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THE “FIRST DEBORAH” – GENESIS 35:8 IN THE LITERARY AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

ABSTRACT

Exegetes consider Genesis 35:8 an intrusive verse in the narrative of Genesis 35:1-15 because of its isolated mention of the death and burial of Deborah, Rebekah's nurse. However, the analysis of the verse in its literary and theological context in this article shows that it has been strategically placed in the narrative to underscore, among other things, the important role of Deborah in the Bethel tradition and the Jacob Cycle, as well as the subtle pointer to the fact that little people also have a place in the overall narrative of God's people.

1. INTRODUCTION

Now Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died and was buried under the oak below Bethel. So it was named Allon Bacuth (Genesis 35:8).

Whenever the name Deborah is mentioned in connection with the Bible, the image that comes to mind is that of the famous judge, prophetess and warrior of Judges 4-5. Few people seem to be aware of a Deborah in “the book of beginnings”. In this article, the spotlight will be on this “First Deborah” of Genesis 35:8, as part of the narrative of Genesis 35:1-15. Our assumption is that there must have been something striking about this “ordinary” wet nurse who, at her death, made the whole household of Israel stand still and mourn. So great was the mourning and the weeping at Deborah's funeral that the oak under which she was buried was named “the Oak of Weeping”. Out of the approximately five dozen burials/reburials of individuals or groups of people mentioned in the Old Testament, Deborah's is the third. Except for Jezebel's whose remains were only available for burial

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in 2 Kings 9:35, the Old Testament mentions the burial of only five women (all of them in Genesis), namely Sarah (Gen. 23:19), Deborah (Gen. 35:8), Rachel (Gen. 35:19), Rebekah, and Leah (Gen. 49:31). It is interesting to probe why, in death, this “ordinary maid” was able to rub shoulders with women of nobility.¹

The choice of Genesis 35:8 is informed by its striking position in the narrative of Jacob’s itinerary. Commentators have wondered for a long time why this verse features in the narrative. If we begin with Skinner (1910:425), who regards the notice about Deborah as “perplexing in many ways”, one would easily agree that the array of comments on verse 8 is indeed worthy of note. According to Stigers (1976:262), the verse is “most intrusive in the train of thoughts”. Rendsburg (1984:364) admits that, “The commentators have traditionally struggled with Gen. xxxv 8”, and Westermann (1985:552) claims that “V.8 is difficult [*schwierig*] because it does not fit the context...”. Sarna (1989:241) views the account of Deborah’s passage in the verse as puzzling and the intrusive nature of the verse even more perplexing. Whereas Janzen (1993:140) regards the burial of Deborah as “tantalizingly unexplained”, Wenham (1994:325) considers the record of the death strange. For Hamilton (1995:378) and Fretheim (1994:586), verse 8 is “a curious note” and the presence of the material at that point is puzzling to many commentators. Cotter (2003:259) also considers Genesis 35:8 a frame break or an intrusion in the narrative, and in Roth’s (2003:204) view, “the reappearance of the wet nurse in Genesis 35 is troubling in the chronology of the narrative”. It is not surprising, therefore, that Mathews (2005:60) also regards the mention of Deborah in that narrative as “surprising”.

From the range of adjectives (strange, intrusive, most intrusive, overbearing, perplexing, curious, puzzling, tantalizingly unexplained, troubling, and surprising) used to describe the presence of verse 8 in Genesis 35, Fokkelman’s (1991:235fn.) confession that “v.8 is overbearing, we do not know what to do with it” is indeed understandable. The question is: What makes Genesis 35:8 appear so intractable? It is of interest to us to investigate the factors that could account for the inscrutability of the material in the context of Genesis 35. Although both the literary and theological contexts of the verse naturally overlap, it is helpful to examine the text of Genesis 35:8 first in its literary setting and then from a theological viewpoint.² In the sense that the discussion highlights the significance of a female biblical character and God’s tendency to affirm

1 Jehu ordered that Jezebel’s corpse be buried because she was a king’s daughter (2 Kgs 9:34). But she was also a queen.

2 For a more detailed discussion of the “First Deborah”, cf. Olojede (2011:88-130).

the marginalized, the present reading could also be considered feminist as well as liberationist.

2. LITERARY ANALYSIS OF GENESIS 35:8

In this section, Genesis 35:8 will be analysed in terms of the literary structure, context and content, as well as its intertextual affinities.

