan Library
 M644, fol. 87r



(see figs. 3-4 handout)

This is because they are all describing something very similar. In a word, it is **heaven come down to earth**. This is actually the exact opposite of what an astrolo-

gustine, *Harmony of the Gospels* 1.6.9. The four animals are always the same, though which Gospel goes to which animal was sometimes different.



Plaque with Agnus Dei on a Cross between Emblems of the Four Evangelists

1000–1050 AD
 German or North Italian
 Ivory; 9 1/4 x 5 3/8 in. (23.5 x 13.7 cm)
 Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.38)



Four Gospels

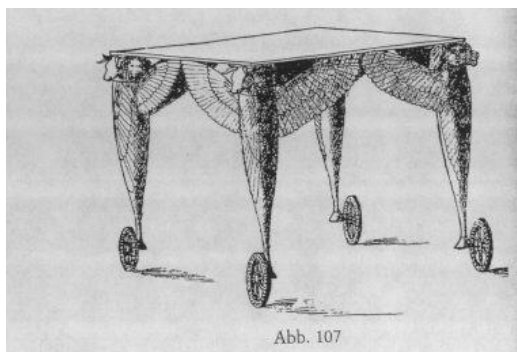
The Book of Kells
 ca. 800 AD

ger will tell you. For them, you have to “reach up into heaven to bring God down” (Rom 10:6). But what we are talking about now is God coming down to us, and being very near to us in a special way. This is ultimately what Jacob is prophesying as it concerns the nation, which is why you find the idea from the Exodus - Revelation.

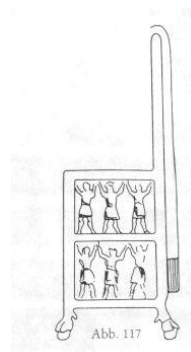
When God is describing this for us in the Bible, sometimes you have a heavenly scene depicted (**Ezek 1**, **Rev 4**). Ezekiel’s “wheel” with eyes is one example. The ancient kings represented this on their thrones and platforms, with figures holding their arms up as if separating heavenly space from lower space, because the king was considered by all to be “god on earth,” or a representative of the gods on earth. Well, Ezekiel’s depiction of a wheel is nothing less than seeing the rotation of the constellations around the earth—four living creatures full of sparkling eyes.



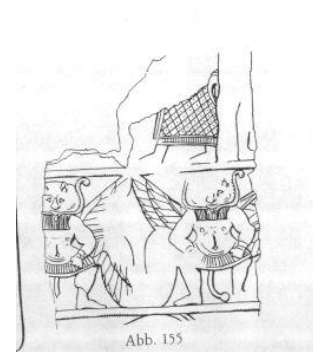
The Heavenly “Wheel” (see fig. 5 handout)



- (1) a throne platform with wheels;
- (2) multi-faced bovine heads with touching wings – 2 more wings are folded on the body of the creature;
- (3) hooved leg-bottoms adjacent to the wheels



- Creatures holding up the god-king, lifting him off the earth. Note the hooved feet at the base of the throne.

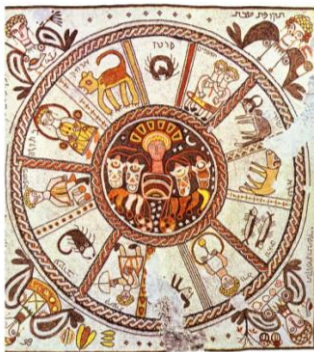


- Four wingtips of the creatures touching each other as they support the god and his throne (see Ezek. 1:22ff.)²⁰

²⁰ The imagery depicted two inter-related things. First, it symbolized the four corners of the earth, with the pillars that held up the sky. Scholars have long understood this to be the case. See Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, vol. 28, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 28–29. Daniel Isaac Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 324–25. I know that sounds bizarre, but that is because you have Google Earth and men who have flown in space telling you that the earth is round and supported on nothing. But in a flat earth cosmology, the sky was held up by pillars (often, mountains), to keep the two realms separate. See also Michael Heiser, “Notes on Ezekiel’s Vision,” <http://www.sitchiniswrong.com/ezekielnotes.htm>,

Other times you have heaven depicted on earth through something like the city or the camp of Israel. It is very important to understand [the reason God is doing this](#). In causing Israel to emulate the constellations as the tabernacle rotated through the space-void of the desert as it were, or even the new Jerusalem that looks so much like it, it forces us to understand that *these have become* the constellations that pagans worship as gods. Israel is now fixed to the destiny of the nations, not the stars. The church is now fixed to the destiny of the nations, not the stars. This is so because God is in their midst. He has come down. He is bringing heaven down to earth in a way that emulates the stars above. As in Joseph's dream. Jacob is prophesying this. But Joseph is not the end of all this. Joseph died long before there was ever a rotation of tribes around the tent of God.

Now, something curious happened in the worship of the Jews much, much later that is related to all this. Almost inexplicably, Jews would actually put zodiacs in their synagogues. These zodiacs were not pagan, like you see in a newspaper. They were the twelve tribes of Israel rotating around the Shekinah-Glory of God.



