

Comments on Gen. 35

After the disaster of the preceding chapter, the Lord tells Jacob it is time to leave. The implication is Jacob's concerns, voiced in 34:30, are real and the Lord foresees trouble on the horizon and is proactively telling Jacob to move his family out of that area, protecting them along the way (v. 5).

While many commentators see this chapter as a series of disconnected texts, it pulls together all of the loose threads from the preceding stories (ch. 27-34), and closes the narrative of Jacob as the leading character. But, the closing chapter is a mix of good and bad. Jacob has been prospered as the Lord promised and now has great wealth and twelve sons, but the twelfth son comes at the expense of the beloved wife's life, and these sons are far from perfect. Death attends the herald of Jacob's return to his family estate, and when he does finally return it is for his father's funeral, but at least he is completely reconciled with his formerly estranged brother, so they can bury their father together (v. 29).

In a personal and eternal sense Jacob is maintaining his covenant with the Lord and is doing well. But, in a practical and temporal sense, things in his family are difficult and life is messy. The promise of continuing life is surrounded by pervasive death. While the Lord and Jacob are maintaining the covenant, that doesn't make for a story book ending in real life. Kids behave badly, mortality takes loved ones, and people are still forced to deal with difficult things, even when they are God's chosen and largely doing what they should be doing.

¹ And God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God, that appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother.

² Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that were with him, Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments: ³ And let us arise, and go up to Bethel; and I will make there an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went. ⁴ And they gave unto Jacob all the strange gods which were in their hand, and all their earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem.

v1-4 The Lord communicates with Jacob, telling him to return to their original covenant site, cf. 28:10-17 (v. 1), signifying Jacob's keeping the promise he made in 28:18-22, since the Lord kept his side. Jacob tells his family and servants it is time for them to fully commit to the Lord as their God (v. 2), as they are returning to the place where he originally covenanted

with the Lord, who has protected and prospered all of them for all these years (v. 3). The family and servants commit, turn in all of their idolatrous artefacts and imagery, which they bury and leave behind (v. 4).

v2 Who has the idols among the group is not explicitly identified, but since there are servants among the group, it isn't necessarily his immediate family. We do know Rachel had her father's family idols, but it seems likely she would have kept that a secret, owing to the problems they caused in 31:22-42. It is also clear there were other items among the family as well, given the reference to earrings in v. 4.

v3 The altar is a formalized way of giving thanks to the Lord, as a more substantial version of the anointed stone of 28:18.

v4 Is this when Jacob discovers Rachel stole Laban's household idols (cf. 31:34-35)? The earrings, and perhaps other jewelry as well, must have been idolatrous in some way.

Note Jacob himself hid them under the oak, probably in private and secretly. These objects were likely intrinsically valuable aside from their purpose as idols, and people might have been tempted to recover them because of that value, to sell or repurpose them. Jacob clearly wants nothing to do with these polluted objects, regardless of their potential value.

⁵ And they journeyed: and the terror of God was upon the cities that were round about them, and they did not pursue after the sons of Jacob. ⁶ So Jacob came to Luz, which is in the land of Canaan, that is, Bethel, he and all the people that were with him. ⁷ And he built there an altar, and called the place Elbethel: because there God appeared unto him, when he fled from the face of his brother. ⁸ But Deborah, Rebekah's nurse died, and she was buried beneath Bethel under an oak: and the name of it was called Allonbachuth.

v5-8 The locals leave Jacob and his entourage alone as they depart the area (v. 5). They arrive at Bethel (v. 6), where the Lord originally appeared to him over twenty years earlier, and Jacob builds an altar (v. 7). The sacrificial feast at the dedication of the altar is interrupted by the death of Rebekah's nursemaid, which results in the family mourning instead of celebrating (v. 8).

v5 It is unclear what this "terror of God" is. The context suggests it is some act of providence that spares them from what

Jacob fears in 34:30. This is a case of the Lord protecting Jacob yet again, cf. 48:22.

v7 "built an altar there", the building of an altar presumes some sort of sacrifice attended it. It is safe to assume there was a family sacrificial feast, as Jacob insisted in v. 2-4 the entire family ritually purify themselves.

v8 Rebekah probably sent Deborah per her promise in 27:45. This necessarily implies Esau was still a mortal threat to Jacob right up until the events of ch. 32-33. Unfortunately, Deborah's visit ends with her demise. Deborah is probably still alive at this point, but it is unclear. We don't hear anything one way or the other about Rebekah until 49:31, which says she and Isaac are buried together. She isn't mentioned when Jacob and Esau bury Isaac in v. 29, so perhaps that means she is deceased?

v9 "Allonbachuth", meaning, "the oak of weeping". The Genesis Rabbah (Jacob Neusner, 1985, volume 3, page 163) says:

R. Samuel bar Nahman said, "In the Greek language, the word for oak, *allon*, means, 'other,' so the sense is this: 'while he was still observing the period of mourning for Deborah, the news concerning his mother reached him [so the name for the place really was 'another weeping']".

