

## Genesis 27:41-28:22 – Jacob’s Dream at Bethel

### Review

Last time, we saw that God reiterated to Isaac several times the same promise He had made to Abraham – that in Isaac’s offspring (זרע *zera* ‘ - seed) all the nations of the world would be blessed. When Isaac went to Gerar fleeing another famine in the land, he lied to the Philistine people, saying Rebekah was his sister, just as his father Abraham had lied to Pharaoh and Abimelech about Sarah. Afterward at Beersheba, Isaac and Abimelech swore an oath of peaceful coexistence just as Abraham and Abimelech had many years before. Finally, we saw that Isaac’s son Jacob (יעקב *ya ‘aqōb* - heel holder, supplanter) and his mother Rebekah (רבקה *ribqâ* - ensnarer) conspired to trick Isaac who by that time was old and blind into giving his blessing to Jacob rather than Esau his twin brother who was Isaac and Rebekah’s firstborn. Esau was understandably upset that his brother had deceitfully taken from him the double-portion inheritance traditionally given to the firstborn son.

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### Jacob Flees Esau’s Wrath

*<sup>41</sup>Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.” <sup>42</sup>But the words of Esau her older son were told to Rebekah. So she sent and called Jacob her younger son and said to him, “Behold, your brother Esau comforts himself about you by planning to kill you. <sup>43</sup>Now therefore, my son, obey my voice. Arise, flee to Laban my brother in Haran <sup>44</sup>and stay with him a while, until your brother’s fury turns away— <sup>45</sup>until your brother’s anger turns away from you, and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will send and bring you from there. Why should I be bereft of you both in one day?”* Genesis 27:41-45 (ESV)

Rebekah’s wording gives us some insight into her character. First, notice that she says that Esau is angry because of what Jacob had done to him. But recall that it was her own idea to disguise Jacob – her favorite – so together they could trick Isaac into giving Jacob his blessing instead of Esau – Isaac’s favorite and the firstborn to whom it rightly belonged. Furthermore, notice her self-centered motivation in sending Jacob away. She was worried that both her sons might die if Esau tried to kill Jacob. But did she really care about either of her sons? It seems perhaps she was worried that she might be left with no one to care for her after Isaac died.

Of course, we need to remember that these events were all part of God’s plan to bring forth Jesus His משיח *māšîaḥ* for the salvation of all mankind just as God promised Jacob, his father Isaac, and grandfather Abraham before him. As we shall see, while Jacob sojourned in Haran with Rebekah’s brother Laban, he fathered the twelve sons who would found the nation of Israel – most importantly his son Judah from whose line the Lord Jesus was eventually born.

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*<sup>46</sup>Then Rebekah said to Isaac, “I loathe my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women like these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?”* Genesis 27:46 (ESV)

Recall from Genesis 26:34-35 that when Esau was forty years old, he had married two Hittite women – Judith and Basemath, and that these wives had made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah. Here now we

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see that Rebekah took advantage of Isaac’s displeasure with Esau’s wives to convince Isaac to send Jacob to her people in Paddan-Aram seeking a wife. Recall that Abraham had sent his servant to seek a wife for Isaac there, and that Rebekah had returned with Abraham’s servant to Canaan and married Isaac. As we read here, Rebekah was quite the scheming drama queen. She knew how to manipulate Isaac into going along with almost anything she hatched up. Once again though, we need to always remember that this entire story unfolded just as God had always planned.

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***<sup>1</sup>Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and directed him, “You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women. <sup>2</sup>Arise, go to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel your mother’s father, and take as your wife from there one of the daughters of Laban your mother’s brother. <sup>3</sup>God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. <sup>4</sup>May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!” <sup>5</sup>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.*** Genesis 28:1-5 (ESV)

In Genesis 28:3, we find the second instance of the Name **אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי 'ēl šaday** – God Almighty or most powerful. God called Himself by this name when He appeared to Abram when he was 99 years old saying “*walk before me, and be blameless.*” (Genesis 17:1).

