

“The Way Back Home” (Genesis 35:1-29)

In your driving experience, have you ever taken a wrong turn? I have. When I was in seminary I interned at a church in Vancouver (WA). One of my responsibilities was to follow up the people who attended our church. One evening, I drove north of Vancouver into a distant and unfamiliar neighborhood. My visit lasted longer than expected and so I was in a hurry to get back home. Unfortunately, I took one wrong turn. This one wrong turn led to several more wrong turns until I was completely lost. Although I was only 30 miles from our apartment in SE Portland, I honestly wondered if I would ever locate civilization. The harder I tried to find my way back home, the more my destination eluded me. However, the reason for my plight was my own ignorance. I’m directionally impaired...I have trouble reading a map.

Now, unlike me, Jacob could read a map. He had vowed that he would return to Bethel, (28:20-22), and God had reminded Jacob of his vow (31:3, 13). Interestingly, in Gen 35, thirty years have passed since Jacob made that vow. Twenty of those years were spent serving his father-in-law, Laban, and ten years living in the ungodly city of Shechem, which almost destroyed his family.¹ From a physical point of view, only 30 miles separated Jacob from God and His appointed destination of Bethel. That thirty miles had separated him from God’s will for 30 years! And for the past ten years, he was near Bethel but not near to the God of Bethel. From a spiritual standpoint, Jacob might as well have been a million miles away. Jacob’s condition is not that different from many Christians today. Outwardly, we may appear to be walking close to the Lord, but inwardly we have stopped short of whole-hearted devotion to Him. Since every one of us will face times when we have strayed from an intimate and obedient walk with God, Genesis 35 provides us with a map for finding our way back home.

Sometime after being humiliated by his sons (34:30-31), God speaks to Jacob and says: “**Arise, go up to Bethel** [“The House of God”] **and live there, and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau**” (35:1).² God says, “Hit the road, Jake!” In fact, there are two commands in 35:1: “**Arise**” and “**go up**.”³ There is a sense of urgency. God is saying, “You’ve delayed so long, now you *must* fulfill your vow. There can be no more procrastinating. You must go to Bethel.” Why does God command Jacob to go to Bethel? It was at Bethel that Jacob had his first real encounter with God. It was at Bethel that Jacob was first told about God’s plan to bless him. It was at Bethel that Jacob first built an altar of worship to the Lord.

God has not spoken to Jacob since He had commanded him to leave Paddan-aram and return to Bethel (31:3, 13), some ten years earlier. Why the ten years of silence? Until now Jacob wasn’t ready to listen. Now Jacob is facing a crisis and he has “ears to hear”:

- Jacob’s only daughter, Dinah, has been raped.
- Jacob’s sons (Simeon and Levi) had slaughtered the men of Shechem in their vengeance.
- Jacob’s sons had looted the city and taken the women and children as captives.
- As a result, the relatives and neighbors of the people of Shechem would undoubtedly launch a vicious and deadly counterattack!

It’s amazing how a personal crisis can improve one’s spiritual hearing. Often the bottom has to drop out before we’re ready to listen to God. He has to bring us to our knees so that there is no other place to look but up. God does not, like many of us do as parents, yell and holler and fuss and fume over the disobedience of His children. He is, of course, deeply grieved by disobedience, but He will allow us to go our own way and to reap the painful price of sin (Gal 6:7-8). And then, when we have gotten our fill of sin and there is no other way to turn, He will speak to us again, reminding us of that which He has previously spoken.⁴

God calls Jacob to fulfill the vow he made when he **“fled from...Esau”** (27:42-45; 28:20-22). This phrase is pointed and is intended to remind Jacob that he should have headed to Bethel a long time ago. He has been wasting time, out of God’s will. If you are contemplating a detour to Bethel, take this word to heart: You will never find what you’re looking for. You will waste precious years that you will never be able to have back. It’s not worth it! Besides, God will eventually come to you again and call you back to where you were supposed to be in the first place. Why expend the effort of traveling far outside of His will and then retracing your steps back to where He originally wanted you?

