

THE PATRIARCHS

Isaac and Jacob

Genesis 23-36

PART 1

PREPARATION

Circumcision – A Sign of the Covenant

The practice of circumcision dates back to prehistoric times. In ancient Egypt it was part of a sacred initiation that marked the passage from adolescence to adulthood and was performed on boys from the age of about ten to fourteen.¹ It was also practiced in some parts of the ancient Near East as a sexual or marriage initiation rite, or it may have been done for hygienic reasons. Circumcision was not practiced in Mesopotamia, the land of Abraham's origin.

In Genesis 17, God appears to Abraham and renews His covenant with him. God promises that He will make Abraham exceedingly fruitful; many nations and kings will come for the from him; the land will be given to his descendants as a possession, and the nations of the earth shall be blessed. This time, no animal sacrifices are involved. The covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants is sealed with a personal sacrifice – circumcision. Every male is to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth (17:12). Circumcision was to serve as a sign of membership: belonging to God's covenant people; and participating in His promises and blessings. To refuse circumcision was to break the covenant and cut oneself off from the nation that God was forming.

However, was there something more to circumcision? Most likely, yes. Note that the fulfillment of God's promise involved marriage, sexual activity, and procreation. Since circumcision left a permanent mark upon the body, it would serve as a constant reminder of several things:

- 1) Every man is called to walk before the Lord and lead a blameless life. Male sexual activity needs to be disciplined and dedicated to God. This requires self-sacrifice. A man's seed is sacred and must not be abused. Marriage is sacred.
- 2) God is in control. He is the Source and Giver of life. He is the author of marriage, sexual activity, and procreation.
- 3) God will fulfill His promise to give many descendants. Circumcision is a sign of faith, obedience, and trust in His word.

¹ Helen Strudwick, General Editor, *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (London, United Kingdom: Amber Books), 453.

Birthrights and Blessings

Ancient inheritance laws gave special rights to the firstborn son. This “birthright” (in Hebrew, *bekorah*) was sacred and highly respected. Only with the consent of the first-born son or the father’s directive, could it be shifted or sold to another son.

Upon the death of his father, the firstborn son assumed the following responsibilities and privileges of his birthright.

- 1) *Blessing* (in Hebrew, *berakah*). Usually on his death bed, the father would invoke a special blessing upon his first-born son.
- 2) *A double portion of the inheritance*. The eldest son received a larger (double) share of what was given to his other brothers.
- 3) *A leadership role*. He became the new “father” for the extended family, the “king” of the family clan.
- 4) *A priestly role*. The first-born son became the “priest” of the family clan, calling upon the name of the Lord and offering sacrifices on behalf of the family. He is called to pass on the faith to the next generation.
- 5) *Family line*. The first-born was given the privilege of carrying on the family line.

STUDY AND REFLECTION

Abraham buys a burial place (Gen 23)

According to Genesis 23:1, Sarah died at the age of a hundred and twenty-seven years, in *Kiriath-arba* (the oldest name for the city of *Hebron*), in the land of Canaan.

To bury Sarah, Abraham decides to buy a cave that it might serve as a family burial place. He is an alien and stranger in the land, and as such has only limited rights; he cannot own properly legally. For Abraham to acquire property, the matter must be decided by the elders of the city.

Abraham comes to the gates of the city, where the elders sat and managed all legal transaction. The Hittites with whom Abraham negotiates are one of the many groups who are living in Canaan at that time.

At first, the Hittites are hesitant to sell land to a foreigner. They agree to allow Abraham to bury Sarah in any of their burial sites. This is not what Abraham wants. He ignores their offer and indicates the exact cave that he wants to purchase: the cave of Machpelah on the on the property of Ephron the Hittite (23:9).

Ephron, the owner, offers to give Abraham not only the cave, but also the field where the cave is located (23:11). But Abraham gracious refuses the gift and insists on paying for it. Ephron then offers to sell it to him for a price of 400 shekels of silver. Abraham could have continued bartering for a lesser price. Instead, he accepts Ephron’s first offer, even though it may be too high of a price. In the end, Abraham achieved his objective – he now owns property in Canaan for Sarah’s burial. Abraham’s possession of a portion of land stands as a pledge for the future possession of the entire land.

