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AGED JACOB: JACOB'S FINAL YEARS AS THE BIBLICAL IDEAL OF OLD AGE

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Introduction

The first association of many Dutch people with “old Jacob” will be with the title of the song ‘De ouwe Jacob’ by Annie M. G. Schmid, first performed in a TV series in 1967. It tells the dramatic story of an old man sitting before his window, looking into the distance, hoping to see his daughter return home. A long time ago she left with an unknown destination. Finally, she does return and calls out to old Jacob: “Father, here I am!” She does not get an answer, because he died just before she entered the house. The series was aimed at children, but was also popular with adults. There are two reasons why it is appropriate to begin this contribution on the biblical Jacob with the reference to this Dutch song. First, one may note the correspondences between the song and the story of Jacob in Genesis. Of both old men it is said that they lost a beloved child. It is likely that Annie M. G. Schmid, who was the daughter of a Protestant minister, had the biblical story of Jacob mourning the loss of Joseph in mind. This makes the differences all the more apparent: a daughter instead of a son, a father who died before being united with his child again instead of the happy reunion of the biblical old Jacob with his son. In the book of Genesis it is the overture to a positive story of the final part of his life. The second reason is that Karel Deurloo, to whom this volume is devoted, has much in common with Annie M. G. Schmid. Both are gifted authors who wrote for both adults and children, taking the latter as serious as the former.

In what follows the story of Old Jacob is taken as an example of the Old Testament view on old age. This is not the place to give an extensive overview of everything that can be found on the subject of ageing in the Old Testament. This has been done before in elaborate mono-

graphs¹, shorter surveys², and more specific smaller studies³. The goal of the present study is to describe the place of the story of Old Jacob within this larger context. Within the history of the patriarchs it appears to be a culmination point of the previous stories about the same theme. Within the Old Testament it is representative of the positive views on old age and of the related concern about the right attitude towards elderly people. There are no clear indications of some kind development of this view in the course of time, so we can stick to the synchronic approach, so much advocated by Karel Deurloo.

Old Jacob

Jacob is often mentioned as an old man in the stories of Joseph and his brothers, especially in relation to his children with Rachel. The first reference is in Gen 37:3: “Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age (בְּוֶן־זְקֵנִים).”⁴ The same is said of Benjamin (Gen 44:20). Although it is not explicitly stated in

¹ Cf. Stephen Sapp, *Full of Years: Aging and the Elderly in the Bible and Today*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1987; Rachel Z. Dulin, *A Crown of Glory: A Biblical View of Aging*, Mahwah: Paulist, 1988; Marten Stoll – Sven P. Vleeming (eds.), *The Care of the Elderly in the Ancient Near East*, Leiden: Brill, 1998; J. Gordon Harris, *Biblical Perspectives on Aging: God and the Elderly* (second edition), New York: Routledge, 2008; Stephanie Ernst, *Segen – Aufgabe – Einsicht: Aspekte und Bilder des Alterns in den Texten des alten Israel* (ATSAT 93), St. Ottilien: Eos Verlag, 2011; Melanie Werren, *Alttestamentliche Altersvorstellungen. „Ehe die Tage des Übels kommen...“ in Kohelet 11,7–12,8*, München: Grins Verlag, 2016.

² Cf. Josef Scharbert, “Das Alter und die Alten in der Bibel”, *Saeculum* 30 (1979), 338–354; Martin A. Klopfenstein, “Die Stellung des alten Menschen in der Sicht des Alten Testaments”, in: idem, *Leben aus dem Wort: Beiträge zum Alten Testament* (BEAT 40), Bern: Peter Lang, 1996, 261–273; Bas van Iersel, “De ouderen in de spiegel van het Oude Testament”, *Schrift* 189 (2000), 89–93.

³ Cf. Arndt Meinhold, “Bewertung und Beginn des Greisenalters”, in: idem, *Zur weisheitlichen Sicht des Menschen: Gesammelte Schriften* (ABG 6), Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2002, 99–116; Christian Frevel, “‘Du wirst jemand haben, der dein Herz erfreut und dich im Alter versorgt’ (Rut 4,15). Alter und Altersversorgung im Alten/Ersten Testament”, in: Rainer Kampling (ed.), *Alter – Blicke auf das Bevorstehende*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009, 13–43; Andreas Michel, “Texts of Terror für Alte? Gewalt gegen ältere Menschen im Alten Testament”, in: Irmitraud Fischer (ed.), *Macht – Gewalt – Krieg im Alten Testament: Gesellschaftliche Problematik und das Problem ihrer Repräsentation*, Freiburg: Herder, 2013, 53–82.

