

Genesis 35 Return to Bethel

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Overview

Jacob evidences a tendency to stop short of the goal.

- Jacob's original *request* at Bethel was to "come again to my father's house in peace," 28:21
- His original *promise* was "that this stone ... shall be God's house," where he would worship, thus promising a return to Bethel.
- After his reconciliation with Esau, he lingers in Succoth (33:17, then Shechem (ch. 34). These are neither his father's house nor Bethel.

In this chapter, the Lord leads him to fulfill his promises.

- In 1-15, he returns to Bethel and offers sacrifice there.
- In 16-29, he finally makes his way back to his father's house.

Application: God will not let his children persist in carnality. He is "the author and finisher of our faith." His purpose is to conform us to the image of his blessed son, and he will not fail.

1-15, Pilgrimage to Bethel

His pilgrimage to Bethel begins with a divine call, awakening him from the spiritual stupor into which he had fallen in ch. 34. He has been careless, but is not disobedient, and after appropriate preparation, comes to worship at Bethel, fulfilling the first of the two unfinished items of business.

A repeated milestone in this section is the command in v.1, which Jacob first repeats to his family in preparation for the voyage (v.3), then carries out (6-7). Note the similarities (although the differences will merit attention):

v.1	vv.2-3	vv. 6-7
And God said unto Jacob,	Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that <i>were</i> with him,	... he and all the people that were with him.
Arise,	3 And let us arise,	
go up to Bethel,	and go up to Bethel;	So Jacob came to Luz, which is in the land of Canaan, that is, Bethel, ...
and dwell there:		
and make there an altar unto God,	and I will make there an altar unto God,	And he built there an altar, and called the place Elbethel:
that appeared <i>r/h</i> unto thee	who answered me ... and was with me ...	because there God appeared <i>nglh</i> unto him,
when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother.	... in the day of my distress, ... in the way which I went.	when he fled from the face of his brother.

1, Call

God said unto Jacob.—Now that Jacob and his sons have clearly seen the futility of fleshly effort, God intervenes.

go up to Bethel ... and make there an altar.—God calls Jacob to fulfill his promise of 28:22. Jacob promised that Bethel, not Shechem, would be “God’s house.” He has indeed offered sacrifices to God (33:20), but not at the place where God appeared unto him.

when thou fleddest.—Jacob’s response to the slaughter of Shechem was one of fear, 34:30. He has forgotten God’s proven protection from the anger of Esau, and the Lord gently reminds him of this.

Note how the Lord’s command puts the finger right on Jacob’s weakness. The Lord seldom commands us to do easy things; his commands are intended to purge and instruct us, and they invariably exercise us where we are weakest. After the slaughter of Shechem, Jacob would want to lay low and fortify the encampment, not encounter other cities who might have heard of his violent conduct. But the Lord puts him back on the road.

Dwell there.—Discuss distribution of *y\$b* in Genesis. High-ranking chapters are

- 13 (6x), separation of the dwellings of Abram and Lot
- 19 (6x), Lot’s dwelling in Sodom
- 34 (7x), the invitation of the Shechemites to dwell in the land
- 47 (5x), Israel’s dwelling in the land of Goshen

Chapter 34 is the most prominent “dwelling” chapter in Genesis, and the focus was the temptation to dwell with the people of the world. Instead, God wants Jacob to dwell at Bethel, the house of God. The challenge that God gives him here is precisely that faced by the Psalmist in 84:10 (though the Hebrew word “dwell” is different).

Where is our dwelling? Are we truly strangers and pilgrims in the earth, or have we become content to “dwell in the tents of wickedness”?

2-5, Preparation

In preparation for the pilgrimage, Jacob commands his household, and they obey. It is important to observe how Jacob includes his household in his obedience to the command.

3, Purpose

After the events of the last chapter, Jacob perhaps realizes that he has been deficient in giving spiritual guidance to his family, and he now seeks to correct this by modeling correct behavior.

Jacob’s command includes two groups: “his household and all that were with him.” The second group includes

- bondservants acquired in Haran (30:43);
- captives from Shechem (34:29).

Jacob does not exclude them from the command. He does not take the attitude, “they are just servants, and not as important as my immediate family.” Everyone within the extended encampment is included.