The cave of Machpelah became the burial place for Sarah and Abraham (25:9-10), Isaac (35:27-29), Rebekah (49:31), Jacob (50:13) and Leah (49:31).

A wife for Isaac (Genesis 24-25)

According to custom, Abraham must make the arrangements for the marriage of his son, Isaac. Since he is old and near death, he entrusts the task of find a wife to his chief servant, who serves him more like a friend and trusted steward.

Abraham binds the servant by oath to carry out this mission. He says to the servant: “Put your hand under my thigh, and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughter of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, but will go to my country to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac” (Gen 24:2-4). The servant is not to let Isaac marry a Canaanite woman, of a different faith. Abraham knows that if Isaac a marries a local woman, he will lose his faith in the one true God.

Abraham also forbids the servant to take Isaac with him on the journey. He is afraid that Isaac may leave and not return. Leaving the land without God’s permission would jeopardize the covenant promise.

The servant does as he is told. He travels with ten camels, loaded with gifts necessary to secure a bride price. Since most people at the time used donkeys, the use of ten camels indicates that Abraham is a very wealthy man.

Having arrived in Haran, the servant stops outside the city at a well of water, at the time of evening when women go out to draw water (24:11). In his prayer, he entrusts the success of his mission into God’s hands. He then asks God for a sign that will reveal which woman God has chosen for his master, Isaac. The sign is this: The woman who offers him water to drink, and then freely offers to water his ten thirsty camels – that will be the woman that God has chosen.

The sign is a good one. In addition to revealing God’s will, it reveals the character of the woman. To water the ten camels would requiring many gallons of water, and a lot of hard work to draw it from the well. Only a generous and hardworking woman would freely offer to do this for a stranger. Rebekah is that kind of woman. She arrives (24:5) and unknowingly, carries out the requirements of the sign.

For this, the servant showers Rebekah with gifts. He is then further convinced that she is the right woman, when he finds out that she is the grandniece of Abraham. Rebekah invites him to come to the home of her mother. Her father, Bethuel, has passed away. When they arrive at the house, the negotiations for the marriage are made with Laban, Rebekah’s brother.

Laban’s character is somewhat revealed in his behaviour. He is overly eager to invite the stranger into the home, once he sees all the expensive gifts that Rebekah has been given. His greed will become more apparent later, in his relationship with Jacob (the future son of Isaac and Rebekah).

After the arrangements were made, the servant stays only for one night. The following morning, he wants to leave immediately with Rebekah. The family

understandably objects. But Rebekah agrees to leave immediately; and receives a blessing.

When they arrive, Isaac is in the field, walking out to meet them. Rebekah veils herself. According to custom, the groom was not to see the bride until after the wedding. The story ends with their marriage and subsequent love. “He loved her and was comforted after his mother’s death” (Gen 24:67). In both Jewish and Christian traditions, the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah is seen as a model of conjugal love.

How old was Isaac when he married Rebekah?

According to Genesis 25:20, Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah. Was he forty or was he twenty years old? It would seem odd that a man at that time and culture would wait until he was forty to be married (2,000 B.C.). Realistically, Isaac would have been approximately twenty years old when he married Rebekah. The number forty is most likely symbolic here, to represent a fullness of time.

In the stories about Abraham and Isaac, all the ages of people appear to be doubled. Is the author doubling the ages to make a point? Or is the author using a different method to calculate age, i.e. number of harvests? Possibly. Ancient peoples measured time by observing significant cycles in nature or by observing lunar months. Around 2900 B.C., Egyptians were the first to develop a solar calendar with a solar year of 365 days.²

In the story of Joseph, we will see a change in the reporting of people’s ages.

How old was Abraham before he died and where was he buried?

According to the Scriptures, Abraham was 175 years old when he died. If the numbers are being doubled, then he would have been just over 87 years old when he died. Abraham was buried next to his wife, Sarah, in the cave of the field of Machpelah opposite Mamre.

The birth of Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25:19-28)

After some time, there are no children. Rebekah is barren. Her barrenness echoes the barrenness of Sarah. Isaac prays for his wife and God intervenes. Rebekah conceives and becomes pregnant.

