

SESSION SEVEN

THE JACOB AND JOSEPH NARRATIVES

Genesis 25:12—50:26

I. INTRODUCTION

The remainder of Genesis (25:12—50:26) deals primarily with the lives of two individuals: Jacob and Joseph. However, these cannot be seen in isolation. This is still part of the ongoing work of God in connection with the Abrahamic covenant. God is going to keep His promise to raise up a nation from Abraham's seed through whom He can carry out His divine program as revealed in Gen 12:1-3. In doing so, however, He will not ignore the character and lack of faith in the seed . . . He will discipline and develop their faith. In this light, these chapters are concerned with the development of the promised seed and the struggle to get the blessing. When God steps in to confirm the covenant promises, this marks a significant episode.

In the transferal of the blessing, however, the descendants are never the "man of faith" that Abraham became. Moreover, there is a serious deterioration in the family (particularly with Jacob and his sons) that causes the line of blessing to be jeopardized. They are in danger of being corrupted and assimilated into the Canaanite culture. Rather than being a blessing to the inhabitants of the land . . . bringing spiritual knowledge and testimony of YHWH . . . they become more and more degenerate like the Canaanites. This answers the question when we come to Exodus: if God promised the land of Canaan to Israel, what in the world are they doing in Egypt (not to mention that they are in miserable bondage)? The reason they are in Egypt is explained in the Joseph narrative. Through their disobedience and degeneracy, they had corrupted themselves and jeopardized the line of blessing. They had nearly lost their distinctiveness as the people of God. To preserve them and protect them from further Canaanite influence, God sent them to Egypt where they could grow and develop into a nation. When that process is completed, God will return them to the land of promise.

II. THE JACOB NARRATIVE (GEN 25:19—35:29) [Jacob 2006-1859 BC]

One thing the Jacob narrative reveals is that God is in no hurry to rush His program of blessing. He is quite content to develop and deal with the character of His "line of blessing" along the way. This is the chief concern of this section: God carefully works with the character of Jacob until He makes him more of a "man of faith" than a deceitful treacherous manipulator. In the process, however, the nation would have its own character mirrored, as though it were a prophetic anticipation.

Without question, God intended the blessing to Jacob. To resort to some sort of deceitful scheming to get the Abrahamic blessing from his brother was not the way of faith. Jacob, at this point, does not have the kind of character that God desires in His "theocratic administrator." Thus, God takes him out of the land of blessing to discipline him (under Laban) and eventually brings him back after many hard years of labor. As he returns, he is fearful of facing the "inhabitant" of the land, i.e., his brother Esau, and God must uniquely work in his life to prepare him (by means of the wrestling episode) to face Esau by faith. When he enters, Esau is no opposition for him because God had so worked on Jacob's behalf. Despite the victory of being back in the land, the sons of Jacob degenerate and corrupt themselves. This series of events could not be a more fitting portrayal of the nation. Though they were the inheritor of the promise by election, God removed them from the land in discipline until such

a time that God returned them under Moses. They, too, approached the land in fear, only to have God uniquely deal with them so as to enter the land in faith under Joshua. In Jacob, the nation learns its true character!

A. **Jacob Secures the Blessing by Treachery (25:19—28:9)**

The account of Esau and Jacob is a very interesting story. Isaac receives the Abrahamic blessing from his father Abraham (25:5,11). However, his wife Rebekah, like Sarah, is barren and there is no seed to carry on the line of blessing. Yet Isaac had learned from his father's experience: you do not resort to human devices to get the seed. Rather, you pray, cry out to God, and trust Him. Having prayed for Rebekah, Isaac is met with the joyful discovery that Rebekah has not only conceived but shall have twins! According to the oriental custom, it is the firstborn who is the primary inheritor of his father's estate. The birthright of the firstborn (as the primary inheritor) included the right to be the spiritual head of the family, and thus the spiritual line should come through him. Since Esau is the firstborn, the birthright is his. Nevertheless, God intercedes to demonstrate a point. Even while the twins are still in their mother's womb, God declares (Gen 25:23):

"Two nations are in your womb; and two peoples shall be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; and the older shall serve the younger."

Jacob would be the younger, the second born, and yet God declares that he would prevail. The point is this: God is interrupting the natural order to show that the recipient of blessing would be by election, i.e., by God's choice (this is fundamental to Paul's argument of the doctrine of the believer's election in Rom 9). And yet more is involved here than two individuals. Two distinct nations are at stake, and the point could not be plainer that the nation Israel has her role by God's election. From the outset, the birth of the nation of Israel is supernaturally superintended. And yet there is a lesson for Israel at the individual level: to be an Israelite did not mean that one was automatically in the "family of faith." Was not Esau a descendant of Isaac? Nevertheless, Esau was not included as a recipient of blessing, for he was not elect and he was not of faith (he despised the birthright). To be descended from Abraham did not "save" any Israelite . . . a point Jesus was to confront the unbelieving Jews with of His generation.

