
GENESIS 24-36

Lesson 5, Old Testament, Adult Religion Class, Tuesday, 27 Sep 2011

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INTRODUCTION

We are introduced to Abraham as a fully obedient, fully formed servant of God. These chapters cover the stories of his son, Isaac and grandson, Jacob, who we get to see go through that personal development process—especially Jacob. Isaac is an enigmatic figure, whose greatest claims to fame include not resisting being a human sacrifice and getting fooled into blessing the wrong son. We have the least information about Isaac of any patriarch and much of what we do have echoes adventures of his own father. On the other hand, Jacob is the most developed character of any in Genesis. We see him in his youth learning hard lessons, watch him mature and grow in understanding, and see his journey to a relationship with the Lord that will finally result in him becoming Israel, the father of a nation that takes on his own name.

Alma asked, “Have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances?”

Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?” (Alma 5:14). This is Jacob's struggle, one he resisted at first but eventually embraced. Alma said another time words that summarize Jacob's quest: “And now I would that ye should be humble, and be submissive and gentle; easy to be entreated; full of patience and long-suffering; being temperate in all things; being diligent in keeping the commandments of God at all times; asking for whatsoever things ye stand in need, both spiritual and temporal; always returning thanks unto God for whatsoever things ye do receive” (Alma 7:23).

In that sense, the story of Jacob is the story of each of us, for we are each called to know God, worship and follow him, and receive his greatest blessings—but must learn to humble ourselves and give up all that holds us back from those blessings along the way.

ISAAC AND REBEKAH (24:1-67)

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 24 is the longest chapter in Genesis, telling a complex story of covenant, travel, inspiration, decision, and marriage. Here Abraham finally moved forward to secure a wife for his heir, Isaac, so that the Lord's promises to him could be fulfilled in the next generation.

We learn that Isaac was about **forty years old** at this time (Genesis 25:20), a time which could be literal or just mean 'a really long time.' Either way, why did Abraham wait so long to get him a wife? The record offers no answer and no account of prior marriages or children; Isaac simply appears to have been single until forty (as will be his sons, Esau and Jacob). Perhaps he did it out of loyalty to his mother, caring for her and Abraham until his mother passed away. The text does not give a sense of Rebekah's age when they marry, but since she was a young woman not yet married, she was likely twenty or more years Isaac's junior (Olson 52).

Why does Abraham feel so strongly about Isaac **marrying** someone from his **family**? This account

(and that of Jacob later) are sometimes cited as examples of the need to marry in the covenant, yet none of the wives were actually 'in the covenant' until after their marriage to a man of the covenant line. In fact, evidence is that their families were idol worshippers and thus at best, polytheists who may have accepted YHWH as part of their pantheon of gods (Genesis 31:19; 35:2). So why marry an idol-worshipping family member living far away instead of a local idol-worshipping woman? Perhaps because Abraham had learned that the current inhabitants of the land of Canaan were going to eventually be destroyed and his family would inherit the land, so he didn't want to mix with them and risk part of his family being lost in that judgment (Keil 1:164-165). It may have been tied to a desire to keep the inheritance to a tight group of family members (Zondervan 100). Additionally, God had instructed Abraham that the covenant was strictly with his family, so seeking to keep grand-children in the same line strengthened the covenant (cf. Genesis 17:7-10).

COMMENTARY

As he was getting older, Abraham called his "eldest servant" to him and put him under covenant to **get Isaac a wife** from among his extended family, not the Canaanites. Some have assumed the servant is Eliezer, referenced in Genesis 15:2, but the name of the servant is not given and is thus not known. The covenant is made by the servant placing his hand under Abraham's **thigh**. This practice is not known in any other ancient documents, though it is repeated later with Jacob and Joseph (Genesis 47:29). Some scholars think "thigh" may be a euphemism for genitals, making the oath somehow binding after the person's death (perhaps tying to Abraham's circumcision covenant), but nothing is certain (Zondervan 1:100). Interestingly, the JST changes "thigh" to

"hand" here, which makes more sense to modern readers—putting hands together as a symbol of agreement—but it is left as "thigh" in Genesis 47:29.

Abraham's entreaty has the appearance of a **deathbed request**, and the servant taking Rebekah directly to Isaac without his master's involvement leads some to suggest that Abraham might have died during the trip. But if Genesis 25:7-8 is to be believed, Abraham didn't die for thirty-five more years, living long enough to see both Esau and Jacob as teenagers. Perhaps Abraham was just very ill at the time and feared death but recovered to live many more years.