This time around Jacob has learned his lesson and responds to God’s command with prompt obedience. In 35:2-3, Moses writes, **“So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, ‘Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments; and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.’”** Jacob finally does right. Instead of being passive and silent, he demonstrates spiritual leadership by taking initiative and leading his family in righteousness. In 35:2, he tells his entire caravan to **“put away the foreign gods.”** These “foreign gods” came from Laban’s collection (31:19) and the Shechem spoils (34:27-29). Worshipping the gods of the pagan nations was always a temptation to the Israelites. Moses had to warn them about idolatry before they entered the land (Deut 7:3-6, 25-26) and Joshua had to challenge the Israelites to abandon their idols after they had conquered the land (Josh 24:14, 23-24). Even Samuel faced this problem in his day (1 Sam 7:2-4). Not to mention, the prophets after Samuel often rebuked the nation for building the high places where they served false gods.

Despite knowing Israel’s struggle with idols, it’s easy to think, “This doesn’t apply to me. I don’t have any idols—I’m a Christian, not a pagan!” But idols aren’t just little statues you bow down to. An idol is anything that takes your attention and devotion away from God, anything that competes with your worship of God, or anything that has more influence in your life than God.

- For some, the idol is *career success*. It is the consuming desire to earn a powerful promotion, make more money, and have the respect of one’s colleagues. Everything else, even the family, is subordinated to the goal of career success.
- For others, it is *affluence*: collecting all the junk Madison Avenue tells us we need to be happy or spending an inordinate amount of time studying the stock market or working on investments.
- Some worship *personal fulfillment*, even if it means divorcing their mate.
- For some, it’s the pursuit of *leisure*. There is no time for personal or family devotions. No time for getting to know lost neighbors. There’s no time to serve in the church or community but there is time for TV, movies, videogames, sports, or other hobbies.⁵

The second command Jacob gives is **“purify yourselves and change your garments”** (35:2). This sounds strange to our modern ears. Yet, we must keep in mind that most people today are accustomed to indoor plumbing, fragrant soap, and ample wardrobes, so we forget that the ancient, nomadic people in Bible lands had none of these conveniences. For that matter, our modern hygienic practices and facilities were totally unknown, even in Western civilization, during most of its history. What we call necessities would have been considered luxuries by our ancestors. Thus, in Scripture, washing the body and changing clothes is quite significant. It signifies making a new beginning. Like dirt, sin is defiling and must be washed away (Ps 51:2, 7; Isa 1:16; 2 Cor 7:1; 1 John 1:9). Our old garments typify the old life with its failures (Isa 64:6), but God in His mercy gives us “new garments” so we can make a fresh beginning (3:21; Exod 19:9-15; Isa 61:10; Zech 3:1-5; Luke 15:22; Eph 4:22-24; Rev 3:18).⁶ For some of us this will mean new behavior. We forsake immorality. For others it will mean a new wardrobe. We stop showing skin. For others it will mean a new attitude, new entertainment, new priorities, etc.

It is significant that Jacob called God the One **“who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone”** (35:3b). That epithet serves as a fitting summary of the picture of God that has emerged from the Jacob narratives. Jacob was in constant distress; yet, in each instance, God remained faithful to His promise and delivered him.⁷ Whether you are aware of it or not, if you are a believer in Christ, this is the story of your life. God has been with you wherever you have gone, even in your seasons of disobedience and sin. And He is the One that answers you in your day of trouble.

How did Jacob’s family and company respond to his orders? Moses records these words: **“So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem”** (35:4). There is an immediate response of obedience. Verse 4 demonstrates the natural outcome of spiritual leadership. In 35:2-3, Jacob exercised spiritual leadership and the family and company followed. Husbands and fathers, our wives and children are looking for us to step up and lead. They want to follow. They want to respect us. It may not be easy initially. There may be a season of transition. But since this is God’s intention and design, if we play by His rules, we can expect that eventually His purposes will be accomplished in our homes. Husband and father, today you may sense the Spirit’s conviction. You know that you have not been the spiritual leader God has called you to be. I have four words for you: “Better late than never!” This is your day. Like Jacob, you can capitalize TODAY! While you can’t get back the years you’ve lost, you can redeem the time and begin today to be the man God wants you to be (Eph 5:15-16).

