

## Jacob's Dream at Bethel

Ever wanted to get away from it all? Our culture tells us that we can get the right car or a credit card and do just that. We can drive off into the sunset or fly across continents; we can charge wonderful exotic things and hang out with handsome and beautiful people. In our consumer culture, a new life can be bought. Get away, find yourself, and never mind the bills or the past. The old can be left behind like a cicada's shell on a tree.

Jacob had plenty to get away from. As the scene opens in 28:10, Jacob's brother and father are both victims of his guile (chap. 27). While his father, Isaac, has sent him off with a blessing (28:3), Jacob has nevertheless been sent off, to Paddan-aram, four hundred miles from home. His twin Esau hates him and wishes him dead (27:41). Rebekah planned a sort of witness relocation program for her favorite son, convincing Isaac that Jacob will find a suitable wife back in her ancestral land (27:46). Jacob will get away from it all.

Whether he knows it or not, Jacob is at the lowest point in his life. He has betrayed his father and made an enemy of his brother. He has coveted and absconded with the birthright, which gives him the double share of the inheritance (25:29–34), and the blessing, giving him privilege and prosperity (27:28, 29). He has the latest model luxury sedan and the gold credit card. But he is a fugitive, and he travels alone.

However, we know from the start that Jacob is special. He is the answer to prayer

"Jacob was on his way, a long meandering way, to becoming Israel." H. Stephen Shoemaker, *GodStories: New Narratives from Sacred Texts* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1998), 53.

for a barren couple (25:21). The Lord gives him preeminence over his twin, who was born first (25:23). (The oracle of 25:23 is given to Rebekah, who subsequently loves Jacob best.) But the only time Jacob invokes the Lord is in the ruse of 27:10, when he lies to his father. The episode of 28:10–22 marks the first encounter between Jacob and God.

### The Things Dreams Are Made Of

It is important to note that the encounter is both a visual experience and a speech. The visual elements are striking and memorable, but what Jacob *sees* merely sets the stage for what is central. The *word* of promise is what the scene is all about. The speech of God, then, is our focal point.

The theophany occurs in a dream, that state of mind in which humans have no control. The dream state is the domain God chose to reveal God's self. We are familiar today with dreams as psychological phenomena. We might wish to dismiss the theophany and say that Jacob's unconscious desires were being manifest in his dream state, or look at the visual elements as archetypes and symbols. But the text will not allow us to deny the objective reality of the dream. The dream does not stand for anything; it is what it is.

Keep in mind that Jacob has never been less "worthy" of a theophany than he is at this time. He did not seek out the Lord. He did not merit the promises. Jacob is a conflicted man whose chief concern is survival. He is on the road, fleeing his past, and this particular night he is in no particular place. Exiled and threatened, the last thing he would expect is the word that comes to him in the night.

Yet Jacob is sure that God spoke to him there (28:16). What startles Jacob, and us, is not that God spoke, but that God chose this time to speak to one who was treacherous, deceptive, and unworthy of the speech. God is bound to Jacob. God makes outrageous and unconditional promises to a person and changes the course of history in doing so. Such is the character of God.

"The element in the narrative that surprises Jacob and seems incredible to us is not the religious phenomenon of appearance. It is the wonder, mystery, and shock that this God should be present in such a decisive way to this exiled one."—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, 242.

## God's Promise

The news is a blessing that makes the future possible for Jacob. Verse 15 is addressed specifically to Jacob; it is on this key verse that we will focus. But just prior to the announcement that is unique to Jacob, verses 13–14 repeat the threefold promise first issued to Abraham in 12:1–3 and reissued in 26:4 to Isaac. The patriarchs and matriarchs of Genesis are told that (1) they will become a mighty nation, (2) they will inherit the land of promise, and (3) all the nations of the earth will be blessed through them. God has sworn that it will be so; God has *limited* God's power in a way that binds God to these promises. The divine options are no longer so open-ended. This binding of God to a particular people is the meaning of covenant and the heart of the good news in the Genesis stories.

While the first two parts of the promise focus on the well-being of this particular people (descendants, land), the last concerns the well-being of others (12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4). God is indeed interested in this people, but they are not to retreat into self-interest. God moves them beyond narrow concerns. The way in which this people is to become a blessing to the world is not developed in Genesis; it is Isaiah who will pick up this theme and magnify it. For now, this part of the promise is implicit, hidden, undeveloped.

The hint that Jacob should be the heir to this promise is given at his birth (25:23). No reason is given for this choice, just as none was given to his grandfather Abraham. Jacob is given priority over Esau, who is imminently more likable and good. It is the inscrutable will of God that a nomad from Ur of the Chaldees would receive this word and that his deceptive, scheming grandson would as well.

