

The Patriarchs of Israel

Week 6

Jacob*

“A wandering Aramean was my father” (Deut. 26:5). This is an apt description of Jacob's history, which may be considered in four sections according to his place of residence.

A. Early Life in Canaan (Chapters 25—27)

The conception of Isaac's sons is remarkable in that it did not occur until twenty years after his marriage to Rebekah. As Abraham had been required to exercise faith in the promise of an heir, so was Isaac. The peculiar nature of his birth may have given Jacob his name, but even earlier he was designated as the chosen son through whom the promise given to Abraham should pass. Although born in Canaan, he was racially distinct, being the grandson of a man from Ur of the Chaldees, a Semite among the descendants of Ham.

The relationship of Esau and Jacob, twin brothers and full-born sons of Isaac, could not be eased by such a separation as divided Isaac and Ishmael. Later teachings (e.g., Mal. 1:2f.) show that it was by the sovereign will of God that one was chosen over the other. The supremacy of God over human customs was exemplified by the choice of Jacob, the younger son. The contrast between the two brothers may be seen as the contrast between the agriculturalist and the nomad-hunter who lives “from hand to mouth.” These were the characteristics of the later nations of Israel and Edom. Esau's thoughtlessness cost him his birthright (the privilege of the firstborn son to inherit a double share of the paternal estate), thus allowing Jacob the material superiority. His equally heedless marriage to local women of Hittite stock (Gen. 26:34) rendered him unsuitable to become the father of the chosen people. Nevertheless, Isaac intended to bestow the blessing of the firstborn upon Esau. The oracle given to Rebekah before the birth of her sons (25:23) probably encouraged her to counter Isaac's will and to gain the blessing for her favorite son by a fraud. The blessing that was given to Jacob conveyed the status of head of the family, apparently apart from the status of heir. Esau had disposed of this many years before. The blessing, once pronounced, was irrevocable; Jacob was sent to the safety of Rebekah's home until Esau should forgive him.

B. To Paddan-Aram (Chapters 28—30)

Chapter 28. Jacob was well over forty years old when he left home. For Esau had already married at the age of forty (26:34; 27:46). The journey from Beersheba may be reckoned, however, as the commencement of his life as an individual. He had received the paternal blessing, and doubtless knew of the God who had made great promises to his father and to his grandfather; yet it was not until he slept at Luz that he realized that he was required to participate in the fulfillment of these promises. He was following the road to the north along the central hills when night fell, and he lay down with a convenient stone at his head. The text does not indicate that he had arrived at a recognized shrine, although Abraham had built an altar in that region (12:8) and archaeological evidence suggests that it was an ancient holy place.

In a dream, God revealed Himself to Jacob and renewed the promise to him by His name Yahweh, the name in which the promise had first been given. The traveler was given reassurance for his journey and of his eventual return. The erection of a stone pillar, this time only a small boulder, was a common practice for commemoration of some notable event. For Jacob this place was henceforth sanctified as “the gate of heaven” where God first communicated with him. It was for him *Beth-El*, “the dwelling of God.”

Chapter 29. Jacob moved northward to the “fields of Aram” (*Paddan-Aram*). The relatives of Bethuel were evidently prosperous citizens of Haran who cultivated the land surrounding the town in the valley and pastured their flocks on the hills. Jacob was welcomed into his mother's family. An agreement was made that he should give seven years of service and then take as his wife his cousin Rachel, whom he had first met at the well outside the town.

When the day of Jacob's marriage arrived, Rachel's father Laban substituted his elder daughter Leah, on the plea of a local custom that the elder was always first. Perhaps the narrator knew of another reason: Leah had "weak eyes" (29:17), i.e., she was not beautiful, so it might have been more difficult to find a suitable husband for her. After the week of celebration had passed, Rachel also was given to Jacob. He had to promise another seven years of service in return. Jacob remained in Laban's employ for six years after he had worked out his contract in order to earn sufficient capital for the support of his family.

Chapter 30. Leah bore his first four sons (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah). Rachel, jealous of her sister since she herself was barren and eager to remove that reproach, gave her maid Bilhah to her husband. By this means, which was an accepted practice at the time (cf. Abraham and Hagar), any child born would be counted as Rachel's (30:3). The two sons borne by Bilhah were named by Rachel, as if they were her own, Dan and Naphtali. Leah then did likewise with her maid Zilpah, who bore two sons, named by her mistress Gad and Asher. At this juncture Reuben, Leah's firstborn and now about twelve years old, found mandrakes, which he brought to his mother. Rachel purchased this herb from her sister for its supposed fertility-enhancing qualities. As a result of the bargain, Leah bore two more sons to Jacob, Issachar and Zebulun, and at some time a daughter, Dinah. Then at last Rachel gave birth to her first son Joseph.

Now, Jacob pressed for permission to return to Canaan. Laban could not afford to lose so good a herdsman and offered him any wage he cared to name. Yet even when Jacob had suggested his reward, Laban tried to avoid payment. The evasion was overcome by Jacob's experience with the flocks. He succeeded in breeding fine sheep of the type he had asked from Laban, while his father-in-law was left with inferior stock. This prosperity aroused the jealousy of Laban's own sons and of Laban himself. Rachel and Leah supported their husband when he related to them the divine command to return to his father's home. They claimed that their father had not given them any dowry but had spent it instead, treating them as foreigners.