Now, let us turn our attention to the scene where Jacob gains the birthright from Esau. What should strike us is that God always intended Jacob to end up with the Abrahamic blessing (that is the significance of the divine oracle before their birth). To resort to manipulation and deceitful scheming was never necessary for Jacob. It could have been his by faith . . . trusting God to give him the birthright. Yet Jacob at this point is a man who takes matters into his own hands. In fact, his very name means "heel gripper" which will take on a negative sense of "tripper" or crafty deceiver. His name attests to his character.

On the other hand, Esau is of lesser character than Jacob. Gen 25:34 tells us that "*Esau despised the birthright*," i.e., he despised that which was of value. What was at stake was God's divine program . . . the blessing of Abraham . . . the mediator of blessing. Nevertheless, he despised it . . . he saw little value in it . . . in effect he was insulting what God esteemed . . . a slap to God's face. Despite Jacob's manner in which he sought to gain what was Esau's privilege, we must commend the fact that he knows what is of value and goes after it. Jacob recognizes the spiritual value in the birthright! Both men are a lesson to Israel. With Jacob, they should learn that the promises do not come that way (by treachery and deceit). With Esau, they were warned not to despise that which is of value. As a consequence, Jacob ends up fleeing the land of promise (paralleling the sojourn of the family to Egypt). Yet, as he goes, even Isaac recognizes the blessing will be Jacob's: "*May He also give you the blessing of*

Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you; that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham" (28:4).

B. Vision at Bethel (28:10-22)

This scene has even been put in the form of a song: "I am climbing Jacob's ladder." However, the biblical account is much different. This passage is intended to bring encouragement to Jacob as he leaves the land. In earlier stories, the patriarchs were not to leave the land. But in Jacob's leaving, it is not against God's will, but rather in divine discipline (whenever Israel is out of the land, it is a disciplinary action). As Jacob leaves, he not only gets assurance from his father that the blessing is his, but now even YHWH confirms the promises to him. So the ladder is symbolic that God is present with Jacob wherever he goes and that the angels are available to attend to him at God's direction (cf. 32:1,2). This is a promise of protection and provision wherever he goes, an affirmation of the Abrahamic covenant to Jacob. That he has the blessing is apparent in that even during his time with Laban, he is being greatly blessed by YHWH and even Laban is receiving blessing through Jacob (30:27,30). Jacob's response to this revelation is worship in which he vows loyalty to YHWH (28:18-20).

C. Jacob-Laban Conflict (29:1—31:55)

If Jacob was ever deceitful in character, he more than meets his match in Laban. And that is the whole point: this is a divine arrangement to discipline Jacob. The years with Laban develop Jacob in faith by making him aware in a painful way of his shortcomings and sins. Nevertheless, there is blessing mixed with the discipline in that Jacob gains the seed through Rachel and Leah (and the two maids) which will perpetuate the line of blessing. Joseph, being the first-born of Rachel, becomes the favorite of his father whose love was greatest for Rachel.

D. Meeting Esau: From Fear to Faith (32:1—33:20)

To serve Laban forever was not an option, for it was the divine plan to give Jacob the land of promise (recall that Pharaoh would pursue the departing Israelites under Moses much like Laban pursued Jacob). However, in God's estimation, Jacob is still not ready to take the land. Fear is gripping his heart, not faith. Jacob's messengers who had been sent ahead come back with the report that Esau is approaching with a massive force (32:6). Jacob's response is reported in 32:7, "*Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed*" (one cannot help but recall the 12 spies who were sent out under Moses). His plan is to resort to his own tactics to succeed. He divides up his family into different traveling groups, and he tries to send gifts as though he could sooth his brother. Jacob is fearful of the meeting, and he anticipates a fight. The striking note is that he is not casting himself in total faith upon the power of God to resolve the conflict for him. Rather, he seeks to handle it himself. He has always been able to outwit others (even Laban), but can he do it this time? In his desperation, he prays to the LORD for deliverance on the basis of the Abrahamic promises to him (32:9-12). This was the right thing to do, but his actions that follow reveal that he is still trying to fight for himself rather than allowing the LORD to fight for him. This is what he must learn at all cost: he cannot take the land until he allows the LORD to fight for him! The strange incident in which he wrestles with a man at the Jabbok (32:22-32) is the key to the whole section in which Jacob learns that very lesson.

