

Genesis 28: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 28 Thus Isaac sent Jacob away, and he went to Paddan Aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob's and Esau's mother.

Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan Aram to take a wife from there, and that as he blessed him, he directed him, you must not take a wife from the Canaanite women, and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and gone to Paddan Aram.

So when Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please Isaac his father, Esau went to Ishmael and took as his wife, besides the wives he had, Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nebaoth.

Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran, and he came to a certain place and stayed there that night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep.

And he dreamed. And behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

[1 : 45] And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.

Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south. And in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.

And he was afraid and said, How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven. So early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.

He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. Then Jacob made 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 clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house.

[3 : 08] And of all that you give me, I will give a full tenth to you. Genesis chapter 28 occurs in the wake of the events of the previous chapter. Jacob, with the aid of his mother Rebekah, has deceived his father Isaac and received the blessing over his brother Esau.

Now he is summoned by his father again. He's blessed again. And then he's directed to go to Paddan Aram to take a daughter of Laban as his wife. Jacob continues to be associated primarily with his mother and his mother's side of the family.

His mother had the prophecy concerning him and his brother that the older would serve the younger. His mother is also the one who directed him in his actions up to the point when he deceived his father.

His mother now and his father instruct him to take a wife from his maternal cousins. And this instruction is mirrored on the other side with Esau, who takes a wife from his paternal cousins, the daughters of Ishmael.

By this, Ishmael seems to want to improve relationships between him and his parents. Perhaps this is some sign of repentance on Esau's front, a sign of concern to win back his parents' favour.

[4 : 25] Jacob now retraces the path of Abraham back to Haran. He ascends back to the land of the ancestors for refuge from his brother, who's trying to kill him, and also for a wife.

Now, we've already seen that Esau is associated with the colour red, as Edom. He's the one who wants the red, red stew. And he's a skilful man of the hand. But now, Jacob is walking to the land of Mr White, Laban, the man associated with the colour white.

And Laban's his uncle. He's a shrewd, crafty serpent-type figure. And as he wrestles with these characters, he will grow in his own abilities and character. So, he's overcome Mr Red, and now he has to go to Mr White.

And then he will have to meet Mr Red again, in a new way. He is gaining wisdom and skill through experience here. Now, Jacob alights upon a particular place.

And he stays there that night, because the sun has set. The setting of the sun is not an incidental detail in the story. Later on, we'll see the sun rising at a key point in the narrative.

[5 : 30] And it's important to pay attention to these scenic details, because the Bible does not usually give us a lot of scenic details. It's not usually trying to build a picture within our minds of a very rich backdrop for its events.

Rather, it gives us very sparse details about how people appear, what time of the day things occurred at, all these sorts of details. And then sometimes it will give us lots and lots and lots of details.

And there seems to be a reason for this. These details are not accidental. They're there to be reflected upon. When a few chapters later we see the sun rising, we should be clued into the fact that there is a full cycle that has occurred here.

That Jacob has spent a few chapters, as it were, symbolically in the dark. And now his journey is complete. The sun has risen. It's been evening and it's been morning.

And now a new day in his life is starting. So what happens at this point is the beginning of a there and back again story. Jacob is leaving his home. He'll be returning to his home a few chapters later.

[6 : 36] And during that time away, he is undergoing a deep experience that will transform him. And that transforming experience will equip him to face the struggles that await him in the future.

As we move forward in this story, we'll see a number of the ways in which the later part of the story mirrors the earlier part of the story and fleshes out this there and back again pattern.

I won't get into that now, but I do want us to pay attention to some of the details of this particular story. Jacob takes of the stones of the place and he lays down to sleep. While he sleeps, he dreams and sees a ladder with angels ascending and descending and God at the top.

Now, what might this remind us of? Earlier on, before the story of Abraham, in chapter 11, we read of the builders of Babel coming to a plain in the land of Shinar, settling there, gathering bricks and setting out to build a city and a tower whose top was in the heavens.

Jacob gathers stones as the Babel builders gathered bricks. Later, he will take a single stone that has been used as a pillow and then he'll set it up as a pillar.

[7 : 50] He marvels at what he sees when he sees this vision of the angels ascending and descending and calls the name of the place Bethel, meaning house of God, and then goes on to describe it as the house of God and the gate of heaven.

Now, the Akkadian name for Babel means gate of God. And so calling this particular place house of God and gate of heaven might remind us of Babel, the gate of God.

So what are we to make of all these parallels and juxtapositions between the story of Babel and the story of Bethel? Well, it seems to me something of Jacob's mission and the mission of the descendants of Jacob is being fleshed out here.

The Babel builders had sought to avoid being spread out over the earth, to gather together in this particular place to make a name great for themselves. God is declaring to Jacob that his descendants would be spread out to the four corners of the earth, but then also be gathered into that particular place.

And that as they were gathered in, that God would make his name great. This is something that contrasts with the story of Babel, but also shows that God is going to fulfill what the Babel builders sought to fulfill, but he's going to fulfill it in a different way, and for his glory, not for the building up of the names of proud men.

[9 : 11] The name of the city is changed from Luz to Bethel. Luz is associated with the almond tree, but also with crookedness. Later we'll see the almond tree mentioned as one of the trees with which Jacob outwitted Laban.

Bethel was an important site of worship in the early history of Israel, and the Temple Mount has already been marked out in chapter 22, and now Bethel is marked out as well. There will be a tower formed between heaven and earth, but it will be formed not by human technological genius and engineering, but it will be formed by worship, by establishing this unhewn stone of worship, this pillar that goes up towards God's heavens.

Jacob, as we'll see in the chapters that follow, is a man associated with stones. There are a number of significant stones within Jacob's life, and these stones contrast with the bricks of Babel, but also with the brick that is associated with Laban's own name.

Later on in the instructions given to Israel, they are told not to use bricks to build their altars, but to use unhewn stones, and there seems to be something of this contrast that continues into the later life and worship of the nation.

So Israel is going to be established as the true Tower of Babel, the true point where heaven and earth meet in worship, as God's angels descend to earth and interact with human beings, and as human beings are raised up to God's presence in worship, this communication between heaven and earth is established by God himself.

[10:54] In the New Testament, we can see this goes further. Christ says to Nathaniel, Hereafter you'll see the heavens opened and angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Christ is the true Tower of Babel, the true connection between heaven and earth.

He is the one who sends down his Spirit upon the church, that by the Spirit, our prayers and our petitions and our lives might ascend to God's presence. That is the true connection between heaven and earth.

But here we have the great anticipation of what's about to happen, that God is going to fulfil the intent of Babel, but in a different way, in a way that is founded upon his work, and it's going to be through the descendants of Jacob.

Some questions to reflect upon. There are similarities between this story and the story of God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush. Can you see any of them? And what help might they give us to interpret what's going on here?

A second question. The name of Luz is changed to Bethel. On Jacob's return to the land, another change of name occurs. How might these two events shed light upon each other?