

WHAT LEGACY WILL YOU LEAVE BEHIND?

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When I was a teenager I had a little plaque sitting on my desk. Whenever I sat down to do my homework my eyes would fall upon these words:

Only one life, 'Twill soon be past,

Only what's done for Christ will last.

The older I grow, the more I find myself thinking about what I am going to leave *behind* when I die. Will I leave any significant legacy *this side* of the Kingdom of heaven? Heaven will not forget me, but will earth?

I am persuaded that what's been done for Christ and his coming kingdom will last, and that our labour is not in vain in the Lord (I Corinthians 15:58). Our Master comes bringing his rewards for the faithful with him.

But here is my immediate concern: Will I pass from this scene like a vapour of smoke with little or no trace in the meantime? It seems that not much we do will be remembered or last beyond say, even a hundred years. By then even our grandkids will have died with their memories of us (if we are blessed to have grandchildren, that is). Do you know much, if anything, about your great-grandparents? Hmm. Cause for thought!

Talk to a materialistic evolutionist and you will be told the cheery news that the only legacy you are going to leave behind is your genes (and that's not your jeans!). You will live on in your offspring. For the Darwinist, the nearest we will ever come to being immortal is measured in how successful we have been at reproduction!

Of course, there is a significant truth in that. Long before the Darwinian evolutionist came along, the Jews understood the value of leaving behind a good legacy for your family. Indeed, one of their sages wrote,

A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children (Proverbs 13:22).

In the context of that Jewish culture, one of the primary ways "a good man" left a lasting legacy was to faithfully pass on his parcel of the tribal land to his children, and so to their future generations. Investing ourselves and our resources into our families is definitely a vital part of what it means to be a godly person. God wants us to leave behind a good legacy. But surely there must be more to a legacy than just leaving land and wealth?

THREE CONNECTED STORIES ABOUT LEGACY

Jewish sages have long recognised that when their Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) groups stories together out of chronological order, that we are meant to discover a common underlying theme. What on the surface may appear to be random and unrelated events, upon deeper reflection, actually teach marvellously insightful lessons for our profit.

Let's take an example of this principle in the context of our theme of leaving behind a good legacy ...

There are three apparently unconnected narratives towards the end of the Book of Numbers. The first account concerns a census of the nation before Israel entered the Promised Land (Numbers 26). The second story concerns the daughters of Zelophehad appealing to Moses for a portion of land to be bequeathed to them (Numbers 27). Then, suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere, these two stories culminate with God telling Moses about his pending death (Numbers 27: 12 f)!

Why does the author of Numbers group these three stories together? We may see the logic of the first two being contextually and historically tied together, but why is the death of Moses introduced immediately after them? Moses doesn't die until the very end of Deuteronomy --- there is an entire book to go! So why introduce this third story out of chronological context here? Is it possible there an underlying theme connecting these stories?

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go up to this mountain of Abarim, and see the land which I have given to the sons of Israel. And when you have seen it, you too shall be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother was; for in the wilderness of Zin, during the strife of the congregation, you rebelled against My command to treat Me as holy before their eyes ...” (Numbers 27: 12-14).

Let’s remember that God repeats this command in its proper chronological place right where we’d expect it at the end of Deuteronomy. So the story of Moses’ death doesn’t happen here in Numbers at all. Historically it happens at the very end of the Torah. It’s introduction here seems almost superfluous. So why does Numbers choose to tell the story here? The rabbis reckon it’s intentionally hinting at the theme of leaving behind a good legacy.¹ Let’s explore this.

PHINEHAS’ LEGACY OF A LASTING PRIESTHOOD

The first of the three stories is set against the backdrop of Phinehas’ act of zealotry. It’s the rather graphic story of how (in order to stay the fierce anger of the LORD) Phinehas runs with his spear into the tent of an Israelite man who has taken a Midianite woman there with the intention of joining himself to her in an act of blatant defiance of God’s clear instructions. Phinehas thrusts both through “their belly” and “so the plague of the sons of Israel was checked” (Numbers 25: 8).