The close similarity between v.1 and v.3 shows that Jacob is bringing his family along. God commanded only him, but he wants his family to observe his worship, in the hopes that they too will be subject to the God whom he worships. Note the progress in his life:

- Ch. 28, private interview with God.
- Ch. 31, he shares a recent revelation with his wives.

Now he brings the entire family into the discussion.

Note three differences between the original command and the one he passes to his family:

1. He does not tell them that this is a divine command. The command should not have been necessary, but was needed to arouse him from his spiritual torpor. He should have thought of it himself.
2. He does not mention that this is a permanent move (God’s command “dwell there”). They may fear such a dislocation.
3. He amplifies the grounds for this worship.
 - a. God says that he appeared to Jacob; Jacob describes this appearance as an “answer,” which implies that he cried out to God at this time. We would never have guessed this from the description of the arrogant young man in ch. 28. In retrospect, as throughout Jacob’s life, we can see how God was humbling him to open his heart to faith.
 - b. He adds an acknowledgment of God’s faithfulness during his sojourn in Haran.

2, Command

Jacob commands three actions from his family preparatory to worship. These are still appropriate to us as we approach the Lord. Cf. 1 Cor 11:28, “let a man examine himself.” Worship requires preparation.

Put away the strange gods that *are* among you.—We see here how corruption can creep into even a believing family. Rachel’s theft of the family gods from her father (31:19) has led to a diffusion of idolatry throughout the household, perhaps reinforced by idols that might have been among the spoil from Shechem. Jacob is not ignorant of this (else he could not have given this command). But up to now he has winked at the offense. Now, fearful of the coming journey, he realizes he cannot afford to offend the Lord, and commands his family to prepare.

This dynamic of infiltration of strange gods, and their subsequent removal at times of covenant renewal, is a repeated theme in the OT.

- Josh 24:23, when Joshua renews the covenant with Israel after the conquest
- Judg 10:16, when the children of Israel are being oppressed and call to the Lord
- 1 Sam 7:3, in repentance after the battle of Aphek
- 2 Kings 18:4, Hezekiah’s reform, after the beginning of the siege of Samaria by Assyria

- 2 Kings 23:1-6, Josiah, after the prophecy of coming doom

Joshua's is the only such reform not to follow on a national disaster! When we are comfortable and in prosperity, it is easy to tolerate compromise. So the Lord sometimes constrains us, to turn our eyes back to him and gently purge out impurity from our lives. Calvin:

Whence also we infer how important it is for us to be aroused from slumber by suffering. For we know how pertinacious and rebellious is superstition. If, in a peaceful and joyous state of affairs, Jacob had given any such command, the greater part of his family would have fraudulently concealed their idols: some, perhaps, would have obstinately refused to surrender them; but now the hand of God urges them, and with ready minds they quickly repent.

The application to us is that whenever we approach the Lord, we should examine our lives for idols, alternative claims on our affections, and discard them.

and be clean.—Better, “purify yourselves.” Putting away the physical idols is not enough. The worshippers were defiled, and needed to be purified. So we as believers require cleansing from the defilements we encounter in our daily lives. Two NT passages bear on this point.

- John 13:6-10. The Lord instructs Peter on the **need** to wash his feet in order to have fellowship with the Lord.
- 1 John 1:9 describes confession as the **means** by which we can be cleansed spiritually.

and change your garments.—This ought not to be confused with the frequent Scriptural injunction, in worship contexts, to “wash your garments” (Exod 19:10 at Sinai; 21x in Leviticus). “Change your garments” appears only here and two other places:

- Gen 41:14, when Joseph is brought from prison to stand before Pharaoh
- 2 Sam 12:20, when David arises from mourning his son by Bathsheba and comes into the house of the Lord to worship.
- The words are different in 2 Kings 25:29, but the concept is the same: leaving prison to enter the king's court.

In both cases, the former garments were common (David has been lying on the ground, fasting for the sick child), and inappropriate for the exalted audience that the subject will shortly enjoy (Joseph with Pharaoh, David with the Lord). What Jacob commands of his family is what our parents commanded us when they told us to dress up for church on Sunday.

