



Genesis - Chapter Thirty Five

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

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

Summary of Chapter Thirty Five

Following the terrible deeds at Shechem, God instructs Jacob to continue his return journey to Bethel. After instructing his household to abandon their idols, which Jacob buried, they made the journey. On arrival, Jacob built an altar to honour God for his first promise to Jacob all those years before. It was there that God reappeared to Jacob, confirmed that he was now to be called Israel and that all the promises he had made to Abraham and Isaac were now passed on to Jacob.

The family continued their journey in order to Jacob to see his father Isaac. Rachel was pregnant for a second time and gave birth to a son, Benjamin, but she died in childbirth. It was during this time that Jacob's firstborn son Reuben slept with his father's concubine, Bilhah.

Jacob came to Isaac, whose death is then recorded as 180 years. He was buried by his two sons, Esau and Jacob.

II.b.xx Genesis 35:1-29 - Jacob's Onward Journey to Hebron

Jacob moves by stages from Shechem to Bethel, eventually coming to Hebron, where his father Isaac is still alive. During this journey a number of incidents occur that either bring to a close previous episodes or anticipate later developments in Genesis. Ending with the death of Isaac, this chapter marks the passing of one generation while preparing for the next. Transformed by the experiences of Bethel and Peniel, Jacob is now in a position to assume the mantle of his father as the one through whom the divine promises to Abraham will be continued.

II.b.xx.1 Genesis 35:1-15 - Jacob Returns to Bethel

Having disposed of his family's idols, Jacob obeys a new command from God to return to Bethel, where God had first visited him as he fled Esau. His fear that the Canaanites would seek revenge for the Shechemites was ill-founded thanks to God putting fear into the local populations who let Jacob pass unmolested.

God appeared to Jacob again at Bethel, confirming his name change to Israel and bestowing the blessing on him that had been promised to both Abraham and Isaac. In response, Jacob built an altar and made an offering to God.

¹ God said to Jacob, 'Arise, go up to Bethel, and settle there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.'

Genesis 35:1

Jacob had only set up a pillar at Bethel when God appeared to him (28:18). By returning to Bethel and building an altar there, Jacob acknowledges that God has been faithful to him (28:20-22).

² So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, 'Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your clothes; ³ then come, let us go up to Bethel, that I may make an altar there to the God who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.'

Genesis 35:2-3

Jacob's instructions are intended to prepare his household for entering God's presence; Bethel is the 'house of God.' They must rid themselves of the foreign gods. As emphasised later in the first prohibition of the Ten Commandments, those who worship the Lord must not have other gods, i.e. <<***you shall have no other gods before me***>> (Exodus 20:3). Rachel's theft of her father's household gods suggests that polytheistic beliefs existed within Jacob's household. These must be eradicated. However, it was clear that many of their descendants continued to worship other gods: <<***Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD***>> (Joshua 24:14), a practice that would eventually cause the destruction of the whole nation.

The members of Jacob's household must purify themselves. While no details are given here, later Israelite tradition emphasised the importance of purification rituals, some of which involved the washing of clothes: <<***the LORD said to Moses: 'Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash***>>

their clothes and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the LORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people>> (Exodus 19:10). This may explain Jacob's final instruction to change your clothes.

Who answered me in the day of my distress. Although the NRSVA translates it as answered, many others show it to be in the present tense, thus indicating that God has consistently responded to Jacob in every time of trouble.

⁴ So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak that was near Shechem.

Genesis 35:4

The rings that were in their ears. It is not clear whether these earrings were worn by the people: <<*It was the custom of the Ishmaelites to wear gold earrings*>> (Judges 8:24b NIV), or by the foreign gods; some ancient Near Eastern evidence indicates that idols could have earrings. Jacob probably buried these cultic objects so that their location would not be easily discovered rather than with the intention of recovering them at a later time.

⁵ As they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities all around them, so that no one pursued them.

Genesis 35:5

A terror from God fell upon the cities all around them. While the precise nature of this terror is unknown, other passages in Genesis record how fear of God is used to protect the patriarchs, e.g. 20:8 and 26:28-29. Jacob's fears expressed in 34:30 are answered by God's protection for, in spite of the excessive vengeance shown by Simeon and Levi (34:25), no one pursued them: <<*he allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account*>> (Psalm 105:14).