The threefold promise of verse 15 is addressed specifically to Jacob. "I am with you." "I will keep you." "I will bring you back." The promise involves God's presence, God's action, and Jacob's homecoming.

"This promise presents a central thrust of biblical faith. It refutes all the despairing judgments about human existence. A fresh understanding of God is required if we are to be delivered from the hopeless analyses of human possibility made by pessimistic scientists and by the poets of existence."—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, 244–45.

## God with Us

"I am with you." The visual elements of the dream correspond to these words. The ladder, or better, "ramp," is borrowed from ancient Near Eastern religious iconography. Mesopotamian ziggurats were temples formed like stacked building blocks making stairways or ramps to the heavens. The gods were "up there" and it was the worshiper's task to ascend to them. The stairway provided the means of approach to the gods, the link from the human sphere upward to the divine. But the ramp in Genesis 28:12 is God's doing. Heaven meets earth because God has decided it would be so. While the ancient world conceived the movement in one way, from the bottom up, the good news is that here we find God bridging the gap. "The LORD stood beside him" (v. 13); God speaks directly to him. Indeed, the gap does not exist at all.

Eighteenth-century Deism pictured God as the Great Watchmaker who created the great clock of the universe, wound it up, and hurled it out to tick away with its own scientific laws and rhythms. God might be an interested bystander, but such a God would not interfere with creation, indeed could not change it. While the Deists might offer thanks to this God for the gift of creation, intercessory prayer was unthinkable. God had simply stepped out of the picture.

The ramp and the promise shatter this theology. Jacob is not alone. Earth cannot be divorced from the presence of God. The biblical record agrees with the Deists' conception of the creator God, but it goes further than that. God does not create and then leave creation to its own devices any more than a mother gives birth and leaves the baby at the doorstep. God is both creator and sustainer, life giver and nurturer. "You are always mine" is the implied promise to the exiled Cain as he is given the mark of God's protection (Gen. 4:15). It is the promise to Jeremiah as he is called to the terrifying office of the prophet (Jer. 1:19). It is the word given to the exiled community in Babylon (Isa. 43:1, 2). Finally, it is the name of Jesus: "Emmanuel," God with us (Matt. 1:23; see also John 1:51).

## Upheld by My Hand

"I will keep you." The visual element that corresponds to these words is the presence of the angels in verse 12 (see also 32:1, 2). The world

is upheld, sustained, kept by God. Israel is graven in the palm of God's hand (Isa. 49:16); we are supported from underneath by the everlasting arms (Deut. 33:27, RSV).

A favorite picture of God in both the Old Testament and the New Testament is the shepherd. As the shepherd is the keeper of the flock, so God is the keeper of Jacob. Sheep require a lot of overseeing. They are obstinate and stubborn, panicky and defenseless. They butt heads to establish a hierarchy in the herd. They can starve to death just yards away from good pastureland but return time and again to polluted watering holes. When they get fat they are easily "cast," flaying frantically and unable to get up unassisted.

There is nothing particularly lovable about them. They are, in fact, a pain. And they are, in fact, like us. God keeps the flock safe, knowing that the job is not a pleasant one and we are bound to make it difficult.

### At Journey's End

"I will bring you home." Jacob's exile was for twenty-one years in Paddan-aram. Judah's exile was for fifty years in Babylon. Our modern experience of exile and displacement appears at times to be permanent, without end. We live in a world of displacement. We respond by "nesting" and accumulating things: a home with a security system, an entertainment center, overstuffed couches, and big, billowy bed linens. Surely we can create a home, fill it with stuff that

will keep us safe and relieve our anxieties, relax in spite of our tedium or boredom or exhaustion. Patriarchal history affirms this sense of displacement. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor" (Deut. 26:5). The people of promise are descendants of this wanderer Abraham. The truth is that, like Jacob, we are not at home. Who makes us lie down in green pastures? Who or what restores our soul? The biblical record affirms that this work is God's doing. "Our hearts are restless till they find rest in thee," Augustine said. As fugitives we look

for a pillow and find a stone; we settle for a night in a place with no name. We awake to find that the stony place is actually the house of God ("Bethel"). Homecoming is the work of the Lord.

### Jacob Awakes

Now we turn from the spoken word of God to the human response. Of one thing Jacob is sure: "Surely the LORD is in this place" (28:16). God spoke in the night in a dream, and God's presence persists as the day dawns. How does Jacob respond?