Before moving on, notice that the family and company gave all of their idols to Jacob and it was Jacob who hid or buried these idols. Back in 31:34, Rachel had taken the household idols and put them in the camel’s saddle and sat on them. Now here, their burial beneath the oak of Shechem ridicules these idols as worthless and pathetic items that are really no gods at all.⁹ Jacob’s hands and fingers must have been covered with dirt from digging holes to bury idols, yet the dirt and calluses depict a self-sufficient schemer and trickster who has been transformed into a dependent servant.¹⁰

The oak referred to here seems to have been the oak of Moreh (lit. “teacher”) where God had appeared to Abraham shortly after he had entered the land (12:6). At the same spot, possibly prompted by Jacob’s example, Joshua issued a very similar call to Israel. In Josh 24:15, Joshua commanded the people of Israel to “... choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.” Later, in Josh 24:23, he said, “... put away the foreign gods which are in your midst, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” There comes a time when we must draw a line in the sand. Have you drawn your line?

In 35:5, Moses writes, **“As they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.”** The inclusion of the phrase **“the sons of Jacob”** suggests that the other cities feared Jacob’s boys (cf. Deut 11:25) because of what they had done to the people of Shechem. Yet, it also seems evident that as Jacob obeyed the Lord, the Lord protected Jacob and his family by causing a great terror to fall on the surrounding cities.¹¹ Admittedly, this is rather ironic. Throughout his life, Jacob has had to contend with his own fears—fear of God (28:17), fear of Laban (31:31), and fear of Esau (32:7, 11). Nobody had been in fear of him...angry, yes; fearful, no.¹² Yet here, it is the terror of God that protects him. What a powerful truth: God can accomplish far more through His powerful means than we can pull off through all of our sinful scheming.

As a result of this terror, **“Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. He built an altar there, and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed Himself to him when he fled from his brother”** (35:6-7). Jacob faithfully fulfilled his vow to God at Luz, which he renamed Bethel (house of God, 35:15). He named the place of his altar El-Bethel (God of Bethel, 35:7) in memory of God’s first revelation to him there.

In 35:8, we read these sobering words: **“Now Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak; it was named Allon-bacuth [“Oak of Weeping”].”** Deborah (cf. 24:59) must have been an important member of Jacob’s household to merit this notation. She was a favorite nanny who may have left Beersheba with Jacob or may have joined him later, after the death of Rebekah. The reference to Deborah is probably a way of reminding the reader of Rebekah and alluding to her death in a veiled manner. This may have been appropriate in view of Rebekah’s deception of Isaac (ch. 27).¹³ How sobering! Women, this should serve as a great reminder to not deceive your husbands.

This verse is the first of three deaths mentioned in this chapter. This is intended to demonstrate that Jacob’s new step of faith didn’t prevent him from experiencing new problems and trials. Being a victorious Christian doesn’t mean escaping the difficulties of life and enjoying only carefree days. Rather, it means walking with God by faith, knowing that He is with us, and trusting Him to help us for our good and His glory, no matter what difficulties He permits to come our way. The maturing Christian doesn’t pray, *“How can I get out of this?”* but *“What can I get out of this?”*¹⁴ Are you in the midst of a severe trial today? I pray that this will be your response as you continue to be faithful to the Lord.

In 35:9-12, the Lord reconfirms His covenant with Jacob. **“Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him”** (35:9). Upon Jacob’s obedience, God again appears to Jacob and then blesses him in three ways.