2.1 Literary structure and context of Genesis 35:8

Genesis 35:1-15 is found in the context of a broader composition that is traditionally identified as the Jacob Cycle (or what some feminist theologians have re-captioned as the Rebekah cycle³) within the ancestral or patriarchal narratives (Gen. 12-50). Genesis 35, as a whole, is regarded as the end of the Jacob Cycle (Gen. 25:12-35:29). The seemingly disparate materials in the chapter serve as closure to the Jacob narrative and relate to Jacob’s final steps back to Canaan prior to his father’s death (Brueggemann 1982:280, 283; Wenham 1994:321).

Whereas some scholars are inclined to combine verse 8 with either the preceding verses (Wenham 1994:321; Hamilton 1995:376-379) or the verses immediately before and after it (Von Rad 1963:330; Stigers 1976:262; Brueggemann 1982:280), others treat the verse as a separate unit (Coats 1983:238ff.; Westermann 1985:552; 1987:244; Fokkelman 1991:235). In my opinion, Coats’ (1983:238) analysis of Genesis 35:8 is an independent, particularly instructive unit, as it enables us to probe the verse more deeply. In this discussion, Genesis 35:8 will be treated as a unit in consonance with Coats’ outline which divides the verse into two, (a) report and (b) place name, but further subdivides 8a into 8a α (death) and 8a β (burial):

8a α Now Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died

8a β and was buried under the oak below Bethel.

8b So it was named Allon Bacuth.

2.1.1 Genesis 35:8a α

As noted earlier, some critics regard Genesis 35:8 as either an intrusion in the main narrative or a misplaced addition.⁴ However, the fact that the verse begins with a *waw* consecutive suggests a connection with the preceding verse, as each of the verses in the pericope of 35:1-15 in the

3 Steinberg (1984:179; 1993:87ff).

4 Sama (1989:241); Westermann (1985:525). For further details, cf. Olojede (2011:102).

Hebrew text does, in fact, begin with the *waw* consecutive. Clearly, that fact presupposes a narrative progression and, therefore, some degree of textual unity, at least on a syntactic level. It is striking that all the verses in Genesis 35, with the exception of the opening verses in the genealogy section (vv. 23-24, which begin with *וַיְבִי*), begin with the *waw* consecutive.

Thus, in 35:8, a female character is introduced to the reader – Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse. So far, in Genesis 35, only God and Jacob have played audible roles and appear in the foreground; the other characters seem to remain in the background. Who is Deborah, and why does she feature in the Jacob Cycle? What role could she possibly have played in the broader narrative? The mention of Deborah in this verse calls to mind the unnamed nurse in Genesis 24:59 who the history of interpretation unequivocally identifies as the Deborah in Genesis 35:8.⁵ Whereas some interpreters read the phrase *מִיִּנְקַת רֵבֶקָה*, Rebekah’s nurse, to mean the nurse who suckled Rebekah as a child, others regard it as the nurse who was assigned to Rebekah to help her suckle her babies when they would eventually arrive.⁶

At any rate, Deborah died. Could that be the summary of a life fully lived? Besides the reference to the fact that she was Rebekah’s nurse and the earlier mention of her departure from Paddan Aram with her mistress, nothing else is stated about this woman. Nothing is mentioned of her birth, background, family, or relationships; nothing is known of her physical appearance, as is typical of many biblical characters. Her voice was never heard and there is no direct characterization of Deborah, no suggestions about her emotions or feelings. How then could one enter into Deborah’s world? What does her death reveal about her life? Could the fact that Deborah’s death was mentioned while that of her mistress, Rebekah was overlooked⁷ point to something extraordinary about this life? As Sarna (1989:241) pointed out, “the demise of a woman is reported only in exceptional cases in the Torah”.

5 Cf. Skinner (1910:425); Speiser (1964:270); Rendsburg (1984:365); Westermann (1987:245); Sarna (1989:169, 241); Boling (1992:113); Janzen (1993:141); Fretheim (1994:511, 586); Wenham (1994:150, 325); Hamilton (1995:158); Roth (2003:204); Mathews (2005:344, 621); Arnold (2009:302).

6 For instance, Rebekah’s nurse is identified as “the nanny who has looked after her from childhood” (Wenham 1994:150; Sarna 1989:169). For the alternative view, cf. Janzen (1993:141) and Fretheim (1994:586).

7 Genesis records the death of each of the patriarch’s wives, except Rebekah’s, who must have died while Jacob was away in Aram (Hamilton 1995:378; Rendsburg 1984:364; Wenham 1994:325). Leah’s death is not on record, that is, besides Jacob’s last-minute reference to her burial place on his deathbed (Gen. 49:31).

