5786 - Genesis 28-32 - Vayeitzei (And he left)

JACOB'S ENCOUNTER WITH GOD (28:10-22)[1]

The biography of Jacob as an independent personality, a patriarch in his own right, now begins. The home-loving favorite of an overprotective mother is now an exile, utterly alone and friendless, embarking on a long perilous journey that is to take him from Beer-sheba in southern Canaan to Haran in northern Mesopotamia. His character is to be tested and refined, his personality molded and transformed by the experience.

In typically nondescriptive biblical style, the narrative provides no details about the adventures or the trials and tribulations of Jacob in the course of his trek, only the bare facts that he set out and that he arrived. This follows the pattern of the accounts of Abraham's three-day journey to Moriah and of his servant's mission to *Aram-naharaim*. In the present instance, however, the silence on detail is broken by the highlighting of a single, momentous encounter on the way, **an encounter not with man but with God**. This event draws the curtain on the cycle of Jacob-Esau stories and prepares the reader for a new phase in the lifc of Jacob.

THE DREAM-REVELATION (vw. 11-15)

I1. He came upon a certain place The impossibility of travel after sunset is the only reason for Jacob's stopping at the nameless "place." The use of this designation is suggestive because Hebrew *makom* frequently has the connotation of "a sacred site" ... To Jacob, however, it is a profane (i.e., non-sacred) place with no prior tradition of holiness, and he treats it with indifference.

12. While Jacob sleeps unsuspectingly in this "place," he receives a dream-revelation. Superficially, the episode recalls the phenomenon of incubation (i.e., to cause or aid the development of something). It was customary throughout the ancicnt world, both Near Eastern and classical, for a devotee to sleep in the sacred precincts of a temple in order to induce the deity to reveal its will. However, **the present narrative emphatically dissociates Jacob's experiencc from this pagan practice by stressing the wholly unplanned nature of his stopover**, the complete anonymity of "the place," and the total unexpectedness of the theophany. Here it is God who freely takes the initiative in revealing Himself to an amazcd Jacob.

Visual imagery and an auditory sensation are the manifest content of the dream. The Hebrew terṁ *sullam*, here rendered “stairway," is unique in the Bible; its etymology is uncertain. It may derive from the stem *s-l-l*, "to cast up a mound," or may be connected with Akkadian *simmiltu*, "steps." *Sullam* could therefore be a ladder or a stairway ramp. The inspirational stimulus for the image seems to be the ladder of ascent to heaven known from Egyptian and Hittite sources, in which both divinities and the souls of the dead are provided with ladders to enable them to ascend from the netherworld to the abodes of men and the gods. Another explanation of the representational reality lies in thc Babylonian ziggurat, the temple tower familiar from the Tower of-Babel story in chapter 11. This edifice was equipped with an external stairway or ramp linking each stage of the tower with the next until "its top reached the sky." It should be noted, though, that in Jacob's dream, the *sullam*, whatever it be, **does not function as a channel of communication between man and God**.

angels of God They play no role in the dream. Their presence may reflect the notion of angelic beings who patrol the carth and report back to God.[(5)] It is also possible that the angelic activity may symbolize Jacob's personal hopes and fears, his prayers for protection, which rise to heaven and receive a response.

13. I am theLORD For this introductory, self-identifying formula, see the Comment to 15:7. In the present context the use of the divine name YHVH has special importance because the revelation is thercby disengaged from any possible connection with El, the head of the Canaanite pantheon, whose name is a component of Bethel, the name soon to be given to the place.

Abrabam ... Isaac **The theophany confirms Jacob as the heir to the divine promises to his forebears**. The continuity of the generations is assured. Jacob thus becomes the third patriarch.

the ground on which you are lying ... ..**Just as he is about to be exiled from the land, his title to it is affirmed**. It is quite possible that Jacob's simple recumbency (i.e., lying down), occasioncd by the sunset, is here transformed by God into a symbolic, formal act that constitutes a mode of legal acquisition. This would correspond to Abraham's walking about the land, discussed in the Comment to 13:17.