The area to which the servant had to travel was some 850 miles from Hebron. Called "Nahor" in

the text (v. 10), it is also known as “**Paddan Aram**” (plains of Aram; 25:20; 28:2) or “**Aram Naharaim**” (Aram of the two rivers, this verse in the Hebrew). It was located at the place in upper Mesopotamia near where both the Tigris and Euphrates rivers began. Haran and Nahor were on separate tributaries of the Euphrates river, near Mari and Nuzi (Zondervan 101).

The servant’s requested sign and Rebekah’s subsequent act of giving **water to the camels** was not only unusual but a substantial amount of work. The servant brought ten camels on the journey. Each camel would typically consume twenty-five to thirty gallons after a long walk. If Rebekah’s water pitcher was typical, it could hold five gallons, meaning that she had to fill and empty it perhaps sixty times to fully water all the camels (Olson 51).

In a JST change to v. 16, Rebekah becomes not just a virgin (“neither had any man known her” in the KJV) but the **most beautiful** and remarkable women the servant had ever seen: “And the damsel being a virgin, very fair to look upon, such as the servant of Abraham had not seen, neither had any man known the like unto her.”

Recognizing that she had fulfilled the requested sign, the servant at first wondered (“pondering in his heart” in the JST, v. 21) if it could be true. He gave her “a golden **earring**” (v. 22). This is actually a nose ring, worn pinched to the right nostril, highly favored in that day. The two bracelets were probably symbolic of marriage, one for each the bride and the groom. The value of the

gifts was large (enough to purchase five slaves) and thus indicative of Abraham and Isaac’s wealth and thus the assurance for Rebekah to enjoy a comfortable life (Olson 54; Zondervan 101-102). Finally, he confirmed that Abraham’s conditions were met—he needed to learn her family and her availability. Once he determined both were what he sought, he thanked YHWH for the blessing and she ran to tell her family of this stranger’s appearance and gifts.

Laban’s negotiating indicates that Rebekah’s father, Bethuel, had already passed away (in spite of a reference to him speaking in v. 50, which is probably a scribal mistake). What is unusual was for the woman to be consulted when the servant wanted to leave immediately and the family wished her to stay for at least ten more days. Rebekah’s response, “**I will go**” (v. 58), is reminiscent of Nephi’s response to his father when asked to go back and get the brass plates (1 Nephi 3:7), a ready example of someone willing to follow the Lord’s will.

The **first encounter** between Isaac and Rebekah is a fun description of events. Isaac was mediating and watching (it may have been two months since the servant departed—did he go out each day looking for the caravan?); Rebekah spotted him first, getting off the camel and putting on her veil. Other women were in the group (at least one) so Isaac would not have known which was his bride until they drew close enough to inquire, but she had time to look him over first. They were soon married, Rebekah bringing comfort to Isaac “after his mother’s death” (v. 67).

ABRAHAM AND KETURAH (25:1-6)

COMMENTARY

The sometimes-overlooked third wife of Abraham, **Keturah**, bore him the most children. Nothing is known of her except that she was his concubine (6), meaning she was a wife but that she and her children had lesser status (Zondervan 103). The text documents that Isaac was still the heir, receiving “all that [Abraham] had” (5) but Abraham generously exceeded what custom required and gave the other

sons gifts and sent them away to live in the east. The sons listed are the nations of many areas east of Canaan. One son was named **Midian**, who may have been an ancestor of Jethro, who ordained Moses to the priesthood. Thus one of Abraham’s gifts for his sons seems to have been the teachings of the gospel and the priesthood (Rasmussen 54).

ABRAHAM'S DEATH (25:7-11)

COMMENTARY

“The days of the years” (7) is a literal translation of the phrase in Hebrew, *yôm šānāh*. It only occurs here and in Genesis 47:9. The JST changes it to “the numbers of the years,” which is a good English rendition of the meaning of the phrase. The same change is made in 25:7 speaking of Ishmael, though the Hebrew there is different, and 47:9 is left unchanged.

Abraham's death at **175** means that he lived long enough to see Esau and Jacob reach their fifteenth birthdays.

The KJV phrase “**gave up the ghost**” (8) is a poetic rendering of the simple Hebrew phrase, meaning

he ‘expired.’ The King James translators changed the Geneva (1560) Bible's phrasing, “Abraham yielded the spirit.”

Isaac and Ishmael acted together to bury their father in the same cave as Sarah, in the field of Machpelah, which Abraham had purchased when his wife died (23:1-20).

After his father's death, the record indicates that Isaac lived near the well named “Lahai-roi,” which is where Hagar had encountered the angel (16:14).

