

The Family of Abraham - Part 25—Three Deaths, a Birth, and a Rebellion

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[0 : 00] Welcome back to this, the 25th in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. Today we're looking at chapter 35 of the book of Genesis, which concerns Jacob's southward journey from Shechem to Hebron by way of Bethel and Migdal-Eda.

This story is one that's punctuated by a number of key events that represent transitions in the narrative. There's a shift in the story here. The weight of the narrative is moving in a different direction.

There's a return to points that he left earlier on and eventually landing up in the house of his father and his father Isaac dying. So there's a turning back to the very beginning of the story here and the journey has gone full circle as it were.

There are also key events that occur along the way. There's the appearance of God's word coming to Jacob, telling him to go to Bethel, set up an altar there, the place where he appeared after Jacob fled from Esau.

Then he goes to Bethel after they've recommitted themselves to the Lord at Shechem. From Bethel, God restates the covenant blessing to him and there's an accentuation of that in many respects.

[1 : 21] Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, dies there and she's buried at Bethel. From Bethel they go to Migdal-Eda. On the way there, Rachel dies in giving birth to Benjamin.

At Migdal-Eda, Reuben tries to usurp his father by lying with his father's concubine and then finally he ends up in Hebron.

And in Hebron he buries his father Isaac with Esau. So this is an important series of transitions here. There's the death of Rebecca's nurse.

There's the death of Rachel. There's the birth of Benjamin. There's the actions of the firstborn, Reuben. And then finally there's the death of Isaac.

So within this story we're seeing a very significant series of events. And I want to try and piece together the significance of them for you. Bethel occurs at a significant time.

[2 : 19] It's a similar lining up of that event in some respects. He's told to go back to the place where he went, where he fled from Esau, his brother. He was told to go to Padam Aram by his mother to arise and go to flee from his brother.

And now he's told to go back to that point, the point where he stayed that first night. And as he returns to that point he will be recalling all the events that have befallen him along the way.

There's a, as I said before, his journey is turning full circle. He's returning to the point where he started. And as he returns to the point where he started, there's a resolution of the themes that have been ongoing.

There's a sense of having reached the conclusion. The story, the cycle has been completed. They must leave the error of Shechem in part as a result of sin.

They need to purify themselves, change their garments. They need to put away their foreign gods. And they need to recommit themselves to God once again. This is perhaps related to the actions of Jacob's sons in the preceding chapter.

[3 : 29] The violence that they were engaged in that meant that they were scared to leave Shechem at that point because they had become an outrage.

There had been a scandal about what they had done and other people might try and attack them if they came in the area, seeing them as a threat and a danger. He was no longer seen as a welcome presence. And so they could stay in Shechem because they had dominated that area now and maybe they were safe, but they didn't want to travel further.

But God tells him to go down and to go to Bethel again. And as he travels to, before he travels to Bethel, they give up their foreign gods and the earrings in their ears.

And Jacob hides them under the terebinth tree, which is by Shechem. He hides them. He doesn't just bury them. It's a different word. Why mention the tree here?

We have a lot of references to trees within the story of Genesis and elsewhere in Scripture, and it may seem odd to many readers. I want to take just a bit of an excursus here to think about the significance of trees.

[4 : 34] Why mention trees within these stories? Why mention the specific type of tree? That seems even stranger. Think about what trees represent.

First of all, trees are firmly rooted in the ground. Trees are strong things. They have sturdy trunks and they are deeply embedded in the ground.

And that represents a pillar. It's a pillar of strength. And as such, it's something that can last for a very long time. A terebinth tree could last a thousand years.

And so every time you saw that terebinth tree, it was a pillar. A pillar of strength and as such a memorial. So certain key events happen at trees that provide memorials.

That when you see this tree, you remember all those different events that are connected with that particular place, with that particular tree. And these trees could last, like altars, a very long time.

[5 : 32] Like altars, they're landmarks. If you're giving directions within the land. You don't have names that you'd have now in quite the same way.

And you don't have signposts and all the mile markers. What you would have are these key landmarks. And these landmarks give you a sense of orientation. A sense of where you are.

And also the significance of the place where you are. If you look back through the story of Genesis, we've met this tree in all likelihood before. In chapter 12, verse 6, we read of Abraham.

Abraham passed through the land to the place of Shechem, as far as the terebinth tree of Moreh. And the Canaanites were then in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abraham and said, To your descendants I will give this land.

And there he built an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. So he's gone to this significant site. He's gone to Shechem. And he's encountered the terebinth tree of Moreh.

[6 : 34] And he's built an altar there. So this is a site that in all likelihood we have met before. We meet it again in scripture. And it's a very noteworthy occasion.

At the very end of the book of Joshua. At a time where it really is. This is a climactic event. An event that brings things to a satisfactory conclusion.

Just before the death of Joshua, what do we see? Joshua said to the people, You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God.

He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you. After he has done you good.

And the people said to Joshua, No, but we will serve the Lord. So Joshua said to the people, You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord for yourselves to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses.

[7 : 29] Now therefore, he said, Put away the foreign gods which are among you. And incline your heart to the Lord God of Israel. And the people said to Joshua, The Lord our God we will serve and his voice we will obey.

So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day and made for them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. Then Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God. And he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord.

And Joshua said to all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness to us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord which he spoke to us. It shall therefore be a witness to you, lest you deny your God.

So Joshua let the people depart each to his own inheritance. So this event at the very end of the book of Joshua recalls many of the themes. There's a commitment to the Lord.

There's a giving up of foreign gods. There's this occurring at Shechem and in association with the oak or the terebinth tree there. All of those associations lead us to believe that this is the same tree.

[8 : 35] This is the same tree in the story of Abraham that we see in the story of Jacob and then later on we see in the story of Joshua and in the story of Abimelech within Judges chapter 9.

These are consistent themes. These are not things that just appear on one occasion. And so this tree is a landmark. It's a landmark that is a memorial of key events within Israel's history.

It's a memorial of the first time they enter into the land. It's a memorial of that time of recommitment as they re-enter the land and as they're going down there is that commitment to leave the foreign gods at that point and to fully enter into the possession, to enter into the inheritance.

So these are connections that are marked by the tree. The tree is a landmark physically and geographically and topographically but also it's a textual landmark.

That when you see this within the text, you think, I remember that tree. That tree is a specific tree. It's not a tree as such. It's a specific tree. But trees are also, we've mentioned that they are pillars, they can be memorials.

[9 : 44] They're also things associated with canopies, overshadowing canopies, that you have the trees that overshadow and they give shade. It's, when you go through a forest, this is one of the things you'll see.

You'll notice that there are these great pillars rising up to heaven and there's this vast canopy above your head overshadowing you. It's like clouds in the sky. And later on you can see in the Feast of Booths this association of trees with canopies, with clouds.

The Sukkoth is associated with clouds. It's also associated with trees that cover people and give them shade. And so the tree is a pillar and also a cloud.

It's a cloud that's above your head and something that gives you shade from the heat of the sun and judgment as well. Trees can be sites of judgment. They're sites of memorial. They're sites of strength.

They're sites where, they're landmarks as well. And for all those reasons, they're associated with judgment. They have divine connotations. And so, for instance, we'll have Abraham being by a tree.

[10 : 51] The key events occur at that tree. Later on you'll see in the story of Deborah that she judges the people under a palm tree. There's shade there and there's judgment as well.

These things are associated with each other. What else do we see in the context of trees? What else do we see in their significance? Well, as pillars, they can be like Yachin and Boaz.

The entrance to the temple, these are pillars of strength. They're connected with legs. As you look at the tabernacle, the tabernacle is connected with the human being and the human body.

And those pillars are like the pillars of the legs of a person. They're the pillars of strength. They're pillars that uphold a person and enable them to stand up, upright and be strong.

They're also places of ascent. You ascend a tree to get to heaven. Now I mentioned it's a pillar. It's a pillar that's grounded in the earth, but it's also, it has overshadowing canopy at the top.

[11 : 50] It's like clouds. And so a tree is in itself a sort of ladder to heaven. When you see trees, your eyes are drawn up. A great tree is a remarkable thing.

It can rise up many, many feet into the air and you're looking up, craning your head to see to the top. And you can maybe pick out some things at the very top, maybe a bird that has nested there.

But at the top, you have this canopy, this sort of canopy, this covering that shades you from the heat of the day.

And it's something that is like a cloud on a pillar. And so it's associated with divine symbolism. At various points. It's a place of divine presence, a grove.

You can have a number of trees gathered together. And under the shade of those things, it's like being in a realm of divine protection. When you think about a traditional church building, this is part of the architecture.

[12 : 51] Look at the pillars of a church. It's like a tree trunk, a vast tree trunk. And sometimes they literally are from tree trunks. But they go up and they uphold this canopy that's above your head.

This vast canopy that you look up and you feel like it's like being in a forest. It's the nearest connotation to it. And so our cathedrals and our great churches, they're bringing some of this natural symbolism to light.

This is just, we have a connection between pillars of stone and these pillars of tree trunks. And then more generally in scripture, we see these things played out like Yachin and Boaz, pillars of stone, and they're connected with arboreal symbolism.

They're pillars that surrounded with bronze. And then you have at the top these plants and other things like that, pomegranates and images of just verdant life and things like that.

And when you think about it, they would have turned green over time. These are all images that you need to attend to. That there's part of the natural symbolism of these places. That these places have a natural symbolism in being connected with canopies, with pillars, with landmarks, that they are realms, groves in which God can be encountered.

[14 : 13] And they are means of ascent to heaven. That as you climb up, you enter into the heavenlies. When you think about a cathedral, one of the reasons cathedrals draw our minds upwards is that's just naturally how we work.

We connect upwards with things that are more elevated, things that are greater, more exalted, things that are more sublime.

All these sorts of things are associated with the upward movement. And so when we have buildings that draw our mind and our attention upwards, there is something that responds to us in a very basic physical level that we recognise there is a natural symbolism that we respond to.

And it wouldn't make sense to connect it to death in quite the same way. As you go up, you're entering into the presence of the brilliance of the sun, this realm of judgement, this realm of clouds as well that overshadow you.

And so the way that, if you see a cathedral, is designed to bring these things to mind. The dappled light that comes through the stained glass window, the vast trunks of stone that uphold this canopy that's above your head, this vaulted canopy.

[15 : 30] It's all like being in a forest. It's all like seeing the light that comes through, this dappled light that comes through the trees. And our natural response to that, whether it's stone or wood, and if you think about the temple, the temple was built out of wood primarily, these cedar trees and cypress and these other sorts of things.

These are symbols that are natural and powerful symbols that connect with us not just on a sort of conceptual level, but on a gut level. When you walk into a building like that, you think and you feel different.

There's something within you that responds to the place. And in the same way, trees, mountains, great stones all have symbolism in Scripture because they're connected with our natural apprehension of the world as a site of meaning, a site of natural symbolism.

Now, different trees have different connotations. If you look through the story of Scripture, you'll see that there are periods of time that are particularly connoted with particular trees. So oaks and terebinths within the period of Genesis are particularly pronounced.

Later on, you'll have palm trees and acacia wood for the tabernacle. Gopher wood for the building of the ark. Cedar, olive, and cypress for the story of the establishment of the kingdom and the temple.

[16 : 53] Fig tree later on. And all these sorts of symbols, and the myrtle tree, all these symbols are powerful ones that have a network of connotations.

If you work through Scripture, you'll see these connotations. Now, continuing this excursus a bit, think about Palm Sunday, which we celebrated yesterday. On Palm Sunday, we think about palm trees.

Now, palm trees have a whole lot of different connotations. Sometimes it's associated with a name. As we look through the story of Genesis, we've already seen the way that particular trees play off names.

So luz and the almond tree. The way that that word is used to remind you of the place called luz and the concept of craftiness, and then the other tree that's associated with cunning, and then the other tree that's associated with Laban, Laban's name.

And those are plays on words. So those have a particular set of connotations. There are other ones that have particular associations with the story. So we mentioned the oak of Moreh, or the terebinth tree of Moreh, that you see again at this point, and then probably again at the end of the book of Joshua.

[18 : 05] So there's specific narrative connotations to particular trees. Then you have the way that trees can have other sorts of conceptual symbolism around them.

So the palm tree is associated with Tamar. Tamar means palm. The palm tree is associated with Deborah. Deborah judged beneath the palm tree. It's associated with the Feast of Booths, where they have to put leafy branches, but also palm trees are mentioned explicitly within that context, that they dwell beneath palms.

