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Issachar is a Strong Donkey, and Became a Laborer Who Tills 49: 14-15

Issachar is a strong donkey, and became a laborer who tills DIG: Why can these verses be seen in either a positive or a negative light? Why? How does Judges 5:19-22 and First Chronicles 12:23 and 32 help us to know which view is correct? In what sense was Issachar a strong donkey? How are all the other animals in Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 viewed? How was the land he inherited good and pleasant? What from Issachar's past history would indicate that he would not choose slavery over liberty? What was Issachar's far eschatological future?

REFLECT: How are we to understand the times today? Are you a hard worker? When was the last time you had to rest from exertion when serving the Lord? How does the thought of being a strong donkey for ADONAI strike you? In what way do you need a burden lifted from you today? Who can you talk to? Is there anything holding you back from seeking help? Why? Are you a burden bearer for others?

Issachar is a strong donkey pausing to **rest between the sheepfolds, and [when] he saw how good [his] resting-place was, and that the land was**

pleasant he will [bent his shoulder to the burden], and will became a [farmer who tills the land].

As **Jacob** gazed up at **his sons** standing around **his** deathbed, **Issachar** was next as he was standing next to **Zebulun**. The last of **Leah's** six **sons, his near historical prophecy** can be somewhat perplexing. Many of the words in these two verses are so obscure, that translations from the Hebrew vary widely. This has led commentators to come to one of two conclusions. On the one hand, some believe these words should be translated to paint **a negative picture** the tribe of **Issachar** as a beast of burden, who, unwilling to fight, would rather submit to the yoke and be forced to do the work of a slave rather than risk their possessions and their peace in the struggle for liberty. On the other hand, others see **a positive picture** of **Issachar** being a sturdy, hard-working **donkey**, who is seen resting from **his** labors. When **he** sees how good **his** inheritance is and how productive **the land** may become, **he** becomes determined to continue **his** hard-working efforts. To get a more complete picture, we need to look elsewhere in the TaNaKh.

First, we see the tribe of **Issachar's** loyal support of **the prophetess Deborah** in defeating the Canaanites. **The princes of Issachar were with Deborah; yes, Issachar was with** General **Barak** (who was from the tribe of **Issachar**)**, sent under his command into the valley (Judges 5:15a).** The Song of **Deborah** blessed those tribes who responded freely to the call to **battle** – included in that list was the tribe of **Issachar**. **They** were not faint of heart and would not submit to **the kings of Canaan (Judges 5:19-22)**, nor sacrifice **their** peace for the sake of safety. **They** were not lazy cowards!

Secondly, the chronicler tells us of **their** willingness to fight and die for what **they** knew was right. **These were the numbers of the men armed for battle who came to David at Hebron to turn Saul's kingdom over to him, as ADONAI had** said: **From Issachar, men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do – 200 chiefs, with all their relatives under their command (First Chronicles 12:23** and **32).** This is not the picture of a timid tribe who chose slavery over liberty for **want** to fight. As a result, Scripture points to the fact that **Issachar** and **his** descendants should be seen in a positive light. **They** had discernment and because of that the other tribes leaned on **them** for **their** insight.

***ADONAI** is looking for men and women who have discernment and understand **the times** today. It is absolutely amazing how many people today are so busy with the*

things of this world they do not understand they are on the wide road to judgment (see my commentary on ***Revelation, to see link click Fo – The Great White Throne Judgment****). What a tragedy to go through life chasing the wind and miss that single most important reason we are here – to worship* ***God****. The other tribes might have been somewhat distracted, but* ***Issachar understood the times and knew what Israel should do.*** *And so should we. All we have to do is read and believe the Scriptures. The Bible says it . . . I believe it . . . and that settles it!*

The name **Issachar** means *hire*. When **Leah's son Reuben found some mandrake plants,** meaning *love apples* (a supposed aphrodisiac) **he brought** them **to his mother.** But when Rachael found out about them, she wanted them to help her with her barrenness. She then agreed that **Jacob** could **sleep with Leah** that night **in return for** the **mandrakes (30:15).** When **Jacob** came in from the fields that day, **Leah** informed him: **I have hired you** (to **sleep with** me tonight) **with my son's mandrakes.** Consequently, when she became pregnant **Leah** named her **son Issachar**, or *hire* (see **Hl – God Listened to Leah and She Became Pregnant and Bore Issachar, Zebulan, and Dinah**). This **son** would have a special gifting in bearing the burdens of others.