Deborah died after Jacob and his caravan arrived in Bethel, where Jacob built an altar to the Lord (Gen. 35:6-7). Was Deborah residing in Bethel, or was she part of Jacob’s company? The latter appears more probable, as the narrative does not indicate that Jacob had any relatives residing in Bethel. In verse 16, he and his company moved on from Bethel. For the first time in Jacob’s itinerary, death hit the troupe, and struck the oldest member. The family had escaped death in Shechem, but now the smell of death was in the way. Deborah died in the midst of loved ones.

2.1.2 Genesis 35:8aβ

Deborah not only died at a ripe old age, but she was also buried. She had a proper burial under the shadow of the terebinth tree, away from the shadow of death, where her spent old body could “rest secure” (Ps. 16:9). For the household of Jacob, under the oak was the place to let go, the place for a final farewell to the matriarch Rebekah’s nurse. For Jacob, the event must have been an anticlimax to the euphoria he had just experienced from the encounter with God. He had to make peace with the fact that it was time for this old pilgrim to go home.

It is significant that the oak, under which Deborah was buried, was located “below Bethel”, that is, near or at Bethel (Westermann 1987:245). She was buried below Bethel – that place which was, for Jacob, a place of paradox, a place of terror and a place of divine encounter, a place of refuge for the fugitive in time of trouble. Jacob had just erected a monument to the God of Bethel, the one who delivered him in the time of his distress. Now, he has to seek a suitable place of rest that would act as a monument to his mother’s nurse. What better place than under the oak of Bethel!

2.1.3 Genesis 35:8b

The reader learns that the oak acquired a name – the Oak of Tears or the Oak of Weeping (אֵלֶּיךָ בְּבוֹרֵי), which is regarded as an aetiological place name (Arnold 2009:302). The name given to the oak apparently testifies to what happened under it during Deborah’s internment. The people wept a great deal. So great, so unrestrained, and so memorable was the weeping that the site was given a name to preserve Deborah’s memory for later generations. She would be remembered long after her death (Westermann 1985:552; 1987:245).

Why would the people weep so much for an “ordinary” wet nurse? Why would anyone bother to keep alive the memory of an old maid? What was it about this woman who stood by Rebekah through twenty years of barrenness when there was no baby to suckle? Why would the people

not stand still to mourn this woman who must have dandled Israel on her knees, and who stuck with him in all his wanderings? At a time when Jacob was already estranged from his mother, this First Deborah probably became his surrogate mother,⁸ the one who comforted him in his pain. Perhaps then, she was no ordinary maid after all. By naming that oak, Israel's household was declaring to the world, "Deborah means the world to us and we would like the whole world to know it!"

Some scholars claim that Deborah played no role in the narrative (Arnold 2009:302), but Rendsburg (1984:365) concludes convincingly that she played a prominent role in the overall narrative, or else, why would an entire clan stand still to express such palpable grief for "an ancillary character" (Hamilton 1995:158-159), whose life did not count or make any difference? It is true that nothing else is revealed about her person, except that she was Rebekah's nurse; but the tears spoke volumes. Deborah did not utter a single word in the Jacob Cycle, but her voice could be heard in the weeping of Jacob's household – and in the whisper of the terebinth tree.

2.2 Intertextual allusions in Genesis 35:8

A number of intertextual references or allusions can be observed within the unit. First, the connections to other verses in Genesis 35, in particular, 35:1-15 will be examined.

2.2.1 Genesis 35:1-15 – death and burial

It has been observed that Deborah's death in Genesis 35:8a α is the first of three deaths recorded in Genesis 35. The other two are the deaths of Rachel and Isaac in verse 19 and verse 29, respectively. Incidentally, the chapter also records the burials of all three characters. Blum (1984:205) aptly identifies a structural parallel between the death and burial of, and the place naming for Deborah and Rachel. One may assume, therefore, that the similarity between the two death reports confirms some literary unity within the chapter. Perhaps Jacob's sad encounter with a succession of deaths at that stage of his journey was an indication that the Jacob Cycle was about to close.

In addition, Deborah's burial under the oak near Bethel not only resonates with two other burials in the chapter, but also echoes a fourth (in fact, the first) "burial" in 35:4. Jacob is said to have buried all the foreign gods and jewels that belonged to his household. Although the Hebrew

8 This point is further explained in Roth's comment in 2.2.2 below.

word translated as “bury” (קָבַר) in verse 4 is different from קָבַר in verses 8, 19, and 29, the “burial” of those gods and rings seems to be a token of the real burials that would inevitably follow. It is interesting to note that the burial in verse 4 took place near Shechem, like Deborah’s, under the terebinth. Hamilton (1995:378-379) reckons that Deborah’s burial under the oak tree is used deliberately to act as a parallel to the internment of the false gods under the terebinth (cf. Fretheim 1994:586). Whereas the burial of Deborah resulted in the naming of the oak, the burial of the gods did not (Janzen 1993:140).

