

## Genesis 35:16-29 The Sons of Israel

Jacob had at last found both a safe place and a new identity. And he knew that both of these blessings had been given to him by God. To begin, God had provided protection for Jacob's family as they had journeyed from Shechem to Bethel, ensuring that the vastly outnumbered Israelites would not be overpowered by the local Canaanites who were bent on revenge. The murder of the inhabitants of Shechem by Jacob's sons had set in motion a series of events that had the potential to prove fatal to the patriarch's family. But God, in His grace and mercy had intervened to preserve them for His greater purposes.

Second, God had again appeared to Jacob and reminded him of the promises of land, seed, and blessing that he had inherited from his father and grandfather. Not that Jacob had come into these promises by any right of his own. Rather, the giving of these promises was in the hand of God alone, Who chose to continue to use this particular family for His own perfect sovereign plan of redemption. As a symbol of that sovereign choice, Jacob was given the name Israel, and through his sons, a nation was one day to emerge.

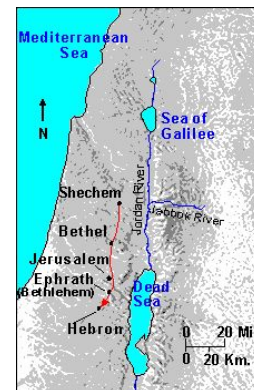
This passage continues to mark the transition of the biblical narrative from Jacob to his sons, eventually focusing on Joseph. As the account of Jacob's return to Canaan had progressed, Scripture has brought Jacob's life full circle in many ways. He had returned to Bethel, where he had first been encountered by God. There he had promised to worship God if he survived the journey to Paddan-aram, and there he had done so (Genesis 28:20-22, 35:6-7). The burial of Rebekah's servant, Deborah, marked another moment of transition. She had been the last remnant of his mother, and was likely his last tie to the family of his uncle Laban in Paddan-aram.

And another example of the Jacob narrative coming full circle, which we will see in the passage we look at today, was the birth of Benjamin. This event recalls to the reader the birth of the twins Esau and Jacob, and the death of Rachel during childbirth of Benjamin reminds the reader of the physical challenges of Rebekah's pregnancy that foreshadowed the turbulent years that followed. As the Jacob cycle had begun with a difficult pregnancy, so now the cycle will close with one.

### **The Birth of Benjamin and the Death of Rachel**

Though he had settled in Bethel with the expectation of staying there a long time, Jacob eventually moved on. And it was not necessarily a good time to do so. For at the time Jacob chose to uproot his family yet again, his wife, Rachel, was pregnant. And her pregnancy was not going well. "They journeyed from Bethel; and when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and she suffered severe labor" (v. 16).

Scripture is silent as to why Jacob chose to move to Hebron with his wife several months into her pregnancy. Perhaps it was to fulfill the vow he had made when God first appeared to him, "20 then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'if



God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, <sup>21</sup>and I return to my father's house in safety, then the Lord will be my God" (Genesis 28:20-21). So it may have been that Bethel was still a bit close to Shechem for Jacob to feel entirely comfortable, and he wanted to return to Isaac and combine their forces should they be attacked by the Canaanites. He had promised to make the Lord his God if he made it safely to his father's house, and Jacob was taking this promise quite literally.

But as we said, things were not going well for his beloved Rachel. She "suffered severe labor" (v. 16), that is, she had reached the time of the baby's delivery, and she was experiencing significant difficulties. We are reminded of the struggles of Rebekah during her pregnancy (Genesis 25:22). The clan had only traveled less than twenty miles since leaving Bethel. They were approaching Ephrath, which was later known as Bethlehem (v. 19). The narrative suggests that they had probably made their way through Jerusalem, and were somewhere in between the two settlements when Rachel's labor pains compelled the caravan to stop and rest.

Aware of Rachel's troubles, the servant assisting her during delivery tried to offer some words of encouragement. "When she was in severe labor the midwife said to her, 'do not fear, for now you have another son'" (v. 17). One might wonder if this was the same servant who had been present when Rachel gave birth to Joseph back in Paddan-aram, and if she had heard her mistress pray "may the Lord give me another son" (Genesis 30:24). In the convoluted competition that Rachel had engaged in with Leah, the giving of sons to their husband had been paramount. And Rachel had not been particularly successful. While Leah had produced six sons, including the eldest, Rachel had managed to bring forth only Joseph as a son to Jacob. To be sure Rachel's maid, Bilhah, had borne two sons as a surrogate for Rachel, but Leah's maid, Zilpah, had matched that with two sons of her own.