God rewards Phinehas’ devotion with the promise of a perpetual legacy,

“Behold, I give him My covenant of peace; and it shall be for him and his descendants after him, a covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God, and made atonement for the sons of Israel” (Numbers 25: 12-13).

Phinehas’ reward wasn’t just for himself, but included all his future descendants. Phinehas would be the progenitor of all Levitical priesthood that would forever come after him. So, he secured a good legacy by his zeal for God’s honour and for the purity of Israel. That’s the context of the first story about the census.

A CENSUS

So, right after Phinehas’ reward, God commands Moses to take a census of the people. The text then lists the names of all the heads of the tribes and their genealogies ... this tribe had this many children, and these were their names, and each one of them had this many children, and these were their names, and so on.

Why is there a census here in the first place? It is helpful to recall the context: We’re at the end of a 40-year journey in the desert and the people are about to enter the Land. The census will list the descendants of each tribe who will eventually get their own portion of land in the Promised Land of Israel.

So the purpose of the census is to divide the land as an inheritance. These are the people who will settle the land as representatives of their tribes and their families. Essentially, this is a census about the legacy of each tribe, of those who will carry on the names of their parents. Like Phinehas’ story, the census is all about leaving a good legacy.

THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD

So we come to the next story, the story of the daughters of Zelophehad. There is no doubt this story makes it very clear that the census was really about legacy. Immediately following the census the daughters of Zelophehad approach Moses before all the leaders and the whole congregation, and right in front of the tabernacle, make this claim,

“Our father died in the desert ... but he had no sons --- why should the name of our father be withdrawn from among his family because he had no son? Give us a possession among our father’s brothers” (Numbers 27: 3-4).

¹ I want to give credit to Rabbi Fohrman at his web site Aleph Beta for this connection and much of the following.



Did you carefully listen to their plea? They don't just say, "Please let us inherit our father's property. Give us the portion of land as our brothers would have had. Why should the name of our father be erased just because he has no sons?" No. What they were asking for was something much bigger. And it wasn't a request for wealth, either. That's right, you guessed it! It was about *legacy*. Why should the name of our father be wiped out, let us continue his legacy. If his legacy continues, then we and our future children are also assured of having a legacy.

God grants their request and He has Moses announce this new rule to everyone. When a father doesn't have sons the inheritance goes to the daughters, and if there are no daughters then it goes to the father's brothers, and so on. The text is emphasizing that even when the normal rules of inheritance don't apply, there are contingency plans to make sure that everyone gets a shot at continued legacy.

BUT WHAT ABOUT MOSES?

So far all these stories really are about guaranteeing a decent legacy. But there's also a subtle tension in the text. Moses seems to play a prominent role in all these stories, but Moses' own legacy seems to be missing, and it seems that the text itself does everything it can to draw our attention to it.

Ask yourself: Who is the one who delivered the message of Phinehas' reward? It's Moses. That's not surprising, for Moses is very often God's mouthpiece. But if you were Moses and you were making this announcement, you can't help but notice that it's your brother's legacy that's being established. Phinehas was Aaron's grandson, Moses' great-nephew. It might even make Moses start to think about his own legacy ... Hmm, it's great for my brother, but what will be of me?

Then in the next story of the census, we meet the family of Levi, the tribe of Moses and Aaron. The text lists both Moses and Aaron as part of the lineage and then, just like we'd expect, it begins to list the children of that next generation. It lists Aaron's sons. But then as if to be as pointed as possible, right when we'd expect the list of Moses' children, the census ends.

Moses had children; Gershom and Eliezer, but what happened to them? They should be there. Their absence surely is glaring. You know who is taking the census? Yes, it's Moses himself along with his nephew Eleazar. Again, Moses is the one announcing the legacy of everyone else, and his own legacy is nowhere to be found. If Moses wasn't thinking about his own legacy earlier, he's probably thinking about it here.