GENERATIONS OF ISHMAEL (25:12-18)

COMMENTARY

The *tôlēdāt* (story) of Ishmael recounts his many descendants. As Abraham had been promised (17:20), Ishmael had twelve sons, here listed using

medieval names and titles—“princes” and “castles,” similar to Esau's descendants (Genesis 36). Ishmael lived to be 137.

GENERATIONS OF ISAAC (25:19 – 35:29)

INTRODUCTION

The *tôlēdāt* (story) of Isaac (25:19) is really the story of Jacob, just as the story of Terah was that of his son, Abraham (Genesis 11:27).

The order of the preceding accounts is the reverse of their importance, in terms of the history of

Israel: first, Keturah and her sons (25:1-6); then Ishmael and his family (25:12-18); then Isaac and his family (this section).

COMMENTARY

ESAU AND JACOB BORN (25:19-28)

Like her mother-in-law, Rebekah **could not conceive** at first. Twenty years after she and Isaac were married, there was still no child. Finally the

sixty-year-old Isaac “intreated the Lord for his wife” (21), and she became pregnant.

In verses 21-22, the JST makes two changes that clarify the story. In the KJV, Isaac prayed to the Lord because she was barren; the JST adds “that

she might bare children,” making explicit the request. Then, as the twins struggled within (her “womb,” adds the JST, which is exactly how other modern translations render the Hebrew there), Rebekah said in the KJV, “**If it be so, why am I thus?**” The meaning of this Hebrew is uncertain (JSB 53). The JST helps by rephrasing, “If I am with child, why is it thus with me?” In other words, the Lord has granted their petition and given her a pregnancy, but the pregnancy is very hard (probably because of the twins). The NIV renders it, “Why is this happening to me?”

When Rebekah asked the Lord about her troubles, she learned that she was carrying twins and that the “elder shall serve the younger” (23). The wording of the verse suggests she sought the Lord’s word at a place of worship (“she went to enquire,” v. 22), perhaps one of Abraham’s altars? It’s not clear if she ever shared this revelation with Isaac—he certainly didn’t treat Jacob as this prophesy indicated until much later.

“**Esau**” (עֶשָׂו) is related to the Hebrew word for ‘hair’; the nation that comes from him, Edom, also reflects his appearance, relating to the word for ‘red’ (JSB 53).

Jacob’s name is rich in meaning and reflects his complex personality. *ya ʿaqov* is related to the Hebrew *ʿāqev* or heel, since he grabbed his brother’s heel while being born. Thus the meaning of the name is ‘heel holder,’ which is a metaphor for ‘supplanter’ (BDB 785). Many think his name is also a shortened form of the word *ya ʿaqob-ʿel*, meaning, ‘may God protect’ (JSB 53). Thus Jacob’s name symbolizes both the trickery he will experience and God’s overarching protection of him through whom the covenant will be carried.

The story records that “Esau was a cunning hunter” and Jacob stayed near camp, being “a plain man” (27). “**Plain**” is the same word otherwise translated as “complete” or “perfect” (Student Manual 85), meaning that Jacob was an upright individual.

We are told that “Isaac loved [or preferred] Esau” because of his “venison” (meaning ‘hunting’) but

Rebekah preferred Jacob, thus setting us up for the events of chapter 27.

SELLING THE BIRTHRIGHT (25:29-34)

Jacob was cooking stew one day when Esau returned from hunting, very hungry. Asking for food, Jacob saw this as an opportunity to ask for the birthright. This is likely not the first time they had had this discussion, for Jacob would not have asked for such a big thing for such a small price if he didn’t already believe that Esau was ready to make the trade.

The **birthright** included two elements. First, the person received a **double-portion** of the inheritance. For example, if there were two sons, the birthright son received two-thirds and the other son one-third. Second, the birthright was a **responsibility** to care for the family upon the death of the patriarch. This required him to perform a variety of functions, including negotiating marriages, caring for widows and orphans, redeeming anyone in the family that might be in debt or slavery, and caring for his mother. Ancient law (as discovered in the Nuzi texts) indicate that the father could legally bestow the birthright on any son he chose and that the birthright owner could sell some or all of the birthright like any other commodity. Both of these actions come into play in the story of Jacob and Esau. Esau did not value the birthright (he “despised” it (34), meaning ‘regarded it with contempt’) nor likely did he want the responsibilities it entailed, so he readily sold it for to Jacob for a low price. Isaac later confirmed the birthright on Jacob, essentially making him the ‘oldest son’ in title (Olson 59-60).

