

What can we learn from the tribe of Issachar?

Each of the twelve sons of Israel / Jacob received a blessing from his father just before Jacob's death. The twelve sons were the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel, and Jacob's blessings contained prophetic information about each tribe. In the case of the tribe of Issachar, Jacob prophesied, "Issachar is a rawboned donkey, lying down between two burdens; He saw that rest was good, and that the land was pleasant; He bowed his shoulder to bear a burden, and became a band of slaves" (Genesis 49:14-15).

The first part of the prophecy about the tribe of Issachar, whose name means either "he will bring a reward" or "man of wages," is somewhat obscure. The word translated "rawboned" in the NIV is translated "strong" in other versions. It can also mean "bony" as in "nothing but skin and bones." Therefore, the prophecy could either mean that the descendants of Issachar would be strong and robust, able to bear burdens, or that they would be thin and weak and unable to do so.

The image of a donkey lying down between its burdens can also be interpreted two ways. On one hand, it could portray a sturdy animal resting for the task ahead. On the other hand, donkeys also are known to stubbornly crouch between their burdens to keep from having to do the work! Again, the prophecy eludes a dogmatic interpretation. The subsequent history of Issachar in the Bible does not conclusively favor either construal.

As for the second part of the prophecy, some commentators believe it is an indication that the descendants of Issachar would be farmers—the reference to "a band of slaves" means they would be servants of the land. Others see it as a prediction of forced labor, although nothing in Scripture indicates that the tribe of Issachar was ever forced into

slavery of any kind. In fact, the Hebrew wording is so obscure that English translations vary widely. Consider the following:

KJV: "Issachar is a strong ass couching down between two burdens: And he saw that rest was good, and the land that it was pleasant; and bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant unto tribute."

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

NASB: "Issachar is a strong donkey, Lying down between the sheepfolds. When he saw that a resting place was good And that the land was pleasant, He bowed his shoulder to bear burdens, And became a slave at forced labor."

NIV: "Issachar is a rawboned donkey lying down between two saddlebags. When he sees how good is his resting place and how pleasant is his land, he will bend his shoulder to the burden and submit to forced labor."

There is another reference to the men of Issachar during the time of David's struggle against Saul (1 Chronicles 12:32). The two hundred chiefs of Issachar who are faithful to David are described as those who "understood the times and knew what Israel should do." Scholars are divided on the meaning of the phrase "understood the times." Some portray the men of Issachar as politically astute, knowing how to use current events to their own advantage. Others interpret the phrase to mean they were known for their understanding of astronomy and physical science. Still others see them as men of

prudence and wisdom who, because of their religious scholarship, knew that this was the proper time for David to become king. The truth is that we really don't know for sure.

As part of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the territory of Issachar was conquered by the Assyrians around 720 B.C. and the tribe exiled. After that, all explicit biblical references to the tribe cease.

How are we to understand these references to Issachar and their different interpretations, and what do they mean to us as Christians? First, it's important to understand that Jacob's prophecies to his sons were just that—prophecies to his sons. We should be very careful when applying Old Testament passages to the Church Age or to Christians in general. We can, however, glean certain general principles regarding work and its rewards. The Bible makes it clear that work is a gift from God for the benefit of His people (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13; 5:18-20) and those who don't work shouldn't eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10). The Bible contains numerous references to those who work as reaping rewards, both in the temporal and spiritual realms (2 Chronicles 15:7; 1 Corinthians 3:8,14; 2 John 1:8; Revelation 2:23; 22:12).

There are some who would point to the different translations of Genesis 49:14-15 as evidence of the unreliability of the Bible. However, it must be remembered that such cases of obscurity are extremely rare, and none of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith are ever in question. Whether the donkey was bony or robust does not affect the Bible's teaching on sin, death, judgment, heaven, hell, the atonement of Christ, or a myriad other doctrines. Scripture contains ample information regarding these doctrines to make them clearly understood to all who have "ears to hear" (Mark 4:9, 23).