

Parashat Vayechi

The dominant theme of the Bible is God's plan to save the world from itself, by the choice and providential guidance of a community (to be called Israel), which would act on His behalf against the massed forces of greed, hate, cruelty and the rest of the sins that blight humanity. This theme is clearly reflected in the Joseph story. There are two big clues in Joseph's story; namely, in Genesis 45:5 & 50:20. Recall Joseph saying to his errant brothers, "Now therefore be not grieved nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither; for God did send me before you, to preserve life." And, again, in today's portion, "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive." Joseph incarnates the experience and the redemptive work of the people of God. We have seen that, chosen to inherit the promise made to Abraham that through him and his seed, God's rich blessing would come to the nations, Joseph's fortunes prospered no matter what evil chances befell him. As the old Tyndale translation puts it, in Gen.39:2, "The Lorde was with Joseph and he was a lucky felowe."

Genesis commences with the words, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...." and closes with the words, "So Joseph died at the age of 110, and they embalmed him and put him in a coffin in Egypt." But this coffin was not closure, for in that final cluster of verses, Joseph speaks of the future, "I am dying. But God will surely remember you and bring you up out of this land to the land which he swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.....God will surely remember you, and you are to carry my bones up from here." None of the faithful are meant to remain in coffins.

Despite the malevolence of his brothers, the pique of a jilted lady, and the perils of high office, Joseph's success is assured. God overrules the evils perpetrated on him, to further His Grand Plan of Redemption. It is for God's glory and not Joseph's that the Bible is concerned with. Joseph's promotion and well-being are incidental. He is but an instrument in God's hands to save life - the lives of Jacob and his family, involving the safeguarding of the promise and the lives of the whole Egyptian people. The pattern of Joseph's life-story is thus of the same pattern as the life-story of God's Israel, who despite her own suffering and the power of evil, is enabled by God to fulfil her mission of bringing salvation to the life of the world. It is for this reason that the story of Joseph has resonance with the experience of our Messiah Yeshua, cruelly murdered but raised up by His Heavenly Father to be the blessing and salvation for the world. As son of Abraham and embodiment of the true Israel, our Lord Yeshua becomes finally the one through whom all the nations of the earth are blessed.

The author of Hebrews tells us in 11:39-12:2 of the great cloud of witnesses who ran their race in faith, as we must also run ours. Like Joseph, they believed in the promise although they did not see its fulfilment. Yet, unseeing, they too had their eyes upon Yeshua "as the pioneer and perfection of faith", in that they saw as the crown of God's purpose for them the lion of Judah, as stated in Gen.49:9-12 (to be read out). That Lion is the one identified in the majestic vision of the book of Revelation with the Lamb that was slain for our redemption. The prophecy concerning Judah, of all the dying Jacob's blessings in Ch.49, has, therefore, the

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greatest of significance. Indeed, his introductory sentence in 49 arrests our attention, by the use of the phrase *acharit-hayamim* - "in the last days." It surely applies to the end of time and history, when God's will and purpose will be made manifest to the world. As we know, each tribe is allotted his portion of the land of the promise by Jacob but Judah is given a "sceptre" and a "rulers staff", accompanied by the phrase (as in some translations) "until Shiloh comes", or, as we have just read, "until he comes to whom obedience belongs." Whatever the debates on this phrase, and there are plenty, it is surely a clear messianic reference. The blessing promised to Judah implies future dominion for that tribe via David and his descendants, and the eventual appearance in it of the one who will receive "the obedience of the peoples" (as the RV puts it) in a setting suggesting Paradise restored.

'Till He comes" is a phrase with a familiar ring to us and here in what is probably one of the earliest fragments of Hebrew poetry, we have the beginning of that hope of the coming of God's Ambassador, Messiah, who will be sent to save the world. Sent, not by force of arms, but by the inauguration of a new order and a new relationship between us and our God. We should not forget that our Lord Yeshua was given the title of "son of David" in the gospels (Matt.21:9), and that through Joseph, the husband of Mary His mother, He not only numbered David amongst His ancestors but also Pharez (Paretz), the son of Judah, whose birth is the climax of the apparently unconnected story of Tamar in Gen.38 and is listed in Matthew's genealogy (1:1-16)

We must not leave these fascinating stories of the patriarchs without pausing to notice 48:1-22, the parable of the crossed hands of God. Blind old Jacob wishes to pass on blessing and promise to Joseph and his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Manasseh is eldest. When Joseph brings the lads forward, he expects his father's right hand, the hand of blessing, to be placed on Manasseh's head. But Jacob crossed his hands and gave the blessing to the younger boy, despite Joseph's protests. The KJV puts it charmingly, as "he guided his hands wittingly". In the event, Ephraim became important enough to be synonymous with the Northern Kingdom following Solomon's death. However, the real Biblical lesson is that once again God's sovereign power is shown. He does not choose His servants by man-made standards. That verse in 1 Samuel 16:7 is so apt, "Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart." Therefore, He chose not Ishmael but Isaac, not Esau but Jacob, not Reuben but Joseph, not Manasseh but Ephraim. Those who are chosen for His blessing are those whom He knows to be fittest to receive it.

So, here we are, at the end of the patriarchal period. The custodians of God's promise are happily settled in Egypt. But, beware, it is the calm before the storm, as the opening verses of the book of Exodus will tell us. However, let us remind ourselves of God's word to Jacob at Beersheba (46:1-4), "I will go down with thee into Egypt; and I will also surely bring thee up again." Whatever the vicissitudes in store for them, God's people have nothing to fear. Their future is safeguarded by God's word. Looking at history since, I think we can agree that our Lord does not make empty promises.

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Finally, I like those words in Habakkuk 2:1-3, where he says, "I will stand at my watchpost; I will stand myself on the rampart. I will look to see what God will say through me and I will answer when I am reproved." Then Adonai answers, "Write down the vision clearly on tablets, so that even a runner can read it. For the vision is meant for its appointed time; It speaks of the end, and it does not lie. It may take a while, but wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay." Have you ever noticed the "wondering-ness " of the people who truly go on with God? They are the ones who never seem to be overanxious or over concerned. They seem to get trustingly younger in spirit and have a 'child-heart'. Others? Always sighing, with mental and spiritual rheumatism, and neuralgia, moral twists and perversity, and nothing seems to be able to rouse their enthusiasm. They need that wonder of God's vision, that child-spirit of the Holy Spirit. A vision will put enthusiasm into you, a thrilling understanding of God's word. Then you will run without being weary and walk without fear or fainting.