ISAAC AND THE COVENANT (26:1-35)

This is the only chapter that gives us many **details of Isaac’s life**. In most other texts, he is acting either as Abraham’s son or Esau and Jacob’s father. Because of this lack of information about Isaac as an individual, he is sometimes thought of as the ‘invisible’ patriarch, whose role was just to carry the blessing from his father to his son (though see Joseph Smith’s comment below).

When a **famine** began, Isaac was inclined to go to Egypt as his father had done, but the Lord specifically instructed him not to (2-3). Then the Lord extended the covenant of Abraham to Isaac: “for unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I swore unto Abraham thy father” (3). Isaac was promised seed “as the stars of heaven” and that through him “shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (4).

Joseph Smith wrote to his uncle Silas Smith in 1833 that “Isaac the promised seed was not required to rest his hope upon the promises made to his father Abraham but was privileged with the assurance of his approbation in the sight of Heaven by the direct voice of the Lord to him...he was more holy and more perfect before God and came to him with a purer heart and more faith than in this day” (Jessee 322).

So instead of going to Egypt on account of the famine, Isaac went to **Gerar**, which is on the way to Egypt at the southern edge of what would later be Philistine territory. The king of Gerar was named **Abimelech**—the same name as the king Abraham encountered but not the same person, as it was many years later. Unlike his father, there is no indication that Isaac’s statement of Rebekah being his **sister** was something the Lord commanded him to do. In fact, when finally confronted (after the king saw him “sporting” or “caressing” [NASB] his wife), the JST has Isaac explain that he “feared” being killed (cf. v. 7). But whether he was just following his father’s example or following an unrecorded command from God, the Lord had no chastisement for Isaac’s action, but instead blesses him greatly (12).

The rest of the chapter recounts how Isaac and **Abimelech** contended over **wells**—an important asset in that dry part of the world—showing Isaac’s patience and endurance. The first well they contended over he named “Esek” which means ‘contention’; the second “Sitnah,” meaning ‘harassment’; the third one he was finally able to use, so he called it “Rehoboth,” or ‘wide places,’ meaning there was finally plenty of room.

The Lord appeared to Isaac at night and the second time promised the covenant of Abraham to him (24), causing Isaac to build an altar and worship the Lord there. He also started digging a new well. At that time, **Abimelech** and his chiefs came to Isaac, acknowledging Isaac’s material success and asking for a **truce** after the well-digging contention of before. Generously, Isaac offered them a feast and they made oaths of peace to each other. Shortly after Abimelech’s departure, Isaac’s servants told him they had found water in the new well, causing Isaac to name it “Shebah, “meaning ‘an oath’ (or ‘seven’) (33). This is how the town of Beersheba got its name (*bēʾēr*, meaning ‘well’).

JACOB BLESSED BY ISAAC (27:1-40)

Fearing his death may be near, **Isaac called Esau** to him and asked him to hunt some game and make some good meat, then Isaac would bless his son. When Esau left to hunt, Rebekah, who had heard the conversation, found Jacob and told her they needed to make some meat for Isaac, dress Jacob as Esau, and send him to get the blessing before Esau returned.

To the modern reader, Rebekah’s and Jacob’s actions appear deceitful and manipulative. Their goal seemed to be to **trick Isaac** to get what they wanted. But to the ancient reader, their acts are commendable. Rebekah had already been told by God that Jacob was to be the leader (Genesis 25:23). The text indicates that Isaac favored Esau (Genesis 25:28), making the reader wonder how the promise to Jacob would be fulfilled. Furthermore, Esau had already sold the birthright to Jacob. God’s revealed plan for his covenant people was thus at risk of being thwarted by Isaac’s favoritism. Rebekah and Jacob acted decisively to put things back on track. Thus in that perspective, they did not so much trick Isaac as guide him to the correct action. That Isaac knew this in the end is evident by his initial reaction (he could have easily rescinded the blessing and still given it to Esau) and his later conferring the full Abrahamic covenant on Jacob (Genesis 28:1-4) (see Olson 61; *Student Manual* 85-86). This story begins to display the rich meaning of **Jacob’s**

name, as he works to supplant Esau from Isaac's preference while still striving to be protected by God.

Note that Jacob characterized the Lord as "thy God" (20) at this stage. Jacob's progressing **relationship with the Lord** begins with this event, then moves through conditional acceptance in chapter 28 and finally to full acceptance in chapter 32.

Some Jewish commentators have noted a tradition that Esau had already received **Adam's garment** from his father and would have worn it for this blessing. Thus Rebekah's efforts to adorn Jacob in the finest clothing she had and put goat skins on him was an attempt to dress him in a mocked-up version of that ancient covenant garment, that Isaac might be convinced of his identity (Olson 60-61).

