

3. **Jacob**

Jacob was the third in the line of covenant patriarchs. Consistent with the nature and operation of the covenant, he – like his father and grandfather – represented the exertion of sovereign initiative and power. As with Isaac, Jacob was born of a barren mother and, being the younger son, was granted covenant status contrary to the normal order of things. But in Jacob’s case, the principle of divine prerogative was even more pronounced. For, whereas the covenant distinction between Isaac and Ishmael was understandable, the only basis for it with Jacob and Esau was God’s sovereign choice (cf. Genesis 25:21-23; Malachi 1:2-3; Romans 9:6-13).

In the movement of the Genesis narrative, the Abrahamic Covenant passes quickly from Isaac to Jacob. From his introduction in chapter 25, Jacob’s story continues through the balance of the book. There are at least two very evident reasons for the text affording him so much narrative space:

- The most obvious is the intimate relationship that exists between Jacob and Israel. Jacob himself becomes “Israel,” and the nation of Israel emerged from him through his twelve sons. Thus Jacob is the pivotal figure in the transition from the covenant father Abraham to the “great nation” promised to him. Through Jacob, possession of the covenant became a corporate phenomenon; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob became the God of Israel.
- Jacob was the key figure in the evolution of the concept of the covenant *seed*, but that was equally true with respect to the development of the idea of the covenant *land*. It is in the Jacob narrative that the principle of exile comes to the forefront as Jacob’s own experience foreshadowed his descendents’ sojourn in Egypt. And inasmuch as the *man* Israel’s personal exile out of the land prefigured that of the *nation* Israel, God’s dealings with Jacob indicated what the sons of Israel could expect from Him in terms of their own exile and recovery to Canaan.

The Jacob narrative dominates the second half of Genesis because his story would prove to be the story of Israel, and Israel is the focal concern in all the Old Testament, even as the nation would find its own destiny and fulfillment in the singular “Israel” who is Jesus Christ. Among other things, this means that the Jacob narrative plays a profound role in the development of the revelation of redemption as it draws upon and advances God’s covenant with Abraham in preparation for the coming of the promised Seed. In a word, to understand Jacob’s story is to understand Israel’s story, and that, in turn, is to gain broad insight into Israel’s Messiah.

a. Jacob’s Departure from Canaan – Bethel

Jacob’s exile had its origin in the conspiracy to gain his father’s blessing. Though God had revealed before their births that Jacob would supplant Esau as the next covenant patriarch, he and his mother sought to obtain the blessing through guile. The divine determination would stand, even if effected through human sin.

With the two components of the birthright and the patriarchal blessing in place, Jacob had become the legitimate third member of the covenantal triad. But having secured the blessing Esau believed belonged to him, Jacob was compelled to flee from his brother's wrath to his uncle Laban's house. Notably, Jacob's journey had its point of departure at Beersheba, the sight where Abraham had established his first secure presence in Canaan. At that time, Beersheba epitomized the covenant grant of Canaan, and now Jacob was departing from it. He was fleeing from Canaan into exile, but he was going as the heir of the covenant.

This is the context for God's encounter with Jacob at Bethel (Genesis 28:10-15). As Jacob traveled from Beersheba he bedded down one night only to have a dream in which he saw a series of stairs extending from earth to heaven, and the angels of God ascending and descending on them. At the top stood the covenant Lord Himself, and as Jacob lifted his gaze the Lord spoke of His covenant and Jacob's relation to it. He revealed Himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac and issued to Jacob the three key promises of the Abrahamic covenant, namely land, seed, and blessing, and pledged His enduring faithfulness to him.

Jacob was departing Canaan, and, as he headed toward Haran (Paddan-aram), he likely wondered whether he would ever return. But there was no uncertainty with God: Jacob was the covenant son, and the land he was leaving had been endowed by covenant to him and his descendants. He would surely return to Canaan, and one day his progeny would possess it just as God had promised to Abraham and Isaac. Jacob's share in the covenant determined that he would return. But more importantly, God declared that He would go with Jacob from the land and bless him in the place of his sojourn before restoring him to Canaan.

In response to the dream and its revelation Jacob declared: "*Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.*" Some have viewed this statement as indicating that Jacob conceived of God as being like the deities of the nations – localized entities whose domain was confined to the geographical regions possessed by the people they represented. But his words expressed a different set of concerns, as the following observations show:

- 1) Of first importance is the fact that this visitation came shortly after Jacob had received his father's blessing. In terms of temporal requirements, everything had been accomplished that was necessary for Jacob to assume the decreed status of covenant patriarch in the place of Isaac (ref. 25:23).
- 2) The dream came while Jacob was in flight from his home and his brother. There is no doubt but that his own heart was convicted regarding his act of deceit and the great anguish it had caused his father and brother. He had gained the blessing, perhaps even with the confidence that this outcome was what God had intended from the beginning. Nevertheless, it had been gained at great cost, and now he had been forced to flee indefinitely from his family and home and go a foreign place and an unfamiliar people.

