



Genesis - Chapter Twenty Eight

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

II.b Genesis 25:19-36:43 - Isaac's Descendants (continues)

II.b.vii Genesis 27:41-28:5 - Jacob Escapes Esau's Fury (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Twenty Eight

This chapter, which continues the account of Jacob's deception of Isaac, focuses on the issue of finding an appropriate wife for Jacob and presupposes some knowledge of the earlier comment in 26:34-35 about Esau's choice of wives. Isaac and Rebekah encourage Jacob to get a wife from among their relatives who are living in northwest Mesopotamia. Their advice to Jacob in turn prompts Esau to take another wife, on this occasion from Ishmael's family.

During the journey Jacob stopped at a place for the night. Sleeping out in the open, he laid his head on a rock and dreamed of a ladder into heaven with angels ascending and descending.

It was here that God promised to Jacob the same as he had to Abraham and Isaac before him. On waking the next morning Jacob acknowledged God's favour and knew that one day he would return safely to the land he was now leaving. He anointed the stone on which he had slept and promised a tithe to God of one tenth of all that he would come to possess.

¹ Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and charged him, 'You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women. ² Go at once to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father; and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother.

Genesis 28:1-2

Isaac called Jacob and blessed him. By now Isaac had resigned himself to what his wife Rebekah told him was the Lord's will all along - that the older would serve the younger and that Jacob, not Esau, would receive the birthright. So he sent Jacob on with blessing and instructions. He clearly had forgiven his son and wife for their earlier deception.

In response to Rebekah's negative observation about Hittite wives, Isaac instructs Jacob to take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban. Abraham issued similar instructions in 24:3-4. This advice, which coincides with Rebekah's desire that Jacob should flee from Esau, requires Jacob to go to Paddan-aram, which means the plain of Aram.

Although Rebekah specifically mentions Hittite wives, Isaac expands on this by referring to Canaanite women, a broader designation that would have included the Hittites, refer to the comments made on 10:6-20.

³ May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, that you may become a company of peoples. ⁴ May he give to you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your offspring with you, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien – land that God gave to Abraham.' ⁵ Thus Isaac sent Jacob away; and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban son of Bethuel the Aramæan, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob's and Esau's mother.

Genesis 28:3-5

May God Almighty bless you. Isaac's blessing of Jacob, as in 27:29, not only echoes the divine promises to Abraham but explicitly requests that God Almighty will give the blessing of Abraham to Jacob. Although Jacob is being sent away to Haran in northwest Mesopotamia, Isaac anticipates that he will return to Canaan in order to take possession of the land divinely given to Abraham.

Requesting the Lord's blessing in this way is a common theme in Scripture: <<*The LORD bless you and keep you*>> (Numbers 6:24), <<*Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, 'The LORD be with you.'*>> They answered, '*The LORD bless you*'>> (Ruth 2:4), <<*The blessing of the LORD be upon you! We bless you in the name of the LORD!*>> (Psalm 129:8b), and: <<*Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Once more they shall use these words in the land of Judah and in its towns when I restore their fortunes: 'The LORD bless you, O abode of righteousness, O holy hill!'*>> (Jeremiah 31:23).

Make you fruitful and numerous. This is in keeping with the command given by God to Adam and Eve shortly after creation. Refer to the comment made on 1:28.

A company of peoples. This echoes the motif of Abraham as the father of many nations (17:4-6) and is repeated in 35:11.

To you and to your offspring with you. Jacob was by no means worthy of this blessing. Each of the four parties in the whole birthright mess acted unspiritually somewhere along the line. The amazing thing is that God brought any good out of all this, and this was a triumph of God's sovereignty.

Once again the family in Haran, and by inference Abraham and his descendants, are referred to as Aramæans. Refer to the comment made on 25:20.

II.b.viii Genesis 28:6-9 - Esau Marries Ishmael's Daughter

Esau had already caused his parents a great deal of pain by marrying two Hittite women. Now that his younger brother, the usurper in Esau's eyes, had been instructed to seek a wife from their own family, Esau tries to redeem himself by also taking a wife from within the family, for she was Abraham's granddaughter.

⁶ Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, and that as he blessed him he charged him, 'You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women', ⁷ and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and gone to Paddan-aram. ⁸ So when Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please his father Isaac, ⁹ Esau went to Ishmael and took Mahalath daughter of Abraham's son Ishmael, and sister of Nebaioth, to be his wife in addition to the wives he had.

Genesis 28:6-9

Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob. Having heard his father's instruction to Jacob that he should not take a Canaanite wife, and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother, Esau seeks to make amends for his earlier actions. In an attempt to gain his parents' approval, he marries one of Ishmael's daughters. Esau, however, still retains his two Hittite wives.

Isaac sent him away to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there. This is the start of a major part of the patriarchal history and was referred to later by one of the prophets: <<*Jacob fled to the land of Aram; there Israel served for a wife, and for a wife he guarded sheep*>> (Hosea 12:12).