⁴ The translations are based on the New Revised Standard Version.

the story of the Joseph's birth (Gen 30:23–24), we have to assume that it can be compared with what we read in Gen 21:2 about Sarah giving birth to Isaac as “a son in his [Abraham's] old age”. At the moment of Joseph's birth, Jacob was almost as old as his grandfather when he received his son Isaac. Abraham was one hundred years old and Jacob probably ninety-one.⁵ The reference to his old age in connection with Joseph can also be seen as foreshadowing the situation that his old age will be characterized by the mourning over his son. They prepare the reader for Jacob's reaction to the message of his other sons from which he concludes that Joseph must have been killed by a wild animal: “All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, ‘No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.’ Thus his father bewailed him” (Gen 37:35).

We find the same combination in the references to Jacob's old age in chapter 44. In Gen 44:20 Jacob's sons speak of their “old father” and of Benjamin as the “the young child of (his) old age” (יְלֶד זְקֵנִים קָטָן). This should be related to Jacob's reaction to the request to bring Benjamin to Egypt: “If you take this one also from me, and harm comes to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in sorrow to Sheol” (Gen 44:29). This repeats what he told his sons before: “My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should come to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol” (Gen 42:38).

The way Jacob reacts to the presumed death of Joseph and his fear that he will also lose Benjamin can be interpreted as an indication of another aspect of Joseph being called the “son of his old age”. Jacob must have seen him as the ideal successor. As he was getting old he did not have to worry about the future, but with the disappearance of Joseph this hope was shattered. The fact that he still had Benjamin brought him some comfort, but this had been threatened as well. He reacts by stating that his life is not worth living anymore. As with Psalms 88:3–4 and 116:3 he could say that in his great distress he is

⁵ When Jacob meets Pharaoh he is 130 years old (Gen. 47:9). At that moment Joseph is 39 years old, because he was 30 when he explains the dreams of Pharaoh (41:46) and between that moment and the moment when he is reunited with his father there are the seven years of plenty in Egypt (41:53) and two years of famine before Jacob and his family moving to Egypt (45:6).

already counted among those who go down to the world of the dead. The reverse is also true: when Jacob realizes that Joseph is still alive “his spirit revived” and he says: “My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die” (45:28). When Jacob finally can embrace Joseph again, he again speaks of his death, but now in a positive way: “I can die now, having seen for myself that you are still alive” (46:30). The prospect of his death has turned from negative into positive.

Introducing himself to Pharaoh, Jacob indicates that until now he has not lived a happy life. Abraham and Isaac had been better off: “The years of my earthly sojourn are one hundred and thirty; few and hard have been the years of my life. They do not compare with the years of the life of my ancestors during their long sojourn” (Gen 47:9). This moment, however, proves to be a turning point. Things are changing for the better in the rest of his life. This can also be illustrated by comparison with his ancestors. Like his father Isaac, he becomes visually impaired in his old age (Gen 48:10; cf. 27:1), but Jacob does not share the fate of being misled by his offspring at the moment that he wants to give his blessings. There are some differences in the situation sketched in Gen 48 compared to the one in chapter 27. Isaac took the initiative himself to bless his son Esau. Although he refers to his old age, he does not seem to be on the brink of death. According to Gen 48:1, Jacob was ill. For Joseph this is the reason to take action to ask him to bless his sons. So there is more pressure upon Jacob. Joseph helps his father by placing his sons in the right position before their grandfather, so that Jacob will put his right hand on the first born, Manasseh, and his left hand on his younger brother, Ephraim (Gen 48:13). When Jacob reverses the order by crossing his hands, Joseph assumes that his father makes a mistake and wants to correct it, but Jacob makes clear that he deliberately made this choice. This is in more than one respect the opposite situation of what was said in chapter 27 about the blessing by Isaac. Jacob was not fooled by his son. Joseph did not take advantage of his father’s weakness and did not prevent Jacob from acting against the wish of his son. So Joseph paid respect to his old father, which Jacob had withheld from his father.

