



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Jacob's Story: The Final Act

Genesis 35.1–29

Summary/Overview

1. It will be helpful to begin with the end in mind, noting where the story stands at the end of chapter 35. As summarized by John Walton:

Genesis 35 draws the Jacob narrative to its climax. What is the state of the covenant? (1) Jacob has returned to the land. (2) He has disposed of other gods, suggesting a commitment of allegiance to Yahweh. (3) Yahweh has exerted his authority over Jacob by changing his name to Israel and has reiterated the covenant blessings to him. (4) Jacob has established two more foundations in the land (the altar and pillar at Bethel and Rachel's tomb). (5) The family has continued to expand and can now be considered as a recognizable clan, independent and settled (despite the serious threat from the Hivites that nearly scuttled it).

Genesis 35 provides an opportunity for the reader to take stock of how far the ancestors have come. Two hundred years and twenty-three chapters into this covenant experience find everything still intact, though there has been no shortage of scrapes and bruises along the way. A dozen times the covenant has dangled by a single thread, but God is faithful and sovereign and his grace is sufficient (Walton 2001, Bridging Contexts).

2. We'll do a big-picture paragraph-by-paragraph summary and then focus on a few points of clarification and emphasis.

Paragraph-by-paragraph (ESV)

3. Part 1: Jacob at Bethel
 - a. Verses 1–4: God tells Jacob to take his family away from Shechem and go to Bethel where they are to purify themselves and remove foreign gods and related trappings.
 - b. Verses 5–9: Illustrating the concern expressed in 34.30–31, Jacob and his sons are protected from the surrounding cities; arriving in Bethel, Jacob builds an altar and names the place El-Bethel; Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, dies and is buried somewhere "below Bethel."
 - c. Verses 10–15: Jacob's renaming as Israel and the covenant promises are reaffirmed, the latter including an explicit connection to Abraham by emphasizing the name El-Shaddai; Jacob sets up a pillar, offers a drink offering, and reaffirms the name of the place as Bethel.
4. Part 2: Family Matters: a short narrative and summary that completes the family history for Jacob.
 - a. Verses 16–21: Rachel gives birth to Benjamin and, "with her dying breath" (v. 18 NET), names him *Ben-oni*, "son of my suffering"; Jacob renames him *Benjamin*, "son of the [my] right hand," and buries Rachel "somewhere along the road from Bethel to Jerusalem" (Walton 2009, 120). They journey onward, stopping "beyond the tower of Eder."
 - b. Verse 22a: While Israel was living in the land, Reuben slept with Bilhah, Rachel's servant and Jacob's

concubine.

- c. Verses 22b–26: Jacob’s sons are listed again in order of his wives and then the concubines: Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah.
- d. Verses 27–29: Isaac, who has lived to 180, dies in Hebron, having lived a full life, and is buried by Esau and Jacob (who are mentioned in that order).

