

## **Genesis 35:1-15**

### **Jacob Becomes Israel**

Jacob had settled in Canaan. And, perhaps to his surprise, he had found himself, even though a sojourner, somewhat at home. He had begun to have business dealings with the local community, he had purchased some land, and his flocks and herds grazed in the nearby hill country. His family had even begun to make some acquaintances among the local population. One day his daughter, Dinah, went out to meet some friends among the local young women of the village. As she did so, she was attacked by the son of the local ruler. He raped her and took her back to his home.

When Jacob heard the news, he felt both heartbreak and guilt. After all, his sons had been out caring for the flocks when Dinah was assaulted. Jacob had, in some sense, been responsible for her safety. His feelings must have been those of any loving father under the circumstances. His sons, however, reacted differently. When Jacob's sons heard the news, they were angry. They felt no sense of guilt or heartbreak, but rather were belligerent and vindictive. So, when Hamor, the leader of the village and the father of Shechem, the man who had attacked Dinah, came to meet Jacob and his family to negotiate a marriage agreement between the young couple and even to propose an alliance between the two people groups based on future intermarriage, Jacob's sons concocted a plan to get their revenge.

Simeon and Levi, the main instigators among Jacob's sons, insisted to Hamor and Shechem that only if all the men of the village were circumcised could the marriage between Shechem and Dinah, and any future marriages for that matter, take place. Thinking that a small price to pay for the opportunity to intermarry, and knowing they were likely to absorb this small community of wanderers (and importantly their livestock and other wealth) into their own culture, the men of the village agreed and underwent the procedure. Weak, sore, and probably feverish on the third day after the rite had been performed, the men of the town tried to recover. And as they did so, Simeon and Levi, accompanied by their other brothers and probably some servants as well, entered the town, murdered all the male inhabitants, rescued their sister, took the women and children as slaves, gathered whatever portable wealth they could carry, and drove the community's herds and flocks back to their own camp.

Jacob saw them coming, but as pleased as he must have been at again seeing his daughter, he also understood the larger implications of this attack by his sons. Such blood vengeance always had its reprisals in the ancient world. He knew that soon other surrounding villages would hear of the attack by these immigrant Hebrews, and they would seek their own revenge. Jacob and his family could not possibly withstand the attack of several hundred, if not thousands, of hostile Canaanites. Jacob knew he and his family would have to emigrate.

This narrative brings elements of unity to the main Jacob narrative in Genesis. From this point on, the attention will turn to the lives of Jacob's sons, particularly Joseph. But this narrative is important because it reminds us of some of the aspects we have been discussing in the life of this great, though flawed, patriarch. First, there was geographic closure. We will see that God brought Jacob back to the place where He first drew Jacob's attention to Himself as the keeper of the promises of land, seed, and blessing.

Reminding Jacob of the past he was so quick to forget or ignore, God recalled to Jacob the place of their first meeting when the Lord said,

“<sup>13</sup>I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. <sup>14</sup>Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. <sup>15</sup>Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. . . . <sup>18</sup>So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top. <sup>19</sup>He called the name of that place Bethel” (Genesis 28:13-15, 18-19).

In this account we see that, for a time, Jacob would again live and worship at Bethel.

A second sense of closure is provided in the narrative by the four burials that were identified. First, there was the burial of the pagan gods. Some of those idols must have been among those that Rachel had stolen from her father, but others, no doubt, were acquired by family members after having returned to Canaan. Then there was the burial of Rebekah’s nurse, Deborah, followed by the burial of Rachel, and finally the burial of Isaac. The latter’s death was significant in that it marked a transition in the generations from one patriarch to another. Isaac had died, and Jacob had begun to be replaced by his sons as the main actors in the Biblical account.

### **The Command to Leave**

Recognizing that Jacob’s situation had become untenable after the slaughter of the inhabitants of Bethel, God commanded Jacob to return to Bethel. “God said to Jacob, ‘arise, go up to Bethel and live there, and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau’” (v. 1). God gave no reason for the move, perhaps none was necessary under the circumstances, but He did clearly articulate two things that Jacob was to do when he arrived at Bethel. First, Jacob was to live there permanently, or at least long term. The word used does not describe a temporary encampment, but rather a settlement that is expected to be inhabited for a long duration. And secondly, once there, Jacob was to build an altar to his God.

