

d. Jacob's Restored Presence in Canaan – Bethel

Upon his return to Canaan, Jacob settled with his family at Shechem and built an altar there (33:18-20). Notably, Shechem was also the first stopping place for Abraham in the land of Canaan, and the site of his first altar (ref. 12:4-7). But God intended – in accordance with Jacob's vow – for Jacob to return to the place where he had issued his oath, and this meant continuing on past Shechem to Bethel (cf. 28:20-22, 31:3, 13, 35:1). And while the text doesn't state that Jacob's sojourn in Shechem constituted an act of direct disobedience, the threat to the covenant that transpired there (ref. 34:1-31) highlights the fact that Shechem was not the end of Jacob's journey. If he were to fulfill his vow, he would need to travel as far as Bethel.

After the calamity at Shechem God again called Jacob, and this time He instructed him explicitly to return to Bethel (35:1). By setting up residence at Shechem Jacob had mingled his family with the unbelieving Canaanites, and so when they departed from that place they also left behind their foreign gods and Canaanite trappings and adornments. Jacob had fallen short by stopping at Shechem, but God would not allow Jacob's covenant vow (and covenant journey) to go unfulfilled. Once again, the text is careful to demonstrate that the promise and its fulfillment depend on God and not men – even the covenant heirs.

It was Jacob's arrival at Bethel that served to complete his journey to his father's house that had begun at Paddan-aram (31:1-18, cf. 35:9). Most importantly, by returning to Bethel Jacob was now able to fulfill his vow: The Lord had brought him back to the place where he had bound himself by oath, having kept the promise that provoked Jacob's vow in the first place (ref. 28:10-22). Thus Jacob's return to Bethel brought his journey full-circle and effectively proved out the "fleece" he set before Yahweh at Bethel years earlier:

- At that time Jacob had pledged that, if Yahweh would show Himself through providential care and oversight to be *his* covenant God, then Jacob would indeed serve Him as such (28:20-22).
- Moreover, Jacob would memorialize God's covenant faithfulness by renaming of Luz "Bethel" and by identifying it as the "house of God" (epitomized in Jacob's stone altar) (28:22).
- God had kept his promise to the covenant seed and showed Himself to be the God of "Abraham, Isaac, *and* Jacob."

These things provide the backdrop for – and so show the significance of – God's reiteration of the covenant to Jacob (35:9-12). And as God had kept His promise, so Jacob responded according to his own pledge (35:13-15; ref. again 28:20-22). Moreover, God's reconfirmation of the covenant with Jacob and His elaboration on its blessings set the stage for the deaths of Rachel and Isaac (35:16-29).

With the completion of Jacob's journey, the reaffirmation of his covenant status, and the death of Isaac, the text has placed the Abrahamic mantle squarely on Jacob's shoulders. At this point, the detailing of his "generations" section" as the seed of the woman is appropriate, but the text follows the pattern established with Ishmael and Isaac, providing the generations of the non-covenant son of Isaac (Esau) before that of the covenant son (36:1-43). *In this way, and consistent with its thematic structure, the narrative continues to chart the progress of the serpent's seed as well as the woman's.*

e. Jacob's Exile in Egypt

Immediately following Esau's genealogy the narrative returns to the covenant line and the introduction of the Joseph narrative. Joseph serves as the primary character in the balance of Genesis, and the reason is obvious: It's in relation to Joseph that the covenant household was to find itself in exile in Egypt. The man Israel's personal exile and "redemption" were now to be repeated in the life of the nation descended from him (ref. again 15:13-14). William Dumbrell observes:

"The long and distinct Joseph narratives close the Book of Genesis. As the theme in the Jacob cycle was the establishment of the twelve tribes of Israel, the theme of the Joseph narratives is Israel's remarkable preservation outside the Promised Land. As such, the Joseph account functions as a bridge between the patriarchal narratives and the Book of Exodus, tying the promises to the fathers with the pending occupation of the land. Joseph is presented as the preserver not only of Israel's traditions, but of Israel herself." (The Faith of Israel)

The story of Joseph is vitally important to the movement of the biblical storyline and the development of the revelation of redemption, but much of it is outside the scope of the present study. It is sufficient, therefore, to note the key highlights of that story.

