



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

## Jacob Meets God at Bethel

Genesis 28.10–22

*Part 1: Jacob Dreams a Dream (or Stairway to Heaven)*

**Part 2: God's Promise and Jacob's Response**

### *Introduction*

1. What looks to be a straightforward telling of Jacob's flight to Haran—with his famous dream along the way—is one of the pivotal passages in Genesis.
2. This text is the first of two “brackets” (Gen 28; 32) on either end of his time in Aram/Haran that show Jacob's *transformation process* and realization/acceptance of his role in advancing God's promises.
  - a. “The two most significant events in the life of Jacob were nocturnal theophanies” (Ross 1985, 226).<sup>1</sup>
3. The location of these stories is strategic.
  - a. Our text is the transition from the Jacob-Esau cycle, while the Peniel story connects back to Esau.
  - b. “In each of the encounters with God there is instilled in the patriarch great expectation for the uncertain future. In this incident at Bethel Jacob's vow expresses his anticipation for the future. God would now be with him and help him, even though he might be slow to realize it. The promise of God's presence and protection would bring continued encouragement during the 20 years with Laban” (Ross 1985, 226).
4. The focus also shifts in Jacob's story. We have been introduced to Jacob (birth, Gen 25.26) and seen his involvement in significant events (Gen 25.26–28.9), but this is the first time where the Lord is said to have revealed himself to him.<sup>2</sup>

### *Body*

#### I. Overview of Theme.

A. Previous references tell us that Jacob is to be the one to advance the promises (cf. Gen 25.23;

<sup>1</sup> Ross also observes that these episodes are the only places in Genesis where reference is made to “angels of God” (28.11; 32.1) (Ross 1985, 226).

<sup>2</sup> In that respect, his story differs from Abraham's, to whom God first gave the promise; we knew little about him when he was introduced in chs. 11–12.

27.1–29), “but were the promises actually his? If he truly was the heir, why must he flee from the land? Would God’s blessing be his as it had been Abraham’s and Isaac’s before him? Nothing less than a sure word from God would ease his doubts and give him confidence for the future” (Ross 1985, 227).

1. There is a sense of uncertainty and drama which we can miss because, like someone who has seen the movie before, we know how it ends.

## II. Literary Features and Focus.

*Lost in translation are several literary features that heighten the drama and add perspective; notably:*

A. Repetition of key terms tying the narrative together and explaining the significance of Jacob’s response (Ross 1985, 225).

1. Use of the “stand/stood,” or a word that includes that word in its parts.
  - a. A stairway standing, נָשָׂב, *nāṣab* (v. 12).
  - b. The Lord standing above it, נָשָׂב, *nāṣab* (v. 13).
  - c. Moved by what he saw, Jacob set up ( ׀ׁי, *śiyim*) the pillar (מַשְׁבָּחַ, *maṣṣāḇāh*), “this word recalling the other two” (v. 18) (Ross 1985, 225).
2. A word for “top/head” (רֹאֵשׁ, *roʾš*).
  - a. Top of the stairway in heaven (v. 12).
  - b. Jacob anoints the top of the stone that was set up to commemorate the theophany (v. 18).
  - c. Significance of “place” (מָקוֹם, *māqom*), used six times (vv. 11 [3x], 16 [2], 19).

B. There is a change of style that animates Jacob’s actions.

1. In verses 10–11, all the verbs are past tense; but in verses 12–13 there is a series of participles that are coupled with “behold” (הִנֵּה, *hinnēh*) to express Jacob’s wonder: “behold, there was a ladder, ... behold, the angels ... behold, the LORD stood.”
2. The phrasing has this effect: “There! A ladder! Oh, angels! And look, the LORD himself” (Ross 1985, 227).

C. There is also a narrowing of focus to emphasize “the central point of the vision, the Lord.”

1. In Hebrew, each clause is shorter than the one preceding it (7 words, 6, 4): from ladder/stairway, to angels, to the Lord (somewhat evident in the English, but not as defined). Cf. vv. 12–13 NET:
  - a. “He saw a stairway erected on the earth with its top reaching to the heavens.
  - b. “The angels of God were going up and coming down it
  - c. “and the LORD stood at its top.”
2. “Attention is focused first on the setting, then narrowed to participants, and then to the Lord” (Ross 1985, 228).

D. “The literary features, then, strengthen the development of the motifs of the narrative to show how a place became a shrine, a stone became an altar, and a fugitive became a pilgrim—God in His grace revealed Himself to Jacob in that place” (Ross 1985, 225–226).

