

Genesis 33 Reunion with Esau

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Overview

This chapter works out one layer further in the chiasm of Jacob's life.

Birth of Sons	25, Jacob and Esau	35, Benjamin
Relations with the People of the Land	26, Isaac in Gerar	34, Jacob in Shechem
Alienation and Reconciliation with Esau	27:1-28:9	33
Jacob Meets with God	28:10-22	32
Jacob comes to, and departs from, Padan-Aram and Laban	29:1-14	31
Each out-bargains the other	29:15-30, for wives	30:25-43, for flocks
The birth of Jacob's Children	29:31-30:24	

1-11, Reconciliation

1-2, Preparations

Jacob has no sooner rejoined the main body of the camp than he sees Esau approaching. "Behold" invites us to see the approaching force through Jacob's eyes.

He orders his family so that those most precious to him are farthest in the rear, where they could flee if trouble broke out: handmaids first, then Leah, then Rachel. But he himself goes in front, taking the place of greatest danger.

3-4, Gestures of Greeting

The meeting of the brothers is marked by extreme deference on Jacob's part, and by warm affection on Esau's.

3, he bowed himself to the ground seven times.—Two things are of note in this expression.

- "bowed himself to the ground" is a gesture of great reverence, most commonly translated "worship." It is not unprecedented toward men; Abraham bows down thus to the children of Heth when he purchases a tomb for Sarah in 23:7. But it does show extreme deference, such as would be appropriate toward God (22:5).
- "seven times" is illumined by the Amarna letters, from the capital of Pharaoh Akhenaten (1400-1350 BC), which frequently begin with such a formula. An excerpt from one may give some idea of the extreme deference that Jacob is offering to Esau. Compare EA 234, from the ruler of Akka (modern Acco, north of Haifa) to Pharaoh, his feudal lord: "To the king, my lord, the Sun from the sky: Message of Satatna, the ruler of Akka, your servant, the servant of the king, and the dirt at his feet, the ground on which he treads. I prostrate

myself at the feet of the king, my lord, the Sun from the sky, 7 times and 7 times, both on the stomach and on the back.”

4 Esau ran ... embraced ... fell on his neck ... kissed him.—Esau cannot do enough to show his affection toward his brother. Compare Luke 15:20, the return of the prodigal son, where our Lord no doubt has this reunion in mind. Bailey notes on Luke 15 that the old men in Palestinian villages never run. It isn't considered dignified. When the father (or here, Esau) runs, they are opening themselves to ridicule. Esau's running is itself a mark of his emotional welcome for Jacob.

they wept.—Note the plural verb. Both of them break down and cry.

5-11, Dialog

As befits a client, Jacob does not speak, but waits for Esau to initiate the conversation. Esau asks two questions. Jacob's response is permeated by different forms of the word "grace." When he left home, he was a demanding, fleshly person. Now he comes limping back, deeply humbled, and conscious above all of his dependence on unmerited favor.

5, Who are those with thee?—The women and children are right behind Jacob. Such a large band of dependents must catch Esau's attention. Recall that he is not accustomed to large families, having grown up with only a twin brother.

Jacob answers this question verbally and with action.

- Verbally, he says, "The children which God hath graciously given thy servant." The AV suggests that the notion of giving is primary, with "graciously" as a modifier. In fact, the verb usually means "to be gracious to someone." The object almost always refers to the recipient of God's grace, and only twice is a second object added reflecting the means by which grace has been shown. We should translate, "the children with which God has been gracious to thy servant."

The emphasis is important. Jacob takes a question about his wives and children and turns it into an answer about God's undeserved favor toward him. Esau's attention is on things, but Jacob's is on the God who gives the things. We will see this reinforced in the second interchange.

- By action, he presents his family to Esau, in order of honor, beginning with the handmaids, and culminating with his favorite wife Rachel. Each of them bows humbly before Esau, following Jacob's example.

This example illustrates the humility that believers should have toward the world. In the life to come, we shall judge angels, but it is not our place to vaunt ourselves over unbelievers in this life. When we have erred, we should humbly admit our error.

8, What meanest thou by all this drove which I met?—Next, Esau inquires about the animals that have preceded Jacob.

