

Not Ashamed to Be Called Their God

Light and shade in the life of Jacob.

Gen. 34 and 35 cover a portion of the life of Jacob, following his meeting with Esau when he returned to the land with his family.

First is the incident of Dinah and Shechem. Then the command to go to Bethel. He puts away the strange gods of his household, goes to Bethel and builds an altar there; God appears to him and renews the covenant. He journeys on, and Rachel dies while giving birth to Benjamin. Reuben defiles Jacob's concubine Bilhah. Finally he reaches Isaac, his father, at Hebron. And lastly, Isaac dies and Jacob and Esau bury him.

The account, on the surface, is in the main sordid, sad and purposeless—just a common record of human weakness, evil and misfortune. But these things are all recorded for a purpose. They all form part of those things which, says Paul, were "written for our admonition." Although the surface picture is one of the natural, and apparently purposeless, heaving of troubled waters, yet *beneath* it there is a strong current of divine direction and control.

Jacob is working out his salvation, and learning obedience by the things which he suffers. The record is a strange mixture of the human and the divine. Between the sordid episodes of Dinah and Reuben we find the glorious events of Bethel.

There is very little recorded of happiness or peace in the lives of the patriarchs. It is mostly trouble, and friction, and danger, and sorrow, and the endless, restless, journeying onward. In Abraham's picture there was the conflict of Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael. In Isaac's, that between Esau and Jacob. And Jacob's family was the scene of continual jealousy and strife.

To the patriarchs, as they struggled through their lives, the broad picture was not as clear as it is to us, for we can look back from the vantage point of a long historical fulfilment. So we find that Abraham pleaded that Ishmael might be accepted as the seed through which the Redeemer should come. And Isaac loved Esau, and sought to transmit the great treasure of the divine blessing through him.

We may wonder at this, but (though God, Who sees the end from the beginning, made choice of Jacob before their birth) there may have been aspects of Jacob's natural character that needed beautifying through trial, and of Esau's that were robust and appealing.

It takes suffering and adversity to bring out character. We know—because we have the completed record of their lives, and the verdict of the Spirit—that Jacob was a *man of faith*, and Esau a *profane person*. But a man of faith may have much to learn about love and truth and kindness and largeness of heart. Jacob, who first comes to our notice involved in a deception, finds that deception stalks him throughout his life. His deception doubtless was well-meaning, and was even rooted in a misapplication of his faith, but it is a strange irony that, as he used the skin of a kid of the goats to deceive *his* father, so he was deceived in a much more cruel way by his own sons with the blood of a kid of the goats.

The first chapter (34) is entirely about the affair of Dinah and Shechem. It all began when, as we read in v. 1:

"Dinah went out to see the daughters of the land."

We wonder why the events of this chapter should happen—and why they were recorded. When we look at the results it would seem that the overall purpose in the divine plan was the breaking up of the association that was forming between the family of Jacob and these Canaanites.

Both Abraham and Isaac had shown great anxiety that the holy seed should not be joined in marriage with the people of the land. We wonder, therefore, why Jacob should buy land and plan to settle down at the gate of a Canaanite city. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were, by divine decree, strangers and pilgrims. Integration with the people of the land was the one thing above all others that must be avoided.

As we look over the lives of Abraham and Isaac, we see how events conspired to keep them separate and ever moving. Even the incidents of representing their wives as sisters had the result of their being sent out from among the people with whom they were dwelling.

Beside keeping separate, one other thing was very important. Until the foreordained time came for God to take them to Egypt (as foreshadowed to Abraham) they had to stay in the land—but as *pilgrims*, not as settlers. We remember Abraham went into Egypt because of the famine, but circumstances soon caused his return. When a similar famine came in the days of Isaac, God very significantly told him NOT to go to Egypt, promising to care for him in the land.

When Abraham sent back to Haran for a wife for Isaac, his most pressing instruction to his servant was that he should not—under any circumstances—ever take Isaac back to Haran. If the woman would not come to the promised land, the marriage would not be consummated. (There is a type in this.)

But arising out of the complications and frictions of the deception about the blessing, Isaac—influenced by Rebekah—sent Jacob back to Haran, out of the promised land where they had been commanded to dwell. Thus one mis-step led to another, and Jacob became so enmeshed and involved at Haran that it took 20 years of hardship and oppression to drive him back to the land again.

And now he is back he settles down at the gate of the city of Shechem. He seems to forget for the time that the divine choice of his family was founded on complete separation from the people of the world. God had said to Abraham:

"Get thee OUT . . . and I will bless thee."

Just as He declared to us through the apostle Paul:

"Come ye OUT . . . and I will be your Father."

See how Lot made the sad mistake of getting involved in the corrupt city-life of the heathen. The plain of the Jordan was prosperous and populous—exciting and inviting—so Lot "pitched his tent toward Sodom," just exactly as Jacob pitched his tent before Shechem—just as close as he could get without going in.

