

## WISDOM FROM THE BEGINNING – PART VII- SECTION II

### JACOB AND HIS SONS – CHAPTERS 35 AND 36

I. After the disaster regarding Dinah, God steps in and calls upon Jacob to correct the mistake that let everything else happen, the decision to live among pagans, rather than the return to Bethel as Jacob had promised.

A. God does not directly comment on Jacob's failure to protect his daughter, nor upon the sons' revenge. In Genesis, unlike later books of the Bible, God does not often hand down judgments on past events. Rather he gives instructions for the future. It is often best when the faith begins in a person or a culture to focus more on the future than the past.

B. God speaks only to Jacob, telling him to go to Bethel and build the altar there. After the vision of the ladder at Bethel, Jacob had promised that, if God brought him safely through his travels, He would take the Lord as his God; and he had planned to return to his father's house, which was now in either in Mamre near Bethel. God is calling for him to fulfill that intention and build the altar that was fitting for His first appearance to Jacob there about 30 years earlier.

1. Thus, at one level, the call to return is simply a call to fulfill his original plan of returning to his father's residence, where the faith was presumably practiced among Isaac's people.

2. The text does not say it, but the departure from Shechem also avoided possible hostilities in that region.

3. Jacob had also promised to give to God a tithe of his possessions if he returned safely. The text does not mention this promise, but it may be implied in the call to build an altar there, possibly for sacrifice.

4. Here God refers to the patriarch as Jacob, not Israel, for he must be restored back to that glorified status.

C. Jacob recovers his paternal authority and immediately calls for his household to get rid of their pagan idols, for they will be

entering sacred ground.

1. His children are from their late teens to early 20s; and at least some of them are apparently worshipping idols, probably along with Rachel and the handmaids. The fact that his household still has these idols over 20 years after his marriage to Leah and Rachel indicates that Jacob has not been teaching religion to his children well. This fact, like such a situation in any family, does not bode well for the future.

- Some instruction would also be needed because of the seizure of the women and children from Shechem. However, if the children had been raised well, they would have known not to allow the pagan idols among the captives.

- A similar situation later occurs when the Chosen People had entered the Promised Land and Jacob tells them to get rid of their pagan gods and serve the Lord, now after over 40 years of God's guidance and power. Josh. 24:14-24.

2. But now he does assert his authority and is obeyed. The people seem to understand that he is taking them to sacred land and that they must obey him. It is also possible that the sons realized the precarious position they are in due to the violence against Shechem.

3. The rings may well have been pagan amulets that they gained by the sack of Shechem. In any case, they were a carry over from paganism. Jacob also tells them to purify themselves and put on fresh clothes. Washing and wearing fresh clothes would be natural for a solemn occasion, but there is also a symbolic aspect of leaving the old life behind.

D. They are able to return home in safety because God protects them and puts fear into the hearts of the cities around Shechem.

- There would be two likely responses to the slaughter at Shechem. There could be a desire to avenge the violence by attacking Jacob and his sons. On the other hand, there could be fear at people who would commit such a bold act, and a desire to see them leave. God insures that the reaction would be the latter one.

## II. The time in Bethel is one of glory and sadness intertwined.

A. First, Jacob begins to reestablish the religious order as he finally builds the altar, and presumably a temple or other building surrounding it, in Bethel.

1. The town was going by its old name Luz, for the sanctity of the place was being forgotten.

2. Bethel would continue to be a center of worship for years to come. The Ark of the Covenant would later be kept there for a time when Israel was being ruled by the judges just before the time of the kings. See Judges 20:18-28. It appears that Samuel went there to consult with God. Later, when the kingdom split into two, Bethel was a center of worship in the northern kingdom, unfortunately often involving pagan rites. See 1 Kings 12:26-33; Amos 7:12-13. The good southern king Josiah captured in and ended the pagan worship, see 2 Kings 23:15-20, but it probably began again. The city was later destroyed by the Persians in the fifth century B.C., but rebuilt later by the Greeks and Romans, to be maintained until about the fifth century A.D., when it was later destroyed as the Byzantine (eastern Roman) empire began to leave the region.

B. The situation, however, turns sorrowful as Deborah, Rebekah's old nurse from the land of her family, dies. Deborah had come with Rebekah from her family's home almost 100 years earlier. See Gen. 24:59. Rebekah has apparently already died and is buried with Abraham and Sarah. See Gen. 49:31. The last connection with the land of Laban is being severed. There is both a necessary departure from that largely pagan side of the family, but also poignancy at the loss of that connection to a bygone era.

- Furthermore, within about five years, Eber, Noah's great-great grandson and Abraham's last living ancestor dies. The old order is passing away.