Thus the promise of another son to be born to Rachel must have encouraged her, even as she felt her life slipping away. Struggling through the pain, Rachel managed to make her final wishes known. "It came about as her soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin" (v. 18). The naming of the baby was probably Rachel's last words. She called her son the "son of my sorrow," a fitting appellation for a dying mother.

In a manner not typical in the ancient world, the mothers of Jacob's sons had always had the prerogative of naming the child (Genesis 29:32-35; 30:6-8, 10-13, 18-20, 23-24). In this case, however, Jacob changed the name of the child. He called him the "son of my right hand," a more optimistic, if not more fitting, name. The right hand was a place of power and authority. To give one example of many, Moses exulted,

"Your right hand, O Lord, is majestic in power,  
Your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy" (Exodus 15:6).

Such an appellation was an unusual one for the twelfth son of a patriarch. Yet, we must remember that Benjamin was the only one of Jacob's sons born in Canaan, the land of promise, and he was the last child born to his beloved Rachel. As a result of this last characteristic, Benjamin always remained particularly special to Jacob. We are all familiar with his heartfelt plea, when his other sons needed to take Benjamin

to Egypt. “But Jacob said, ‘my son [Benjamin] shall not go down with you; for his brother [Joseph] is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should befall him on the journey you are taking, then you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow” (Genesis 42:38). Along with Joseph, the other of Rachel's sons, Benjamin was clearly favored by their father. As a consequence, this bred resentment among the other brothers, which manifested itself with destructive results.

But all that was in the future. For now, Jacob had to bury his beloved wife. “<sup>19</sup>So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). <sup>20</sup>Jacob set up a pillar over her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel’s grave to this day” (v. 19-20). The exact location of her grave remains unknown, though the church historian Eusebius (fourth century) and the Jewish, *Guide to Jerusalem* (tenth century), placed it one mile north of Bethlehem. That Jacob erected a pillar there may mean more than simply the modern equivalent of a tombstone. We are familiar with the fact that Jacob was known to employ pillars at sites where he worshipped (Genesis 28:18, 34:14). This should not imply that Jacob in any way worshipped his wife, but perhaps he took the time there to worship God and reflect on the journey he had been on thus far.

### **Further Evidence of Decline**

Having buried his beloved Rachel, Jacob and the family continued their journey. “Then Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder” (v. 21). This location of this particular tower is obscure, but it was probably on the way from Bethlehem to Hebron, Jacob’s eventual destination. There was a settlement called Eder located on the southern border to the lands eventually given to the tribe of Judah after the conquest of Canaan (Joshua 15:21). The name means “tower of the flock,” so it likely served as a watchtower for those who lived in the area and grazed their flocks nearby.

And then, the unthinkable happened. “It came about while Israel was dwelling in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine, and Israel heard of it” (v. 22). Bilhah was the maidservant of Rachel and the mother of Dan and Naphtali. Scripture is silent on a motive for the taking of Bilhah by Reuben, and he may have been stimulated by nothing more than sheer lust. It is also possible that his act was in retaliation against Jacob for his father’s affection for Rachel instead of his own mother, Leah. We can remember the struggle between Leah and Rachel for control of the marital bed, perhaps best reflected in the narrative about the mandrakes (Genesis 30:14-16).

But it may also be possible that Reuben was trying to assert himself as the leader of the family, since Simeon and Levi had won fame, if not their father's approval, for their attack on Shechem. In any case, the act of taking Bilhah would likely have been interpreted as an assertion of authority over his father.

“<sup>7</sup>Nathan then said to David, ‘you are the man! Thus says the Lord God of Israel, “It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I who delivered you from the hand of Saul. <sup>8</sup>I also gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your care, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added to you many more things like these!” . . . <sup>11</sup>Thus says the Lord, “behold, I will raise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes and give them to your companion, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight”” (2 Samuel 12:7-8, 11).