More importantly, the association of Deborah’s burial with Bethel echoes the reference to Bethel in verses 1-7 and 9-16. Whereas some scholars tend to regard Genesis 35:8 as an intrusion in the chapter, the reference to Bethel in the verse as in the preceding and following verses points to the contrary. Rather, it alludes to some underlying harmony between the verse and its context, at least from a literary standpoint. Coats” (1983:238) insight in this regard is especially crucial to this discussion. He notes that, although Deborah plays no role in the narrative, the unit in which she is mentioned has contact with the rest of the narrative only on the basis of a catchword, Bethel (cf. Gomes 2006:88)! Therefore, the significance of Bethel in the unit will be explored later in the discussion.

In addition, the naming of the oak in remembrance of Deborah corresponds with the setting up of the pillar over Rachel’s tomb, as Blum rightly noted. Both were to serve as monuments to these unforgettable women who both died on the way. Overall, the intratextual references in verse 8 to other portions of the chapter point to some textual unity within the chapter.

2.2.2 Genesis 35:8 and 24:59

Several other intertextual references are recognizable between 35:8 and other parts of Genesis. For instance, a clear allusion that is accepted univocally by critics in Genesis 35:8 is the identification of Deborah with Rebekah’s unnamed nurse in Genesis 24:59.⁹ Different reasons have been adduced for her anonymity in 24:59. According to Westermann (1985:552), “[t]here was no need to mention her name in 24:59, but it is required in the account of her death”. However, Hamilton (1995:158) suggests that her anonymity may have been to “balance the unnamed servant [i.e. of Abraham] and his companions” in the narrative, and that the omission of

9 “So they sent their sister Rebekah on her way, along with her nurse and Abraham’s servant and his men” (Gen. 24:59).

her name is a deliberate strategy to keep the focus on the main character in the plot – Rebekah.

In this instance, it is worth noting Rendsburg's point that the anonymity of Rebekah's nurse in 24:59 prepares the reader's mind for the prominent role that the character would eventually play in the overall narrative, namely in 35:8. He notes that the reference is a clear and brilliant example of the literary feature, which Sarna (1989:82) calls "the anticipatory use of information" in Genesis narratives (Rendsburg 1984:365). It is also likely, in my view, that her anonymity in 24:59 shows her status in the eyes of her mistress and the family at that time – another faceless servant. In time, she became a powerful member of Israel's household whose identity could no longer be ignored.

Of importance also is Roth's (2003:203ff.) observation that Deborah's departure from Haran as Rebekah's nurse finds parallel in the Neo-Babylonian dowry transmission in which a single female slave is given as a dowry to the bride by her mother (or another female relative) to help the bride adjust to her new life in her husband's home. On the question of how Deborah ended up in Jacob's company, Roth (2003:205) argues that:

It is entirely in keeping with the sentiments of the narrative as well as the marriage customs and practices of the times for Rebekah to give her wet nurse Deborah to her favoured son Jacob. Thus, Deborah could have joined Jacob's retinue at any time that Rebekah chose to award ownership of her dowry slave woman to Jacob.

For Roth, the comparison of Deborah's role with the Neo-Babylonian dowry practice supports Rashi's assumption that Rebekah sent Deborah to Jacob in Haran in fulfilment of her promise in Genesis 27:45 to send for him when his brother Esau's anger abated. When Jacob departed Haran for Canaan, Deborah left with him.

Another allusion in connection with Genesis 24:59, not unrelated to the point in the last paragraph, is the mention of Rebekah. It has been suggested that the mention of Rebekah, in this instance, generally brings to mind the character who, in association with Jacob, orchestrated the deception of her husband Isaac in Genesis 27. The conspiracy resulted in Jacob usurping the blessing that was reserved for Esau. The inference is that Rebekah was being punished for her deeds, as she never saw her son Jacob again after he left for Paddan Aram. The last time she was mentioned in the narratives was in Genesis 27:45 before Jacob returned

from his sojourn with Laban (Rendsburg 1984:364;¹⁰ Wenham 1994:325; Hamilton 1995:378).¹¹

2.2.3 First Deborah and Deborah

In terms of Judges 4:4-5, a double intertextual connection can safely be made. The first relates to the name “Deborah” which features again in the Old Testament in Judges 4:4, and refers to the prophetess and wife of Lapidoth “who judged Israel at that time”. However, another connection touches on the place where this famous Deborah held court – “under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel” (Judg. 4:5). Exegetes no doubt recognize the literary link between the two, although they understand it differently (Westermann 1987:245; Lindars 1995:183-184; Gomes 2006:88, 121, 139).¹²

Kaiser (2009:124) comments on the claim of some modern critics that Genesis 35:8 confuses the Deborah there with the one in Judges 4. His view (which sounds reasonable) is that “[t]he confusion is only in the mind of critics”. Whether or not the same tree is being referred to in the two texts remains open to debate, but the proximity of the location and the similarity of names in the two texts suggest either an overlap in or the development of tradition. Alternatively, the second Deborah takes her name after the first because of her location under the tree near Bethel.