By now, Jacob must have been used to being commanded to go. After the plan to steal Isaac’s blessing had succeeded, though with potentially violent consequences, Jacob’s mother had commanded him to “arise, flee to Haran, to my brother Laban!” (Genesis 27:43). Putty in the hands of his wife, Rebekah, Isaac passively had echoed that sentiment when he told Jacob, “arise, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel your mother’s father; and from there take to yourself a wife from the daughters of Laban your mother’s brother” (Genesis 28:2). And decades later, God had commanded Jacob to go, in this instance insisting that he retrace the steps he had taken more than two decades before. “Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you” (Genesis 31:13).

And we see that God had kept this promise quite literally. He had once told Jacob that “behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land” (Genesis 28:15), and He had done so. Jacob was right back at Bethel where that original vision had been received. And now that

he had settled there, Jacob was commanded to build an altar. One must wonder if he used the remains of the original pillar he had set up so many years before (Genesis 28:22).

We have seen the patriarchs build altars and other places of worship before. Recall that Abraham had particularly modeled this practice.

“<sup>7</sup>The Lord appeared to Abram and said, ‘to your descendants I will give this land.’ So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him. <sup>8</sup>Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord” (Genesis 12:7-8).

“Then Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and there he built an altar to the Lord” (Genesis 13:18).

Abraham had set an excellent example of worship. His son and grandsons must have observed that.

Now having received his directive from God, Jacob, himself, gave commands. “<sup>2</sup>Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, ‘put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments; <sup>3</sup>and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone” (v. 2-3). Jacob addressed both his family and his servants. He spoke to all who were members of his household. And this number would also have included the recently acquired slaves from Shechem, who no doubt possessed many of the pagan gods that needed to be put away.

Jacob’s commands were twofold. First, they were to “put away” the foreign gods, and second, they were to purify themselves. The language to “put away” the cultic gods was typical of many Old Testament commands involving idols (Joshua 24:23; 2 Kings 18:4). It was also often associated with spiritual renewal (Judges 10:16; 1 Samuel 7:3-4), though there is no indication that such was the case here. That is, Scripture does not give the impression that Jacob’s family had taken up the worship of these pagan idols, but rather it implies that their very presence among the Israelites was potentially harmful. In fact, notice that it was not God Who commanded that these gods be abandoned. This was Jacob’s doing. Perhaps Jacob realized that their continued closeness would not be compatible with the new life in Bethel. Finally, the rite of purification which Jacob required also might have had religious overtones, though it may have been no more than the physical cleaning necessary after contact with the many dead bodies among the victims in Shechem.

And unlike God, Jacob gave his listeners a reason for his commands. He was going to move the family to Bethel so he could build an altar to his God, “who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone” (v. 3). Jacob was unashamed. He was honest and straightforward. He publicly acknowledged that his actions were intended to give God the glory that was His due. Jacob proclaimed the protection and presence of the Lord in his life and sought to be obedient to His commands.

There was no rebuttal offered. His family and their servants simply obeyed. “They gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the oak

which was near Shechem” (v. 4). The members of Jacob’s clan gave up their gods and their earrings without resistance or argument. These ornaments may have been merely part of the loot of the city, though their mention in this context might also indicate that they had some cultic significance as well. Perhaps they had religious symbols on them. Ancient texts mention that pagan idols themselves had earrings, and that may be what was referred to here.

That these idols were buried rather than destroyed also deserves some comment. First, we can see that the author continued the mockery of these gods that had begun when Rachel first stole them. These gods could be stolen, sat upon, contaminated with menstrual blood, and now completely buried and forgotten. In addition, trees in the ancient world were often associated with worship. Not that they were always the objects of worship, but that they provided a location conducive to encountering the eternal. In fact, we can recall that when Abraham had entered Canaan, he “passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh” (Genesis 12:6). This association of sacred groves of trees with the divine would persist until well after the fall of the Roman empire in the West two millennium later. The oak tree mentioned in the account of Abraham may have been the very place that Jacob buried these gods. If so, the items may have been buried there to desecrate the place and make it unworthy of being used as a place of worship for Yahweh. Jacob was closing the chapter on his time in Shechem and wanted to remove any temptation for returning there.

