

Jacob Goes to Haran. God's Covenant at Bethel.

Genesis 28:10-22

Jacob in Exile

After having received God Almighty's blessing by Isaac, Jacob left the encampment.

Some time later, Esau went to the *south* to obtain his third wife from the Arabian desert regions; Jacob went to the *north* to get a wife from among his relatives in Haran.

This was no play of fate, but God's providence, fulfilling the word to Rebekah that two nations in her womb would be *divided*—a profound word. This process of division in their ways of life had already become evident in their youth, although the brothers had both been part of one family, even after Esau had married and had set up his tents near those of Isaac. Now they were going separate ways forever, to grow into two nations with distinct religions, habitations, histories, and ways of life. They were not to be one nation out of Isaac, but two: out of Jacob and out of Esau; there was a definite division into the farthest generations.

Jacob, however, remained the blessed one. He, according to the promise, was the father of the generation which, after the flesh, would bring forth the Messiah. In him the promises made to Abraham and Isaac would meet their ongoing fulfilment.

Now it seemed as if he was leaving this further and further behind. He had become an exile, fleeing far from the promised land in fear of Esau. He possessed nothing but his provisions, his clothing, and his staff. He received no caravan to command. No escort brought him to the borders of the

land. He did not even have a mount: he had to make the journey on foot. This we discover from 29:1, where a literal translation would be: “Then Jacob lifted his feet,” a beautiful expression from the Mideast, meaning: he marched away.

Why like this? We should not overemphasize it—in ancient days people knew what walking was, and with their leisurely lifestyle, they could find the time for it. Still, it seems strange that the son of a prince among herdsmen left his father’s house as a penniless pauper. Abraham, when he left his father’s house, had had great wealth. Isaac had received an enormous inheritance. But Jacob had nothing, and had no prospects for future inheritance. We can only state that God, in His providence, led things in this way, and see, in the light of Scripture, the fulfilment of the persecution of Abraham’s seed, as it had already begun in Abraham’s tent by the hand of Ishmael, by the Philistines, and had continued, especially in Jacob’s life, until it would come to its climax in Egypt.

God’s Revelation at Bethel

When Jacob had walked for several days, following the trade routes established by the caravans, he arrived at a place near Luz, almost 100 kilometres north of Beersheba, where he laid himself down to sleep because the sun had set.

He lay down, wrapped in his cloak, with a stone as his pillow. In those times, and in that area, it was not uncommon to sleep under the stars, but this description in Jacob’s case, gives a picture of poverty and misery.

That night the LORD revealed Himself to him. In this revelation we can clearly distinguish the *sign* from the *covenant confirmation* with its *personal promise*.

a. The visible sign, which came to him in a dream, was that of a ladder: “Behold, a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven” (KJV). This was the first thing to draw his attention. The ladder was not being set up, and was not being let down—it *was* set up.

“And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!” It should be remarked that all this, the having been set up on the earth, and the ascending from the earth (mentioned first), did not start in heaven, but on earth.

“And behold, the LORD stood above it and said” God revealed Himself—of course in a sign, perhaps in human form.

Take note of the triple “behold.” This is more than just lively narration; it points out the unexpected, that which attracted attention: first that ladder, then the ascending and also the descending angels becoming visible, and then the sudden revelation of the speaking God, glorious in the sign of His appearance.

It is clear that Jacob was shown that there is a roadway connecting heaven and earth.

This is illuminated by what we read in John 1:52, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” The Lord Christ has rightly been called the “Ladder of Jacob.” Through His sacrifice on the cross, He is the Way to the Father for us who have become alienated from God through sin. He is the ladder that has been set up on Golgotha. On this ladder the angels ascend and descend to serve the elect according to the instructions they have received to lead them and to protect them (Genesis 32:1, 2; 2 Kings 6:17; Psalm 91:11; Matthew 18:10; John 20:12; Acts 10:22; etc.). Jacob did not fully realize this: that Christ is the ladder that has been set up on the earth. Jesus says this looking to the future. Jacob did see the roadway in the sign of the ladder. Later he would see a multitude of angels who had descended to protect him (32:1, 2).

b. “And God said” What follows is the confirmation of the covenant and a personal promise for Jacob.

