

Genesis 28 Jacob's Dream

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Overview

<p>¹⁰ And Jacob went out from Beersheba, and went toward Haran. ¹¹ And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put <i>them for his pillows</i>, and lay down in that place to sleep.</p>	<p>¹⁶ And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew <i>it</i> not. ¹⁷ And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful <i>is</i> this place! this <i>is</i> none other but the house of God, and this <i>is</i> the gate of heaven.</p>
<p>¹² And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And, behold, the LORD stood above it,</p>	<p>¹⁸ And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it.</p>
	<p>¹⁹ And he called the name of that place Bethel: but the name of that city <i>was called</i> Luz at the first.</p>
<p>and said,</p>	<p>²⁰ And Jacob vowed a vow, saying,</p>
<p><i>I am</i> the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; ¹⁴ And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.</p>	<p>If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, ²¹ So that I come again to my father's house in peace;</p>
<p>¹⁵ And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all <i>places</i> whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done <i>that</i> which I have spoken to thee of.</p>	<p>then shall the LORD be my God: ²² And this stone, which I have set <i>for</i> a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.</p>

The text is an alternation. Each panel includes

1. a description of the “place,”
2. association of a symbol with the place,
3. a promise

Note also that Jacob is passive in the first panel, but active in the second. God reveals himself, and Jacob responds.

There are two structural embellishments on the basic alternation:

- The description and the symbol are unfolded into a chiasm in the second panel, where references to “place” and “house of God” both precede and follow the symbol.
- In the promise, the Lord offers first a covenant relationship and then specific promises of personal care, while Jacob’s response reverses these.

10-15, God's Revelation

10-11, *The Place*

10, from Beersheba ... toward Haran.—This is a trip of 470 miles as the crow flies, and much longer by foot. We hear nothing of the details of the journey, except this one episode. From Beersheba to Bethel is at least a four-days trip (over 80 km).

11 he lighted upon a certain place.—The wording sets up a tension. “Lighted upon” suggests this is an accident, but “a certain place” is definite in Hebrew, “the place,” suggesting the place is already known, at least to us. In fact, the first use of “the place” in Genesis is 13:3, referring to the location where Abraham built an altar (12:8) between Bethel and Ai. Jacob apparently doesn't realize it, but the place he has chosen for his bivouac is the same one where Abraham worshipped.

We need to clarify several references to this place.

- 12:8 and 13:3 refer to “Bethel” as a known city near Ai. Abraham's altar between these two must have been in a rural setting; a foreigner does not set up an altar in the streets of a walled town.
- 28:19 tells us that it is Jacob who actually gave the name, to a rural setting where he camped in the open. So the name in ch. 12-13 is anachronistic.
- But it also associates the location with the Canaanite city called Luz, a city whose remains show that it was a major settlement at this time.
- The name “Bethel” became attached to the city by the Israelites, following Jacob's use of it for a location outside the town where God had met with him and previously with Abraham.

Why does he sleep out of doors, when there is a major Canaanite city there? Why not seek refuge in the city, as in the examples of Lot's guests in Sodom (Gen 19), Joshua's spies (Josh 2:1), and the Levite in Gibeah (Jud 19:11-15)?

- Note that Abraham did the same thing when he passed through this area. He “pitched his tent, having Bethel on the west, and Hai on the east” (12:8).
- Heb 11:9,10 cites as evidence of Abraham's pilgrim status that he was “dwelling in tabernacles [tents] with Isaac and Jacob.” They were nomads, like today's Bedouin, not city folk. Hebrews sees his choice of tents as a rejection of earthly cities, and a recognition that his citizenship was in heaven.
- Jer 35:6-10 describes the Rechabites, a conservative sect within Israel, part of whose discipline was not to dwell in houses.

Jacob is not a city boy. He is uncomfortable with cities, and would rather camp in the open. This choice is cultural, not moral at this point. But it does help protect him from contamination with the already corrupt morals of the Canaanites, as the examples of Lot and the Levite make clear.