However, the pregnancy is not an easy one. There seems to be a struggle going on in her womb. So, she inquired of the Lord and received an answer. The word of the Lord takes the form of an oracle: There are two children in her womb, two nations who will struggle with one another until eventually the lesser one wins (Gen 25:23).

When the time came to give birth, the first child to be born is a boy, with red hair all over his body. He looks like he is covered with a red cloak or mantle (25:25). So, he is given the name *Esau*, which may mean “wrapped,” “covered,” or “cloaked.”

² Helen Strudwick, General Editor, *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (London, United Kingdom: Amber Books), 446-451.

The second child is also a boy. He is born with his hand holding onto Esau's heel. He is given the name *Jacob*, which means "he grasps the heel," which could also mean "he deceives" or "wrestles" wrestles to get ahead. From the moment of Jacob's birth, he is grasping at what belongs to his older brother: first his heel, then his birthright, and finally his father's blessing.

According to Gen 25:26, Isaac was sixty when Rebekah gave birth to the two sons. If the numbers are being reported as double, then Isaac may have been approximately thirty years old.

Esau and Jacob are twins, but they are not identical twins. Their personalities are quite different.

Esau is the extrovert. He acts before he thinks. He is the adventurous, an outdoors type, a hunter, and a man of the field. By implication, is wild and crude. He dislikes the job of being shepherd, nor does he like spending too much time around the home tent.

Jacob is the introvert. He is a quiet man, a thinker. He thinks things out before he acts. Jacob does not share Esau's passion for hunting and adventure. He prefers being a shepherd, a tent-dweller, close to home.

Unfortunately, the difference between the two brothers is further accentuated by the preferential love of parents. Isaac favours Esau, while Rebekah favours Jacob.

Esau sell his birthright (Genesis 25:29-34)

Ancient inheritance laws gave special rights to the firstborn son. On a man's death, his firstborn son received a double portion of the inheritance and took over as the head of extended family, acting as both "king" and "priest" of the family clan, or tribe. The birthright generally came with a special blessing given by the father on his deathbed. In the case of Abraham and Isaac, the blessing would also carry with it the covenant promises of God.

One day, Jacob was cooking a pot of red soup. Esau came in from the field hungry and exhausted. He says to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red pottage" (Gen 25:30). Jacob, the thinker, responds by saying, "First sell me your birthright... swear to me" (25:31-33). Without thinking, Esau sells his birthright, a double portion of the family inheritance, for a bowl of soup. At that moment, he is more interested in satisfying his immediate physical needs than worrying about his birthright. It is possible that Esau figured that after receiving his father's special blessing, he would easily re-gain his birthright from Jacob by wrestling it away from him.

It is obvious that Jacob had taken advantage of his brother by pushing him, not only to sell his birthright, but also to make the deal *irrevocable*, by forcing Esau to swear to it.

Stories about Isaac (Genesis 26)

This chapter records a number of stories about Isaac, and they are similar to the stories told about Abraham: referring to his wife as his sister to protect himself; disputes over wells; appearances of the Lord; blessings, success and prosperity; and building an

altar. Isaac behaves very much like his father, Abraham. God repeats His promise to Isaac in view of the oath He swore to Abraham and in view of Abraham's faithfulness.

The chapter ends with a reference to Esau. Isaac and Rebekah hoped that Esau would marry a woman of their own kind, from their own extended tribe, to carry on the faith of his father, Isaac. This, however, does not happen. At the age of forty (twenty?), Esau married Judith, a local Hittite woman, who follows a different faith. Both Esau and Judith make life difficult for Isaac and Rebekah (26:34).

Jacob obtains Esau's blessing (Genesis 27)

When Isaac was old and blind, his wish was to bless Esau before he dies. In the ancient world, death bed blessings were believed to be particularly effective and the meal that was prepared and eaten prior to the blessing had a sacred character.

Isaac calls his eldest son Esau and sends him to hunt for game and to prepare a meal for him, so that he may impart the special blessing (in Hebrew, *berakah*) upon Esau before he dies. Once this blessing is imparted, it cannot not be taken away or repeated.

Rebekah overhears the conversation. She calls Jacob and devises a plan to deceive Isaac into giving the blessing to Jacob. The two brothers have struggled right from the womb, and now the younger will do anything to win, to wrestle from his brother what rightfully belongs to him. Jacob is living up to his name.