This was the physical and emotional context of God's appearance, and it helps to bring out the significance of His words to Jacob and Jacob's response to what he saw and heard. God affirmed to him that the covenant he had made with Abraham and Isaac applied to him as well. Despite the sinful circumstances of the blessing, Jacob was its rightful recipient, and the covenant standing it implied belonged to him. God was the God of Abraham, Isaac, *and* Jacob, and his identity in the covenant was unaffected by where he was residing or what he was doing. God had set him apart and He would establish him. He would go with Jacob wherever he went, and He would one day bring him back to his homeland and fulfill the promise that the descendants of Abraham would possess it as an inheritance.

“The revelation was intended not only to stamp the blessing, with which Isaac had dismissed him from his home, with the seal of divine approval, but also to impress upon Jacob's mind the fact that, although Jehovah would be near to protect and guide him even in a foreign land, the land of promise was the holy ground on which the God of his fathers would set up the covenant of His grace. On his departure from that land, he was to carry with him a sacred awe of the gracious presence of Jehovah there.” (Keil and Delitzsch)

Thus Jacob's response was not an acknowledgement of divine omnipresence, but an exclamation of his astonishment that the God of his fathers would condescend to be near him in this foreign place and commit Himself to his welfare wherever he went and under whatever circumstances he should find himself. Having acknowledged God's presence with him and His promises to him, Jacob took the stone he had used for a pillow, set it up as a pillar and poured oil over it to consecrate it as a memorial of God's promise and mercy toward him.

He also renamed the nearby city *Bethel*, which means “house of God,” for he believed that he was standing at the very gate of heaven. Finally, Jacob made a vow to God, promising Him that if He would go with him and provide for the needs of his journey, and eventually bring him back to his father's house, then he would be his God (vv. 20-22). While some have viewed Jacob's vow as a rash act of insubordination in which he was putting God to the test, nothing could be further from the truth.

Jacob was not testing God or insisting upon personal benefit as the basis for allegiance and submission. God Himself had pledged His care, covenant blessing, and abiding faithfulness. He had promised Jacob that He would be with him and would bring him back to the land of his fathers. **Jacob's vow was merely his acknowledgment of God's pledge and his own commitment to Him.**

By performing what He had promised, this One who declared Himself to be the God of his fathers would certify His identity, thus showing Himself to be the true God who alone was worthy of Jacob's devotion and service. Jacob's vow was an act of affirmation, and that's why later, when God was about to bring him and his family and possessions out of Haran, He reminded Jacob of it (31:1-13).

As Beersheba had been central to God's relationship with Abraham and Isaac, Bethel became the focal point of His relationship with Jacob (ref. 31:13, 35:1-15). Like his fathers had done at Beersheba, Jacob made Bethel a shrine by erecting a monument to God and calling upon Him (28:18-22). Not unexpectedly, the theme of *sacred space* is developed in the shift of emphasis from Beersheba to Bethel:

- Beersheba represented God's faithfulness to establish His covenant people in the land of promise. This is why Beersheba is associated with both of Jacob's "exiles" out of Canaan and God's covenant oath in relation to them (cf. 28:10-15, 46:1-7).
- On the other hand, Bethel represented God's promise to be the God of His covenant people – not simply to bless them from afar, but to dwell in their midst (28:13-17). And so it was that God represented Bethel to Jacob as the place of the bridge between heaven and earth. In this way Bethel prefigures the sacred space of the Israelite sanctuary, and ultimately the true sanctuary that is Jesus Christ, who is *Immanuel*. Through Him, men become the dwelling of God in the Holy Spirit. Bruce Waltke observes:

"God's presence not only gives our identity eternal dignity and meaning but also transforms our secular journey from a touring expedition into a sacred pilgrimage [just as was the case with Jacob]... Simply becoming aware of God's presence transforms the meaning and sanctity of our chartered paths. Our life is not simply a solitary wandering but a journey to the holy city with the holy God." (Commentary on Genesis)

b. Jacob's Prosperity in Exile – Haran

The next milestone in Jacob's life encompassed his lengthy sojourn in Paddan-aram (28:1-31:16). What was conceived at first as a brief stay (27:43-44) became a 20-year absence from the patriarchal land (31:38-41). But Yahweh had promised to go with Jacob and provide for him during his journey, and He was faithful to fulfill His word. While in Haran, Jacob not only acquired two wives and thirteen children, he effectively plundered his uncle Laban's wealth – not through his own guile or power, but the Lord's sovereign hand (29:1-30:43).

*God prospered the **man** Israel in his exile from the covenant land and then delivered him from his oppressive servitude bearing his master's wealth. This episode in Jacob's life would prove to be prophetic: It was to be repeated in the experience of the **nation** of Israel descended from him. God had not forgotten his word to Abraham (15:13-14); it would be fulfilled in the twelve tribes of Israel.*

This personal triumph of the covenant seed over Laban, the Aramean, prefigured Israel's preeminence over Aram (Syria). Jacob had triumphed, not through personal strength or ingenuity, but through the Lord's power and blessing. His triumph testified that the Lord of the covenant was faithful and true.

c. Jacob's Return to Canaan – Mahanaim and Peniel

Jacob served Laban faithfully for twenty years, and, though Laban sought repeatedly to defraud and desolate his son-in-law, the Lord was with the covenant patriarch and blessed him at every turn (30:25-31:42). The treatment calculated to destroy Jacob only served to enhance his prosperity, and so it would be in the experience of the nation to come from him (ref. Exodus 1:8-21). Now, having been preserved and prospered under adversity, it was time for the covenant seed to return to the land of promise.