Application: We need to recognize the danger of too close an association with the world. It is corrupt and corrupting: “Evil communications corrupt good manners,” 1 Cor 15:33.

So the stage is set. He “lighted upon the place.” Evening just happens to overtake him as he is near the place where Abraham sacrificed. His own cultural background leads him to camp in the country rather than lodging in the city. It looks perfectly accidental, but God has led him there for an encounter that will change his life.

12-13a, The Symbol

The threefold repetition of “and behold” changes the perspective from that of the narrator to that of Jacob. We see through his eyes three things that arrested his attention. His vision proceeds from earth up to heaven.

A ladder.—Compare 11:4, where the people of Babel tried to build “a tower whose top may reach unto heaven.” Men’s attempts to reach up to a holy God are futile, but when God pleases, he can reach down to the most deceitful and sinful of men. Jacob’s attention starts “on earth.” The first thing he sees is the bottom of the ladder; then his attention is drawn upward.

At this point, he recognizes a separation between earth and heaven, and a bridge across this separation. Many people share this recognition, but think that they can climb the ladder on their own. His next observation shows the error of this.

Angels ascending and descending.—Focusing his eyes on the ladder, he sees angels going up and down. The ones ascending have been with him; the ones descending are now joining him. Recall the concept in Daniel (10:13, 20) that different angels are responsible for different countries. As Jacob leaves Canaan, his Canaanite escort leaves him and his Syrian escort takes over. He is constantly escorted and protected by angelic forces, though he is ignorant of the fact. Compare Heb 1:13,14. God not only can reach down to us, but he can care for us.

In John 1:51, our Lord alludes to this phrase in describing his mission to Nathaniel: “Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.” The KJV suggests that he is the ladder upon which the angels ascend and descend, just as in Gen 28:12, “the angels of God ascending and descending on it.” However, the LXX of Gen 28:12 uses *epi* with the genitive for “descending on it,” while our Lord uses *epi* with the accusative. Elsewhere in the NT, *epi* + acc with “descend” *katabainw* describes the *destination* of movement, not its *path*: John 6:16; Luke 3:22; cf John 1:32,33. The point is that the angels come to minister to the Lord, just as they did to Jacob. Thus Jacob in his exile to seek a foreign wife becomes a type of Christ, leaving heaven to seek us, and both are under the constant protection of the angels.

Consider the angelic ministrations to our Lord:

- Announcing his birth, Luke 2:9-13;
- in the wilderness, Mark 1:13; Matt 4:11
- in the garden, Luke 22:43;
- at the resurrection, Matt 28:2-4; John 20:12-13.

It was a point insisted on the early confessions of the church that he was “seen of angels” (1 Tim 3:16). As he is our example in godliness and in submission to the Father’s will, so we should take encouragement from him at the angelic care that God has provided for us.

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There is widespread preoccupation today with angels. It is good to recognize the role of these beings, but by themselves they are not the whole story. Jacob next sees the one who sends them forth.

The LORD.—“Above it,” the ladder, keeping the same antecedent for the pronoun as in the previous clauses. The Lord is seen in heaven, emphasizing his sovereign position, and the gap that would exist between him and Jacob, had he not provided this ladder with its angelic messengers. Here is the one with whom Jacob must deal, and in the next paragraph he addresses Jacob.

13b-15, The Promise

After introducing himself, the Lord offers a two-part promise, separated by 15 “and behold.” The first part repeats the promises to Abraham. The second is a more personal assurance of God’s care.

13b, Introduction

The Lord identifies himself with three names:

The LORD.—That is, YHWH, the covenant God. This is the second occurrence of the phrase “I am YHWH” in the Bible; the first was to Abraham in 15:7, the point at which the Lord initiates his covenant with Abraham (“cut,” 15:18). All the wrestling in the previous chapter was over who would receive the blessing from Isaac, but somehow everyone missed the point that the blessing needs to come from the Lord himself. That’s how Abraham received it, that’s how Isaac received it (26:3, 24), and now, at this point, that’s how Jacob must receive it. The Lord’s intervention here is a reminder that our parents’ instruction and blessing cannot take the place of our personal encounter with the Lord.