Rebekah prepares the meal, and once everything is ready, Jacob goes to his father wearing Esau's garments and skins of kids on his hands and neck. He deceives his father by lying three times: first, claiming to be Esau; then lying about his quick success in hunting; and then insisting a final time, that he is Esau. At first, Isaac recognizes Jacob's voice, but when he feels the kid hair on his hands, he believes that it is Esau. And so, he imparts the blessing.

What Jacob did was not right. Although he knew from his mother, that God has said that the "elder shall serve the younger," he should have allowed God to fulfill the promise in His own time. Instead of trusting in God's Providence, he tries to make it happen by his own deceitful actions. "What goes around – comes around" is a saying that we are familiar with. "What you sow is what you reap" is another way of saying the same thing. What Jacob has done will come back at him.

As soon as Jacob leaves, Esau enters the tent with prepared food for his father, but he has arrived too late. Esau does receive a blessing from Isaac, but it is not the blessing that was meant for him. Esau is furious; and he plans to kill Jacob when Isaac passes away.

Why did God allow this to happen?

As the Source of all blessings, God is free to give what gifts He wishes, to whom He chooses. At times, He may act in accordance with human customs, traditions, and culture, but He is not bound by them. If He wishes, He may act in away contrary to human expectations and thinking. God chose Jacob not because of his faithfulness or his

behavior; not because of anything he had done. He chose Jacob, while Jacob is still in his mother's womb.

How does Rebekah intervene?

Rebekah intervenes not only to save her son Jacob, but also to save Esau. If Esau kills Jacob, he will become a fugitive and will eventually be put to death for murdering his brother. Rebekah warns Jacob about Esau's plans, and insists that he leave and stay with her brother Laban in Haran, until Esau's anger subsides. She then convinces Isaac to send Jacob away to find a wife. Isaac calls Jacob to himself and blesses him; and then forbids him to choose a wife from among the Canaanites. He sends Jacob to Haran, to the house of Laban, Rebekah's brother, to choose a wife from among their kinsman.

Who are the future descendants of Esau? Who are the future descendants of Jacob?

The Edomites will be the future descendants of Esau (Edom means "red"). The Israelites will be the future descendants of Jacob.

Jacob's Dream (Genesis 28:10-22)

Jacob left his home in Beer-sheeba and went travelled north on his way to Haran. He would have passed Hebron, Jerusalem (Jebus), and stopped for the night somewhere close to Bethel (Luz). Jacob took one of the stones in that place and put it under his head and lays down to sleep (28:11). This suggests that he escaped with nothing but his life. All his possessions were left behind. He does not know when he will be able to return. He may not even be able to claim his inheritance, since his brother has vowed to kill him.

As he slept, Jacob dreamed that there was a **ladder** or **staircase** (in Hebrew, *sullam*; in Greek, *climax*) set up on the earth (i.e. built up from the earth), and the top reached to heaven; and angels of God were ascending and descending upon it. Then the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants; and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth... by you and your descendants all the families of the earth shall bless themselves. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land..." (Gen 28:13-15).

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and say, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it... 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). So, he rose early in the morning, and he took the stone which he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He named that place *Bethel*, which means "house of God." It was called *Luz* at that time.

In Genesis 11, men tried to reach God on their own. In their pride, they thought that by building a tower (a ziggurat with a staircase), they would be able to unite earth to heaven. In Jacob's dream, it becomes clear that God is the One Who will make it possible for man to ascend to Him. He will provide the temple with a staircase that will unite heaven and earth, both God and man.

In the dream, God confirms that His blessing is upon Jacob. God has not abandoned him, despite his actions. The covenant promise will go through Jacob. Through his descendant, the promised Saviour, all the nations of the world shall be blessed (Gen 28:13-14). Jacob has done nothing to deserve this. It is a gift that God has bestowed upon him freely.

Jacob is also reassured that God will take care of him. He will provide him with the food and clothing he needs; He will keep him safe on his journey and one day, allow him to return to his home safely (Gen 28:15). If God fulfills this promise, Jacob vows that He will remain faithful to God. He will confirm this faithfulness by tithing – giving back to God a tenth of all he shall be blessed with (Gen 28:22).

