

From Shechem to Bethel and Mamre

Genesis 35

Back to Bethel

Jacob's journey to Shechem has been an error in his life, and his long stay in the extensive region, where, not far from his encampment, he dug a well of the purest, most sweet-tasting water (John 4:5, 11, 12) which no tourist passes by without tasting, led to religious decline and an immoral lifestyle. His family, moreover, would have been destroyed by the surrounding populace, because of the murder and senseless looting of the city, and the taking into captivity of the women and children, had not God stepped in miraculously to save Isaac's seed.

“Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there; and make there an altar to the God Who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.”

As weakly as he had acted before, and finally, overwhelmed by grief on account of the swift sequence of events, no longer seeing a way out (partly his own fault), so clearly he showed his strength now.

He commanded all who were with him to put away their strange gods, first Rachel's teraphim, undoubtedly, and those of the people of the household who had followed her in this sin, but also, probably, those of the captive Shechemite women. Also, he commanded them to purify themselves, that is, their hearts, and therefore also, to change their clothing. Furthermore, he urged them on to Bethel, there to perform their altar-service to the God Who had saved him from distress.

This order had effect. Strange gods and ear-amulets were given up, and buried by Jacob under the oak which was near Shechem. This oak, pos-

sibly, was the same one mentioned in 12:6, because these trees have a very long life-span. Then they dismantled the tents, and, safely guided, journeyed to Bethel.

There an altar was erected and the place was called El-Bethel (the God of Bethel), because He had revealed Himself there when Jacob had been fleeing from Esau. There this God now appeared with a rich revelation of the Word, in which Jacob's name, Israel, was again specifically mentioned, and the Abrahamic blessing was slightly expanded to include Jacob. When God had gone up from Jacob, Jacob erected a pillar of remembrance, poured out a drink offering (of wine?) and oil on the stone to sanctify it, and again called the place Bethel.

Hosea 12:4 reads: "He found him at Bethel, and there He spake with us" (KJV). The word *us* indicates that posterity could share in the blessing. Not at Shechem would God let Himself be found, but at Bethel, the legitimate place of worship, where God had appeared before. Peniel was where he had *seen* God, Bethel was where God had repeatedly *spoken* the rich words of promise.

The Death of Deborah

Very soberly, Moses, in verse 8, noted the death of Deborah, once the nurse of Rebekah (cf. 24:59). She had lived approximately 160 years. This faithful housekeeper had been taken up by Jacob in his family; perhaps after one of those occasions on which he, leaving his camp in Succoth under the supervision of his trusted old household slave, visited his parent's home. We can deduce that Rebekah had already died (49:31). Deborah was buried under an oak which received the name: "Oak of Weeping." This indicates how much she was bewailed; we can deduce that she occupied an honoured place in the camp because of her pious life-style, her pointing to the promise, and her warnings. Her grave was below Bethel, that is, at the foot of the hill. We should notice that Scripture connects the time of Deborah's death with that of the appearance of God. Deborah's going is followed by God's coming. This short narrative also indicates how much respect was accorded to the older generation by the younger generation, even to a household slave.

The Death of Rachel

Jacob then travels on in a southerly direction until he comes to his father. A few incidents of this journey are mentioned:

First, the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel. This happened on the road to *Ephrath*, then the name for Bethlehem. Rachel bore her second son. The first she had named Joseph: “May the Lord add to me another son.” Now, about fifteen years later, she *receives* the second. Jacob had been 97 when he left Haran, so he will now have been about 107. The birth was difficult and resulted in her death. Dying, Rachel called her little son: *Benoni* (son of my sorrow, child of misfortune), but his father called him *Benjamin* (son of my right hand, child of joy). He, without doubt, saw this child in the light of Bethel. In remembrance, Jacob erected a pillar on her grave. Nowadays tourists still look at the so-called “Rachel’s Tomb.”

She had been Jacob’s beloved. From the first, her beauty had attracted him, and her femininity had enthralled him. She had also had a desire: to become the mother of a tribe. Now it was her repeated motherhood that had become her death. Her dying lament echoed through the ages (Jeremiah 31:15-17, Matthew 2:17ff.). She is known as the lamenting one, but then, for her children, her people, comfortless, because her children were no more. Her sorrow found its fulfilment in the sorrow of the mothers whose children had been murdered by Herod. Hatred had been directed against the Christ, in Whom the comfort had been given of victory over Satan’s fury against the people of God. It should be noticed that the suffering of the nation born out of Rachel—here we can say: Israel—is seen here as being that of Rachel. Scripture connects the people of Jeremiah’s time, and those from Bethlehem, with Rachel.

