

## “BURY ME WITH MY FATHERS:” A SEXIST OR AN INCLUSIVE VIEW OF DEATH?

Arthur H. Lewis

As a translator of the Old Testament and member of several NIV teams, I've had many opportunities to protest against the use of sexist language wherever 'adam or ben-adam is generic and clearly refers to both men and women. For example, in the Creation account, "He created man ('adam) in his own image... male and female, he created them" (1:26-27), 'adam should read either "the human race" or "people." The same is probably true for Genesis 2:5, 3:21, 5:1 and 6:3. Certainly the 'adam in Psalm 8:4 deserves to be rendered "human beings" or "men and women."

A parallel example is found repeatedly in the books of the Old Testament. It is a Hebrew phrase that describes death as being "gathered to my fathers" or "buried with my fathers" (Gen 49:29). Elsewhere the Lord promised Abraham: "You will go to your fathers in peace" (Gen 15:15), and told Moses, "You are going to rest with your fathers" (Deut 31:16).

There are a number of reasons to understand "fathers" (Hebrew *aboth*) in these contexts as a generic term. I believe Jacob was referring not just to the male members of his family, to whom he hoped to be joined in death, but to his wives and female ancestors as well.

### PHYSICAL PROXIMITY

First, as many interpret the phrase, Jacob may have had in mind the physical burial of his body beside the bodies of his fathers "in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite" (49:29). If this were Jacob's wish, then when he said, "bury me with my fathers," he meant "bury my body at Hebron in the family tomb, the one bought by Abraham for his beloved wife, Sarah, the cave in the field of Machpelah." Therefore, we must note, as Jacob himself recalls, this tomb was also the resting place of two other women: Rebekah (his mother and Isaac's wife) and Leah, his own first wife, whom he buried there himself (49:31).

All tourists who have recently visited the Mosque in Hebron that is built above the (traditional) cave of Machpelah will testify that the tombs on the upper level still include these patriarchal women beside their husbands, just as Jacob describes them in this passage. If he is requesting, therefore, that his body rest in close proximity to those of his "fathers," then his grandmother, mother, and first wife would have to be included in the meaning of the term as well.

### PARALLEL WITH "HIS PEOPLE"

Jacob told his sons in Egypt that he would soon be "gathered to my people" (49:29), and the inspired author records that he "breathed his last and was gathered to his people"

(v. 33). Genesis also informs us that Abraham "lived a hundred and seventy-five years... and was gathered to his people" (25:8). In each of these uses the Hebrew term for "people" (*'am*) is substituted for "fathers," and helps to further define its meaning.

But '*am* is never a term for males only; rather, it stands for all citizens, male and female, of a nation or land (11:6). When the three sons of Noah repopulated the earth, "from them came the people who were scattered over the earth" (9:19). Their three wives were the "mothers," seldom remembered, who made that repopulation happen.

Obviously there were child-producing women in the nations, or the nations could never have increased and scattered, as the Lord commanded (9:7). The word for "people," therefore, can not be sexist in the Hebrew Bible, exclusive of the female members of any community, nor can "fathers" be included in a "men only" category.

### PLURAL IN FEMININE FORM

Only readers of the Hebrew language can appreciate the surprise that comes with the discovery that the plural for father (*'abh*) is not '*abhim* (common masculine plural, as might be expected), but '*abhoth* (feminine, plural). This same transfer is true of other masculine nouns, such as *shulchanoth* for "tables," but never seems to affect the translation or meaning. The feminine plural suggests that "fathers" has a generic connotation and is inclusive of both sexes. Thus, the NRSV translates '*abhoth* as "ancestors" in Deuteronomy 31:16, referring to both men and women.

Moses says that the plague of locusts "will fill your houses... something neither your parents or grandparents have seen (Ex 10:6), a hardship clearly shared by the women in each household!

### JACOB'S LONGING FOR RACHEL

Jacob's most beloved wife was not Leah but Rachel, for whom he paid her father Laban fourteen years of labor (Gen 29:18-30). Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin, and was buried near Bethlehem (35:16-19), so her body was not in the family tomb at Hebron.

However, the ancient Hebrews may have held a spiritual view of death, meaning a gathering with the spirits of their ancestors (Ecc 12:7, 2 Sam 12:23). If this were so, then Jacob would have longed to be, after his death, in the presence of his beloved mother, Rebekah (25:28), and his beautiful wife, Rachel (29:17-18). This desire would probably have been even greater than to be joined to his forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We know from what Jesus said that their souls are not dead, but alive with God (Mt 22:32).

These four arguments based on the original text support my contention that "fathers" is a generic term in these phrases referring to death in the Hebrew Scriptures, and that "fathers" was not intended to be a sexist term referring to men only.

---

A graduate of Wheaton College (B.A.) and Brandeis University (Ph.D.), Arthur H. Lewis is professor emeritus of Old Testament Studies at Bethel College, specializing in Hebrew, Akkadian, and Ugaritic.