Issachar is a *hamor garem,* or **strong donkey (49:14a NET).** If viewed negatively, the word translated "rawboned" in the NIV is translated **strong** in the New English Translation and other versions. "Rawboned" can also mean "bony" as in "nothing but skin and bones." Some see a sadly comical picture of an ass that has knelt with its heavy saddle bags and can no longer stand up. Thus, if viewed negatively, the prophecy could mean that the descendants of **Issachar** would be thin and weak.

However, the positive nature of all other animal comparisons in both **Genesis 49** and **Deuteronomy 33** suggests the possibility that this prophecy contains a similarly positive statement about **Issachar**. A brief summary of the other animal comparisons will illustrate this point. In **Genesis 49:9**, **Judah** is compared to **a lion's cub**. In **Genesis 49:17**, **Dan will be a snake by the roadside, a viper along the path that bites the horse's heels so that its rider tumbles backward.** The imagery here seems to suggest that **Dan**, although small, will be quite capable of holding **his** own. **His** strength will be greater than **his** size. As diminutive as **he** is, **he** will be able to strike panic into those much larger than **himself**. In **Genesis 49:21**, **Naphtali** is compared to **a doe**, and in **Genesis 49:27**, **Benjamin** is compared to **a wolf**. It seems to me that commentators have been too quick to read western views of the ass into this text. For centuries the

word “ass” has been a metaphor in the English language for stupidity. Nothing in the Scriptures suggests this view. **The donkey** is an important animal in the Bible – sure-footed in rough terrain, able to survive on poor forage, the basic transportation of poorer people and the bearer of burdens.[779]

Pausing to **rest between the sheepfolds (49:14b NET).** The word *hammispetayim* appears only three times in the TaNaKh. In **Judges 5:16 CJB** we read: **But why did you stay at the pens for the sheep, and listen to the shepherd’s flute playing for the flocks?** And **Psalm 68:13 NIV** says: **Even while you sleep among the sheep pens, the wings of My dove are sheathed with silver, its feathers with shinning gold.** So this translation seems preferable to that of “saddlebags,” as some have translated it.[780] The positive picture here, then, is of a **strong donkey**, pausing temporarily to **rest** from the work that **he** was meant to accomplish. **Jacob** calling **his son a donkey** was actually a complement because **donkeys** were a very important mode of travel and a mean of work during those days. One who carried **burdens**.

And [when] he saw how good [his] resting-place was, and that the land was pleasant (49:15a). This verse continues that thought of the previous verse, explaining what Issachar, the strong donkey, will do when he arrives in Canaan. When viewed negatively, **Issachar** is seen as “a rawboned donkey,” who preferred “lying down between two saddlebags,” or the territory between the Carmel Mountain Range and the Gilboa Mountain Range. In the northwest, the boundaries of **the tribe of Issachar** touched those of Zebulun, and extended westward to the Kishon River. The southern boundary bordered the northern boundary of West Manasseh. Consequently, an eastern portion of the Jezreel Valley, along with the city of Megiddo, rested with their tribal allotment. **The son’s of Issachar** looked east through the Jezreel valley and the Plain of Esdraelon. The Jordan River formed the tribe’s eastern boundary (Joshua 19:17-23). **Their** allotment was one of the most agriculturally desirable.

However, the Hebrew word *rabas, to lie down,* merely means *to rest from exertion.* There is nothing inherent in the verb **resting-place**, sometimes interpreted by some as **laying down**, to suggest laziness. I think those who find laziness here have been influenced by the rebuke of Reuben in **49:3-4**, where there is a contrast between what Reuben might have become and what he really became. Some commentators expect to find the same thing here.

He will [bend his shoulder to the burden] (49:15b NIV). Besides being fertile, the

main highway from Egypt to Babylon passed through the Jezreel Valley so that any country trying to control the trade routes would seek to take control of that region. It is therefore understandable that Issachar would often be subject to invading armies. Therefore, those who would interpret the verse negatively would say that Issachar would not fight for his land. They would say that he was strong, but passive and lazy, preferring to take it easy.