Jacob's and Esau's **blessings** (28-29, 39-40) both include "the dew of heaven" and "the fat of the earth." Jacob's, though, is about lordship over his family, his enemies, and even nations. Esau's blessing affirms that he will serve Jacob for a time but will eventually throw off the yoke of that servitude. **Edom** and Israel proved to be enemies over the years, with Israel often having the upper hand. But finally with the siege of Jerusalem under Nebuchadrezzar, the Edomites joined him and defeated their long-standing enemy. Later their culture reappears through Idumea, but after the Roman siege of Jerusalem in AD 70, they are never heard of again.

JACOB GOES TO LABAN (27:41 – 28:9)

Jacob's deception greatly angered Esau, who swore to **kill** his brother after his father's death. Fearing that this might be soon, Rebekah convinced Isaac that Jacob needed to go to her family in the north to find a wife. Both were upset with Esau's marriage to a local woman. Rebekah only intended for Jacob to be gone "a few days" (44) but he ended up leaving for twenty years and perhaps never saw his mother again.

Isaac agreed with the plan and called Jacob, giving him instructions to go to Padan-aram to the house

of Rebekah's brother, Laban, and there find a wife. **Isaac blessed him** to be fruitful, and passed on Abraham's blessing as he had received it, before sending Jacob away.

JACOB'S VISION AT BETH-EL (28:10-22)

The journey from Beersheba to Haran was similar to the one made by Abraham's servant when he found Rebekah. Knowing that story may have motivated Jacob to keep going during the long trip, which would have taken him perhaps several weeks. Along the way, he stopped at a certain location to rest. Making a pillow of rocks, Jacob slept and had a **dream**, seeing a **ladder** (or 'ramp'—think Mesopotamian ziggurat [JSB 58; Zondervan 106]) reaching up to heaven, with angels going up and down. The angels are descending from God, delivering their messages to the world, then returning to report their actions (Zondervan 106). Looking into heaven, Jacob saw God, who spoke, saying he was YHWH, the god of Abraham and Isaac. The Lord reiterated the Abrahamic covenant, applying it directly to Jacob, making the promises unconditional.

When Jacob awoke, he was frightened, exclaiming "this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (17). So he took his pillow-rocks and made a shrine, pouring oil on it to mark the spot. He called the location Beth-el ('house of El'), a name Abraham had also encountered in his travels.

President **Marion G. Romney** explained that the steps of the ladder for Jacob represented the covenant steps he needed to take to see the fulfillment of the promised blessings (Student Manual 86). Indeed, it is clear from the account that this was Jacob's first real step toward a personal relationship with the Lord, a relationship which would change him in many ways.

But he was not there yet. After the dream, Jacob vowed a **conditional vow**: 'If God will be with me, and protect me, and give me food and clothing and return me safely to my father's house, then I will accept YHWH as my god and pay my tithing' (20-21 paraphrased). The key word is that first "If." Jacob wanted the blessings first, then he would

accept God. But the Lord had yet more to teach Jacob that would help him become an unconditional servant. (Note that Jacob returns to this place to fulfill part of his promise in chapter 35).

JACOB MARRIES (29:1-30)

Continuing his journey, Jacob finally arrived at perhaps the same well where his grandfather's servant had found his mother. History did providently repeat itself in a way—a young woman came to the well while a man waited. **Rachel** came to water her brother's sheep, arriving just as the others had told Jacob that she was Laban's daughter. But this time it was the visitor that watered the animals of the resident, as Jacob (with the strength of many men) moved the stone and watered all of Rachel's sheep. With that task completed, "Jacob kissed Rachel," and wept (11). Explaining who he was, she ran for her brother, Laban, who came and invited Jacob into his home.

After living there and working for a month, **Laban** in essence **changed the relationship**. He offered to start paying a wage to Jacob, treating him not like a valued family member but like a hired servant. Jacob took it in stride; the two negotiated a marriage contract—**seven years** labor for Rachel's hand. But this was the first example of Laban's manipulative tactics to turn things to his own advantage.

Rachel had an older sister, Leah (some believe they were twins, like Jacob and Esau). The description that she was "**tender eyed**" is understood variously. Some translations say she had "weak eyes" (e.g., NASB and NIV), while others say "lovely eyes" (e.g., NAB, NJB). So it's not clear if her eyes were a handicap of some kind or her best asset.