The God of Abraham thy father.—Exactly the same phrase used to Isaac in 26:3, 24; noteworthy because in the following phrase he does NOT say “Isaac thy father.” God here emphasizes Jacob’s continuity with Abraham. He is the descendant of the one with whom God made the covenant.

The God of Isaac.—Although the focus is on Jacob as the heir of Abraham’s covenant, yet he is here reminded that his immediate father also had a personal relation with the Lord. Thus the Lord faces him with the implicit challenge, “Will I be your God as well?”

13c-14, Covenant Promise

Here the Lord repeats many of the elements of the promise to Abraham, particularly the form of the promise that he gave him in Bethel in ch. 13.

Gen 13	Gen 28
15 For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever.	13c the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed;
16 And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, [then] shall thy seed also be	14 And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth,

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numbered.	
14 look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward:	and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south:
	and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

Why the echo of ch. 13? Perhaps to recall the circumstances of that promise. There, as here, the promise came after a separation occasioned by strife over worldly possessions.

- The herdsmen of Abraham and Lot contended over grazing rights, just as Jacob and Esau contended over the patriarchal blessing.
- A contrast is that there the one receiving the divine blessing yielded graciously, while here the one being blessed is the grasping one.
- But in both cases one can argue that the one being blessed seems to have received the short end of the stick. It is Jacob the blessed who is expelled from home, while Esau the unblessed has continued access to the family and its historical lands. Yet ultimately it is neither Isaac's scheming blessing nor Rebekah's plan for Jacob's flight that will determine the outcome, but God's sovereign promise.

the land whereon thou liest.—Much more focused than the form of the promise to Abraham. The point here concerns this very place, where God has met with him. In v.14 God will expand the promise to all the land, but here the point is that possession will start with the place where God has met with him. As in the introduction, the emphasis is on this personal transaction between Jacob and the Lord.

thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth.—As before, he will be the father of an innumerable seed. This makes an unambiguous link with ch. 13; other promises of an abundant seed use the stars of heaven (15, 22, 26) or the sand of the seashore (22) as the basis of comparison.

to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south.—This phrasing also appears intended to recall ch. 13.

shall all the families of the earth be blessed.—This is the one element that was not included explicitly in Isaac's blessing to Jacob (or in the blessing of ch. 13). In some ways it is the most critical, since it is the one that embodies the messianic hope. Isaac received it (26:4), and also heard God give it to his father Abraham on Moriah (22:18), but apparently did not appreciate its importance. Thankfully, God's promises depend only on himself, not on the humans whom he sometimes uses to mediate them to us.

15, Personal Promise

Compare God's words to Isaac in 26:3, 24. These promises are more personal and immediate than those of 13-14. They concern Jacob individually and personally, not at the level of his descendants as 13-14 do. 13-14 are relevant to his role as bearer of the Abrahamic promise; 15 is relevant to his condition as an exile from home.

Behold.—After the three “behold’s” of the previous paragraph, the Lord explains the main point that he wants Jacob to carry away from the dream.

I am with thee.—This is a common promise in the OT, which reaches its fulfillment in the messianic title *Immanu-el*, “God with us.” The frequency of this promise is all the more impressive when one considers that (as of Preuss’s TDOT article, I.451) there were only two references in other ANE literature to the deity being with anyone, both Egyptian and both with the king! Israel’s God is different than the gods of the nations. The pagan deities are snobbish super-heroes, magnified people who stand aloof from their people. YHWH is at once transcendent (not just a super-human) and immanent (with his people).