II.b.ix Genesis 28:10-22 - Jacob's Dream at Bethel

Through an extraordinary dream, Jacob encounters the Lord. This experience has a dramatic effect on him as the Lord confirms that the divine promises to Abraham will be established through him. This encounter with God is later matched by a similar event on Jacob's return to Canaan (32:22-32). Both events take place at crucial points in the life of Jacob, as he is departing from and returning to Canaan.

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran.

Genesis 28:10

Leaving Beer-sheba, Jacob sets out to travel the 550 miles or 900 km to Haran, refer to the comment made on 11:31.

¹¹ He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹² And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

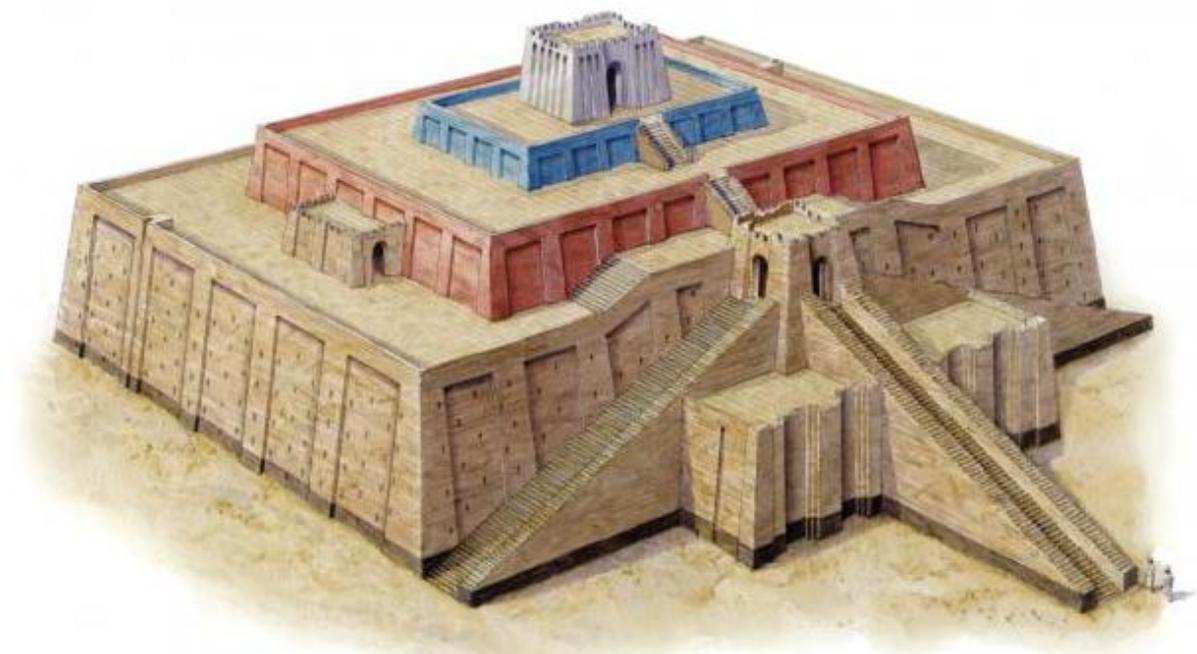
Genesis 28:11-12

As he rests overnight, Jacob has a dream, which centres on a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven. The Hebrew term translated ladder could possibly denote a stairway similar to those found on ancient ziggurats, see the image below. What matters most is not the precise shape of this structure but its purpose; it provides a bridge between heaven and earth, revealing that God is still committed to making the earth his dwelling place. Jesus identifies himself as the ladder linking earth and heaven: <<*And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man'*>> (John 1:51). While human beings want to ascend to heaven, as reflected in the Tower of Babel story in Genesis Chapter Eleven, God is interested in making the earth his temple-city.

Ziggurats are monumental temple-towers found throughout the area of ancient Mesopotamia. They were commonly built of sun-dried mud and straw bricks held in position with bitumen as mortar. Stairways ascended to the top of these structures, where a small temple or shrine sat on the summit.

The illustration depicts the Ziggurat of Nanna at Ur, which was constructed during the reign of Ur-Nammu, circa 2113-2095 BC. Its area covered 150x200 feet or 46x61m, and its height was 80 feet or 24m. It is commonly believed that this type of structure was being built in the Tower of Babel episode (Genesis 11:1-9). The text indicates that the builders of Babel had discovered the process of making mud bricks and that they employed <<*bitumen for*

mortar>> (v.3). Based on that invention, the builders decided <<to build a tower with its top in the heavens>> (v.4).



An Ancient Ziggurat

¹³ And the LORD stood beside him and said, ‘I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴ and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵ Know that 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.’

