5786 - Genesis 32-36 - Vayishlach (And he sent)

FAMILY AFFAIRS (35:l6-29)[1]

THE DEATH OF RACHEL; THE BIRTH OF BENJAMIN (vv. l6-20)

Jacob moves south from Bethel. For the second time since his homecoming, tragedy strikes: His beloved Rachel dies in childbirth. He first set eyes on her when he arrived at Haran after the theophany at Bethel. Just as, at the beginning of their relationship he had been separated from her by a cruel ruse of Laban, so at the end a cruel ruse of fate separates her from him in the grave.

In 48:3-7, when Jacob is on his deathbed, he repeats in the same order the events here recorded: the blessing at Bethel and the demise of Rachel while giving birth to Benjamin. The juxtaposition reflects a reality apart from the time sequence. The blessing containcd a promise of kingship, which first found fulfillment in the person of King Saul, a Benjaminite.

16. ***some distance*** Hebrew *kivrat ha-'arets* is of uncertain derivation and meaning. Other than 48:7, which is a citation from this passage, it appears again only in 2Kings 5:19, where it must designate a distance short enough for a runner to catch up with a chariot on the move.

Ephrath Leaving Bethel, Jacob journeyed southward on the north-south longitudinal road that traverses the central hill country. Rachel's death and burial must have occurred not far from "Ephrath" ... Where is Ephrath? At first glance the answer is simple: It is identified with Bethlehem in verse 19, in 48:7, and in a host of other texts. Thus in 1Samuel 17:12, David is described as "the son of a certain Ephrathite in Judah." In Ruth 1:2, the two sons of the Elimilech, Naomi's husband, are similarly termed "Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah." **Micah 5:1 addresses "Bethlehem of Ephrath,"** and in Ruth 4:11 Boaz receives the blessing: "Prosper in Ephrathah and perpetuate your name in Bethlehem."

But there are difficulties. It is strange that Rachel would be buried in Judean territory, which is where Bethlehem lies, rather than within the Benjamite or Josephite tribal boundaries ...[2]

17. ***Have no fear*** Rachel is comforted in her death agony by the knowledge that God answered the prayer she had uttered after the birth of Joseph: "May the Lord add another son for me."(13)

18. ***Ben-oni*** The name has been almost universally understood to mean "son of my sorrow." It could also be"son of my vigor," a euphemism for "son of my debility"—that is,"his birth drained my strength."

Benjamin Jacob either reinterprets *ben-'oni* or replaces it by a more auspicious name. The meaning could be, "son of my right hand," the right being a symbol of dexterity, power, protection. Another rendering is "son of the south," that is, "the one born in the south." Such a meaning, suggested by Rashi, finds analogy in the Mari texts, which refer to tribal confederations of *DUMU Meš-yamina*, "sons of the south, Southerners," as opposed to *DUMU Meš-sim'al*, "sons of the north, Northerners." A third possibility, put forward by Rashbam, takes *yamin* for *yamim*, "days," so-that Benjamin would mean "son of my old age." In 44:20 he is called a child of his old age."This is the interpretation given in the Testament of Benjamin[3] 1:16 of Second Temple times. In the Samaritan Pentateuch the name is regularly written "Minyamin."

Benjamin is the only son born in Canaan. In terms of tribal history, this means that it was the last to become part of the Israelite tribal league.The traditions represented by the account of Benjamin's birth must be very ancient and not retrojections (i.e., to project into the past) from later history for the simple reason that here Joseph and Benjamin are brothers, "Rachel tribes," whereas after the settlement period Benjamin was adjaccnt to, and its fortunes politically bound up with, Judah, rather than with his fraternal Joseph tribes.

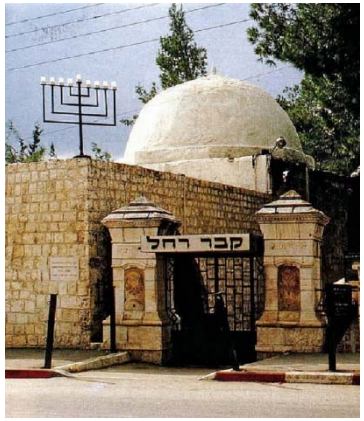
THE TOMB OF RACHEL (vv. 19-20)