Recall that Paddan-aram – meaning “the field (or level place) of Aram” – lies in northern Mesopotamia near the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Aram is the ancient name for Syria – named after the youngest son of Noah’s son Shem (Genesis 10:22). Thus, Abraham’s nephew Bethuel was called an Aramean. Abram was living in Paddan-aram in the city of Haran when God called him to leave the house of his father and journey to a land God would show him (Canaan). Just as his father Abraham sent his servant back to Paddan-aram to find a wife for his son Isaac, here in this passage we see that Isaac also sent his own son Jacob back to Paddan-aram to find a wife there from among his mother’s family.

Look at the [Patriarchs of Israel diagram](#). Notice that Isaac’s wife Rebekah was also his 2<sup>nd</sup> cousin – the daughter of his cousin Bethuel. As we shall learn, two of Jacob’s wives – Leah and Rachel – were his cousins – the daughters of his uncle Laban. While in Paddan-aram, Jacob married two wives and took two of his wives’ servants as concubines. In all, these bore Jacob twelve sons and at least one daughter. The twelve sons became the progenitors of the twelve tribes which formed the nation of Israel. They are shown on this diagram in the order of their birth.

**NOTE** – God’s Word and secular literature frequently mention the “twelve tribes of Israel.” However, prior to the Egyptian captivity, two sons – Manasseh and Ephraim – were born to Jacob’s second youngest son Joseph by his Egyptian wife Asenath. Just prior to his death (Genesis 48) Jacob blessed Joseph’s sons saying that they should receive a portion of the inheritance alongside Joseph’s eleven brothers. Thus, in subsequent listings of the “twelve tribes of Israel,” sometimes Joseph is listed, while elsewhere Joseph’s two sons are often counted in Joseph’s place as founders of two tribes of Israel. In these cases, one of the other tribes is usually excluded from the list to keep the number of tribes listed as 12 rather than 13. This begs the question, which twelve names will be inscribed on the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem described by John in Revelation 21?

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But we’re getting ahead of ourselves...

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### Esau Takes Another Wife

***6Now 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,” 7and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and gone to Paddan-aram. 8So when Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please Isaac his father, 9Esau went to Ishmael and took as his wife, besides the wives he had, Mahalath [מַחֲלַת mahälät - stringed instrument] the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, the sister of Nebaioth. Genesis 28:6-9 (ESV)***

Esau’s response to his parents’ rejection of his Canaanite wives is heartbreaking. Although Esau by this time was over 40 years old, he still desperately desired to please his parents as he saw that his twin brother Jacob had. Recall that Ishmael had also been rejected and cast out of his father Abraham’s family, so he could certainly empathize with Esau.

We have no way of knowing whether Ishmael and his family practiced idolatry as we certainly know the Canaanite people did. It is possible that Ishmael’s family worshipped the Egyptian gods since Ishmael’s mother Hager was Egyptian and so was his wife. It seems unlikely that Hager herself worshipped the gods of her homeland rather than the true God of Abraham since we know for certain that God Himself spoke to Hagar on at least two occasions (Genesis 16:7-14 and Genesis 21:17-20). Despite being rejected by Abraham and Sarah, it is also unlikely that Ishmael worshipped the Egyptian gods, since God had blessed him and made him prosperous throughout his life.

Esau’s Ishmaelite wife Mahalath is mentioned only here in this passage although her brother Nebaioth – Ishmael’s firstborn son – and her sister Basemoth are both mentioned in the listing of Esau’s descendants in Genesis 36 where we read that Esau also married Basemoth. It seems strange that Mahalath isn’t mentioned in the listings of Esau’s family found in Genesis 36 and 1 Chronicles 1. Perhaps Mahalath was infertile, or died before bearing any sons to Esau so that her role as Esau’s first Ishmaelite wife is insignificant for genealogical purposes.

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***10Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. 11And 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. 12And 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! Genesis 28:10-12(ESV)***

Here is another of the well-known stories we find throughout Genesis. Many people who are not followers of God are nevertheless familiar with the story of “Jacob’s Ladder” although few are familiar with its context – Jacob fleeing from the threat of death at the hands of his own brother.

