



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Esau and Jacob Are Reconciled

Genesis 33.1–17

Preliminaries

1. Today's study concludes the three-part account of Jacob's return to Canaan and reunion with Esau.
 - 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).
2. Jacob's dread of the meeting has been lessened by his encounter in which, because he desired God's blessing, he prevailed against him in the sense of holding on while he was humbled by him. Having been brought low, he was strengthened for the meeting with Esau which finally occurs in chapter 33 (cf. Packer 1973, 85).

Textual survey with attention to key themes

3. Still fearful, Jacob divides the camp, privileging Rachel and Joseph over the others (vv. 1–2).
 - a. The division of his family into three groups with Rachel and Joseph in the third indicates they are the most cherished.
 - 1) "This kind of ranking according to favoritism no doubt fed the jealousy over Joseph that later becomes an important element in the narrative. It must have been painful to the family to see that they were expendable" (NET Notes 2019).
4. Jacob goes before them and meets and shows honor to Esau (v. 3).
 - a. Jacob bows seven times to Esau, introducing a theme of deference that will be repeated by the following family groups (vv. 6–7).
 - b. Bowing down to ground "is attested protocol used when a vassal has an audience with his superior. Most notably, the petty city-state kings of Canaan speak of themselves acting this way toward the Egyptian pharaoh in the Amarna letters (mid-second millennium)" (Walton 2009, 116).
 - c. Bowing seven times magnifies the sense of respect (Rigsby 2003, 465).
5. Jacob's deference continues throughout the meeting with Esau (vv. 4–11).
 - a. Esau runs to meet him, embraces him, kisses his neck, etc. (anticipates Gen 45.14; 46. 29; cf. Luke 15.20) (vv. 4–5).
 - b. The three groups in turn approach and bow down to Esau (vv. 6–7).
 - c. Queried by Esau regarding the meaning of the camp (מַחֲנֵה *machaneh*; "company" ESV) he had met, Jacob answers that he sent the present "to find favor in the sight of my lord" (v. 8).

- 1) Both NET and NIV translate with a reference to the flocks and herds Jacob had sent ahead (32.13ff.) (cf. *ESV Study Bible* note on v. 8).
- 2) “Favor” (חֵן, *hēn*; “to be gracious, to show favor”) continues a recurring theme throughout this episode (vv. 10, 15; cf. 32.5; see the related word חָנָן, *hānan*, for “graciously given” in 33.5).
- d. Esau attempts to refuse the gift, but Jacob insists and Esau accepts it (vv. 9–11).
 - 1) In addition to the “favor” theme, the “face” theme recurs (v. 10; cf. 32.20, 30).
 - 2) Willis says, “The expression **face of God** (*pine ’elohim*) is virtually the same as *peni’el*, “Peniel,” or *penu’el*, “Penuel” (32:30–31). It was common to compare someone with God or one of his angels if one wished to express great respect for him (cf. 1 Sam. 29:9; 2 Sam. 14:17, 20; 19:27 [Hebrew 28])” (Willis 1979, 361).
 - 3) The reference to the previous encounter apparently draws a parallel between God’s blessing him when he wrestled and Esau’s reception of him with forgiveness and brotherly love here.
- e. Note the word “blessing” (בְּרָכָה, *b’rākāh*) in v. 11 (NASB, NRSV “gift”; NIV 2011, NET “present”).
 - 1) In effect, Jacob, apparently in recognition of the injustice he had done to Esau, is seeking to reverse the blessing he had illicitly acquired from his brother.¹
6. Jacob’s strategic separation (vv. 12–17).
 - a. Esau invites Jacob to accompany him, but Jacob appeals to the frailty of the children and concern for the flocks as his reasons for refusing; Esau offers to leave workers to help, but again Jacob refuses (vv. 12–15).
 - 1) The text does not say why Jacob refused, but several plausible reasons exist.
 - a) The children and herds would have had a hard time keeping up.
 - b) He probably did not fully trust his brother.
 - c) God did tell him to return to his land, not Seir (NET Notes 2019) (cf. 28.20–22; 31.13; 35.1; noted in Willis 1979, 361).
 - 2) It is apparent that, despite his changes, something of the old Jacob remains.
 - 3) That said, the bottom line is that the brothers have been reconciled (cf. Gen 35.29); the main issues set in motion in 25.19–26 have been resolved, and the Jacob-Esau narrative has essentially concluded.
 - b. Jacob moves along the Jabbok River about seven miles west of Mahanaim, near to where it meets the Jordan, and stops at Succoth (vv. 16–17).
 - 1) “Succoth” means “shelters” or “booths” (ESV); a wordplay between the place name and what Jacob does there.
 - 2) He apparently spent considerable time there (v. 17).²

Lessons for reconciliation

7. The three-part story, especially Jacob’s interaction with God in it, introduces some important things to

¹ Gordon Wenham has elaborated the reversal of blessing idea as follows: “That Jacob himself recognises [sic] the injustice that he has done to Esau is very clear in chapter 33, where he tries to return the blessing he had illicitly acquired from Esau. He and his sons repeatedly bow down to Esau (33:3, 6, 7) just as Isaac predicted in the blessing he thought he was bestowing on Esau, ‘May your mother’s sons bow down to you’. He describes himself as Esau’s servant and Esau as his lord, again echoing the blessing formula, ‘Be lord over your brothers’ (27:29; cf. 32:18, 20; 33:5, 8, 13, 14, 15). Even more striking is Jacob’s description of the droves of animals that he presents to Esau to placate him: ‘please accept my blessing which has been brought to you’ (33:11). He is deliberately giving back to Esau the blessing which he had cheated him out of” (G. J. Wenham, “The Face at the Bottom of the Well,” *He Swore an Oath*, ed. R. S. Hess, P. E. Satterwaite, G. J. Wenham [Cambridge: Tyndale House, 2003], 203; in Walton 2001).

² Willis (1979, 361) notes that the flow of the narrative in 30.21–43 coupled with 31.41 suggest Dinah was about seven when Jacob’s household left Haran, but 34.1–2 indicate she was a grown young woman when they finally lived in Shechem, or at least when the incident at Shechem occurs.

learn about reconciliation that will be fleshed out later in the biblical story.

- a. First, “reconciliations are seldom as unambiguous as we anticipate” (Bruggemann 1982, 273).
- b. Paul’s elaboration of the theme in 2 Corinthians 5.16–21 is different, but there are some parallels.
 - 1) In both texts, reconciliation begins with God.
 - 2) In both texts, the vertical reconciliation mandates a subsequent horizontal reconciliation (the same ideas are present in Eph 2.1–10, 11–22).
- c. Both texts also show the importance of humility in reconciliation.
 - 1) “The limping of Penu’el may keep us from speaking flippantly about the ‘New Being’, for the New Creature may be marked by limping as a sign of newness (cf. II Cor. 4:7–12)” (Bruggemann 1982, 273).
- d. John also reminds us that “love of God and love of brother belong together” (1 John 4.12, 20–21; cf. Matt 22.37–40).

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