Jacob characterizes the experience as "awesome." Rudolf Otto, in his classic *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), writes that the response to the holy is not rational; it is beyond conceptual expression. Those who experience the Wholly Other are moved to a painful awareness of creatureliness in the face of tremendous mystery (see Isa. 6:5). They experience a profound sense of awe: of being simultaneously repelled by and drawn to the presence of God, dreading this power and yet fascinated by it. Finally, the experience moves them to action (see Isa. 6:8). We see Jacob responding to God in the fashion described by Otto. Overwhelmed by the awesomeness of the Holy One, he cannot be merely an interested spectator. He is drawn into the holiness of God and moved toward change in his own life.

Fear is the most debilitating of diseases. Fright can provoke flight, but it can also make us rigid and passive. One might say that the opposite of fear is authentic action. In verses 16-22, we see that Jacob moves from fear and guilt to a new reality. He moves from fright and flight toward a concrete, genuine vocation.

He rises early, alert and ready. He sets up a pillar and consecrates it with oil, an anointing that sets the stone apart as sacred (as in Ex. 40:9-11). He renames the place, which was once called Luz by the Canaanites. It will be a sacred site to which he will return in 35:14 after his sojourn in Paddan-aram, and a site of great importance in the history of Israel. He declares Bethel to be the gate of



Jacob's pillar may have looked like this.



### Want to Know More?

**About theophanies?** See Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 1062-63; Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 15-45.

**About dreams in the Bible?** See Lois Lindsey Hendricks, *Discovering My Biblical Dream Heritage* (San Jose, Calif.: Resource Publications, 1989). If you are interested in dreams and spirituality, see Morton Kelsey, *Dreams: A Way to Listen to God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

**About limits to God's power?** See Daniel L. Migliore, *The Power of God*, Library of Living Faith (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 70-74, 91-101; for a more academic discussion, see E. Frank Tupper, *A Scandalous Providence: The Jesus Story of the Compassion of God* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995), 326-31, 358-61.

heaven. The tower of Babel was supposed to be just that (11:1–9), but it became a ruined monument to human pride. This monument is marked by a simple pillar of stone because God, not human achievement, has made it the gateway to heaven.

Next Jacob makes a vow (vv. 20–22). While some commentators gloss over the “If” at the beginning of his vow, this little word is pivotal. What God has promised unconditionally, Jacob turns into a set of conditions. What God has promised in general terms, Jacob makes specific, detailed, and tangible. The simplicity of verse 15 turns into the rather complicated vow of verses 20–22. His vows are authentic responses, perhaps, but to what? Did God require the tithe and the founding of a shrine? When God promised to “keep” Jacob, does Jacob

need to remind God that food and clothing are part of this safekeeping? Finally, Jacob declares that if his conditions are met, “then the LORD shall be my God.” What if homecoming does not involve peace in his father’s house? What if God does not perform as Jacob specifies? While the actions and words

of God are consistent with each other, it is the mark of humanity that the same is not true for us. What Jacob *does* here are acts of faith and trust, pointers to a new reality. But his *words* sound like he still wishes to hedge the bet. If God satisfies Jacob’s wish list, then he will respond in faithful obedience (disciplined worship, the concrete act of tithe).

“I will surely give one tenth to you.” Jacob follows the example of Abraham (Gen. 14:20) and offers a tithe back to God (Gen. 28:22).

### The Journey Is Our Home

A new world of possibility has indeed opened up to Jacob, a world where fear and mistrust give way to promise and assurance. But he is still Jacob, the schemer, whose *modus operandi* is to bargain and dicker. He will proceed on his journey a changed man in some ways, but he has in no way “arrived.” He makes his first, feeble baby steps in the direction of faith. And these tentative steps are, God might say, enough for now.

While he wanted to get away from it all, what Jacob needed was the presence of God. While he was a fugitive on the

“Part of the lesson was that, luckily for Jacob, God doesn’t love people because of who they are but because of who [God] is. *It’s on the house* is one way of saying it and *it’s by grace* is another.”—Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 58.

run, he learned that he was the heir to the promise. The journey is an apt metaphor for Jacob. The journey also applies to the character of God. God is on a divine journey with God’s people wherever they might go (Psalm 23; Isa. 43:1–2; 46:3–4). Jacob’s dream at Bethel gives us this good news: God is known in the traveling, and we do not make the trip alone.



### Questions for Reflection

1. This story is about a dream that changed Jacob’s life. Many people cannot even remember their dreams. How do dreams affect people’s lives?
2. “Surely the LORD is in this place.” Jacob marked the place with a monument and made a vow. Have you ever had moments when you came to this realization? What were those moments like? What are the ways people mark these moments?
3. God makes an unqualified promise to Jacob in verses 14–15, and Jacob responds with a conditional vow to God in verses 20–22. What precipitates the difference in the way Jacob and God approach each other? What are ways people approach God today?
4. Psalm 139:7–8 affirms God’s presence even in remote places. What does it mean to be “kept by God”?