They're overshadowed by the palms. If we read through the story of the Exodus, one of the first places they come to is Elim. And in Elim, there are 12 wells of water and 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees, 12 associated with the 12 tribes of Israel, 70 associated with the elders of Israel, and also the 70 nations.

Thinking about these associations is important then. Other associations with palms, the city of Jericho is called the city of palms on several occasions. So when we come to the story of John's Gospel, which is the only one that actually explicitly mentions palms, the others mention branches or leafy branches that are cast before Christ, in John's Gospel, it does not actually mention them casting the palm trees anywhere.

It says they came out to meet him with palm branches. Later on in the story of Revelation, you see in chapter 7 that they come with palm branches and they seem to be waving them.

[19 : 39] It's not a matter of throwing them before, although they would be throwing them before, presumably in the triumphal entry. What is emphasised is presumably them waving the palm branches as Christ enters the city.

So again, these are associations that we need to pay attention to. Trees are important things. And if you want to read more on this, I cannot recommend James Jordan's *Through New Eyes* enough.

He gets into this and many other things besides in great detail, explaining the symbolism, explaining why we should pay attention to these details and some of the connotations that exist.

The events at Bethel are important. When they arrive at Bethel, it's described as Luz again. The name seems to be still the same and it's called Bethel by Jacob and he called the name again El Bethel, God of the house of God.

But it seems to still be called Luz. He is calling this, it's named by faith, I believe. It's not just a matter of calling it and the name has changed immediately.

[20 : 50] Rather, everyone's still calling this place Luz. But Jacob calls it Bethel in hope that one day and in confidence that one day the place name really will be Bethel. Everyone will call it Bethel.

That will be the thing that defines it. But to this point, it's still called Luz. He builds an altar there and calls the name of the place El Bethel because there God appeared to him when he fled the face of his brother.

And at this point, Deborah, Rebekah's nurse dies and she's buried below Bethel under the terebinth tree. And it's called the terebinth of weeping at this point.

Now, why mention the death of Rebekah's nurse? Rebekah's nurse has never been mentioned by name before this point. We've heard of Rebekah's nurse when she leaves the house of Laban in chapter 24, but never by name.

She's first mentioned here as Deborah. Why would we care about Rebekah's nurse? Is she just an isolated character that the text saw fit to mention but has no significance in herself?

[21 : 56] No, I think she's a significant character. By this time, I think we're to surmise that Rebekah has died. And as Rebekah has died, Deborah leaves the house of Isaac.

There's no reason for her to remain there. She's been associated with Rebekah all of Rebekah's life. And now, it's natural for her to move on. She doesn't really have the same attachment to Jacob or to Isaac.

She has a strong attachment to Jacob though. Jacob is the son that his mother loved and she wants to be around Jacob rather than being in the house with Jacob or with Isaac and presumably with Esau coming around from time to time.

She feels more of an association with Jacob. So presumably, she goes up and meets with Jacob before Jacob has returned to his father's house. And spending that time with Jacob, she then dies after that.

And who is she within the story? She's the nurse of Rebekah. She's the one who would have raised Rebekah. Had that deep attachment to Rebekah. She's the one who would have brought her up through that most basic stages of life and been alongside her all her life.

[23 : 15] More attached to her than her mother in many respects. This is the grandmother as it were of the house of Isaac. The grandmother or the grandmother that he would have grown up with as the woman who had a deep affectionate connection to him.

So it's fairly natural that she would want to live with Jacob at this point. But her death represents a transition. Earlier on, we saw in chapter 24 and chapter 23 the death of Sarah, how that represents the transition and the need for Isaac to find a wife and him being comforted for the death of his mother Sarah as Rebekah comes into his mother's tent.

There's a shifting, there's a new matriarch within this point, at this point. Now that Deborah has died, the matriarch has complete, that generation has passed away.

Rebekah's died, that generation of women has passed away. Rebekah has died and also her nurse has died now. And so the grandmother and the mother figure have passed and now you are left just with Jacob, Rachel and Leah.

And this helps us to understand maybe a bit more of the significance of the death of Rachel that occurs shortly after. When she is buried, they call the name of the tree, the tree of, Terebinth Tree of Weeping.

