

Comments on Genesis 28

Separating from all he has known, lived in, and worked for, and now personally owns, because of his brother's very real threat of murder creates a crisis for Jacob. This precipitates the Lord stepping in, and a change in his faith on Jacob's part.

And Isaac called Jacob, and blessed him, and charged him, and said unto him, Thou shalt not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan. ² Arise, go to Padanaram, to the house of Bethuel thy mother's father; and take thee a wife from thence of the daughters of Laban thy mother's brother. ³ And God Almighty bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, that thou mayest be a multitude of people; ⁴ And give thee the blessing of Abraham, to thee, and to thy seed with thee; that thou mayest inherit the land wherein thou art a stranger, which God gave unto Abraham. ⁵ And Isaac sent away Jacob: and he went to Padanaram unto Laban, son of Bethuel the Syrian, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob's and Esau's mother.

v1-5 The subject for this chapter starts with the last verse of the preceding chapter. In 27:46 we learn that Rebekah uses her disgust for Esau's wives as a foil to get Isaac out of the house away from the murderously minded Esau.

Isaac agrees with her and sends him off to Rebekah's family compound to find a wife (v. 1-2). Then, Isaac voluntarily bestows a blessing upon Jacob which endorses the previously purloined blessing and forwards the Abrahamic Covenant upon him (v. 3-4), but somewhere else, just not here. Jacob sets out on his way (v. 5).

Note there is no indication of anger on Isaac's part or remorse on Jacob's part after the events of the last chapter. Little time has passed, so this is likely the first time Isaac and Jacob have met since Jacob deceived Isaac. Why then is Isaac not angry at Jacob, and why does he voluntarily bless him? Read the blessing in v. 4 carefully. Isaac is sending Jacob away permanently, away from all he has just inherited. Isaac thinks he is dealing with Jacob's duplicity by getting rid of him, so Esau will be the de facto inheritor of the estate. Yes, Isaac blesses Jacob with the blessing of Abraham, just somewhere else, away from himself and Esau, who were both just tricked.

v2 The distance between Beersheba and Haran is 457 miles straight line, so it was approximately 500 miles distance to travel. Far enough to keep Jacob and Esau separated, and Jacob out of the family business.

⁶ When Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob, and sent him away to Padanaram, to take him a wife from thence; and that as he blessed him he gave him a charge, saying, Thou shalt not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan; ⁷ And that Jacob obeyed his father and his mother, and was gone to Padanaram; ⁸ And Esau seeing that the daughters of Canaan pleased not Isaac his father; ⁹ Then went Esau unto Ishmael, and took unto the wives which he had Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael Abraham's son, the sister of Nebajoth, to be his wife.

v6-9 Esau finally realizes his parents don't like his wives and attempts superficial means of ingratiating himself with them, rather than actually address his wives' problematic behavior. It also indicates Esau is so dim-witted he doesn't understand their sending Jacob away is a result of his intent to kill him.

v9 "Mahalath", the names of the wives change between 26:34-35, here and 36:2-3, suggesting perhaps some of these are name-titles instead of birthnames. Since "Basemath" appears to change between two women, we might conclude that is a name-title that switches between the two of them at some point. In Biblical Hebrew, the word "basemath" translates to "fragrance" or "spice".

¹⁰ And Jacob went out from Beersheba, and went toward Haran. ¹¹ And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. ¹² And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And, behold, the LORD stood above it, and said, I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; ¹⁴ And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵ And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of. ¹⁶ And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. ¹⁷ And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven. ¹⁸ And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. ¹⁹ And he called the name

of that place Bethel: but the name of that city was called Luz at the first. ²⁰ And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, ²¹ So that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the LORD be my God: ²² And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.

v10-22 Jacob travels some time and ends up camping out for the night (v. 10-11). During the night he has a dream of a stairway or ladder connecting heaven and earth upon which the angels of God ascend and descend (v. 12). Then the Lord stands beside him and announces the same blessings he pronounced upon Abraham upon him, with particular emphasis upon his seed, or descendants (v. 13-14). The Lord then provides special emphasis upon His blessing of physical protection (v. 15), which would obviously be intended to allay his very present fears about Esau's murderous disposition, which will also become important later in ch. 32-33.

Jacob is stunned by the dream, confessing his own naivety over spiritual matters (v. 16). Shaken up by the event, the fear of God sinks in and he additionally confesses "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven" (JPS) (v. 17). That same morning Jacob takes the stone that was formerly serving as a pillow, fashions it into a pillar and anoints it (v. 18), the anointing being symbolic of the outpouring of the Spirit upon him in the form of revelation, as well as that of the consecration of the site. He then pronounces the site Bethel, or "the House of God" (v. 19, also cp. 12:7-8 for similarities with the Abraham story).

Jacob's resolve and convictions become plain here as he covenants with the Lord to have Him as his God and worship him (v. 20-22).