The last story about the daughters of Zelophehad is about those whose legacies have not been so far accounted for, so maybe Moses' legacy is going to be here? But again look at Moses' role in the final story. He's the one to whom the daughters of Zelophehad bring their claim, he's the one that delivers the news to all of the people guaranteeing a legacy for everyone. We, and probably Moses too, can't help but think, what about Moses? Even people who would not normally have a legacy are ensured one, but what about Moses? Moses has sons, so what about him?

WILL MOSES HAVE A LEGACY?

After all this, we get to our story where God tells Moses to ascend the mountain where he'll die. If you were Moses and you just heard about your own death, and you've just seen Phinehas secure your brother's legacy, and you just saw all of Israel secure their legacy in the census in which you were left out, and you saw the daughters of Zelophehad secure their legacy, what would you be thinking?

How would you react? Most of us would probably feel like, well, is that it? I'm just going to die? Poof! Gonsky! Don't I get a legacy too?

But that's not how Moses reacts. He asks the God of all living things to appoint someone over the people; "Don't let the people be a flock without a shepherd!" Notice how selfless he is. Moses doesn't ask for his own legacy. He is thinking of others. He asks something for the people. They need a leader who will be a good shepherd. So he requests,

"May the LORD ... appoint a man over congregation ... that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep which have no shepherd" (Numbers 27: 16-17).

The word Moses uses for "appoint" in both the Hebrew and the Septuagint Greek, is the very same word used back during the census, when the legacies of each tribe were being counted. To "appoint" is to "count" or to "number".²

In Moses' plea for God to "appoint" a new leader perhaps we can hear a tinge of longing. "God" he may be implying, "what about my legacy? *Appoint* a legacy for me. *Count* me in this legacy business, too!"

Now, if we just look one verse later we see that the new leader is going to be Joshua. But Joshua is not a son of Moses. He's not even a relative of Moses! Moses' general request for a new leader is answered, but it seems that his more subtle plea to be appointed a legacy, to be counted worthy of a legacy, goes entirely ignored. Or is it?

THE LEGACY OF A LEADER'S SPIRIT

God says to Moses,

"Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man who has spirit in him, and lay your hand on him" (Numbers 27: 18).³

Then God tells Moses,

"And you shall put some of your authority on him, so that all the congregation of the sons of Israel may obey him" ... Then he laid his hands on him and established him, just as the LORD had spoken through Moses (Numbers 27: 20, 23).⁴



Moses is thus to bequeath his glory, his honour, and therefore his authority to Israel's new leader. Joshua is going to continue Moses' leadership. He's an extension of Moses' leadership. The verses emphasize that Moses' legacy will pass on through to Joshua. So Moses puts his hands on Joshua and gives of his "glory" to Joshua. He symbolically takes of himself and infuses his "authority" into Joshua.

Yes Moses, you do have a legacy after all! No, it's not a biological legacy, that's not what leadership is about. Good leadership is about facilitating the needs of the community. Moses, everything you've done, everything you've been for the people, will continue on in the

² *Yifkod* in Hebrew and *episkeptomai* in the LXX. It's the same word used in Numbers 26: 62 - 64, for instance, where it is translated as "numbered" ... "These are those who were *numbered* by Moses."

³ This is the literal rendering of both the Hebrew and the Greek. The LXX verb for "has" --- Joshua "has spirit in him --- may equally well be translated to mean that Joshua, "possesses, holds to, retains, or is in a certain state of spirit". The immediate context of the preceding verse is indicating that Joshua is the man who has the "shepherd spirit" in him (v.17). Thus, English translations that have a capital 'S' for spirit are unwarranted. To most modern readers, the capital 'S' subconsciously suggests the trinitarian doctrine of the Spirit as the Third Person in the Trinity. This is grammatically, contextually, and culturally adding to the text.