C. At Bethel, God appears to Jacob once again, and confirms the promises and Jacob's new name Israel.

1. God now confirms the message of the angel regarding Jacob's new name Israel and makes it permanent. Jacob's old identity as the planner and clever/crafty one is over; his new mission as a patriarch is confirmed.
2. Having named the patriarch Israel, God identifies Himself as God Almighty (El Shaddai.) See also Ex. 6:3. God had used this term in appearing to Abraham, and Isaac had used it in sending forth Jacob. See Gen. 17:1, 28:3. The term would emphasize the power and mystery of God, being used most often in the books of Job and Revelation (30 times in the former and 8 in the latter.) See, e.g., Job 5:17, 6:4, 37:23; Rev. 4:8, 16:7, 19:15, 21:22. Unlike the angel, God will make Himself known.
3. God begins by reiterating the command given to Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and multiply." Israel already has twelve children, and so the command is not so much to have more children himself as to keep the family together as one people. It is different from what has happened so far, when only one branch of the family (that of Shem, or Isaac or Jacob) continues the blessing of God.
4. God then reiterates the promises of descendants coming from Israel, as well as the land he is on. God does not expressly reiterate the promise that all nations will be blessed in Israel, a promise He had made to Abraham, Isaac and even Jacob earlier. Compare with Gen. 12:3, 26:4, 28:14. There may be a notion here that the nations to be blessed will in a mysterious way come from Israel himself. It will not be a blessing conferred upon outsiders, as may have been implied by the previous promise. Rather all nations will be joined together as one people. We now know that that promise would be fulfilled in Christ and his Church. Acts 2:25; Gal. 3:7; Rev. 21:24-26.
  - There are conflicting desires regarding the unity of nations. On the one hand, there is a desire for a universal order that will overcome strife and war and that will lead to mutual understanding. On the other hand, give the sinfulness and imprudence of human nature, there is a great suspicion of empires that unite countries, for they are often tyrannical and suppress the unique gifts given to each culture. Jesus responds to this desire and this concern by establishing a kingdom, but not one of this world. See, e.g., John 18:36-37.

D. Israel then establishes a memorial stone permanently to reflect God's appearance to him, which may or may not be the same memorial stone that he placed in commemoration of the appearance about 30 years earlier. He also names the city Bethel (house of God), but adds a second term El, implying something like "God's house of God." The idea is that God Himself selected this site for worship; it was not a merely human designation.

- The dedication of the stone is similar to the one that occurred before, except that wine as well as oil is poured on top of it. The symbolism of wine may add a notion of sharing a banquet with God Himself, a greater sense of unity. Wine, or a chalice of wine, would become a symbol of prosperity and God's blessings in the Old Testament, to be fulfilled in the Eucharist. See Ps. 4:8, 23: 5; 104:5; Prov. 3:10, 9:2; Is. 55:1; Joel 2:24, 4:18. (God's wrath could also be compared to a cup of wrath that brings illness. See, e.g., Ps. 75:9; Rev. 14:8-10.)

III. Bethel, as sacred as it is, will not be the dwelling place of Israel. The family must return to Isaac before he dies. And so, they depart for Mamre, or Hebron, and go on journey that involves joy and sorrow, holiness and treachery.

A. First, the family departs for Ephrath, later called Bethlehem.

1. That family would later be the birthplace of King David. And the prophet Micah would foretell that the future king must come from the same town. See Ruth 4:11; 1 Sam. 16; Micah 5:1.

2. It is not entirely clear why Israel wanted to go there first before coming to Mamre. It may have been simply a good place to keep the family, while close enough to Isaac to visit when he wished. Or it could have been understood as a sacred site.

B. In any case, the journey to Bethlehem is an occasion of both joy and sorrow at the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel.

1. Here once again Rachel gives birth. She is by now probably about in her mid to late 40s, for it has been about 23 years since she was married to Jacob, and about 30 years since they were first engaged.

2. The pregnancy is a difficult one, and she dies just as she is giving birth to her second son. She names him Ben-oni, which could mean "son of my vigor" or "son of affliction," with the latter term being more fitting. Israel names him Benjamin, which means "son of my right hand." Israel could simply be changing his name to a similar one so that he will not be reminded of Rachel's death. Israel may also be hoping that Benjamin will be a support to him in his old age.
3. Tragedy and joy are mixed together in Israel's life and in the life of all the faithful. However, there may also be here the unintended effect of Jacob's declaration about 10 years earlier that the one who had stolen Laban's gods should die. Here, the judgment takes place and Rachel, who although beloved, had kept paganism in the family, perishes.
4. A monument to her shows Israel's love, but also his recognition of mortality. He cannot bring her with him to his final home.