And will become a [farmer who tills the land] (49:15c ASV). When viewed negatively, some see that **Issachar's** apathy resulted in the tribe's slavery to the Canaanites: "He will bend his shoulder to the burden and submit to forced labor." But **Issachar's** name *hire*, does not fit this "forced labor" view. There is nothing in the TaNaKh that indicates the tribe of **Issachar** was ever forced into slavery of any kind. In fact, the Greek Septuagint (the Greek translation of the TaNaKh), supports the elementary, nontechnical meaning of the phrase, translating *kai egenethe aner georgos,* **and he will become a farmer** who **tills the land**.

A negative view of this passage sees a tribe **strong** enough to conquer the Canaanites in its area, but unwilling to forego political power and military victory in favor of enjoying the good land, even at the cost of liberty. They say the people of **Issachar** were willing to work for others just as long as they could enjoy peace and quiet. But this view is at odds with Scripture as seen in the introductory comments on **Judges 5:19-22** and **First Chronicles 12:23** and **32.** It is hard to see how **Issachar** could expect to enjoy subjugation or be willing to endure it after the experience of 430 years of oppression in Egypt (see my commentary on **Exodus Ca – At the End of the 430 Years, to the Very Day**). It is hard to see how slavery would be preferable to liberty, particularly when the history of Isra'el is filled with rebellions against various tyrannical rulers. No . . . it is better to take the positive view of these two verses and see **Issachar** as a **strong**, hard-working **donkey**, who at the present time is **resting** from **his** labors. And when **he saw how good his** inheritance was **and how** productive **the land** may become, **he** would continue **his** hard-working efforts.[781]

But in the **far eschatological future**, **Issachar will have one portion** in the messianic Kingdom**; it will border the territory of Simeon from east to west (Ezeki'el 48:25).**

The spirit of **Issachar** is still will us today. Rabbi Sha'ul, inspired by **the Ruach ha-Kodesh** speaks to us today and says: **Brothers, suppose someone is caught doing something wrong. You who have the Spirit should set him right, but**

in a spirit of humility, keeping an eye on yourselves so that you won't be tempted too. Bear one another's burdens – in this way you will be fulfilling the Torah's true meaning, which the Messiah upholds (Galatians 6:1-2 CJB). This reminds us of our own calling – being a **burden** bearer. **A strong donkey** for **Yeshua**, if you will. I wonder if Rabbi Sha'ul wasn't thinking of the tribe of **Issachar** when he wrote these words. The spirit of **Issachar** is about restoration – about bearing **burdens**. That's a picture of what **ADONAI** wants in our community. We all need assistance from time to time. Which means **God** will use you as the **burden** bearer.

On May 30, 1935, the greatest career in the history of major league baseball came to an end. It was Memorial Day in Philadelphia, but there were no fireworks to bid farewell, just a weak ground ball to Phillies' first baseman Dolph Camilli and a mournful walk back to the dugout. The immortal Babe Ruth was finished.

Towards the end of that same season, the Babe was playing for the Boston Braves in a game against the Reds at Crosley Field in Cincinnati. His skills had eroded and he was a shadow of his former self as the best player in the game – arguably of all time. There he had a nightmare game – three errors in the outfield resulting in five unearned runs, five strike-outs. At the end of the game he was jogging in from left field and the crowd started booing. In the midst of the booing, a young boy ran out onto the field and hugged Babe Ruth's leg. After a brief moment, the Babe took hold of the boy's hand and they started walking off the field. Everyone was so silent you could hear a pin drop. The actions of the youngster had put things into perspective – this once great player was having a bad game. A few cheers started to come from the once-quiet crowd. Just a few at first. But as the Babe and the boy walked off the field hand-in-hand, the jeers turned to cheers. That's a **burden** bearer. Someone with discernment who understood what was happening and did something about it. Are you an **Issachar**? Are you able to **bear a burden**? We must always remember **Messiah** has touched us so we can touch others until **He** comes. Thank **God**.

Continuing around the circle on **his** deathbed, **Ya'akov** next came to **Dan**, whose mother was **Rachel's** maidservant, **Bilhah**.