- First of all, the Israelite exile in Egypt was grounded in a sequence of providential occurrences ordered around a series of paired dreams and the later Middle Eastern famine.
- The story begins with two corresponding dreams Joseph experienced. Those dreams prophetically indicated his future supremacy over his family, including his father and mother (37:1-11), and so provided the foundation for transforming his brothers' jealousy into hatred. That hatred culminated with their selling Joseph into slavery, which resulted in his being brought into the service of the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard.
- There Joseph distinguished himself, eventually attaining the most exalted position in Potiphar's house, only to find himself unjustly cast down into Pharaoh's prison. But because the Lord was with him, Joseph once again rose above his circumstances to become head over all the prisoners.

- A pair of dreams had started the trouble that now found Joseph in prison, another two dreams by his fellow prisoners would lead to his release, and yet one more pair given to Pharaoh would secure his ascension to the place of ruler over all Egypt (40:1-41:41). Moreover, Pharaoh's dreams predicted the second primary providence leading to Israel's exile, namely the coming famine following on the heels of seven years of plenty.
- During the years of abundance Joseph labored to store grain, so that when the famine arrived the storehouses of Egypt were full. This circumstance led to the covenant household's departure for Egypt – twice to obtain food, and later to establish residence there with Joseph.
- While in Egypt the second time, Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers and sent them home to Canaan to gather their father and households and return to Egypt. There Joseph – the man to whom God had given the power of life and death – would provide for the well-being of his family. After more than two decades Joseph's prophetic dreams had come true, and through that fulfillment his typological significance in the history of redemption was also fully revealed:

The one who had suffered so greatly and “died” because of the sins of others had become, through his suffering, the appointed agent of their deliverance and preservation. By his “death” and subsequent exaltation Joseph was made the possessor of “life” – the one who alone could vanquish death through the provision of “living bread” to all the nations.

Joseph's important typological role in the revelation of redemption is made more evident by a few further observations:

- The foundation for Israel's coming deliverance was found in Joseph's *privileged status* (37:2-4). As the first son of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel, Joseph was uniquely loved by his father. For that reason, Joseph was envied and hated by his brethren.
- Though not explicit in the dreams themselves, it would soon become evident that the preservation of the covenant people was bound up in Joseph's *regal power and authority* first revealed in his dreams (37:5-10).

The first dream addressed his reign over his brothers, and the second dream extended his dominion to include his father and mother. Joseph's claim to authority over the house of Israel only served to inflame their hatred of him, leading them to determine to do away with him.

- Finally, Joseph's *sale into slavery* constituted the providence that would lead to Israel's deliverance (37:11-36). Note again some of the startling typological particulars:

- 1) Joseph's brothers – the household of Israel – sought his death but were unwilling to kill him themselves (37:11-27).
- 2) Being unwilling to take his life, the brothers delivered Joseph over to almost certain death at the hands of non-Israelites, and that for twenty pieces of silver (37:28; cf. vv. 29-32).
- 3) Jacob – the father of the one who would reign over the Gentiles and the house of Israel – mourned the “death” of his son (ref. 37:31-35). But this son would show himself alive at the appointed time, and from his place of rule and authority he would deliver his brethren from death, just as he had done with the Gentiles.

When Jacob learned that Joseph was alive and was the ruler over all Egypt, he couldn't believe his ears. But when finally his sons convinced him, he determined to return with them to Egypt. Notably, it is at this point in the narrative (46:1-27) that the writer returns to the genealogy he introduced at the beginning of chapter 37. Jacob's genealogy forms the last of Genesis' ten generations sections, *and the author conspicuously associates it with the Egyptian exile of the covenant household*. This serves at least two functions in the development of the storyline:

- First, it connects Jacob's family and their circumstance with God's promise to Abraham that his covenant descendents would endure four hundred years of oppression before inheriting the covenant land.
- Second, it provides insight into what the future held for the twelve tribes of Israel. Though Jacob and his sons and their families were going into Egypt as privileged relatives of Pharaoh's right-hand man, enslavement and cruel oppression stood on the horizon.