This reading is highly speculative as it relies on a transliteration of the Hebrew to Greek, and then takes the meaning of a Greek homophone to add implied meaning from the Greek homophone. Nevertheless, among Rabbinical commentators, this is a reading that is discussed, probably owing to the lack of any explicit comment on Rebekah's passing in the Biblical text, but her burial is mentioned in 49:31.

⁹ And God appeared unto Jacob again, when he came out of Padanaram, and blessed him. ¹⁰ And God said unto him, Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and he called his name Israel. ¹¹ And God said unto him, I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins; ¹² And the land which I gave Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land. ¹³ And God went up from him in the place where he talked with him. ¹⁴ And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he talked with him, even a pillar of stone: and he poured a

drink offering thereon, and he poured oil thereon. ¹⁵ And Jacob called the name of the place where God spake with him, Bethel.

v9-15 The Lord comes to speak with Jacob again, providing an ending theophany to the initial one in 28:10-22, thereby reinforcing the fulfilment of the promises made in 28:15. The Lord repeats similar statements to that of the initial theophany, placing emphases on three things: first, the name change from "the heel" to "the one who struggles/prevails with God" (v. 10); second, the promise of great lineage (v. 11); third, the promise of the land for his lineage (v. 12). The Lord leaves, ascending to heaven (v. 13). Jacob then revisits his original memorial with a larger more elaborately consecrated memorial altar (v. 14, cf. 28:18), again calling the place Bethel (v. 15, cf. 28:19, 28:22).

The conversation between the Lord and Jacob/Israel represents the formal end of the earlier promises made between them in ch. 28, but also presents Israel as Abraham's heir by explicitly connecting those covenants made with Abraham with Israel.

Most modern translations arrange the three promises made by the Lord poetically, something like the following, which is the JPS Tanakh:

God blessed him, saying to him,
"You whose name is Jacob,
You shall be called Jacob no more,
But Israel shall be your name."
Thus he was named Israel.
And God said to him,
"I am El Shaddai.
Be fertile and increase;
A nation, yea an assembly of nations,
Shall descend from you.
Kings shall issue from your loins.
The land that I assigned to Abraham and Isaac
I assign to you;
And to your offspring to come
Will I assign the land."

To emphasize the poetry, I would arrange it like this:

God blessed him, saying to him,
"You whose name is Jacob,

You shall be called Jacob no more,
But Israel shall be your name.”
Thus he was named Israel.

And God said to him,
“I am El Shaddai.
Be fertile and increase;
A nation, yea an assembly of nations,
Shall descend from you.
Kings shall issue from your loins.

The land that I assigned
to Abraham and Isaac
I assign to you; And
to your offspring to come
Will I assign the land.”

The first strophe is an inverted parallelism where the Lord blesses him by changing his name from something insulting, to something complimentary, suggesting how he has changed from his early life to his later life.

The second and third strophes are a repetition of the promises made to Abraham that are explicitly being brought forward to Abraham's grandson (note the lead phrase of "I am El Shaddai" here is connected to the Lord's conversation with Abraham in 17:1 where the Lord changes his name also), namely a multitude of posterity and a land of inheritance. The second strophe is a synonymous parallelism, the third strophe is an inverted parallelism that presents the inheritance of land to the predecessors, the present man, and his children, being past, present and future.

v11 "a nation and a company of nations", we tend to read this as the expansion of natural Israel, but in the light of 27:29, 28:14, and 48:16-22, it is clear the company of nations is the adoption of the Gentile nations.

v13 An easily overlooked verse that necessarily implies the Lord appeared to and spoke with Jacob face to face, and when He left He "went up". This was not a dream or night vision. This is similarly worded to 17:22 where Abraham talked with the Lord.

Robert Alter, in his translation, renders this verse "And God ascended from him in the place where He had spoken with him." Everett Fox translates it "God went up from beside him, at the place where he had spoken with him."

Both Christian and Jewish commentators alike skip over this verse without commenting on the theological implications of a God who is not some all-pervasive, all-encompassing, ephemeral, disembodied energy-like force.