⁴ Both the Hebrew and the Greek texts literally read, "you shall put your majesty", or "you shall put your glory" on Joshua.

man who has your spirit! That's your legacy. That's your glorious contribution. In a very real sense, you yourself will continue to exercise an enduring leadership through someone who will devote himself with your spirit to continue it.

Who was Joshua? He was Moses' "servant"; he dedicated himself to serving Moses and his mission. All those years Joshua had been at Moses' side, watching, observing, listening, learning. He has imbibed the very spirit and mind of Moses himself. Moses cannot personally lead the people into the Promised Land. But he will be there "in spirit", in the person of Joshua who will continue his great shepherd's heart.

That's what was being transferred to Joshua on top of the mountain the spirit of Moses.

MOUNT ABARIM

Now let's take a little lesson in Hebrew. Some things get lost in translation, and this is one place where the mother tongue is very helpful. Did you notice the name of the mountain on which this all happens? That's right. In our translations Moses is told to ascend Mount Abarim (Numbers 27:12). In the Hebrew tongue this is Mount Avarim.

This is significant, because back in the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, God says, yes, the daughters of Zelophehad are right --- the inheritance of their father should pass over to them.

Before this they didn't have a claim to the land at all, but that changes here, and the mechanism through which that changes is Ha'avarta. The land transfers over and continues with them. Here on this mountain, Har Ha'Avarim, it's as if God is saying, Moses come up to this mountain, the mountain of continuing legacies, on which your legacy will continue.

That's why the story of Moses' death is here. It's to draw our attention to the matter of how important it is to leave behind the legacy of one's ideas, one's ideology, one's values, one's teaching, one's heart, soul and mind. In other words, there is something more than just biological legacy, just leaving your genes behind! There is something more than just leaving behind a material legacy, whether that be land or a bank account or possessions.



MOSES ON MOUNT AVARIM --- THE MOUNT OF CONTINUING LEGACY!

God was going to ensure that Moses "authority", Moses' "glory", Moses' excellence of character and teaching, would continue in the person of Joshua. God is teaching us that the most important type of legacy, the legacy that really, really matters, is whether we will leave behind something of the "glory" of our persons to benefit others ... something of our "spirit".

VERY JEWISH!

This idea of leaving your "spirit" behind is very Jewish. We meet it on a number of occasions in the Hebrew Bible. Just turn back a few pages in this very same book of Numbers to chapter 11.

Moses is feeling quite depressed by the burden of this complaining "rabble" (vs. 1-4). He says to the LORD, "Why have You been so hard on me, Your servant? Haven't I found favour in Your sight, so why have You laid the burden of this people on me" (vs. 11)? Moses is being worn down by the weeping of the people, and laments that he alone cannot bear all this people, because they are "too burdensome for me" (vs. 14).

In response, God tells Moses to gather 70 elders from among the people, and bring them to the Tabernacle so they can take their stand there with him,

“Then I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit which is upon you, and will put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you shall not bear it all alone” (vs. 17).⁵

Then, having gathered the elders to the Tent, the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses. God took of the Spirit which was upon Moses and placed it upon the 70 elders, and when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied (vs. 25).

“THE SPIRIT OF ELIJAH”

The same idea is conveyed in the story of how “the spirit of Elijah” came to rest upon his prodigee, Elisha. You probably know the story well. The salient point is that after the fiery chariot caught Elijah up, and after Elisha had put his master’s mantle on and parted the waters of the river in front of him, he was now clothed with the same power for ministry that Elijah had exercised. Recognizing this, the sons of the prophets exclaimed, “The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha” (2 Kings 2:15)!



ELIJAH PASSES ON HIS SPIRIT TO ELISHA.

