

BIBLE BACKGROUND

Genesis 28:10-19

Verses 10,11

Jacob left Beer Sheeba and set out for Haran. He reached a certain place and lodged there because the sun had set. He took some of the stones of the place and arranged them for his head and lay down in that place.

This episode records the first stage of Jacob's flight from his brother Esau, who was secretly planning to kill him (41). His mother Rebekah urged him to flee to her brother Laban living in **Haran** (43). Jacob had deceived his brother, lied to his father, and falsely obtained the patriarch's blessing (18-29). **The place**, mentioned three times, was to become significant for Jacob and for his descendants (35:6; 48:3). It was known as Luz, built about 2,000BC, a century before Abraham, and was a Canaanite town eventually allotted to the tribe of Benjamin (Josh 18:2; 18:13 and Judges 1:23,26) but lost and later retaken by the Ephraimites. It was a sanctuary for the Canaanite deity El, meaning god. The term was used generally by the Israelites in a generic fashion. Jacob had settled for the night probably on a ridge nearby and perhaps very close to where his grandfather Abraham had built an altar (12:8; 13:4). Luz, therefore, was important, not only for its many springs but as a place of worship.

Verse 12-15

He dreamed and look there was a ladder with its feet stationed on earth and its top reaching heaven. What a sight! Angels of the Lord were going up it and descending on it. And look, Yahweh was stationed at the top of it and he said, "I am Yahweh, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land which you are lying upon I will give to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth and you will break through westwards, eastwards, northwards and southwards. And all the peoples of the land will be blessed by you and your descendants. Take note, I will be with your people and I will keep watch over you in all your journeys and will return you to this land for I will not forsake you until I do everything I have told you.

He dreamed, and we know that the Lord often spoke to people in dreams (Gen 20:3; 37:5 et al). The dream was of a theophany, a revelation of the glory of God, not unlike the Lord appearing to Moses in a burning bush (3:5). Like the burning bush, the place of this dream was important. The word **behold** הנה, which I have translated **look, what a sight**, and **take note**, occurs four times and gives emphasis to the event and promises. Jacob saw **a ladder** מִלְּמָה, a word only used here. Stairway would have been represented by another word. The ladder is not a substantial stairway of stone and part of a building of stone or like a pagan ziggurat but something used temporarily, as we do to reach high places. It was not a permanent or man-made structure. Interestingly, **the angels** mentioned first were the ones **ascending** from the earth and then the **descending** ones are mentioned. What does this mean? Our Lord Jesus spoke of this vision in Jn 1:51 and applied it to himself rather than to a place on earth. This is our clue. **The ladder was stationed** מַצַּב **on the earth**, not simply the ground, but the terrestrial sphere as opposed to the heavenly realm. God was revealing himself to Jacob at this location; it was a vision of heaven, of the heavenly beings and of God himself, at a special location on earth. Hence, the ascent of the angels is mentioned first, something that occurred on earth, near Jacob, right next to him indeed.

It makes perfect sense that **Yahweh** would be **stationed at the top of the ladder**, the same verb used for the ladder being stationed on earth. His majestic transcendence precludes him from coming down the ladder like the angels. But an act of grace took place in that night for the Lord came to Jacob, this fugitive, and allowed him to see his glory. The Lord identified himself as **I am Yahweh, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac**. It is strange to our ears that a grandfather would be referred to as **father**. But father was a common term for an ancestral leader. The point

here is that the Lord was identifying the covenantal line and indicating to Jacob that he, though younger than his twin brother Esau, was the next in line to inherit the covenant and all its promises.

The standard features of the covenant are repeated here: land, descendants, nationhood, territory and blessings to the nations. **The land Jacob was lying on** was not owned by him and he was also fleeing the territory. The Lord was promising him and his descendants a future even though he was just one person, and indeed, a person in trouble. Though Jacob would return as a nomad, the land would eventually be owned by his **descendants**, the Israelites. Therefore, the Lord was promising Jacob a wife and children and from them other children. These descendants would become as numerous as **the dust of the earth**, that is, they would be no longer a clan or tribe, but a homogenous nation. A nation needs a reasonable area and thus Yahweh promised that Jacob's descendants would be become a sovereign state spreading out to the four points of the compass: **westwards, eastwards, northwards and southwards**. Finally, **all the peoples of the land will be blessed by you and your descendants**. Ultimately, the Messiah would be born from this nation. Israel's covenant, its laws, worship and temple, would be a beacon of righteousness to the surrounding nations, though, in reality, this was not always so.