## III. The Journey Begins.

A. The passage has a disarmingly casual beginning.

1. Jacob is persona non grata in Canaan after deceiving Isaac and infuriating Esau.
2. He leaves Beersheba to go to Haran, a 550-mile trip that would have taken more than a month (Walton 2001, “Jacob’s Departure”).
  - a. His likely route would have taken him north along the edge of the hills, passing west of Hebron, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem to Bethel.
  - b. About 55 miles in, he arrives at Bethel, probably on the 3rd night (Walton 2009, 106) [Ross 1985, 227, says, “only two days out.”]
- B. “He came to a certain place” (v. 11); the text is more nuanced than the translation indicates, emphasizing the randomness of Jacob’s choice to stop there. It was not where he had his “reservation,” just the place where he was at “the end of the daylight hours” (Hamilton 1995, 238).
  1. There is also a narrowing that occurs with regard to the “place” in verse 11.
    - a. *Māqom*’s first use is without the article; the place is not named, just referred to as “a place. This reflects the randomness of Jacob’s choice.
    - b. The second use of *māqom* has the article, which may be the narrator’s way of hinting that this place is more special than Jacob realized; “the [holy] place” (Hamilton 1995, 238–239),
  2. There was also nothing special about his selection of the stone; it was just a random stone to lay by his head as he slept (Ross 1985, 227).

#### IV. The Dream.<sup>3</sup>

- A. The “ladder” (ESV), or “stairway” (NET) (“מִזְבֵּל, *sullam*) which is better; this is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where this word appears (hapax legeomenon).
  1. The word, which may have been connected to *sālal*, “heap up,” suggests a meaning like “ramp” or “stairlike pavement.” More likely connected to Akkadian *similtu*, “stairway.” (Hamilton 1995, 239).
  2. Different sources of background have been suggested, including Egyptian and Canaanite, but “the one that has the most to commend it” is the view that connects with Mesopotamian [Babylonian] temple towers; the messengers are moving between worlds/realms (Ross 1985, 228–229).<sup>4</sup>
  3. The image behind the stairway may have been the ziggurat on which stairways were portals from this realm into the other. “Jacob is not seeing a ziggurat, but he is seeing the stairway portal between heaven and earth that ziggurats were designed to provide” (Walton 2009, 106).<sup>5</sup>
- B. Angels ascending and descending, suggesting their presence on earth and access to heaven (Ross

<sup>3</sup> Care should be taken not to press the image. It is not to be taken too rationalistically, e.g., to work out how the angels are going up and down a “ladder” or “stairway” at the same time. If we’re going to press things, “we need to isolate the issue in terms not of ‘ladder’ versus ‘stairway,’ but why angels would need either one!” (Hamilton 1995, 239).

<sup>4</sup> See the discussions of the myth of Nergel and Ereshkigal in Ross 1985, 229; Millard 1966, 86. Hoerth (1998, 111 n. 13) says that “commentators reject the popular ‘ladder’ imagery. Elsewhere the same Hebrew word carries the sense of a ramp, like that commonly built up to a city on a hill.” If so—and he cites neither the word nor references—it would be a different form or synonym since the word in Genesis is a hapax.

<sup>5</sup> See Walton’s sidebar on “A Temple and the Gate of Heaven” where he makes a comparison to the wardrobe in the Chronicles of Narnia (*Lion, With and Wardrobe*) that exists in both worlds (Walton 2009, 107).

1985, 229).<sup>6</sup>

1. In Genesis passages (see n. 6), angels are depicted as “guarding, communicating, rescuing, and protecting” (Ross 1985, 229).
2. “In this vision, then, the angels of God communicated God's protection for Jacob, the recipient of the promises” (Ross 1985, 229).
  - a. “We should not imagine that the angels he sees are marching in procession down and up the stairway as often pictured in art. Rather he sees messengers (= angels) going off on missions and returning from delivering their messages” (Walton 2009, 106).
- C. “The third and central feature of the vision, however, was the Lord who was standing over the stairway” (Ross 1985, 230).
  1. Because the combination of the verb and preposition used here always means “beside,” the idea is likely that the Lord stood “beside” the stairway (Walton 2009, 108, 152) or “beside him” (Ross 1985, 230, 236) (cf. Gen 18.1–2; 24.13).<sup>7</sup>
  2. The point is God’s control and presence, which forms the basis for the restatement of the promise which follows.

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### Works Cited

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<sup>6</sup> For discussion of angels in Genesis, including references in 3.24; ch. 18–19; 22.11, 15; 28.13; and 48.16, see Ross 1985, 229.

<sup>7</sup> Ross 1985, 236 n. 21, argues that the context here suggests “over it” because God’s realm is in the heavens and because Jacob anointed the top of the stone.