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FROM SURVIVAL TO DOMINATION: Hope in the pre-monarchical until the early monarchical period of Israel

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Introduction

Hope, the expectation of or desire for something (good/better) to happen in the future, is an universal human phenomenon. But what do people hope for? In Xhosa there is a saying 'to bear children is to extend oneself' *(ukuzala kukuzolula):* children are there to provide for one in future times of need. They also say: 'The future of a person lies in his (her) children' *(ikamva lomntu lisebantwanini).* Survival, particularly of the 'name' of a person, is secured by having descendants who can remember one, also when one is in future life[1].

When reflecting on hope in the pre-monarchic period of ancient Israel, the hope for descendants and for land immediately comes to mind. The promise of descendants and of land has long been recognized as the central theme of the narratives dealing with the patriarchs. No other hope-motive is prominent in the rest of the period --namely in the Egypt, desert and tribal-period stories (Von Rad 1975:165-170). Likewise, these elements of hope for descendants and land, later interpreted as independent nationhood in an independent territory, lived on in Israel, in fact it lives on till this very day. What happened to these elements of hope in the heydays of the early monarchy is another story, a story which I will try to outline.

1. The materials

It is significant to note that the noun *tiqwat* (hope), which occurs only once in the narratives dealing with the pre-monarchic period, functions in the context of hope for descendants. Naomi says to her daughters-in-law:

> 'I am too old to marry again. But even if I could say that I have hope of a child, if I were to marry this night, and if I were to bear sons, would you wait till they grew up?' (Ruth 1:12, NEB).

Although the present formulation of Genesis 1:28 may be of a later date, its theme of combining the aspects of descendants and of land, is certainly ancient: 'Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it...' (NEB). These two elements which are essential for the survival of the human race form a core aspect of the primal history. Already in Genesis 4 survival comes under threat when the first man to be born on earth kills his brother and was exiled to 'the land of wandering' (4:16). The great stories of the flood and of Babel carry the same theme. The flood story relates how humanity and its environment were

1 Xhosa is the language spoken by the Southern Nguni, the people to whom most of the members of the present South African cabinet, including Mr. Mandela, belong. According to the Xhosa beliefs, and for that matter many other Africans', which still functions in the lives of even urbanized people, a person lives on after death and remains part of the community. The living are responsible to fulfill certain obligations towards these 'living-dead' (forefathers). One's 'survival' after death is actually dependent on one's direct descendants' remembering you. For an exposition of Xhosa cosmology, particularly regarding the dead, see Hunter 1969:25-28, 227-256.

almost extinguished, only to be given a second chance through a renewal and expansion of the original command in Genesis 1 (Gen. 9:5-7). Likewise the extensive genealogies ('record of the descendants of...' NEB) bear witness to this theme. In these materials the element of hope is, however, not explicit, probably because in its present form it serves as introduction, as pre-history to the history of the patriarchs and Israel (Von Rad 1984:21-22, 152-155).

The theme of hope, of an orientation to the future, is explicit in the patriarchal narrative, particularly in the Abraham- and Isaac-Jacob cycles. In the Joseph cycle, which differs from the rest in many respects, hope is not playing a roll, except for as far as the Jacob-story extends into the Joseph cycle (McKane 1979:146ff). It is noteworthy that here the survival of the family line is secured by leaving, in stead of occupying, the promised land. This ironical solution occurred already earlier, though then only temporarily and intertwined with another motive (Gen. 12:10-20; see below).

The hope for descendants, for nationhood was fulfilled already while the people of the promise were still in Egypt, at least as seen from a later perspective. While a major threat of extinction (the murder of the Hebrew baby-boys) occurred here also, it was temporarily. The Exodus narrative assumes nationhood and is orientated towards a return to the promised land. A major thrust of the desert stories is the different threats that were encountered on the way and which kept the element of hope in balance. I will return to the theme of threat and hope shortly. Also in the stories of the occupation and of the judges, threats of different kind persist. Here, however, the explicit theological perspective of the Deuteronomistic writers/redactors gives a twist to the angle of the stories' perspective so that hope of the earlier period functions only in a re-interpreted mode[2]. By the time of the Judges both elements of hope, namely nationhood and occupation of the land, were (at least) ideally fulfilled. The fulfilment was actually achieved in the Davidic-Salomonistic age when Israel was, for the only time in its long history, an independent nation in an independent state. The study of the materials covering the early monarchic period falls outside the scope of this study. Still we will have to look at the way in which the earlier history, particularly that of Abraham and Jacob, has been viewed in this period, because of the drastic influence it had on the patriarchal materials.