The text tells of the death and burial of Rachel and of a stone memorial marker set up over her grave. It is clear from 1Samuel 10:2 that in the time of Samuel, about 1020 BCE, "the tomb of Rachel" was a famous landmark. The traditional site, presently so-called, lies about 4 miles (6.5 km.) south of Jerusalem and 1 mile (1.6 km.) north of Bethlehem. It is repeatedly described in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim sources since the fourth century CE. Through the ages it has served as a place of pilgrimage for Jews on New Moons, during the month of Elul, and on the fourteenth of Marcheshvan (*or* Cheshvan), the traditional anniversary of Rachel's death. The present small, square-shaped, domed structure, which was featured on the pictorial stamp issued for Palestine by the British government between 1927 and 1948, is relatively modern. In 1841 the tomb was renovated through the

1 Nahum M. Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis (The Jewish Publication Society), pp. 243-245.

2 Excerpted from Excursus 27, "Ephrath, Rachel's Tomb, and Migdal Eder" (35:16-22), p. 407.

3 The Testament of Benjamin is part of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, a collection of writings attributed to the sons of Jacob. In this testament, Benjamin shares his reflections and teachings with his sons, emphasizing the importance of righteousness, love for God, and moral integrity. The text is believed to have been written in the 2nd-century BCE.



generosity of Sir Moses Montefiore. In 1948 it was taken over by Jordanian invaders, Jews were excluded from it, and the area was converted into a Muslim cemetery. It was liberated by Israel in 1967.

REUBEN'S WANTON CHALLENGE (vv.21-22a)

Jacob continues his journey. At one encampment his first-born son Reuben cohabits with Bilhah. She was Rachel's maid, whom she had given to her husband as a co-wife and who had borne him Dan and Naphtali. **The account of Reuben's incest is succinct to the point of obscurity**.

This incident is directly linked to the foregoing because it is Rachel's demise that presents the occasion for Reuben's act. By violating Bilhah, Reuben makes sure that she cannot supplant or even rival his mother's position of chief wife now that Rachel is dead. As a statement in Shabbat 55b expresses it, “He resented his mothers humiliation. He said, ‘If my mother's sister was a rival to my mother, must the maid of my mother's sister be a rival to my mother?’" In this connection, it is interesting that Reuben had earlier been involved in the attempt to get his father to restore the conjugal rights of his mother (30:14-16). As a result of Reuben's cohabitation with Bilhah, she would thereby acquire the tragic status of “living widowhood," as happened to David's concubines whom he left behind when he fled Jerusalem and who were possessed by his son Absalom, as recounted in 2Samuel 15:16, 16:22, and 20:3.

Why did Reuben choose to accomplish his purpose by the particular means reported? The Torah legislation of Leviticus 18:8 and 20:11, reinforced by the curse of Deuteronomy 27:20, forbids a sexual relationship between a son and the wife of his father. The proscription probably reacts against the widespread practice of the eldest son inheriting the wives of his father along with the estate. Such was customary among pre-Islamic Arabs until outlawed by the Koran (4:19), and the practice may have existed in contemporary Canaanite society in Jacob's time. **As the first-born son, Reuben, in effect, prematurely lays claim to an inheritance that he would have expectcd to be his eventually**.

This leads to a third consideration that is crucial to the understanding of the Reuben-Bilhah episode. It is apparent from several biblical stories and from ancicnt Near Eastern texts that in matters of leadership, possession of thc concubine(s) of one's father or of one's vanquished enemy on the part of the aspirant or usurper bestowed legitimacy on the assumption of heirship and validated the succession. That is why Ish-bosheth, son of Saul, was so alarm-ed when Abner lay with his father's concubinc and why the accused had to defend his loyalty (2Sam. 3:7-8). This same principle cxplains why Nathan's censure of David when he took Bathsheba included this sentence: "Thus said the Lord, the God of Israel: It was I who anointed you king over Israel and it was I who rescued you from the hand of Saul. I gave you your masters house and possession of your master's wives ... (2Sam. 12:7-8). The same explains Absalom's actions in the passages cited above, and that is why King Solomon, in 1Kings 2:13-25, could interpret the request of Adonijah for Abishag as proof of treasonable intentions.

All this leads to the conclusion that Reuben's bid to promote his mother's rights is at the same time a calculated challenge to his father's authority. **His move is more political than lustful**. The summary account in this verse hides an attempt to usurp the leadership of the Israelite tribes. Its failure is reflected in Jacob's rebuke of 49:3-4, **in which he removes Reuben from hegemony** (authority) **over the tribes**. In 1Chronicles 5:1 the text explicitly relates that Reuben was “the first-born of Israel, but when he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph." **It is not unlikely that the involvement of Reubenites in the wilderness rebellion against Moses, recorded in Numbers 16, also is in some way connected with that tribe's loss of status**. For further information on the history of the Reubenites, see Comment to 49:3-4.