Jacob responds with his second reference to grace: "to find grace in the sight of my lord." Strictly speaking, the expression is an idiom meaning "to please," but given the prevalence of the language of grace in this history, it is probably appropriate to take the expression literally. This

time Esau is the one whose grace Jacob seeks. Jacob recognizes that he deserves his brother's wrath. He does not come with self-righteous protestations, "God promised the blessing to me, so when Dad wouldn't give it to me willingly, it was right for me to take it." Instead, he acknowledges that he is unworthy of Esau's favor.

Esau tries to refuse the gift (9), but Jacob insists with two reasons, both of which again recall grace.

- 10 recalls his desire to "find grace in [Esau's] sight." "Receive my present, because I have seen your face and you were pleased with me." The gift is an expression of his gratitude to Esau for the cordial reception he has received.

Jacob calls the gift, "my present," lit. "my offering." He views this reconciliation as an act of divine worship.

- 11 returns to the focus on God's grace that we saw in v.5: "God hath dealt graciously with me." This time, he calls the gift, "my blessing." Given the reference to God's grace, the genitive is probably objective, "the blessing with which God has blessed me." Now the offering is an acknowledgement of God's goodness to him.

With this explanation, Jacob reverses his position in ch. 27. In both places, he is preoccupied with God's blessing on him. There, he senses a need to snatch it from Esau by his own strength. Here, he is so sure of it that he can give it away to Esau.

In fact, it is possible to understand this verse as referring, not to the droves of animals, but to the original patriarchal blessing. "In addition to this gift, I want to relinquish my claim to the blessing that I took 40 years ago. God has provided for me; that is all I need."

At Jacob's insistence, Esau accepts the gift. By not giving one in return, he acknowledges Jacob's gift as an apology, and accepts it.

12-15, Disengagement

Esau makes two offers to support Jacob on his journey:

- 12-14, to accompany him on the way
- 15, to give him a bodyguard.

Jacob refuses both of them.

12-14, I will lead on softly.—In the first case, the reason is that he must travel slowly in order not to exhaust the flocks and young children. They have already been greatly stressed in their flight from Laban.

He says that he will eventually make his way to Seir; but we have no record of this ever happening. He may well have gone to visit his brother there once his family was established. The important thing is that his objective is not Seir, but the land of promise.

15 What needeth it?—The weakness of the children and flocks does not explain why he rejected the second offer. Leupold compares Abraham’s refusal to be enriched by the king of Sodom in 14:21-24. His trust is in the Lord, and he wants that to be evident to his brother.

16-20, Separation

After the brothers part ways, Jacob makes two stops.

17, Succoth.—The likely site for Succoth is north of the Jabbok, but in the plain of Jordan. Apparently he moved back across the river and lived for some time here.

There is some suggestion of a hesitation on Jacob’s part. The Jordan valley is warm all year around, and would be very attractive to a pastoralist, as it was to Lot two generations before. Jacob forsakes his tents and builds a house. There are two lessons here for us.

1. Jacob seems to be stopping short of the land of promise, not moving on to the full blessing that God has for him. After the excitement of the reunion with Esau, a let-down might be natural, and he is tempted to rest on his laurels. But this would be to miss the Lord’s purpose for him. We must not
2. We do not know the details of what prompted him to leave his settlement in Succoth and resume his nomadic lifestyle, but we can be sure that the Lord who has so patiently guided and instructed him over the past four decades will not leave the job half-done. “He who has begun a good work in you will perform it,” Phil 1:6; “the author and finisher of our faith,” Heb 12:2. In some way, the Lord arouses him from his torpor and urges him to take the last few steps of his journey home.

18-20, Shechem.—“Shalem” is not a place name, but an adverb: he arrived safe and sound. The condition of 28:21 is being fulfilled—he is not yet at his father’s house, but he has arrived safely in the land, as he requested. God has faithfully protected him even without Esau’s bodyguard. Finally he is in the land, as v.18 emphasizes: “which is in the land of Canaan.” Only now is his journey complete, and Moses recognizes this by the phrase, “when he came from Padanaram.” Everything we have been reading happened “when he came from Padanaram,” but this is the goal of his journey. Upon reaching Shechem, he does three things.

