

## **A Question of Suffering**

*[Jacob leaves for Egypt]*

A rising breeze toyed with the ashes round the top of the altar, dragging a last wisp of smoke away to the North-east. Jacob's eyes followed it towards the slopes of the Hebron mountains. Many a Springtime he had seen these slopes covered with lush pastures. Now the yellow grey soil merged with the red sand of the wilderness. Not even a trickle of water could be seen in the gullies, though water still ran. A feeble stream ambled under the sheer rock-face below him. His people - Israel were camped by the side of it. There was little movement in the camp. The intense heat brought a desultory lethargy over everyone. Even the crows had gone to find shade in the hills. The people were restless - hopeful and fearful. Cattle and sheep herded around the pools lower down the parched valley. Respect for Jacob had won them a brief respite here. The local people were naturally defensive of their lessening water supply. No-one knew how long the famine would last. Joseph had spoken of years.

Jacob struggled to his feet. It had become an effort to raise himself. Usually he would be helped, but after the sacrifice he had given orders that he should be left alone. Judah and Benjamin had built him a shelter from the heat under the rock-face near to the altar. The sacrifice was a special moment. How he wished Joseph could have shared it - and Rachel. There were times still when she seemed very close. He slowly, painfully drew himself up, supported by two stout staves. The ache in his heart was greater than any physical pain.

The sacrifice had helped. Judah had organised the altar. It had weathered since Jacob's last visit. The earth mound had to be patched up and several of the top stones needed replacing. Jacob had felt relieved as though having fulfilled an obligation. He had honoured God by giving the lamb. He had insisted on using the knife himself. He was still the father of his people - God's Israel. The sacrifice was necessary. He had wanted to put right the past before moving on - moving away - to Egypt. He had wanted more than anything to express his thanks to God - how else could he tell of

the incredible joy - his son had come back from the dead - he was going to meet him !

Yet the sacrifice had not been all he had anticipated. He had hoped for some assurance; some word from the Lord; some deep inner conviction that what he was doing was right. God had brought him to this land - the land of his fathers - the land God had promised would be theirs, and in which they would become a great nation. Now they were having to leave it - driven out by the elements which were God's to control ! Why ?

Another wisp of smoke and ash drifted across the altar. Jacob's prayers had been so fervent when he began, almost as fervent as the prayers he had offered at Peniel years ago. Those had been fearful, uncertain prayers - but he was younger then. Now his prayer was like the drift of smoke, caught by the wind - a last dying effort. "Why, Lord ? Why ?"

Jacob lowered himself again, slithering down against the rock face. Age and the heat were taking a heavy toll. The day was wearing on. Benjamin would come looking for him soon. The western sky reddened as the sun lowered - a great hanging ball of smoky fire. He could see the road winding on across the desert - towards the sunset - towards Egypt - and away from Canaan. "Why, Lord ? Why ?" "Why leave this land ?

Jacob wanted Beersheba to be his point of departure. This place of sacrifice - the place of the vow - the place of his youth - had been a starting point before. From here Abraham had gone out to Mount Moriah in obedience to the Lord, prepared to offer his own son, Jacob's father as a sacrifice. From here Jacob had gone out to Haran, seeking refuge from his brother's anger. Always, it seemed God was giving them a land and then taking them away from it again. "Why ?"

So many questions. So much time now for recollection. Why all this suffering ? The eleven sons had been with him for the sacrifice - Benjamin close to his side. Had the prayer of expiation touched them, he wondered. Nothing had been said, but they had not told him the truth about Jacob even now. He knew what it was to live with a lie. He had deceived his father Isaac, just as they had deceived him. However, his pride in Joseph, his incredulous relief at his being alive and the heart-bursting joy at the thought of seeing him again, all outweighed the bitterness and hurt. Yet still the nagging questions. "Why ? Why, Lord?" Why go through all this ? The years of unnecessary grief ? The fear of

losing his other sons - especially Benjamin and Simeon. What a strange God had taken them for his people!

Some times Jacob felt he knew this God intimately, yet at others he was a mysterious stranger. There were moments when he was closer than touching, yet moments when it seemed he did not even exist. Times when he was so demanding, yet times when he seemed to want to make them the richest people in the world. Now it seemed he was robbing them of it all again by drought and famine.

Had God not seen how the pastures shrivelled up. Had he not heard the cattle, lowing for water, skin stretched tight over their ribs. ? "Why, Lord ? Why ?" Jacob's attention was drawn again to the altar. The breeze growing stronger now, had fanned the embers into a flame. It blazed up straight in a curl of smoke. Jacob felt the tingling first. It was a sensation he had not known for a long time, yet it was unmistakable. It had been like this at Bethel. There was a presence. The voice in his mind was not his own. God had come. God was speaking. "Jacob, Jacob !" There was a youthful excitement in the old man's voice as he spoke aloud, "Yes, Lord. I'm here Lord."

Surely he should be on his knees, but the voice went on. And the Lord assured him that he was God. The message was clear. Jacob should not be afraid to move his whole people down to Egypt. God's will had been worked out in the sufferings and tragedies surrounding Joseph. They would be safe and prosper in Egypt. The promise to Abraham and Isaac was unchanged. Jacob's descendant would come back to this land. And the finest promise of all - he would live to see Joseph in Egypt - his son the ruler of all Egypt !

Jacob pulled himself to his feet again. Below him shadows were engthening over the camp. He could see Benjamin coming along the winding path to find him. "God has spoken to me !" he called, but the ageing voice no longer carried round the hills. "God has spoken," he continued to himself, "And we are in God's will. You, me, Joseph, Egypt.... we are all in God's will."