21. ***Migdal-eder*** The name means "herd-tower" and designates a structure built to provide protection against raiders of the flocks.

22. ***Reuben went*** The verb suggests a calculated act.

concubine Only here is Bilhah so called. The term has sociolegal implications within the context of the situation described above.

Israel found out Literally, “heard." The same phrase occurs in Numbers 12:2 in connection with the slandering of Moses: "The Lord heard it." It suggests impending reaction to the offense, but none occurs here. Instead, the received Hebrew text has a *piska' be-'emtsa' pasuk*, "a paragraph [that ends] with the middle of a verse." The exact significance of this device is unclear. It may here draw attention to the anomaly. At any rate, there is certainly much more to the story than is here revealed. This kind of sensitivity to the unlovely details is reflected in the rule in

Mishnah Megillah 4:10: "The story of Reuben is read [in public in the synagogue] but not rendered [into Aramaic]."

THE LIST OF JACOB'S SONS (vv. 22b-26)

With the birth of Benjamin, the family of Jacob is complete, and it is appropriate to list it in full, particularly since the next chapter is to feature the genealogies of Esau. The roster also indicatcs that, despite Reuben's misdeed, the unity of the family remained intact. The listing also specifies through whom the blessing of verse 11, “Be fertile and increase," is to be realized and through whom the people of Israel come into being. Each son listed is the eponymous4 ancestor, or founding father, of a tribe. In short, the list constitutes a fitting conclusion to the cycle of independent-Jacob narratives.

(13) Cf. 1Sam 4:20

1. *Just as, at the beginning of their relationship he had been separated from her by a cruel ruse of Laban, so at the end a cruel ruse of fate separates her from him in the grave.*

   a. Isaiah 43:1-2

   [1]But now, this is what the LORD says—he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. [2]**When you pass through the waters, I will be with you**; and **when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you**. **When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned**; the flames will not set you ablaze.

   b. James 1:2-4

   [2]**Consider it pure joy**, my brothers and sisters, **whenever you face trials of many kinds**, [3]because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. [4]Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

   c. Joseph was approximately 10 years old when his mother died.

2. *The meaning (of Benjamin’s name) could be, "son of my right hand," the right being a symbol of dexterity, power, protection.*

   a. God's “right hand” denotes His omnipotence—“the right hand” being more proficient than the left hand, is the place of honour, “the left” is the place of dishonour.

      1) Psalm 110:1

      Of David. A psalm. The LORD says to my Lord: “**Sit at my right hand** until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”

      2) Matthew 25:33

      He will put the sheep on **his right** (לִימִינוֹ—*li-mi-no*, i.e., *on the right, right side, **right hand**, south*) and the goats on his left.

      NJB—**on his right hand** and the goats on his left.

   b. The Advocate Messiah is at the believer's “right hand” to defend his cause effectively.

      1) Psalm 16:8-9

      [8]I have set the LORD always before me. Because he is **at my right hand**, I will not be shaken. [9]Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure,

      2) Psalm 109:30-31

      [30]With my mouth I will greatly extol **the LORD**; in the great throng I will praise him. [31]For **he stands at the right hand** of the needy one, to save his life from those who condemn him.

      3) Romans 8:31-34

      [31]What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? … [33]Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. [34]Who is he that condemns? Messiah Yeshua who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is **at the right hand of God** and is also interceding for us.

3. ***As the first-born son, Reuben, in effect, prematurely lays claim to an inheritance that he would have expectcd to be his eventually.***

   a. This is an often overlooked detail mentioned in the Parable of the Man with Two Sons. The “prodigal son” asks for his inheritance before his father passed away. It is as if he couldn’t wait until his father died so that he could receive his inheritance and live the life he always dreamed of.

4. ***21. Migdal-eder*** *The name means "herd-tower" and designates a structure built to provide protection against raiders of the flocks.*

   a. Luke 2:6-11

   [6]While they (Yosef and Miriam) were there, the time came for the baby to be born, [7]and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. [8]And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. [9]An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. [10]But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will

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4 eponymous, “giving one’s name to a place or thing.”

be for all the people. [11]Today in the town of David (*i.e.,* Bethlehem) a Savior has been born to you; he is Messiah the Lord.

