



HEAVEN ON THE RUN

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 28:10-22

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In Genesis 28 we come to a scene in the Jacob story that is every parent's nightmare: the occasion when a son or daughter goes off into exile. At his father's command, Jacob is journeying to his mother's home, seeking a wife. But there is more than one motive driving this pilgrim. Beneath the surface of Jacob's quest for a wife lies the fear of his being killed by a brother who hates him. In fact, so great is the emotional damage to the family that Jacob is leaving behind, one wonders if he thought he could ever look back. So he looks more like a refugee fleeing in fear than a potential groom laden with a handsome dowry. Being banished from one's home is a terrible thing. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare describes it as a fate worse than death.

Ha, banishment! Be merciful, say "death":

For exile hath more terror in his look,
much more than death. Do not say "banishment."

There is no world without Verona walls,

But purgatory, torture, hell itself.

Hence banished is banish'd from the world,

And world's exile is death. Then "banished"

Is death mis-term'd; calling death "banished,"

Thou cut'st my head off with a golden axe,

And smilest upon the stroke that murders me.

(*Romeo and Juliet*, Act III, Scene III)¹

But the Bible gives a very different view of banishment. Scripture teaches that for God's people, exile can be the critical starting point for an authentic journey with God. In the Jacob story this will become the place where God no longer directs the affairs of men from behind the scenes, but where he steps right onto center-stage for Jacob to see. This event sets the stage for a journey that will last twenty years. At the most critical juncture in this journey, the initial stage of his flight and return home, heaven breaks into Jacob's life. These two encounters will transform him and his entire world.

Jacob's Journey

A Jacob flees Esau

B Angels of God meet Jacob at Bethel

X Jacob in exile in Paddan Aram

B' Angels of God meet Jacob at Mahanaim

A' Jacob reconciles with Esau

So we come to this amazing encounter. What happens to Jacob in this account becomes a paradigm for what God will do later with the nation of Israel in the Exodus, and again, a thousand years later, with Israel languishing in lonely exile, to prepare her for the coming of her Messiah (Isa 43:1-7). So this story serves as a model for how God in his grace breaks into the life of his children who are "on the run."

The text has two scenes, and each has three movements that parallel one another. In the first scene, Jacob is asleep, and God descends (28:10-15); in the second, Jacob is awake, and God receives his worship (28:16-22).

I. Jacob Sleeps, God Descends (Gen 28:10-15)

A. On the run: Jacob arrives at a "no-place" (28:10-11)

Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place and spent the night there,

because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. (Gen 28:10-11, NASB)

"Place" is the key word in the text (it is used three times here, six times in all). Jacob fled home and "came" to a "certain place." The verb "came" (*paga'*) is better translated "to meet, encounter, or reach." When it is used in a geographical context, it usually pertains to a border crossing. But most often it is used to describe life-changing encounters with people, angels (32:1), or with God. So Jacob is in a "no-place," but in reality this will become a mystical "border crossing" where he will have the encounter of his life.

The conditions of that place become a mirror that reflects and magnifies the ache within Jacob's soul. He is a lonely refugee, shut out to all hospitality. The only comfort he will find at his "Dream Inn" is a pillow from among the stones. Bruce Waltke explains:

The setting of God's encounter with Jacob matches Jacob's psychological condition. The security of the sun has been replaced by the dangers of night. The comfort of his parents' tents has been replaced by a rock. Behind him lies Beersheba, where Esau waits to kill him; ahead of him is Haran, where Laban waits to exploit him. He is situated between a death camp and a hard-labor camp.²

Ironically, however, harsh conditions like these open up the human soul to receive a vision of the grace of God. So as to connect with God, Jacob needed to be geographically separated from a controlling mother, a passive father and a competitive brother. Now that he is off-stage, his only friend, the demon of fear, pursuing him, and the weight of unresolved guilt pressing in upon him, his soul becomes sensitive to the voice of God. I have found the same principle at work in my own life. My richest experiences of heaven have come when I was "exiled" in some unknown place. The first occasion was when I was nineteen. I was in Florence for two semesters of study. Arriving there in the darkness of night, I came to the villa where I was to spend the next six months. I climbed the spiral staircase to my room on the third floor, opened the window overlooking the city, and felt a cold stab of loneliness taking over my soul. Yet this would become the "place" of an incredible journey with God.