Jacob loved Rachel (18, 20). When the seven years ended, Laban threw a huge **wedding feast**. The JST adds that before the feast, he gave Rachel to Jacob, implying a wedding contract, which was common in that time. But Laban switched the women, substituting his oldest daughter for the promised Rachel. Was Rachel willingly complicit

in the deception or forced to silently watch as Jacob married and took Leah into his tent? The text offers no insight from her perspective. But when Jacob discovered the deceit in the morning, he was understandably outraged. The reader sees the fairness in this—the trickster was the recipient of a colossal trick. Knowing he was in a weak position—he had broken the contract—Laban agreed to giving Rachel to Jacob also in a week, though he had to serve another seven years after the fact.

Laban's gift of **handmaids** (slaves) to his two daughters was the only dowry he gave them, but it provided each ownership over the other women (Olson 69). Thus later when children were born to them, they were the property of Leah and Rachel, not Jacob's directly, since a bride's present from her family could never be taken away.

CHILDREN OF JACOB AND HIS WIVES (29:31 – 30:24)

Jacob's preference for Rachel over Leah was a constant source of **tension** in the family, and certainly a struggle for Leah as reflected in the names of her sons. But Rachel's life was not happy either because she was unable to have children. As the number of Leah's sons increased and Rachel had none, each gave their slaves to Jacob. This gave Rachel a claim as a surrogate mother ("she shall bear upon my knees" [30:3], an image seen in statues discovered in our day) and Leah a larger number of sons to call her own.

The **mandrakes** mentioned in 30:14-16 were a plant that were felt to have aphrodisiac powers (Zondervan 109; Olson 71). Rachel wanted them for herself, still trying to conceive, so negotiated with Leah for Jacob's time. Sadly for Rachel, the result was that Leah conceived again, not her.

Finally, "God remembered Rachel" (22) and she bore a son, **Joseph**. Her second son would come much later and his birth would cost her her life.

Jacob's **twelve sons** in birth order are as follows (see Olson, 79-80; Student Manual 87):

Leah's sons:

- Reuben, ('look, a son,' 29:32)
- Simeon ('hearing,' 29:33)
- Levi ('joined,' 29:34)
- Judah ('praise,' 29:35)

Bilhah's sons:

- Dan ('judge,' 30:6)
- Naphtali ('wrestling,' 30:8)

Zilpah's sons:

- Gad ('good fortune' or 'troop,' 30:11)
- Asher ('happy' or 'blessed,' 30:13)

Leah's sons:

- Issachar ('recompense or reward,' 30:18)
- Zebulun ('lofty, high, exalted,' from the same root at 'endowed,' 30:20)

Rachel's sons:

- Joseph ('to add, to take away, to gather,' 30:23-24)
- Benjamin ('son of the right hand,' 35:18)

LABAN'S ANIMALS (30:25-43)

Jacob was ready to take his wife and leave after the first seven years (29:21 implies that, but the JST makes it explicit, with Jacob saying "Give unto me my wife, that I may go and take her, for my days of serving thee are fulfilled"), but stayed when Laban tricked him into also marrying Leah. At the end of the second seven years, he again expressed a desire to go (25-26). Laban told Jacob that he knew "**by experience**" that he had been blessed by YHWH on account of Jacob's service. The phrase translated "by experience" means by divination, omen, or a sign. This is a reflection of Laban's polytheist belief system, which was similar to his neighbors. The deal they cut was for Jacob to get the "**speckled and spotted**" sheep and goats. With that as payment, he would care for all of Laban's animals. Normally sheep were white and goats black, with very few deviations. Over time, Jacob employed a system that was a reflection of that time's superstition but is known to do nothing today. Still, he carefully bred the stronger animals and culled out the weaker ones, thereby increasing his own herds more so than Laban's. This story represents yet another

example of cunning and trickery between these two men.

DEPARTURE FROM ARAM (31:1-55)

Overhearing Laban's sons complaining about Jacob's increased wealth and seeing Laban growing frustrated towards him, when the Lord told Jacob it was time to "**return unto the land of thy fathers**" (3), Jacob had no trouble complying. Telling his wives of his plan and his grievances against Laban, they agreed with him, and all prepared to go. As they were leaving, Rachel went and took her father's "images" (*tērāpîm* in Hebrew, meaning '**household idols**,' that may have represented ancestors who watched over the family). The text gives no indication why but several possibilities exist, based on other ancient customs and records. She could have done it to deter her father from worshipping them. It might be that she did it to keep him from finding Jacob's group (because the idols were often used for divination). Or it could be that she was establishing either her and/or Jacob's claim as Laban's chief heirs (implied by possession of the idols). In the end, having the images in her possession was a short-term activity; Jacob soon had them rid their company of all such images and idols (meaning there were many more than what Rachel had hidden away; Genesis 35:2).