Jacob had experienced a supernatural encounter with angels at Bethel when he was departing Canaan, and now, as he journeyed back to the land, he encountered God's angels again (32:1-2). Their presence indicated God's presence, and so Jacob named that place *Mahanaim* ("two camps") in recognition that both he and God were sharing the same encampment. Nothing more is said about this encounter, but the broader context reveals its significance within the storyline:

- 1) Jacob was returning to Canaan, and he knew that meant he would eventually have to deal with his estranged brother Esau. And so, filled with all sorts of fearful thoughts, he sent a party to Esau to plead for his favor toward him (32:3-5). But very shortly they returned with news that Esau was on his way to meet Jacob along with four hundred of his men.
- 2) Terrified, Jacob immediately set about formulating a plan: First, he divided his family into two parties (two "camps") in case Esau staged an attack. But hoping to avoid that, he also sent back to his brother three separate parties, strategically staged so that one party would arrive after the other, each one bearing lavish gifts of appeasement (32:6-9, 13-20).
- 3) Alongside his natural measures, Jacob turned to God in prayer, pleading with Him to remember His oath at Bethel to preserve and prosper him in his exile and bring him safely back into the promised land (32:9-12; ref. also 28:13-15).

The significance of Mahanaim is seen in Jacob's duplicity: *He set about securing his own encampment even while acknowledging that place as God's camp.* Jacob knew God was with him there; most importantly, he knew that the Lord's presence reflected His enduring commitment to His oath at Bethel. God swore that He would go with Jacob and preserve and prosper him, but specifically toward the goal of bringing him back to Canaan and fulfilling the promise that his innumerable descendents would possess that land. *It was precisely that promise that Isaac was appealing to in his prayer at the same time that he was seeking to preserve his own life and those of his household.* God had prospered Jacob and given him descendents just as He said He would, and now He was bringing them back to the covenant land (ref. again 31:3-13). Why, then, would he fear for his family and his own well-being? God was about to answer Jacob's petition.

After dispatching the three gift parties and sending his family across the river, Jacob was left alone in his camp; there he was confronted by a man with whom he wrestled until daybreak (32:21-24). Because of its surreal and mysterious character, some have regarded this episode as non-historical. Among other obvious problems with this conclusion, it raises the question of why the inspired writer chose to record it as historical fact if indeed it was not; what did he intend this mythological account to communicate to his Israelite audience?

Despite the interpretive difficulty it presents, this event clearly must be regarded as an historical, physical encounter, for it left Jacob with a permanent physical impairment. This being the case, it's important to determine Jacob's perception of what was transpiring and his intention in wrestling with this strange man. One thing that is immediately evident is that Jacob viewed this individual as representing Yahweh Himself, and this is the reason he wouldn't turn loose of him until he had obtained his blessing (32:26). The man's refusal to declare his name highlights the obviousness of his identity, which Jacob then acknowledged by naming that place *Peniel* – "face of God" (32:29-30; cf. also Hosea 12:3-5). The stranger's divine identity is further substantiated by the fact that he merely touched the socket of Jacob's thigh and it was instantly dislocated. Nevertheless, Jacob managed to prevail over the man so as to obtain his blessing.

Even with his hip out of socket, Jacob refused to let go of his opponent until he had gained a blessing for himself. Yet there was no arrogance toward God in this encounter. The citation in Hosea makes it clear that he sought for the blessing with tears and supplication. *In fact, the Hebrew text of Hosea indicates that Jacob's prevailing was associated with his weeping and supplication, not his physical victory.* Jacob did not fight and overcome God; rather, he implored God's blessing with fervent tenacity and would not "let go" of Him until he had obtained it. The result was that he named the place Peniel and God named him *Israel* ("God prevails" or "he prevails with God") (32:28).

The meaning of this episode becomes evident in the realization that it came in response to Jacob's petition to God to remember His covenant oath and protect him (32:1-12). (This prayer is notable as the longest in the book of Genesis, which serves to spotlight its content.) Jacob was now Israel; he had prevailed with God – not by his own strength, but by virtue of his covenant favor with God – and in that way had received the answer to his prayer: He would indeed triumph over his brother, but because he had first successfully contended with God.

Thus when Jacob went out to Esau, he was met with an eager and joyful reception (33:1-16). All his fearful strategizing had been nothing but foolish unbelief. His God had gone before him and made his way prosperous. And so, departing from Esau, Jacob journeyed on to Shechem where he erected an altar to *his* God who had granted him his petition at Bethel (33:20, cf. 28:10-22). But God had called Jacob to return to his father's house in fulfillment of his vow at Bethel, and his stopping short at Shechem would have disastrous results for the covenant family.