[24 : 43] And I think that again suggests this is a significant event. It represents the transition. And I would suggest that it's because she's a grandmother type figure. She is the connection that he still has with Rebekah now that Rebekah has gone.

Rebekah presumably died when he was away in the land of Laban and Rebekah was buried in the Cave of Machpelah. We see that later on in chapter 49. And at this point, Rebekah's memory has really, she's passed away completely now that her nurse has died as well.

God appears to Jacob at this point and he blesses him. Again, it's a transitional moment. Your name is Jacob. Your name shall not be called Jacob anymore, but Israel shall be your name.

So he called his name Israel. And God said to him, I am God Almighty, be fruitful and multiply, a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you and kings shall come from your body. The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac I give to you and to your descendants after you I give this land.

Then God went up from him in the place where he talked with him. So Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he talked with him, a pillar of stone and he poured a drink offering on it and he poured oil on it.

[25 : 56] And Jacob called the name of the place where God spoke with him Bethel. Again, we see the name of the place being given twice. El Bethel, now Bethel. And earlier on we saw Bethel too.

These are recurring themes that this place is being renamed on three occasions as it were. Just affirming that. And in a similar way, Jacob's own name is given to him once again, that new name, Israel.

Why call him Israel? Is Israel just the name that he has as a righteous person and Jacob the old trickster? I don't think that's the case. He retains the name Jacob even in positive points in the story.

It's not seen as a negative thing to be called Jacob. Rather, the name Israel is associated with him becoming a company of people.

And so we see in the previous chapter that it talks about the sons of Jacob came in from the field when they heard it and the men were grieved and very angry because he had done a disgraceful thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter.

[27 : 05] That's a strange way to speak. What does it mean to do a disgraceful thing in Israel? It means that they have disgraced their father. that their father represents he's the head of the household.

He's also the head of the nation. It's a collective name now that Israel represents the whole household of Jacob. It's not just Jacob himself.

So you have Jacob as an individual. Then you have Israel, that great head of the household and the household that bears his name. And so I think that new name is associated with his new status as the leader of a nation and a company of a people, not just an isolated individual.

What else can we see at this point? After this there is the movement towards Bethlehem or Ephrath.

Another way, Rachel dies in childbirth and she has hard labour. This is associated, Bethlehem is associated with death and new life, Ephrath. And we see that elsewhere in scripture on a number of occasions, particularly in places like Micah 4 to 5.

[28 : 20] For instance, I will make the lame a remnant and the outcast a strong nation, so the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from now on even forever. And you, O tower of the flock, the stronghold of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, even the form and dominion shall come, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem.

Now why do you cry aloud? Is there no king in your midst? Has your counsellor perished? For pangs have seized you like a woman in labour. Be in pain and labour to bring forth, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in birth pangs.

From now you shall go forth from the city. You shall dwell in the field and you shall go even to Babylon. There you shall be delivered, for there the Lord will redeem you from the hand of your enemies, etc.

Arise and thresh, O daughter of Zion, for I will make your horn iron, I will make your hooves bronze, you shall beat in pieces many peoples. I will consecrate their grain to the Lord and their sustenance to the Lord of the whole earth.

Now gather yourselves in troops, O daughter of troops. He has laid siege against us. They will strike the judge of Israel with a rod on the cheek. But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to me the one to be a ruler in Israel, whose going forths have been from old, from everlasting.

[29 : 39] Therefore he shall give them up until the time that she who is in labor has given birth. Then the remnant of his brethren shall return to the children of Israel, etc. That is retelling the story of Rachel and her death on the way to Bethlehem.

But now they reach Bethlehem. That Bethlehem is the site from which the Messiah, the king, will come. Bethlehem and she dies on the way to Bethlehem. She doesn't quite reach there.

Now you've seen this foreshadowed in various ways in the story of the Teraphim where she is lying upon bloodied garments and she'll eventually bleed out in her death.

She dies in a way, on the way, in a way that the event of the Teraphim foreshadows. The torn son of Joseph, I mentioned later on, this playing upon those words, the tearing of the son and the Teraphim.

If you read that in the Hebrew, it would seem there is some playing upon the words there. Earlier on in the story of Rachel, what is the first word that she says concerning children?

