



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

Review

1. We continue looking at Genesis 28, a pivotal chapter in the narrative.
 - a. The focus is on Jacob, for the first time as a designated promise recipient.
 - b. This is the beginning of a crucial period in his life where he leaves Canaan, marries, has children, and secures his prosperity—before returning to Canaan.
2. It's a crucial time, not only for Jacob personally, but for the promise/plan of God.
 - a. We know Jacob is to be the heir, but the plot is tenuous: why must he flee the land? Why has there been no direct word from YHWH about it? Would the blessing be the same for him as for Abraham and Isaac?
3. We focused on some things that bring the story to life: literary details including repetition and style change to bring out Jacob's wonder and excitement, the journey, and stop at "a certain place" but here will focus on seeing the text as its main themes are developed (see the outline by Ross).

Finishing the Dream

4. We discussed two of the three features of the dream, noting the background for the "stairway" J saw and the presence of the angels.
5. "The third and central feature of the vision, however, was the Lord who was standing over the stairway" (Ross 1985, 230).
 - a. The point is God's control and presence, which forms the basis for the restatement of the promise which follows.
 - b. This accentuates the point that the primary character in Jacob's story, as in Genesis and the Bible as a whole, is God. Indeed, eternal life (John 17.3) and thus Scripture is about knowing God above else.

Promises

6. Without a word of rebuke, YHWH bestows on Jacob three unconditional promises, like those given to Abraham and Isaac (Hamilton 1995, 241).¹
 - a. The **land** promise is prominent: on which you sleep, I will give to your offspring. The theophanies in

¹ Hamilton, 1995, does note that in the opening of God's speech, there may be at least an indirect censure. He is the God of Abraham and Isaac; will he also be the God of Jacob? Implicit, perhaps, in the reference to Isaac is the fact that he was the one Jacob had deceived and manipulated.

- Genesis tend to be land-oriented (Walton 2001. “Jacob’s Departure”).
- b. The promise of “offspring like the dust of the earth” (v. 14) is especially encouraging since Jacob was going to find a wife; notice how they would spread abroad to all points of Canaan.
 - 1) Contrast with Abraham: when he first hears the promise (Gen 12.3), he is married but childless; Jacob at this point is neither (Hamilton 1995, 242).
 - c. The promise that through Jacob all “families of the earth [will] be blessed.”
 - 1) Significant: God has chosen Jacob and his family as the means to mediate his blessing to the world, despite his behavior (Hamilton 1995, 242)
 - 2) This is the 5th text in Gen to refer to a patriarch (and/or offspring) as the means of worldwide blessing: 18.18; 22.18; 26.4 → “nations of the earth” (*gōyê hā’āreš*) = beneficiaries. 12.3; 28.14 → “families of the earth” (*mišpehōl hā’adāmā*) = beneficiaries (Hamilton 1995, 242).²
 - 3) This promise extends throughout Scripture (cf. Isa 42.1–7; 49.6; 61.1–2; Luke 2.26–32; 4.18–21; Acts 13.43. 46–48).³
 - d. Think about the confidence for Jacob and especially what this shows about God: Despite his deceit, we see God’s grace on Jacob: he is fleeing the land, yet he will receive the land—and the two other promises too.
 - 1) Recall the point Dale Manor made in our study of Genesis 27: God didn’t need Jacob and Rebekah to “help” Jacob surpass Esau.
 - 2) The fact that he was predestined to surpass Esau did not give him “the right to be manipulative, exploitative, and deceitful. The end does not justify the means.” (Hamilton 2005, 112).
7. An additional specific promise of **protection** is given in verse 15.
- a. It begins with the promise of God’s presence, which will prove helpful to Israel repeatedly (cf. Exod 4.12, 15; 7.17; etc.). See also Ps 46.10 in the context of trials in vv. 7, 11; note also Jas 1.2’s use of the word, “consider.”
 - b. Additionally, he assures Jacob that he will return to the land even before he leaves it.
 - 1) “One must not overlook the context of these promises. Humphreys (2001: 172) puts it well: ‘We must remember that God promises all this to a man in flight from the land of promise, a man in flight because he bilked his brother and deceived his father, a “heel-grabber,” who now is on the run from the wrath of a brother out to kill him’” (Hamilton 2005, 113)

Realization

8. Jacob realizes the place he had chosen at random was the Lord’s place and was therefore holy.
9. With that came a healthy dose of reverential fear (cf. Exod 3.6; 19; Ps 2.11)!
 - a. A 19th century man named George Bush, writing in 1860, was right: “His feelings upon awakening were those of grateful wonder mingled with emotions of reverential awe, bordering close upon dread” (in Ross 1985, 231).