C. Presumably shortly after the death of Rachel, Reuben has relations with her handmaid Bildah.

1. His actions may have been motivated by: lust; a desire to assert authority above his brothers or even against his father; revenge for Rachel being the preferred one of Israel's wives, as opposed to Reuben's mother Leah; a desire to have the first children of the next generation; her desire to connect with someone powerful in the next generation; or some combination thereof.
2. In any case, it is clear that, even in the midst of a sorrowful event, treachery and abominations are occurring. It sounds abominable, but the death of the wealthy is often a time of both maneuvering and false loves. Death can also be the source of great nobility and charity. Here, as elsewhere, the greatest potential for good and evil exist side by side.

3. The event will have grave consequences. Immediately, it creates at least divisions between Israel and Reuben. Israel would later curse Reuben for the abomination, and Reuben would lose his position as the rightful leader. See Gen. 49:3-4; 1 Chron. 5:1.
  - Reuben would try unsuccessfully to regain his father's favor by thwarting his brothers' attempt to kill Joseph. Gradually, he would fade from the scene.

IV. The chapter, and the centrality of Jacob's role, ends with a list of his sons and the death of Isaac.

A. The text lists all of the sons as united, but also divided. They are united as sons of Jacob, but divided by their mothers.

1. The text once again refers to Jacob, not Israel. The sons do not yet seem to grasp God's calling that would form them as the people Israel.

2. Dinah is mysteriously missing. It would appear that she was still living, for she apparently went into Egypt with the family years later. See Gen. 46:15. It may be that she did not have any children and, as a result, was not critical to later history.

3. Eleven of the sons would have been from about age 17 to 24, with Joseph being the youngest and Reuben the oldest. Benjamin was at this point newborn.

B. The family finally arrives at Mamre, where Isaac is living, to be with him in his old age and to rejoin his people, including those who descended of the tribe Abraham had led, with him. But they were not heirs of the promise

C. The text lists Isaac as dying at the age of 180. The reference is interesting because if it means that he died at exactly age 180, his death would have occurred about 50 year later, just before the whole family migrated to Egypt, after the events surrounding Joseph in the next several chapters.

1. It may be that the event is placed here to close out the references to Isaac, even though he lives much longer, or it may be that 180 was simply a round number.

2. In any case, the death is a noble one, after a full life. He has now seen his son and grandchildren return. His blessings have begun to be fulfilled, and he is at peace.
  
3. In one final act of unity, Jacob and Esau bury Isaac together in the same land that Abraham bought for Sarah long ago. See Gen. 49:29-32. It will be Jacob's last wish to be buried at the same site.

V. Chapter 36 then completes the account of Esau by describing his numerous descendants, who will become the people of Edom.

A. Like Lot long before, Esau avoids any conflict with his relatives by moving away to the south, not far from where Lot had stayed. However, unlike the hapless Lot, he prospers quickly and becomes, even in his lifetime, a great chieftain and the father of many children.

- Most commentators think that Esau was already living in Seir to the southeast of the Dead Sea when Jacob returned, for he seemed to come towards Jacob from the south. However, it is very possible that he remained near Isaac until Isaac's death, only then leaving for the south.

B. The text makes it very clear that Esau's people become very numerous and form the nation of Edom.

1. When the Chosen People were returning to the Promised Land, the people of Edom did not let them go through their land. See Num. 20:14-21. Nevertheless, Moses told the people not to interfere with Edom; and in fact he seemed to want good relations with them. See Duet. 23:8-10.

2. It does seem that the people of Edom were known for wisdom during the time shortly before and after the entrance of the Chosen People into the Promised Land, for the prophets would later speak of wisdom departing from Edom. See Jer. 49:7; Obad. 1:8. In fact, the names and locations of Job's friends could indicate that the events described in that book took place there. See Job 2:11.

3. Unfortunately, relations between Israel and Edom would deteriorate. At first, Israel took control of Edom under Kings Saul, David and Solomon. However, Edom won independence. Later Edom would support the Assyrians in their attack on the southern kingdom of Judah at the end of the eighth century B.C. As a result, the prophets declared, wisdom would depart from Edom and it would decline and fall. See Jer. 49: 8-22; Obad. 1-14.

4. Once the Babylonians took control in the sixth century B.C., Edom declined, although continue as the kingdom of Idumea under the Greek and then Roman influence. Herod, often called the Great would arise from Idumea, to rule over Palestine under appointment by the Romans. He was a powerful, but cruel, king; and it was he who tried to have the child Jesus killed. His descendants including the tetrarch Herod.

C. Most of the names on the various lists in chapter 36 are now unknown. However, two factors shine forth. First, the nation was very successful, at least for a time, conquering the Midianites to the south at one point. Second, verses 31-39 indicates that the succession of kings was not based upon family relationships; the throne was not handed down from father to son. That fact can be good or bad. It can be a good thing if the leading people were able to find the most qualified candidate. It can be a very negative thing if the result was violence to obtain the throne. There was perhaps some of one, and some of the other. Here as elsewhere the Bible leaves much room for the imagination, and perhaps room to see how similar experiences can play out in the life of one's own land.