Jacob had prayed for deliverance (32:9-12), but God knows that something more important is needed. Jacob must first be delivered of the fear in his heart. At the ford of the Jabbok, the threshold to the land of promise, he meets a "man" in the night who wrestles with him. Jacob will come out a changed man.

Before Jacob has a chance to pull one of his schemes on Esau, someone wants to meet him face to face. The identity of the antagonist remains unidentified, and only by his words and actions did Jacob learn of his identity. Obviously, Jacob's opponent is the LORD Himself, for it was really the LORD whom Jacob had been wrestling with all his life. The LORD is now going to teach something very important to Jacob through a most interesting tactic. The struggle pursues all night and appears to be indecisive until the "man" resorts to a supernatural activity, a simple touch. This "simple touch" dislocates Jacob's hip (ironically, a deceitful blow). The point could not be more plain: Jacob has been wrestling with the LORD all his life, and yet the LORD restrained Himself from blotting Jacob out. He could have done that, for just one supernatural "touch" permanently disabled him. God had been restraining Himself with Jacob, for God is faithful to the object of His election who has the blessing of Abraham. But this whole episode represents more than Jacob himself. This is the character of the chosen nation, and even of you and me.

Jacob realizes that he is no match for this "man." No one can contend with this figure and prevail. The experience becomes an unveiling for Jacob, realizing who the "man" really is, and so he clings to him and will not let him go without a blessing. This is the Jacob God commends; this is the Jacob who realizes the value in the birthright; this is the Jacob who is hungry and desperate for God's blessing. This is Jacob with a heart of faith!

Jacob cries out for blessing, and God's response is to examine his name. This is significant for it is the *name* which reflects the character. As Jacob confesses his name, he is confessing his life-long character as a deceitful treacherous person, one who had sought to gain blessing in a back-handed manner. By having Jacob confess his name, God has now called his attention to this, and thereby demanded that such a fixed pattern of life be turned back radically. With the confession, God gives him a new name, and that is the divine response to Jacob's plea for a blessing. The new name signifies a new character, and the new name is "Israel," meaning "God fights." The explanation (32:28) is that Jacob had striven with God and men, and yet prevailed. Ross explains,

Throughout Jacob's entire life he had been dragging God's blessing out under all circumstances for his own use, under "his own steam." He was too self-willed and too proud to let the blessing be given to him.

. . . This meant, first, that God chose, because of the patriarch's stubbornness and pride, to fight against him. Second, it meant that God would fight for Israel.

Jacob's new name would remind him and others of this fight in which he had overcome. These words were full of hope to the Israelites. If one could contend successfully with God, he could then win the battle with man. Thus the name "God fights" and the explanation that Jacob had "overcome" obtained the significance of a promise for the nation's forthcoming struggles.¹

The incident would be a reminder not only to Jacob but to the nation as well that they had striven with God. They prevail, not in the sense of defeating the LORD, but in the sense that they end up with the blessing despite the struggle.

The confrontation is certainly convicting, but is also a new start. From this time forth, Jacob will be a changed man (in more ways than the fact that he will limp the rest of his life due to a dislocated hip). He is now crippled for life, and yet it is in this particular state that he learns

¹Allen Ross, "Genesis," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 81.

that God is his strength. He must look upon human deceitful scheming as the old way of life. He will always remember that God is the one who by a mere "touch" can disable his opponent. Jacob is now Israel ("God fights"), and he can now face Esau with the courage that it is the LORD who fights his battles. His self-confidence is gone, and with it the use of carnal weapons. One result is that Jacob names the place "Peniel," (which means "face of God"), for it is at this point that he had to deal with God face to face.

The outcome is all too ironic: his encounter with Esau is no fight at all for the LORD simply subdues the heart of Esau (much like Israel's defeat of Jericho). The nation could learn much from this as it prepared to enter the promised land under Moses. In particular, they must advance in faith allowing God to fight for them. As the Jacob narrative concludes, he is back in the land as God has promised. Unfortunately, the family degenerates and this theme will be taken up under Joseph.

III. THE JOSEPH NARRATIVES (GEN 37:1—50:26) [Joseph 1916-1806 BC]

What becomes of Jacob? His twelve sons become the twelve tribes of Israel, but they have greatly degenerated. This section will trace the deterioration of the line of blessing, resulting in removal from the land of promise to Egypt for divine discipline. It is more than a famine which drives them to Egypt. If they are in Egypt, the question arises, "What went wrong with the program of God? Why did God take them out of the promised land and bring them to the 'iron furnace' of Egypt?" They are not in Egypt accidentally; this is divine purpose. In the process, God raises up one from the midst of the brothers who will be the deliverer for the nation, namely Joseph.