- **First, God renames Jacob:** **“God said to him, ‘Your name is Jacob; You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.’ Thus He called him Israel”**¹⁵ (35:10). Why does God rename Jacob for the second time (32:28)? Because men and women are prone to forget. Yet, we must remember our identity is not shaped by our past but our future. It is not based on our performance; it is based on Christ’s performance.
- **Second, God promises Jacob many descendants:** **“God also said to him, ‘I am God Almighty [*El Shaddai*];¹⁶ be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come forth from you”** (35:11). God’s words, **“be fruitful and multiply”** recalls clearly the original blessing of creation (1:28) and, hence, shows God to be still “at work” in bringing about the blessing to all mankind through Jacob. Furthermore, for the first time since 17:16 (“kings of peoples will come from her”), the mention is made of royalty (“kings,” 35:11) in the promised line.
- **Third, God promises Jacob land:** **“The land which I gave¹⁷ to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you”** (35:12). God’s promise of land was first given to Abraham and then to Isaac, and was renewed here with Jacob. God’s blessing of Jacob when his dedication was complete, illustrates God’s response to those who fully obey Him.

In 35:13-15, Moses records Jacob’s response to God’s promises. **“Then God went up from him in the place where He had spoken with him. 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; he also poured oil on it. So Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel.”** Jacob solemnized this occasion by setting up a second pillar (cf. 28:18) that perpetuated the memory of God’s faithfulness for the benefit of his descendants. He not only set the stone apart as special, by pouring oil on it as he had done 30 years earlier, but also made an offering to God there and renamed the place “Bethel.” Jacob celebrates God. He acknowledges it is by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is a picture of the Christian life. It is to be a life of celebration that is lived out under the influence of the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18-21).

Jacob is riding high. Things are going well. He is in a great place spiritually. Still, all of Jacob's problems are not behind him. Someone has said that the person whose problems are all behind him or her is probably a school bus driver!¹⁸

In 35:16a, Jacob's caravan **"journeyed from Bethel."** Before we go any further, it is important to recognize that Jacob is not disobedient to God in leaving Bethel. God's instructions to go to Bethel and "live there" (35:1) were evidently directions to dwell there while he fulfilled his vow. God did not command permanent residence there. Moses continues **"...and when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and she suffered severe labor. When she was in severe labor the midwife said to her, 'Do not fear, for now you have another son.' It came about as her soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin"** (35:16b-18). Ben-oni means "son of my sorrow" (35:18).¹⁹ Can you imagine this? "What's your name?" "My name is 'Depression.'" "How are you doing, Depression?" "Terrible." For Rachel, Benjamin's birth was a fatally painful experience. However, the birth of his twelfth son alleviates Jacob's sorrow over Rachel's death. So he names his son Benjamin, meaning "The son of my right hand." One thing boxers know is to watch out for the right hand! The left hand is to set up the right. Jacob is saying, "This son of mine is going to be powerful and meaningful to me." This is the only son that Jacob named, which suggests his renewed leadership of the family. Benjamin was born in the land that later became part of his tribe's allotment. His birth there gave him title to it. He was also born near the same town where Jesus was born (Matt 2:1). It's amazing to see how the Scriptures fit together.

In 35:19-21, we read these words: **"So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). Jacob set up a pillar over her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day. Then Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder."**²⁰ Jacob buried Rachel near Ephrath, an older name for Bethlehem ("house of bread").²¹ Ironically, Rachel, who had cried in desperation to Jacob, "Give me children, or else I die" (30:1), died giving birth to a child. So again, Jacob must grieve through the course of his life walking with God. Men, one day you may bury your wife. Live your marriage as if it is that day. Pray that you may outlive your wife so that you can provide for her all the days of her life.

In 35:22a, Moses writes these disturbing words: **"It came about while Israel was dwelling in that land, that Reuben²² went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine,²³ and Israel heard of it."** This was not an act of passion or lust. Instead, Reuben was seeking to accomplish two things: First, Reuben wanted to prevent Rachel's maid, Bilhah, from succeeding Rachel as his father's favorite wife. By making Bilhah detestable to Jacob, Reuben hoped that he would turn to his mother, Leah. (Taking the concubine of one's predecessor was a perverted way of claiming to be the new lord of the bride.) Second, Reuben wanted to assert his position as the rightful heir to Jacob.²⁴ In the ancient Near East, a man who wanted to assert his superiority over another man might do so by having sexual relations with that man's wife or concubine.²⁵

Reuben acts as the firstborn since the others sons have disqualified themselves. His dream is that the two most powerful people in Israel will be him and his mom. Yet, this sinful act would come back to haunt Reuben. In the end, he forfeited his rights as the firstborn son of Jacob (49:3-4). Judah obtained the right to rule as head of the family, and Levi got the right to be the family priest eventually. The double portion of his father's inheritance went to Joseph, who realized it through his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Reuben also lost the privilege of being in the direct line of the promised Messiah (1 Chron 5:1-2).²⁶

Sin always has costly consequences. In the end, it is never worth it. Thus, the goal must be to live with the end in mind. Today, contemplate where your sin might take you. Can you handle the price tag?