Let us not overlook that it was *Rachel* who was the mother of Joseph, by divine providence inheritor of the birthright (Genesis 49:3, 4; 1 Chronicles 5:1). Because of his sin, Leah’s first-born had to surrender his place to the first-born of Rachel. Subsequent history shows how three tribes issued from Rachel: Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin. The first two were the most central, most important tribes (after Judah), and the last became part of the Kingdom of Judah. God, Who determines history, from the very beginning of Israel’s emergence as a nation, has drawn

the base, and the line from Rachel to the Christ. For Him, the Creator of history, (and what for us is most important) the Creator of the history of salvation, history is one wondrous unity.

Reuben's Shameful Act

A second incident on the journey was that Reuben, during the stopover at the Tower of Eder (a place unknown to us), raped Jacob's concubine Bilhah, and that Jacob (called Israel here) heard of it. No more is said here, but later, just before he died, the patriarch withheld the birthright from Reuben, as a punishment. It is very remarkable that Jacob is called Israel in this one place: as *Israel* he travelled on after burying Rachel; as *Israel* he lived near the Tower of Eder; as *Israel* he heard of Reuben's deed. Here we see Jacob in the strength of faith.

Jacob with Isaac. End of Isaac's History

The journey from Shechem was completed, after several interruptions, at *Mamre* near Kiriath-Arba, that is, Hebron, where Isaac was encamped. There Jacob stayed (37:14). When he had gone to Paddan-aram about 30 years previously, the camp had been at *Beersheba* (28:10).

But first Scripture describes Jacob's *family*, the family of the man whom we have just read of as Israel (35:21, 22). That this list of names is placed *here* and not, for example, at the end of the chapter, after Isaac's death, and before the history of Esau, seems strange at first. This list of names would have been a nice conclusion to the history of Isaac if it had been placed at the end, to show, once again, how greatly his seed had multiplied. Indeed, it is the opinion of some that this list is in the wrong place.

Added to this:

1. The names are grouped according to the four mothers, in this order: *Leah*, *Rachel*, *Bilhah* (Rachel's slave), and *Zilpah* (Leah's slave), not according to age; moreover, Dinah, the daughter, is not mentioned.
2. Of *all* these sons we read: ". . . were born to him in Paddan-aram." But that doesn't apply to Benjamin, does it?
3. Here *Jacob* is the name used, while immediately preceding this, we read *Israel*, three times.

There is no lack of critical “explanations,” but with those methods one violates the Scriptures and comes to no unity. The conclusion then, in fact, is: “We do not know.” But then one ignores the prophetic character of these historical books also, in the sense that they, too, in presenting historical facts, have a message to all times and people. Through the history of salvation we receive instruction from the Holy Spirit, the true Author of the Scriptures. Then it becomes clear from what we can note, that we do not have to do with just a list of names, but a short description—moreover, of the *state of being of Jacob’s family*, with which he arrived in Mamre.

Concerning the remark that they were all born in Paddan-aram—and this applies also to the four mothers!—it indicates that a paganized Haran had made its impression on them, as they showed clearly at Shechem, where the deterioration in worship and religious lifestyle had been terrible. They were encompassed by the bond of God’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but it also applies to children of the covenant that, “that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). Flesh, in this context, indicates the sensual, the sinful way of life of the natural man, directed away from God; only those born of God are spiritual. It was to this family unit that Benjamin belonged, born, as he was, from his mother. The family was not a family of Israel, but of Jacob, even though Jacob had received a new name. Compare Ezekiel 16:3. “Your origin and your birth are of the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite”; which means that the Amorites and Hittites had so impressed their stamp on Abraham’s seed that the Amorite and Hittite could be called father and mother of the godless offspring.

With such a family, its image given in this list of names, Jacob came to his father Isaac. It wasn’t much to speak of. But so much the more may we glory in God’s mercy and faithfulness, that He, in spite of it all, included this people in His covenant and gave it His promise—for the sake of Christ, Who, after the flesh, would be born of it.

At the age of 180, a few years later, Isaac died, old and full of days. He had been permitted to meet his manifold seed.

Jacob had carried the light of God's faithfulness to Mamre.

There Isaac's fading evening-sun set.

Esau and Jacob went to bury their father in the cave which also contained the bones of Abraham.

Questions

1. (35:2) Why are the false gods called "strange gods"?
2. (35:2) Is the heart's purity reflected on the outside, for example, in clothing? in amulets? in superfluous ornaments? (cf. 1 Peter 3:3, 4). If so, does it still apply today?
3. (35:7) Was it not idolatry to name a place after God?
4. What was the name of the place nearby where God had appeared?
5. How should we understand that appearance?
6. (35:9) What should we consider to be the meaning of "again"? What was the first time, and what was the second?
7. (35:8) Can we say of Deborah, as of her namesake (Judges 5:7), that she was a mother in Israel (here: Jacob's house)? Why, or why not?
8. The Scriptures do not say whether Rachel was saved. Why not?
9. What did Joseph's birthright include? (Genesis 49:3).
10. How old were Esau and Jacob when Isaac died?