- It is true that man looks on the outward appearance but God on the heart, and that a poor person who cannot afford decent clothing must not be excluded on that account (James 2:1-3).
- But when prosperous believers appear before the Lord in sloppy, casual garments, it says something about the attitude of our heart. If we were appearing before a potential employer for a job interview, or if we had an audience with the president of the US, we would show our respect by wearing our best garments. Should not we do the same when we gather in the presence of the Lord?

4, *Obedience*

They gave.—His household complies with his command. The reference to the earrings is interesting, and suggests that they were symbolic of devotion to idols. Note also

- Exod 32:2, these furnished the raw material for the golden calf at Sinai
- Exod 21:6, a pierced ear is a sign of perpetual servitude
- Gen 24:22, earrings as a marriage gift, binding a girl to her husband

Jacob hid them.—Why did he not destroy them, as other reformers did with the idols they encountered? Calvin: “It seems, however, absurd, that Jacob should have buried the idols under an oak, and not rather have broken them in pieces and consumed them in the fire, as we read that Moses did with the golden calves, (Exodus 32:20,) and Hezekiah with the brazen serpent, “(2 Kings 18:4.)” There are usually three motives for hiding things in the Bible:

- A desire to avoid discovery and punishment for something that is wrong
 1. Moses hid the dead Egyptian in the sand, Exod 2:12
 2. Job anticipates hiding transgressions as Adam did, 31:33
 3. Isa 2:10
- A desire to protect it from others and recover it later
 1. Rahab hid the spies among stalks of flax, Jos 2:6
 2. Achan hid the gold and the garment in the earth in his tent, Jos 7:21,22
 3. 2 Kings 7:8, what the lepers did to the treasures from the camp of the Syrians
 4. Jeremiah’s girdle, 13:4-7
- There is also a series of references, notably in Psalms, to the net that is hidden in order to trap its prey: 9:16; 31:4; 35:7,8; 64:5; 140:6; 142:4; cf Jer 18:22

The second is most relevant here. The flesh still evidences itself in a reluctance to destroy the idols completely, perhaps influenced by Rachel’s attachment to them.

5, *Protection*

God’s command to go to Bethel forces Jacob to confront his carnal fears and trust in the Lord. This verse shows that God does not let him down. He places a holy dread on all the cities round about so that they do not pursue Jacob and his family as they make their journey to Bethel.

6-15, *At Bethel*

6-7, *Worship*

Like v.3, these verses follow the basic format of the command in v.1, reporting Jacob’s obedience. Again, it is worthwhile to observe the slight differences.

Compared with vv.1,3, the place is identified much more fully as “Luz, which is in the land of Canaan.” Moses wants to emphasize that Jacob has returned to the land of promise, the place where God appeared to him. This emphasis is picked up a few verses later in v.9 “when he came

out of Padan-Aram.” Compare the use of this expression in 33:18. The two significant stages in this return are his entry into the land, and his arrival at Bethel.

The expression “God appeared unto him” differs in two important ways from the phrase in v.1.

- The verb is different. In v.1, it is “God who was seen by you,” which is the usual verb for theophanies, especially in the patriarchal narratives: 12:7 (*bis*), 17:1; 18:1; 22:14; 26:2, 24; 35:1,9. Here it is “was disclosed to you,” emphasizing the revelation of something previously hidden (cf. Deut 29:29). Whenever this expression is applied to God, it always suggests that God is revealing himself through an intermediary: in 1 Sam 3:21 this disclosure is indirect, via his word; cf. also 1 Sam 2:27, which was via Moses and his miracles. (God himself can hardly be “disclosed,” since that would require some higher controlling force to disclose him. He may disclose himself, but not be disclosed. Evidence?)
- The verb itself is plural, not singular! The name “God” *elohim* is grammatically plural, but when applied to the God of the Bible takes singular verbs. (20:13 is no exception, see notes on that passage.) The use of the plural here suggests we should understand it not of God himself, but of his exalted representatives, the angels whom Jacob saw in ch. 28 ascending and descending. *Elohim* is used elsewhere in scripture of God’s representatives: Ps 82:1,6; Psa 8:5.