When **Laban** did finally catch up with them, he **accused Jacob** of stealing his idols. Having no idea of Rachel's deed, he told Laban that whoever among his group had done this would die. Laban searched the whole camp but when he got to Rachel's tent, she hid them among the camel gear, and then sat on them, asking not to be disturbed because it was her time of the month. Angry at being falsely accused (as he believed), he confronted Laban with this and other wrongs over the previous twenty years of service. Laban saw he was again in no position to negotiate, so he proposed a **truce**, which Jacob accepted, and the two set a stone marker to signify their pact. Scores of such "pillars" have been found in the Near East, showing it to be a common custom. Each of them named the spot: Laban called it "Jegarsahadutha" meaning 'the stone heap of witness' in Aramaic,

and Jacob “Galeed,” the same term in Hebrew. Jacob also called it “Mizpah,” meaning ‘watch-tower’ or ‘look-out,’ because they were on a hill.

ENCOUNTERS WITH ANGELS (32:1-32)

Perhaps the **most important chapter** in Jacob’s life happened on the way back to his father’s land. Jacob the supplanter and the trickster over time had become Jacob the diligent and faithful, improving his relationship with God and with others. With age came wisdom and perhaps a softening that prepared Jacob for this event.

First, he encountered “the **angels** of God.” No details are given but Jacob calls the place “Mahanaïm,” meaning ‘two camps,’ because there was both his camp and “God’s host” together (2).

Knowing that returning home included seeing his brother again, Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to **locate his brother** in Seir or Edom. They returned, saying that Esau was coming with four hundred men. Fearing this was the long-awaited reprisal, Jacob split his group into two companies (perhaps taking a cue from the visits of the angels and the name he gave that place) and **prayed** mightily for God’s assistance—no “ifs” or conditions this time, just a humble plea for help. Then he took hundreds of animals and sent them ahead in groups, telling the servants to approach one group at a time and tell Esau they were **gifts** from Jacob.

Sending everyone in his group across the Jabbok river (which name presciently means ‘wrestling’; Rasmussen 65), he remained alone, reminiscent of when he first left his home and went north to Haran, alone and with few possessions. Suddenly Jacob was **wrestling** with an unknown man. The match lasted all night with neither prevailing. Finally the man touched Jacob’s hip, dislocating it. Still Jacob clung to his adversary, saying he would only let go if the man would give him a blessing. Asking his name, the man told Jacob that he would no longer be called ‘heel-grabber’ but now ‘God prevails’ or ‘He perseveres with God’—**Israel**. When Jacob sought the man’s name, it was refused, but a blessing was left. Jacob called the place “Penuel,” meaning ‘the face of God’ (30), for

in his encounter he believed he had seen the Lord—or at least one of his representatives. Joseph Fielding Smith believed the man was a messenger—perhaps a prophet—but not an angel (Student Manual 89). Others believe the being must have had more than mortal powers. Either way, for Jacob, it was a significant turning point in his life. Getting a new name means a new character and a new life—it means he was born again. As Jacob limps across the river and catches up with his family, he is now Israel—the prevailer.

REUNION WITH ESAU (33:1-17)

Seeing **Esau coming**, Jacob sent his family ahead of him then passed through them all to encounter Esau himself, bowing seven times to show respect. The reaction was immediate and seemingly unexpected, but an answer to prayer—Esau ran to him, embraced him, kissed him, and both wept. Esau tried to refuse the gifts, saying, “**I have enough**” (9) but Jacob urged him to accept the offering, echoing that he also had enough (11), a great lesson for our day of ‘I can never have too much.’

Esau returned to his home and Jacob made his way first to a place called “**Succoth**” after his construction of temporary housing for his sheep (the word means ‘booths’ or ‘tabernacles’ in the KJV). The text then marks Jacob’s progress through the land—first heading across the Jordan River to **Shechem**.

SIMEON AND LEVI AVENGE DINAH (33:18 – 34:31)

While in Shechem, Leah’s daughter **Dinah** (the only daughter of Jacob mentioned) caught the attention of a local man named **Shechem**. He was attracted to her and took her by force; the text says he loved her and even was kind to her after the fact, but he had defiled her against her will. Shechem’s father, **Hamor**, came to ask for her hand in marriage for his son, proposing a broad alliance where both groups would have their sons and daughters marry each other. Shechem offered to “give according as ye shall say unto me” to have Dinah for his wife, and Jacob’s sons concocted a

plan. Explaining that **circumcision** was required of all males in their clan, they told the men of Shechem that if they would be circumcised, the marriage would be agreed, and others would be considered. No circumcision on their part meant no deal, and Jacob's clan would leave the area. Shechem and Hamor convinced the city elders to agree, pointing out the wealth they could gain from Jacob and his family, and the entire town submitted to the procedure.