B. The dream: A ladder, angels, and God! (28:12-13a)

He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And behold, the LORD stood above it. (Gen 28:12-13a)

At a time when Jacob's life is dark, the world is silent and he is still, God makes himself known to him through a dream. Brueggemann writes: "The wakeful world of Jacob was a world of fear, terror, loneliness. Those were parameters of his existence. The dream permits the entry of an alternative into his life. The dream is not a morbid review of a shameful past. It is rather the presentation of an alternative future with God. The gospel moves to Jacob in a time when his guard is down. The dream permits news."³

In his dream, Jacob sees three marvelous things, each introduced by the word "behold" or "see." First, he sees a stairway, firmly planted on the earth. Gazing upward, he sees that its top

(lit.: “head”) reaches into the very heavens. The stairway probably looked more like a Mesopotamian ziggurat than a ladder, with a “vast ramp with terraced landings.”⁴ This is what the builders of the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9) were hoping to erect, but their efforts fell far short. The stairway in Jacob’s dream indicates that heaven and earth are connected, but only God can bridge the chasm. Then Jacob sees hosts of angels ascending and descending on this stairway between the two realms, as effortlessly as one would cross a street. Their presence shatters his world. “He had assumed he was traveling alone, and his only purpose was survival,” but now he learns that “earth is not left to its own resources, and heaven is not a remote self-contained realm for the Gods.”⁵ The realm of heaven is exceedingly present and near (Deut 30:14; Ps 91:11-12).

Finally, Jacob’s gaze focuses even higher. At the top of the stairway is the LORD himself poised over him. The vision turns this “no-place” into a holy place, the very axis point where heaven and earth intersect. Denise Levertov, the Jewish Christian poet, captures the sense of “earthy” awe in this scene as heaven touches earth.

Jacob’s Ladder⁶

The stairway is not
a thing of gleaming strands
a radiant evanescence
for angels’ feet that only glance in their tread, and need not
touch the stone.

It is of stone.
A rosy stone that takes
a glowing tone of softness
only because behind it the sky is a doubtful, a doubting
night gray.

A stairway of sharp
angles, solidly built.
One sees that the angels must spring
down from one step to the next, giving a little
lift of the wings:

and a man climbing
must scrape his knees, and bring
the grip of his hands into play. The cut stone
consoles his groping feet. Wings brush past him.
The poem ascends.

Following the vision of this wondrous connection between heaven and earth, Jacob hears the voice of God speaking to him as intimately as God had spoken with his grandfather Abraham. In the oracle, God reaffirms the promises of Abraham to Jacob, intensifies them, and uniquely commits himself to the lonely fugitive.

C. The Oracle: God speaking (28:13-15)

And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants.” (Gen 28:13)

Instead of a sharp rebuke that we might expect from God to the refugee on the run, his first words to Jacob are tender, personal and gracious. How typical of God. Rather than rebuking us when we are running away, he runs after us and gives us a fresh vision of his love (Ps 139:7-12; John 21). The land that God had promised to Abraham and Isaac is now deeded over as a gift to the grandson Jacob. The verb “to give” is significant for this patriarch. It communicates to him that the blessing he so longed for will be his not by scheming and manipulating, but by simply opening his hands and receiving it by faith. And this gift will be uncontested and irrevocably secured for all of his descendants.

“Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the

north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. (Gen 28:14)

Then God reiterates the second aspect of the covenant granted earlier to Abraham regarding his seed. If Abraham’s seed would be as numerous as the stars of the sky, Jacob’s will be like the dust of the earth. The language here is much more vivid than that which he heard from his father Isaac. Then God adds that not only will his ancestors be numerous, they will be powerful, too, “*breaking out*” everywhere across the globe. (Waltke explains that the Hebrew verb denotes “*to break out with destructive force; it connotes holy war.*”⁷) No national border or physical boundary will be able to confine them. Jesus further develops this image when he says, “The gates of Hades will not overpower it” (Matt 16:18). And finally, the blessing that Jacob so desperately longs for will be so firmly anchored in his descendants that every family on earth will find it the source of their blessing. It would not be an exaggeration to say that every spiritual blessing has come from the Jews.

What a word to this exiled man, who stood so alone and alienated at this juncture in his life. No longer is he a refugee. God tells him that at this moment he is the most honored and holy vessel in the world. But there is still more to come.

God now moves beyond the far future and speaks about Jacob’s painful present. Surely Jacob was well familiar with these earlier promises from his father. Although personally hearing them from God would have produced awe, their content would not have come as a shock to him. But these next words speak right to Jacob’s fearful heart, taking the grace of God to a new level.

“Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” (Gen 28:15)

The opening words, “I am with you,” resound with an astonishing personal commitment by God to Jacob. Brueggemann explains: “The introduction of this formula dare not be treated like a cliché. It is the amazing new disclosure of Jacob’s God, one who is willing to cast his lot with this man, to stand with him in places of threat.”⁸ God explains that he will be Jacob’s private escort, personal protector and passionate guarantor for the success of this journey. At the very moment that he finds himself lost from home, Jacob is guaranteed a round-trip ticket back to his home. So God’s promise of his presence should not be construed as if he were merely accompanying the patriarch, like a passive spectator on the journey, but, rather, a powerful protective presence that accomplishes the specifics of the promise.

And the expression, “until I have done what I have promised,” does not imply that the relationship will end when the task is done. For, as Waltke writes, “The Hebrew ‘until’ does not entail a situation change after God has fulfilled his promises.”⁹ This promise had such an impact upon Israel that it was reshaped into the priestly blessing for all Israel (Num 6:24-26); David’s famous shepherd’s prayer (Ps 23); the pilgrim’s prayer on his journey to Zion (Ps 121); the promise to Israel in its exile (Isa 43:1-3), and the seal of Jesus’ great commission (Matt 28:20).

In the second half of the text the narrator captures Jacob’s threefold response to the place, the dream, and the oracle. Each response parallels the three movements of the first scene.

I. Jacob sleeps, God descends

A Jacob arrives in a “no place”

B Jacob’s Dream

C God’s oracle

II. Jacob awake, he worships

A’ Jacob’s awe in that “place”

B’ Jacob’s response to the dream

C’ Jacob’s response to the oracle

II. Jacob Awake, God Receives His Worship

(Gen 28:16-22)

A. Jacob's awe in that place (28:16-17)

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this *place*, and I did not know it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this *place*! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (Gen 28:16,17)

"The story shows Jacob waking up in two stages."¹⁰ Upon awakening, the first emotion he experiences is awe. He was asleep in a "no-place," and in the dream discovers God was in "this place," and he is amazed that he didn't perceive this. Fear is his second emotion. This is a common response when sinful man encounters the holiness of God (Isa 6:5). Jacob realizes he is standing at the entrance to God's sanctuary.

B. Jacob's response to the dream: "no-place" sanctified into a holy place (28:18-19)

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top. He called the name of that place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz. (Gen 28:18-19)

Now that the eyes of Jacob's heart are enlightened, he embraces this new world of the dream, which gives him far greater hope than his previous world. As an act of faith he sets his stone pillar upright as a memorial. The term pillar, *masseba*, "denotes a single upright stone and forms a word play with 'resting' (*mus-sab*, 28:12) and 'stood' (*nissab*, 28:13)."¹¹

Then Jacob sanctifies the stone by pouring oil on it to serve as a miniature replica of his dream. In one case the top (head) of the ladder reaches to heaven, in the other, the stone that lay under his *head* is now standing upright and sanctified with oil on its head. This suggests that from this time forward, Jacob will be keenly aware that heaven lives in the very air that he breathes, as the memory of the event is etched eternal through concrete worship.