2.2.4 Genesis 35:8 and Bethel

As mentioned earlier, the use of Bethel connect verse 8 with Genesis 35, especially with verses 1-15. The Bethel connection is, however, not limited to Genesis 35, since Bethel is mentioned extensively in other parts of Genesis and indeed in many other Old Testament books. Reference to Bethel in the book of Genesis begins with Abraham’s removal of his tent to a location between Ai and Bethel in Genesis 12:8. Remarkably, the last mention of Bethel in Genesis is in chapter 35, immediately before the

10 Rendsburg (1984:365) argues that, “[o]ur author will not openly moralize about Rebekah... Rather he leaves clues in the narrative which allow us, the readers, to reach our own conclusion... Our author cleverly included the name Rebekah to evoke in our minds the recollection of her character lest we have forgotten about her, but the person Rebekah is absent”.

11 Mention should also be made of the Targumic tradition that Jacob learnt of his mother’s death when Deborah died (Hayward 1990:181-182). The *Fragment Targums* FT, therefore, translates the “אֵלֶּון בְּכֹרֶת” as the “Other Weeping” from the Greek *allon* (other), presuming that the weeping for Rebekah was the “first weeping”.

12 For more details on this discussion, cf. Olojede (2011:112).

Jacob Cycle would close. There is no doubt that the mention of Bethel is significant in Genesis 35:8. What is equally notable, in this instance, however is the connection that has been established between weeping and several Old Testament Bethel traditions. Baruchi-Unna rightly acknowledged that connection:

(1) “Oak of Weeping” was located “below Bethel” (Gen. xxxv 8). (2) The tribe of Israel wept there before the Lord during their war with Benjamin (Jug. xx 23, 26; xxi 2). (3) The struggle between Jacob and the angel took place in Bethel, according to a tradition known by Prophet Hosea, and it also spoke of weeping: “Yea, he had power over the angel, and prevailed: wept, and made supplication unto him: he found him at Bethel, and there he spoke with us” (Hos. xii 5). (4) In the Septuagint version of Judges ii 1, a Hebrew *Vorlage* is reflected in which Israel’s weeping following the angel (*sic*) words (Jud. ii 4) took place in Bethel as well: *And an angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal, to the weepers, to Bethel (2008:630-31, *italics added*)¹³.

Overall, it appears that the clearest external connections to Bethel in 35:8 relate to the Deborah of Judges 4:4-5, because the connection with Bethel simultaneously ties up with the tree and with the strong tradition of weeping at Bethel.

The First Deborah died and she was buried below Bethel. Is there anything particularly significant about the location? As noted earlier, Coats (1983:238) shows that the “catchword organization” that connects the unit with the context is Bethel; without it, the unit has no contact with the context. If the weight of the unit’s connection rests on the location Bethel, as Coats demonstrates, then the importance of Bethel should be probed further. The name Bethel is mentioned explicitly in verses 35:1, 3, 6, 8, 15 and 16. It is remarkable that six of the twelve occurrences of the name in the book of Genesis appear in chapter 35.

There is no doubt that Bethel was recognized as a sacred place. Sama (1989:200, 398) argues that the initial sanctity of Bethel was based solely on Jacob’s revelation of God at the place. Thus, Bethel stands as a “spiritual milestone”, based on the experience of theophany in Genesis 28:10-22 (Speiser 1964:219). The centrality of Bethel to the Jacob Cycle, which incidentally begins with a Bethel event, has also been attested (Sama 1989:197). The

13 Cf. Amit 2000:125; Judg. 20:26. Before the battle in Jabesh-Gilead, the people also came to Bethel, “and they lifted up their voices and wept bitterly...” (21:2-4). Note that other critics also connect this weeping at Bochim (Judg. 2:1, 4-5) with Allon Bacuth. In fact, some claim that Bochim refers to Bethel and emend Bochim to read Bethel based on the LXX, as Baruchi-Unna has done (cf. Boling 1992:113; Gomes 2006:88, 100, 117). For a different view, cf. Lindars (1995:74-76).

