

Genesis 47:28-31 (also 49:28-33), No. 73
“The Holy Land”
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The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Text Comment

- v.28 That is, Jacob lived in Egypt with Joseph the same number of years that Joseph had lived with his father in Canaan before he was sold into slavery by his brothers (cf. 37:2).
- v.29 You remember the similar form of oath taken by Abraham’s servant in 24:2. The hand near the organ of procreation gave the oath a special solemnity in the ANE, all the more as Abraham, and so Jacob later, had been circumcised as a sign of his belonging to God.
- v.31 The same consonants make both the words “bed” and “staff” and, remember, originally, Hebrew was spelled only with consonants. The word the NIV renders “staff” – as did the LXX, whose translation is cited in Hebrews 11:21 – is the same word as is rendered “bed” in the ESV. It is bed in both translations in 48:2. However, 48:1 suggests that 47:31 was before Jacob’s final illness, so “staff” may well be correct. His staff would be appropriate to mention as a symbol of his pilgrimage (just mentioned in 47:9).

Now it is time for us to come to terms with the biblical doctrine of the Promised Land that has featured so largely in the narrative of Genesis to this point. We spoke just a few Lord’s Days ago of the concentration in Genesis on the dual promises of the seed and the land and how, in chapter after chapter, the fulfillment of those promises is front and center – the promise either being jeopardized by the patriarch’s unfaithfulness, or embraced by the patriarchs in faith, or being preserved, kept, and fulfilled by God. *Genesis is largely a book about the seed and the land.* We made the point that in the Genesis narrative, progress toward the fulfillment of both promises proceeds at a snail’s pace and, even at the end of the book the seed shows little promise of being the salvation of the world and the family still has no personal possession of the land God promised to them, apart from the burial ground that Abraham had purchased. Still everything, in one way or another, concerns the seed and the land, the promises God had made to the people he had brought into covenant with himself. “To your offspring, I will give this land” God promised Abraham in 12:7. So here we are at the very end of the book, with Jacob determined that his body not be buried permanently in Egypt but carried back to the Promised Land and buried there. Indeed, the attention paid to this in chapters 47, 49, and 50 is impressive and due to the facts that Jacob died *outside the Promised Land* and the entire family was living outside the Promised Land at the time. [Sarna, 323]

What is this but the importance of the land being emphasized once more? Jacob’s insistence on being buried in Canaan was an act of faith in the certainty that God would keep the promise he made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: “to your offspring, I will give this land.” We also know this because in Hebrews 11:22, the similar instructions that Joseph later gave regarding the burial of *his bones* in the Promised Land, are said to have been an act of faith. “By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones.” *He knew Israel would one day inherit the land; God would keep his word.*

The sense of sacred duty that Jacob felt is conveyed in v. 29 in two ways. First, there is the almost oddly deferential tone in which Jacob spoke to his son, Joseph: “If I have found favor in your sight...” In Genesis previously, when that form of words has been used – “If I have found favor in your sight...” – it has been used by an inferior to a superior. But here the father spoke this way to his son, and, moreover, to an obliging son, a dutiful son, not a son he would have to convince to do his will. That way of speaking on Jacob’s part reflects how much his request mattered to Jacob, how much he cared to elicit Joseph’s agreement. *He was virtually begging his son!*

And then there is the matter of the vow. You remember Abraham asking his old servant Eliezer to do a similar thing, to make a vow in a similar way, when, long ago, he put Eliezer under obligation to find a wife for Isaac from the extended family back in Paddan Aram. This solemn oath demonstrates the concern on Jacob’s part to fulfil his part of the covenant, *to be a man of the Promised Land*, which he would show himself to be if he were buried there with his fathers.

And, this is what was done, of course. We will read of that in 50:1-14. With great ceremony and with great care Jacob was carried back to the Promised Land and buried in the same place where his grandfather, Abraham, grandmother Sarah, his parents Isaac and Rebekah, and his wife Leah were already buried.

This is what Joseph later also arranged for himself. The last verse of Genesis informs us that Joseph was buried in Egypt, but before he died he made his brothers swear an oath that his bones would be carried up from Egypt to the Promised Land when the family returned there in due time. And we read in Exodus 13:19 that Moses, four hundred years later, fulfilled that oath and took the bones of Joseph from Egypt at the exodus. The first book of the Bible, then, comes to an end, with Abraham’s descendants all in Egypt, but with all of them still eyeing the Promised Land, all determined to return there – if only for burial – all sure that the future of their covenant with God was tied up with the Promised Land.