MT/Genesis 35:19-21

[19]And Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which *is* Bethlehem. [20]And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave: that *is* the pillar of Rachel's grave unto this day. [21]And Israel journeyed, **and spread his tent beyond the tower of Eder** (*Migdal-Eder*).

b. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan/Genesis 35:21

And Jacob moved on, and pitched his tent onward **to the tower of Eder**, **the place whence the King Messiah is destined to reveal himself at the end of days**.

c. That the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, was a settled conviction. Equally so was the belief, **that He was to be revealed from *Migdal Eder,* 'the tower of the flock.'** This *Migdal Eder* was not the watchtower for the ordinary flocks which pastured on the barren sheepground beyond Bethlehem, but lay close to the town, on the road to Jerusalem. **A passage in the Mishnah (*Shekalim 7:4*) leads to the conclusion, that the flocks, which pastured there, were destined for Temple-sacrifices, and accordingly, that the shepherds, who watched over them, were not ordinary shepherds. This same Mishnaic passage (puts) these flocks ... in the fields thirty days before the Passover**.[5]

d. Matthew 2:6

[6]But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.

MT/Micah 5:1(2)

And thou Bethlehem, Ephrathah, *though* thou be little among the thousands of Judah, *yet* out of thee shall come forth unto me *that is* to be **ruler in Israel**; **whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting**.

e. Targum Jonathan/Micah 5:1

And you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, you who were too small to be numbered among the thousands of the house of Judah, **from you shall come forth before Me the Messiah**, to exercise dominion over Israel, he whose name was mentioned from before, from the days of creation.

1) The latter part of v. 1 in the Hebrew text would tend to support the doctrine of a pre-existent Messiah, which is not found in rabbinic thought.[6]

2) Pesachim 54a

Seven things were created before the world was created, and these are they: The Torah, repentance, the Garden of Eden, Gehenna, the throne of Glory, the Temple, **and the name of the Messiah** ... The name of the Messiah, as it is written, *His* (*sc.* **the Messiah's) *name shall endure for ever and has existed before the sun!*** (Ps. 72:17).

f. Psalm 72:15-17—"*Of Solomon*"

[15]Long may he live! ... [17]May his name endure forever; may it continue as long as the sun. **All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed**.

1) 15-17 Reflection on the benefits of the theocratic kingship renews the prayer for the extension in time and space of the Davidic dynasty and its monarch ... the prayer includes a petition for the longevity of the king and the perpetuity of the dynasty ... The concern for the 'name' of the king (v. 17) relates to the continuity of his regime as well as to the continuation of the blessings of his regime ...[7]

g. Pesikta Rabbati[8] 33:6

6. Another comment ... You find that at the very beginning of the creation of the world, the king Messiah had already come into being, for he existed in God's thought even before the world was created. Of his existence Scripture says, *And there came forth a shoot out of the stock of Jesse* (Isa. 11:1); it does not say "**And there shall come forth**" < **but *And there came forth*** >, implying that the shoot out of the stock of Jesse had already come forth.

But where in connection with the creation of the world do you find a verse which speaks of the ... king Messiah? *In the beginning God created ... Now the Land was waste and desolate; and darkness was upon the face of the abyss; and the spirit of god moved upon the face of the waters* (Gen. 1:1-2) ... But where is the proof that the

5 Edersheim, Alfred, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (MacDonald Publishing Company), p. 186-187.

6 Levey, Samson H., *The Messiah: An Aramaic Interpretation, The Messianic Exegesis of the Targum* (Hebrew Union College Press, 1974), p. 93.

7 Gaebelein, Frank E. (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, in Twelve Volumes, Volume 5* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), p. 473.

8 Pesikta Rabbati is a medieval Midrash on the festivals of the year. The word *pesikta* means "section." It consists of a series of separate sections on the pentateuchal and prophetic lessons of the festivals. Most other Midrashim are continuous exegetical commentaries on the Bible. It is called Rabbati ("the greater") probably in contrast to the earlier Pesikta de-Rav Kahana.

king Messiah existed from the beginning of God's creation of the world? The proof is in the verse ***And the Spirit of God moved, words which identify the king Messiah***, of whom it is said "And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him" (Isa. 11:2). But when will *the spirit of God* moves [to bring about your redemption, O Israel]? When in contrition you pour our your heart like water – *upon the face of the waters* – before the Lord. Then *I, even I, will comfort you.*

1) Hebrews 4:3

> Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" And yet **his work has been finished since the creation of the world**.

2) 1Peter 1:20

> [20]**He was chosen before the creation of the world**, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.

3) Revelation 13:8

> [18]All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to **the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world**.