Jacob Cycle begins and climaxes at Bethel (Gen. 28:11ff.; 35:1-8), that is, with the revelation at Bethel and the vow at Bethel (Gomes 2006:70, 218). Gomes (2006:212) argues that, by and large, the Bethel cult was pivotal to the configuration of Israelite identity. However, it is also worth noting that Bethel was most famous (or infamous) for the “golden calves” erected there (and at Dan) by Jeroboam I (1 Kgs 12:29).

2.2.5 Burial and weeping/mourning

Closely associated with proper burials in the Old Testament is the custom of weeping and mourning.¹⁴ The text implies that Jacob’s household must have wept and mourned over Deborah; hence, the tree under which she was buried was named Allon Bacuth. Qoheleth (Eccl 6:3) stresses the importance of a proper burial in the Old Testament period. The book of Genesis shows that all the patriarchs and all the matriarchs (except Rachel) were buried at the Cave of Machpelah, which Abraham had earlier bought from Hephron the Hittite (Gen. 23:3-20; 49:29-30). Such burials in tombs and in caves were common, but it was also customary to bury people where they died, as in the case of Rachel in Genesis 35:19. Unlike the communal burial of the dead in family tombs on ancestral land, the burial of Deborah like that of Rachel was at the location of death (Block-Smith 1992a:785-786).

Although Bar (2010:271-272) rightly argues that Deborah’s burial under the oak was to perpetuate her memory (cf. also Block-Smith 1992b:115), his claim that she was buried under a tree rather than in a tomb, because of her status as a commoner, is questionable. It appears that this kind of burial took place when a person died on a journey or away from home. For instance, the bones of Saul (who was by no means a commoner) and his sons were buried under the tamarisk tree (1 Sam. 31:13), and in Numbers 11:34, the people who lusted after meat in the desert were buried at Kibroth-hattaavah. Rachel was also buried on the way, because she died on the way (Gen. 48:7). Block-Smith (1992b:114-115) attests that members of the Exodus generation were buried where they died; for example, Miriam in Kadesh (Num. 20:1), and Aaron and Moses presumably on Mount Hor (Num. 33:39) and in Moab near Beth-peor (Deut. 34:6), respectively. Therefore, Deborah’s burial on the way, under the oak, had nothing to do with her social status or the fact that she was not part of the family, as Bar suggests. In fact, Hallote (2001:48) confirms that, “[t]ree burial was sometimes done when a person died away from home, presumably so that the location of the roadside grave would not be forgotten”.¹⁵

14 Cf. 2 Samuel 1:12; 11:26; 1 Kings 13:30; 1 Chronicles 7:22; 2 Chronicles 35:24.

15 For more on burials in the Old Testament, cf. Cole (2000:204-205) and Hallote (2001:30-45). Note further discussions of trees as burial markers in the Old

Clearly, it was customary to weep over loved ones at their burial. Abraham wept for Sarah and mourned her (Gen. 23:2). The children of Israel wept for (and mourned) Moses for thirty days in the plains of Moab (Deut. 34:8), while David and his people wept at the grave of Abner (2 Sam. 3:32). It appears that weeping was a major element in the mourning process. Other aspects included fasting (2 Sam. 1:12), removing one's jewellery (Ex. 33:4), tearing one's clothes, and wearing sackcloth and ashes (2 Sam. 3:31). When a great person died, mourning could go on for prolonged periods. At the death of Jacob, his offspring and all of Egypt mourned for him for seventy days (Gen. 50:3). The house of Israel mourned for Aaron and Moses for thirty days each (Num. 20:29; Deut. 34:8), while the men who buried the bones of Saul and his sons fasted for them for seven days (1 Sam. 31:13). In some instances, mourning was accompanied by lamentation (1 Sam. 1:17; 25:1; 28:3; 2 Chron. 35:25; cf. Luke 23:27; John 20:11).

Thus, it is possible to recapture the kind of burial that Deborah received. Not only was her burial marked by such great lamentation and weeping that the burial spot became memorialized. For Bar (2010:271, 274), the site was named "Oak of Weeping", because Deborah served as a "professional crier" (*bakkītu*) in the last stages of her life. There is no evidence to support this conjecture. Rather, Deborah's burial seems comparable to only that of notable persons in the Old Testament. For instance, after the whole land of Egypt mourned Jacob for seventy days, Joseph and all his brethren and the elders of Egypt went up to bury him at the Cave of Machpelah. The event is described in Genesis 50:10-11 as follows:

... and there *they mourned with a great and very sore lamentation...*
 And when the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning in the floor of Atad, they said, This is a *grievous mourning* to the Egyptians: wherefore the name of it was called Abel-mizraim...
 (emphasis added).

