

Allonbachuth: Oak of Weeping

Wilson L. Thompson

Biblical names, like the stones Joshua kept heaping during the conquest of Canaan (Joshua 4:7,21;7:26;8:29;8:31;10:27), are God's mnemonics. They often are keys to biblical social facts now buried by our sinful neglect of the Bible. For example, the well of Harod (fear) recalls Gideon's trembling army before God reminded him of the law requiring the fearful be sent home (Judges 7:3; Deut. 20:8). So, Allonbachuth (oak of weeping) recalls a great mourning that took place in Israel when Deborah, Jacob's nanny died (Genesis 35:8).

So, how came Deborah to Bethel where she died? And why was her death such an occasion of mourning in Israel? First, she was a righteous servant who, like Eliezer under Abraham (Genesis 15:2), had risen to a position of influence within the covenant community. The Bible reveals that Deborah had originally come to Canaan as Rebekah's "nurse" when she journeyed to Canaan to become Isaac's wife (Genesis 24:59). Finally, we learn through the account of her death at Bethel that she has now obviously become a pillar in Jacob's household. But, when did Deborah leave the house of Isaac?

There is no record that Deborah ever returned to Padan-aram. And, after Esau's death threats prompted Isaac to send Jacob away, she helped Isaac and Rebekah cope with Esau (Genesis 27:41ff). Despite their resistance, up to four hundred of Isaac's servants began to follow Esau during the decades that Jacob was working for Laban. Esau finally led these men to threaten attack against the house of Jacob whose return raised again the issue of the disputed birthright (Genesis 25:29-34; 27:36; 32:6).

After, negotiating a standoff with Esau, Jacob had moved his prosperous household to Shechem (Genesis 33:18-19) well away from the house of Isaac in Hebron. Then, Edom began to lose in economic competition with Israel Industries (Genesis 36:6-8). Facing mass defection of servants, including righteous Deborah, to Jacob, Esau salvaged what he could and retired from Canaan to Mt. Seir. In Israel, Jacob had to cope with disaster, as Simeon and Levi misled loyal servants in a hideous massacre at Shechem (Genesis 34:25ff). **"And God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, . . . and make there an altar unto God, that appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother" (Genesis 35:1).**

Then Jacob commanded Israel to **"Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments . . . And let us arise, and go up to Bethel . . . And they gave unto Jacob all the strange gods which were in their hand" (Genesis 35:2-4).** Jacob went to Bethel and built the altar to God. **"But Deborah Rebekah's nurse died, and she was buried beneath Bethel under an oak: and the name of it was called Allonbachuth" (Genesis 35:8).**