The following chapters of the book of Genesis also indicate that Jacob’s complaint about having had a more difficult life than his ancestors did not apply to his old age. In line with what was said about

the blessing of the sons of Joseph, he is given ample opportunity to bless his own sons and to arrange his own funeral in the grave of his ancestors. He ends his life in full command and only after having completed everything he wanted to arrange does he die. His death comes at the moment he must have wished for himself: "When Jacob ended his charge to his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people" (Gen 49:33).

There are many parallels between what happened with Jacob in his old age to the life stories of the other key figures in the second part of the book of Genesis. With Abraham he shares the blessing of a good death, which as a rule is the combination of having had a long life, enjoying the presence of children, and having the prospect of receiving a proper funeral in a grave in one's own land. Aged 147 years (47:28) Jacob may not have become as old as his father Isaac (180 years, 35:28) or his grandfather Abraham (175 years, 25:7), but it is still far beyond the average and much older than, for instance, his son Joseph (110 years, 50:22). With regard to his offspring, Jacob eventually is luckier than Abraham and Isaac. He has more children and unlike his two ancestors even enjoys the presence of grandchildren. All three patriarchs had to witness the quarrels between their sons. Abraham was forced by his wife Sarah to send away Ismael after she had seen him mocking Isaac (21:9–10). Only after the death of Abraham did these two sons get together again for the burial (25:9). In his old age, Isaac himself was involved in the fight between Esau and Jacob. Before he died his sons became reconciled, but Isaac did not play a role in that. Jacob was also aware of the tensions between Joseph and his other sons (37:10). More than with Isaac we read how Jacob was also present when his sons got together again (46:28–31). Just as Isaac was betrayed by his son Jacob, Jacob himself was betrayed by a number of his sons. In both cases the betrayal concerned a conflict between brothers. Jacob had taken advantage of his father's weakness, as is clearly indicated at the beginning of the story about his stealing of the blessing for the first born: "When Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he could no longer see" (27:1). It has a parallel in the story of Lot being manipulated by his daughters. It is narrated that Lot was old (19:31). His daughters made him even more helpless by plying him with wine. Compared with these stories, old Jacob is far better off, when Joseph tries to influence his

father whose “eyes are failing because of old age” (48:10) to give his blessing in the order Joseph thought was right. Unlike what happened to Lot and to Isaac, Joseph is treating his father with respect, not misleading him or forcing his will upon him. Jacob is able to make his own choices and is being treated with respect. He dies in the knowledge that his family is saved from the famine and he himself will be buried in the grave of his ancestors (49:29–33). During his lifetime he had experienced that he not always could bend things to his will. At the end of his life Jacob is able to arrange things according to his own wishes. The contrast with the other periods in his life and with other stories about old men in the book of Genesis indicates that Jacob’s old age is more or less ideal. It can, therefore, also be used as a starting point in describing the view on old age within the Bible as a whole. We can distinguish three aspects: vulnerability, wisdom, and ideal.

Vulnerable old age

As with many people, Jacob’s old age was accompanied by weakness. He became ill (48:1) and visually impaired (48:10). Other biblical texts give more extensive descriptions of the ailments of old age. The most beautiful one is the allegory in Ecclesiastes 12:1–7:

¹ Remember your Creator in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
and the years approach when you will say,
“I find no pleasure in them” –

² before the sun and the light grow dark
and the moon and the stars,
and the clouds return after the rain;

³ when the keepers of the house tremble,
and the strong men stoop,
when the grinders cease because they are few,
and those looking through the windows grow dim;

⁴ when the doors to the street are closed
and the sound of grinding fades;
when people rise up at the sound of birds,
but all their songs grow faint;

⁵ when people are afraid of heights
 and of dangers in the streets;
 when the almond tree blossoms
 and the grasshopper drags itself along
 and desire no longer is stirred.
 Then people go to their eternal home
 and mourners go about the streets.
⁶ Remember him – before the silver cord is severed,
 and the golden bowl is broken;
 before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,
 and the wheel broken at the well,
⁷ and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
 and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Most interpreters⁶ agree that the darkening of the light by the stormy clouds in v. 2 refers to the coming of age. This is followed in v. 3 by the hands and legs of the old man/woman being compared to the keepers of the house and the bones and arms to strong men stooping. The teeth are like grinders ceasing because they have become few. The eyesight is like windows growing dim. The doors in v. 4 refer to the mouth and ears: they are closed and sound is fading. What follows is a more realistic description of ageing, followed by a poetic description of death. For Kohelet this poetic description of the problems that come with ageing is a reason to urge the reader to enjoy one's youth. So his view on old age is primarily negative. Old age is associated with weakness, as in Psalm 71:9 when the Lord is asked: "Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone."

