**THOUGHTS ON THE PARASHAH**

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**Joseph’s Portion**

Genesis Chapter 48 records Jacob’s adoption of Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.  They were elevated to the status of tribes of Israel.  Each was destined to receive a separate portion upon the eventual conquest of the Promised Land.  After blessing his grandsons, Jacob turned to Joseph and said: ואני נתתי לך שכם אחד על אחיך אשר לקחתי מיד האמרי בחרבי ובקשתי.  The JPS translation is “Moreover I have given to thee one portion above thy brethren, which I took out of the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow (48:22).”  The enigmatic expression שכם אחד makes it difficult to grasp the plain meaning of the verse.

The Hebrew word שכם means shoulder.  The best-known Scriptural passage mentioning שכם as a body part is Exodus 12:34, in which the Israelites departing from Egypt took with them unleavened dough and slung their kneading utensils over their shoulders.  Clearly, Genesis 48:22 must have some alternate or euphemistic meaning, since of course Joseph did not receive an additional shoulder. Some scholars understand שכם as a topographical description.  Joseph was awarded a plot of land, like a mountain ridge or slope, that physically resembles the shape of a shoulder.  This understanding is quite popular among Christian commentators.

Pseudo-Jonathan and Rashi understood Genesis 48:22 as referring to the city of Shechem (Nablus).  Rashi explained that Jacob rewarded Joseph measure for measure.  Just as Joseph swore that he would make the effort to bury his father in the Holy Land, he, in turn, would merit a burial place in the Holy Land, specifically, in Shechem.  This promise is fulfilled at the end of the Israelite conquest of Canaan (Joshua 24:32).

There are three major objections to this interpretation.  First, if in this context שכם is a proper noun, then the adjective should be in the feminine form and the phrase should be שכם אחת, not שכם אחד, since cities in Hebrew are always feminine.  Second, Jacob did not capture Shechem from the Amorites.  Simon and Levi, contrary to Jacob’s wishes, captured the city from the Hivites in a murderous rampage whereby they avenged the rape of Dinah.  The third objection is contextual.  It would make more sense if Jacob’s beneficence toward Joseph as described in this verse were related to the incident at hand -- namely, Jacob’s adoption of Joseph’s two boys and the expansion of “Joseph” from one tribe into two.  If Rashi’s interpretation were correct, the more logical place for this verse would be after 47:31, when Joseph takes a solemn oath to bury his father in the family plot at Hebron.

Targum Onkelos renders the phrase חולק חד יתיר “an additional portion.”  Most of the Jewish translations follow this approach, as do Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban among the classical rabbinic commentators.  Ramban cogently explains how this verse logically concludes the episode of the elevation of Ephraim and Manasseh.  Jacob loved Joseph very much; Joseph was the firstborn of Jacob’s beloved late wife, Rachel.  (That Jacob never truly recovered from the devastating early loss of Rachel is evident in 48:7 when, as a non-sequitur, he obsessively recalls Rachel’s death.)  Jacob might have wanted to favor Joseph in the division of his estate, but was limited by rule and the need reasonably to treat his other sons.  The best Jacob could do for Joseph was to declare him the possessor of the rights of firstborn, which would entitle Joseph to a double portion.  Practically, he achieved this end by elevating Ephraim and Manasseh to the status of full-fledged sons.

Ibn Ezra dealt with the vexing problem of Jacob’s use of the past tense.  The double portion of land destined to be allotted to Joseph’s descendants had not yet been conquered.  [This datum favors Rashi’s approach of a Patriarchal era conquest.]  Ibn Ezra explained that since God had promised Abraham that the Hebrew nation would eventually come to possess the Land of Canaan, it was the custom of the family to speak of its inheritance in the past tense, not the future tense, in a demonstration of their absolute faith in God’s word.

Yet the biblical justification for translating שכם as “portion” is, at best, minimal.  Other Scriptural verses referenced by the major commentators mentioned above to support their interpretations fail to do so.  Robert Alter notes that the expression שכם אחדappears only one other time in Scripture:  “For then will I turn to the peoples a pure language that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve Him with one consent (Zephaniah 3:9).”  It is clear from this verse that שכם אחד is an adverbial expression.

Returning to Genesis 48:22: Over and above that which the other brothers will receive, Jacob promised Joseph something that, at a future time, would be taken by the sword from the Amorites.  Jacob conducted this matter of family business in a fashion described as שכם אחד.  Professor Alter understands the expression as indicating unswerving dedication to the task at hand.

Understood in this way, the phrase in Genesis 48:22 teaches an important moral and practical lesson. Securing a favorable inheritance for Joseph had long been Jacob’s desire.  Yet over many years, Jacob neglected to do the requisite work that alone could make such an outcome possible.  When he was near death, Jacob might have thought it too late to rectify that aspect of his legacy.

But so long as a person is willing to act with singular purpose and dedication, it is possible to accomplish his goal even as death appears close.  Like our patriarch Jacob, many people, despite being preoccupied with such thoughts for decades, leave the composition of their ethical-will, or the instructions concerning the material division of their estate, unfinished until the final hour approaches.  But when we are willing to act in the spirit of שכם אחד there is no reason for us to enter the next world with regrets about what we failed to do during our lifetimes.