



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Jacob Prepares to Meet Esau

Genesis 32.1–21

Context

1. Genesis 32 continues the story of the conflict between Jacob and Esau, resuming from 27.45. The story picks up after the Haran interlude (28.1–31.55) with nothing resolved between the two.
2. Chapter 32 explicitly connects with 28.10–22, the last account of Jacob in Canaan (cf. 31.18; 33.18). Note that 32.1–33.17 comprise a unit, with three major parts.
 - a. Jacob prepares to meet Esau (32.1–21).
 - b. Jacob's name is changed to Israel (32.22–32).
 - c. Esau and Jacob are reconciled (33.1–17) (Lang, Ward, and Nelson 2015).
3. This is a well-crafted narrative where the author patiently allows the brothers to work out their problem and reconcile. But, while a fascinating story of human calculation and interaction, it also contains some notable theological emphases: a theophany (32.1–2); a prayer (32.9–12); an extended encounter with God (32.22–32) (Brueggemann 1982, 261).
4. In part 1, we'll focus on Jacob's preparations, in four sections.
 - a. The preparation introduced (32.1–2).
 - b. First contact with Esau (32.3–8).
 - c. Jacob petitions God to honor his promise (32.9–12).
 - d. Jacob seeks to appease Esau (32.13–21).

Preparation introduced: Jacob met by the angels of God (vv. 1–2)

5. Jacob moves on after his encounter with Laban, “and the angels of God met him.”
 - a. The phrase, “angels of God” occurs in the OT only here and in Gen 28.12 (Net Bible).
 - 1) The Bethel connection is evident, reinforced by Jacob's account of his dream in which an angel appeared as “the God of Bethel” and told him to leave Laban and return to Canaan (31.11–13).
 - 2) He encountered angels when leaving and again as he reenters (Walton 2009, 114).
 - 3) The angel in 31.11–13 recalled the Bethel experience and Jacob's vow (Rigsby 2003, 464).
 - b. In view of the command to return, it's sensible to see the angels as likely protective agents sent to bodyguard Jacob as he returned (or at least to indicate God was with him) and prepared to face Esau (Brueggemann 1982, 262).
6. Jacob's response: “‘This is God's camp!’ So he called the name of that place Mahanaim” (v. 2).
 - a. Mahanaim means “two camps,” the reference being to the camps of the angels and Jacob (Walton

2009, 114). (Willis 1979, 355, notes a series of wordplays on the word Mahanaim in vv. 2, 7–8, 10).

First contact with Esau (vv. 3–8)

7. Having been met by messengers, Jacob now sends messengers to Esau (“angels” and “messengers” are from the same Hebrew word; מַלְאָכִים, *mal’ākē*).
 - a. “Messenger” is a sort of link-word that keeps the two dimensions of the account together—toward God and toward Esau (Brueggemann 1982, 262).
 - b. Esau is “in the land of Seir,” identified with the mountainous region of Edom (elevations mostly over 5,000 feet), along the eastern side of the Arabah from the Brook Zered at the south end of the Dead Sea to Gulf of Aqaba (Walton 2009, 115).
8. There are two dimensions to the narrative.
 - a. Jacob enters negotiations with fear and anxiety; there is no indication of remorse, but he is very much aware of Esau’s wrath and doubtless remembers why.
 - b. Jacob prepares for his meeting with extreme deference: note the phrase, “If I find favor in your eyes” (v. 5; cf. 33.8, 10, 15). He seems to recognize that he cannot have his way by force or deceit.
9. The developments:
 - a. With deference, yet indications that he is a man of means and power, Jacob sends messengers to Esau (vv. 3–5).
 - b. The messengers [again] return and report Esau is on his way to Jacob with four hundred men (v. 6).
 - c. Jacob “was greatly afraid” and divides the group into “two camps” [again] (vv. 7–8).