Relevant to our discussion, both these incidents make the point that God’s anointing on both Moses and Elijah was bequeathed to others for leadership and ministry. In Jewish thinking, God’s power and work begun by Moses and Elijah, would not cease just because these “greats” had passed from the scene. Not at all. God was ensuring their legacy would be carried on. Their successors ---faithful to God’s programme, and empowered by God’s Spirit --- would continue to walk in the same mind, character, authority and spirit their masters had demonstrated.

JESUS’ LEGACY OF THE SPIRIT

Let’s apply this principle to Jesus himself. As the elders received of Moses’ spirit and prophesied, and as Elisha received a “double portion” of Elijah’s spirit to go out in his master’s power, just so, after Pentecost the disciples go out in the spirit and power of their resurrected Lord to carry on his Kingdom work.⁶

Now think about how remarkable this is. For when the prophet Isaiah looked way into his future, he saw Messiah oppressed, denied justice, cut off from the land of the living for the people, and with no offspring.

The obvious question then was whether Jesus would be cut off without any possibility of leaving an inheritance;

**By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
Who shall describe his generation?
For he was cut off out of the land of the living:
For the transgression of my people was he struck (Isaiah 53: 8).**

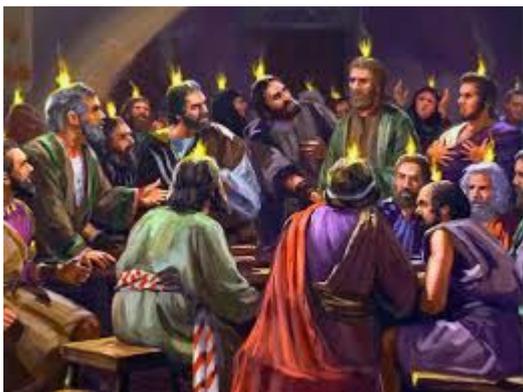
⁵ Here it is contextually quite legitimate to capitalise the “Spirit”, for the referent is God’s Spirit. The Spirit of God is God Himself Personally at work. The Spirit of God is His operational Presence, but definitely is never called ‘God the Spirit’ as per later trinitarian accretion. In the Bible there is both “the Spirit of God” and “the spirit of man” and each context must be weighed to avoid confusion. See previous footnote number 3.

⁶ In Jewish thought then, the Spirit of Christ now rests on the disciples who will go in the power of the Lord as they proclaim the Gospel. Thus, in Biblical parlance, there is no thought that the Holy Spirit descending from Jesus now ascended to the right hand of his God and Father is the third member of the Godhead, any more than the Spirit that God took from Moses, or the spirit of Elijah sent upon Elisha, was a third member of the Trinity.

Isaiah naturally asks, “Who shall relate his generation, his origin, his family? It would seem Messiah would die childless. He apparently will die without leaving a lasting legacy. He would seem to die all alone. Now remember, in traditional Jewish thinking, to die childless was to die accursed. It was to die without the blessing of God, without leaving a legacy to your “children’s children”.

But God did not abandon Jesus the Messiah. Jesus did not die “childless”. The grain of wheat was buried in the ground for three days. And when God the Father vindicated Jesus Messiah by raising him up to immortality, a whole crop of ‘new lifers’ potentially rose in him too. Jesus became the prototype of the New Humanity to enter God’s promised future Kingdom. Jesus did not die childless. Jesus has a legacy ... a Kingdom full of redeemed people!

Jesus’ ministry was only the beginning of all he “began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1). His ascension into heaven and the subsequent Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit in wind and fire on the disciples has clear parallels with Moses’ spirit being divided on the elders, and with Elijah’s spirit falling upon Elisha. On the day of Pentecost God the Father took of the Spirit of the resurrected Lord Jesus and it came like a “rushing wind” and appeared like “tongues of fire distributing themselves, and it rested on each one” of the disciples (Acts 2:2-3). Jesus’ legacy was being assured! His “spirit” was being passed on.



THE DISCIPLES ARE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT OF GOD, ENSURING THE LASTING LEGACY OF THE RISEN JESUS.

