

Genesis 35: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 35 So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears.

Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem. And as they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.

And Jacob came to Luz, that is Bethel, which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. And there he built an altar and called the place El Bethel, because there God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother.

And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak below Bethel, so he called its name Halam Bukuth. God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan Aram and blessed him.

And God said to him, Your name is Jacob. No longer shall your name be called Jacob, 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.

[1 : 35] A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.

Then God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him. And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone. He poured out a drink offering on it, and poured oil on it.

So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel. Then they journeyed from Bethel. When there was still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labour, and she had hard labour.

And when her labour was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, Do not fear, for you have another son. And as her soul was departing, for she was dying, she called his name Benoni.

But his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath, that is Bethlehem. And Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day.

[2 : 40] Israel journeyed on, and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Edah. When Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine.

And Israel heard of it. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. The sons of Leah, Reuben, Jacob's firstborn. Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun.

The sons of Rachel, Joseph, and Benjamin. The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's servant, Dan, and Naphtali. The sons of Zilpah, Leah's servant, Gad, and Asher.

These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan Aram. And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriathaba, that is Hebron, where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned.

Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. And Isaac breathed his last, and he died, and was gathered to his people, old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

[3 : 42] In chapter 35 of Genesis, following the bloodbath at Shechem, Jacob is sent to Bethel, to the place where God first appeared to him. Note that he's also retracing the original journey of Abraham, who went from Haran to Shechem to Bethel.

He's returning to points where he left earlier, as the story is going back to its origin. It's, as I have said before, a there and back again story. And here he's on the return journey to arrive at the place where he began.

Before he leaves Shechem, the people rededicate themselves to the Lord. They put away foreign gods, purify themselves, and change their garments. And the gods and the rings and their ears are buried beneath the terebinth tree in Shechem, which clearly was a significant site of covenant remembrance, as it also appears in the final chapter of the book of Joshua.

In that story, they forsake their foreign gods and place a large stone beneath the terebinth tree, which is now next to the sanctuary of God. As we look through the story of Genesis, we'll see that trees are natural pillars of remembrance.

They're landmarks. It's one of the reasons why we so often see them mentioned in the Pentateuch. On several occasions, they're associated with altars. They also provide the blessing of shade, like a cloud on a pillar.

[4 : 57] A tree with its canopy is something that has a natural symbolism to it. We continue that symbolism in the way that we design churches, where you'll have the big trunk that is the pillar that holds up the roof, and then the vaulting of the roof as the tree canopy that shades you.

And then the light coming through stained glass windows is like the light passing through the canopy of trees onto people beneath. So there are all sorts of symbolic associations that we see.

And also with particular trees, the specific type of tree can represent a particular period of Israel's history. The cypress, the oak, the terebinth associated with the oak.

Or we might think about the acacia or the gopher wood that's used for the building of the ark. The vine or the fig tree. All of these have particular associations.

The sycamore. Even beyond particular types of trees, we have specific trees, like the oaks at Morit, or we have the oak or terebinth here at Shechem.

[6 : 01] And so these associations are very important in Scripture. Scripture is a book about specific things. And it pays a lot of attention to specific places, the events that occur there, the ways that one set of events can be connected to another set of events, and particular types of things in the world.

Not just trees as such, but specific types of trees and their associations. So it's important that we pay attention to these things. God promised Jacob that he would bring him back to the land in Genesis chapter 28, at the site of Bethel.

And now he returns to the place of that promise. But not now a solitary individual escaping from his brother, but surrounded by a large family, many people, and extensive possessions, returning home.

God has made him rich in the land of Haran, Paddan Aram, and now he's going to be returning to his family. God places a terror on the cities so that they don't attack Jacob.

It's a similar sort of thing that we see in the story of the Exodus and the conquest of the land, that God goes before his people and he protects them. After the events of Shechem, it's not surprising that Jacob would need some protection.

[7 : 12] He certainly feels very vulnerable at the end. And here God prepares for that. He gives protection as he walks on the way. When he arrives at Bethel, he builds an altar, naming it for the God of Bethel, the God he first encountered on his way out to the land of Paddan Aram.

And the place still seems to be called Uz. And it's called Bethel in part in anticipation of its fully becoming that later. And it's at Bethel that Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, dies and is buried.

And she is probably the last remaining connection that Jacob has to his mother. Deborah seems to have accompanied Rebecca in chapter 24 as she goes down and meets with Isaac.

But presumably after Rebecca's death, Rebecca seems to have died in this interim period, she goes back to the house of Laban in order to look after the favoured son of Rebecca and also to help him raise his children.

There are other possibilities for how this might have worked out, but I suspect that's the most likely situation. But with the death of Deborah, that one last remaining connection to his mother has gone.

[8 : 24] And so it's a tragic event for Jacob. It has a very deep personal significance to him. Jacob has always been deeply connected with his mother and his mother's side of the family in his going to Paddan Aram to be with his uncle Laban.

But now that tie has been cut and he has to move on. There's also a fulfilled transition here to Rachel and Leah as the new matriarchs. It's no longer Rebecca as the key matriarch of the covenant people.

Now it's Rachel and Leah. And that transition to the new generation is completed later on in this chapter with the death of Isaac. God appears to Jacob again at Bethel and declares that he will be fruitful and multiply, will receive the land and the kings will come from his body.