“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 descendants; and your descendants 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 by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.*”

In this Abrahamic blessing, which had also been confirmed to Isaac, we discover no really new elements. We do notice, and this is new, that the blessing given to Abraham and to Isaac only mentions “by you” (12:3) or “by your descendants” (22:18; 26:4), which in this last case already existed; but in this blessing given to Jacob we find both: “by you and your descendants.” *Jacob was not yet a patriarch, and did not have any children yet.* His life history was still included in the toledoth (history) of Isaac. But here God affirmed what had already been stated in Jacob’s blessing by Isaac (28:4), that he would function as head of the family, and also that he would bring forth the seed. Here Jacob saw his future, intended as a rich comfort to him.

The LORD also gave him a personal blessing for the present and the near future: “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 that of which I have spoken to you.” These last words mean: “I will *never* leave you.” This personal blessing also, is preceded by the word “behold,” that is, “take note”; and the word “I” receives the emphasis. Jacob had to remember constantly that the LORD Himself would always keep, protect, and lead him, both on his journey and on his return. We can deduce from this promise that Jacob, in his misery, was in definite need of such comfort, and would also be in need of it in the future, in a land strange to him. Joshua also would later receive this comfort (Joshua 1 :5b, 9b). Is God not the God of comfort for all His people?

Jacob’s Vow

When he awoke, Jacob said: “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” It was a special surprise to have met the LORD, Who had revealed Himself to him. This also was something new: Isaac had not received a revelation until after the death of Abraham (26:2); before that only Abraham was spoken to. Jacob, on the other hand, now already received a revelation, while Isaac lived. Although Isaac was still the patriarch, God already came to Jacob, and since then, the LORD repeatedly revealed Himself to Jacob: in Haran, at Peniel, and after his return to

Canaan. As far as Isaac was concerned, we read no more about it. In his 180-year existence, his life slowly faded out, and with his life, his patriarchy, while the LORD was already attracting Jacob, revealing Himself to him, and making *him* head of the seed, blessing him with children and slaves and cattle in multitude; in short, with new and rich possessions; since he could no longer count on his father's inheritance. He became: *Jacob the blessed one*.

Jacob became afraid upon awaking. "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

When it had become day, Jacob sanctified that stone and also the place where he was, and named it Bethel, that is, House of God, a name later given to the town of Luz.

Jacob vowed to bring the LORD a sacrifice of thanksgiving, when he had received that which had been promised, and when he had safely returned to the house of his father: the LORD would be a God to him—which indicates lasting service out of love; the stone which had been set up would serve as a permanent reminder of a Bethel; and he would faithfully give tithes of all that God would give him. The poor exile at the moment had no more to give than a thankful heart.

If we read this narrative, it becomes clear that the LORD has made a new start: the lonely Jacob, by God's special providence, goes to Haran, there to be made a blessing as the father of a widespread people—the start of the formation of a congregation in the multitude of Isaac's one seed.

Questions

1. If we only consider human actions, is there a reasonable explanation for the fact that Jacob was sent away empty-handed?
2. Why did Jacob not see a ladder coming down from heaven, but rather a ladder set up on the earth?
3. Give some examples of the work of angels in the service of the Church in the Old and New Testaments.

4. (Verse 16) May we say that Jacob thought God only dwelt in the camp of Isaac, there where the sacrifices were made?
5. (Verse 17) How can this fear be explained?
6. What might have happened to Isaac's earthly inheritance?
7. (Verse 20) May we say that Jacob was putting God to the test?
8. (Verse 22) What did Jacob imagine concerning the time of his return to his father's house? Compare 27:43ff.