Appeasing Esau (vv. 13–21)

10. As he settles for the night, Jacob prepares a present for Esau.
 - a. Several functions, but mainly to show he was not interested in anything Esau may've inherited.
 - b. The gift is generous, larger than many towns could have paid in tribute to kings, even at later dates.
 - 1) If Esau was seeking plunder, he need not bother (Walton 2009, 115).

a) 220 goats	d) 50 cows/bulls
b) 220 sheep	e) 30 donkeys
c) 30 milking camels and calves.	
 - 2) Compare with a list of spoils collected by a ninth century Assyrian king, Tukulti-Ninurta II; a tribute list from Hindani (near Mari on Middle Euphrates).

a) 10 minas of gold	e) 10 minas of silver
b) 2 talents of tin	f) 30 dromedaries
c) 50 oxen	g) 30 asses
d) 14 ducks	h) 200 sheep (Walton 2009, 116).
11. Clearly, he is trying to appease Esau, a conclusion reached from two terms.
 - a. The theme of seeing the face is important; a form of the word “face” (פָּנֵה, *pāneh*) is used five times in verses 20–21; cf. vv. 16–17 (“ahead”); 32.30; 33.3, 10, 14, 18.
 - 1) Note the bold words: “I may appease **him*** with the present that goes **ahead** of **me**, and afterward I shall see his **face**. Perhaps he will **accept me**.” So the present passed on **ahead** of him, and he himself stayed that night in the camp” (32.20–21 ESV; *note on “him” — “appease his face”).
 - b. “Appease” (כָּפַר, *kāpar*). In Leviticus (e.g., 16.10–11), the same word refers to the removal of anger due to sin or guilt. Jacob sought to assuage Esau with a gift of more than 550 animals (NET Bible).
 - c. Jacob’s done all he can; now he waits to see if Esau will be appeased; but that’s not all he does.

Petitioning God to keep his promise (vv. 9–12)

12. To his credit, Jacob does not rely solely on his planning; he prays; verses 9–12 comprise “the only extended prayer in the book of Genesis” (Brueggemann 1982, 263).
- a. *Addresses* God – affirming that God made promises (the return was God’s idea), he means to hold God to them (v. 9).
 - 1) Note the connection to Abraham and Isaac; these are not just Jacob’s promises—or his plan.
 - b. *Affirms* God’s past goodness; deference in view of his being unqualified; marveling over his reversal of fortune (v. 10).
 - 1) “I am not worthy of the least” translates the governing verb, “I am smaller” (יִבְרָךְ, *qāṭon*); a primary theme of biblical faith is God casting his lot with the little ones against the strong (cf. Matt 10.42; 18.6–14; 1 Cor 1.18–25) (Brueggemann 1982, 264).
 - a) Jacob “stood” only because of God.
 - 2) “Steadfast love and faithfulness” (*hesed* [חֶסֶד] and *’emet* [אֱמֶת]) is Israel’s most frequent characterization of God (cf. Exod 34.6; cf. Jesus as full of grace and truth, John 1.14).
 - c. *Petition*, in light of address and affirmation – an appeal for a present show of mercy (v. 11).
 - 1) He prays with both deference and audacity (Brueggemann 1982, 265).
 - 2) Notice especially the imperative verb “deliver” (נָשַׁל, *nāṣal*): the word used in 31.9, 16 to describe God’s action in taking Laban’s property for Jacob. “As God has ‘snatched’ property for Jacob from Laban, so Jacob prays to be ‘snatched’ from the power of Esau” (Brueggemann 1982, 265).
 - 3) “In this petition, Jacob prays the most characteristic prayer of the biblical community (cf. Pss. 7:1–2; 31.15–16; 59:2–4; 142:6–7; 143:9; 144:11)” (Brueggemann 1982, 265).
 - a) Note that the first four of the above references are laments; cf. Ps 4.1 and Teddlie’s song, “Hear Me When I Call.”
 - d. *Repetition* – affirmation of God’s goodness intensified (cf. the laments again) (v. 12).
 - 1) Note the repetition from verse 9, intensified here: “I will *do you good*” (v. 9) to “But you said, I will *surely do you good*” (v. 12).
 - 2) The idea includes more than prosperity, though that is its essential meaning (NET Bible).
 - 3) Again, notice Jacob’s deference.
13. Willis summarizes the prayer as follows: “The (a) rehearsal of God’s promises, (b) expression of one’s own unworthiness, and (c) petition for help in time of crisis are fundamental elements of prayer” (Willis 1979. 356).

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Works Cited

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