

GENESIS

In the beginning God...

Jacob Returns to Bethel

Shechem was probably a beautiful place to stay and it undoubtedly appealed to Jacob to stop and sort things out while raising a family. Many years had passed since they first arrived and now after the horrific events of chapter 34 it would be safe to say they stayed in Shechem too long. After reading the narrative of chapter 34 one central question rises to the top: Why didn't Jacob seek God's guidance? This of course raises a number of other questions like: Was Jacob supposed to settle in Shechem? Why did he feel he was alone? Was Jacob disobeying God by being settling in Shechem? Why didn't Jacob remove the remnants of Laban's idolatry among his family earlier? Was he aware of the infiltrating influences of the Shechemites? Needless to say Jacob was in critical need of a fresh revelation and blessing of God!

Chapter 35

- V1** *God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau." (ESV)*
- V2** *So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments. (ESV)*
- V3** *Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone." (ESV)*
- V4** *So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears. Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem. (ESV)*

It was at this critical point in Jacob's life that God once again spoke to him in grace rather than judgment giving him clear and concise instructions. Quite possibly, Jacob's grief over the events of those days led him to go to God in confession and prayer, seeking wisdom for the future and forgiveness for his negligence during the decade spent in Shechem. Traumatic events often help us to remember God. That is why Jesus reminds us that it would be easier (and better for us in the long run) to remain in Him. When we try to do something on our own we find that we are only fooling ourselves. (See John 15:1-9 and 1 John 1:8)

When God answered him, it was to instruct Jacob to move away from Shechem and go up to Bethel, which was about 15 miles south of Shechem but approximately 1,000 feet higher in elevation.

There was still some use of idols among his servants and evidently even among his own family (Rachel stole her father's "*teraphim*" or "household idols", see Genesis 31:19). Jacob had no doubt been faithful in teaching his wives and children about God and His promises, but he had been negligent in insisting that they discard completely their images and amulets. (Often when polytheistic pagans learn about God they add Him to long list of other 'gods' rather than worship Him exclusively) They were trying, like many 'professing' Christians today, to worship God while at the same time hanging on to some of the superstitions and practices of the world around them.

God reminded Jacob of his encounter with Him at Bethel, and of His promises there, and commanded him immediately to move on to Bethel. With a broken and repentant heart, Jacob did what he should have done long ago: he required his family and servants to abandon all remnants of idolatry; discard their images, earrings, and rings; put away their "foreign gods" and even garments they had been wearing; then wash themselves clean and put on fresh clothing symbolic of the pure worship of God. Jacob then buried the idols under the oak tree that was near Shechem.

V5 *And as they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.* (ESV)

V6 *And Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him,* (ESV)

V7 *and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother.* (ESV)

V8 *And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak below Bethel. So he called its name Allon-bacuth.* (ESV)

Just as Jacob predicted (See Genesis 34:30), the people of cities around them would be seeking vengeance on them for their slaughter of the Shechemites, and would be almost certain to pursue them as they were apparently trying to escape. God however, prevented this! The surrounding Canaanite people probably outnumbered them, but became so fearful of them that they refrained from attacking them. Jacob and his company arrived safely at the little community of Luz, which had been renamed Bethel, and immediately proceeded to build an altar and its associate house of worship there. He named the place Bethel, and now he named the altar El-bethel ("God of the House of God").

At this point, the writer notes that it was at this time and place that Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died. She was very old by now. She was well loved and revered by the family, and there is sincere grief at her departing, as indicated by their naming the place of her burial the "Oak of Weeping." The record does not say when she rejoined Jacob, but it was probably on one of the visits to Isaac while he was living at Shechem. In fact, her presence in Jacob's household is one of the reasons scholars are confident that Jacob did visit his father during those years. The fact that she was now with Jacob is proof that Rebekah herself was dead at this time.

V9 *God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him.* (ESV)

- V10** *And God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.” So he called his name Israel.* (ESV)
- V11** *And God said to him, “I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body.* (ESV)
- V12** *The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.”* (ESV)
- V13** *Then God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him.* (ESV)
- V14** *And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone. He poured out a drink offering on it and poured oil on it.* (ESV)
- V15** *So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.* (ESV)

It was here at Bethel that God once again appeared to Jacob, renewing the promises made 30 years before at the same spot. God identified Himself as “God Almighty” (El Shaddai). God revealed Himself by this name to Abram (See Genesis 17:1) and to Isaac (See Genesis 28:3) and now to Jacob.

Once again God promised Jacob that he and his offspring, which would be a great multitude, would possess this land, as He had promised also to Abraham and Isaac. Though he would be a “nation,” he would also be a “company of nations,” a reference unique to Jacob and to the continuing distinctiveness of the twelve tribes of Israel. God also reaffirmed and re-impressed on Jacob that he now had a new name, Israel. He was a prevailing and powerful prince of God! He should therefore live as one who possessed such a high calling.