“<sup>20</sup>Then Absalom said to Ahithophel, ‘give your advice. What shall we do?’ <sup>21</sup>Ahithophel said to Absalom, ‘go in to your father’s concubines, whom he has left to keep the house; then all Israel will hear that you have made yourself odious to your father. The hands of all who are with you will also be strengthened.’ <sup>22</sup>So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof, and Absalom went in to his father’s concubines in the sight of all Israel” (2 Samuel 16:20-22).

“<sup>1</sup>Now Ben-hadad king of Aram gathered all his army, and there were thirty-two kings with him, and horses and chariots. And he went up and besieged Samaria and fought against it. <sup>2</sup>Then he sent messengers to the city to Ahab king of Israel and said to him, ‘thus says Ben-hadad, <sup>3</sup>“your silver and your gold are mine; your most beautiful wives and children are also mine”’ <sup>4</sup>The king of Israel replied, ‘it is according to your word, my lord, O king; I am yours, and all that I have”’ (1 Kings 20:1-4).

Whether or not that was Reuben’s intent, certainly such conduct would have been perceived as an act of rebellion. That Bilhah was described as Jacob’s concubine, and not as Rachel’s servant is indicative of how the author of Genesis understood the situation. And while these Hebrews were not yet under the Law, clearly such an action was unacceptable. Eventually such behavior would be made illicit, and one cannot but wonder if this specific event was in the mind of God as He gave the Law to Moses.

“You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife; it is your father’s nakedness” (Leviticus 18:8).

“If there is a man who lies with his father’s wife, he has uncovered his father’s nakedness; both of them shall surely be put to death, their bloodguiltiness is upon them” (Leviticus 20:11).

That Jacob was not officially married to Bilhah did not absolve Reuben of his sin. Bilhah’s children were seen as Rachel’s children, and thus the relationship between Jacob and Bilhah was one of intimacy in both act and custom.

Yet we cannot absolve Jacob from some responsibility as well. After all, he had married sisters, an act that, itself, would later be proscribed. “You shall not marry a woman in addition to her sister as a rival while she is alive, to uncover her nakedness” (Leviticus 18:18). Jacob’s polygamy, and perhaps even his apparent indifference to the attack on Dinah, may have contributed to the libertine attitudes of his sons. It is significant, I think, that Scripture states that Jacob heard of the attack; it does not state that he condemned or punished it. Clearly his authority in the family was diminishing. And his other sons, too, seem to not have made any significant demonstration of displeasure at the act of Reuben. They had been provoked to murder when Dinah had been violated, and perhaps Bilhah was a willing sexual partner for Reuben, but still we cannot overlook their apathy at such behavior.

If his authority was declining, his memory was not. Even on his deathbed, Jacob remembered this act of defiance and debauchery.

<sup>1</sup>Then Jacob summoned his sons and said, ‘assemble yourselves that I may tell you what will befall you in the days to come.

<sup>2</sup>Gather together and hear, O sons of Jacob;  
And listen to Israel your father.

<sup>3</sup>Reuben, you are my firstborn;  
My might and the beginning of my strength,  
Preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power.

<sup>4</sup>Uncontrolled as water, you shall not have preeminence,  
Because you went up to your father’s bed;  
Then you defiled it - he went up to my couch” (Genesis 49:1-4).

And as the Chronicler explained, this was why Reuben, though the firstborn, did not inherit the birthright and the blessing of his father, but rather it was passed to Joseph, the firstborn by Jacob’s beloved Rachel.

“Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel (for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father’s bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph the son of Israel; so that he is not enrolled in the genealogy according to the birthright” (1 Chronicles 5:1).

### **The Sons of Israel and the Death of Isaac**

As this passage marks the denouement of the Jacob narrative, it is fitting that a repetition and summary of Jacob’s progeny be given here. After this, Scripture will give its attention to the rivalry among the others and the rise of Joseph as the successor to Jacob. And notice that the sons are listed by their mother, rather than by birth order, and this, too, gives impetus to the narrative by foreshadowing the family strife that was to follow.