2. Threat and hope

In the patriarchal stories, *threats to survival provided the logical anti-thesis of and the fertile soil for the development of hope.* The three key elements to survival are production, reproduction and self-defence (Gottwald 1987:175). Descendants, particularly sons, secure the survival of the family, because they supply the labour force and military power, especially in tribal societies. In the Abraham-cycle the hope for a son, an heir, is recognized as the core and original element of promise (see below). The frame in which the threat to survival of his 'name' and the hope for a son occurs is that of the infertility of Sarah (Gen. 11:30. Westermann 1980:132-133). This theme is further amplified by the motive of the age of both parents. It runs right through up to the last moment of the birth of Isaac and provides the occasion for picturing the marvellous qualities of Abraham's faith and hope.

The theme of infertility likewise functions in the stories of both Isaac and Jacob

2 Assuming a late-monarchical, early exilic date for the Deuteronomist(s), hope for descendants and land (independent nationhood in an independent land) of the early period again formed the basis for hope for the future. The theological angle was, however, changed from that of promise to that of repentance as a condition for restoration to the earlier ideal situation of the united kingdom (Zimmerli 1893:179-180).

(Brenner 1993:205-206). Both Rebecca and Rachel were reported to be infertile (Gen. 24:60, 25:1, 29:31). This primal threat to survival is by nature a family experience and usually short lived, because it was solved with the (regarded) miraculous birth of a son[3].

In the Abraham story this hope is intensified by the delay of the birth until the very end of the story. Except for the further threat to the hope posed by the command to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22), the story of Abraham almost ends with the birth of the son of the infertile wife. The narrative strategy of intertwining the Lot and Hagar/Ishmael-stories with that of Abraham serves to delay the fulfilment and intensifies the element of hope.

The stories on the *wives of the patriarchs who were taken by foreign rulers* should be regarded as related to the theme of infertility. In their present form this is not (no longer) explicit, though certain clues to that effect remain part of the text (Gen. 20:17-18, 26:10-11). Sexual contact with another man's wife was regarded as endangering the family line of the man aggrieved (Schüngel-Straumann 1973:47-50).

In both the Abraham and Jacob stories the use of *concubines* to counter infertility occurs. In the case of Abraham this posed a particular threat to the hope of a son (Gen. 16:1-6, 21:8-21). From a later perspective the sons of Jacob's concubines served as mothers of the true nation, while the descendants of Abraham's concubine and of his later wives served as mothers of enemy nations (Gen. 16:10-12, 21:13, 25:1-6. McKane 1979:91-93).

Conflict is a second threat-motive which runs throughout the stories of the patriarchs, and the whole of the pre-monarchic period, in a particular way. In the patriarchal stories these *conflicts occur within the family.* In the case of Abraham it is the concubine and her son who becomes a threat to the true heir (Gen. 21:8-13, 25:5-6). The story of Isaac is actually the story of the conflict between his sons, which is in essence a conflict over true heirship. In the Jacob story this comes even closer to home: it becomes a conflict between the two sisters on the question of whom is to be regarded as the true mother of the nation. In this story, which is told from a early-monarchic perspective (the twelve tribe period), no clear heir emerges, even though the sons of Rachel are pictured as the loved ones (see also Gen. 49).

Conflict with other tribes and nations which threatened the future of the descendants of the patriarchs occurred for the first time in the confrontation with the Egyptian empire. This conflict constitutes the Exodus story from beginning to end (Ex 1, 14). Likewise confrontation with other tribes posed a constant threat to the survival of the Israelite tribes in the desert and occupation stories and also forms a key element of all the stories of the judges. By means of the early genealogies of the descendants of the patriarchs, according to which many of these tribes were considered to be blood-relations to the Israelite tribes, the earlier conflict-motives are thus continued in these stories. It was only by the time of David, when Israel gained military supremacy, that these threats disappeared.

Another element of the conflict-motive is that of *conflict over territory.* In the patriarchal stories this is however not related to the theme of survival and hope for descendants or nationhood, as is the case in the later pre-monarchical period.

Thirdly, the threat which natural disasters, especially droughts and famine, posed for survival of the family, should be noted (Gen. 12:10f; 21:14f; 26:1f; 42:1f). This motive is also related to the hope for land, which in a number of cases could ironically only be secured by leaving the promised land (Gen. 12, 42, 46)[4]. Related disasters, particularly on

3 Note also the case of Hannah in 1 Sam. 1, where infertility and hope are strongly connected. The threat to survival is also prominent in the bizarre story of Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19:31-38).

