

Comments on Genesis 33

After preparing for Esau's arrival in the previous chapter, Esau and Jacob now meet, are reconciled, and part company as friends. Jacob eventually moves permanently back to his ancestral lands, fulfilling the Lord's command in 31:3.

Thus chapter concludes Jacob's struggle with God, but it also concludes God's struggle with Jacob. The Lord had to do a lot a work around and on the man Jacob to get him where He needed him to be. Jacob is a changed man, no longer focused on material things, he is now primarily interested in godly things.

1 And Jacob lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, Esau came, and with him four hundred men. And he divided the children unto Leah, and unto Rachel, and unto the two handmaids. 2 And he put the handmaids and their children foremost, and Leah and her children after, and Rachel and Joseph hindermost. 3 And he passed over before them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.

4 And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept. 5 And he lifted up his eyes, and saw the women and the children; and said, who are those with thee? And he said, The children which God hath graciously given thy servant. 6 Then the handmaidens came near, they and their children, and they bowed themselves. 7 And Leah also with her children came near, and bowed themselves: and after came Joseph near and Rachel, and they bowed themselves.

8 And he said, what meanest thou by all this drove which I met? And he said, These are to find grace in the sight of my lord. 9 And Esau said, I have enough, my brother; keep that thou hast unto thyself. 10 And Jacob said, Nay, I pray thee, if now I have found grace in thy sight, then receive my present at my hand: for therefore I have seen thy face, as though I had seen the face of God, and thou wast pleased with me. 11 Take, I pray thee, my blessing that is brought to thee; because God hath dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough. And he urged him, and he took it.

v1-11 The sun is up, and Jacob sees Esau and his men coming. Jacob separates his families by wife and respective children (v. 1), apparently in rank order of how he values the wives and children, concubines first, then Leah, then Rachel (v. 2). He then goes ahead of all of them to greet Esau and he bows down repeatedly until they meet (v. 3). Esau and Jacob meet and are overcome by emotion (v. 4). Esau sees all of the women and

children and asks Jacob who they are, and Jacob introduces them as blessings from God, and he explicitly defers to Esau by calling himself "your servant" (v. 5). Each of the women with their children then approach in turn for introduction and they in turn each bow to Esau (v. 6-7). Esau then questions Jacob concerning the droves of animals, and Jacob tells him they are a gift (v. 8). Esau attempts to decline the gifts, but Jacob insists, so Esau accepts (v. 9-11).

Separating his family into four groups and staggering them follows the pattern set up in the previous chapter (cf. 32:13-21) where the droves of flocks are presented as gifts. Here, Jacob is offering himself and his family up as figurative gifts to Esau, as vassals, whom Jacob is deferring to as though he is royalty. The previous division into two groups (cf. 32:8) was purely defensive in the event of attack, but here Jacob's approach is entirely diplomatic.

Note when it is time for Jacob to actually turn the property over, Jacob insists Esau take the flocks, but he is eager to physically separate as quickly as possible from Esau and his men.

v2 Rachel appears to still be the favored wife, over Leah, despite all of the conflict of ch. 30.

v3 "bowed himself to the ground seven times", I would take the "seven" to mean "several" and not necessarily exactly seven times. It seems unlikely Jacob was counting off exactly seven bows, but rather was bowing the entire time of Esau's approach when they were in sight of each other.

Speiser, Sarna and Alter all comment this was a common cultural practice among the people at the time when addressing royalty, as similar references are made in the Amarna letters and Ugaritic documents.

Sarna notes there is irony in the presentation, as it contradicts the blessing of 27:29 in a physical sense. Clearly, we would read that original blessing in a spiritual and eternal sense.

v4 "Esau ran to meet him", assuming Esau and his four hundred

men were mounted, this would mean he dismounted and ran to Jacob, which would have been a great relief to Jacob, as it would have indicated he was not attacking but greeting.

"embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept", Alter says "This is, of course, the big surprise in the story of the twins: instead of lethal grappling, Esau embraces Jacob in fraternal affection. The Masoretic Text has both brothers weeping, the verb showing a plural inflection, but some scholars have conjectured that the plural *waw* at the end of the verb is a scribal error, duplicated from the first letter of the next word in the text, and that Esau alone weeps, Jacob remaining impassive." Alter doesn't explicitly take a position in this matter, but his translation of the text is "they wept", suggesting he favors the reading forwarded in the Masoretic Text. It seems likely the "they wept" is the better reading, as this would have been a moment of huge relief for Jacob, as their meeting is a happy reunion and not the anticipated murderous pillaging.

Sarna also notes Esau's kiss is the final resolution of the tragic series of events that starts with Jacob's deceitful kiss in stealing Isaac's blessing from Esau, cf. 27:26.

v9-11 Jacob was eager to prove to Esau that he no longer had any personal motivation when it came to their father's estate. By insisting Esau take the flocks and herds, Esau can no longer suspect Jacob was after what should have been his. Had Jacob relented in the negotiation and allowed Esau to decline, that could have still left Esau vulnerable to suspicions of Jacob's trickery.