While Jacob has made some strides in this chapter, again he demonstrates his passivity. Moses puts it like this, “**Israel²⁷ heard of it.**” Jacob was told of Rueben’s sinful actions but did nothing about it. My guess is that Jacob’s own sin and guilt over stealing Esau’s birthright and blessing, as the first-born son of Isaac, prevented him from taking disciplinary action against his own son. Much in the same way that King David’s sin with Bathsheba prevented him from taking action against his son, Absalom, who slept with his father’s concubines (2 Sam 16:21-22).

Amazingly, in spite of the dysfunction of Jacob’s family, God’s plan would be worked out in human history through Jacob’s 12 sons (see 1 Cor 1:26-29). Our passage closes in 35:22b-29. **“Now there were twelve sons of Jacob—the sons of Leah: Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn, then Simeon and Levi and Judah and Issachar and Zebulun; the sons of Rachel: Joseph²⁸ and Benjamin; and the sons of Bilhah, Rachel’s maid: Dan and Naphtali; and the sons of Zilpah, Leah’s maid: Gad and Asher. These are the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.²⁹ Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre of Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. Isaac breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, an old man of ripe age; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.”³⁰** Jacob had left Beersheba with only a staff in his hand. Now he returned with 12 sons, a large household, and much livestock. Through Jacob’s 12 sons God would fulfill His promises.

The end of the Jacob narratives is marked by the death of his father, Isaac.³¹ The purpose of this notice is not simply to record Isaac’s death but rather to show the complete fulfillment of God’s promise to Jacob (28:21). According to Jacob’s vow, he had asked that God watch over him during his sojourn and return him safely to the house of his father. Thus, the conclusion of the narrative marks the final fulfillment of these words as Jacob returned to the house of his father, Isaac, before he died.³² The Bible says that when he died he was “gathered to his people, old and full of years.” That thought of being **“gathered to his people”** is an early hint of life after death. This, incidentally, is the last recorded time that Jacob and Esau meet. Many years earlier they had separated because of their father; now they had come together to bury him (35:27-29).

Like Jacob, have you spent the last 30 years only 30 miles short of God’s will? Jacob’s reconciliation with God, at Bethel, required several actions on Jacob’s part: First, he had to come to the point where he stopped going his own sinful way and once again obeyed that which he knew to be God’s will. Second, he had to get rid of the foreign gods he had tolerated, which were so offensive to God. Finally, he had to be reconciled with his family members whom he had injured and offended by his sins (Matt 5:23-24; 18:15-17). It is very important that God’s people follow through and keep the commitments they have made concerning participation in His program. When they commit themselves to Him in purity and worship, He commits Himself to blessing them.

Have you ever learned a language? It is difficult and can be very discouraging. After several months of learning, there is the frequent temptation to quit. Yet, it is important to go back to the beginning of the process. When we first looked at Greek, Spanish, French, or German, even the alphabet looked like chicken-scratch. It can be helpful to remember how far we’ve come.