“The Spirit of Truth” --- aka the Comforter --- is thus the combined activity of the Father and the risen Son mediated to the world through the faithful witness of the church.

Jesus’ legacy is thus guaranteed whenever his followers faithfully believe and act upon his words, his teaching. Jesus’ words are the extension of Jesus himself who is no longer visibly and physically with us on earth. The Spirit of Jesus is thus the power of God operating wherever his Gospel-word is shared.

Jesus said his words are spirit and they are life (John 6:63). Which is to say, Jesus’ words carry his “spirit”, his mind and his life. When we faithfully pass on the words and teachings of Jesus, we are leaving a lasting legacy ... the spirit of Jesus!

THE APOSTLE PAUL’S LEGACY

The apostle Paul understood how this principle works too. He was a batchelor. He devoted his life to Christ and the church. He wrote many epistles, which we have as his lasting legacy today. And he invested his life in “imitating Christ” and in passing on his Lord’s message. Paul thus worked to pass on the legacy of Jesus, ensuring his own legacy in Christ too;

The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (2 Timothy 2:2).

Aha. Thanks Paul for further impressing this upon our minds. The way to pass on a good and lasting legacy is to first listen to and follow Jesus as Lord. Then we faithfully model and teach the words of Jesus --- his spirit --- before others.

Moses mentored Joshua and other leaders. Elijah mentored Elisha. Jesus mentored the twelve and other men and women. Paul mentored Timothy, Titus and many others. God gave to each of these faithful ones a lasting legacy. God took of their mind, their “authority”, their glory, their excellence --- their “spirit” --- and divided it for the benefit of others. All of this is very Jewish, very Biblical.

THE HEART OF GOD

I cannot help but believe that if we would “get” this and live by this, then we will have captured the heart of God for,

To say that Jesus lives in Christian hearts through the Spirit is to say that believing Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom means identifying oneself, one’s future, with the reality of Jesus, a hope that brings renewal and transformation ... Jesus is the embodiment of God’s promised future. He dwells within the people of God in the form of the Spirit --- the breath of God --- , which is the revelation of God’s promised future; the breath enters the people of God as they are understandingly-persuaded --- as they believe --- Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom. ⁷

MY LEGACY? YOUR LEGACY?

I don’t know about you. But I wonder about what legacy I will leave behind when I’m gone. And recently I’ve thought that I need to work smarter, too. That’s one of the reasons I wrote a book. I want my children and grandchildren to know what I believe, why I believe, of my faith in Christ Jesus the Son of God, something about my “spirit”!

That’s also one reason I started this website. While I sleep, I am working around the world! Any significance my life might have, has all come by imbibing the spirit, the words, the mind, the character of Jesus my Lord.

Just like Moses,
just like Elijah,
just like Jesus,
just like Paul,

in a very real sense, my “spirit” will live on in what I have said, in the example I have left, and in what I have written and taught.



The only legacy that will live on and have eternal consequences, will be the extent to which you and I have passed on the words and the Spirit of our Lord Jesus.

You too can leave a good legacy. A dad or a mum who faithfully read the Scriptures to their children, and who pray with them, and who model the love and wisdom of God, will pass on a lasting legacy to their children. My mother did that for my brother and me. Her legacy through passing on the spirit and mind of God to us will never pass away!

WILL YOU BE ENROLLED IN THE ONLY CENSUS THAT ULTIMATELY MATTERS?

With Moses, my prayer for you and for myself, is that God would grant us that shepherd’s heart, so that we may be “counted” in the only census that matters --- the one where God takes of our excellence and passes on His Spirit in us for the blessing of others. This way, we’ll be remembered this side of Eternity, as well as enter the Promised Land of God’s everlasting Kingdom! To Him be the glory forever and forever! Amen.

Only one life, 'Twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

⁷ Hach, Robert. *Possession and Persuasion: The Rhetoric of Christian Faith*. Xlibris Corp.,USA. 2001, p 141.