Why the shift from the revelation of God himself to the disclosure of the angels?

- In v.1 the appearance of God is simply a *description* of the Lord.
- Here this is given as the *reason* for giving the place the name “God, the God of Bethel.”

The Lord spoke with him at other places: in Haran to command him to leave (31:3, 11ff), and in Shechem to draw him to Bethel (35:1), but the vision of the angels made Bethel special, and marked it as distinctly “the house of God.” The angels form the heavenly court (1 Kings 22; Psa 82:1; Rev 4-5). Their appearance shows that this is the place of appointed worship. Recall that they figured prominently in the iconography of the tabernacle and temple, embroidered on the veil and adorning the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant.

NB: God is not worshipped in isolation. In the OT he is attended by hosts of angels; in the NT, his presence is promised where “two or three” gather unto his name.

8, *Death of Deborah*

Jacob was commanded to “dwell” at Bethel, and we may understand that he resided some time there. During his sojourn, Deborah died and was buried. This remarkable notice is entirely unexpected.

- Who is she? We know from 24:59 that Rebekah had a nurse, sent with her from her father’s home when she married Isaac, but this is the first we learn of her name. She must be very old by this time—some calculations yield an age of about 170.
- How does she come to be Jacob at this point? We can imagine she would have been like a grandmother to Isaac’s sons, and retained a great affection for them. Perhaps on the death of Rebekah, having heard of Jacob’s return to Canaan, and motivated by her love for him, she obtained leave from Isaac to go meet him.

Genesis 35 Return to Bethel

- Why does Moses mention her here? The reference emphasizes that Rebekah is *not* mentioned after ch. 27. Her cunning attempt to secure the blessing for her favorite son backfired on her, and she never saw him again after he left for Haran. Her nurse must take her place as the one who welcomes Jacob back to Canaan, and then only with her dying breath.

9-13, Revelation

During Jacob’s sojourn at Bethel, God once again meets with him. This meeting is described in four brief paragraphs, each naming God explicitly.

This passage has numerous parallels with God’s covenant with Abraham in Gen 17.

Gen 17	Gen 35
1 And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram,	9 And God appeared unto Jacob again, when he came out of Padanaram,
5 Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee.	10 Thy name <i>is</i> Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and he called his name Israel.
1 ... and said unto him, I <i>am</i> the Almighty God	11 And God said unto him, I <i>am</i> God Almighty:
2 And I ... will multiply thee exceedingly. ... 6 And I will make thee exceeding fruitful,	be fruitful and multiply;
4 As for me, behold, my covenant <i>is</i> with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. ... 6 and I will make nations of thee,	a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee,
6 ... and kings shall come out of thee.	and kings shall come out of thy loins;
8 And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession;	12 And the land which I gave Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land.
22 and God went up from Abraham.	13 And God went up from him in the place where he talked with him.

Recall that Gen 17 was not a new covenant, but the reconfirmation of the covenant originally made in ch. 15. So here, God now confirms it with Jacob.

Notable differences:

- *Nothing in Gen 17 corresponds to the statement in 35:9 that “God blessed him,” probably because the fact of God’s blessing on Abraham was made clear in earlier passages (e.g., ch. 12).*
- *Ch. 17 emphasizes God’s relation to Abraham (17:7, “to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee”). There is no reference to this in 35. The offer only has to be made once, and it is now Jacob’s place to accept that offer.*

- Neither is there any mention of circumcision, which was so central to ch. 17, but again, this should have been clear to Jacob already.

The last two are to be explained because they were enjoined to Abraham on behalf of all of his descendants. Once offered, they must be accepted. Jacob's conditional promise in ch. 28 shows that he understands this, and his nomination of the Lord as his God at the end of ch. 33 shows that he finally accepts this relation.

BW search for the formula of 17:7-- $\frac{3}{4}$ ~yhla@ncÁ l@Pp+SxÁ l@Pp+SÁ Á1 hyh@vÁ

9, Appearance.—God is only said to have “appeared” to Jacob at Bethel (35:1, 9; 48:3). He spoke with him at other times, but these were special appearances, comparable to that of God to Abraham at Shechem (12:7) or Mamre (17:1; 18:1). From the closing notice that God “went up” from him, we may understand that this appearance is a personal engagement with the Angel of the Lord.

