

Genesis 35:1 – 29

¹ Then God said to Jacob, ‘Arise, go up to Bethel and live there, and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.’ ² So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, ‘Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments; ³ and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.’ ⁴ So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem. ⁵ As they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. ⁶ So Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. ⁷ He built an altar there, and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed Himself to him when he fled from his brother. ⁸ Now Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak; it was named Allon-bacuth. ⁹ Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him. ¹⁰ God said to him, ‘Your name is Jacob; you shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.’ Thus He called him Israel. ¹¹ God also 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 forth from you. ¹² The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you.’ ¹³ Then God went up from him in the place where He had spoken with him. ¹⁴ Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a pillar of stone, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. ¹⁵ So Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel. ¹⁶ Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and she suffered severe labor. ¹⁷ When she was in severe labor the midwife said to her, ‘Do not fear, for now you have another son.’ ¹⁸ It came about as her soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. ¹⁹ So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). ²⁰ Jacob set up a pillar over her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel’s grave to this day. ²¹ Then Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. ²² It came about while Israel was dwelling in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine, and Israel heard of it. ²³ The sons of Leah: Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn, then Simeon and Levi and Judah and Issachar and Zebulun; ²⁴ the sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin; ²⁵ and the sons of Bilhah, Rachel’s maid: Dan and Naphtali; ²⁶ and the sons of Zilpah, Leah’s maid: Gad and Asher. These are the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram. ²⁷ Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre of Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. ²⁸ Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. ²⁹ Isaac breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, an old man of ripe age; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

Historical and Cultural Background

- Jacob dumped all the other idols. He ‘hid them under the oak’ means ‘buried them.’ ‘The rare Hebrew term...may signify that they were buried ignominiously (i.e. ‘dumped’). This is a unique procedure. Later Israelite leaders burned them (Ex. 32:30; Dt.9:21; 1 Ki.15:13; 1 Chr.14:12).’ (Waltke, *Genesis*, p.472 – 473)
- Bethel was the place that God first appeared to Jacob, when he was running away from Esau and left for Aram.
- Ben-oni means son of my sorrow.

Questions

1. Why did it take so long for Jacob to call his whole household to put away their idols?
 - a. Recall that Rachel had stolen her father Laban's household gods, and brought them with her. Jacob didn't know this at the time. But presumably he has found out by this time. Is this a way of kindly calling out Rachel by inviting everyone in his own household to do this?
2. What do you think it meant for Jacob to return to Bethel?
 - a. Spiritual renewal in his relationship with God
 - b. Why is the death of Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, mentioned here (35:8)? A motherly person from Jacob's past, who was part of the family, has now passed on. This is a theme in this passage. His father dies, too.
 - c. God appears again to Jacob and restates His promise to Abraham: 'God also 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 forth from you' (Gen.35:11; cf. Gen.17:5 – 7 and 12:1 – 3). Why did God add these amplified details from Gen.12:1 – 3?
 - i. God is free to travel in the same direction as His promise. Amplification is no problem.
 - ii. God is restoring the creational blessing that should have rested on all humanity. Now, God is making clear He is making of Israel a new humanity, in some sense.
 - iii. Perhaps God is showing Jacob that it is people who follow in his faith, not just who are genetically descended from him, who will be among the 'company of nations.'
 - iv. God is showing Jacob that there will be a line of kings that will come through him. Jacob will look for who among his sons will bear the kingship. By the time he is on his deathbed, Jacob will eventually see by faith that it is Judah (Gen.49:8 – 12).
3. But there is also unexpected heartache: Rachel dies after giving birth to Ben-oni, whom Jacob renames Benjamin.
 - a. Perhaps Jacob gets a sense, by renaming Ben-oni, that God was renaming him.
4. Why does Reuben have sex with Bilhah?
 - a. Notice that Bilhah was Rachel's handmaiden (35:25)
 - b. He wants to degrade Bilhah so that Jacob would not favor her in Rachel's place
 - c. This is how Reuben disqualifies himself from being the firstborn and bearing the kingship (Gen.49).
 - d. How does Reuben's way of dealing with his father Jacob's favoritism echo Jacob's own way of dealing with his father Isaac's favoritism?
5. Then Jacob is reunited with his father Isaac. Why do you think the narrator tells us absolutely nothing about this long-awaited encounter between Jacob and his father?
 - a. The story invites us to speculate and reflect on our own lives
 - b. The story invites us to reflect on Jacob's life and consider different possibilities
 - c. What Jacob might have been longing for, the kindness and blessing of his father, wasn't there
6. Is there a comparison being made between burying the idols, burying Deborah, burying Rachel, and burying Isaac?
 - a. There is a sequence of sorts, emotionally. We get the sense that Jacob is voluntarily turning to God by burying the idols. We also get the sense for his loss of people who were familiar and important to him. Jacob idolized Rachel in the sense that he did not treat Leah or her side of the family fairly. Jacob probably idolized his father's blessing and approval.
 - b. Where does this leave Jacob? He can either look to God with his emotional needs, or turn to his children and keep playing favorites. Unfortunately, he will turn to his children and play favorites before he turns to God.
 - c. Illus: What is it like to bury something? Whether that thing is negative (idols) or positive (a loved one)? [story] But even those times, God invites us to let Him fill us.
7. What significance is there to letting God rename you and give you your identity in relationship to Himself?
 - a. It corresponds to burying things from our past, letting them die or fade away.
 - b. It often can happen when your parents die and you are orphaned. Your sense of needing God as a parent is heightened.