



Genesis - Chapter Thirty Three

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

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

Summary of Chapter Thirty Three

As the time of the meeting between Jacob and Esau approached, Jacob split his family into four groups of the mothers and their children, with Rachel being the last of these groups. Jacob himself took the lead of the group and when he met with Esau he showed great respect to his elder brother. However, Esau ran to meet Jacob and the two of them cried for joy as they embraced.

Jacob then introduced his family to Esau and was prompted to explain the gifts he had sent on ahead. Esau wished to decline the gifts as he too was wealthy but Jacob asked that they be accepted.

Esau wanted to escort Jacob's group but he declined saying the pace would be too much for the children and the young animals. Jacob agreed to meet with Esau again at Seir. Esau then departed but Jacob travelled to Succoth instead.

When Jacob reached the city of Shechem, he bought a small plot of land on which to settle and he set up an altar to the Lord.

II.b.xvi Genesis 33:1-17 - Jacob and Esau Meet

The account of Jacob's reconciliation with Esau comes as the sequel to Jacob's encounter with God at Peniel. Esau's affectionate embrace of his brother and Jacob's deferential attitude ensure a successful reunion.

¹ Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. ² He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah

with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. ³ He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.

Genesis 33:1-3

With Esau in sight, Jacob arranges his wives, their maids and children in order of importance, from the least to the greatest, with pride of place being given to Rachel and Joseph, the only one of Jacob's sons to be named here. Jacob's special treatment of Joseph becomes an important theme later in Genesis; refer to Chapter 37.

He put the maids with their children in front. At least Leah was more protected than the two maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah were, with Rachel and Joseph receiving the greatest protection from any attack.

He himself went on ahead of them. After being conquered by God, Jacob now led the procession to meet Esau. This displays some change of character and perhaps faith at last that God would protect him.

Jacob slowly approaches Esau, bowing himself to the ground seven times. Jacob's actions are clearly intended to express his submission to Esau. Jacob's behaviour is noteworthy, especially given the earlier divine revelation that the elder brother would serve the younger (25:23).

Joseph would later have a dream that his parents and brothers would one day bow down before him in respect: <<There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.' His brothers said to him, 'Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?' So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, 'Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.' But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, 'What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?''>> (Genesis 37:7-10).

It should also be noted that bowing down in this fashion is also a sign of love and mutual respect, as in the case of David and Jonathan: <<As soon as the boy had gone, David rose from beside the stone heap and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. He bowed three times, and they kissed each other, and wept with each other; David wept the more>> (1 Samuel 20:41).

⁴ But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

Genesis 33:4

Esau ran to meet him. The unreserved manner in which Esau greets and embraces Jacob reveals that he holds no animosity toward his brother. The description of their reconciliation may well have influenced Jesus' account of the lost son returning to his father: <<*So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him*>> (Luke 15:20).

Fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. Esau and Jacob did not feel a need to discuss and resolve the past. God worked in both their hearts and there was no need to dredge it all up again. What was past was past.

⁵ When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, 'Who are these with you?' Jacob said, 'The children whom God has graciously given your servant.'⁶ Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down;⁷ Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down.

Genesis 33:5-7

Who are these with you? Esau enquires after the women and the children in Jacob's group and he is introduced to them in order from the least to the greatest in Jacob's thinking. Each group in turn bowed down to Esau as a mark of respect for their brother-in-law and uncle.

The children whom God has graciously given your servant. Jacob rightly acknowledges that families are God's gift to his people: <<*Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward*>> (Psalm 127:3), and: <<*See, I and the children whom the LORD has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion*>> (Isaiah 8:18).

⁸ Esau said, 'What do you mean by all this company that I met?' Jacob answered, 'To find favour with my lord.'⁹ But Esau said, 'I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.'

Genesis 33:8-9

All this company that I met refers to the droves of animals that Jacob had sent ahead to Esau intended as a gift of reconciliation (32:13-21).

To find favour with my lord. The gift was a peace offering. Esau's refusal is in part because he already is wealthy himself and in no need of the gift, and is also part of the cultural protocol of negotiation. The contrast between Jacob's my lord and Esau's my brother indicates how each man approached this reunion.

¹⁰ Jacob said, 'No, please; if I find favour with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God – since you have received me with such favour.'