The final blessing and promise, since the Lord had promised to be the God of Abraham and Isaac, was the promise to faithfully love and protect Jacob and his descendants: **I will be with your people and I will keep watch over you in all your journeys**. Jacob would be later called Israel (32:28), and therefore, the promise to Jacob is also the promise to Israel. So, we can see in the promise to return Jacob to this land he was fleeing from, the return of Israel from exile in Babylon. The veracity of the promises are founded on the depth of the Lord's love for Jacob, incomprehensible, when one is familiar with Jacob's deceiving activity. All that God says in his word, which is a solemn promise issued through this covenant, is based on the statement: **I will not forsake אעצבך you**. The Lord pledged himself to Jacob in a covenant of grace, love and promise. Yahweh permanently attached himself to a person, and then to a nation. This bond was stronger than a marriage, stronger than a blood relationship, stronger than ethnicity, and stronger than family. Ultimately, the Lord Jesus brought these words of grace to completion (Matt 28:20) for he was called Immanuel (Matt 1:23).

Verses 16-19

When Jacob awoke from his sleep he said, "Surely, Yahweh is in this place and I did not know it." He was afraid and said, "What an awesome place this is. It is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven." Jacob rose early that morning and took the stone that was there under his head and he set it up as a pillar. He poured oil on top of it. He called the name of that place Bethel, though indeed, the name of the town was formerly Luz.

Place was more significant to the Hebrews than it is for people today. God's covenant with Abraham involved the gift of territory, namely, the land of Canaan. Since the Lord would reign over a nation rather than an invisible church through his Spirit, at this stage of salvation history, actual places where God chose to reveal himself became crucial as places of worship. Jacob was aware that the vision of Yahweh in his dream, though a dream, had something to do with where he was. As Abraham, Isaac, and now Jacob, were chosen people, where their descendants would eventually settle was critical to them, for the land was chosen by God and certain places within it became special intersections with Yahweh.

Jacob went on to specify what he meant by the Lord being **in this place: it is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven**. He was referring to the vision he saw in his dream of a ladder from earth to heaven. Though the Lord dwelt in heaven, the replica of his heavenly house could be built on earth at designated positions. Later, the various temples of worship would be reduced to one centred within Jerusalem, which King David would chose as his capital. **The house of God**, which Bethel means, was the place of God's invisible presence amongst his people. It was a **gate** only שער, never-the-less, **the gate of heaven**.

The Hebrew expression אין זה כי, literally, **there is none like this**, emphasizes the uniqueness of the place. By his revelation, the Lord was appointing Bethel as a place for God's people to gather and be assured he was coming down to meet them. Jacob's insistence about the place revealed his personality here; he was holding God to his promise and cementing Bethel as a place where he could meet him at a later date (Gen 35:14,15). This later visit would be the occasion when the Lord would change his name to Israel, he who struggles with God. His new name fitted his nature as one who wanted to pin God down and wrestle with him for a blessing. When Jacob said, **I did not know it**, he was once again exhibiting his nature as an opportunist. He could see the advantages this discovery could provide him. However, this time, in contrast to his previous opportunistic behaviour towards his brother Esau, Jacob has a new faith. God had found him and chose him and the place had to be honoured in a special way for God's sake; for the sake of his grace.

He was afraid and said, "What an awesome place this is. A typical reaction of a person experiencing a theophany. Two uses of the Hebrew for **fear** are used here: ויירא and נורא. God's appearance, in spite of being cloaked by angels and a stairway and an audible voice, was still **awesome**, a cause for great **trembling and fear**. The fear of God became the standard form for expressing faith in Israel's theology, not only for the sake of due reverence and even fear of punishment but mostly because the Lord, in his grace, had chosen to reveal himself and give himself to his people. He had opened the gate of heaven for them to glimpse him but mostly to receive his election and gifts.

Two actions followed from this exclamation of faith (fear) in Yahweh: the first was an act of worship. Taking from the little he had, **he poured oil of the stone** he set upright in its place. It was not a great rock or anything impressive but a simple marker or altar, sanctifying the place for God. Secondly, he named it **Bethel**. Bethel, later became a town in Benjamin, about 15klm north of Jerusalem. Jeroboam would set up a golden calf there. **Luz**, perhaps, was the city nearby. Jacob would undergo a name change and the same process was at work here. To change a name was to indicate new ownership; Jacob set apart Bethel, making it holy for the Lord. He really was a new man from this point on!