[30 : 45] Give me children or I die. What does she say when she gives birth to Joseph? The Lord will add to me another son. And so the significant words, of the midwife, is do not fear, you will have this son also, this son will be added to you.

So there's all sorts of foreshadowing within the story of Rachel. Her story is a tragic one. She does not make it to the place that she had sought to reach. And so she dies on the way to Bethlehem and is buried on the way.

Later on they end up at Migdal Eda, the tower of the flock, the tower of Eda. And that is what's mentioned within Micah. As you read the story of Micah, Micah's playing back this story with Bethlehem, Ephrath, Migdalida, all these significant names and the woman that's struggling to give birth and to give birth to a king, this king that will come.

Bethlehem. And this is something that helps us to see the significance of the juncture at which this happens. What does God say to Jacob at Bethel?

Be fruitful and multiply and nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you and kings shall come from your body. What comes first? He lives at Bethel for a while and presumably after this appearance Benjamin is conceived.

[32 : 13] And Benjamin comes from the loins of Jacob. Remember the loins are the place associated with the place where he was touched, where his hip was put out of joint.

And this again is something that calls our mind back to these larger themes that are playing out. God is making Israel into a political entity and as he makes them into a political entity kings will come forth and where does the first king come from?

The first king is Benjamin from the tribe of Benjamin and we see also the story of Benjamin as a tragic one, a story that is associated with nearly being wiped out at the end of the book of the judges at a similar place to it's around the place that this occurs.

And we see that in the story of first Samuel as Saul comes searching for the donkeys, the last donkeys of his father. These are again significant places, significant events, significant connotations.

The near death of Benjamin, that tribe that's almost wiped out at the end of Judges and then that king that comes forth, that first king, and then finally arriving at Bethlehem and what comes forth from Bethlehem?

[33 : 32] David. David. David comes from Bethlehem and that arrival at Bethlehem is the full fulfilment of the kingdom.

And so I think when we're reading this story we need to pay attention to the way that it echoes throughout the rest of scripture and particularly within the New Testament. We have Rachel's tears hanging like a pall over the story of Matthew chapter 2.

The passage of Micah 5 is alluded to Bethlehem and Fratha. We have this allusion to explicit mention of Jeremiah 31 15.

Rachel weeping for her children because they are no more. Rachel who almost lost Benjamin in childbirth, who almost lost Joseph as well. And thinking about the chronology of these stories, it's quite possible that this occurred after Joseph went to Egypt.

Joseph may not know that he has a younger brother. He may not know that his mother has died. And we can think about that from the periods of time in which the children have to be born within the house of Laban, what age Dinah had to be to be taken by Shechem, all these sorts of things can help us piece together a larger picture.

[34 : 55] And in this case it's quite likely that Joseph is already in the land of Egypt and that Benjamin is born after that point. And Benjamin's tragic birth that he's raised up at this point perhaps because he's the only son of this loved mother.

He's the only son that's left. Rachel has died, her whole story seems to have reached this tragic end. and the fact that when he first met with her Jacob cried out in tears this again recalls the tragedy of that story, her story that plays out and the terror theme that overshadows it and leads to this anticipation of disaster towards the end.

When we're reading this story then we need to look forward to what's going to happen in the future. Mary reaches Bethlehem. Christ is born in the city of David. Mary does not die on the road to Bethlehem as Rachel does.

Rather there's a raising up of the matriarch of Israel as her bringing to birth actually occurs. There is this child that comes forth.

At this point we need to think about the family dynamics. Rachel has died, Benjamin has been born, and Benjamin is called son of the right hand.

[36 : 21] So you have the son that's born through the travail of the mother, the travail, the mother suffering, and then the father raises up this child to his right hand. There are messianic themes there that we shouldn't miss.

The travail of the mother, the woman whose birth pangs come upon her, and then the child that she brings into the world, as we read in John 16, 33, I think it is.

But we also have the son that's raised up to the right hand of the father. Christ, the one that's raised up to God's right hand. So Benjamin has those sorts of associations.

The king that's born at this particular point on the way to Bethlehem, and then finally they reach Bethlehem. And Christ takes up this story in his story. And so you have all the tragedy of Rachel, her tears, but then you have the returning son.