Mosaic pavement of a 6th century synagogue at [Beth Alpha](#), Jezreel Valley, northern Israel. It was discovered in 1928



MOSAIC FLOOR OF THE 4-5TH C. SYNAGOGUE IN HAMAT TIBERIAS. CENTRAL PANEL WITH THE ZODIAC AND THE SUN GOD HELIUS IN THE CENTER

(see fig. 6 handout)



Zodiac Wheel Mosaic in the great synagogue of Tzippori (Sepphoris), 5th century

Rabbis explained this anomaly, “The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him [Abraham]: just as the zodiac [*mazalot*] surrounds me, and my glory is in the center, so shall your descendants multiply and camp under many flags, with my *shekhina* in the center.”²¹ The Shekinah as the center sounds a lot like Christ as the center in Reve-

last accessed 5-11-2015. Pictures from Othmar Keel – *Jahwe-Visionen und Siegelkunst: Eine neue Deutung der Majestätsschilderungen in Jes, Ez 1 und 10 und Sach 4* (“Visions of Yahweh and Seal Art: A New Interpretation of the Majestic Portrayals in Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1 and 10, and Zechariah 4”), Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart, 1984-85).

²¹ From a Geniza fragment of *Midrash Deut. Rabba*) These quotations are cited by Michael Klein, “Palestinian Targum and Synagogue Mosaics,” Jerusalem, *Immanuel* 11 (1980). See Zanger. “And for the twelve stones, whether we understand by them the months, or whether we understand the like number of the signs of that

lation 4-5 or 21, and indeed, Christ is the “glory” of God ([John 1:14](#)).²² Much later, Christians we start doing the same thing in their own churches (not that I’m endorsing this, mind you):



the *Ainoi* (the ‘Praises’ from psalms 148-151). In the centre is Christ Enthroned encircled by the sun and moon and signs of the Zodiac, a reference to “*praise him all his angels..... ye sun and moon.....praise him all ye stars of light.*”
Dekoulou Monastery, Greece



A 15th-17th-century fresco
Cathedral of Living Pillar, Georgia (Russia)



Zodiac mural in Megistis Lavras Monastery ~ Mount Athos, Greece. Depicting Jesus with the symbols of the 4 Evangelists and around him the 9 angelic orders. The outer circle with the zodiac signs, the sun and the moon has not any specific meaning but only “the heavens with the stars”.

(see fig. 7 handout)

Christ and the Blessing of the Nations

What accounts for all this? Only one thing. Jesus Christ, who also happens to be the focal point of Gen 49. As we conclude I want to call your attention back to Joseph who is likened to both a vine and/or bull/donkey. Now it is time to look at the one remaining son of Jacob: [Judah](#). Curiously, the same images are found in his prophecy. “[Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey’s colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes](#)” (11). The next verse adds that his [eyes are darker than wine and his teeth whiter than milk](#) (12). This is predicting both the [First and Second comings](#), but not with Joseph. Rather, with Judah. Riding in on a donkey, entering the city, dying for sins; returning with a sword to judge. He will do what the stars could not. How do I know?

Look at the rest of Judah’s prophecy. Like so many of the others, it begins with a play on his name. Judah means “[praise](#).” Judah, your brothers “[shall praise you](#)” ([Gen 49:8](#)). It then starts to describe more warfare, but this time, Judah is a victor over his enemies. Then comes the famous comparison to a lion, “[Judah is a lion’s cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him?](#)” (10). Lions are the “king of the jungle.” As we have seen, this [lion](#) corresponds to Leo in the heavens.

circle which the Greeks call the Zodiac, we shall not be mistaken in their meaning.” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.186).

²² See my Christ in the OT book and the chapter on the Glory.

Then it gets really interesting. This idea of “king” comes into sharp focus. “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,²³ until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.” “Tribute” is the famous “Shiloh.” This is an extremely difficult word to translate. It may mean “ruler.” It may mean “tribute” (ESV). It may mean “until he comes whose it [the scepter] is” (RSV, NIV).

In the last, “Judah” and the “he who comes” are separate people. Who is this? Young’s Literal Translation has, “Till his Seed come” (Gen 49:10). This isn’t Judah. Suddenly, Genesis 3:15 is right back in view. The point of the first is that there is a Ruler somewhere far off in the distance that is not Judah. So the Targums amazingly read together in unison, “Until the time that the King Meshiha shall come” (Gen 49:10). The ESV adds the idea of foreign nations coming to bring tribute to this king. Like the stars surrounding the throne of God, so the nations come to bring him tribute. What all translations agree on is that there is going to be a King who will come in the future through the line of Judah. Thus, the book of Genesis begins with a seed and ends with a king, and both are prophecies of a future Messiah.

Jacob’s words were to his sons, but they were also to the twelve tribes of Israel and beyond, to the church whose foundations are the twelve pillars of the Apostles. The symbolism is that of the heavens come down to earth. There is no need to reach up to the stars to determine your fate. That is slavery that Christ has set us free from as the salvation Dan waited for has come. Christ has come near. And now, he is moving the very heavens themselves, through his church, as she triumphantly shakes the heavens, bringing the announcement of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that the lion of Judah has entered from the east to conquer sin, that the water of life flows from the buckets of the God-man, that the serpent has his own fatal boot to the head, by the heel of the Bull of Israel. People are released. God alone determines our destinies and shows us the way forward through the one who alone has put into effect a new covenant, a new Testament—which was made effective by his death on the cross.

He bids you now, join the cloud of witnesses who encircle the throne on all sides and sing, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain. Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.”

²³ “Feet” is changed to “standards,” in the Samaritan translation.