The above account of the mourning for Jacob parallels Mathews' (2005:621) description of the mourning for Deborah: "The *grievous mourning* and raising of a special memorial evidenced the deep heartache Jacob must have felt toward the passing of the nursemaid who had attended him in his childhood" (*emphasis added*). As noted earlier, besides Deborah's, only the burial of five other women (all women of nobility) are mentioned in the Old Testament. This fact indeed adds to the significance of Deborah's burial and the extraordinary mourning that accompanied it.

2.2.6 Deborah and women in Genesis

Lastly, Deborah could be viewed in light of other women in Genesis. Scholars have established that Genesis women sometimes used deception to achieve their goals (Bellis 1994:69; Niditch 1998:22). Bellis (1994:67ff.) notes that the majority of women in Genesis are “helpmates”, that is, wives and mothers, and that the women “run the gamut from helpmates to harlots”; the only missing category is that of heroes (Bellis 1994:94). Among the women of Genesis, many of whom are stereotyped and stigmatized as deceivers and tricksters, Deborah stands out as a true mother in Israel. Bellis’ missing category of heroines could perhaps be filled in this First Deborah. Deborah fits into the image of Genesis women who operated from the private domain, but, more than that, the great and unprecedented mourning for this “ordinary” maid suggests that she is an example of what has been referred to as “a domestic hero” or “a common person as a hero” (Ryken *et al.* 1998:378-381).¹⁶

3. THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF GENESIS 35:8

Besides its literary context, the theological context of Genesis 35:8, which is intertwined with the literary context, is also worth probing briefly. First, the inclusion of Deborah’s eulogy in the story of the “big men” of Genesis demonstrates that God is not only on the side of the great, but also on the side of the marginalized and those the society regards as little people. It is not surprising that the Old Testament notices this First Deborah. After all, a tendency in Scriptures is for God to be on the side of the marginalized, the poor, the oppressed, and the least likely to succeed, some of whom he also continues to support even when they have risen to power. With God, there is always hope for the underdog, as He often places the younger above the elder (as in Jacob over Esau, or David above all his older brothers). He also readily supports the weak against the mighty (as in the case of David against Goliath). That trend is noticeable in the story of Deborah. One would have expected an obituary notice on Rebekah, “the Lady of the Manor”. Rather, one is confronted with the death notice of Deborah, her maid, the only such woman in Genesis who stood shoulder-to-shoulder in death

16 Ryken *et al.* (1998:378-381) identify certain familiar images of the hero/heroine in Scriptures, including aristocratic heroes, religious heroes, the common person as hero, intellectual heroes, lovers as heroes, domestic heroes and exemplary characters as heroes, and so forth. The category of domestic heroes that they proffer includes wives and mothers and they also point out that, “[t]he virtuous wife of Proverbs 31:10-31 is a composite of all that a domestic heroine might aspire to be”.

with noble women. Perhaps, the saying is true that a person's greatness is rightly revealed in their death.

Secondly, notable in this context is Diebner's (1988) intriguing response to Westermann's (1981:672) description of the short notice on Deborah as *schwierig und unverstandlich*. Diebner argues that the solution to the question of the placement of verse 8 in Genesis 35 and of Deborah in Jacob's itinerary is twofold – Deborah's role and Deborah's name.

Deborah's role as a מִיִּנְקָה meant that she produced milk, and her name, Deborah (bee) implied that she produced honey. For Diebner, Deborah did not die accidentally, but at the right time – the moment Jacob stepped on the threshold of Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey. Her name was not mentioned earlier in 24:59, because it had to be introduced at the right moment (confirming Rendsburg's argument that the writer of Genesis employed anticipatory use of information to delay the mention of Deborah's name). Indeed, Diebner's conclusion confirms that Genesis 35:8 was not an accidental placement in the unit.

Thirdly, the theological implication of Diebner's depiction of Deborah as a producer of milk and honey is remarkable. Deborah could be regarded as a nourisher of the house of Rebekah, a provider of food, and of sustenance.¹⁷ The first occurrence of the Hebrew word מִיִּנְקָה (wet nurse, nurse, foster mother) or any of its cognates (for example, אִמָּנָה) in the Old Testament is in Genesis 24:59, while the second mention in Genesis 35:8 refers to the same character, Rebekah's nurse.¹⁸ In ancient Israel, the wet nurse nursed a baby on behalf of another woman. This service often entailed breastfeeding the baby, particularly when the mother had insufficient breast milk or died during childbirth, and providing general care (Exod. 2:5-9; Ruth 4:16; 2 Kings 11:2). The wet nurse, like the related role of the midwife, was exclusively a female occupation in Israel. Although women in the lower strata of society nursed their own babies, wealthy and royal women could engage the services of a wet nurse, which suggests that Rebekah was also, in a sense, wealthy and "royal". The indication is that nurses stayed with the family of the babies sometimes long after the

17 In fact, Diebner (1988:184) views Deborah as a producer of milk and honey for Israel in the Golah (i.e. "mesopotamischen Golah"), and at the point when Israel would reach the "land that flows with milk and honey", Deborah's mission ended. She died on the border of Canaan.