Without a doubt, the land remains a central focus of the rest of Israel’s history. After the exodus from Egypt Israel made her way, in fits and starts, to the land promised to her Fathers long centuries before. The Book of Joshua contains the account of Israel’s conquest of the land and the division of the land among the tribes of Israel. Judges gives an account of Israel’s spiritual decay and the correspondingly tenuous grip she came to hold on the land of her inheritance. The Philistines and others ruled the land more than she did. And then came the kings who, in the first place, solidified Israel’s ownership of the land and extended her borders finally, for the first time, closer to the full extent of the territory God had originally promised to Abraham. But, after Solomon, the narrative of Kings and Chronicles is the story of Israel frittering away the Promised Land through unbelief and rebellion against God, until finally, as her judgment, she was sent out of the land into exile – the northern tribes never to return, the southern two tribes to return seventy years later to a Promised Land now so small as to consist largely of the ruins of the city of Jerusalem and its suburbs, and so inconsequential as to remain the client state of larger powers for the centuries that followed until finally in A.D. 70 Jerusalem was destroyed once more and the nation of Israel ceased to exist in the Promised Land, a situation not remedied until 1948 with the creation of the modern Jewish state.

Now all of this makes of striking interest the fact that the word “land”, in the sense of the land of Canaan, hardly appears at all in the New Testament. Indeed, *ha-aretz*, “the land,” the fourth most frequently occurring noun in the Hebrew Bible, disappears in the New Testament as a designation for the land of Canaan. Nowhere, for example, is it prophesied that Israel or the Jews will return to the land, “land” meaning Canaan, or that they will prosper in the land, or that Canaan, or even Judea, is the inheritance of the people of God. What is more, in three remarkably significant texts, the entire idea of the land, so prominent, so central to the idea of God’s covenant with his people from the time of Abraham, is “resignified,” if you will.

The first of these texts is the Lord’s statement in the beatitudes that begin his “Sermon on the Mount” that “the meek shall inherit the earth.” As you may remember, that phrase is a citation of Psalm 37:11. But, in Psalm 37:11, in translation, we read that “The meek shall inherit *the land*.” And, without doubt, the phrase in Psalm 37 – it is repeated several times in Psalm 37 – refers to the land of Canaan. But the Lord resignified the term “land.” He did not use the term as a territorial reference, as a reference to Canaan or Judea, but as a reference to the ultimate victory that will finally belong to those who have faith in him. “Inheriting the land,” then, has become equivalent to receiving or entering the kingdom of God, or, finally, to entering heaven itself.

The second text is Romans 4:13 and it is still more striking a resignification of the idea of the land. There we read, “It was not through the law that Abraham and his seed received the promise that he would be the heir *of the world*, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.” There “land” in the most definite way has become not Canaan, not Palestine, but the entire world (“*kosmos*” is the word Paul used). The entire inheritance lost by sin will be restored to those who have faith in Christ, not one particular piece of real estate at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. Paul says *that this* is what God really had promised Abraham when he promised him the land of Canaan!

Finally, there is Ephesians 6:3, where Paul, writing to the children of the church, said, “Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise – that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth (or the land, for the word is the same).” Of course, as you remember, the original form of the fifth commandment, both in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 is that “you may live long – and it may go well – *in the land the Lord your God is giving you*.” Paul, in Ephesians, was writing to Gentiles, who neither lived in Palestine nor ever would, and yet the promise of the land was made over to them, *but in this different form or with this different meaning*.

In each of these texts, the promise of the land, so prominent in Genesis, so precious to the patriarchs, the prospect of which was so important a part of their faith, was resignified. In particular, it was generalized. It now refers to the blessings of the kingdom of God in general, the blessings just as truly the inheritance of Gentiles who live somewhere else in the world. And, what makes this still more significant, as I said, is that otherwise the land of Canaan, the Promised Land where the patriarchs were buried, simply disappears as an interest in the later part of Holy Scripture. We hear nothing about it. But the promise that God made *in the form of the Promise Land* is still regarded as the inheritance of those who have faith in Christ. What the

promise of the land ultimately had to do with is ours still today, we who believe in Christ, though the actual real estate in Palestine has lost its importance.

So the resignification of the promise of a land is not a betrayal of the promise God made to Abraham, nor would a believing Jew have thought it was. God was not forgetting his word to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For, as we read in Hebrews 3 and 4, the gospel was never a matter of earthly territory and entering and taking possession of a territory on earth. Israel did that under Joshua, but generations later David said, through the Holy Spirit, that unless Israel lived in faithfulness to the Lord, she would never enter the Promised Land. Israel already occupied Canaan in David's day. But she did not occupy the Promised Land in the ultimate sense of the term. Indeed, the author says, in 4:8, that Joshua, who led the people of God into Canaan, explicitly did not lead them into the Promised Land in the ultimate sense.