14. The wording of the divine promises shows clear dependency on the promise made to Abraham in 13:14-17.

15. The unconditional national promises that project into the distant future conclude on a personal note directed specifically to Jacob in his present predicament.

BETHEL (vv. l6-19)

The next morning Jacob memorializes the events of the night, gives a name to the site, and makes a vow to God. The selection of the name

1 Nahum M. Sarna, Ed., *The JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis* (The Jewish Publication Society), pp. 197-201.

Bethel and its attribution to Jacob are of particular interest because of the paramount importance that the sanctuary at Bethel later assumed in the religious history of Israel and because the undoubted prior Canaanite associations of Bethel are wholly ignorcd ... **The theophany to Jacob provides the sole basis for the sanctity of Bethel, and there is a deliberate dissociation from any sacred antecedents**.

16. Surely the LORD is present in this place This reaction of amazement is unprecedented in the patriarchal stories. Neither Abraham nor Isaac exhibit any surprise at their initial experience of God's sudden self-revelation. Jacob's exceptional emotional response requires explanation. Undoubtedly it lies, at least partially, **in his realization of the baseness of his behavior toward his father and brother**. **He must have been beset with feelings of complete and deserved abandonment by God and man**. **Having fallen prey to guilt and solitary despair, he is surpriscd that God is still concerned for him**. At the same time, "the place" he has stumbled upon possesses no intrinsic value for Jacob. It is merely a convenient spot where he may lodge for the night.

I did not know it Had he known that YHVH would reveal Himself there, he would not have treated the place as profane.

17. Shaken Jacob is profoundly affected by the unique, overwhelming mystery of the encounter with God.

abode of God That is, **the site where He has manifested His presence**. The building or consecration of a sanctuary is not mentioned. When Jacob returns from Haran he erects only an altar (35:7).

the gateway to heaven That is, the place where the angels ascend to and descend from heaven. The notion that such "gateways" existed was widespread. One of the titles of the high priest of Thebes in Egypt was "The Opener of the Gates of Heavens," while the city of Babylon was understood by the Semites to have derived its name from *bab-ilim*, "gate of the god." The phraseology has persisted to this day in the Jewish liturgy.

18. a pillar Hebrew *matsevah* derives from the stem *n-ts-v*, "to stand." It denotes a single, upright slab of stone. Believed to be the repository of a divinity or spirit, it was often used as a cultic object. For this reason, *matsevot* are strictly proscribed in the Torah as being idolatrous. There is also the legitimate *matsevah*, such as, for instance, one that simply memorializes the dead. In 35:20 Jacob erects one for Rachel, and in 2Samuel 18:18 Absalom sets one up for himself because he had no children. The lawful type is also attested in Genesis 31:45-54, where it serves as a mute witness to a treaty between Jacob and Laban. A large stone was similarly used to commemorate the covenant between God and Isral made at Shechem. The wording used in Joshua 24:27 is highly instructive: “See, this very stone shall be a witness against us, for it heard all the words that the LORD spoke to us. This text provides the key to Jacob's action. Because the stone is under his head while he sleeps, it not only marks the spot but functions, as it were, **as a witness to the dream and the accompanying divine promises**.

and poured oil on the top of it This ritual must have held great significance for it is recalled in 31:13, where the stem *m-sh-ch* is used to describe the action. **This is the regular Hebrew term for the sacred ceremony of anointing**. Jacob once again pours oil over a *matsevah* at Bethel on his return from Haran (35:14). The meaning of the anointing is uncertain. It might be a means of consecration in much the same way that the wilderness Tabernacle and its appurtenances (i.e., the “things” associated with the Tabernacle) were thereby dedicated and sanctified.[11] Far more plausible in the present instance is the suggestion that the anointing of the witness stone with oil was a symbolic act establishing a contractual bond between Jacob and God. There is widespread evidence from the ancient Near East for the use of oil in international treaty relationships and in effectuating business contracts. It seems to have been a token of peace, friendship, and assumed obligation. **In Jacob's case, the anointing is connected with the making of a vow that binds him to a certain commitment**. The special connection between the pouring of oil and the vow is explicit in 31:13.