It is remarkable that this does not go together with many commands about caring for elderly people. The most famous one is from Leviticus 19: "Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord" (v. 32), although this does not explicitly refer to caring for old people. The same holds true for Proverbs 23:22: "Listen to your father, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old." Isaiah 46:4 inspires to the right

⁶ Cf. Anton Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament), Leuven: Peeters, 2013, 780–825, for an overview of scholarly discussion and detailed exegesis. According to Schoors, vv. 3–5b should not be read as an allegory of the declining body, but as the description of mourning over death.

attitude, with God giving a good example: “even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.” In the book of Isaiah we also find the opposite of respect for old people in a description of what awaits Jerusalem when God stops supporting the city: “The people will be oppressed, everyone by another and everyone by a neighbour; the youth will be insolent to the elder, and the base to the honourable” (Isa 3:5). Clearer positive admonitions are found in later literature, especially in Sirach 3:12–16:

- ¹² My child, help your father in his old age,
and do not grieve him as long as he lives;
¹³ even if his mind fails, be patient with him;
because you have all your faculties do not despise him.
¹⁴ For kindness to a father will not be forgotten,
and will be credited to you against your sins;
¹⁵ in the day of your distress it will be remembered in your favour;
like frost in fair weather, your sins will melt away.
¹⁶ Whoever forsakes a father is like a blasphemer,
and whoever angers a mother is cursed by the Lord.

There can be no doubt about it that Tenach wants to inspire its readers to care for elderly people, when they become weak and helpless. We hardly find specific laws about caring for the elderly. The command to honour one’s parents can be interpreted in this way,⁷ but an explicit reference to old age is missing. Narratives, like the one about Jacob in a positive sense and Lot and Isaac in a negative sense, are more helpful here to point the reader in the right direction.⁸

Wisdom

More than with weakness, wisdom is associated in the Old Testament with wisdom. In society, leadership is usually entrusted to the elders.

⁷ Cf. Rainer Albertz, “Hintergrund und Bedeutung des Elternggebots im Dekalog”, *ZAW* 90 (1978), 348–374.

⁸ Cf. John Barton, *Ethics in Ancient Israel*, Oxford: University Press, 2014, 25–32, about the important place of narratives in the study of ethics in ancient Israel.

According to the story in Numbers 11, they are capable of taking over part of the work and responsibilities of Moses. When Moses was on the brink over being overburdened, the elders were summoned to help him:

So the Lord said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself" (Num 11:16–17).

This shows the very prominent place of the elders: they share the same spirit that comes from God himself. This is something that reflects on all elders functioning as leaders in Israel. Like Moses they were intermediaries between God and men. One of the telling stories in this respect is 1 Kings 12:6–8 about Rehoboam ignoring the advice of the older men and consulting the young men instead, with very negative consequences for the united kingdom of Israel.

More generally we find the association of old age with wisdom in many texts. Again, it is formulated very well in the book of Sirach, who clearly held elderly people in high esteem:

Stand in the company of the elders.
 Who is wise? Attach yourself to such a one (Sir 6:34).
 Do not ignore the discourse of the aged,
 for they themselves learned from their parents;
 from them you learn how to understand
 and to give an answer when the need arises (Sir 8:9).
 How attractive is wisdom in the aged,
 and understanding and counsel in the venerable!
 Rich experience is the crown of the aged,
 and their boast is the fear of the Lord (Sir 25:5–6).

Next to this we also find the insight that old age does not automatically go together with wisdom. In the book of Job, in which traditional views on what is right and wrong are constantly ques-

tioned, this association also is put to the test and placed into perspective:

Is wisdom with the aged,
and understanding in length of days?
With God are wisdom and strength;
he has counsel and understanding (Job 12:12–13).