10, Name.—The name is not explained here, because it was already explained at the end of ch. 32. Recall that the name means, “God fights,” reminding him that the one with whom he has been struggling all along is really the Lord. So we, in our difficulties, should remember that a loving heavenly Father is behind them, guiding us through them.

11, God Almighty.—This is the name *El Shaddai* that we studied in ch. 17. Recap:

- One line of interpretation sees the name as reflecting God's personal care for his people.
- Another emphasizes his power, translating it *pantokrator* “Almighty.” SDD = deal violently, despoil, ruin.
- Usage in Pentateuch
 - 17:1, in confirming the Abrahamic covenant
 - 28:3, in sending Isaac out to Padan Aram: “May El Shaddai bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, that thou mayest be a multitude of people.”
 - Now here, the God known to Jacob's fathers comes to him personally.
- Summary: El Shaddai is the almighty God, but not in an abstract sense. He deploys this power to bring blessing to his people. Delitzsch in Wenham: “El Shaddai is the God who so constrains natures that it does his will, and so subdues it that it bows to and serves grace.”

11, Covenant.—Here God repeats two of the three main terms of the promise to Abraham, the land and the seed. There is no reference to a personal relationship here because that was promised to Abraham in ch. 17 on behalf of all his descendants. This is a standing offer, which Jacob has conditionally accepted in 28:21, and confirmed in 33:20. The next repetition of that promise from God is to the nation as a nation in Exodus 6:7, which turns on the covenant at Sinai. (Similarly, no reference to circumcision—Jacob is already circumcised, as are his sons.)

13, Departure.—The Lord leaves in the same way that he left Abraham in ch. 17.

14-15, Memorial

This section is closely parallel to his response to God's appearance at his first visit to Bethel in 28:18, 19. In both we have

- a stone pillar
- on which he pours oil
- and the declaration of the name of the place to be Bethel,
- related to the fact that God spoke with him there.

An interesting difference in this case is that he not only anoints the stone with oil, but pours out a drink offering, which he did not do in ch. 28. The two have distinctly different meanings, which it is well to distinguish.

- Pouring oil on something or someone is how one “anoints” a priest (Lev 8:12), someone being cleansed (Lev 14:26-28), an offering (Lev 2:6), or a king (1 Sam 10:1, 2 Kings 9:3). Cf the use of the oil to anoint the Tabernacle, rendering it most holy (Exod 40:9). Pouring oil marks something as “set apart,” holy, special. In both passages, Jacob recognizes the holiness of the place.
- Offering wine is a sacrifice to the deity. In ch. 28, Jacob was not yet ready to offer sacrifice (v.22), but now that God has fulfilled what Jacob asked, he is ready to sacrifice.

16-29, Return to his Father

Jacob does not return north to Shechem, but continues on southward. V.27 shows that his goal is to return to visit his father.

It is a striking thing that after receiving the great promises of vv. 9-13, Jacob’s life becomes one disaster after another. Calvin summarizes well:

We have seen how severe a wound the defilement of his daughter inflicted on holy Jacob, and with what terror the cruel deed of his two sons had inspired him. Various trials are now blended together, by which he is heavily afflicted throughout his old age; ...

- The death of his beloved wife is next related;
- and soon after follows the incestuous intercourse of his firstborn with his wife Bilhah.
- A little later, Isaac his father dies;
- then his son Joseph is snatched away, whom he supposes to have been torn in pieces by wild beasts.
- While he is almost consumed with perpetual mourning, a famine arises, so that he is compelled to seek food from Egypt.
- There another of his sons is kept in chains;
- and, at length, he is deprived of his own most beloved Benjamin, whom he sends away as if his own bowels were torn from him.

We see, therefore, by what a severe conflict, and by what a continued succession of evils, he was trained to the hope of a better life.

This phase of Jacob’s life reminds us of the exhortation of Heb 12:6 (commenting on Prov 3:12), “whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth.” So it will profit us to inquire in each of these episodes, what the Lord is seeking to teach Jacob.