A. Deterioration of the Line of Blessing

To understand the Joseph narrative, one must realize what is happening to the line of blessing. They were created to be the mediator of blessing to other nations and to bear testimony of YHWH. This demands distinctiveness as YHWH's people, not being shackled by sin. But Jacob and his sons are losing their distinctiveness. Rather than bringing the Canaanites to the knowledge of YHWH, the "seed" is becoming like the Canaanites. They are failing in three important areas:

1. A Purpose to Bear Testimony to YHWH

Recall Gen 12:8, 26:25, and 33:20 where the patriarchs built altars. They called on the name of the LORD, and in so doing were witnesses for the name of YHWH. This was their calling . . . to be a blessing in the midst of the Canaanites. Sadly, this purpose to bring a testimony has faded.

2. Concern for Unity

There should be no division and tension between the worshippers of YHWH.

- a. In Gen 13:5-8, Abram gives the choice of the land to Lot (note vs 7 which seems to reflect that this was open to the Canaanites).
- b. In contrast, the 12 sons of Jacob take Joseph and attempt to get rid of him. There is jealousy among them.

3. A Need to Remain Distinct (separated from the Canaanites)

The previous generations were very careful not to intermarry with the Canaanites (cf. Gen 24:1-3; 27:46). But now there is degeneration:

- a. Following Dinah's rape, Simeon and Levi perverted the spiritual institution of circumcision to bring death upon the people (ch 34).
- b. Reuben, the eldest son of Jacob, commits incest with his father's concubine (35:22).²
- c. Judah goes off and takes a wife from the Canaanites. This, in turn, leads to an act of harlotry with his daughter-in-law Tamar. As a result, Judah is revealed as an unfit representative of YHWH (38:26), and loses any effective testimony before the Canaanites (38:21-22).

The line from Jacob has lost the transcendental purpose of their commission by YHWH, and they are in danger of merging with the Canaanites. Thus, God works in a unique way to bring the "seed" into Egypt.³ This migration to Egypt is no act of disobedience on their part, but the will of God for them (comp. 15:13; 46:3). The question is: why Egypt?

The Egyptians have a completely different mind set toward the Hebrews than the Canaanites do. Whereas the Canaanites welcomed the Hebrews and were willing to integrate them into their society, the Egyptians were segregationists and wanted nothing to do with the Hebrews (see 43:32,34; 46:34). As a result, once the Hebrews came to Egypt, they remained in isolation (which allowed them to develop into a nation). By placing them in a different culture where the Egyptians will have nothing to do with them, God actually is preserving His program by creating a protective shelter for His people. God is not abandoning His program. In spite of their faults, He is working to build them into a distinctive nation (50:20).

Of course, the whole episode turns on Joseph.⁴ The robe he receives (37:3) was an indicator from his father that he was to be the heir (i.e., the theocratic administrator—an investiture of authority). His brothers are seized by jealousy and attempt to get rid of him. Ironically, this leads to his position in Egypt which becomes the means of delivering his brothers and the line of blessing. In many ways, the life of Joseph parallels the life of Christ. Despised and rejected by His fellow Jews, Jesus actually became the Savior of His brothers.

As the book draws to a close, we hear from the lips of Joseph his confidence in the Abrahamic covenant: "*I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you, and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob*" (50:24). Whereas Genesis began with Adam in Eden, it closes with Joseph in a coffin. Nevertheless, we are prepared now for understanding the events of Exodus. We understand what the divine program is, so as to realize why they must leave Egypt for Canaan, and we understand how they got to Egypt in the first place.

²This act was typical of a Canaanite lifestyle, and especially of the purported lifestyle of their gods. Cf. Charles F. Pfeiffer, *Ras Shamra and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1962), 31-32.

³The commencement of the Egyptian sojourn would be *ca.* 1876 BC based on 1 Kgs 6:1; Ex 12:40-41. Cf. Eugene Merrill, "Fixed Dates in Patriarchal Chronology," *BibSac* 137 (1980):241-51; and *Kingdom of Priests*, 48-49.

⁴According to Merrill, "Joseph was born in 1916, entered Egypt in 1899, rose to power in 1886, and died in 1806 (Gen 50:22) at the age of 110" (*Kingdom of Priests*, 49).

One last comment concerns the blessings on the sons in Gen 49. There is a Messianic prophecy in vs 10: "*The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.*" Shiloh could mean "perfect peace" (related to שלום) but is more likely to be translated "the one to whom it (the scepter) belongs" (the NIV translation is to be preferred at this point over the NASB). If the latter translation is correct, the verse would be saying that the ruler's scepter would be passed down through the tribe of Judah until the coming of the One who would rule over all peoples. The hope of the people rests in one from the line of Judah, and certainly Jesus of Nazareth shall bring in the obedience of the peoples!