I ... will keep thee in all places whither thou goest.—“Keep” = “guard, protect.” Sometimes we desire that God would bless us by keeping us out of difficult situations. His way is rather to let us experience difficulty, but with the promise that wherever we are, he will protect us. Christ sends his disciples into “all the world” with the promise of his protective presence. He did not keep Paul out of the Roman prison, but he protected him there, and from that experience Paul “learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content” (Phil 4:11).

I ... will bring thee again into this land.—This promise answers a natural question arising from v.13. What good is God’s promise of the land if Jacob is being exiled from it? Here he is promised that he will return to the land of promise.

I will not leave thee.—This is the negative counterpart of “I am with thee.” It is the first instance of a precious, patient promise that God gives to those who are timid. The only other first person occurrences in the OT are Josh 1:5; Isa 41:17 but it is given in the third person in Dt 31:6,8; 1 Chr 28:20; (1 Sam 12:22 *n+\$*), Psa 37:28. Heb 13:15 picks up Josh 1:5 and applies it to believers.

until I have done.—We are not warranted to assume that he *will* forsake us after completing this. GKC 164f, “Clauses introduced by (*ad* ... sometimes express a limit which is not absolute (terminating the preceding action), but only relative, beyond which the action or state described in the principal clause still continues.” E.g.,

- Psa 110:1; Christ is not forced to leave the Father’s right hand once his enemies are subdued.
- Gen 26:13, Isaac did not stop prospering once he became great.
- Gen 49:10, the scepter will not depart from Judah after Shiloh comes.
- Psa 112:8 (*(ad) asher*), the righteous man does not begin to fear once his enemies are dispatched.

All of these are calculated to comfort Jacob personally, and show God’s tender care toward his chosen ones when they are dismayed and distressed.

16-22, Jacob’s Response

There are many interesting details in Jacob’s response, but the overarching lesson here is found in three steps in his relation to God. If we would not stop short in our spiritual development, we need to follow all three steps.

16-17, 19, The Place

Jacob awaked.—Probably during the night, since v.18 suggests that “the morning” was later. His reaction shows the first two steps in our relation with God.

What he knew.—He realizes that the Lord, *YHWH*, is in this place. It is notable that Isaac did not bless him in the name of *YHWH*, but in the name of *elohim* 27:28 and *el shaddai* 28:3. But now the Lord appears and introduces himself by the covenant name.

He certainly knew the name of *YHWH*, for he invokes it (in vain) in 27:20, “the Lord thy God brought [the game] to me,” and recognizes that this God is personal to his father. But he draws an unwarranted conclusion that because *YHWH* is personal, he must also be local. Recall the novelty of the promise, “I am with thee,” in the context of the ANE. The notion that such a personal God could also be sovereign elsewhere is new to him. “I thought that when I left Beersheba, I would leave this deity far behind. Now I find that he is here as well.”

Application: The first step in knowing God is acknowledging that he exists, and is immanent in our world. But many folk with a respectable social religion acknowledge this. It is not enough.

What he felt.—As he meditates on this realization, a dreadful fear creeps over him. He realizes that he cannot escape the notice of this God; that everything he does comes under God’s scrutiny, no matter how far he may travel. His realization of God’s omnipresence is still limited. He focuses on “this place,” which he calls “the house of God,” *beth elohim*, shortened in v.19 to Bethel. But at least he realizes that the proper response to God is not abstract theological statements, but personal fear.

Application: One might think that this fear is appropriate because of Jacob’s sin. He is sinful, but the Psalmist reminds us that “God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him” (Psalm 89:7). God is not just the object of abstract study, much less the subject of study, but a powerful, fearful being before whom mortals tremble. Even at the end of the NT, in the full light of revelation, John in the presence of deity says, “I fell at his feet as dead” (Rev 1:17).

This is the second step in knowing God. Simply acknowledging God is not enough. If we really understand how great he is and how sinful we are, we will tremble before him. The NT marks this step in our development by commanding us to “repent.”