4 Although told with a different motive, also Jacob's survival was secured by fleeing from the land of promise

the journey through the desert, threatened the survival of the tribes (Ex. 15:22f, 16:1f, 17:1f etc). The plagues and disasters mentioned in the deuteronomistic list of curses (Dtr. 28:15f) are all threats to the survival of the tribes in genand disasters mentioned in the deuteronomistic list of curses (Dtr. 28:15f) are all threanand disasters mentioned in the deuteroand disasters mentioned in the deuteronomistic list of curses (Dtr. 28:15f) are all threats to the survival of the tribes in genand disasters mentioned in the deuteronomistic list of curses (Dtr. 28:15f) are all threats to the survival of the tribes in genand disasters mentioned in the deuteronomistic list of curses (Dtr. 28:15f) are all threats to the survival of the tribes in genreached. Today the growth of the population has become a threat to survival, not only of families, but for life on the planet! Population numbers have become a major environmental issue (Mann 1993).

3. Promise and hope

So far some of the narrative themes related to hope in the material covering the pre-monarchical period in its canonical form were traced. Matters, however, become a little more complicated when one tries to determine the nature and content of the hope of the patriarchs. The problem is that the texts we have to rely on come from much later times. It can be assumed that the contents of the stories did not drastically change over time. We have no reason to doubt that Abraham had no heir until a late age, that he hoped for a son of his own, that there were threats to this hope, as outlined above.

The 'contribution' of later renderings of these stories is to be looked for in the way these have been told, particularly in the perspective and aim thereof. It is natural, and unmistakable, that these stories had been actualized as they were retold from generation to generation (Albertz 1994:24,28). Traces of this history of the material on oral and literary level may be found in different texts in differing degrees and forms. The problem is that we can identify these only in very broad terms based on our limited information. Here we will work only with elements which will be termed 'original' and others which will broadly be categorized as 'early-monarchical'[5].

Theologically divine promise forms the sure basis for hope for the individual and the community. In the patriarchal stories hope is reflected in the promises which abound. These promises all deal with descendants (nationhood) or land, or some combination thereof (Westermann 1980:128-9).

In order, therefore, to determine what the patriarchs hoped for, one has to study these promises. Westermann (1980:122-124) suggests that the promises that fit naturally in the narrative in which they occur and are the simplest in form should be regarded as the most original ones. The more complicated or expanded, especially theologically expanded a promise is, the further removed from the original it should be regarded[6].

The simplest form of *the promise*, and thus hope, is that *of a son* only *(BN).* Albertz

(Gen. 28:1-5). Famine also sets the scene for the story of Naomi and Ruth (Ruth 1:1).

5 Brueggemann 1982:107. The identification of 'early-monarchical' material is done on the basis that an 'all-Israel perspective' can be detected in the texts, linked with a picture of the socio-political and economic situation of that time (Hayes and Miller 1977:349-356). This would roughly coincide with the assumed J-material, although I purposefully refrain from identifying all so-called J-material with this period. Later contributions to the material, particularly by Deteuronomistic and Priestly writers/redactors, are not taken into account in this study, because that would carry us too far outside the scope of this paper. For that reason Gen. 17, which is widely regarded as P-material, will not be taken into account here..

6 See Westermann 1980:95-118, 122-124, 129 for an overview of the debate on the question of the origin and original form of promise in the patriarchal stories.

(1994:30) says about the patriarchal period that 'the religious experiences and notions are primarily governed by the horizons and needs of family life'. This singular promise occurs only in Genesis 18:1-16. This is not a far off promise, but a very specific and concrete one. It is noteworthy that this promise is communicated by human visitors who were later identified as divine messengers because of their prophetic functions (18:33, 19:1. Von Rad 1984:204). A next level would be where the promise of a son is extended to include an assurance of a great number of descendants (Westermann 1980:149-150). In Genesis 15:1-6 this promise of an heir is set in the context of Abraham's dwindling hope for an heir of his own. Here the promise is communicated directly by Yahweh, in a vision *(BMGWH).* A similar type of promise is communicated to Hagar by a divine messenger *(ML'K JHWH)* (16:7-12. Westermann 1980:120-122,134). After the birth of Isaac the promise of a son developed into a promise of a great increase *(ZR-;* 21:12, 22:16-18).

The promise of a multitude of descendants in Genesis 15 is supplemented by a probably originally *independent promise of land,* linked to some kind of ancient ritual story (Gen. 15:7-12,17. Von Rad 1984:182-183, 186-188). The latter part of this narrative unit (15:13-21) clearly reflects an early-monarchical setting (15:18 in particular. Von Rad 1984:188-189; Gottwald 1987:334). The only other promise of land standing by itself (Gen. 12:7) is not well integrated into the narrative. Also the means of communication of this promise is vaguer than those mentioned earlier. It is important to note that it *assumes* the fact that Abraham would have descendants. The same is true of the land-promise in 13:14-17 (Von Rad 1984:172-173). This may suggest that the hope for land is of a later date. It furthermore seems as if the promise of land is more strongly, and perhaps originally, associated with the Jacob tradition. Genesis 28:13-15 reports a very particular promise of land to Jacob (Von Rad 1984:183-185). Noteworthy is the pertinent means of revelation (see also 35:9-13). With him descendants was more or less secured. Further more, for a man with a big family, the need of land and the hope for land would be stronger than the hope for descendants (Westermann 1980:144-145).

In case the Abraham and Jacob traditions were in fact originally independent, it might be suggested that the prominent element of hope in the Abraham tradition was for a son and for descendants (a multitude like the stars of heaven, 15:5). Hope in the Jacob tradition would then be focused on occupation of the land. For those early predecessors of the Israelites who were more nomadic, land would not be of central importance. For 'rural villagers' and 'marginalized urban dwellers' land would be a key issue (Gottwald 1987:176-177)[7].

As these two major traditions became fused, seemingly by employing the Isaac tradition as a connecting link (McKane 1979:150-151), these two themes of hope were also fused. In the present form of the patriarchal stories, the focus is on the promise of land for the people (Bruggemann 1982:109).

Above it was said that Genesis 18:1-16 contains the simplest and probably one of the most original versions of promise in the patriarchal stories. This promise is supplemented by the insertion of one of the most theologically loaded promises (18:17-19)[8]. No reference to a son is made, but a promise of nationhood occurs *(GW').* This in itself may suggest a situation where nationhood has become a strong possibility or even a reality. That this nation would be a 'blessing to all nations' further suggests the only time when Israel could

7 For the debate on which promise was the 'original', see Hayes and Miller 1977:135-137; Westermann 1980:95-118.

8 Von Rad (1984:209) says: 'the Yawistic narrator here speaks on his own... vs 17-19 bear a strong reflective character... and this strengthens their theologically programmatic significance'.

think of itself in these grand terms, which would be the time of national unity under David to Solomon (Westermann 1980:155-156)[9].

The similarities between this promise in 18:17-19 and that in 12:1-3 are unmistakable. Genesis 12:1-3 functions as a connection between the 'pre-history' and the history of the patriarchs. Above all it serves as an introduction and topical saying which sets the tone for the following stories of the patriarchs in their canonical setting. It is clear that this is the work of a redactor/composer of much later. It is most likely that these opening verses in 12:1-3, like 18:17-19, are in fact coming from the time of the united nation (Westermann 1980:73,107,156). Making the promise of land and nationhood, coupled with that of blessing and being a blessing to the nations, the topical introduction to the integrated corpus of patriarchal stories, gives these a very particular function in the whole of the pre-nationhood traditions. The fact that this is an unconditional promise and, above all, a direct word from Yahweh himself, gives this topical saying a strong authoritative position.

4. Ideologized hope

On the basis of the above arguments, we may conclude that hope in the lives of the early patriarchs was very natural and down to earth, so to speak. It had to do with everyday life of the individual or family in their struggle for survival. Threats to survival, in the form of infertility, natural disasters and conflicts of different kind, formed the 'breeding ground' for hope in their lives. As such there is nothing unique or special to it: it is a common human phenomenon.

This hope had strongly been amplified by and probably became the driving force in their lives through the *particular religious experiences* of these men. Diverse kinds of experiences are reported: human and divine messengers, dreams and visions and some experience of direct address by JHWH. The standard element in these experiences is that of promise. This was, however, not an exclusive male experience. Many cases of women having had this experience are reported in the Bible: Sarah shared it with Abraham (Gen. 18:9f); Hagar, Hannah, and Mary in the New Testament.