### **The Journey to Bethel**

Jacob and his family then set out for Bethel. It lay about twenty miles to the south. One might think that Jacob and his family traveled stealthily by night as they made their way. After all, they were few in number compared to the surrounding inhabitants of the cities by which they had to pass. And they must have assumed they were being pursued. But Scripture makes it clear that such was not the case. God’s plans for His people superseded the retaliatory plans of the neighboring Canaanites. In fact, “as they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob” (v. 5).

This must have been an unusual sensation for Jacob. Usually he was the one who had been afraid.

Of God - “He was afraid and said, ‘how awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven’” (Genesis 28:17).

Of Laban - “Then Jacob replied to Laban, ‘because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force’” (Genesis 31:31).

Of Esau - “Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two companies” (Genesis 32:7).



So, while many people had been angry with Jacob, none had feared him. Until now. Such was the power of the protection of God and the sense pagans had, and still have, of His presence among His people. God continued to be faithful to Jacob and offered His protection and presence on his journeys.

Finally, Jacob and his family arrived at their destination. <sup>6</sup>So Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. <sup>7</sup>He built an altar there, and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed Himself to him when he fled from his brother” (v. 6-7). Jacob had obeyed both of God’s commands. He had returned to Bethel and he had built the altar. The language used was the exact same wording used to describe the building of the altar at Bethel by Abraham (Genesis 12:7). Notice, also, that the author takes advantage of the name of the place to remind the reader that its name had changed over time, as will Jacob’s, himself. Where once the village was called Luz, now it was Bethel. Where once he was Jacob, in future he will be called Israel.

That Jacob renamed the place El-Bethel, is a reminder that this God has become his God. The first time he passed through the area, Jacob had “called the name of that place Bethel” (Genesis 28:19). The vision Jacob received compelled him to call the place the House of God. Now, more than two decades later, Jacob’s understanding of God had grown. Now, Jacob called the place the God of the House of God. In other words, where once the name had been associated with a place, now it was associated with the presence of God. The generic had become the personal.

Then, within this narrative, there is the curious inclusion in the narrative of the death of Rebekah’s nurse. “Now Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak; it was named Allon-bacuth” (v. 8). As the narrative unfolded, Scripture gives us an accounting of the death of each of the patriarchs, Abraham (Genesis 25:7-11), Isaac (Genesis 35:29), Jacob (Genesis 49:33), and Joseph (Genesis 50:26). Scripture also includes the deaths of Sarah (Genesis 23:1-2) and Rachel (Genesis 35:19). Missing from the narrative is any account of the death of Rebekah, though her that she was buried is mentioned (Genesis 49:31).

That Rebekah’s nurse traveled with the family, but that no mention is made of Rebekah, herself, likely indicates that Rebekah died before Jacob returned. Sadly, Scripture offers the reader no reunion between the mother and her favorite son. Instead, it was left to Deborah to represent the older generation. She had journeyed with Rebekah from Paddan-aram (Genesis 24:59). She must have become more than a servant over the years, for the name Jacob gave the place where she was buried was the “oak of weeping,” a strong indication that he felt sadness at the parting of his mother’s personal servant. She was likely his last link to his mother. Though Isaac still lived, we must remember that Jacob had always been his mother’s favorite, and that their relationship was much closer than the one Jacob had enjoyed with his father. Thus, much like the burial of the pagan idols at Shechem, Deborah’s burial marked the end of any connection with Paddan-aram.

### **The Name Regiven and the Promise Renewed**

Once at Bethel, God again appeared to Jacob. We notice no mention of fear in Jacob. He had grown more accustomed to the presence of his God.

<sup>9</sup>“Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him.

<sup>10</sup>God said to him,

‘Your name is Jacob;  
You shall no longer be called Jacob,  
But Israel shall be your name.’

