

## *Sacred Space in Promise: The Patriarchal Period – Jacob’s Exile in Haran*

### **I. Introduction**

1. The Genesis narrative passes quickly from Isaac to Jacob, suggesting Isaac’s transitional role in bearing the covenant from Abraham to Jacob, whose story fills the balance of Genesis.
2. Isaac’s story contributes to God’s revelation of His covenant design, but Jacob’s even more so, particularly for the original Israelite audience that originated in him as the man *Israel*.
3. Jacob’s story, then, served as the primary reference point for Israel’s self-identity, and it highlighted three core principles for Israel’s sense of itself, its relationship with God, and its role in His purposes:
  - a. The first is Israel’s **election** as a matter of divine prerogative and not natural criteria.
  - b. The second derives from the first, which is the nature of Israel’s **distinction** as a people. Israel enjoyed unique, exalted status because of God’s purpose and power – Israel was *Yisrael: the one who prevailed with God because He prevailed with them*.
  - c. The third concerns God’s **habitation** in relation to Israel. In connection with Jacob, God made it clear that He resides with His people, not in a particular location. Canaan was His dwelling place, but only as He had determined to dwell there with His covenant people.
4. These principles emerge from the various features of Jacob’s life as recorded in Genesis, including his covenant status, his sojourn in Haran, and his reconciliation with Esau.

### **II. The Progress of the Covenant in Jacob**

#### **A. Jacob’s Departure from Canaan - Bethel (25:19-28:22)**

1. Two events – both grounded in God’s will (25:23) – led to Jacob’s departure from Canaan and the encounter at Bethel: the *transference of the birthright* and the *stolen blessing*.
2. Jacob obtained the birthright and blessing dishonorably and through deceit, *but none of this altered God’s determination*. He was the covenant heir, and thus the covenant Lord (“Yahweh” – 25:13) confronted him while he camped at Bethel on his way to Haran.
3. Yahweh appeared to Jacob in a dream and He reiterated to him the three key promises of the covenant: land, seed, and blessing. Moreover, the Lord pledged His enduring faithfulness to Jacob, wherever he found himself (Gen. 28:10-15). *Thus He revealed that the covenant sons, not the covenant land, were the focus of His covenant*.

***God had pledged Canaan as the land inheritance where He would dwell with His people, but the ultimate issue in this cohabitation was covenant relationship, not location.***

4. Jacob responded by naming that place *Bethel* (“house of God”), saying “surely the Lord is in this place.” *This wasn’t a simple acknowledgment of divine omnipresence, but Jacob expressing his astonishment that the God of his fathers had met him in this lonely place, far from his father’s home as he was departing the covenant land, and committed Himself to his welfare wherever he went and whatever his circumstances.*

5. Yahweh had pledged Himself to Jacob, and Jacob made his own vow (28:20-22). By this vow, he wasn't testing God or demanding personal benefit as the condition of serving Him, but was acknowledging God's pledge and declaring his own commitment to Him.

*By performing what He had promised, this One who declared Himself to be the God of his fathers would prove out His identity and integrity regarding His covenant and His word, thus vindicating Jacob's faith, devotion and commitment. \* ref. 31:1-13*

6. Beersheba had been central to God's relationship with Abraham and Isaac, and so it was with Bethel and Jacob. \* 31:13, 35:1-15
  - a. Beersheba signified God's faithfulness to establish His covenant people in the promised land. *This is why it is associated with Jacob's "exiles" from Canaan. \* 28:10-15, 46:1-7*
  - b. On the other hand, Bethel signified God's promise to be the God of His covenant people, being with them and upholding them, wherever they might find themselves (28:13-17).

## **B. Jacob's Prosperity in Exile - Haran (29:1-31:43)**

1. The next milestone in Jacob's life involved his sojourn in Haran (Paddan-aram). Conceived as a brief stay (27:43-44), it became a 20-year absence from the patriarchal land (31:38-41).
2. But Yahweh had promised to go with Jacob and provide for him during his journey, and He was faithful to fulfill His word. While in Haran, Jacob not only acquired two wives and twelve children, he effectively "plundered" his uncle Laban's wealth. \* 30:25-31:18

*God prospered the **man** Israel in his exile from the land and then delivered him from his oppressive servitude bearing his master's wealth. This episode in Jacob's life would prove to be prophetic, later being repeated in the experience of the **nation** of Israel. God had not forgotten his word to Abraham and He would yet fulfill it. \* cf. Gen. 15:13-14; Exod. 3:1-10*

### **Conclusions:**

1. The Abraham and Isaac narratives emphasize Canaan as God's dwelling, and thus the place of encounter. But this shifted with Jacob, as Yahweh pledged to be with him wherever he went. He then honored that oath by preserving and prospering Jacob, both outside the covenant land at Haran (30:25-31:13) and then at Mahanaim (32:1-33:16).
2. Yet Bethel remained the focal point of Jacob's relationship with God, even as it epitomized *sacred space* in his experience. He knew it as the place where heaven and earth converge, and it was the place from which he departed Canaan and to which he returned after his "exile" from it (cf. Gen. 28:11-19, 31:11-13, 35:1-7). So Bethel prefigured the Israelite sanctuary (cf. Judges 20 with Psalm 99:1-5, 132:1-8), even as it became a powerful symbol of Israel's idolatry (1 Kings 12-13). *Israel's unfaithfulness defiled Bethel as sacred space, but one day its defining imagery would find its substance in the faithful Israelite who conjoins heaven and earth as God's incarnate sanctuary* (cf. John 1:14-18, 43-51, 4:19-24).
3. Finally, Jacob's life under the covenant presaged Israel's story: a story of weakness, unbelief and self-resource; a story of failed sonship, but sonship that endured and prevailed because of the determination, power and faithfulness of the covenant Father who made Israel *Israel*.