

JACOB'S RETURN HOME AND RECONCILIATION WITH ESAU

I. After Jacob expresses righteous outrage, Laban agrees that he may go, although still asserting authority and insisting on an agreement for the future.

A. Laban agrees to let Jacob and his family go unhindered, as he must give God's command. But he still retains the claim that he is doing so voluntarily, saying that the women, children and flocks are rightfully his.

1. It is interesting that he should make the claim that they are morally his, given that Jacob worked for them. He may be arguing that, while Jacob had the right to them, he did not have the right to leave the country with them. One would think that that was a part of the understanding, but it was not clear.

2. In any case, Laban could mean that they are his by power, i.e. that he could keep them by force. If one simply considered the physical power, that claim would be true. However, given that God has told Laban to let Jacob go, and given that Laban probably believes it to be a real vision, he could not really keep them.

3. Laban may have been making the claim to avoid losing face in front of his company.

B. Laban then proposes to make a pact with Jacob for mutual peace, presenting it as a favor to Leah and Rachel, which among other things it was.

1. The pact would be a non-aggression arrangement that would set forth boundaries to keep the two sides of the family friendly. Laban certainly understands that Jacob is blessed by God. He may not have understood who God is, and probably believed in his gods as powerful in his area. But he knows that here at least Jacob is in favor with God. At the end he refers to the God of Abraham and the God (or god) of Nahor, i.e. his grandfather. He could mean that both are the same, or that he believes that each branch of the family has its own god. He does seem at least to be approaching the true God.

2. Jacob basically seems to accept the deal, setting up stones at the place to mark permanently the boundary. They

may also have written the agreement on the stones. Stones are as permanent a marker as they could arrange at the time.

3. Assuming the place was the Mount Gilead that it is currently understood to be, that is about at the northeast corner of the kingdom of King David, and close to the furthest Israel would ever extend under the reign of Solomon. Thus, the agreement was effective in dividing the land of Israel from that of its neighbors.
4. Laban also insists on the agreement that Jacob not mistreat Leah or Rachel, nor marry any other women. It is noteworthy that he is at least looking out for them, which is an improvement over the former situation. Like Jacob, Laban seems to be becoming nobler through the encounter.
5. Jacob accepts the deal in the name of God, whom he calls "the Fearful One of Isaac," the same name he used at the end of his last speech. That somewhat unusual name of God recalls the fear of the Lord that Abraham felt, and that would later be called the beginning of wisdom. See, e.g., Gen. 15:12; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7, 9:10; Sir. 1:9-14.

II. Having left Laban, Jacob must now return home and confront Esau, whom he apparently has not seen in 20 years.

A. As he progresses toward his homeland, Isaac is still living; and Jacob no doubt wishes to greet him. However, he has probably found out that Esau is residing to the south, in the land of Seir, later to be called Edom.

B. As he sets out, messengers from God (probably although not certainly angels) come to meet him in a town about 35 miles

to the south of Mount Gilead. He would name this area Mahanaim, which means God's encampment. The town would be well within the future territory of Gad, part of Israel to the east of the Jordan River. One of Saul's sons would briefly be king there over that area of Israel, in opposition to the new King David. See 2 Sam. 2:8.

- Jacob is plainly relying more and more on God, and God is strengthening him for the coming encounter

C. Nevertheless, Jacob wants to find out what Esau's intentions were, and to plan accordingly. His first strategy was to send messengers to Esau to greet him in kind and flattering terms, referring to himself as Esau's servant, and speaking of his success in the land of Laban. He is hoping that Esau wants now to be at peace.

D. The messenger comes back with what appears to be very bad news, namely, that Esau is coming toward Jacob with 400 men. Jacob understandably interprets this approach with an army as hostile. His response is two-fold, reflecting both his own planning and prayer.

1. He realizes that he cannot fight Esau, and Esau is probably close enough with a very mobile army that flight will not work. There is probably not enough time to send a messenger to Isaac to have him intervene.

2. Jacob first divides his people into two camps. The idea is that, if Esau attacks one camp, the parley and/or fight will create enough of a delay to let the other camp slip away. Jacob would thus himself have a chance of escaping. And, in any case, about half of his children will escape to preserve the inherited promises. Jacob is still acting in a clever fashion.

3. Jacob then turns to God in a poignant prayer, which is the longest prayer recorded thus far in the Bible. The prayer recounts many classic elements of prayer: adoration, blessing, contrition, thanksgiving, petition, and intercession. See Catechism 2526-43.

a. He begins with adoration, which the Catechism calls "the first attitude of man acknowledging that he is a creature before the Creator." Catechism 2828. Here he describes God and the God of Abraham and Isaac, his grandfather and father.

b. In blessing, he recalls the promises God has given, and God's own instructions. As the Catechism says, "Blessing expresses the basic movement of Christian prayer; it is an encounter between God and man. In blessing, God's gift and man's acceptance are united in dialogue." Catechism 2626.

c. There is then repentance for sins, an acknowledgement of his own unworthiness, especially given his scheming.

d. He then refers in thanksgiving to God's own blessings to him, and especially the fact that he came to the land of Laban with nothing, but now leaves with two wives, twelve children (including Dinah) and great wealth. He now understands that God has been guiding him all along.

e. He then makes his prayer of petition and intercession. Prayers of petition and intercession are related. Petitions tend to refer to oneself or something closer to oneself. Intercessions are for others or for justice in general.