Jacob's insistence that Esau take the herds as gifts may also have been to placate the four hundred men whom Esau brought. If these four hundred were ruffians bent on plunder, and were deprived, they would be angry at both Esau and Jacob, having their expectations dashed. Jacob's gift dispels any risk of the men causing problems, as Esau could easily hand them over or prepare a feast of them for the men.

v9 Sarna states "The etiquette of the East requires Esau to make a show of refusing the gift and Jacob to press it on him.

To all outward appearances, the recipient accepts it reluctantly."

"my brother", Esau addresses Jacob in a familial way, where Jacob consistently addresses Esau deferentially as "lord" and himself as "thy servant". Jacob does not slip into familial references through the entire exchange, being careful to show Esau he means what he says, it is not feigned or a formality.

But, also, the familial reference of "brother" used by Esau shows the two of them are now reconciled, as a result of Jacob's humility and deference.

"keep that thou hast unto thyself", Sarna states "Beneath the surface meaning lies, perhaps, Esau's final concession of the birthright" citing Rashi and Radak. To that I would add the blessing as well. If Esau is conceding, he is conceding everything he seemingly lost twenty years ago, as he has materially prospered despite the loss. This shows Esau saw nothing in the birthright or blessing beyond the physical aspects, being blind to the spiritual implications. Hence the Lord's rejection of him over Jacob.

v10 "I have seen thy face, as though I has seen the face of God", Jacob is eager to present himself as greatly blessed by Esau's presence, but at the same time is acknowledging God's hand is at work in sparing him, cf. 32:30, which certainly would have been lost on Esau.

v11 "Take, I pray thee, my blessing", Jacob is repaying what he has stolen, cf. 27:36. Esau's acceptance of the gift also necessarily implies reconciliation between them. If Esau had rejected the gifts, that would suggest he still harbored resentment and possibly hostility. Acceptance of the gift means acceptance of Jacob's apology, it is a material token of the verbal apology.

12 And he said, Let us take our journey, and let us go, and I will go before thee. 13 And he said unto him, My lord knoweth that the children are tender, and the flocks and herds with young are with me: and if men should overdrive them one day, all the flock will die. 14 Let my lord, I pray thee, pass over

before his servant: and I will lead on softly, according as the cattle that goeth before me and the children be able to endure, until I come unto my lord unto Seir. 15 And Esau said, Let me now leave with thee some of the folk that are with me. And he said, what needeth it? let me find grace in the sight of my lord. 16 So Esau returned that day on his way unto Seir. 17 And Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built him an house, and made booths for his cattle: therefore the name of the place is called Succoth.

v12-17 Esau offers to escort Jacob's family and flocks (v. 12), but Jacob makes excuses to avoid them staying together (v. 13-14). Esau offers to leave some of his men to assist Jacob, which Jacob also declines, so Esau leaves with his four hundred men (v. 15-16). Jacob continues the journey and builds temporary huts for the cattle (v. 17), as he wants to put distance between himself and Esau and his men.

Jacob is eager to have Esau and his men leave, and doesn't want any of them hanging around. We have to assume Jacob is acting in his own best interest here, as these men are likely not God-fearing and would only cause problems. Esau's offer is seemingly gracious, but Jacob knows their cultural and social differences will be problematic. Later Scriptural texts say pretty negative things about Esau, Edom and Idumea, which are all connected by lineage, but those are significantly later in Israel's history. The only clear indication of Esau's current cultural practices is his marrying Hethite and Ishmaelite women, the former Rebekah did not approve of, the latter we know nothing of (cf. 27:46, 28:8-9). But, the simple fact Esau would have four hundred men at his disposal on a moment's notice clearly suggests violence is a way of life for him and his people.

v14 "unto Seir", Jacob does not travel South to Seir, but travels North to Sukkoth. Here, Jacob does not commit to visiting in any specific time frame, only that he will visit in his own good time, which ends up being never.

v17 Jacob is clearly in no rush to travel to Seir. The temporary huts suggests the intent is to stay put to take

advantage of the local land, suggesting they were there during the rainy season when the fields would have been green and lush. Then, once the dry season approaches, they would continue their journey. The stay could have been weeks or months.

18 And Jacob came to Shalem, a city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Padanaram; and pitched his tent before the city. 19 And he bought a parcel of a field, where he had spread his tent, at the hand of the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for an hundred pieces of money. 20 And he erected there an altar, and called it EleloheIsrael.

v18-20 Jacob safely arrives at his destination and finds a plot of land and purchases and sets up his family there (v. 18-19), erecting an altar to the Lord, using his new name in declaring his allegiance to Him (v. 20).

Note Jacob does not return to his parent's estate, to claim what he has won through deception some twenty years earlier, nor does he travel to Esau's land in Seir. He buys his own land and sets up there instead.

v18 "And Jacob came to Shalem, a city of Shechem", pretty much all modern translations render this phrase as something like "Now Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem" (NAS), the issue being the translation of the Hebrew word "shalem" to "safely" or "peacefully" instead of transliterating it to a place name.

Clearly, the intent is to show that despite Esau's initial hostility, the covenant between the Lord and Jacob has been protected by Jacob's repentance and the Lord's providence.

v19 This is the second legal acquisition of land in the area promised to Abraham, the first being ch. 23.

v20 Jacob builds an altar there on his newly acquired land, completing his journey home, having survived and been prospered as a result of God's providence. He acknowledges as much by adopting the new name given to him by the angel-messenger in the previous chapter.

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