This is also true in the spiritual life. There are times when we look at our spiritual walk and feel as if we haven’t gotten anywhere. We can feel overwhelmed by our failures and our inability to master the Christian life. Those are the times when we need to pause and look back so that we can gain an appreciation of how far God has brought us. God does not demand instant perfection, but He leads us little by little, making inroads into our self-centeredness and doing His work in our lives one step at a time.³³

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Notes

¹ We can deduce that some time has passed from two lines of inquiry. First, from the age of Dinah in Shechem as compared to her age at the time of Jacob's departure. When Jacob left Paddan-aram, she must have been a very young child, for Dinah was born after Leah had borne Jacob six sons (cf. 30:21). By the time Jacob was in Shechem, Dinah was of a marriageable age (cf. 34:1ff.). Secondly, we know that Joseph was 17 when he was sold into slavery, and this seems to be not too long after Jacob went to Bethel for the second time (37:2). Since we know that Joseph was born at the end of Jacob's 14-year contract with Laban (30:25-26), he would have been about six years old when Jacob left Paddan-aram (cf. 31:41). Thus, there is a period of nearly ten years between Jacob's departure from Paddan-aram and his final arrival at Bethel. See Robert Deffinbaugh, *Genesis: From Paradise to Patriarchs*. Lesson 36: The Way Back (Genesis 35:1-29): www.bible.org, 1997, 2.

² God's command to Jacob has parallels with the initial call of Abraham to begin his great walk of faith (Gen 12:1), and with the charge to go to Moriah to offer up a sacrifice (22:2). Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 137. This is the first time God commanded a patriarch to build an altar.

³ This special use of the word "go up" (*alah*) is a call to a religious pilgrimage. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Vol. 2: WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1994), 323.

⁴ Deffinbaugh, *The Way Back*, 2-3.

⁵ Steven J. Cole, *Getting Out of a Spiritual Slump* (Genesis 35:1-29): <http://www.fcfonline.org/site/content/1/sermons/050497m.pdf>, 3-4.

⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Authentic: Genesis 25-50* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1997), 68.

⁷ John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis: EBC* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), Electronic ed.

⁸ Walton makes these interesting comments: "Burying idols is not the same as destroying them. In fact, the text more precisely says that Jacob hides them, not that he buries them. The Hebrew verb used is the same one used when Achan hides the spoils he took from Jericho by burying them in his tent (Josh 7:21-22)." John H. Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 631. It is hard to know what to make of this. Most commentators understand Jacob's burying of the idols to be a positive response.

⁹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50: NICOT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 375.

¹⁰ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 247.

¹¹ The expression "fear of God" apparently refers (1) to a fear of God (objective genitive; God is the object of their fear). (2) But it could mean "fear from God," that is, fear which God placed in them (cf. NRSV "a terror from God"). Another option (3) is that the divine name is used as a superlative here, referring to "tremendous fear" (cf. NEB "were panic-stricken"; NASB "a great terror"). See NET Bible Notes.

¹² Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50*, 377.

¹³ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 473.

¹⁴ Wiersbe, *Be Authentic*, 66.

¹⁵ Sailhamer writes, "For a second time Jacob's name was changed to 'Israel' (35:10; cf. 32:28). Why twice? It is significant that there is no explanation of the name 'Israel' in this second naming. Thus it appears that the negative connotation of the name Israel ('struggled with God,' 32:28) has been deliberately omitted. Perhaps the point of the second renaming was to erase the negative connotation of the name given in the first instance. At this point Jacob was not the same Jacob who 'struggled with God' and men. The point of the second renaming, then, was to give the name 'Israel' a more neutral or even positive connotation—that which it was to have for the remainder of the Torah. It does so by removing the notion of 'struggle' associated with the wordplay in 32:28 and letting it stand in a positive light, contrasting it with the name 'Jacob' (*ya`aqob*), a name frequently associated throughout these narratives with Jacob's deceptions (cf. comment on 27:36). In Jacob's successive names, then, we can see the writer's assessment of Jacob's standing before God." Sailhamer, *Genesis*.

¹⁶ God's use of his name "God Almighty" (*El Shaddai*), is significant in view of what God promised Jacob. It would take an omnipotent God to fulfill these promises (cf. 17:1-2).

¹⁷ The Hebrew verb translated "gave" refers to the Abrahamic promise of the land. However, the actual possession of that land lay in the future. The decree of the LORD made it certain; but it has the sense "promised to give." See NET Bible Notes.

¹⁸ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Genesis* (<http://www.sonlight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdf>, 2005), 224.

¹⁹ The Hebrew word *oni* can mean either trouble or wealth.