When we think of this matter of cities, we are reminded of the Rechabites, whose father commanded them not to drink wine, build houses, sow seed nor plant vineyards,—but to dwell all their days in tents. Not that there was anything wrong in these things as such, but they were to remain perpetually pilgrims, and be constantly reminded of their difference and separation from the surrounding people and their evil ways.

There is much of deep significance in these Rechabites. In the midst of general corruption, Jeremiah found that they had remained true to their covenant of separation, and because of this God pronounced a solemn blessing on their family for ever.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were divinely appointed to possess none of the land—to have *no settled life*. This was to be a big point for the instruction of future generations—keeping the issues very clear concerning the time and condition of the fulfilment of the covenant. And is it no more than a meaningless coincidence that the true Heir, the long-awaited Seed, spent his life as a pilgrim on the roads of this same land—his non-possession of it so complete that he had nowhere to lay his head, and must be buried in another's sepulchre?

"Lot pitched his tent *toward* Sodom." The next thing we hear about him he is right *inside*. True, he vexes his righteous soul from day to day because of the city's corruption and wickedness—but he still stays there. Why? Apparently because he has become involved, and cannot leave. It is always much easier to get in than to get out.

The whole picture points to the conclusion that he had taken a wife from there—a wife whose heart remained in Sodom right to the end. And his children married there. When he tried to persuade them to leave the doomed city, his sons-in-law laughed him to scorn. What an unhappy position he had gotten himself into! The angels of God tugging at him from one side, and his family ties all pulling in the opposite way!

So Jacob *bought some land*, and pitched his tent at the gate of Shechem, apparently with a view to permanency. As was to be expected in the circumstances, his daughter Dinah mingles with the daughters of the land. Something is necessary to bring things to a head, and to put the chosen family back on its divinely-appointed course of separation and pilgrimage. And we find that something—the Dinah-Shechem affair—DOES occur that has the effect of completely isolating Jacob from the Canaanites. Summing it up at the end of the chapter, Jacob says:

"Ye have troubled me to make me to stink among the inhabitants of the land."

We are not to assume, because God used this incident, that He approved the treacherous actions of Levi and Simeon. Speaking prophetically by the Spirit at the end of his life, Jacob says:

"Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel: I will scatter them in Israel."

Their killing of the prince Shechem—"more honorable than all his father's house"—is used as a type of their crucifixion of the Prince of Life—"In their anger they slew a man."

Jacob is very distressed—fearful that all the inhabitants of the land will gather together against him. At this point God again openly intervenes in his life, and says to him:

"Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell THERE, and there make an altar unto God Who appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from Esau."

This was just what Jacob needed, and at the right time. His comfortable settling down at Shechem has been violently broken up, and he is again fleeing in fear. .

First God says: "Go and dwell at Bethel." This command brings into sharp contrast the associations of Bethel with those of Shechem where Jacob had *planned* to dwell. Bethel means "House of God." It was sanctified by the vision of the ladder, the pillar Jacob had set up, and the divine covenant.

Next, the command to build an altar there focuses his mind on God's great purpose through his family; it gives him strength and encouragement and resolve.

And finally, being reminded of God's former assuring appearance to him when he was fleeing from danger—just as he is now— would add to his renewed courage. So a new and brighter chapter opens. We turn from the sordid things of men to the glorious things of God.

"Then said Jacob unto his household, 'Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments' "(35:2).

Here is a new atmosphere. Jacob is reawakening. Here again we have the Jacob who wrestled all the night with the angel, and who was given the noble title of Israel—"Prince with God."

So (vs. 4) they gave Jacob all the strange gods that were among them. It was a general reformation of his household, in preparation for his communion with God at Bethel. We may wonder how it could be that there *were* strange gods in the possession of his household, but in the type of community over which Jacob presided, and in which (judging by his sons) he was practically the only one with a living comprehension of the true God, such practices could very easily develop, unless Jacob constantly rooted them out.

In a somewhat different sense, we would unfortunately find a similar condition in the modern communities of the called-out family of Israel, for "All are not Israel who are of Israel." It behoves us all, then, like Jacob, to gather up all the strange gods and all the earrings—all the flashy and fleshy baubles—and bury them under the oak which is by Shechem; leave them behind at forsaken and ill-remembered Shechem where they belong. It is surely significant that Joshua used these *same words* to Israel, in the *same place*. In Josh. 24:23-26, we find him saying—

"Now, therefore, put away the strange gods which are among you. And the people said, 'We will serve the Lord.' And Joshua made a covenant with the people that day in Shechem, and wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone and set it up there under an oak."

It was on this memorable occasion that Joshua declared—

"Choose ye this day whom ye will serve! As for me and my house—WE WILL SERVE THE LORD!"

Arriving at Bethel, Jacob built the altar as commanded, and God again appeared to him, giving him assurance of the glorious promises concerning his name, his seed, and his inheritance of the land.

But the dark side of the picture turns toward us again the next few verses. Dark, and yet strangely beautiful even in its sadness. Paul, writing to the Galatians, hinges a doctrinal argument on the figurative meaning of the relationship between Sarah and Hagar. He says:

"These are the 2 covenants: Hagar is Mt. Sinai—in bondage with her children."