Death of Rachel, Birth of Benjamin

Note in this sad episode:

The answer to Rachel's prayer.—In 30:24, she had named Joseph (“he shall add”) in the hopes that the Lord would give her another son. Here this prayer is answered.

Rachel's ingratitude.—In the agony of death, she appears to have forgotten this request. The name she gives, “Son of my sorrow,” does not recognize the Lord's graciousness in giving her a son, but only the pain she feels at the moment.

Jacob's perspective.—He realizes that this is a terrible name with which to burden a child throughout its life, and changes it to reflect the “joy that a man is born into the world” (John 16:21).

The memorial.—So great was Jacob's grief at the death of his favorite wife that he erects a memorial that endured over 400 years until the time of Moses. To this day Rachel's tomb is shown on the road from Jerusalem to Hebron, right at the turn-off to Bethlehem.

What lesson does the Lord have for Jacob in Rachel's death? His affection for her appears to be unbalanced. He consistently favors her over Leah, whose conduct is throughout more godly. He tolerates her idolatry. Calvin observes, “The Lord often deprives the faithful of his own gifts, to correct their perverse abuse of them. . . . in taking away from his own people the occasion of sinning, he promotes their salvation. Whoever, therefore, desires the continued use of God's gifts, let him learn not to abuse them, but to enjoy them with purity and sobriety.”

Reuben's Sin

This is the first time the narrator actually uses the name “Israel” for Jacob. Abraham's new name takes over in the narrative as soon as it is given, but Jacob's reflects the ongoing struggle in his life. *Other uses of Israel for the man (as opposed to the nation) are common starting in 37:3 and through the Joseph narrative. But notably, 37:2 speaks not of “the generations of Israel,” but “the generations of Jacob.” “Jacob” occurs 37x in ch. 37ff, while “Israel” appears 31 times.*

The *facts* of this episode are clear. What is the *reason* for incorporating it here? The use of the name “Israel” sets Reuben's conduct in sharp relief, contrasting the unspeakable sin of the son (1 Cor 5:1) with the spiritual state achieved by the father. Jacob has just now finally arrived at the place anticipated in ch. 28, and still his children are falling apart. The paragraph is a parallel with ch. 34, to show the pervasiveness of sin in each generation.

- Each of these follows a great victory for Jacob (reconciliation with Esau in 33, the renewal of the covenant here).
- In both cases, we are reminded of the failings of the next generation.

The covenant does not guarantee godliness among the descendants, only that through them blessing will come to the world. Each generation must repent of their sin and trust in God individually.

22-26, Sons of Jacob

These are ordered

- first by mother

Genesis 35 Return to Bethel

- Starting with wives, then ending with handmaids
- Chiastically by main wife (Leah and her handmaid on the outside, Rachel and hers on the inside)
- Then chronologically.

This record is in preparation for his return to Isaac. Now the blessing of Isaac in 28:3,4 has been fulfilled.

- These verses record the fulfillment of the prayer that he would have a multitude of offspring.
- The previous paragraphs have recorded the fulfillment of the prayer that he would receive the blessing of Abraham.

27-29, Death of Isaac

Finally, Jacob is back home, as he had prayed in ch. 28, and in due time he and Esau bury their father.

This actually does not happen for several years yet—Joseph is sold into Egypt at age 17, when Isaac is only 168 and has yet 12 years to live. But it is reported here because it rounds out the family history of Isaac. The events from this point concern Jacob and his offspring.

Compare 25:7-9, the passing of Abraham.

25:7-9, Abraham	35:28-29, Isaac
7 And these <i>are</i> the days of the years of Abraham's life which he lived, an hundred threescore and fifteen years.	28 And the days of Isaac were an hundred and fourscore years.
8 Then Abraham gave up the ghost, and died ... and was gathered to his people.	29 And Isaac gave up the ghost, and died, and was gathered unto his people,
in a good old age, an old man, and full <i>of years</i> ,	<i>being</i> old and full of days:
9 And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah,	and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

In both cases, both sons join in burying the patriarch of the previous generation, even though only one of them will carry on the history. Moses is emphasizing God's elective purpose throughout the history. At each generation, there is a choice, and one is chosen to carry the promise forward.