

GENESIS 28

Verses 1–5: Jacob Was Sent Away

In contrast with the previous narrative in Genesis 27, where Isaac appeared to be on his deathbed (27:1–2), here Isaac appeared to be in full control of his faculties (he ultimately goes on to live 80 more years; see Genesis 35:28–29).¹ Isaac knowingly blessed Jacob with “the blessing of Abraham” and promised that he may “inherit the land . . . which God gave unto Abraham” (28:4).

Ironically, Jacob now had to leave the land just promised to him (verse 5). This was necessary partially in order to fulfill the other part of God’s promise: to make Jacob “fruitful . . . that thou mayest be a multitude of people” (verse 3), for which he obviously needed a wife. Since Jacob was commanded *not* to take a wife from amongst the Canaanites (verse 1), he had to be sent away to seek a wife among his mother’s kinsmen (verse 2). Yet it was also partially due to the need to put some distance between himself and his brother, Esau, who felt wronged by Jacob’s actions in the previous chapter and was thus plotting murderous revenge (27:41–45). As such, the circumstances of Jacob’s departure from the land promised to him made the time of his return (if ever) uncertain, thereby heightening the narrative drama as readers wonder if and how God’s promises would be fulfilled under these circumstances.²

Verses 6–9: Esau Married Mahalath, the Daughter of Ishmael

Meanwhile, Esau overheard Isaac’s instructions to Jacob about not marrying foreign women (Genesis 28:6). Previously, Esau had married two “Hittite” women, which grieved Isaac and Rebekah (26:34–35;

¹ Aaron P. Schade, “Isaac and Jacob: Succession Narratives, Birthrights, and Blessings,” in *From Creation to Sinai: The Old Testament Through the Lens of the Restoration*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap and Aaron P. Schade (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2021), 368–369 (esp. n53), 373.

² Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 72.

27:46). Realizing that this did not please his parents (28:8), Esau now took a third wife, this time from among his father’s kin (verse 9), perhaps hoping this would be more pleasing to his parents and help him regain the birthright while Jacob was in foreign lands.³

Verses 10–22: The Lord Confirmed Jacob’s Blessing

As Jacob departed his homeland under duress, he had the first of two major encounters with God that bracket his time outside of Canaan (compare Genesis 32:22–32).⁴ As Jacob stopped for the night at “a certain place,” he rested his head on some stones and fell asleep (28:11). As he dreamed, he saw a “ladder,” or as other translations put it, a “stairway”⁵ leading up to heaven, with angels ascending and descending it (verse 12). Above the stairway, Jacob saw the Lord (verse 13). Now the Lord Himself confirmed the promises Jacob received in his blessing from Isaac: God would give to Jacob and his posterity the land of Canaan, and his posterity would be “as the dust of the earth” (verses 13–14). In doing so, the Lord confirmed that Jacob was indeed the inheritor of the covenant given previously to Abraham and Isaac.⁶

But the Lord added a specific promise unique to Jacob’s circumstances: the Lord assured Jacob that God will be with him “and will bring thee again into this land” (verse 15). Exactly how this would be fulfilled is unclear at this point since the tensions with Esau, his brother, still remained, but now Jacob had received the assurance directly from the Lord that he *would* return and inherit the land. Jacob had now been blessed three times: the first was obtained from his father through stratagem (27:1–29), the second given outright to him by Isaac (28:3–4), and the third given to him directly by God (28:13–15). This sequence, culminating with a blessing given by the Lord Himself, seems calculated to reinforce Jacob’s legitimacy as the proper heir of the Abrahamic covenant and to dispel any doubts that might arise from the circumstances surrounding the first of these three blessings.

In response, Jacob promised for the first time to reciprocate: upon awakening, he marveled that this place was the “house of God” (verse 17; Hebrew *bayt ’elohim*) and thus called the place “Bethel” (verse 19). Jacob then vowed that if Lord would fulfill His promise, Jacob would be faithful to Him and give Him a tenth of all that he gained (verses 20–22). “Jacob’s conditional vow does not express a lack of faith in God’s promises but thankfulness for them.”⁷

3 Connie Gundry Tappy, “Genesis,” in *The Eerdmans Companion to the Bible*, ed. Gordon Fee and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 98.

4 Dennis T. Olson, “Genesis,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: One Volume Commentary*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and David Petersen (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 23.

5 See the New International Version, New English Translation, and Lexham English Bible.

6 Olson, “Genesis,” 23.

7 Tappy, “Genesis,” 98.

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