C. Return to Canaan (Chapters 31—33)

Chapter 31. Jacob departed while Laban and his sons were away shearing sheep in the hills. Thereby he gained a two-day head start, and it was not until he reached the highlands of Gilead that Laban overtook him. The seven days indicated as the time taken by Laban's party to cover about 400 miles from Haran to Gilead are within the capabilities of good riding camels. Jacob, with his family and his flocks, took a little longer. Laban complained that he had had no opportunity to bid farewell to his daughters with the accustomed feasting. More important, he wanted to find the "gods" that had been stolen (31:30, 32). These "gods" (*teraphim*, vv. 19, 34) were almost certainly small metal or terra-cotta figures of deities which are commonly found in the ruins of ancient towns. Possession of these images was vested in the head of the family, according to evidence from Nuzi. Certain texts specify that they were to pass to the son of the owner upon the latter's decease rather than to an adopted son, even if he had been made principal heir.

Rachel's theft can now be seen as an attempt to obtain for her husband the status of head of the household. Laban's anxiety arose partly from this consideration and partly from the loss of the magical protection they were thought to provide. This value may well have been in Rachel's mind, too, as she took them with her at the outset of a long journey. Divine command prevented Laban from using force against Jacob, and his daughter's ingenuity deprived him of his gods.

No fault could be found in Jacob's conduct in Haran either. In his own defense (31:36-42) he mentioned that he had not eaten any of Laban's rams and had himself replaced those animals seized by wild beasts. Records from Nuzi describe the prosecution of shepherds who had made their own use of their masters' flocks. The Babylonian laws of Hammurabi (ca. 1750 B.C.) imposed a fine of ten times the value of the animal taken on a shepherd convicted of such an offense. By the same laws, however, the loss of an animal killed by a marauding lion was to be borne not by the herdsman but by the owner.

Laban could do little but suggest a pact of friendship with Jacob. He proposed as terms of the treaty that Jacob should neither ill-treat his wives nor marry any other women, a clause often found in marriage records of this time. Moreover, the site of the covenant was to be a boundary which neither party should cross with evil intent. Ancient treaties frequently stipulated that rulers of states should not permit raids from their territory into the neighboring country and that they should be responsible for the punishment of any of their subjects who did so raid. Such treaties were solemnized by naming various deities as witnesses and depositing a copy in a temple. The covenant of Jacob and Laban was ratified solely by the invocation of the God of Abraham and of their common ancestor Terah. If either Jacob or Laban broke the terms of the agreement, the curse of God would fall upon him. The cairn and the pillar were visible reminders of the treaty, if ever they passed that way again. When a treaty was to be recorded, a picture was carved, on some occasions, representing the contracting parties sharing a meal to indicate their unanimity and good faith, as Jacob and his kin ate together in Gilead on this occasion (31:54).

Chapter 32. The parting from Laban marked another stage in Jacob's development. He was now head of his own household. He also climbed to a higher plane of spiritual experience. An encounter with angels at Mahanaim ("two camps") impressed upon him the might of the God who protected him, encouraging him for the journey southward to meet Esau. His brother's seemingly hostile advance prompted a call for clear evidence of God's guarding. Shrewdly, he sent a handsome gift to his brother and strategically divided his group into two parts; so large had his following become that each would be able to defend itself, or to escape if the other was captured.

When all had crossed the stream of the Jabbok, Jacob was hindered by a stranger. The two struggled without one gaining advantage on the other, until the adversary dislocated Jacob's hip. Jacob still refused to release his antagonist, but, clinging to him, demanded his blessing. This could not be given until the stranger knew Jacob's name. By telling it, Jacob acknowledged his defeat. His opponent, still incognito, could command him as an individual. He emphasized his superiority by renaming the patriarch. No longer was he the man whose name had an unfavorable connotation. He became *Israel*, the one on whose behalf "God strove" or "God strives" and with whom "God strove." The withholding of the adversary's name, perhaps, caused Jacob to realize whom he had met. So Jacob called the place *Peniel* ("face of God"), "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (32:30).

Chapter 33. Jacob's fear of meeting his brother proved groundless. Esau was content to forget the wrongs of the past and to share his life with his brother. The juncture of their two households would bring them greater security and standing among the alien peoples around them. As two men of so contrary natures were unlikely to live together long in harmony, Jacob chose the better course in turning westward, leaving the road to Edom. Succoth was the first halting place before the Jordan was crossed. The length of his stay there is not indicated. It may be that the cattle were breeding and it was necessary to stop and provide shelter for them ("booths," 33:17).

Chapter 34. Now Jacob entered the Promised Land. It was a natural course for him to follow the valley of the Wadi Farah, which joins the Jordan almost opposite Succoth, and so penetrate into the hill country. In Canaan the patriarch was landless, a wanderer, the type of person called *Habiru*, or *'Apiru*, in ancient texts. He traveled until he reached a place of good pasture where he might settle for a time. The town of Shechem was well established in the center of the area, and it was from the rulers of this place that Jacob purchased a plot of land on which he pitched his tent and built an altar.

Inevitably the family chosen by God was brought into contact with the local population, of which the ruling class at least were apparently of non-Semitic, Hurrian stock. The son of the city's ruler was attracted to Jacob's daughter and took her by force. Although the prince, Shechem, afterward made an honorable proposal of marriage, this act alone could not restore friendly relationship between the clans.

*Extracted from Alan R. Millard, "Jacob," in *ISBE*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 948-950.