When we study the relationship of Leah and Rachel, we have the same picture: Rachel the old Mosaic economy—Leah the new; Rachel the flesh—Leah the spirit. By the decision of her father, Leah was the first and the true wife. Paul carefully points out how the Law of Moses (Rachel), to which the natural Jew leaned with such affection, was secondary to, and later than, the original Abrahamic covenant of the Christ-seed.

Leah was "*tender-eyed*"—the word means soft and gentle—but Rachel was beautiful. Jacob preferred Rachel because of outward appearances, just as the Jew loved the outward forms of the Law, but God—who looks upon the heart—ordained that both the priesthood and the throne should come through the line of the unwanted Leah.

But still Rachel has her appointed part to play. As the figure of natural Israel it is she who gives birth to Joseph, the favorite and faithful son of his father, and the most striking type in all Scripture of the rejected Savior.

And now Rachel dies. We remember that as they fled from Laban, Rachel clung to her father's idols. When Laban pursued Jacob and charged him with this theft, Jacob says:

"With whomsoever thou findest thy gods, let him not live!"

They were not discovered, for Rachel concealed them by a deception. In her clinging to these gods of her idolatrous ancestors we can see a type of Israel's self-destructive course all down through their history.

"Whoever is found with them, let him not live." So as they journey on again from Bethel, the covenant-sanctified House of God, Rachel dies—just a little way before they reach Bethlehem. *She did not quite reach Bethlehem.* She was buried and left behind while Jacob and Leah went on to finish the journey together.

The significance of the introduction of Bethlehem into the picture at this point surely cannot be missed! Leah, we later learn, was buried with the patriarchs in the family burying-place of Abraham, the cave of Machpeleh, but Rachel is buried by the wayside on the journey.

She died in giving birth to Israel's last son. As she died, she named him Ben-oni—"son of my sorrow"; but his father called him Benjamin—"son of my right hand." How clearly we see Israel in this allegory! The nation of Israel, as constituted under the old covenant, died in giving birth to Israel's last great son—the Messiah. We recall how Matthew quotes Jeremiah's reference to Rachel weeping for her children, and applies it to the nation at this very time and occasion.

The nation called this child Ben-oni—*son of my sorrow*. Isaiah 53 clearly gives their view of him:

"Despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrow . . . we esteemed him not."

He was "son of their sorrow," too, in that—even while they esteemed him smitten of God—he "bore their grief and carried their sorrows." They called him son of their sorrow also in their rejection and abuse of him. But his father called him Benjamin—*son of my right hand*. David speaks of him (Psa. 80:17), as—

"The man of God's right hand; the son of man whom God made strong for Himself."

This son of God's right hand has now, says Paul,

"Sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high."

After Rachel was buried, Jacob journeyed on. The next event (vs. 22) is the relation of Reuben with Bilhah, his father's concubine. The event is passed over very briefly here, without comment, but it had very far-reaching consequences. When Jacob was about to die, he blessed his sons, and spoke prophetically of the later history of their families. Beginning with Reuben, he said (Gen. 49:3-4)—

"Reuben, thou art my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power."

That is what *might have been*, but he continues—

"Thou shalt NOT excel (that is, have the excellency), because thou wentest up to thy father's bed."

And so in 1 Chr. 5:1 we read that because of this act, the birthright and pre-eminence was taken from the house of Reuben and given to the sons of Joseph. Things may often appear to be passed over without notice at the time, but God does not forget. Let us take this lesson to heart. Let us be impressed by the fact that any action of ours may have great and lasting consequences of good or evil. The Bible contains many such incidents—where the whole course of history and people's destinies are affected by a seemingly small and passed-over act.

"And Jacob came unto Isaac his father" (v. 27).

No mention is made of Rebekah. It would appear from this that she had died sometime during the long years since Jacob had fled from home in fear of Esau. Rebekah had said:

"Go to Laban, and tarry with him a few days."

It does not appear that she ever saw Jacob again. What a long train of events developed from the spur-of-the-moment deception concerning the blessing!

The final event of the chapter is the death and burial of Isaac, 180 years old. We know very little about those 180 years. It was not intended that we should know. Just a few incidents are picked out and recorded for a purpose. But we do know that those 180 years were spent in patient and faithful watching.

"By faith (says the apostle) they sojourned in the land of promise, looking for a city which hath foundations—whose Builder and Maker is God."

It was not God's intention that they should be mixed with the cities of men, but that they should dwell all their lives in tabernacles—tents—disdaining the comforts and pleasure of the world, and thereby confessing their faith that they were strangers and pilgrims in the earth, awaiting their glorious destiny.

"Wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He hath prepared for them a city."

"Not ashamed to be called their God!" Let us so frame our lives that God will not be ashamed to be called our God, and that we, too, may be among the few taken from among men to enter that eternal city!

—G. V. G.