

Genesis 28:10 – 22

¹⁰ Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. ¹² He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. ¹⁴ Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵ Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' ¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.' ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' ¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top. ¹⁹ He called the name of that place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz. ²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, ²¹ and I return to my father's house in safety, then the LORD will be my God. ²² This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.'

Historical and Cultural Background

- *Luz*: The city's name came from the verb *luz* (לֹזַז), meaning 'to turn aside.' In the Bible, this word is used in a mostly negative way, either as a 'turning away' from wisdom (Proverbs 3:21, 4:21) or being a 'twisted' person (Proverbs 3:32, 14:2). The derivative *lazut* (לְזוּזָה) means 'deviation' or 'crookedness' and is used only in Proverbs 4:24. A noun variation *luz* means almond wood. The latter word is used only in Genesis 30:37, where Jacob strips branches of the crooked almond tree.
- *Bethel*: Jacob renames Luz a name which means 'house of God.'
- *Pillar*: There is a play on words here: the word for 'pillar' (*masseba*) is close to 'resting' (*mussab*) and 'stood' (*nissab*).

Questions

1. Where is Jacob? Geographically? Relationally? He is running, between a brother who wants to kill him and an uncle who will take advantage of him.
2. What do you notice about the term 'place'?
 - a. Why is the name 'Luz' something that is revealed later in the story?
 - b. What is the significance of Jacob giving it the name 'Bethel'?
3. Why do you think God appears to Jacob here? Or is it the other way around – is Jacob more open to hearing from God when he is in this 'place' of exile?
4. Why is it that when we are in 'exile' or away from home, we can become more spiritually sensitive?
5. What do you think Jacob understood from Abraham and Isaac? Did he believe what they told him?
6. Is Jacob the type of person at this point who wants to be a blessing to all peoples of the earth? How much does God have to shape his heart?
 - a. He's been raised in a family with favoritism, and he's become too competitive.
 - b. That is one of the values of being in exile. We are not 'at home.' We are forced to be open to the world. So in some sense, we might be more open to God's heart for the world.
 - c. College is often such a place. You are 'between' – not at home and also exposed to the world in a way that God can use to expand your heart for it.
 - d. Illus: My mentor's mentor, Brian Morgan, writes this: 'The first occasion was when I was nineteen. I was in Florence for two semesters of study. Arriving there in the darkness of night, I came to the villa where I was to spend the next six months. I climbed the spiral staircase to my room on the third floor, opened the window overlooking the city, and felt a cold stab of loneliness taking over my soul. Yet this would become the "place" of an incredible journey with God.'
7. What do you think the dream was like for Jacob?
 - a. A 'ladder' might really have been a tower, like the Tower of Babel (Gen.11:1 – 9). Except this time, it is not people reaching up to God trying to survive the next flood (a wrong presumption to start with). It is God bridging the chasm between heaven and earth by coming down to us.
 - b. Jacob probably heard about the story of Babel from his forefathers Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah.
 - c. This is what Jewish-Christian poet Denise Levertov suggests about this dream:

Jacob's Ladder¹

The stairway is not
a thing of gleaming strands
a radiant evanescence
for angels' feet that only glance in their tread, and need not
touch the stone.

It is of stone.
A rosy stone that takes
a glowing tone of softness
only because behind it the sky is a doubtful, a doubting
night gray.

A stairway of sharp
angles, solidly built.
One sees that the angels must spring
down from one step to the next, giving a little
lift of the wings:

and a man climbing
must scrape his knees, and bring
the grip of his hands into play. The cut stone
consoles his groping feet. Wings brush past him.

¹ Denise Levertov, *Poems 1960-1967* (New York: New Directions Books, 1966), p.39.

The poem ascends.

8. Why do you think Jacob bargains with God?
 - a. He's heard of God and the promise, surely, from his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham (Isaac was 40 years old when Jacob and Esau were born, which means that Abraham was 140 and lived until 175 years of age. So Jacob would have overlapped with Abraham for 35 years.)
 - b. But Jacob had to fight and connive and deceive in order to receive the blessing from Isaac. His heart is conditioned by his family experience to be this way.
9. Why does Jacob build a 'pillar'? Consider the wordplay. 'Pillar' (*masseba*) is a play on words, close to 'resting' (*mussab*) and 'stood' (*nissab*)
 - a. To remind himself, to mark the place where he rested and yet also stood in God's presence
 - b. To represent what would happen. Oil tends to be a symbol of blessing, and eventually becomes a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Jacob is describing in physical form the ladder in his dream. God is pouring out blessing from heaven down to earth.
 - c. All of a sudden, we learn that Jacob was near a Canaanite city called Luz. Why did the narration spring it on us here? Perhaps the reason is, as J.P. Fokkelman suggests, 'Before the theophany transformed the maqom ['place'] into Bethel, it had already accomplished another thing. By the theophany, Canaanite Luz has been exposed, leached, purged to the zero-state of 'a place.' God does not want to appear to Jacob in a Canaanite town, but he wants to appear in another which only his appearing will turn into a something, but then no less a House of God. Where the history of the covenant between YHWH and his people begins, all preceding things grow pale. Canaan loses its face, Luz is deprived of its identity papers.'²
 - d. Illus: Brian Morgan continues his story: 'When I felt banished from my home to lonely exile in Italy, God led me to such a place. On a small Greek island I shared Christ with a group of students in a restaurant. Later, I walked to the edge of the sea and stood right above the stone sea wall. As I lifted my gaze upward, the light of the full moon over the Aegean seized me in the darkness. Suddenly the love of God descended into the very air around me, and enveloped me. There were no words to express the feeling in my heart, except to say it was burning (Luke 24:32). Years later, my wife, Emily, purchased a travel poster that captured the scene exactly as I remembered it. Then she framed it and presented to me as a memorial of that wonderful moment. The place was Mykonos, a famous destination for youthful pleasures. But for me, this 'no place' was a holy place, and the framed memory became my first *masseba*.'
 - e. How does Jacob become a changed person after this encounter with God?
 - f. How might you be a changed person after encountering God, especially knowing His desire to bless you and other people around you? You might continue on the same physical journey, but with an entirely different inner experience of that journey. Knowing God is with you makes all the difference. Consider this hymn by Philip Doddridge:

O God of Bethel, by Whose hand
Thy people still are fed,
Who through this weary pilgrimage
Hast all our fathers led.

Our vows, our prayers, we now present
Before Thy throne of grace;
God of our fathers, be the God
Of their succeeding race.

Through each perplexing path of life
Our wandering footsteps guide;
Give us each day our daily bread
And raiment fit provide.

O spread Thy covering wings around,

² J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1975), p.67

Till all our wanderings cease,
And at our Father's loved abode
Our souls arrive in peace.