Once Jacob has set up the pillar he names this "*place*" Bethel (meaning, "house of God"). Surprisingly, this anonymous place was really the substantial Canaanite city of Luz. So why does the narrator refuse to give a name to a city that was as famous as our San Francisco? Perhaps the reason is, as Fokkelman suggests,

Before the theophany transformed the *maqom* ["*place*"] into Bethel, it had already accomplished another thing. By the theophany, Canaanite Luz has been exposed, leached, purged to the zero-state of 'a place'. God does not want to appear to Jacob in a Canaanite town, but he wants to appear in another which only his appearing will turn into a something, but then no less a House of God. Where the history of the covenant between YHWH and his people begins, all preceding things grow pale. Canaan loses its face, Luz is deprived of its identity papers.¹²

When I felt banished from my home to lonely exile in Italy, God led me to such a place. On a small Greek island I shared Christ with a group of students in a restaurant. Later, I walked to the edge of the sea and stood right above the stone sea wall. As I lifted my gaze upward, the light of the full moon over the Aegean seized me in the darkness. Suddenly the love of God descended into the very air around me, and enveloped me. There were no words to express the feeling in my heart, except to say it was burning (Luke 24:32). Years later, my wife, Emily, purchased a travel poster that captured the scene exactly as I remembered it. Then she framed it and presented to me as a memorial of that wonderful moment. The place was Mykonos, a famous destination for youthful pleasures. But for me, this "no place" was a holy place, and the framed memory became my first "*masseba*."

Now our home is filled with numerous tangible memories of God's descending presence.

C. Jacob's response to the oracle: worship (28:20-22)

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, and I return to my father's house in safety, then the LORD will be my God. "This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You." (Gen 28:20-22)

Finally, Jacob responds to God's oracle with a vow of his own to serve this God as LORD. "This is the longest vow in the Old Testament."¹³ It reveals the critical moment when Jacob binds himself by faith to the God of his fathers. But while God's promises were unconditional, Jacob's vow is conditional. Alter explains that, "God has already promised him in the dream that He will do all these things for him. Jacob, however, remains the suspicious bargainer—a 'wrestler' with words and conditions just as he is a physical wrestler, a heel-grabber...now he wants to be sure that God will fulfill His side of the bargain before he commits himself to God's service."¹⁴

Though his vow is uttered by faith, it is not the highest expression of faith. But, let us remember that faith is not perfected overnight. This vow is a very big step for Jacob, and serves a great function in his life. With the promises of God now in his possession, the vow totally reorients his life. He will go to the same destination, with the same intention to secure a wife, but with different identity papers and transcendent purposes. The vow transforms his exiled flight into a holy pilgrimage, just as an "encounter with God changes a stony place into a sanctuary."¹⁵

Second, notice how the vow leads Jacob into worship that is more enduring and tangible than mere inner feelings. The act of raising the stone serves as a perpetual memorial of his encounter with God, and his newly placed hunger to be a temple-builder. Further, the giving of tithes "marks an important moment in his transformation—no longer grasper but giver."¹⁶ And note that this is not a one-time gift, but a perpetual one. God promises fertility, and in turn, Jacob promises to give back the first and the best as a public testimony that all that he has belongs to God.

We might say that the very thing that Rebekah feared most turned out to be the best thing for Jacob's life. When Jacob went on the run, heaven also went on the run, pursuing him and filling him with God's presence, something he had never experienced at home, and this presence totally transformed him. Waltke's summary captures every aspect of Jacob's transformations:

In sum, the story is filled with transformations due to God's presence: a man running away from home runs into God; a man afraid of his brother fears God; a certain place becomes nothing less than God's place; a rock becomes a temple; night turns to morning; Canaanite Luz becomes Bethel ("the house of God"). When the dream is fulfilled, Jacob ("Heel/Grasper") will become Israel ("one who prevails with God and humans").¹⁷

Could it be that the exile we actually fear is really necessary for the soul? It certainly proved to be so for Moses, Israel, David, Elijah, Jesus, Paul, and the early church. So instead of running away from exile, or rescuing our children from it, perhaps we should focus on the "value" of it.