²⁰ The tower of Eder (or Migdal Eder) was simply a watchtower built to help shepherds protect their flocks from robbers (cf. 2 Kgs 18:8; 2 Chron 26:10; 27:4). Since the time of Jerome, the early church father who lived in Bethlehem, tradition has held that Eder lay very close to Bethlehem.

²¹ Both Bethlehem and Kiriath Jeraim became known as Ephrath(a) because the clan of Ephrath settled in both places (cf. 1 Chron 2:50). Constable, *Notes on Genesis*, 225.

²² Reuben is the son that brought the mandrakes to Rachel, hence playing some small part in the all too brief restoration of his mother's conjugal rights (Gen 30:14).

²³ A concubine was sometimes a slave with whom her owner had sexual relations. She enjoyed some of the privileges of a wife, and people sometimes called her a wife in patriarchal times, but she was not a wife in the full sense of the term.

²⁴ Reuben's act constituted a claim against (a challenge to) his father as well as being an immoral act (cf. Deut 22:30; 2 Sam 16:21-22; 1 Kgs 2:13-25). Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 327.

²⁵ For a son to take a father's wife in this manner was a declaration that he was now the head of the family. When Abner took King Saul's concubine, Saul's son and heir Ishbosheth protested because it meant Abner was usurping the crown (2 Sam 3:6-11). When David succeeded Saul as king, he was given Saul's wives as his own (1 Sam 12:8). Rebellious Absalom declared himself ruler by taking his father's concubines (2 Sam 16:20-23), and Adonijah's request to have Abishag as his wife was the same as challenging Solomon's right to the throne (1 Kgs 2:13-25).

²⁶ Davis comments, "Verse 22b and the next few verses (35:23-26), moreover and matter-of-factly, identify Reuben as being the first-born son of Jacob in a listing of all of Jacob's sons. There is still no comment on what Reuben has done or even on Jacob's reaction to Reuben's affair with the maid of Jacob's favorite wife. For the next 13 chapters, the author keeps the reader wondering about the significance of Reuben's actions. Finally, in 49:3-4, the wrath of Jacob falls upon his first-born son at the most crucial of all times—at the time when Jacob pronounces his blessing upon his sons. In 49:3-4, Jacob removes Reuben from being the son who is to have the birthright (cf. 25:27-34). Reuben should have been given the birthright; he also should have been the one through whom the Messiah would come, but he lost those great privileges because of one momentary, foolish, but tragic sin." Barry C. Davis, *Genesis* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Biblical Seminary unpublished class Notes, 2003).

²⁷ The name Israel, rather than Jacob, may suggest that here the patriarch responded rightly (as Israel, not the old "Jacob") to this situation.

²⁸ Sailhamer notes, "Just as Abraham had two sons and only one was the son of promise, and just as Isaac had two sons and only one was the son of the blessing, so now Jacob, though he has twelve sons, has two wives (Leah and Rachel); and each has a son (Judah and Joseph) that can rightfully contend for the blessing. In the narratives that follow, the writer holds both sons, Joseph and Judah, before the readers as rightful heirs of the promise. As the Jacob narratives have already anticipated, in the end it was Judah, the son of Leah, not Joseph, the son of Rachel, that gained the blessing (49:8-12)." Sailhamer, *Genesis*.

²⁹ Benjamin was not born in Paddan-aram but near Bethlehem (35:16-18). Therefore the statement that Jacob's 12 sons were born in Paddan-aram (35:26) must be understood as a general one.

³⁰ With the record of Jacob entering into his father's inheritance, the history of Isaac's life concludes. He was buried in the cave of Machpelah near Hebron (49:29-31). Isaac lived for 12 years after Jacob's relocation to Hebron, however. He shared Jacob's grief over the apparent death of Joseph, but died shortly before Joseph's promotion in Egypt.

³¹ Isaac lived 180 years and then died. The text is so abbreviated here that we might get the impression that Isaac died shortly after Jacob's return. Not so! But he lived an additional 12-13 years.

³² Sailhamer, *Genesis*.

³³ Adapted in part from Walton, *Genesis*, 640.