According to several Fathers of the Church, Jacob's dream is a sign that points to the **Mystery of the Incarnation**. The ladder (staircase) upon which angels descend and ascend represents the promised woman, the Virgin Mary (Gen 3:15), and her Child, Jesus. At the right time, she will be set upon the earth. God the Son will descend from heaven and become incarnate in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit. She will become a *Holy Temple*, in which God dwells, uniting heaven and earth. She will become the *Gate of Heaven*, through which God will pass and descend to earth.³

The stone that Jacob sets as a pillar represents the promised Saviour, to be born of the Virgin Mary. The pouring of oil upon it confirms that He will be the Christ, the Anointed One, upon whom the fullness of the Holy Spirit shall rest. He will crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15).

The Saviour will become the Cornerstone, from which a *New Temple* will be built – the Church. This *Holy Temple*, build by God Himself, will unite heaven and earth.

Jacob's dream is also a sign the points to the **Mystery of the Church**. The ladder (staircase) upon which angels ascend and descend, also represents the Church, the *New Temple* to come, in which God dwells, and through which people ascend from earth to heaven. It will be the *Gate of Heaven*, through which people enter heaven itself. Finally, the Church is the *House of God*, where God shall dwell among His people forever.

What does this story tell us about dreams?

The story confirms that God can speak through dreams. The Holy Scriptures are full of examples where God speaks to His servants by means of dreams or visions. Does did mean that all dreams are messages from God? Absolutely not. Some dreams may come from God, some may come from the evil one, and most of our dreams come from our own subconscious. Dreams are a way in which our sub-conscious level communicates

³ You can see the Virgin Mary as the "Ladder of Jacob" in the icon of Perpetual Help. In the middle we see Mary, as the ladder that which is set on earth and reaches the heavens. On both sides of her we see the seraphim, reminiscent of the angels ascending and descending on both sides of the ladder in Jacob's dream. Finally, we see the promised Saviour, Jesus Christ in the arms of Mary. As He comes down from heaven, taking on human flesh from the Virgin Mary, she becomes the Holy Temple in which God dwells. In her, heaven and earth and united. In the icon, Mary also symbolizes the Church, by which we ascend from earth to heaven.

with our consciousness level, using a language that is rich in imagery, imagination, and symbolism.

We should not be quick to believe own personal understanding or interpretation of dreams, for two good reasons. First, our interpretation may not be accurate. Secondly, it is not always easy to discern the true source of a dream: is it coming from God, the evil one, or our own subconscious self? Accurate discernment of dreams requires a special gift from God. This kind of gift was given to Joseph.

PART 2

PREPARATION

In Jacob's dream of the ladder (staircase) in Gen 28, God confirms that His blessing is upon Jacob. God has not abandoned him, despite his actions. The covenant promise will go through Jacob. Through his descendant, the promised Saviour, all the nations of the world shall be blessed (Gen 28:13-14). Jacob has done nothing to deserve this. It is a gift that God has bestowed upon him freely.

Jacob is also reassured that God will take care of him. He will provide him with the food and clothing he needs; He will keep him safe on his journey and one day, allow him to return to his home safely (Gen 28:15). If God fulfills this promise, Jacob vows that He will remain faithful to God. He will confirm this faithfulness by tithing – giving back to God a tenth of all he shall be blessed with (Gen 28:22).

STUDY AND REFLECTION

Jacob in Haran (Genesis 29:1 - 31:24)

After leaving Canaan, Jacob arrives in Haran. He comes to a well, presumably the same well where Abraham's servant met Rebekah. At the well, he begins a conversation with some shepherds; and enquires about Laban, his uncle (Rebekah's brother). In answer, the shepherds point to Rachel, Laban's daughter.

When Rachel arrives, Jacob removes the stone from the well and waters Laban's sheep. This is the reverse of chapter 24, where Rebekah watered the servant's camels. Rolling back the stone, Jacob reveals his great strength, which impresses Rachel. Jacob is overcome with joy upon meeting Rachel. He tells her who he is – Rebekah's son. Rachel then runs to tell her father.