III. The Value of Exile

A. It is a place of vision

Exile is a place of profound vision. We have to make a geographical "*border crossing*" to get there, and this disconnects us from all the forces at home that inhibit real change. When we are offstage, in extreme loneliness, with no one watching, we are able to hear the tender voice of God pursuing us. In the vision we be-

gin to comprehend the connection between heaven and earth, and God's personal commitment to us.

B. It is a place of commitment

Secondly, exile is a place where genuine commitments can be made. Here, in the darkness of the night, a time when the soul sinks into a lonely terror, it becomes ready to respond to God with genuine commitment and expressions of worship, in tangible and profound ways. When we try and rescue our children from exile, we may be inhibiting them from experiencing the grace of God that leads to genuine commitment to Christ.

C. It is a place of hope

Third, exile is a place that transforms dark despair into a sacred hope. Once Jacob hears God's word, his ordinary journey is transformed into a holy pilgrimage, and he is guaranteed a round-trip ticket home. At some point, God says to each of us that we are going home. He guarantees it. This explains the relationship between experiences of "wonder" that totally reorient our world and character changes that occur within the soul. Though Jacob's vision totally transforms his orientation, his character remains the same. It will take another twenty years to integrate the vision with his character. But the importance of the vision remains. The hope that it gives him allows him to endure the suffering that lies ahead. This is a consistent pattern in the Scriptures. Visions of heaven are designed to gird the saints with such hope of their destiny that they are able to endure the suffering that changes their character.

D. It is a place where we see the absolute necessity of an intermediary

Finally, Jacob's experience prepared all of Israel to search for the reality behind the metaphor of the ladder. Two thousand years later, the reality came when all Israel was groping in its exile of darkness.

"And no one has ascended in heaven, but He who descended from heaven, even the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes in Him have eternal life." (John 3:13-15)

When Nathanael believed and said, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel," Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these." And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (John 1:49-51).

On that day, Nathaniel became the new Jacob.

The story turns conventional thinking on its head. As we live and breathe in the amazing light of Jacob's encounter, perhaps, like Shakespeare, we might like to reinterpret what "banishment" means. But, rather than the pained cry of,

Ha, banishment! Be merciful, say "death";
For exile hath more terror in his look,
much more than death;

we might say,

O banishment! Where art thou, banishment?
For exile hath more light in the darkness
much more than home's brightest day.

We will end our morning with one of Philip Doddridge's wonderful hymns, the sentiments of which are appropriate for every exile longing for home.

O God of Bethel, by Whose hand
Thy people still are fed,
Who through this weary pilgrimage
Hast all our fathers led.

Our vows, our prayers, we now present
Before Thy throne of grace;
God of our fathers, be the God
Of their succeeding race.

Through each perplexing path of life
Our wandering footsteps guide;
Give us each day our daily bread
And raiment fit provide.

O spread Thy covering wings around,
Till all our wanderings cease,
And at our Father's loved abode
Our souls arrive in peace.
Amen.

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1. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 241.
2. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 388.
3. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 243.
4. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 149.
5. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 243.
6. Denise Levertov, *Poems 1960-1967* (New York: New Directions Books, 1966), 39.
7. Waltke, *Genesis*, 391.
8. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 245.
9. Waltke, *Genesis*, 392.
10. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas, Word, 1994), 223.
11. Waltke, *Genesis*, 392.
12. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1975), 67.
13. Waltke, *Genesis*, 393.
14. Alter, *Genesis*, 150.
15. Waltke, *Genesis*, 394.
16. Waltke, *Genesis*, 394.
17. Waltke, *Genesis*, 396.