18 The term מִיִּנְקָה is found elsewhere in the Old Testament in Exodus 2:7-9; Ruth 4:16; 2 Samuel 4:4; 2 Kings 11:2, and 2 Chron. 22:11, but it is also used figuratively in Numbers 11:12; Isaiah 49:23; 60:16 and 66:10-13 (Pace 2009:301; cf. 2 Esdras 1:28-29).

baby had been weaned, as in the case of Deborah (Marsman 2003:431, 237; Sarna 1989:169; Pace 2009:301).

Claassens (2004:7, 107-108) notes that the metaphor of nursing is used to describe God’s love and provision (Num. 11:11-12; Deut. 32:13-14). The figurative use of the term to describe God, מִיִּנְקָתָהּ, in Isaiah 49:23; 60:16 and 66:10-13¹⁹ has theological implications. Could the household of Rebekah have seen the Supreme מִיִּנְקָתָהּ Himself in this earthly מִיִּנְקָתָהּ, in the way she taught, tended and nourished them? The metaphorical use of the term also calls to mind other female imageries of God in the Old Testament. Closely related to that of the מִיִּנְקָתָהּ are the images of God as a midwife (Pss. 22:9-10; 71:6; Is. 46:3; cf. Claassens 2007:767ff.), and a mother, especially a woman in travail.

4. CONCLUSION

The literary analysis of 35:8 shows that it is strategically placed in the centre of the pericope of Genesis 35:1-15. Deborah’s demise (but also, ultimately, that of Rachel) is meant to point out that the Jacob Cycle was about to close. A literary analysis of the verse in both its present context and its intertextual affinities with other passages of Scriptures leads to the conclusion that the verse is not at all intrusive. Rather, it has been deliberately placed by the narrator (writer or editor) to focus on the person of Deborah and her place in the overall narrative of God’s people.

Evidence from the analysis of the theological context of Genesis 35:8 also underscores the significance of Deborah’s presence and role at the centre of the Jacob Cycle and of the Bethel tradition. It has been shown that, on a theological note, Deborah is an example of God’s predilection to support the vulnerable, the marginalized and the oppressed against the mighty, the privileged and the oppressor. Genesis 35:8 is regarded as troubling in its context, probably because of the indignity that naturally accompanies lowly jobs. It appears unthinkable to some exegetes that a woman of such low estate would be accorded a dignified and memorable burial. However, bestowing dignity on all human beings should not be compromised. In some contexts where little people are further belittled by those they serve, the dignifying treatment that Deborah received from Jacob’s family could serve as an example of how to “render honour to whom honour is due” – an example to which preachers also need to pay attention.

19 Cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:7, 2; Numbers 11:12.

The respect accorded to this extraordinary wet nurse at her funeral shows that, to the mourners, Deborah was not an insignificant person; neither does the text portray her as a nobody. In death, she was accorded the kind of mourning reserved for heroes and great women or men. That the text recognized Deborah in this manner shows that, in God's script, there are no little people. The tendency to gloss over Genesis 35:8, to pretend that Deborah is not there or that she is someone else (for instance, Rebekah) is uncalled for, as the verse fits into the context. It seems highly unlikely that commentators would have perceived Genesis 35:8 as puzzling, if the death of Rebekah or Sarah were reported in that verse. However, because Deborah is regarded as an ordinary maid who could not have earned that much praise in death, they wonder how the verse got to its present location.

I submit, therefore, that the unit of Genesis 35:8, with its reference to Deborah, is not an intrusion, but a deliberate literary and theological strategy employed to locate Deborah, at the heart not only of the Bethel tradition, but also of the Jacob Cycle. In addition, I would like to state in closing that when it comes to verses such as Genesis 35:8, which are considered intrusive, the question should not be so much, "What is it doing there (for example, what is Deborah doing in Jacob's caravan)?" but rather, "Who is this person mentioned in the text and what is her/his role, or what does s/he point us to?" The same could apply to events, name lists, and so forth, all of which have hermeneutical significance. Until Deborah is perceived for whom she really was – a true Israelite heroine – commentators will continue to stumble at that Oak under Bethel!

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