19. Luz The name may mean "an almond tree," as in 30:37. In fact, the region is ideal fruit and nut country. An alternative possibility is to derive it from Arabic *laudh*, "a place of refuge," a name highly appropriate to the present circumstances.[12] The change of place-name is an cxception to the usual instances, which are occasioned by the conguest of a city by new settlers. It should be noted that the text carefully differentiates between the site (Heb. *makom*) of Bethel" and “the city of Luz," even though it implies that the name Bethel displaced an earlier name Luz. This conforms to Joshua 16:2, which clearly treats Bethel and Luz as two distinct and coexisting entities, the latter being situated west of the former. On the other hand, the identity of the two localities is again asserted in Genesis 35:6, Joshua 18:13, and Judges 1:23. The most likely explanation for the discrepancy is that Bethel was originally applied solely to the (religious) area outside the town of Luz. As Bethel grew in fame and importance, the name was gradually extended to the urban area as well. Eventually it eclipsed Luz, which fell into disuse.

THE VOW (vv.20-22)

At this critical moment, while still under the impact of his extraordinary dream experience, Jacob takes upon himself certain obligations. The structure and style of his vow is in accord with a pattern known also from the story of Jephthah in Judges11:30-31, of Hannah in 1Samuel 1:1, and of Ab-

salom in 2Samuel 15:8. In each case the desire of the speaker is formulated as a condition whose fulfllment is wholly dependent upon God's providence; the suppliant solemnly undertakes to discharge some special obligation when this materializes. Jacob's vow is unique in that all the desired conditions have already been unqualificdly promised by God (v. 15).

This peculiarity is noted in Genesis Rabba 70:4, where two possible explanations are given. One is that the true sequence of events has been transposed in the narrative so that, in reality, **the theophany becomes a response to Jacob's vow, which actually preceded it**. The other is that verses 20-22 are not so much conditional as temporal. Jacob pledges himself to a certain course of action as an expression of gratitude to God after the promises will be fulfilled. According to the natural order presupposed by our story, **Jacob's vow cannot be understood as a bargaining with God since all that he asks for has already been promised**.

21. the LORD shall be my God This phrase appears to be the resolution of the vow. It implies a commitment on the part of Jacob to exclusive allegiance to YHVH, which expresses itself through the imposition of a self-discipline that demonstrates that loyalty.

22. And this stone ... shall be God's abode The stone shall function as a witness to Jacob's vow. An eighth-century BCE Aramaic treaty inscription from *Sfire*, in Syria, terms each upright stone on which the treaty is inscribed *antsb'* This is the Aramaic cognate of Hebrew *matsevah*, both words being derived from the same stem *n-ts-v*. That text also designatesthese identical stones "abode of the gods (*bty lby'*) when they serve as witnesses to the treaty. It is clear that *matsevah* is the generic term for an upright stone slab irespective of its function; *beit elohim*, "God's abode," is a specific subcategory of the *matsevah*. It is so called because it symbolizes the divine presence that monitors the fulfllment or infraction of the terms of a treaty or vow.

That the expression *beit 'elohim/'el* in this special, technical sense once had a far wider currency is proved by the fact that it found its way into Grcek usage. Hellenistic writers mention “bethels" (*baituloi*) as certain sacred stones supposedly possessed of divine or demonic powers. In addition ... there is plenty of evidence for a pagan god named “Bethel, who would either have been the deificd sacred stone or the watchful divinity thought to reside in the stone of testimony. Of course, **in the mouth of Jacob the term *beit 'elohim* means that the stone is a testimony to the Divine Presence**.

a tithe The institution of tithe-giving to temples and the royal court is well attested throughout the ancient Near East. Abraham had carlier paid a tithe of the spoils of war to Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem (14:20). Jacob, now empty-handed, vows to pay a tithe to God of all his future possessions on his return. This tithe appears to be a one-time votive offering from the flocks and the products of the soil, not an annual obligation. **The text is intriguingly silent on who is to receive the tithe and what is to be done with it**. Normally one offers the tithe only to a king or to a sanctuary with an established clergy.