What is more, we read in Hebrews 11 that *the patriarchs themselves understood this*. There we read that the patriarchs were looking, not first for an earthly country, but for a heavenly one, the city with foundations, whose builder is God. They were pilgrims in this world just as every believer after them, Jew and Gentile alike. The Promised Land, Canaan, was the sign and seal of that future kingdom of God, of the heavenly country, and so it was for them a precious place, but it was not their ultimate destination *and they knew that*.

We are well used to the flexibility of terminology in the OT, the way terms switch back and forth in their signification. We know how certain terms come to have layers of meaning. Sometimes, for example, Jerusalem is the actual city in south central Canaan; sometimes it is the people of Israel, sometimes it is the people of God as a spiritual community – the people of true faith – and, sometimes it stands for what we would call the heavenly Jerusalem, the consummation of the kingdom of God. So with the terms Israel, Zion, Mount Zion, the temple of the Lord, Judah, and so on. All these terms have such layers of meaning.

It is the same today, in the epoch of Christ and the apostles. There is the Jerusalem that is above and the Jerusalem below. There is even a Mount Zion above, so we read in Hebrews 12:22. There is a kingdom of which we are part in this world, and there is a fullness of that kingdom in the world to come. There is a church here below that really is the church of Jesus Christ, though a mixture of believers and unbelievers, but there is a church above, what is called, in Hebrews 12:23, “the church of the firstborn,” the communion of the spirits of righteous men made perfect. The one is linked to the other as the seed is linked to the flower. It is the same Zion, the same Canaan, the same kingdom, the same nation here as there, but here it is imperfect and incomplete and there it is absolutely perfect and complete. Bringing all this promise of a land together, the Lord Christ himself tells us, in Matthew 8:11, that “many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, but the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside in to the darkness...” You could be in the land as an Israelite and be without the favor of God, as one can be in the church today as an outward kingdom, and be without the favor of God. But the Promised Land, the kingdom that belongs to those who keep covenant with God, Jews and Gentiles alike, will be theirs forever. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be there, and so will every true Christian.

There is no land today, as there was then, to signify and seal the coming kingdom and the heavenly country; just as there is no temple today to signify and seal the presence of God with his people. But now *as then* there is this “now, but not yet” character both to our place in the kingdom of God and God’s presence with us. Jacob knew that, much as he was in covenant with God, much as he already had the forgiveness of his sins, much as he already had eternal life, the fullness of these blessings, the consummation of them was still in the future. He would not see them in this life or this world, though, as we read in Hebrews 11 he greeted them from afar. And he gave expression to that faith by his insistence on being buried in the Promised Land.

We, like the patriarchs, await the fulfillment of promises made to us, and we like they, await the fulfillment in another world, another place. We have the foretaste of that fulfillment in the life of the church of Christ in this world – as Jacob did and Abraham before him – but the full inheritance awaits us in another world. We can only greet those greater things, that greater place from afar. But without that hope of the greater and eternal Promised Land our faith as Christians is worthless. As Billy Sunday the early 20th century evangelist tartly put it, “If there is no heaven a lot of ministers are raising money under false pretenses.” You’re going to die. All of you are going to die. What then? What do your children hear you saying to them about the fact that you’re going to die? Do they see in you what Joseph saw in his father Jacob? A man who was in all things, even at the very end, determined to be a man of the Promised Land?

So what are we to carry away from Jacob’s instructions that laid such a sacred emphasis upon the land? Obviously, as Gentile believers in our own day and epoch, it is not that we should care to be connected in some way with Palestine, still less that we should be buried there. Once the new epoch had commenced, really some time before that, the community of those living by faith in God and Christ ceased to have a great interest in the ancient territory of Israel *per se*. It is precisely the demonstration of Judaism’s continuing unbelief in the Messiah that she cares **so** much for the real estate and so little for the God who gave it to her, about Palestine but not about heaven. The true Jew is the one who is Jew inwardly, as Paul says, circumcised in the heart. And the true Promised Land is not a territory in the Near-east, but a kingdom, a people, a country that one enters by faith in Christ wherever he or she lives and will enter finally in its perfection when he or she comes at last to heaven.

Jacob knew that. He didn’t suppose that he had missed the salvation of God because he died before his descendants had taken full possession of Canaan. He had his eye on the better country that comes after the better resurrection. Canaan was for him only the anticipation of that far greater promise. And seeing to his burial there was simply the last act of his faith in the promise of God, the last witness to his family that he cared far more for the land God had promised than he did for this world. *And that is the witness he bore to us and that is how we ought to imitate him.*

There is also something of secondary importance here for us to imitate in the solicitude Jacob showed about the place of his burial. There is a natural feeling of kinship in death that is surely meaningful: the desire to be laid near one’s loved ones as a witness to an earthly love and to the sacred bond of family. Indeed, a careful reader of Genesis cannot but wonder about Jacob’s statement in 49:31, where his explicit instructions regarding his burial are repeated in greater detail.