1. He “pitched his tent before the city.” This is both good and bad news. It is well that he has resumed the nomadic life-style after his period of house-building in Succoth, but the note is ominously reminiscent of Lot’s encampment in 13:12, where he “pitched his tent toward Sodom.” The exact vocabulary differs in the two cases, but the proximity to a major pagan city in both cases affords opportunity for spiritual contamination. In the next chapter we see the effects in Jacob’s case.
2. “He bought a parcel of a field.” Like Abraham in Hebron (ch. 23), the heir to the land must live as a stranger in it, and purchase it with money for his own use.
 - a. Just camping there would not appear to require purchase, but later this plot served as a family burial place (Josh 24:32), and Jacob may have purchased it with this intent. He is now back in the land, and wants to be sure he stays there. (In the end, he himself elects to be buried in the cave of Machpelah, 49:29).
 - b. Still later, a well he dug to support his extensive family would be the meeting place for the Lord Jesus and the woman of Samaria (John 4:12).

3. He built an altar, and dedicated it to “God, the God of Israel.” Using the name that the Lord gave him at Mahanaim, he now for the first time calls the Lord his own God. Thus he begins to fulfill the promise he made in 28:21. He will indeed later call the Lord “the God of Isaac,” as he has before, but with this altar he has owned the Lord as his personal God.

Technical notes

Structure of 16-17

Compare the chiasmic verses 16-17 (the parting of Esau and Jacob) with the similar structure at the parting of Laban and Jacob in 31:55-32:1. In both cases, the person who continues the narrative is named second.

Ki (*al ken*, v.10)

What is the meaning of *ki* (*al ken* in v.10? *ki* suggests causality flowing from dependent clause to independent (“for,” offering an explanation), while (*al ken* suggests the opposite direction (“therefore,” describing a result). Which is the causal direction in the compound phrase? The survey below substantiates that this is essentially *ki*: HALOT, following Frankena in Vriezen FS (in my files under (*al ken*): “a reason which has existed for a long time is only later discovered”

Other references: In 7 out of 9 instances, it supports a request or command, often to a superior.

- Gen 18:5, Abraham to the heavenly visitors: “I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on: **for therefore** are ye come to your servant.” ASV “forasmuch as”
 - *Ki* reading: ASV, “forasmuch as.” “Since you find yourself here, you might as well have a bite to eat.”
 - (*al ken* reading: AV. “There is a cosmic purpose to your coming here. You have come here for the purpose of eating.”
- Gen 19:8, Lot to the men of Sodom: “unto these men do nothing; **for therefore** came they under the shadow of my roof.” ASV “forasmuch as”
 - *Ki* reading: ASV. You can’t touch them, because they are my guests.
 - (*al ken* reading: AV: they came into my house out of fear of you and in order to find refuge from you.
- Gen 38:26, Judah defending Tamar: “She hath been more righteous than I; **because that** I gave her not to Shelah my son.”
 - *Ki* reading: both AV and ASV.
 - (*al ken* reading: because she is more righteous
 - No command, but the context is arguing that she ought not to be burned.
- Num 10:31, Moses to his father in law, “Leave us not, I pray thee; **forasmuch as** thou knowest how we are to encamp in the wilderness.”

Genesis 33 Reunion with Esau

- Ki reading: both AV and ASV
- Num 14:43, Moses to children of Israel, “ye shall fall by the sword: **because** ye are turned away from the LORD, therefore the LORD will not be with you”
 - *Ki* reading: both AV and ASV. The following “therefore” is simply *waw*-conjunctive.
 - No request, but the broader context is arguing that they ought not to try to enter the land in their own strength.
- Judg 6:22, Gideon to the Lord: “Alas, O Lord GOD! **for because** I have seen an angel of the LORD face to face.”
 - *Ki* reading: both AV and ASV.
 - Implied request, “let me not die.”
- Jer 29:27-28, Babylonian elders to Jerusalem, “why hast thou not reprov’d Jeremiah of Anathoth, which maketh himself a prophet to you? **For therefore** he sent unto us in Babylon, saying, This captivity is long:”
 - Both AV and ASV recognize the *ki*.
 - AV also includes “therefore.”
- Jer 38:4, princes to the King, “We beseech thee, let this man be put to death: **for thus** he weakeneth the hands of the men of war”
 - Both AV and ASV recognize the *ki*
 - AV also includes “thus”