Other scriptures also describe how the fear of God protected his people, for example: <<*I will send my terror in front of you, and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you*>> (Exodus 23:27), <<*This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples everywhere under heaven; when they hear report of you, they will tremble and be in anguish because of you*'>> (Deuteronomy 2:25), <<*Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men: 'I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you*>> (Joshua 2:8-9), <<*As Samuel was offering up the burnt-offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel; but the LORD thundered with a mighty voice that day against the Philistines and threw them*

into confusion; and they were routed before Israel>> (1 Samuel 7:10), <<The fear of the LORD fell on all the kingdoms of the lands around Judah, and they did not make war against Jehoshaphat>> (2 Chronicles 17:10), <<And the land of Judah will become a terror to the Egyptians; everyone to whom it is mentioned will fear because of the plan that the LORD of hosts is planning against them>> (Isaiah 19:17), and: <<On that day a great panic from the LORD shall fall on them, so that each will seize the hand of a neighbour, and the hand of one will be raised against the hand of the other>> (Zechariah 14:13), which was often in response to a call from his people, e.g. <<Put them in fear, O LORD; let the nations know that they are only human>> (Psalm 9:20).

Introduction to Genesis 35:6-15

These verses describe what happens when Jacob returns to Bethel; three separate events take place: Jacob builds the altar as instructed (v.7); Deborah dies and is buried (v.8); and God appears to Jacob again (vv.9-15).

⁶ Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, ⁷ and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because it was there that God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother.

Genesis 35:6-7

Luz (that is, Bethel). 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).

Called the place El-bethel. This probably refers to the altar. El-bethel, meaning 'God of Bethel,' resembles in form the name that Jacob gave to the altar at Shechem (33:20).

⁸ And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak below Bethel. So it was called Allon-bacuth.

Genesis 35:8

Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, received a brief mention in 24:59, although this is the first time that her name is given. Her presence with Jacob may suggest that she may have been sent to him by Rebekah in fulfilment of her promise in 27:45.

Introduction to Genesis 35:9-13

These verses bring the account of Jacob's developing relationship with God to an important climax. Jacob's return to Bethel is accompanied by further divine appearances.

⁹ God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and he blessed him.

Genesis 35:9

He blessed him. This not only confirms the blessing of 32:29 but more importantly places Jacob on a par with Abraham and Isaac, of whom similar affirmations were made in 24:1 and 25:11.

¹⁰ God said to him, 'Your name is Jacob; no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.' So he was called Israel.

Genesis 35:10

God's statement here confirms the importance of the transformation that has taken place in Jacob's life. On the change of Jacob's name to Israel refer to the comment made on 32:28.

¹¹ God 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 spring from you. ¹² The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.' ¹³ Then God went up from him at the place where he had spoken with him.

Genesis 35:11-13

God's second statement emphasises that Jacob is now heir to the divine promises first given to Abraham and then to Isaac.

I am God Almighty. This is how God revealed himself to Abraham, refer to the comment made on 17:1-2, and is the divine name used by Isaac when he blesses Jacob in 28:3. Much of God's speech closely resembles what he says to Abraham in 17:5-6 and what Isaac requests for Jacob in 28:3-4.

Be fruitful and multiply. This instruction goes back to the very creation of humanity, refer to the comment made on 1:28.

A nation and a company of nations shall come from you. While Isaac refers to <<a *company of peoples*>> (28:3), God's comment reveals that he has more than the nation of Israel in view. Given the close connection with the divine promises

made to Abraham, this seems to be a development of the idea that Abraham would be the father of many nations (17:4-6).

Kings shall spring from you. The promise of royal descendants is first given to Abraham in 17:6. This royal theme reappears in Joseph's dreams (37:6-10), showing that the ultimate fulfilment of this divine promise will come through Jacob's descendants.

The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac. The divine promise of the land, which goes back to the call of Abraham in 12:1-3, is renewed to include Jacob and his descendants.

¹⁴ 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, and poured oil on it. ¹⁵ So Jacob called the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.

Genesis 35:14-15

Jacob set up a pillar. Refer to the comment made on 28:18.

He poured out a drink-offering. This is the only mention in Genesis of such an offering. Later references suggest that wine was used: <<*and with the first lamb one-tenth of a measure of choice flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of beaten oil, and one-fourth of a hin of wine for a drink-offering*>> (Exodus 29:40), <<*And the grain-offering with it shall be two-tenths of an ephah of choice flour mixed with oil, an offering by fire of pleasing odour to the LORD; and the drink-offering with it shall be of wine, one-fourth of a hin*>> (Leviticus 23:13), <<*and you shall present as a drink-offering half a hin of wine, as an offering by fire, a pleasing odour to the LORD*>> (Numbers 15:10).

II.b.xx.2 Genesis 35:16-26 - The Birth of Benjamin and the Death of Rachel

The family continued their journey away from Bethel and Rachel was pregnant with her second son. It was a difficult birth, which produced Jacob's beloved Benjamin but it cost the life of his beloved Rachel.

There is a brief account of Reuben sleeping with Bilhah, which would cost him his right as the firstborn son of Jacob. The twelve sons of Jacob are then listed.

¹⁶ Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had a difficult labour. ¹⁷ When she was in her difficult labour, the midwife said to her, 'Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son.' ¹⁸ As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-oni; but his

father called him Benjamin. ¹⁹ So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), ²⁰ and Jacob set up a pillar at her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. ²¹ Israel journeyed on, and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.