Laban comes out to greet Jacob. He embraces and kisses him; and brings him to his house (Gen 29:13). Then Laban says to him: "Surely you are my bone and flesh" (Gen 29:14), and Jacob stays with him for a month. Laban's response here is somewhat ambiguous. Is he really pleased with the arrival of a relative or is he disappointed because Jacob arrives with nothing? Jacob comes as a poor relative, whereas Abraham's servant came with wealth and many gifts. What can Laban do but offer Jacob his home?

After a month had passed, Laban offers to pay Jacob for his work. He says: “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing?” At first, it seems that Laban is being generous, but what he really wants to do is to replace the family *uncle-nephew* relationship with a new *lord-servant* relationship.

Jacob has fallen passionately in love with Rachel and hopes to marry her. However, he has no money or wealth with which he could pay the required **bride price** (in Hebrew, *mohar*). Normally, marriages were arranged by the two fathers at the house of the bride. They would agree on a bride price, which the father of the groom paid to the father of the bride. The bride price money was later given by the father to his daughter, as a wedding gift.

As the bride price for Rachel, the younger daughter, Jacob agrees to work for Laban as a servant for *seven years*. The years pass quickly. When the time for payment comes, instead of giving Rachel to Jacob, Laban gives his older daughter, Leah. Jacob is deceived, ‘*jacobed*’ by his own uncle, who wants him to stay. With the help of Jacob, Laban has prospered and become a wealthy man.

How was it possible that Jacob married the wrong women? According to the customs of that time, the bride would be heavily veiled for the wedding and the feast; and escorted in darkness to the husband’s home. We can presume that the darkness, the veil, and the wine at the feast, prevented Jacob from realizing that the woman he had married was not Rachel. It is not until next morning that he discovers that he had married Leah.

Jacob had deceived his father, Isaac, who was nearly blind, to obtain the blessing that rightfully belonged to the oldest son. Now Jacob, in his blindness, is deceived by his uncle, Laban, to take the oldest daughter, Leah, because that is what rightfully belongs to the oldest daughter. To justify his deception, Laban says: “It is not the custom in our country to give the younger before the older.” In other words, it is not fair for the younger one to have what first rightfully belongs to the eldest.

Jacob is learning an important lesson. What goes around comes around. He had deceived his father to take the blessing that belonged to the firstborn, now he is deceived by a father to take what belongs to a firstborn. Both events happened because of the inability to see. Isaac blessed the wrong son, because of his blindness; now Jacob takes the wrong daughter to be his wife, because his inability to see.

Laban then offers to give Rachel in marriage to Jacob, once the week-long festivities are over, under the condition that Jacob agrees to work for Laban another *seven years*. Jacob agrees. Another *seven years* of service becomes the bride price for Rachel.

And so, Jacob remains a servant in Laban’s home. He now has two wives, and his love for Rachel is obvious. This makes Leah feel inferior. But God comes to the help of the weaker and gives children to Leah, not to Rachel. By her fertility, Leah wins Jacob’s favour.

Leah becomes the mother six sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; Issachar and Zebulun. She also gives birth to one daughter, Dinah. The covenant line will go through Leah’s fourth son, Judah, who will become the ancestor David and the forefather of the

promised Saviour, Jesus Christ. Leah's third son, Levi, will become the forefather of Aaron and the Levitical priesthood. Leah may not have the beauty and charm of Rachel, but she is portrayed as a woman of remarkable dignity.

Rachel becomes the mother of two sons: Joseph and Benjamin. Joseph is born in Laban's house, in Haran; Benjamin will be born in Canaan.

The other six sons are born through slave-servants. **Bilhah**, Rachel's servant, gives birth to Dan and Naphtali. **Zilpah**, Leah's servant, gives birth to Gad and Asher.

Having deceived Jacob, Laban was able to get fourteen years (seven?) of work in exchange for two wives, his "wages." God has also blessed Laban by enriching him at the expense of Jacob. Now, Jacob cleverly manages to enrich himself. Sheep were normally white, and goats were black. Anything else was rare. So, when Jacob offers to look after Laban's flock, if he can keep any speckled and spotted goats and black lambs as payment, Laban thinks he is a sure winner, but is beaten by Jacob's skill and knowledge of breeding practices. Jacob uses only the best animals from Laban's flock for his selective breeding. He increases his own flock of black lambs and spotted or speckled goats, leaving Laban with a flock of weaker and inferior animals. Jacob succeeds in acquiring great wealth: "large flocks, maidservants and menservants, camels and donkeys" (Gen 30:43).