<sup>22</sup>Now there were twelve sons of Jacob - <sup>23</sup>the sons of Leah: Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn, then Simeon and Levi and Judah and Issachar and Zebulun; <sup>24</sup>the sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin; <sup>25</sup>and the sons of Bilhah, Rachel’s maid: Dan and Naphtali; <sup>26</sup>and the sons of Zilpah, Leah’s maid: Gad and Asher. These are the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram” (v. 22-26).

But we cannot overlook the fact that this again marks the fulfillment of God’s promises to Jacob. He had promised him descendants.

“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” (Genesis 28:14).

“I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered” (Genesis 32:12).

And now that he was back in Canaan, Jacob could rest assured in God's promises of land as well.

“And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, ‘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’” (Genesis 28:13).

“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” (Genesis 35:12).

Yet it is clear that this is not a nation, and these certainly are not kings. The land remained in the possession of the Canaanites for several more centuries. As with all of God's promises, they are fulfilled according to His perfect timing.

The detail that these “are the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram” (v. 26) should not necessarily be taken literally. Benjamin, as we have just seen, was born in Canaan. The original audience for Genesis, written by Moses, had not themselves entered and taken possession of the land of Canaan, so the author's point was that, like the sons of Jacob, they were about to come into the land by the promise of God.

Finally Jacob arrived at the home of his father. “Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre of Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned” (v. 27). He had quite literally returned to his father's house. Again we see that Scripture directly linked Jacob with both his father and grandfather. The family settlement at Mamre had a long history. Abraham had first come there (Genesis 13:18). Isaac had last been known to live at Beersheba (Genesis 26:23; 28:10), but he, too, must have emigrated to the traditional family estate, if such it could be called. Perhaps he had done so since he knew he was nearing the end of his life and that was where the family burial sepulchre was located (Genesis 23:19; 25:9).

And so Isaac died. <sup>28</sup>“Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. <sup>29</sup>Isaac breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, an old man of ripe age; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him” (v. 28-29). These are the usual formulaic expressions of an obituary for the patriarchs (Genesis 25:7-10). This is the third instance in a relatively short time that Jacob had needed to bury a loved one. First, was the passing of Deborah, the maidservant of his mother. Then his beloved wife, Rachel, had died. And now his father “was gathered to his people” (v. 29).

As is common in such cases, death brought together family members from distant places. Esau journeyed from Seir to join his brother Jacob in the burial. Scripture passes over their meeting and anything they may have said about the past. Perhaps the death of Isaac provided an opportunity for resolution. That Jacob and Esau gathered together for the funeral was reminiscent of Isaac and Ishmael doing the same for Abraham (Genesis 25:9). With Isaac gone, now Jacob formally assumed the role of the patriarch of the family, though, as we have seen, his power and influence was lost. The years in Paddan-aram had done irreparable damage to his ability to lead in Canaan.

And while Isaac's death is recorded here to act as a bookend to this particular narrative, we must notice that chronologically it is out of place. Isaac lived to be one hundred eighty years old, and thus he lived some twelve years after Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, an account yet to be related in Scripture. Consider,

Jacob (and Esau) had been born when Isaac was sixty years old (Genesis 25:26)

Jacob was 120 when Isaac died

Joseph was 17 when he was sold into slavery by his brothers (Genesis 37:2)

Joseph was 30 when he went before Pharaoh and was given control of Egypt (Genesis 46:41)

Joseph led Egypt for 9 years before Jacob came to Egypt (Genesis 45:6)

Jacob was 130 when he stood before Pharaoh (Genesis 47:9)

Therefore, Joseph was 39 when his father was 130, thus Jacob was 91 when Joseph was born

If Jacob was 91, then Isaac was 151 when Joseph was born.

If Joseph was sold into slavery at age 17, then Isaac was 168, and he lived to be 180.

That his later years was encumbered by such a tragedy (he, like Jacob, believed Joseph to have been killed), was unfortunate.

### **Takeaways**

It is impossible not to notice that, during the span of a person's life, many things happen that are unexpected and unwelcome. Jacob had never planned to go to Paddan-aram. Neither had he planned to flee for his life as a result of his son's rash behavior. The death of his wife during childbirth, while certainly not unexpected in the ancient world, was certainly most unwelcome. Yet through it all, God's presence and protection were obvious. As Jacob looked back on his many years, he could testify to God's grace and mercy. And he would have cause to do so again in the future.