You have the one who's born in the city of Bethlehem, the city of David, the one who is the true heir, the one who will raise up the people of Israel. And those associations help us to read the story of scripture as a great connected narrative, not just as isolated events.

[37 : 33] So think about the family dynamics at this point. Rachel has died, Leah is still alive, presumably, and Leah dies during that period in Hebron later on, but Rachel is still alive.

No, Rachel has died. Benjamin has been born. And Benjamin is now the sort of heir apparent. He's the son of the favored mother. He's this young kid, and yet you have these older sons who now resent it.

Simeon and Levi have acted in violence to avenge their sister, Dinah, and the other sons were involved at that point. And Reuben is the oldest son.

He's the one who's the oldest son of Leah, the oldest son of Jacob. And yet, here you have the son of the right hand who's Benjamin.

It seems just wrong. He's the last to be born, and yet he's been given, as it were, the firstborn position. It just seems wrong. Now what does he do at this point?

[38 : 38] Reuben tries to usurp his father's place. Israel journeyed and pitched his tent beyond the Tower of Edah, and it happened when Israel dwelt in that land that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine, and Israel heard about it.

So at this point, he sleeps with his father's concubine. Why would he do that? First of all, Bilhah is the maid of Rachel, the deceased mother.

And so it's a taking of a sort of assault upon the Rachel side of the family. It's playing out this rivalry between the two sides of the family.

And it's always a threat that Bilhah will now become the favoured wife, the concubine that's, because she's associated with the loved wife, she will become the sort of matriarch of the family.

And now if he can take over Bilhah, he can usurp his father's position, he can ensure that his side of the family has the preeminence, and that he will be the firstborn.

[39 : 42] Later on we see sleeping with concubines as a theme, that Abner sleeps with the concubine of Saul in order to gain dominance of Rishbeth, and you see the same thing in Absalom.

Absalom sleeps with his father's concubines as a sign of shaming his father, of rebellion over his father, of his father's impotence. In all these ways it's a way of taking the father's place, of subduing the concubines and wives of the father, and it's just a very ugly sort of dynamic.

It's the sort of thing that we see the actions of the Canaanites, the actions of the Egyptians, the actions of the Philistines, earlier on in the story and elsewhere, taking the wife by force in order to gain some sort of political advantage.

We see it in chapters 12, 20 and 26, and then also to some extent in chapter 34. And so there is an assault that is framed by this overwhelming rivalry between the two sides of the family, the same thing that we saw in the previous chapter.

Joseph might well have been gone at this point again. So this is a rivalry between Benjamin, this new son that's come on the scene, that's been raised up to the right hand. Again, think about the way that Benjamin becomes associated with left-handers later on in scripture.

[41 : 10] It's a play upon words, and often we'll see that. Benjamin, Ehud, the left-handed people with a slingshot at the end of the book of Judges, left-handers and Benjamin have an association, which again, scriptural ironies and humour is something that we see on a number of occasions.

I won't say much more about this chapter except that it ends with Jacob arriving at his father's house at Mamre, at Hebron, and that's where Abraham and Isaac are sojourned, and that's where the tomb as well exists.

So that's where they buried, later on it says that Sarah was buried there, Abraham was buried there, Rebekah was buried there, and presumably in his absence, Isaac ends up being buried there, and Leah gets buried there later on, and Jacob calls for himself to be buried there.

The days of Isaac were 180 years, so Isaac breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people, being old and full of days, and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

We read a similar thing at the end of Abraham's life, where Isaac and Ishmael bury him, and here we see Esau and Jacob burying him. Now remember the death of the father was a significant point within that story, that when the father died, that was when Esau was going to take his vengeance, but here we see Esau and Jacob together at the death of their father, burying him, and so it resolves many of the themes of the story.

[42 : 41] They're no longer rivals, they've come together, and they're together to bury their father, and they've reached, he's gone back to the house of his father, he's gone through this whole cycle, and he's gone back again, and now as he returns to the land, his story can move forward, and there are a number of transitions, the death of the matriarch, Rebecca and her nurse, the grandmother figure, we have the death of Rachel, and then we have the attempt of Reuben to usurp his father's position.

So this is a very significant passage that sets things up for the coming chapters. Tomorrow we'll deal with chapter 36 and the story of Esau. Thank you very much for listening.

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