Jacob leaves Laban (Genesis 30:25- 31:55)

The sons of Laban become increasingly envious of Jacob's wealth and strength. Even Laban does not regard him with favour as before. So, Jacob plans to leave and return to Canaan. God speaks to him and says: "Return to the land of you fathers and your kindred, and I will be with you" (Gen 31:3).

Jacob meets with his wives to see if they agree with him. After hearing how God has intervened, they freely agree to leave with him. Both Leah and Rachel acknowledge their father's greed. Laban made Jacob pay a high bride-price for his daughters. Furthermore, he kept the bride-price for himself (the wages for 14 years of work), instead of giving it back to his daughters, according to custom.

What is implied throughout the story is that Jacob is not free to leave Laban's house with his wives and children. It is not clear why this is the case. It is possible that Jacob's marriage was an *adoption-marriage*, a custom practiced in the ancient Near East. At his marriage to Leah and Rachel, Jacob may have been adopted as a son. Since the two daughters did not leave Laban's family clan when they married, they, and their children, would be considered as the property of Laban. If so, Jacob's flight with his wives and children would not been illegal.

While Jacob was occupied with the annual sheep-shearing, Jacob and his family flee with all their possessions. For some unknown reason, Rachel stole her father's "household gods." These were probably statues of gods who protected Laban's house and his family clan. Possession of these idols may have had some inheritance rights attached to them, or Rachel may have wanted them for superstitious reasons.

After three days, when Laban found out that Jacob had fled, he took his kinsmen with him and pursued Jacob for seven days (Gen 31:22-23). He finally caught up to him in the hill country of the Gilead (east of the river Jordan).

However, God appeared to Laban in a dream and warned him not to harm Jacob. This put Laban in an awkward position. He came to battle, but the dispute can go no further than words. Eventually, Laban establishes a covenant with Jacob. Laban's daughters are to be cared for; and a border is fixed between their respective territories. The sign of the covenant is a mound of stones. It was ratified with a sacrifice and a meal.

Jacob returns home (Genesis 32-33)

As Jacob continues his journey, an army of God's angels appear to him. It is a sign that God is present with him. Jacob does not travel alone. Beside his camp is a camp of God's angels, who provide comfort and protection.

Jacob sends messengers to Esau, hoping that to gain his favour. When the messengers report that Esau is coming with four hundred men, Jacob is alarmed. To avoid total disaster, he divides people and possessions into two companies (camps). If one is taken, the other may be able to escape and survive.

Then Jacob prays. Gifts are sent ahead, in the hope that they will soften Esau's heart. The Jacob sends everyone and everything across the river Jabbok. He then remains alone for the night on the other side.

During the night, Jacob wrestles with a man (an angel) until dawn. Unable to prevail, the man dislocates Jacob's thigh. Jacob realizes that he has been wrestling with God, who in the end, has prevailed. The Lord wants to leave at daybreak, but Jacob clings to Him and will not let go, until he has been blessed. The Lord changes his name, from *Jacob*, which means "he who grasps at the heel" or "he who struggles to get ahead," to ***Israel***, which means "God prevails," or "he who has struggled with God." When Jacob asks for God's name, he does not receive an answer.

Throughout his lifetime, Jacob had wrestled with others to get ahead. From the very beginning, he struggled with his brother, Esau. He took his birthright. He deceived his father, Isaac, to obtain the blessing that belonged to his brother. He struggled with Laban, his uncle, to obtain what was promised. To get what he wanted, Jacob relied on his own intelligence, cleverness, and skill, and not upon God. He realized, that in his struggle with others following his own plan, he was wrestling with God – his will with God's will. In the end, the Divine Will always prevails.

Perseverance in prayer is not a struggle to overpower God, to somehow convince Him or force His Will to conform to ours. In our prayer to God, the struggle is to conform our desires with God's desires, our plans with God's plan, and to embrace His Will as our own.

By daybreak, Jacob has been enlightened and transformed. This is an important turning point in his life. He has realized that only one thing necessary – to cling to God with utmost faith and surrender; and to rely upon Him in all things. God will bless, and He will fulfill whatever He has promised.