We might think that this is in certain ways playing out the pattern of the call to humanity to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth, to subdue it and to exercise dominion over its creatures.

He will be fruitful and multiply, he will receive the land that his people will fill and then kings will come from his body which will both subdue the land and will give dominion over the land.

[9 : 33] And so this is the creation calling that's being fulfilled in this small context of the land of Israel. God reiterates the changing of Jacob's name.

And once again, as in the case of Bethel, it seems that the name change anticipates things that are yet to fully take place. He still has to be made into a political entity.

Israel refers primarily to Jacob as he becomes a political entity. And that has yet to be fully realised. He sets up a pillar here and pours a drink offering and oil upon it.

It's in the place that God goes up from him. I would suggest that this is connected with the story of Jacob Ladder earlier on, that there is this ascending and descending at a particular point.

Elsewhere we see God going his way when he leaves talking with Abraham at the end of chapter 18, for instance. But here, God doesn't go his way, rather he goes up, which suggests that this site has a particular importance as a connection between heaven and earth.

[10 : 37] As they travel on from Bethel, Rachel goes into labour, but she dies before reaching Ephrath. She gives birth to a child who she calls Benoni, whose name is then changed by his father to Benjamin.

Think about Jacob's own name, which was not a favourable name. He was born under inauspicious conditions, and his name that was given to him was later changed by God.

And he changes the name of this second-born son of his wife, Rachel. She's buried there, and a pillar is set up over her. Once again, Jacob is very strongly associated with stones.

He's someone who sets up pillars, who gathers stones, and who also removes stones, as in the story of the well. After the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel, Jacob is referred in the next few verses as Israel.

Now, his name has been changed before, but we've not generally seen him referred to as Israel. And I wonder whether the connection with Benjamin, who is the one who represents the tribe that will give rise to the first kings, whether that is seen as a transition into this more political identity, that Israel can now call himself Israel, now that this son from which the first kings will arise has been born.

[11 : 57] There have been ominous themes throughout the story of Rachel that maybe foreshadow this in different ways and different aspects of the event. First of all, we can think about the way she's replaced by Leah.

Her statement, give me sons or I die. There's a certain foreshadowing there. The death sentence that's cast over her by Jacob when he's pursued by Laban.

And then, in a more positive way, there's foreshadowing when she says, in naming Joseph, that the Lord would add to her another son. And that's fulfilled in the words of the midwife to her, who says, do not fear, you have another son.

As we read further on in the story, I think we'll see further ways in which Rachel's story foreshadows later events. Benjamin's story will be tragic, like Rachel's in many respects.

They will almost be wiped out as a tribe at the end of the book of Judges. After this, Reuben lies with Bilhah, his father's concubine, the handmaid of Rachel.

[12 : 59] Why do this? It seems that Reuben is the firstborn, but the firstborn of the unfavoured mother. Rachel has just had another son, who has been favoured as the son of the father's right hand.

And perhaps what Reuben is attempting to do here is an attempted coup. He humiliates his father, but also presents himself as the man of the house, the one who controls and protects the people within it, all the people of the household and the clan, the sheikdom.

He's the one in charge. Absalom does something very similar to his father's concubines in the book of 2 Samuel. It's again part of a coup, an attempt to gain power and assert his supremacy.

Here I think Reuben might be spurred to his action by his recognition that his father prefers the sons of Rachel over him and his side of the family.

Once again we're seeing the tensions that arise within the family as a result of Jacob's favouring of Rachel over Leah. We've seen this already in the previous chapter in the story of Dinah and her two brothers, and now we're seeing it again in a far more ugly form.

[14 : 06] What we're also seeing is that Reuben is disqualifying himself from the firstborn status by his action. If Simeon and Levi came under judgment because of what they did in chapter 34, here Reuben comes under judgment, which means that the first three sons of Jacob have disqualified themselves in different ways.

At the end of this, Jacob's story finally comes full circle. This is why the list of his descendants is given at this point. It's the fulfilment of his journey, and now things can move on to his sons.

Now that his journey has been completed, his twelve children have been born, and he's returning to the house of his father. He finally comes to his father, and Isaac finally dies.

Before he departed for Paddan Aram, he was expecting his father's death was imminent, but his father was still alive, and so he returns, and now his father dies.

And at this point, the brothers, Jacob and Esau, join together to bury their father. So they're reunited, and their father finally dies, which calls our attention back to the events of chapter 27, now resolved.

[15 : 16] Esau has forgiven Jacob, so he's no longer threatening to take his life, as he once did when his intention was to take Jacob's life after the death of their father. Now they've come to peace.

Isaac dies at the age of 180. We've commented upon the significance of these numbers before. Abraham dies at 175, 7 times 5 squared. Isaac dies at 180, which is 5 times 6 squared.

Jacob will die at 147, 3 times 7 squared, and then Joseph will die at 5 squared plus 6 squared plus 7 squared. So we're seeing a connection between these characters, an ongoing development.

The numeric connection between the characters should alert us to the fact this is a continuing story. Generation after generation are building upon each other, just as we've seen that Jacob retreads the path of his father Abraham, and also he's retreading the path that he once walked himself.

These are united stories, a single story developing, generation after generation building on what has gone before. A question to consider. The death of Rachel is an event that casts a shadow over the rest of scripture.

[16 : 35] How might a reading of Micah chapters 4 and 5, Jeremiah 31, and Matthew 2 make more sense against the background of this passage?

