“AND JACOB SET UP A PILLAR AT HER GRAVE . . .”:
MATERIAL MEMORIALS AND LANDMARKS
IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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1. Introduction

Memorials are landmarks, both in the landscapes of reality as in the
landscapes of imagination, as it is often found in 18th and early 19th
Century painting. Also, in the landscape of Israel as imagined by the
Biblical authors, we find memorials both marking the grave or securing
the remembrance of an important person and the claim for the promised
land. Moreover, the Old Testament reports the erection of victory stelae
(1 Sam 15:12) and stelae as border stones (2 Sam 18:2; Isa 19:19). The
memorials for the dead and the victory stelae are named yāḏ (2 Sam
18:18; Isa 56:5; 1 Sam 15:12), šīyyūn (sepulchre of the man of god in 2 Kgs
23:17) or maṣṣēḇā (the tomb of Rachel in Gen 35:20 and the monument
of Absalom in 2 Sam 18:18), no matter weather they were used as markers
of tombs or memorial stelae. The term maṣṣēḇā also appears to designate
a border-stone (Isa 19:19). Also 1 Sam 10:2 mentions the tomb of Rachel
as a landmark. The aim of this study, which I greatfully dedicate to my
Doktorvater Ed, is to examine both the meaning of such memorials in
the landscapes of reality and in the landscapes of imagination, as well as
their function for cultural memory.

1 I would like to point here to some works depicting imagined memorials and sepul-
chres for important persons, which were placed in Arcadian landscapes, often found
in the period of Sensivity in the second half of the 18th century. See D. Schumacher,
“Freundschaft über den Tod hinaus: Die bürgerliche Kultur des Gedenkens im 18. Jh. am
Beispiel von J.W.L. Gleim.” (ed. U. Pott, Das Jahrhundert der Freundschaft: Johann Wil-
helm Gleim und seine Zeitgenossen, Göttingen 2004) with figs. 1–18 and cat. nos. 109–133.

2 On landscapes as a feature of religious imagination see the volume edited by J. Hahn:
Religiöse Landschaften (AOAT 301; Münster 2002), herein esp. the article by H.P. Müller,
“Die Kunst der Selbsterwandlung in imaginären Landschaften: Zur Vorgeschichte von
Vergils ‘Arkadien,” 73–78. On Palestine as “mnemotope” see J. Assmann, Das kulturelle
Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen (München
1992), 59–60.
Still a landmark to this very day and a place of worship transgressing the boundaries of the so called Abrahamite religions is the tomb of Rachel at Ramath Rahel. In Gen 35:20 Jacob sets up a steleform memorial (here designated as massēbâ) at the grave of his wife, which has died in childbirth on the way to Bethlehem/Ephrath:

16 Then they journeyed from Beth-El; and when it was still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor.
17 When she was in her hard labor, the midwife said to her, “Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son.”
18 As her soul was departing, for she died, she named him “Son of my disaster” (Ben-Oni); but his father called him “Son of the right” (Benjamin).
19 So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath, that is Bethlehem.
20 And Jacob set up a massēbâ at her grave; it is the massēbâ of Rachel’s tomb, which is there to this day.

The text contains etiologies both for the name of Benjamin and Rachel’s tomb, and should therefore be classified as an etiological notice. The tradition about the tomb of Rachel cannot be assigned with any certainty to any of the pentateuchal sources of the classical model. However, the tradition about a tomb is an old one, as Jer 31:15 and 1 Sam 10:2 (but with a different location) indicate. In its present context Gen 35:16–20 seems to be an extension of the Jacob complex comprising the etiologies of the cult of Bethel and Rachel’s tomb, most likely compiled by the first editor of the exilic patriarchal history.

However, the localisation of Rachel’s tomb is not that clear as Gen 35:19 indicates. According to 1 Sam 10:2 Rachel’s tomb is to be found

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3 C. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36* (BKAT 1.2; Neukirchen-Vluyn 1981), 676, designates the text as an itinerary with genealogical note, while L. Ruppert, *Das Buch Genesis* (Geistliche Schriften. AT 6.1–2; Düsseldorf 1976 and 1984), 497, considers it as an anecdotic note combined with two etiologies.
5 See R. Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century BCE* (Studies in Biblical Literature 3; Atlanta 2003), 256.