Thus He called him Israel. <sup>11</sup>God also said to him,

‘I am God Almighty;  
Be fruitful and multiply;  
A nation and a company of nations shall come from you,  
And kings shall come forth from you.

<sup>12</sup>The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac,

I will give it to you,

And I will give the land to your descendants after you” (v. 9-12).

That God appeared to Jacob ‘again’ and that the author mentions Paddan-aram are examples of the narrative marking the fulfillment of promises. That God ‘blessed’ him reminds the reader of the blessing given in the morning before Jacob went to meet Esau (Genesis 32:29). The specifics of the blessing are given in the following verses.

The first mentioned blessing was the change of Jacob’s name to Israel. Unlike the first mention of this (Genesis 32:28) the occasion here was not to mark Jacob as having changed from a trickster to one who submitted to God, but rather to mark Jacob out as the receiver of the patriarchal promises of land, seed, and blessing. One can find a parallel in the life of Abraham who, though he received the promises at the beginning of his relationship with God (Genesis 12:1-3), had them renewed after he had passed the test at Moriah.

<sup>16</sup>“By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup>indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. <sup>18</sup>In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice” (Genesis 22:16-18).

God referred to Himself here as *El Shaddai*, echoing the name he had given to Abraham (Genesis 17:1). This was God the powerful, the God capable of fulfilling His promises. The command/promise “to be fruitful and multiply” (v. 11) had previously been given to childless couples, Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:22), the sons of Noah (Genesis 9:1), and Abraham (Genesis 17:6). But to the elderly Jacob, already blessed with eleven sons, the fulfillment had been witnessed and could be testified to. Jacob had two wives and two other women through whom he had fathered more than a dozen children. So this reference to a “nation and a company of nations [who] shall come from you” (v.11) must be transferred to his children, who would “be fruitful and multiply” in their own time. Thus, this blessing was for Jacob and also for future generations.

That “a nation and a company of nations shall come from you” (v. 11) reminds us that God was thinking of more than a large family. Only through such an extended population could the promised land be subdued and maintained. That Jacob would be the father of kings must have been reassuring to Jacob, who surely doubted the future of his sons after the attack on Shechem. That God would preserve them, even in spite of themselves, must have gladdened this father, as it would any. Finally, the promise of land was anchored in the past promises to Abraham and Isaac, promises which, no doubt, Jacob had been told of many times through the years. That his children would survive to inherit the land reiterated the promises to Abraham and Isaac as well.

Having made His speech, God left Israel, as we must now begin to call him. “Then God went up from him in the place where He had spoken with him” (v. 13). The literal description of God’s ascension is not given, but the language is the same as that used when God’s departed from Abraham on one occasion, “when He finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham” (Genesis 17:22).

In response, Jacob did as was his habit. <sup>14</sup>“Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a pillar of stone, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. <sup>15</sup>So Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel” (v. 14-15). Jacob had already erected an altar, now as he had done after his first encounter with God, Jacob set up a pillar, and it marked Jacob fulfilling the vow made at the time of his original encounter with God at Bethel (Genesis 28:18-21).

The new element mentioned was that of the offering of drink - Jacob had poured oil on the original pillar at Bethel. This particular detail is the only example of one of the patriarchs offering a drink offering, though the ritual became common practice among the later Israelites (2 Samuel 23:16; Isaiah 57:6; Jeremiah 44:19-17) and it was part of the various sacrifices offered at the tabernacle (Exodus 29:40-41; Leviticus 23:13).

### **Takeaways**

Again we see God’s presence and protection, as well as His faithfulness in keeping His promises. Over the years He had sanctified Jacob and brought him from being a deceptive, petulant young man to an older man, confident in the God he worshipped.

God promises included Jacob’s sons. These were men who had, as we have seen and will see again, significant character flaws. Yet, God had promised and God had chosen them to be the fathers of the tribes through whom He would work His perfect, sovereign will.

And God had given Jacob a new identity. That name change from Jacob to Israel can symbolize the change that God works in each of those He class into relationship with Him. He takes us as we are and through our daily experiences of success and heartbreak, shapes us into the children He wants us to be. The process is not completed until we are called to be with Him in heaven, but until then, it is a joy and a privilege to experience the transformation.