Genesis 33:10

For truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God – since you have received me with such favour. Jacob draws a remarkable parallel between his earlier encounter with God and his meeting with Esau. Like God, Esau shows unmerited favour to Jacob.

¹¹ Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.' So he urged him, and he took it.

Genesis 33:11

Please accept my gift or blessing. In this context, Jacob's blessing refers to the tangible gift of livestock that he gives to Esau. Previously, Jacob had deprived Esau of the blessing of the firstborn. While Jacob cannot restore this particular blessing to Esau, he seeks to make restitution by giving him another blessing, which comes from God's blessing of Jacob.

I have everything I want. Both Esau and Jacob have a blessed testimony: <<*Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment*>> (1 Timothy 6:6). Esau's peace and contentment showed him to be a remarkably blessed man, although he did not receive the promise of the Abrahamic covenant as he had hoped.

So he urged him, and he took it. This was as important to the reconciliation as Jacob's giving the gifts. When Jacob gave such generous gifts, it was his way of saying to Esau he was sorry and when Esau accepted the gifts, it was his way of accepting Jacob and saying he was forgiven. In that culture, one never accepted a gift from an enemy, only from a friend. To accept the gift was to accept the friendship.

¹² Then Esau said, 'Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you.' ¹³ But Jacob said to him, 'My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds, which are nursing, are a care to me; and if they are overdriven for one day, all the flocks will die.'

¹⁴ Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir.’

Genesis 33:12-14

Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you. While Esau desires to have his brother return with him, Jacob politely refuses, using the travel-weariness of his children and livestock as an excuse, although it is his genuine responsibility as both a father and a shepherd: <<*He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep*>> (Isaiah 40:11). Yet again, Jacob addresses Esau as my lord and refers to himself as his servant.

Until I come to my lord in Seir. Apparently Jacob still does not fully trust Esau, and has no intention of following him to Seir (v.17). From the point where Esau and Jacob met, the shortest route to the northern border of Seir was approximately 100 miles or 161 km to the south, while Succoth was only 4 miles or 6.4 km to the west.

¹⁵ So Esau said, ‘Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.’ But he said, ‘Why should my lord be so kind to me?’ ¹⁶ So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. ¹⁷ But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house, and made booths for his cattle; therefore the place is called Succoth.

Genesis 33:15-17

The story contains an unexpected twist at this point, for Jacob had earlier indicated to Esau that he would follow him to Seir (v.14). Jacob, however, relocates to Succoth and then Shechem (v.18). Succoth is in the Jordan Valley near where the Jabbok River joins the Jordan River. This appears to be another act of deception on the part of Jacob towards his brother Esau.

II.b.xvii Genesis 33:18-20 - Jacob Reaches Shechem

These brief verses record Jacob purchasing a small plot of land in order to settle near the city of Shechem. It sets the scene for a rather unsavoury account of what was to follow between Jacob’s family and the local people.

¹⁸ Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram; and he camped before the city.

Genesis 33:18

Shechem, which is about 20 miles or 32 km west of Succoth, was the first place named in connection with Abraham's arrival in Canaan (12:6).

¹⁹ And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for one hundred pieces of money the plot of land on which he had pitched his tent.

Genesis 33:19

From the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father. The reference to Shechem links this episode with the next, where he is one of the central characters in the story.

One hundred pieces of money. The Hebrew term rendered here money, *qesitah*, is used rarely in the OT; examples are found in: <<*The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground that Jacob had bought from the children of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for one hundred pieces of money; it became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph*>> (Joshua 24:32), and: <<*Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring*>> (Job 42:11); the precise value is uncertain.

The plot of land on which he had pitched his tent. This indicates that Jacob intended to settle in this region for some time. It is later associated with Sychar in the NT, where Jesus met with the woman at the well: <<*So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph*>> (John 4:5).

²⁰ There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel.

Genesis 33:20

Previously, Abraham had built an altar at Shechem. Possibly, Jacob reconstructs this earlier altar, for the Hebrew verb used to describe his action is not the usual one for building altars. Since this is the first altar mentioned in connection with Jacob, it signals his commitment to worship the Lord. This is reinforced by the name he gives the altar: El-Elohe-Israel, which means 'God, the God of Israel,' or 'Mighty is the God of Israel.' Jacob identifies the God worshiped at this altar as the One whom he had encountered at Peniel and who had changed his name.