After erecting the altar, Jacob, as he had done before, anointed the stone with oil, symbolic of consecration. This act is here called, for the first time in Scripture, a “drink-offering.” Later, such drink-offerings were offered frequently as gifts of devotion and consecration. Jacob then, in the company of all his family and followers, in recognition of God’s unique presence in this place, once again call the name of the place Bethel, the “House of God.”

- V16** *Then they journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labor, and she had hard labor.* (ESV)
- V17** *And when her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, “Do not fear, for you have another son.”* (ESV)
- V18** *And as her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin.* (ESV)

V19 *So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), (ESV)*

V20 *and Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. (ESV)*

After completing his pilgrimage to Bethel and living there long enough to build the altar, Jacob moved south, possibly intending to move all the way back to Hebron with his father Isaac. When they almost reached Ephrath, the region around Bethlehem, another notable event, both joyful and tragic, occurred. Previous to this pilgrimage, after years of barrenness, Jacob's beloved wife Rachel had finally borne a son, before they left Laban and the region of Haran (See Genesis 30:22-25). She had named him Joseph and had, at the time, expressed faith that God would give her still another son. That, however, was 15 years before, and her faith had not yet been rewarded. No doubt she had continued to pray about it, and God finally answered. Rachel must have been well along in her years by now as Jacob was approximately 105 years old by this time. Finally she became pregnant again. Jacob's other wives had long since ceased bearing children, so Rachel gave birth to Jacob's twelfth and last son.

It cost Rachel her life. Before she died, in grief she named the child Ben-oni, meaning the "Son of My Sorrow". Her husband, no doubt also experiencing real anguish of soul as he saw Rachel leaving him, realized that it would be difficult for his son to carry such a name through life; so he renamed him Benjamin after Rachel's death and burial. The name Benjamin means "Son of the Right Hand," signifying a particularly honored position in the family.

Rachel was buried nearby, on the way to Bethlehem, in the Ephrath area. Jacob erected a marker over Rachel's grave, which, according to what seems to be an editorial insertion here, could still be seen in Mose's day. Later associated near the city of Ramah (See Jeremiah 31:15).

V21 *Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. (ESV)*

V22 *While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine. And Israel heard of it. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. (ESV)*

V23 *The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. (ESV)*

V24 *The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. (ESV)*

V25 *The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's servant: Dan and Naphtali. (ESV)*

V26 *The sons of Zilpah, Leah's servant: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram. (ESV)*

Jacob then continued south for a while, stopping again near the “tower of Eder,” or Migdal Eder, a location just outside Bethlehem. While they were camped there, a most unfortunate and disgusting event took place, “*Reuben had intercourse with Bilhah*” (verse 21b, NLT-SE). Reuben was Jacob’s oldest son, now probably about 30 years old. He was unmarried and evidently there was little opportunity for him to find a wife or even to meet any prospective girl friends, except possibly the servant girls in Jacob’s household. These women, however, were off limits to him in view of his position as eldest son and their position as servants. The Canaanites around them also avoided them, and the experiences of Shechem had made them all wary of any contacts with the people of the land.

No details are given concerning events leading up to the affair, but somehow Reuben began to associate intimately with Bilhah, Rachel’s maid. She was much older than Reuben and it was clearly a very abnormal situation, whether or not there were as yet any actual laws in effect against this type of incest. Bilhah was actually the mother of two of Reuben’s younger brothers, Dan and Naphtali. There is no indication, and it seems unlikely, that Reuben was guilty of rape. Some scholars believe it may have been Reuben’s attempt to claim lordship over the family (as a usurper of authority by sleeping with a leader’s concubine, see examples in 2 Samuel 3:7; 12:8; 16:20-22). Jacob said nothing about it now, however in time, it cost Reuben his birthright (See Genesis 49:3-4), as Jacob never forgot it. No matter what the temptations and mitigating circumstances may have been, an action such as this could not be excused.

V27 *And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. (ESV)*

V28 *Now the days of Isaac were 180 years. (ESV)*

V29 *And Isaac breathed his last, and he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him. (ESV)*

Finally Jacob came home. He had, no doubt visited Isaac, and Esau as well, while living at Shechem, but now his entire household had come with him. Isaac was very old at this time, not only blind but surely very feeble as well, in any case, Jacob was home again. Isaac was still living in Hebron, where Abraham also had lived. At the age of 180, Isaac died. This must actually have been about 25 years after Jacob came back from Padan-aram, since Isaac had probably had been about 135 years old or so when Jacob left home. Actually, Isaac must have still been living at the time Joseph was sold into Egypt, but the writer found it appropriate to mention his death at this point. It is noteworthy that Esau and Jacob were still in fellowship with each other, these many years after their first reunion, as the two once-alienated brothers came together to participate with each other in the burying their father.