¹⁶ And they journeyed from Bethel; and there was but a little way to come to Ephrath: and Rachel travailed, and she had hard labour. ¹⁷ And it came to pass, when she was in hard labour, that the midwife said unto her, Fear not; thou shalt have this son also. ¹⁸ And it came to pass, as her soul was in departing, (for she died) that she called his name Benoni: but his father called him Benjamin. ¹⁹ And Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. ²⁰ And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave: that is the pillar of Rachel's grave unto this day.

v16-20 The entourage continues to travel, but stops because Rachel is going to give birth, the labor is difficult (v. 16). Rachel is informed by the midwife the baby is a boy (v. 17). Rachel names him as she is dying, but Israel changes the name subtly to honor her (v. 18). Rachel is buried (v. 19), and Israel builds a pilar on the burial site, which persists to the author's time (v. 19).

The death of Rachel signals the end of Jacob's fathering of children. This suggests that once Rachel started bearing children, Jacob was no longer with Leah, Bilhah or Zilpah. And, the text suggests Jacob's grief over losing Rachel made that permanent, hence v. 22.

v17 "the midwife", it is unclear if the midwife is part of the entourage or was brought in from Ephrath. Israel's entourage was likely large enough, with both family and servants, that there were people among the group with specialized skills.

v19 "unto this day", this is an honorific indicating the locals and extended family have kept the memorial intact and preserved it.

²¹ And Israel journeyed, and spread his tent beyond the tower of Edar. ²² And it came to pass, when Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine: and Israel heard it.

v21-22d After Rachel's death, Israel's entourage keep moving and spread out into the pasture land beyond Migdal Edar (v. 21). While the entourage was pasturing the livestock, Reuben takes

advantage of the family being apart over the land to bed Bilhah, and word gets back to Israel it has happened (v. 22).

The brief passage is implying that with the family and servants spread out in multiple tents over the land, there was an opportunity to do things outside of the immediate supervision of the others. Reuben, the oldest brother, took advantage of the lack of supervision to do something inappropriate, but word still got back to Israel that it happened. How that word got back is left unanswered, but it is safe to assume it was by gossip, as there is nothing to suggest immediate harm or punishment.

v21 "tower of Edar", [Migdal Eder](#), meaning the "tower of the flock". The name might be in reference to a natural stone outcropping or formation that was used by shepherds to watch the sheep, or some construction for the same purpose. Regardless, it is clearly associated with pasturing sheep. Aside from being near Bethlehem, it is unclear where this is, and is not the same as the pillar built in v. 20.

v22 Reuben is the first and oldest son through Leah. Bilhah was Rachel's handmaid. It is unclear how much older Bilhah is than Reuben, but it is safe to assume at least 15-20 years. There is nothing in the story to suggest Reuben assaulted or violated her. In 49:4, during the final father's blessing, Israel pronounces a curse on Reuben for this act, which suggests he loses the birthright. But, note the statement there faults Reuben for defiling his father's bed, not for committing rape.

Traditional Rabbinical interpretation over [this event](#) is highly speculative and sheds little light on the subject.

I take the present rather sparse sentence to be a historical placeholder for the curse and renunciation in 49:4. If it weren't for the present verse, the reader would be entirely nonplussed when they got to ch. 49 and question it's meaning and relevance. With the present verse we know it was a literal, not figurative, event.

One additional aside is the text suggests Jacob was no longer bedding either Leah or the concubines, hence Bilhah's apparent willingness to entertain the affections of Reuben.

Now the sons of Jacob were twelve: ²³ The sons of Leah; Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, and Simeon, and Levi, and Judah, and Issachar, and Zebulun: ²⁴ The sons of Rachel; Joseph, and Benjamin: ²⁵ And the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid; Dan, and Naphtali: ²⁶ And the sons of Zilpah, Leah's handmaid: Gad, and

Asher: these are the sons of Jacob, which were born to him in Padanaram.

v22e-26 Benjamin is the final son of Isaac, and with the end of him siring sons, an accounting of all of the twelve sons is made, with their respective mothers identified.

The point being made is this large family, especially the presence of twelve sons, shows how Israel has prospered while away from his home and he is now returning home (v. 27-29), as the Lord promised in 28:13-15.

²⁷ And Jacob came unto Isaac his father unto Mamre, unto the city of Arbah, which is Hebron, where Abraham and Isaac sojourned.

²⁸ And the days of Isaac were an hundred and fourscore years.

²⁹ And Isaac gave up the ghost, and died, and was gathered unto his people, being old and full of days: and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

v27-29 Jacob returns to his ancestral home (v. 27) before Isaac's death (v. 28). Since Jacob and Esau have reconciled, they bury their father together (v. 29).

v29 Well over twenty years earlier, Isaac thought he was going to die soon and that precipitated the events of ch. 27 (cf. 27:2). The text does not comment at all on Isaacs health or condition for the past twenty years, only that he did not die until after Jacob and his family returned home.

We are informed in 49:31 Isaac was buried with Sarah and Abraham in Macpelah, cf. 23:17-20, 25:9.

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