Response: Worship & a Vow

10. Pillar & oil (v. 18).
 - a. Pillars, standing stones, were prominent in the region as markers⁴ that got the attention of onlookers

² The reason for “families” in 28.14 (& 12.3) over “nations” is because “nations” was already used in v. 13 to specify the land of Canaan which was to be occupied by Jacob’s progeny. The blessing in 14c is universal. (Hamilton 1995, 242)

³ See Anguish 2019, 59–63.

⁴ Walton (2009, 152 n. 464) says there were 142 sites in the Negev and Sinai alone, and another 46 in Iron Age Israel. Ross (1985, 232) and Hamilton (1995, 246) note that they were used to mark graves (Gen 35.20, Rachel), boundaries (Gen 31.45, Laban), significant events (1 Sam 7.12, Samuel’s Ebenezer), or, as here, sacred areas where God could be “found” and prayer could reach him.

- because they were not in their natural position.
- b. The poured oil was an offering, that is, a gift to God, which conveyed the same attitude as making a sacrifice. Jacob performed a symbolic ritual act to demonstrate devotion to God (Ross 1985, 232).⁵
11. Commemoration—naming the place transformed it from a merely Canaanite town named Luz to God’s house (בֵּית־אֵל, *biyt-el*) for Jacob and a place of worship for his descendants.
- a. The house theme is repeated in vv. 21a–b, 22a).
 - b. The narrator calls attention to the former name; the text does not say whether it existed then.⁶ The reference could be the narrator’s later explanation of the history (cf. Hamilton 1995). “Bethel” is surely anachronistic (Gen 12.8; 13.3) (Hamilton 1995, 246–247).
 - c. Bethel is significant because the Lord appeared there. Later, pillars, and this place in particular, were illicit because of Israel’s infidelity (cf. 2 Kings 12.28–29; Hos 4.15; Amos 5.5).
12. Dedication: Jacob’s promise was made solemn by a vow.
- a. Vows in the ancient world generally involved a request of a deity with the promise of a gift in return when the request was fulfilled. The request was often concerned with protection/provision, the gift was typically a sacrifice or donation to sanctuary of deity. Details here conform to that pattern. (Walton 2009, 108)
 - b. Their aim was to bind the worshiper to the performance of some acknowledged duty.
 - c. Jacob’s vow here was in response to what God had promised, not an effort to negotiate whether he would serve.
 - 1) Interpretation challenge. Some see it as bargaining (Walton 2001, “Jacob’s Departure”), but (with Ross 1985, 234, and Hamilton 1995, 248 for the grammatical and theological arguments), I think it’s better to take the “if” part extending through v. 21 with the “then” part beginning at v. 22.
 - a) “If God will be with me, keep me, feed and clothe me, bring me back to my father’s house, and I honor him as my God…”
 - b) “Then this stone shall be God’s house and I will give a tenth of all I have to you.”⁷
 - 2) The idea is more “since then” than “if then.”

Takeaways

13. God bestows grace on Jacob that includes divine friendship and gives Jacob a prominent role in advancing his promises (cf. Hamilton, 2005, 113).
14. As the result, Jacob can transform from a decidedly worldly person to be a worshiper and servant.
- a. Before, Jacob was a fugitive from the results of sin, a troubled son in search of his place, a shrewd shepherd setting out to find a wife.
 - b. After, he is a partner with God, recipient of the covenant promises, and a worshiper.
 - c. Transformed because of God’s intrusion into the course of his life (Ross 1985, 224).
 - d. But not without growing pains and a ways to go before he arrived.**
15. An aside: in John 1.51, Jesus is depicted as “the nexus between God and humankind, a bridge builder between the two parties (cf. Heb 4.14–5.10; 7.1–10.18) (Hamilton 1995, 249–250).

March 23, 2025

⁵ Oil was later used in Israel to sanctify holy places and things (Lev 8.10–11) (Ross).

⁶ Cf. the history of Atlanta, GA which was called Thrasherville, Terminus, and Marthasville before being named Atlanta in the mid-1840s (Wikipedia article [here](#)).

⁷ Ross (1985, 234) writes, “God had promised to be with him, keep him, bless him, return him in peace, in short, be his God; consequently, Jacob promised that the spot would be a place of worship and that he would tithe.”

Works Cited

- David Anguish. 2019. *Getting Acquainted with the Bible: Its Makeup, Purpose, and Story*. CarChlex Books.
- Victor P. Hamilton. 1995. *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Victor P. Hamilton. 2005. *Handbook on the Pentateuch*. 2nd ed. Baker Academic.
- W. L. Humphreys. 2001. *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*. Westminster John Knox. In Hamilton 2005.
- Allan P. Ross. 1985. “Studies in the Life of Jacob Part 1: Jacob’s Vision: The Founding of Bethel.” *Bibliotheca Sacra*. 142: 224–237.
- John H. Walton. 2001. *Genesis*. The NIV Application Commentary. Zondervan. Apple Books ebook, Genesis 28:1–22.
- John H. Walton. 2009. “Genesis.” *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*. ed. John H. Walton. Zondervan.