The image of a stairway leading up to Heaven intrigues us because we long to climb the ladder and rejoin God in Heaven. I do wonder though why angels who are spiritual beings which appear suddenly

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to various people throughout God’s Word would need a physical stairway to travel between Heaven and Earth. But that is perhaps a topic we can leave alone for now. More important than the ladder itself is God’s interaction with Jacob in that place.

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***<sup>13</sup>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 [זֶרַע zera’ - seed]. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>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.”*** Genesis 28:13-15  
(ESV)

Look at the [Patriarchs in Canaan](#) map. Recall from Genesis 12:1-8 that God made virtually identical promises to Abram when He called him out of Haran – saying He would make a great nation from Abram and that in Abram’s offspring (זֶרַע zera’) all the families of the earth would be blessed. Of course, on both occasions God was referring to Jesus the מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ* who was to come from Jacob’s offspring to take away the sins of the world.

Then when Abram arrived in Canaan near Shechem, God promised to give the land to Abram’s descendants. Here in Genesis 28:13 as Jacob was journeying out of Canaan back to Haran for what turned out to be an extended stay, God reiterated to Jacob the promise to give the land where Jacob lay dreaming to his descendants. Furthermore, God promised to bring Jacob back to the land following his sojourning and to accompany and protect Jacob along the way until He fulfills the promises He has made.

Notice that I say “fulfills” not “fulfilled.” In Genesis 28:14 God alluded to the dispersion of Jacob’s descendants around the world and their eventual return to Canaan. The great diaspora of the Israelites from the land of promise, began with the Babylonian captivity in 605 BC, and reached a crescendo with the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem in 70 AD. Nearly 2000 years later, starting in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, God began fulfilling His promise to return Jacob’s descendants to Canaan. The return of the Jews from their dispersion around the globe to אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל - *'ereṣ yiśrā'ēl* (the Land of Israel) continues even today.

Furthermore, as we have noted in our previous Genesis studies, the Israelite people have yet to take full possession of the entire land from the Nile to the Euphrates that God promised to give Abram’s descendants in Genesis 15:18. Thus, God’s promises made to Jacob almost 3,000 years ago remain even now to be completely fulfilled.

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***<sup>16</sup>Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” <sup>17</sup>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.” <sup>18</sup>So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar [מַסְשֵׁבָה maṣṣēbâ] and poured oil on the top***

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*of it.* <sup>19</sup>*He called the name of that place Bethel,* [בֵּית־אֵל bêt-'ēl – house of God] *but the name of the city was Luz* [לֹז lûz – almond tree] *at the first.* Genesis 28:16-19 (ESV)

Bethel was first mentioned when Abram arrived near there shortly after coming into Canaan from Haran (Genesis 12:8). But of course, Bethel was not yet so named in Abram’s time. Look again at the [Patriarchs in Canaan](#) map. The exact locations of the altar Abram built at Bethel and the pillar of remembrance that Jacob set up there are subjects of scholarly debate. Many Biblical scholars believe Bethel was near the modern village of Beitin about 2 miles northeast of Ramallah and 10 miles north of Jerusalem in the Palestinian Authority controlled area.

The Hebrew word מַצְבֵּה *maṣṣēbâ* translated as “pillar” in the ESV can also mean an altar, monument, or personal memorial. Some English translations render it as marker or memorial. Of course, it is evident from the context that Jacob intended the stone as a memorial.

Anointing someone or something with oil was traditionally an indication of consecration. We see this for example in Samuel’s consecration of David to replace Saul as King of Israel (1 Samuel 16:13). The Hebrew word מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ* and the Greek word Χριστός *christos* (from which we derive our English names Messiah and Christ respectively) both mean “anointed.” Thus, the prophet Isaiah refers to the promised Savior...

*<sup>1</sup>The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor;  
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;* Isaiah 61:1 (ESV)

Intriguingly, Isaiah’s Messianic prophecy here is written in the first person. Although Isaiah doesn’t preface this prophecy with “*Thus says the LORD...*” as he often did, clearly these are the very words of God. Jesus Himself famously confirmed this as He taught in the synagogue at Nazareth...