Genesis 28:13-15

The expression the LORD stood beside him could also be rendered ‘the Lord stood above it’. Jacob’s reaction in v.16 suggests that he perceived God as being with him on earth rather than in heaven. The Lord’s words loudly echo the divine promises made to Abraham and Isaac. In an act of grace, God states that he will not abandon Jacob but will fulfil these promises to him.

The God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. Jacob had no doubt heard about the great God who appeared to Abraham and to Isaac, but now this same God met Jacob in a personal way. This was a life-changing experience for Jacob. It is not unusual for Abraham to be referred to as Jacob’s father even though he was

in fact his grandfather. This is often seen in genealogies as well where several generations often exist between the one called the father and the one identified as the son.

The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Before, Isaac told Jacob the covenant was his (vv.3-4), but now the voice of God Himself confirmed it. God promised him land, a nation, i.e. your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and a blessing, that is, all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. This promise is referred to in the NT as well: <<*You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, “And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed”*>> (Acts 3:25), <<*And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you’*>> (Galatians 3:8).

Know that 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. God gave to Jacob the same kind of promise found in: <<*I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ*>> (Philippians 1:6). God keeps a firm hold on his people until his work has been completed in and through them.

The protective promises of God are repeated throughout the OT, for example: <<*It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed*>> (Deuteronomy 31:8), <<*No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you*>> (Joshua 1:5), <<*And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you*>> (Psalm 9:10).

¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!’ ¹⁷ And 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 28:16-17

Surely the LORD is in this place. Jacob’s affirmation of the Lord’s presence indicates that he considers God to be resident in this location. Consequently, he describes it as the house of God. The associated phrase the gate of heaven possibly implies that this is the entrance to the divine city. Since Jacob names the location Bethel (v.19), which means the house of God, the idea of God’s being present on earth is clearly dominant in his thinking.

The later temple in Jerusalem was considered to be the house of God on earth: <<Then David said, 'Here shall be the house of the LORD God and here the altar of burnt-offering for Israel'>> (1 Chronicles 22:1), and: <<Solomon began to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to his father David, at the place that David had designated, on the threshing-floor of Ornan the Jebusite>> (2 Chronicles 3:1).

The idea of a gate into heaven is a common one in ancient Near Eastern literature. For example, one of the titles given to a high priest of Thebes in Egypt was 'The Opener of the Gates of Heaven.'

How awesome is this place! This is an interesting insight into Jacob's understanding at that time. Like many people, Jacob believed that certain places were holy rather than understanding that it is the presence of God that makes a place holy and that, since God is omnipresent, then any place can be considered holy when the presence of God is detected by the believer. Jacob did not realise that if the presence of the Lord was not with him in every place, then God could never fulfil his promise to him.

¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.

Genesis 28:18

Although Jacob commemorates this special event by setting up a pillar and consecrating it with oil, it is noteworthy that he does not build an altar. This is a further indication that he has not yet fully accepted the Lord as his God.

While the practice of setting up pillars was common in Canaanite worship, Deuteronomy 16:22 prohibits it. However, it is something that the prophet recognises will still occur in foreign lands in recognition of God: <<On that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the centre of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the LORD at its border>> (Isaiah 19:19). Years later, after his faith-transforming encounter with God at Penuel (Genesis 32:22-32), Jacob returns to Bethel in order to construct an altar (Genesis 35:1-7).

¹⁹ He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

Genesis 28:19

The name of the city was Luz at the first. The city's name continued to be Luz until the Israelites occupied Canaan many centuries later, as confirmed in Genesis 35:6 and 48:3, Joshua 18:13 and Judges 1:23-26. The actual location called Bethel by Jacob probably lay outside the city of Luz: <<The allotment of the Josephites

went from the Jordan by Jericho, east of the waters of Jericho, into the wilderness, going up from Jericho into the hill country to Bethel; then going from Bethel to Luz, it passes along to Ataroth, the territory of the Archites>> (Joshua 16:1-2).

²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, ‘If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹ so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, ²² and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.’

Genesis 28:20-22

If God will be with me, then the LORD shall be my God. The conditional nature of Jacob’s vow reveals that he is still ambivalent regarding his commitment to the Lord. Although God reveals himself to Jacob at Bethel, it will require a further personal encounter before Jacob fully trusts in the Lord (Genesis 32:22-32).

If a person has bread to eat and clothing to wear they should be satisfied with their lot: *<<Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these>>* (1 Timothy 6:6-8), although Jesus teaches these are not things to be concerned about: *<<He said to his disciples, ‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear>>* (Luke 12:22).

This stone shall be God’s house. Jacob promises that he will construct a sanctuary for God, the consecrated stone being the first part of the process. Temple building becomes an important part of the duties undertaken by the royal line descended from Jacob.

I will surely give one-tenth to you. Centuries later, Israelite worshippers give a tenth of their income to God as an expression of their commitment to him; this is regularly referred to as a tithe. The giving of a tithe was first introduced in the account of Abraham and Melchizedek; refer to the comment made of 14:19-20.