Like Joseph, the nation of Israel would move quickly from prominence to abasement. But also like him, at the appointed time God's favor and power would cause them to rise from their humiliation to glorious exaltation. According to His oath to Abraham, they would shed their bonds, taking Egypt's wealth with them as they returned once again to the land of their fathers (cf. 47:27-31, 50:24-26).

The book of Genesis draws near to its close with Jacob's blessing upon his twelve sons. In this way the text leaves no doubt that a major development has occurred: Previously only one individual in each patriarchal generation enjoyed covenant status, but Jacob's blessing indicates that it was now being transferred to all of his sons, and ultimately beyond them to the twelve tribes descended from them. The covenant son “Israel” was poised to become the covenant nation of Israel. At the same time, Jacob's extended blessing upon Joseph – together with his blessing of Joseph's two sons – indicated that Joseph was to be distinguished among his brothers by being reckoned twice in the covenant household: once in Ephraim and once in Manasseh (ref. 48:1-22, 49:22-26).

As the prelude to his passing the covenant “baton” by means of blessing, Jacob announced to his sons his impending death and charged them to return his body to Canaan and bury him there in the cave in the field of Machpelah where his father and grandfather were buried (48:28-32).

- By maintaining his connection with the other patriarchs, Jacob (and the writer) was affirming his confidence that the exile of the covenant household in Egypt didn't mean the end of the promise.
- Beyond that, Jacob's return to Canaan (in death) would prefigure – and thereby reinforce – God's promise to Abraham regarding the future of his covenant seed. Though Jacob had left the land granted in the covenant, he would be laid to rest in it (cf. 49:33-50:14 with 46:1-4). *Thus Israel's return to Canaan out of his Egyptian exile foreshadowed that of the nation descended from him.* As God fulfilled His word to Jacob, so He would do also with his descendants at the appointed time.

With their father dead and buried, Joseph's brothers became concerned that he would now turn against them and punish them for all they had done to him. And so they contrived a story that Jacob had instructed them before his death to petition Joseph's forgiveness in his name (50:15-17). Surely Joseph would forgive them if he believed that was the dying request of his beloved father. But no such plea was necessary; Joseph had already forgiven them, as his response shows. Importantly, *this encounter brings the Joseph story to its apex.* For through it the narrator makes explicit the meaning of everything leading up to it.

The account of Joseph began with two prophetic dreams, and the content of those dreams had now been realized in Joseph's exaltation to the place of authority over the covenant household (ref. again 37:5-10). The dreams had come true, and God's purpose in that fulfillment is revealed by Joseph's words to his brothers. *Without denying or in any way minimizing their evil intention and deeds, Joseph declared that God had brought him to Egypt and exalted him through unjust suffering in order that he should be the savior of the world.* What his brothers had meant for evil, God meant for good; His intention had been to “preserve many people alive” – not just the covenant household, but all the nations (50:19-21).

Genesis ends with Joseph's death (50:22-26). Like his father, Joseph charged his brothers to return his remains to Canaan. But, along with the rest of his father's household, he was to remain in Egyptian exile – unburied – until the time appointed by God and promised to Abraham. Joseph would participate in Israel's exodus, and only then would he enter the rest of Canaan. Thus Joseph died *in faith*, trusting and holding fast to God's promise in spite of the time and distance – indeed, the fact of death itself – that now separated him from it (cf. Hebrews 11:22). The God who had proven faithful through four generations would not fail to keep His promise; He would surely restore His people to Himself in His sanctuary land. On that note of anticipation the patriarchal epoch came to a close.