(5) Celestial beings who patrol the earth are mentioned in Job I:2 and in Zechariah I:10f.
(11) Cf. Ket. 93a; BK 9a; BM 14a; Shev. 31a
(12) Cf. Ps.38:21; 71:13; 109:20, 29; Zech. 3:1

1. ***In typically nondescriptive biblical style, the narrative provides no details about the adventures ... and tribulations of Jacob in the course of his trek, only the bare facts that he set out and that he arrived.***
2. *However,* ***the present narrative emphatically dissociates Jacob's experiencc from this pagan practice (i.e., of sleeping in the sacred precints of a temple) by stressing the wholly unplanned nature of his stopover ...***
   a. The Jewish calendar did not originally use the name "Tammuz" for its months. In the pre-Babylonian era, the months were typically referred to by their ordinal number (e.g., "the fourth month") or by names that appeared only occasionally in the Hebrew Bible. For example, **the month now known as Tammuz is simply called "the fourth month"** in the book of Jeremiah (39:2).[2]

      The shift to using the name "Tammuz" occurred after the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE. When the Jewish people returned from Babylon, they brought with them the Babylonian names for the months, including Tammuz. This change is documented in rabbinic sources, such as the Jerusalem Talmud, which states that the modern names of the months "came up [to Israel] with [the returnees] from Babylon." Thus, the Jewish calendar adopted the names of the months as they were used in the Babylonian calendar, reflecting the profound cultural influence of the Babylonian empire on the Jewish people during and after the exile

      1) Zechariah 8:19—Zechariah, a “post-exilic” prophet
         [19]This is what the LORD Almighty says: "The fasts of the fourth (Tammuz), fifth (Av), seventh (Tishrei) and tenth (Tevet) months will become joyful and glad occasions ... for Judah ..."

      2) 1Corinthians 8:4
         ... [4]about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one."
3. *It should be noted, though, that in Jacob's dream, the* sullam ... ***does not function as a channel of communication between man and God.***

2 www.notion.com

a. Genesis 28:10-15

[10]Jacob left Beersheba ... [11]When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night ... [12]He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. [13]**There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying**. [14]Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth ... **All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring**. [15]I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

b. John 1:50-51

[50]Yeshua said (to Nathaniel, a friend of Phillip) ... You will see greater things than that." [51]He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, **and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man.**"

4. ***angels of God*** *They play no role in the dream. Their presence may reflect the notion of angelic beings who patrol the carth and report back to God.*

1) Job 1:6-7

[6]One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and (the) Satan (i.e., "the accuser") also came with them. [7]The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" (The) Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it."

2) Zechariah 1:7-10

[7]On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, the month of Shevat ... the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah ... [8]During the night I had a vision, and there before me was a man mounted on a red horse ... [9]I asked, "What are these, my lord?" The angel who was talking with me answered, "I will show you what they are." [10]Then the man ... explained, "They are the ones the LORD has sent to go throughout the earth" (*i.e.*, and check on things).

3) Hebrews 1:14

[14]Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

5. ***15.*** The unconditional national promises that project into the distant future conclude on a personal note directed specifically to Jacob in his present predicament.

a. The unconditional nature of God's covenant with Abraham is a central theme in biblical theology. This covenant, established in Genesis 15, is characterized by God's unilateral commitment to fulfill its promises, regardless of Abraham's actions. The covenant ceremony, where God alone passed through the divided animals, symbolizes His sole responsibility for the promise. This principle is further supported bythe fact that no conditions were stated when the covenant was formally established, and **it was confirmed to be everlasting**. The covenant with Abraham is a testament to God's unwavering faithfulness and grace, offering assurance to believers of His eternal promises.

b. Psalm 94:14

[14]For **the LORD will not reject his people**; he will never forsake his inheritance.