There we hear him say that he wanted to be buried in the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre, where Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebekah were buried. But, then he goes on, “and there I buried Leah.” In death, he will lie with Leah, the woman he so mistreated because of his preference for Rachel. Rachel was not buried where Jacob would be buried; only Leah. At the end, it will be Jacob and Leah together in death. Did Jacob feel that in some small way he was giving himself to Leah in a way, alas, he knew he had not when she was alive? I think so. I think that is why the narrator included those last few words. Real faith always seeks true reconciliation.

But that is not the primary way in which we can imitate Jacob in his faith, the faith that led him to give these instructions about his burial. Christians have been giving outward expression to their faith in the country promised them by their heavenly Father in all manner of ways through the ages. Early Christians, you remember, often were buried with shoes on, and with their feet to the east, so that at the resurrection they could stand straight up to face the Lord and walk with him. Now Christians then knew full well there would be nothing left of their shoes after years had passed and they didn’t imagine that anyone would miss seeing the Lord if he were buried toward the west – they didn’t think any such thing – anymore than Jacob thought that he would lose out on salvation if he weren’t buried in Canaan. These were ways of bearing witness to their faith, to their confidence in things not seen. And, surely, there is no reason we cannot do the same today. Burial, as we have often said, remains the proper method of caring for the Christian dead. It is a most important way to bear witness to our hope in the resurrection.

Here, in Jacob’s single act of providing for his burial in Canaan, the example of a man bearing witness to the direction of his hope and the strength of it. What, may I ask, will you fathers ask of your sons when it comes time for you to die? And what are you asking of them now? What in your speech and your behavior bears witness to the Promised Land? What proves to them that your heart is there and that through all your life in this world you are, like Jacob, welcoming the better country from afar? In our day, which of any day in Christian history, is most preoccupied with the present and little interested in the future, I say, *especially in our day*, it is essential that fathers and mothers bear witness to their faith in a distant but approaching world to their sons and daughters, that fathers prove to their children that they are thinking about another world, that their hearts are longing for a home they will not find in this world. In what ways are you, Christian parents in this sanctuary this morning, leaning on your pilgrim’s staff in full view of your children? Even one hundred forty-seven years of life and even the luxuries of Egypt for the last seventeen years did not make this world home to Jacob. Surely our paltry 70 or 80 years should not make this world home to us!

Here is the way to show your children that this world is not your home and that you are always welcoming the better country from afar. Show it by your words and your deeds and by the affections of your heart. Christina Rossetti put it beautifully.

“True, all our life long we shall we shall be bound to refrain our soul, and keep it low; but what then? For the books we now refrain to read we shall one day be endowed with wisdom and knowledge. For the music we will not listen to we shall join in the song of the redeemed. For the pictures from which we turn we shall gaze unabashed on the

beatific vision. For the companionship we shun we shall be welcomed into angelic society and the communion of triumphant saints. For the amusements we avoid we shall keep the supreme jubilee. For all the pleasures we miss we shall abide, and for evermore abide, in the rapture of heaven.” [Cited in Whyte, *BC*, iii, 36]

And if you say that and live like that, your children will believe you when you say that you, like Jacob, have seen from afar and long for the Promised Land.

Once in a dream I saw the flowers
That bud and bloom in Paradise;
More fair are they than waking eyes
Have seen in all this world of ours.
And faint the perfume-bearing rose,
And faint the lily on its stem,
And faint the perfect violet,
Compared with them.

I heard the songs of Paradise;
Each bird sat singing in its place;
A tender song, so full of grace
It soared like incense to the skies.
Each bird sat singing to its mate
Soft cooing notes among the trees:
The nightingale herself were cold
To such as these.

I saw the four-fold River flow,
And deep it was, with golden sand;
It flowed between a mossy land
With murmured music grave and low.
It hath refreshment for all thirst,
For fainting spirits strength and rest:
Earth holds not such a draught as this
From east to west.

The Tree of Life stood budding there,
Abundant with its twelfold fruits;
Eternal sap sustains its roots,
Its shadowing branches fill the air.
Its leaves are healing for the world,
Its fruit the hungry world can feed,
Sweeter than honey to the taste
And balm indeed.

I saw the Gate called Beautiful;
And looked, but scarce could look within;

I saw the golden streets begin,
And outskirts of the glassy pool.
Oh harps, oh crowns of plenteous stars,
Oh green palm-branches, many-leaved –
Eye hath not seen, nor ear hath heard,
Nor heart conceived.

I hope to see these things again,
But not as once in dreams by night;
To see them with my very sight,
And touch and handle and attain:
To have all heaven beneath my feet
For narrow way that once they trod;
To have my part with all the saints
And with my God.