Some Issues of Clarification and Emphasis

5. Reuben’s challenge to Jacob: the historical-cultural context is important here; this was more than sexual sin.
 - a. By having sex with Bilhah, Rachel’s maid, Reuben (Leah’s oldest son) would have prevented Bilhah from succeeding Rachel as the favorite wife (NET Notes 2019; also G. J. Wehham 1994, Gen 35:1–29).
 - b. More than that, it was likely an attempt to take over leadership of the clan.
 - 1) Possession of concubines that belonged to the clan head was a sign of leadership; when the father died, concubines were among the properties that passed on to the heir.
 - 2) “To seize ownership of the concubines prior to the father’s death would then be seen as an act of subversion and disrespect (comparable to seizing lands or herds), but would not be unusual if succession to clan leadership was contested” (Walton 2009, 120).
 - 3) In this context, Reuben’s offense against Jacob circumvents proper succession procedures and implies the father is powerless (cf. Absalom, 2 Sam 16.21–22).
 - 4) The offense was serious enough that it cost Reuben the birthright (Gen 49.3–4).
6. Purification and re-dedication (vv. 1–4).
 - a. Notice the connection with Jacob’s vow in which he had included three promises (28.20–22): (1) acknowledging Yahweh as his God; (2) setting up a shrine; (3) paying a tithe.
 - 1) The imperative verb, “arise” (v. 1), carries a sense of urgency (NET Notes 2019, n. 1)
 - 2) In order to truly keep the vow’s promises, it was necessary to remove other loyalties, become ritually clean, and change their garments (on the latter, cf. Exod 19.10; Zech 3.3–5) (v. 2).
 - b. Removing the idols and things associated with them was necessarily step one since their “presence is evidence of divided loyalties” (Walton 2009, 118).
 - 1) These were probably not the household gods Rachel had brought with her, which were not strictly speaking divine images, but images of ancestors (cf. 31.19).¹
 - 2) It’s reasonable that they at least included gods plundered from Shechem (Walton 2009, 118).
 - c. The earrings may have had a connection to or been quasi-representatives of the deities.
 - 1) Walton reports that archaeologists have not yet been able to attest to earrings in the shape of deities.
 - 2) He also cites V. Horowitz who reports that many images in the ancient New East were adorned with earrings, indicating that the pronoun “their” (v. 4) may refer to the ears of the deities, not Jacob’s household.
 - 3) Alternately, N. Fox argues that earrings in images indicated a willingness to hear supplicants, while worshipers wore earrings to indicate their willingness to obey.²

¹ On 31.19, “some translations merely transliterate the Hebrew term תְּרָפוֹת (*teraphim*) as ‘teraphim,’ which apparently refers to household idols. Some contend that possession of these idols guaranteed the right of inheritance, but it is more likely that they were viewed simply as protective deities. See M. Greenberg, ‘Another Look at Rachel’s Theft of the Teraphim,’ *JBL* 81 (1962): 239–48 (NET Notes 2019, n. 31; cf. *ESV Study Bible* note on the verse). But see Walton’s comment that they were “images that represented deceased ancestors in order to venerate them” and his accompanying sidebar (Walton 2009, 111–112).

² Compare Exod 21.6 and the reference to the slave having his ear pierced as a sign of permanent submission.

- d. Whatever the particulars, the point is that challengers to ultimate (or parallel) loyalty to God had to be rejected and removed; something necessary as preparation for both worship and life (cf. Willis 1979, 368).
7. El Shaddai and the promise (v. 11).
- a. “The name אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי (*el shadday*, ‘El Shaddai’) has often been translated “God Almighty,” primarily because Jerome translated it omnipotens (“all powerful”) in the Latin Vulgate. There has been much debate over the meaning of the name....
- 1) “Shaddai/El Shaddai is the sovereign king of the world who grants, blesses, and judges. In the Book of Genesis he blesses the patriarchs with fertility and promises numerous descendants. Outside Genesis he both blesses/protects and takes away life/happiness.
 - 2) “The patriarchs knew God primarily as El Shaddai (Exod 6:3). While the origin and meaning of this name are uncertain its significance is clear. The name is used in contexts where God appears as the source of fertility and life” (NET Notes 2019, Gen 35.11 n. 24).
- b. The reference here parallels Genesis 17.1 (Abraham) and is important in the emphasis on the advancement of the covenant, as verse 11 goes on to stress with a reference to the promise; the reiteration confirms what God had previously told Abraham (Gen 17) and Jacob (28.3–4).

Coda

8. “Personally, Jacob has emerged to take his rightful place among his forefathers as a man of faith. Regardless of what spiritual shortcomings may have been exposed in his vow and regardless of the dangers that accompany the vow, Jacob has fulfilled it, and the vow stands as a testimony to his commitment to Yahweh. God’s patient work in his life has resulted in a transformation of character that may have seemed beyond reach in the earlier chapters” (Walton 2001, Bridging Contexts).

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Works Cited

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