

TORAHSCOPE: VaYechi (And he lived)

by Mark Huey posted 21 December, 2007 www.outreachisrael.net

Genesis 47:28-50:26
1 Kings 2:1-12

"Vowed to the Land"

"Then Jacob said to Joseph, 'God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, and He said to me, "Behold, I will make you fruitful and numerous, and I will make you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your descendants after you for an everlasting possession"' (Genesis 48:3-4).

VaYechi brings us to the end of the Book of Genesis. In just twelve readings, the Scriptures have covered several thousand years of human history. The family chosen to become a people for God's own possession, and the nation that will be a light to the world, is beginning to take shape as distinctive tribes. The Earthly sojourn of the great Patriarch Jacob comes to a close and his blessings bestowed upon his children and grandchildren give prophetic insight into the future characteristics and destinies of the twelve unique tribes and the emerging nation of Israel.

Both Jacob and Joseph have some dying requests upon their respective deaths. Both men had a sincere desire to return to the land of their fathers. In fact, both requested and received vows from their survivors to return their bodies to the Land of Canaan. Why was this so important to each of these men? Are there some things we can learn from these examples?

Return to the Land

As this portion begins, Jacob is approaching his death and he calls for Joseph to fulfill a pledge:

"When the time for Israel to die drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, 'Please, if I have found favor in your sight, place now your hand under my thigh and deal with me in kindness and faithfulness. Please do not bury me in Egypt, but when I lie down with my fathers, you shall carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place.' And he said, 'I will do as you have said.' He said, 'Swear to me.' So he swore to him. Then Israel bowed *in worship* at the head of the bed" (Genesis 47:29-31).

As the text continues, Jacob declares his reasons for wanting to be buried in the Land of Canaan:

"Then Jacob said to Joseph, 'God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, and He said to me, "Behold, I will make you fruitful and numerous, and I will make you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your descendants after you for an everlasting possession"' (Genesis 48:3-4).

In the case of Jacob, he knew that his eventual destiny was in the land promised to his fathers Abraham, Isaac, and ultimately him. Jacob had already prepared a burial site for himself next to Leah in the same cave with Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Rebekah. He also knew from multiple declarations by God that this was a land that was destined for his descendants. Is it possible that Jacob understood that being buried in the area around Hebron would someday give additional justification for his descendants to claim that land?

"So Joseph went up to bury his father, and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household and all the elders of the land of Egypt" (Genesis 50:7).

Joseph and his brothers honored the vow committed to Jacob. Joseph sought and received permission from Pharaoh to place Jacob in the cave at Machpelah. The pattern for honoring vows was firmly established in the hearts of the sons of Jacob. As the portion concludes, we see Joseph making the same request regarding his dying body to his brothers:

"Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.' Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, 'God will surely take care of you, and

you shall carry my bones up from here.' So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt" (Genesis 50:24-26).

Why did Joseph want to be buried in the Land of Canaan, and specifically, in the land promised to him by his father Jacob? There must have been something about the Land of Promise. He believed the statements made by his father Jacob that the land would be an everlasting possession for his descendants. Remember that Joseph had also received an inheritance from Jacob at the conclusion of Jacob's blessings to Ephraim and Manasseh:

"Then Israel said to Joseph, 'Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you, and bring you back to the land of your fathers. I give you one portion more than your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and my bow'" (Genesis 48:21-22).

Notice that it is not until the end of the Book of Joshua that we finally see where the remains of Joseph are placed:

"Now they buried the bones of Joseph, which the sons of Israel brought up from Egypt, at Shechem, in the piece of ground which Jacob had bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for one hundred pieces of money; and they became the inheritance of Joseph's sons" (Joshua 24:32).

The people of Israel honored the vow made to Joseph, and transported his mummy through the wilderness experience until he was finally laid to rest at a tomb in Shechem. Is it possible that Joseph knew the importance of making the Land of Canaan, specifically Shechem, his final resting place? Joseph understood that this would please the Most High because he revered his father Jacob who had given him this land for his inheritance. For those of us who study the lives of our spiritual forefathers, this embodiment of faith in the promises of the Lord is very inspirational.

Testimony of Tombs

Today, the Promised Land is under siege and the burial sites of the Patriarchs are a vivid reminder to us all that the final redemption of the Land is not yet complete. And yet, we have faithful men and women who are standing today as a testimony that the Land of the Patriarchs will eventually be given to the descendants of Jacob. These faithful settlers are mirroring the pattern of belief exhibited by their ancestors. Many of them revere the memory of Jacob and Joseph and the vows honored by their forefathers.

In Hebron, a city that is currently under the control of the Palestinian Authority, resides a small community of faithful Jews who are a living example of those who are holding to the promises that have been given by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Surrounded by a people who want them eliminated, the settlers of Kiryat Arba have maintained a synagogue at the tomb of the Patriarchs.

In like manner, overlooking the valley in Shechem (modern-day Nablus of the Palestinian Authority), where the bones of Joseph are buried, there resides another settlement of faithful Jews who are waiting for the redemption of the Promised Land. The Orthodox Jews of Elon Moreh, until the past few years (2002-2003), had a yeshiva located at the tomb of Joseph in hostile Nablus. These faithful followers are staunch defenders of the Torah and its truths. What can we learn from these faithful Jews who are studying these very same Torah teachings this week? Is it possible that when they read these very texts about the burial vows made to Jacob and Joseph that they will be strengthened for the battle of wills against the Palestinians?

Perhaps we can pray for them and ask the Father what it is that we can do to support them in their role as witnesses to the veracity of the Scriptures. Through the ages, the very fact that these vows were kept and are now being honored gives many the inspiration needed to persevere. These people are living examples of those who have been preserved through the ages because of their choices to honor vows. Do you now see how important vows can be when honored? Should we not do the same regarding our vows?

We do know that One who will maintain His vows is the Holy One of Israel. So for the faithful, it is simply a matter of time before the redemption of the Promised Land is completed.

The vow to the Land of Israel is critical for all those who call upon the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Now in this era, when we are witnessing a partial fulfillment, we can be encouraged that the final redemption will indeed come. Maybe this week we can spend some time praying to that end.

Mark Huey (B.A., Vanderbilt University in History and Graduate Studies at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University) is the Director of Outreach Israel Ministries (www.outreachisrael.net). He is the author of several books, including: *TorahScope, Volumes I & II*, and *Counting the Omer: A Daily Devotional Toward Shavuot*. He is also co-author of *Hebraic Roots: An Introductory Study*.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.