*<sup>16</sup>And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. <sup>17</sup>And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,*

*<sup>18</sup>“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
<sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

*<sup>20</sup>And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup>And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* Luke 4:16-21 (ESV)

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Recall Jesus’ response shortly later when John the Baptist sent messengers from prison to ask whether Jesus was the promised מָשִׁיחַ *māšīaḥ* or we should await another.

***22And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. Luke 7:22 (ESV)***

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***20Then 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, 21so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, 22and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth [אָסָר *‘āsār*] to you.”***

Genesis 28:20-22 (ESV)

Recall that after Abram and his allies rescued Lot from captivity by the armies of Chedorlaomer, he returned with Lot and the spoils taken from his captors to the Valley of Shaveh near Salem. There Melchizedek the King of Salem and priest of God Most High blessed him and gave him bread and wine. In response, Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of the spoils taken from Chedorlaomer. (Genesis 14:17-20). It is important to note however that Abram’s gift to Melchizedek was a singular event, not an ongoing devotional offering such as we associate with our tithes.

By contrast, here in Genesis 28:22 Jacob vowed to continually give one tenth of everything with which God blessed him back to God. But this begs the question exactly how Jacob might fulfill this vow. Abram had given his gift of one tenth directly to Melchizedek. But Jacob had no one to give his tithe to nor any treasury into which he could deposit his gift. I think this exposes a fundamental misunderstanding about tithes which has become entrenched in our traditions over the intervening millennia.

Many years after Jacob made this vow, God formalized a command in the Law of Moses for His followers to make tithes (offerings of tenths). But if we carefully read this requirement of the law, we find that the offered tithes were to be used quite differently than we might assume from our traditions.

***22“You shall tithe all the yield of your seed that comes from the field year by year. 23And before the LORD your God, in the place that he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstborn of your herd and flock, that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always. 24And if the way is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, when the LORD your God blesses you, because the place is too far from you, which the LORD your God chooses, to set his name there, 25then you shall turn it into money and bind up the money in your hand and go to the place that the LORD your God chooses 26and spend the money for whatever you desire—oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves. And you shall eat there before the LORD your God and rejoice, you and your household. 27And you shall not neglect the Levite who is within your towns, for he has no portion or inheritance with you.***

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***28“At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. 29And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do. Deuteronomy 14:22-29 (ESV)***

Notice that in most years, a tithe (tenth) of the increase is to be used as a celebration of our blessings before the LORD in the place of His choosing. But every third year, the tithe was to be given to the Levite priests to be used for their own celebrations. In neither case was the tithe to be hoarded for any purposes other than celebration of the blessings God has bestowed. I believe that this is what Jacob intended when he made this vow at Bethel. Since Jacob didn’t have any Levite priests to whom the tithe could be given (obviously, since Jacob’s son Levi hadn’t even yet been born), Jacob’s intent was to celebrate God’s blessings using a tenth of them – presumably once a year after the harvest.

This encounter with God at Bethel had a strong impact upon Jacob’s thoughts throughout the remainder of his life. On his deathbed, Jacob recounted the story to his son Joseph and Joseph’s sons Manasseh and Ephraim.

***3And Jacob said to Joseph, “God Almighty [אֱלֹהֵי שָׂדַי] 'ēl šaday appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, 4and said to me, ‘Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.’ Genesis 48:3-4 (ESV)***

It is interesting that Jacob referred to the LORD as אֱלֹהֵי שָׂדַי 'ēl šaday in recounting this story just as his father Isaac did blessing him before sending him out from Beersheba to Haran. Hundreds of years later, God Himself mentioned this to Moses after he returned from Midian to Egypt to lead the Israelites out of bondage there.

***2God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the LORD. 3I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, [אֱלֹהֵי שָׂדַי] 'ēl šaday but by my name the LORD [יְהוָה] Y’hōvâ I did not make myself known to them. 4I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. Exodus 6:2-4 (ESV)***

Nevertheless, assuming that God used Moses to write down the Genesis narrative, Moses used the Name יְהוָה Y’hōvâ (printed as “LORD” with all uppercase letters in most English language Bibles) throughout the book even before God revealed His Name to Moses.

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## Looking Ahead

Next time, we’ll learn about Jacob’s stay in Paddan-Aram and the birth of his sons who would become the founders of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel.