

A Wandering Aramean was my father



Rabbi Jesus likes to take passages from the Torah and teach us what he believes it means as we move around Galilee. He doesn't always agree with what our Rabbi's tell us. I have always loved the passage from Deuteronomy where it talks about the harvest and giving of the harvest to Yahweh in thanks for all we have. I understand practical things. I can go out into my garden and pick a portion of the produce I have there. I can take it to the Rabbi as an offering. I can lay it in the sacred place and know that Yahweh has accepted my offering. I know that the offering will be given to someone who has need of it, as a gift from Yahweh.

As my people have for generations, when I hand over the produce I recount the story of how I came to have the land on which my produce has been grown. My ancestors were just wandering tribesmen moving from watering hole to watering hole to keep their flocks alive. They would stay in one place long enough for the flocks to eat the grass and then move on. But times change and in one generation drought came, the water dried up and the grass died off. Yahweh then took my ancestors to Egypt where he had placed our ancestor Joseph, in a position where he would be able to help his father and brothers through the difficult times. There the whole tribe stayed and grew together and became a nation within a nation. But then we became a threat to the Egyptian Pharaoh and he made us submit and become his slaves, which we did, until Yahweh sent Moses to liberate us. Through him we left Egypt and came here to the land which Yahweh had promised to our ancestor Abraham. The wandering Aramean from the land of Syria had become the settled Hebrew Tribe here, here where I now grow my vegetables on a piece of land behind my house.

Our annual telling of the story of our history reminds us all how important the land we live on is to us. It is not just any land, it is the promised land, the land given to us by Yahweh to live on, yes, and to thrive on. We should be able to defend it, but at this time we have been overwhelmed by the might of the Roman Empire and although we are not slaves expelled to a foreign country as we have in the past, we are an enslaved people on our own land. It is not the first time this has happened to us, but Yahweh willing when we free ourselves, it will be the last.

Rabbi Jesus likes to teach us from his own experience. But the land seems to mean far more to him than to us, even though it is our livelihood. We all knew about the time he was baptised by John bar Zechariah in the River Jordan. John claimed to have seen a dove coming down from heaven and alighting on the head of Rabbi Jesus and a voice proclaiming that this was the son of Yahweh, and that he was very pleased with him. We always wondered why, having had that endorsement, Rabbi Jesus just turned and walked off across the fertile plain of the river, and as the gathered crowd watched, he climbed up into the hills beyond. It was forty days before he was seen again by anyone. One day he sat down and talked to us about those forty days.

“My father in heaven is the centre of my life and being,” he said. “I see and feel him in everything around me. Before I took up the mantle he has woven for me, I wanted to spend some time with him, learning more about him and what he wanted me to do and say here, to his people, to my people. I took myself off into the mountains and I sat down on a rock and I looked around me. I looked and I concentrated on what I could see before me. I would look and see for hours at a time. Sometimes I would look into the distance and see a large hill sculpted by wind and rain, of colours infinitely changeable, as the sun changed position in the heavens. At other times I would look down at my feet and see a grain of sand and pick it up and hold it in the palm of my hand and try to see its individual shape and colour. I would marvel that both sand and hill were made by Yahweh. When I thought that I had noticed everything, I would get up and find somewhere to fill my water skin. Then I would go to another cave or another rock and I would sit and look again. Maybe this time I would see a lion or a gazelle. Maybe a brown bear would lumber up, look me up and down and decide I was not worth his time and effort, and lumber away again. Sometimes a bird flying above would catch my eye and I would watch it until my eyes could see it no more. All the time time I would wonder and marvel and try to understand what the landscape and its inhabitants were saying to me and what Yahweh was saying to me through it. When I was finished looking at one place I would rejoice and give thanks to Yahweh for the beauty of what I was looking at, for the skill he had shown as he made it. In the praising and thanks I could feel the breath of Yahweh pouring down on me filling me with strength and purpose.

In this way the days in the wilderness of the mountains passed quickly. Many things passed through my mind. But above, all the thing which I held in my mind most was the land itself. This land, this landscape ,the mountains and rocks rivers, the desert

and the fertile land are all reflections of Yahweh. He chose to give us this land. He chose to give us this portion of himself as a dowry. As the prophet Ezekiel says:

“You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” (Ezekiel 36:28)

For the first time I understood the nature of the gift that Yahweh has given to us. This land is a costly place, the rocks and mountains have been formed by his hand. The rivers flow at his behest, to irrigate the land so that we may grow food to sustain us. So that we might raise animals for our food and to offer sacrifice for what we have. We worship Yahweh because he has done all this, but we love him because he first loved us, before we knew him, before he revealed himself to our forefather Abraham. That great revelation, that began the journey of our people, which I and you are all engaged in.”

Later when we returned to the story of his time in the wilderness Rabbi Jesus described the temptations he was offered to turn away from the land and the promise. The Adversary who caused Yahweh to test Job caused Yahweh to test him when he was at his weakest physically, not understanding that for forty days he had done nothing but contemplate, worship and adore Yahweh. Nothing he could have offered would have drawn the Rabbi from the whole of Yahweh.

The first temptation was the suggestion that Rabbi Jesus should turn a stone into bread. We all gasped and wondered how after forty days without food, he was able to turn away from that stone, but Rabbi Jesus just said

‘He didn’t understand that I had just spent forty days with Yahweh. I might have been a bit physically hungry at the beginning, but over those days Yahweh filled me, and I didn’t need anything else, so I told The Adversary that I was already full with the presence of Yahweh and didn’t need his offered stone bread.’

Then The Adversary took Rabbi Jesus to a high place and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and offered them to him, if only he would fall down to worship him and forsake Yahweh. But Rabbi Jesus said that after being in the presence of Yahweh and seeing the beauty of the promised land, how could he want more than that. How could there be more than that? So he put The Adversary aside telling him that he could only ever imagine himself worshipping Yahweh, and whatever Yahweh did, or said, or gave to him, was enough for him.

Finally The Adversary took him to the highest point of the Temple and asked him to cast himself down so that the angels of the Lord would come and save him. Rabbi Jesus said that then he laughed in the face of The Adversary. He said,

‘So what if the people in the Temple see him come down on the wings of angels and land in their midst. What then? Would the people believe more in Yahweh, would they listen to what he had to say or would they be overawed? The people had been given signs and symbols by the prophets, they had been given the land, and had it taken away, and had it given back and they had not remained faithful and true. The

land had shown them the way to Yahweh, and yet they had not seen. What good would landing on the wings of angels do?’

Then Rabbi Jesus looked sad. He said

‘I told the Adversary not to put the Lord your God to the test’,
I could see though that he thought that there were more trials and temptations to come. He has been throwing us hints about what is to come, and in our travels recently we have been circling Jerusalem as if there is something there that Rabbi Jesus is drawn to, but is afraid of. One day I can see that we will turn our faces towards Jerusalem and I hope that The Adversary is right and that the angels of Yahweh will be there to protect the Rabbi. I feel a great fear come upon me as I think about Jerusalem and what it holds for the Rabbi and us.