- Here, Jacob describes the danger he and his family are in and prays for all of them. He describes the possible terror in the poignant terms of mothers being killed on their children.

f. Jacob then concludes his prayer with blessing again, recalling the promises of great descendants God made to him in the vision in Bethel 20 years earlier. See Gen. 28:13-15. Jacob began by referring to God and the God of his father and grandfather. Now he recognizes God and his God as well.

E. After that night of prayer, Jacob then begins to change plans and sends Esau great gifts, both to appease him and to show him that he has been prosperous, possibly hinting to Esau that God is with him.

1. He sends an enormous amount of wealth in the form of animals in three waves to gain Esau's favor. The idea of sending three servants with more and more wealth is to have a sense of buildup, to exceed expectations.

2. Verse 21 refers to the face three times: to appease Esau (literally cover his face); to face Esau; and to have Esau forgive him (literally lift his face.) The episode is setting up Jacob's encounter with the angel, who shows him the face of God.

3. During the night, Jacob crosses the ford at the Jabbock River, which flows into the Jordan, bringing his wives, handmaids, and children. But then he goes back across the river. He may have wanted to spend the night in thought and prayer. Or perhaps he wanted to protect them by confronting Esau by himself.

III. That night, Jacob struggles with an angel, who blesses him and strengthens him, although at the same time wounding him. The event would become a model for encounters with God.

A. Jacob begins by being alone before God, as Adam was before the Fall. A mysterious man comes and wrestles with him in a mysterious combat.

- Although we eventually find out that he is an angel, at the time, there is no explanation for us and likely for Jacob.

B. Jacob, who has before constantly tried to evade open conflict, now must engage in it, to be strengthened and more in contact with the divine. Jacob stands the test, for the struggle continues until dawn.

1. In what was perhaps an illegal move for wrestling, or at least a surprise, or possibly by special divine power, the man strikes Jacob in the thigh apparently near the hip, injuring him. But Jacob continues fighting, grasping onto him.

2. At daybreak, the man demands to be released. Literally, he must leave before the conflict with Esau comes about. More figuratively, the time of prayer has ended and Jacob now must move on to confront Esau.

C. Although almost all are agreed that the man was in fact an angel, there are numerous interpretations about what the angel represented. It could be that the angel represented his own bad conscience and fears that he had to overcome, or an angel sent to punish him for his deceptions. See Leon Kaas, The Beginning of Wisdom 456-57. It could be his own guardian angel, come to strengthen him. The Catechism sees in the angel a symbol of the struggle in prayer, which one who perseveres eventually overcomes, with the result that he is a stronger person. See Catechism 2573. Some Church fathers even saw the man as an image of Christ, who would come to struggle with humanity and save us. See Navarre Bible Series, The Pentateuch 167.

D. Jacob demands to be blessed by the angel before letting him go. He now understands that this man is a supernatural being.

1. The man begins by asking Jacob for his name. The request may seem odd, but the symbolism is that Jacob must reflect upon who he is before the angel will advance him further.

2. The angel then gives him the new name Israel, which will be the people's name from then on. The name has at least three meanings: (1) one who struggles for God; (2) one who struggles with God; or (3) God rules. Here the emphasis is on the middle meaning, that Jacob has struggled with God.

a. The meaning seems to have a positive connotation, for the angel says that Jacob has prevailed. On one level, God has sent Jacob a challenge and Jacob has risen to it. He now really cares and is really willing to struggle, rather than use deceit. And, while struggling against God is itself negative, it reflects an engagement with God, perhaps and engagement with doubts, which is better than indifference.

b. He also becomes a symbol for the future people of Israel, who would struggle both for and against God, and through whom God would establish His rule on earth.

E. Jacob also wants to know the angels' name, but that is forbidden, for one cannot know too much about the divine. Jacob himself acknowledges the wonder that he has come in contact with the divine, and still lived. It would be understood that ordinarily, humans could not come in contact with the presence of God and still live, unless they had been properly called. See, e.g., Lev. 10:6-7; Judges 6:22-23, 13:21-23.

F. Jacob leaves the encounter, stronger, but wounded, perhaps permanently.

1. At a literal level, the injury may also pacify Esau, who seeing Jacob's suffering may deem that sufficient.

2. At another level, the injury will make Jacob more sympathetic, more humble more compassionate, and therefore a

better leader. St. Gregory the Great commented that God often gives great spiritual powers to those who are infirm because infirmity guards power against arrogance. See Commentary on Job 19:2 ("by the plain voice of God it is shown that the guardian of power is frailty"); Rule of Pastoral Care, Part III, ch. 12.

3. In addition, the Church fathers would see in the injury an image of the fact that true devotion never leaves a person the same, but rather always makes one aware of spiritual infirmities and the need to suffer in the world. St. Ambrose saw the injury as participation in the future sufferings of Christ. See Jacob and the Happy Life 7:30. St. Augustine also saw in Jacob and image of the Church, which is blessed by God, but also weakened by unfaithful members so that she limps through history. See Sermons on Genesis 5:8.