

Hugo Bouter

# The memorial at Rachel's grave

Genesis 35

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The last memorial in Jacob's life was a tombstone, and that was the stone on the grave of his beloved Rachel: "So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). And Jacob set a pillar on her grave, which is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day" (Gen. 35:19-20).

Life and death can be close together. The joyous event of the birth of Rachel's second son was overshadowed by the power of death, which took away her life. Just before her soul departed she called his name Ben-oni, that is Son of My Sorrow. But Jacob gave the child the name Benjamin, which means Son of the Right Hand. As a father, he did not want to stamp his son with his mother's sorrow and pain, but rather with the joy he had brought them. This is echoed in the name given by Jacob: Son of the Right Hand. We can notice in this act of Jacob again a growth in wisdom in dealing with the difficulties and sorrows he had to face. Life can end in a painful and grievous way, but we need not give that such a dominating place that it stamps everything in the life and in the memory of the person concerned.

Rachel died and was buried near Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David and also of the Messiah, Who – according to prophecy – will be the Ruler in Israel (Micah 5:1). He is the true Son of the right hand. What a testimony to the great prophetic insight of Jacob.

It was understandable that Jacob wanted to mark this place with a memorial. Rachel was the love of his life, as people say these days. For her he had given his

all, even though he had had to toil in the service of his father-in-law for 20 years. But now those difficult years were over and he was back in the Promised Land. At this moment, however, Rachel was taken from him, right at the birth of her second son. What sadness and suffering for Jacob! This point in his life should be remembered forever.

The memorial on Rachel's grave was there "to this day," we read. What a long time this event was remembered in the fields of Ephrath (i.e. place of fruitfulness). Moses probably added these words later: to this day! Death and life are sometimes close together. Rachel was weeping for her children, it is later written in Jeremiah 31:15. Yet the Savior was also born there. From this place it happened, that Naomi left full and returned empty – and here later a son was laid in her womb. Bethlehem was a place of hope. A hope that Jacob had found in faith.

The patriarchs even lived in the hope of the resurrection from the dead. That is why Jacob himself wanted to be buried in the Promised Land (Gen. 47:27-31). They lived in the hope of the coming of Messiah and the final fulfillment of God's promises for His people. Yes, they even looked forward to a heavenly homeland and to the coming heavenly city, the new Jerusalem (Heb. 11:13-16).

It appears that Jacob's love for his beloved Rachel had passed to both her sons, Joseph and Benjamin – as was also later poignantly expressed by Judah in Genesis 44, just before Joseph made himself known to his brothers. No doubt Jacob recognized the unique qualities of his son Joseph, and he saw the moral integrity that characterized him during the seventeen years he was with him in the land of Canaan (see Gen. 37). This was evident in the way he treated Joseph and the tunic of many colors he gave him.

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