Eliphaz seems to criticise Job for not respecting the wisdom of the elderly:

What do you know that we do not know?
What do you understand that is not clear to us?
The gray-haired and the aged are on our side,
those older than your father (Job 15:9–10).

However, Job's fourth friend, Elihu, mocks his predecessors precisely on this point. They may be old, but after listening to them, he has to conclude that they are not wise. He had the decency to let the elderly speak first, but then does not hold back any more:

I am young in years, and you are aged;
therefore I was timid and afraid to declare my opinion to you.
I said, "Let days speak,
and many years teach wisdom."
But truly it is the spirit in a mortal,
the breath of the Almighty, that makes for understanding.
It is not the old that are wise,
nor the aged that understand what is right (Job 32:6–9).

A similar idea can be found with Ecclesiastes: an old man can be foolish, even when he is a king: "Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who will no longer take advice" (4:13). A good king can be expected to be wise, like Salomon. The story, however, about the vengeful actions of his old father David (1 Kings 2) offer an example of Ecclesiastes' proverb. In the story of Jacob it is clear that with advancing years he became wiser. This becomes especially clear at the end of his life when he gathers his sons and appears to have the

insight that enables him to tell them what will happen to them in days to come (Gen 49:1).

A blessed ending

Becoming old is regarded as a blessing of God and as a reward for living righteously, just as premature death could be interpreted as divine punishment.

Gray hair is a crown of glory;
it is gained in a righteous life (Prov. 16:31).

Of course, old age could only be experienced as a reward when it was not accompanied by the ailments described in Ecclesiastes 12. In the Old Testament we find a number of references to persons who enjoyed this happy old age, ending in a “good” death.⁹ The first example is the way the end of Abraham is described in Genesis 25:8–10:

Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with his wife Sarah.

Characteristic of this good death is that he reached an old age, that he enjoyed the company of his family in life and death, that he died knowing that he had offspring doing well, and that he left his family in possession of land in which he could be buried. Of Gideon we read something similar:

Then Gideon son of Joash died at a good old age, and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash at Ophrah of the Abiezrites (Jdg 8:32).

This report was preceded by the reference to his numerous offspring – seventy sons and an extra son from a concubine – and to the

⁹ Cf. Klaas Spronk, “Good Death and Bad Death in Ancient Israel According to Biblical Lore”, *Social Science and Medicine* 58 (2004), 987–995.

fact that he lived in his own house. A similar good death is reported of David: “He died in a good old age, full of days, riches, and honour; and his son Solomon succeeded him” (1 Chr 29:28). The most positive report about a blessed old age concerns Job. He is blessed with more offspring (with three very beautiful daughters) and possessions than he had at the beginning of the story, all attributed to his death being very good:

After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children’s children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days (Job 42:16–17).

Although it is not explicitly said of Jacob, his death also fits into this picture: he dies at a ripe old age, he is surrounded by his children and grandchildren, and he has seen that they will prosper in the future. He dies far away from his own land, but he knows that his remains will be taken back there to be buried with his ancestors. The fact that Jacob reached this blessed state at the end of life through so many trials and tribulations makes it all the more impressive. It makes Jacob the ideal for all those who are still in the midst of their own trials and tribulations.

Summary: The stories about Jacob in his final years are taken as representative of the positive views in the Old Testament on old age and of the related concern about the right attitude towards elderly people. Jacob ends his life in full command and only after having completed everything he wanted to arrange does he die. The contrast with the other periods in his life and with other stories about old men in the book of Genesis indicates that Jacob’s old age is more or less ideal. In the Old Testament old age is associated with weakness, but this does not go together with many commands about caring for elderly people. Instead, narratives, like the one about Jacob in a positive sense and Lot and Isaac in a negative sense, are more helpful here to point the reader in the right direction. More than with weakness, old age is associated in the Old Testament with wisdom. Finally, it is noted that according to a number of texts becoming old is regarded as a blessing from God

and as a reward for living righteously, just as premature death could be interpreted as divine punishment.

Keywords: Biblical Studies – aging – death – Jacob – Abraham – Lot – Isaac – caring for elderly – wisdom