Two days after the mass circumcision, when the men were incapacitated, Simeon and Levi, Leah's second and third sons, went into the city and **killed** Hamor and Shechem and the other men. They found Dinah and took her out by force, echoing the way Shechem had first violently forced her. After the killing, they also **plundered** the city and made slaves of the women and children.

Jacob's reaction was anger. It wasn't that what his sons felt was unjust—it was appropriate for them to defend their sister—but their trickery was evil as well as foolish when they were trying to establish themselves among these people. Now vengeance would require others to try and kill Jacob and his sons. Simeon and Levi responded with a question: Weren't they required to deal with the terrible treatment of their sister? The scripture leaves the question hanging, unanswered—until Jacob pronounces their destinies in Genesis 49.

JACOB AND THE COVENANT (35:1-15)

Given the events at Shechem, Jacob was commanded to move further south to **Beth-el** for a time, the site of Jacob's vision of God in heaven. Before leaving, Jacob told everyone in his household to "**put away the strange gods** that are among you" (2). That Jacob's extensive clan of wives, children, and slaves had foreign gods in their midst is not surprising. But now before going to the 'house of God,' Jacob needed his family to be purged (Student Manual 89). So everyone responded by giving up their idols and other things associated with idol worship, such as jewelry, and Jacob buried it all under a tree, the

acceptable way to get rid of gods (Zondervan 118).

Returning to Luz/Beth-el, Jacob built an altar and again named it El-Beth-El ('the God of the house of God'). Rebekah's lifetime nurse died there and her burial under a tree gave it the name of 'oak of weeping' (8). Of course, this indicates that Jacob had possibly **reunited with his mother**, though she is never mentioned in the text; he didn't see his father until v. 27.

While there, the Lord appeared again to Jacob and reaffirmed the name he had received from the wrestling messenger—his name was **Israel**. The Lord extended the Abrahamic **covenant** and then "went up from him," meaning ascended into heaven (13), hearkening back to the ladder vision. Jacob also marked this place with a pillar that he poured wine and oil on.

RACHEL'S DEATH (35:16-20)

Continuing their southward journey, the group came to **Ephrath** (later known as Bethlehem). There the pregnant **Rachel** went into labor but it went poorly. The nurse assured her of her son's survival but not her own, though she had time to name her second son before passing: "Ben-oni," meaning 'son of my sorrow' (18). But Jacob, probably not wanting to have that name remind him of his own sorrow each day, changed the name to '**Ben-yamin**,' 'son of my right [hand],' or 'son of the south,' perhaps pointing to the direction they were heading.

JACOB'S FAMILY (35:21-26)

Continuing the journey southward, Jacob's oldest son, **Reuben**, slept with his father's concubine, **Bilhah**. Reuben's act is an immoral one, to be sure, but also carried the connotation of challenging his father's leadership, for he was 'stealing' his father's property. As the firstborn, he would likely receive responsibility for Bilhah upon his father's death anyway, but taking her early is comparable to stealing land or animals and defied the normal succession. He may also have been trying to secure his mother, Leah's, position as chief wife, with Rachel's recent death, by defiling her slave.

Regardless of his motivation, his action caused Reuben to **lose his birthright**. As the oldest child of the next wife (in order), Joseph thus became the heir (compare 1 Chronicles 5:1-3; Student Manual 89).

ISAAC'S DEATH (35:27-29)

Finally Jacob arrived at Mamre/Hebron where **Isaac** lived and saw his father again for the first

time in over twenty years. Since Isaac was sixty when Jacob was born (25:26) and Jacob was about forty when he left (surmised from 26:34), then stayed twenty years (31:41), that would make Isaac about one hundred and twenty when he saw Jacob again. Isaac lived to be one hundred and eighty, so they had sixty more years together.

GENERATIONS OF ESAU (36:1-43)

COMMENTARY

The *tôlēdāt* (story) of Esau concludes this section before we begin the story of Joseph. The interesting use of a medieval title (“duke”) is an interesting KJV addition; in the Hebrew, they are just referred to by their names. Little is known of Esau’s descendants outside the Bible; the Edomites left few material remains or records.

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