Genesis 35:16-21

Jacob travels south from Bethel, undoubtedly with the intention of going to Mamre, i.e. Hebron. His journey is disrupted, however, when Rachel dies while giving birth.

The name that Rachel gives her newborn son, Ben-oni, is potentially ambiguous: it probably means 'son of my sorrow,' to signify the tragic consequences surrounding his birth, but it could also mean 'son of my strength', refer to 49:3 for 'strength' in this sense. Jacob deliberately changes the name and removes the ambiguity. Benjamin means 'son of my right hand.'

She was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). Jewish tradition locates the tomb between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. This tradition, however, can be traced back only to the 4th Century AD. They were still some distance from Ephrath is given as 'about two hours' distance' in some translations, which locates Rachel's grave somewhere north of Jerusalem, which fits with: <<*Thus says the LORD: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more*>> (Jeremiah 31:15).

The Ephrathites were a small clan from the tribe of Judah who were associated with Bethlehem: <<*The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there*>> (Ruth 1:2), <<*Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons. In the days of Saul the man was already old and advanced in years*>> (1 Samuel 17:12), and: <<*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days*>> (Micah 5:2).

Her soul was departing. This is one place in the OT where the word 'soul', Hebrew *nepesh*, denotes what gives life to the body.

The location of the tower of Eder is uncertain, although the context suggests that it lay between Bethlehem and Hebron. Since Eder means flock or herd, this tower may have been used by shepherds.

²² While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard of it. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve.

Genesis 35:22

Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine. While Reuben's action may have been prompted by inappropriate lust, it challenged Jacob's position as head of the household. As the firstborn son, Reuben may also have viewed his action as establishing his authority over his brothers, similar to the way Absalom tried to usurp his father David as king: *<<Then Absalom said to Ahithophel, 'Give us your counsel; what shall we do?' Ahithophel said to Absalom, 'Go in to your father's concubines, the ones he has left to look after the house; and all Israel will hear that you have made yourself odious to your father, and the hands of all who are with you will be strengthened.'* So they pitched a tent for Absalom upon the roof; and Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel. Now in those days the counsel that Ahithophel gave was as if one consulted the oracle of God; so all the counsel of Ahithophel was esteemed, both by David and by Absalom>> (2 Samuel 16:20-23). Yet it had the opposite effect: *<<The sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel. (He was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's bed his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph son of Israel, so that he is not enrolled in the genealogy according to the birthright; though Judah became prominent among his brothers and a ruler came from him, yet the birthright belonged to Joseph)>>* (1 Chronicles 5:1-2); refer also to the comment made on Genesis 48:3-7. Although initially Jacob takes no immediate action against Reuben – implied by the narrator's brief comment, Israel heard of it – he later denies Reuben his pre-eminence as the firstborn: *<<'Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the first fruits of my vigour, excelling in rank and excelling in power. Unstable as water, you shall no longer excel because you went up on to your father's bed; then you defiled it – you went up on to my couch!>>* (Genesis 49:3-4). Although Jacob's actions run counter to the provisions for inheritance in Deuteronomy 21:15-17, the unseemly behaviour of Reuben means that he will not inherit what he otherwise would have received by right of birth.

²³ The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. ²⁴ The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. ²⁵ The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid: Dan and Naphtali. ²⁶ The sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.

Genesis 35:23-26

These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram. Strictly speaking, Benjamin was not born in Paddan-aram, but this is a general summary statement. On this occasion the sons of Leah are listed before those of Rachel, giving precedence to the order of birth by wives first and then by the maids. The narrator wants to highlight the sons here rather than Jacob's preference for Rachel over Leah.

II.b.xx.3 Genesis 35:27-29 - The Death of Isaac

This brief passage has Jacob arriving in his father's home, followed by notice that Isaac died at 180 years of age and he was buried by Esau and Jacob. No mention is made as to how long Jacob was with his father before he died, the state of their relationship or whether Rebekah was alive when Jacob first arrived home.

²⁷ Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had resided as aliens.

Genesis 35:27

Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron). This is one of the locations where Abram settled and built an altar, refer to the comments made on 13:18; and was the place where his wife Sarah died and was buried; refer to the comments made on 23:2. It is the location where the patriarchs and most of their wives were finally laid to rest in the cave bought by Abraham.

²⁸ Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. ²⁹ And Isaac breathed his last; he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

Genesis 35:28-29

In spite of hinting and evidently believing that his death was imminent in 27:1-2, Isaac has remained alive during Jacob's 20 years of exile in Paddan-aram. The report of Isaac's death, like that of Abraham in 25:7-10, marks the end of an era and brings to a natural conclusion the main narrative section that began with 25:19. According to 49:30-31, Isaac was buried by his sons Esau and Jacob in the cave at Machpelah.