These experiences, and particularly the element of promise in these, became so important that it eventually became the perspective from which the whole patriarchal history was viewed. By nature this hope is 'short lived' in the sense that the fulfilment thereof was often within reach (Albertz 1964:33), by the birth of the son or the return of Jacob to Canaan. These fulfilment's almost inevitably occasioned dreams of still bigger things to come, of a great number of descendants and of permanent residence in the land of promise. The hopes of the people in the rest of the pre-monarchical period probably remained of the same character: the hopes of individuals and of families remained focused on the short term, namely a hope for descendants (re. Naomi). For the community who were the bearers of these early traditions, hopes were probably focused on nationhood and land. Eventually these would develop into the hope for political independence.

These hopes remained this-worldly: it had no cosmic or afterlife dimensions. The element of hope to receive some recognition in life after death through bearing children, which, for example, is common with African people (see note 1) cannot be detected in the Pentateuchal narratives. Bernhard (in Beyerlin 1978:225), in discussion of the promise of a

9 Nationhood as promise linked to a son only occurs in connection with Ishmael (21:13,18). The promise of nationhood also occurs in the form of a liturgical blessing in 35:11 (P). Here reference to a 'host of nations...' and 'kings...' (NEB) suggests a later stage in the monarchal period, probably after the split in 922 BCE (likewise 17:5-6), also because this tradition has strong links with Bethel.

son in the Ugaritic epic of Daniil, refers to the parallel promises to the patriarchs (also Westermann 1980:165f). He notes that there the promise of a son is important 'not least (for) the continuity of worship of an ancestral god'. While this idea may carry notions parallel to 'the God of Abraham/the fathers' in the patriarchal stories, it carries no special hopes of the individual believer.

When the socio-political situation changed for the better during the reign of David and Solomon, views changed. Now nationhood has become a reality and military power brought political independence and economic prosperity. For the moment the major threats to survival have effectively been overcome. In terms of the traditional elements of hope there was nothing more to be hoped for.

The historian-theologians of that time could now afford the luxury to reflect on the traditions of the past and to draw some meaning for their age from these (Von Rad 1975:48-56, 170, 173-175). Westermann formulates 'the theological significance of the promises' to the patriarchs in this age as follows:

> The promises given to the fathers provide assurance that God who promised in the past and fulfilled his promises of the land and of increase will remain faithful to his word, that one can rely for future on the words and actions of this God. This assurance makes it possible to look back and see Israel's history as a coherent whole and to look forward trusting in God's future actions (1980:162).

I want to propose that this history was composed and the promises amplified for a different reason and purpose. It is probable that by telling this history in this particular way, stressing nationhood and land, as we have seen above, this history was made to serve as an ideological justification for the Davidic-Solomonistic regime (Hayes and Miller 1977:365-373) and it's socio-political dominance in that age. The fact that Israel is now a nation proper and has effectively conquered this vast territory is legitimized by stressing the divine promises to that effect.

Particularly the unconditional promise in Genesis 12:1-3 is constructed to colour the perspective from which the patriarchal stories were to be viewed. These old stories of the origin of the people were told to authorize Israel's current position of dominance in the early monarchic period. By giving so much prominence to the divine promises, the newly achieved nationhood and lordship over land is legitimized as divinely ordained. These promises of being a blessing to the nations were to make Israelites accept the international policies of David and Solomon as their divine purpose, despite what it meant for them personally (Gottwald 1987:172f). In other words, these stories were now retold as ideological legitimation of the (at least to some extent) oppressive Davidic dynasty.

Abraham in particular received prominence in these promise stories: he was the founder and genesis of what was now achieved. I cannot help but see similarities with Afrikaner apartheid ideological theology. Like Abraham, Jan van Riebeeck was propagated as the founder of the nation. He was God-sent to bring 'faith' and civilization (white domination) to 'our land'. Like Abraham set out with the command and promise of God, so Van Riebeeck's prayer speaks of a Godly mission. Today we recognize that that prayer says less of God's purpose and more of Dutch/West European imperialistic ideology.

5. Conclusion

This rendering of the hope of the patriarchs and in the pre-monarchical period of Israel and what happened to that in the early monarchy shows that simple hope which helped people to survive was turned on its back: simple historical, temporal, earthly hope for

survival of the family and the tribe was reinterpreted to become an ideological instrument of domination. This happened when (one of) the factors which kept this hope alive, namely threats to survival, disappeared. Maybe there is a strong lesson for us in this version of hope in the Old Testament: In the time when there were threats, in the time of oppression, hope was a life-giving force for those who suffered most, particularly in South Africa. What is going to happen now? Is the basis of this hope, in our case faith in the justice of God, going to be ideologized? Is that not already happening in our idolizing human rights?

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