Obviously, the Lord appearing to him here and endorsing the blessings of Abraham upon Jacob makes explicit what was formerly implicit in ch. 27, namely that Isaac was supposed to bless him instead of Esau. This is the pivotal point in Jacob's life where the religious man comes out and the natural man is left behind. Note the events surrounding it are traumatic and trying on Jacob.

Jacob returns to the spot some twenty years later and

builds an altar there, cf. 35:7.

v10 Jacob travels a considerable distance, some ~500 miles, but there is nothing in the text indicating how he traveled. The few details in the text suggest he left quickly and was not well prepared for the journey. Was he on foot, or by camel, or mule? We do not know. The account in 29:1-11 of watering the sheep says nothing of Jacob watering his own animal. One would assume if he were riding on an animal he would have moved the stone off the well to water his own mount, rather than waiting for Rachel to arrive with her sheep. And, the literal translation of 29:1 is "Jacob lifted up his feet", suggesting he made the trek on foot.

v11 "stones...for his pillows", this tells us Jacob was alone, traveled light, left home quickly, and was not used to this kind of travel. The last thing you are going to use as a head rest for sleep is a rock, unless you literally have nothing else and no way to make anything else. An experienced outdoorsman or traveler would have been better prepared. Jacob was neither of those, and had spent little or no time planning for his journey. Everything suggests he left in haste to avoid being murdered.

v12 That ministering angels ascend from heaven to the earth to do the Lord's will is something we simply accept, and that they do it upon Bethel, the House of God (i.e., what we would see as the Temple), is simply intuitive to us.

But, that is not the message the Lord is conveying to Jacob. The message here is the angels of heaven will descend into mortality and then ascend again into immortality through the Lord's ladder, ramp, or staircase, which is the atonement which He will provide (cf. John 1:51) because of the covenant with Abraham, which is being propagated through Jacob's lineage. Note the triple repeated "seed" or descendants in v. 13-14 connected to the angels in v. 12.

Jacob is in fear of his life and going into the unknown, and the Lord is letting him know that He is managing the outcome for him, because of the covenant with his grandfather Abraham. Jacob will not be left to die in the desert or be murdered by his brother Esau. The Lord will protect Jacob because the children of Abraham will Jacob's children, and Jacob must live in order for that to happen.

The imagery of a ziggurat-like ladder or ramp into heaven,

which is the gateway to heaven (v. 17), and Jacob anointing a single uncut stone and pronouncing it the "Bethel" is a polemic against the Tower of Babylon. The real stairway to heaven is the covenant with Abraham which the Lord made and will fulfil Himself, making it possible for us to return via the Atonement.

Nahum Sarna in Understanding Genesis (1966, Schocken Books, ch. 12, pg. 193) states:

This contrast between historic reality and the biblical story of Jacob is of monumental importance for the understanding of the nature of biblical religion and its development. It serves to map out the spiritual boundary lines that divide Israel from its neighbors. The details of the scriptural narrative reveal a subtle and deliberate rejection of pagan notions even as they employ their idiom.

The dream imagery reflects a decidedly Mesopotamian background already familiar to us from the "Tower of Babel" episode. The stairway that Jacob saw connecting heaven and earth recalls at once the picture of the ziggurat with its external ramp linking each stage of the tower to other. The note that "its top reached the sky" (28:12) and the identification of the site of the dream as "the gateway to heaven" (28:17), is reminiscent of the stereotyped phraseology used in connection with that Babylonian temple-towers. But, it differs from pagan mythology in that the stairway of Jacob's dream is not a channel of communication between man and God. The deity does not descend by it to the human realm and man does not ascend to the divine sphere. The chasm between the two is unbridgeable by physical means. Indeed, the background presence of the angels serves to highlight this fact, for the stairway is obviously for them alone. They are merely ornamental, playing no role in the theophany.

Sarna is correct up until the last two sentences. The angels ascending and descending on the staircase are the pre and post-mortal spirits of man. Jewish angelology sees angels as something entirely other than human.

The vision granted to Jacob here is similar to Lehi's vision of the Tree of Life, wherein he sees all of the generations of his family, which Nephi later sees as well. The implied message of both visions is the same, namely that because of the covenant with Abraham the salvation of the Lord is made

available to the generations of their posterity.

v20 Some might read the "If God does such and such for me then I will worship him" to be a selfish sort of condition imposed by Jacob. This is not the case. This is Jacob saying "If God is doing these things (i.e., the substance of v. 13-15 and v. 20), then He is my God and I am doing these other things (i.e., the substance of v. 21-22). There is no hesitancy on Jacob's part that would indicate his not accepting the immediately preceding revelation and the Lord's promises as being entirely genuine. Quite the opposite in fact, as Jacob is fearing God greatly and is overwhelmed by the revelation. Here, probably for the first time in his life, Jacob is humbled and humiliated (for the God who's name he had just sworn in vain just appeared to him), and as a result is religiously convicted.

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