6. ***and poured oil on the top of it*** *This ritual must have held great significance for it is recalled in 31:13, where the stem m-sh-ch is used to describe the action.* ***This is the regular Hebrew term for the sacred ceremony of anointing.***

a. Leviticus 4:3

[3]"'If **the anointed priest** sins, bringing guilt on the people, he must bring to the LORD a young bull without defect as a sin offering for the sin he has committed.

הַכֹּהֵן הַמָּשִׁיחַ (*ha-cohen ha-mashiach*)—"the anointed priest."

b. Numbers 7:84

[84]These were the offerings of the Israelite leaders for the dedication of **the altar when it was anointed** ...

הַמִּזְבֵּחַ בְּיוֹם הִמָּשַׁח (*ha-mizbeach b'yom hi-mashach*)—"the altar on the day it was anointed."

c. 1Sam. 16:13

[13]So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David ...

וַיִּקַּח שְׁמוּאֵל אֶת־קֶרֶן הַשֶּׁמֶן וַיִּמְשַׁח אֹתוֹ (*va-yikach Sh'muel et keren ha-shemen va-yimshach oto*)

d. Matthew 1:18

[18]This is how the birth of Yeshua the Messiah came about ...

יֵשׁוּעַ הַמָּשִׁיחַ (*yeshua ha-mashiach*)—"Yeshua the Messiah."

e. Isaiah 52:13

[13]See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.

1) Targum Jonathan on Isaiah 52:13

[13]Behold, **My servant the Messiah** shall prosper, he shall be exalted and great and very powerful.

עַבְדִּי הַמָּשִׁיחַ (*av-di ha-mashiach*)—“my servant the Messiah.”

7. *The structure and style of his vow is in accord with a pattern known also from the story of Jephthah in Judges11:30-31, of Hannah in 1Samuel 1:1f, and of Absalom in 2Samuel 15:8.* ***In each case the desire of the speaker is formulated as a condition whose fulfillment is wholly dependent upon God's providence****; the suppliant solemnly undertakes to discharge some special obligation when this materializes. Jacob's vow is unique in that all the desired conditions have already been unqualificdly promised by God (v. 15).*

a. Judges 11:30-31

30 And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: "**If you give the Ammonites into my hands**, 31 whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

b. 1Samuel 1:10-11

10 In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly. 11 And she made a vow, saying, "LORD Almighty, **if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me**, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

c. 2Samuel 15:6-10

6 Absalom ... stole the hearts of the people of Israel.

7 At the end of four years, Absalom said to the king, "Let me go to Hebron and fulfill a vow I made to the LORD. 8 While your servant was living at Geshur in Aram, I made this vow: '**If the LORD takes me back to Jerusalem**, I will worship the LORD in Hebron. '" 9 The king (i.e., David) said to him, "Go in peace." So he went to Hebron. 10 Then Absalom sent secret messengers throughout the tribes of Israel to say, "As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpets, then say, 'Absalom is king in Hebron.'"

8. ***... in his realization of the baseness of his behavior toward his father and brother. He must have been beset with feelings of complete and deserved abandonment by God and man. Having fallen prey to guilt and solitary despair, he is surpriscd that God is still concerned for him***

a. Exodus 3:10-11

10 So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." 11 But Moses said to God, "**Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh** and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

b. 1Samuel 18:18

18 But David said to Saul, "**Who am I**, and what is my family or my clan in Israel, that I should become the king's son-in-law?"

c. Judges 6:14-15

14 The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" 15 "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but **how can I save Israel?** My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family."

d. Isaiah 6:5

5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "**I am ruined!** For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

e. Jeremiah 1:6

6 "Alas, Sovereign LORD," I said, "**I do not know how to speak; I am too young**."

f. 2Corinthians 3:5

5 Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but **our competence comes from God**.