Several Fathers of the Church (Justin, Ambrose, Athanasius, Hilary) have suggested that the one who wrestled with Jacob was the Son of God, the Word, who would later become a man. Here, he only appears in the form of an angel or a man.

The name change indicates that Jacob has become a new person. From this moment until his death, he is a man of faith, honour and integrity.

Jacob meets Esau (Genesis 33)

Seeing Esau approaching with four hundred men, Jacob prepares to meet him. Now, he himself goes first, before his family, without fear, and with complete trust in God. There is no deceit. Esau runs out to meet him. They embrace, kiss, and weep together. Esau has forgiven his brother, and the two are reconciled with one another.

Jacob eventually settles in Canaanite territory, at the city of Shechem. There he constructs an altar and calls upon the name of the Lord in worship. This is same place where Abraham had first arrived and built an altar to God. Jacob retraces the steps of his grandfather, Abraham, by moving to Bethel, and then to Hebron.

Jacob in Shechem and the violation of Dinah (Genesis 34)

Hamor was the king of city of Shechem, in Canaan, where Jacob had settled. His son was also named Shechem. When Dinah was visiting some women of the land, Shechem seized her and forced himself upon her. Since he did love her, he asked his father, king Hamor, to make the arrangements for marriage.

King Hamor went out to Jacob to speak with him. Now Jacob had heard that Shechem had defiled his daughter Dinah. King Hamor wants to make amends. He asked Jacob to give his daughter in marriage to his son, Shechem. Furthermore, he expresses his hope that the two peoples would intermarry in the future and become allies. Jacob's people would be allowed to move freely and to use the land for the needs of their flock.

In the hope of avenging their sister, the sons tell Jacob and King Hamor that the marriage could take place only on one condition: that all the males of Shechem be circumcised. In good faith, they do this. On the third day, when all the men were still in pain and weak, Simeon and Levi take their swords and lead a company of men into the city to avenge their sister. All the men of Shechem are killed and the city is looted. The whole event ends in a heart-breaking tragedy.

What had been sacred part of the covenant between God and Abraham (circumcision) is now profaned by Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi. They had used what God had given for their own purposes. Not only did they dishonor their father, but they also dishonoured God and the covenant He had established.

Jacob at Bethel: The Covenant is renewed (Genesis 35:1-15)

God then commands Jacob to move to Bethel: "Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there; and make there an altar to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau" (Gen 35:2). So, Jacob did as he was commanded. He ordered everyone in his household to put away any foreign idols, to purify themselves, and to change into

new garments. Jacob took all the idols and buried them under the oak tree, which was near Shechem. As the journey to Bethel, the terror of God falls upon the other cities of Canaan, so that no one pursues them to avenge the atrocity committed at Shechem. Having arrived at Luz (Bethel), Jacob built an altar and called upon the name of the Lord. At Bethel, God appeared to Jacob again, and re-established His covenant with him. He renews the promise He had made to Abraham (Gen 35:9-15). Jacob raises a stone monument to mark the place where God had spoken to him. He pours oil upon it.

Jacob returns home to his father (Genesis 35:16 -29)

As they journeyed from Bethel towards Hebron, at some distance from Ephrath, Rachel dies giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. She is buried on the road to Ephratha, near Bethlehem.

Jacob (Israel) finally arrives home to his father, Isaac, at Mamre, near Hebron. Isaac dies at the age of a hundred and eighty years (ninety years?). He is buried by his sons Esau and Jacob.

The Genealogy of Esau (Genesis 36)

The story of Jacob ends with the genealogy of Esau, which serves an important purpose. It shows that the older son, Esau, has ceded to the younger son, Jacob, his right to the land. Esau has left Canaan and has come to dwell with his descendants in the hill country of Seir. Esau and his descendants are Edom. The fruitfulness of Esau's line confirms the blessing given to him by his father, Isaac (Gen 26:4).

The special blessing of Israel (Jacob) will not be given to Reuben, the first-born, because of the sin he had committed against his father. The blessing will also not be given to the second and third sons, Simeon, and Levi, because of the dishonour they had brought to their father at Shechem. The sacred blessing of the father, together with the Covenant blessing, will be imparted to the fourth son, Judah. The promised Messiah will come from his lineage.

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