18, The Symbol

As soon as it was light enough to see, Jacob set up one of the stones of that place for a pillar, and anointed it with oil. Such a stone would serve as a memorial; compare Jacob’s later pillars (31:45, in Mount Gilead when Laban overtook him; 35:14 on return to Bethel). The practice is not sinful in itself; Moses (Exod 24:4), Joshua (24:26) and Samuel (1 Sam 7:12) set up stones of memorial, and Moses’ stones are even called “pillars.” Isa 19:19 predicts that in the millennium, there will be a pillar set up to the Lord at the border of Egypt.

But Jacob’s words in v.22, and the anointing, show that he intends the stone as more than just a memorial. Sacred stones were common among the pagans in connection with their worship. Exod 23:24; 34:13; and numerous other passages (translating *maccebah* with “image”) command the Israelites to destroy such sanctuaries when they find them. Lev 26:1 and Deut 16:22 explicitly prohibit Israel from setting up such stones.

Jacob's action is no doubt modeled on practices that he has seen among his Canaanite neighbors. It would have been inappropriate after the giving of the law, but we see here how God patiently leads his children along as they grow in understanding of him. Many believers—no doubt, all of us—are imperfect in our worship to the Lord. Our love to the Lord demands that we purify our practice as we learn more of his will; his patience to us means that he accepts our feeble efforts, flawed as they are, as expressions of our hearts toward him.

20-22, The Promise

Jacob's promise is conditional. The condition follows closely to the terms of God's promise in v.15:

Promise	Condition Request
I <i>am</i> with thee,	If God will be with me,
and will keep thee in all <i>places</i> whither thou goest,	and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on,
and will bring thee again into this land	²¹ So that I come again to my father's house in peace

The request for food and raiment amplifies what it means for God to keep him.

It is not inappropriate for Jacob to ask for things that God has already promised. In fact, it is healthy in prayer to base our requests on God's promises.

- We are to agree in prayer with one another (Matt 18:19), and it is easiest to agree on a request if God has promised it.
- We are to pray according to God's will (1 John 5:14), and an excellent way to know that something is God's will is if he has promised it to us.

What is questionable is that Jacob makes these requests the condition for his personal devotion to the Lord. He promises:

1. Personal devotion to the Lord, "then shall the Lord be my God," following in the steps of Abraham and Isaac.
2. Establishment of Bethel as a sanctuary to the Lord
3. Regular worship through tithes.

He is still the bargainer, negotiating with God for the blessing as he did in ch. 25 with his brother for the birthright. He does not understand that God's blessing is already his, unconditional, unearned and unearnable. He is not yet a believer, one who trusts in God's promises. His shortcoming shows that one can fear God without yet coming to the place of personal faith!

This is the third step in our relation with God. After knowing that he is there and fearing before him, we come to trust and serve him. Note that the trust ("then shall the Lord be my God") is integrally bound up with service ("I will surely give"). We are saved by grace through faith apart from works, but true faith will always produce godly works.

Technical Notes

"I am with thee"

There are several distinct phrases, using one or the other of two different prepositions, (*im* and *)et*. Preuss in TDNT I asserts that there is no difference, except that (*im* is more common in later texts. (???)

(im

)ehyh (imka (26:3; Exod 3:12)

)anoki (imka (28:15; 31:8 of Jacob in Laban's hire; (imka as adverb to verbless clause in 46:4; Psa 39:13).

hineni (imka (1 Sam 14:7 Saul's armorbearer)

(imka)ani (Isa 41:10)

Cf. Abimelech's confession in 21:22; Jacob in 31:5; Dt 2:7; 48:21; Ex 18:19; Dt 20:1; 1 Kings 8:57; ultimately *immanu-el*

)et

(itka)anoki (26:24), ...)ani (Isa 43:5; Jer 1:8, 19; 15:20; 30:11; 46:28)

Cf. Acts 18:10.