

## Genesis 28

The focus of the next several chapters in Genesis will be Jacob. He is, after all, the chosen son of Isaac to receive the promise. But he will not be able to carry on the promise if he is not married. So, this chapter follows Jacob from his home with his parents in Beer Sheba, to a place on the way to Padan Aram, where he is given a vision by God. As a part of that vision, God will bless Jacob, promise to be with him, and promise to bring him back.

### TRANSLATION - 28:1-4:

**1** So Isaac called to Jacob and blessed him and commanded him and said to him, “Do not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. **2** Arise. Go to Padan Aram, to the house of Bethuel, the father of your mother and take for yourself from there a wife from the daughters of Laban, the brother of your mother. **3** And may El Shaddai bless you and make you fruitful and he will bless you and you will be for a congregation of peoples. **4** And he gave to you the blessing of Abraham to you and to your seed with you, for you to inherit the land of your temporary dwelling which God gave to Abraham.”

### WORDS:

“Congregation” (verse 3; 123 times) means “assembly, community, or crowd.” The verb is used 39 times. What makes this word significant is that it is translated in the LXX as *synagogas*, which is generally translated “synagogue” or “assembly” in the NT. A related word is translated “preacher” in Ecclesiastes 1:1, 12; 12:8. “To inherit” (verse 4) was used in 15:3-4, 7-8.

### ARCHAEOLOGY:

Padan Aram was first seen in 25:20. It is used frequently in this chapter. It is also identified with being close to Haran (27:43; 28:10). It was located in a bend in the Euphrates River in northern Mesopotamia, in modern Syria.

### COMMENTS:

After being encouraged by Rebekah to send Jacob away, to her family to find a wife (27:43-46), Isaac blesses him (some think the idea here is “greeted”), probably in a more generic sense than the official family blessing of chapter 27 (cf. Gen. 12:1-7), and then sends him away. Isaac echoes Rebekah’s concern that Jacob not marry a woman among the Canaanites but to go to Rebekah’s family, to Bethuel, Rebekah’s father. While most commentators assume there are religious or spiritual reasons why Isaac wants Jacob to marry someone from Mesopotamia, we must note that the text never says and, as far as we know, those from Mesopotamia were just as pagan as those in Canaan (cf. Gen. 31:30; Josh. 24:2). What we do know is that the Amorites will be destroyed at some future date; no one knows when (cf. Gen. 15:16).

As a part of his blessing, Isaac wishes “El Shaddai” (God Almighty, see comments at 17:1), to bless Jacob and make him fruitful (cf. 1:22, 28; 8:17; 9:1, 7) and make him into a “congregation of peoples.” We’re not clear why Isaac uses this word for “congregation” (cf. the word’s use later in Jacob’s life: 35:11; 48:4). Isaac acknowledges in verse 4 that God had given Jacob (not Esau) the promised blessing of Abraham and to Isaac’s seed. It will be Jacob, not Esau, who inherits the land.

### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - Jacob knows that Rebekah was God’s choice of a wife for Isaac. Even though the same thought was not put into Jacob to go back to Mesopotamia to find a wife, he surely found comfort in knowing that the Almighty God, the God of his father and grandfather, would be with him and bless him.

TRANSLATION - 28:5-9:

**5** So Isaac sent away Jacob and he left to Padan Aram to Laban, the son of Bethuel, the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau.

**6** Now Esau saw that Isaac blessed Jacob and sent him to Padan Aram to take for himself from there a wife; when he blessed him then he commanded him saying, "Do not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan." **7** And Jacob listened to his father and to his mother and he left to Padan Aram. **8** Then Esau saw that evil [were] the daughters of Canaan in the eyes of Isaac, his father. **9** So Esau went to Ishmael and took Mahalat, the daughter of Ishmael, son of Abraham, the sister of Nebaiot, wives to himself for a wife.

ARCHAEOLOGY:

We have noted before that the Arameans will have a long history as a friend and enemy of Israel. They are found eighteen times, all the way through the exile and the return from exile. They are identified with the Syrians, whose capital will be established at Damascus.

COMMENTS:

Isaac sent Jacob back to Rebekah's family to find a wife. In the meanwhile, Moses gives us an update on Esau because God is blessing Esau as well, even though Esau is not the son of promise. Moses points out in verses 6-7 that Esau knew the details and the motivation of Isaac sending Jacob away. Moses also notes that it was "evil" in the eyes of his parents to take a wife of the Canaanites. While the word "evil" could denote moral or spiritual evil, here it likely better denotes the idea of "unpleasant" or "not preferred."

Perhaps he thought it would be a good substitute so Esau goes to his uncle, Ishmael, and marries Mahalat, the daughter of Ishmael, to add to the wives he had. Esau will marry his father's niece; Jacob will marry his mother's nieces.

APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - God will require Israel to marry within their own nation, specifically because they were all the same religion (Deut. 7:1-6).

TRANSLATION - 28:10-22:

**10** Jacob went out from Beer Sheba and he went to Haran. **11** And he arrived in the place and spent a night there because the sun came [down] and he took from stones of the place and set [them] under his head and laid down in that place. **12** Then he dreamed and behold a stairway was standing toward the earth and its top reaching toward heaven, and behold angels of God were going up and going down on it. **13** And behold Jehovah was standing on it and he said, "I [am] Jehovah, God of Abraham, your father and God of Isaac. The land which you are sleeping on it, to you I am giving and to your seed. **14** And your seed will be like dust of the earth and you will spread out toward the sea and to the west and to the north and to the Negev and they will be blessed in you all the tribes of the land and in your seed. **15** And behold, I [am] with you and I will guard you in all which you go and I will return you to this land because I will not leave you until when I do what I spoke to you."

**16** So Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely Jehovah is in this place and I myself did not know [it]." **17** Then he was afraid and said, "What a fearful place! This [is] that [which is] the house of God and this [is] the gate of heaven!" **18** And Jacob rose early in the morning and took the stone which [was] there under his head and he set it [as] a pillar and poured oil on its top. **19** And he called the name of that place Bethel and now Luz [was] the name of the city before. **20** Then Jacob vowed a vow saying, "If God will be with me and He will guard me in this way which I myself am going, and He will give to me bread to eat and clothes to wear **21** and I return in peace to the house of my father then Jehovah will be to me for God. **22** And that stone which I put for a pillar will be the house of God and all which He gives to me, a tenth I will tithe to him."

### WORDS:

“He arrived” (verse 10) is the normal verb “to go.” Notice how the text emphasizes “the place” (verse 11, three times; verses 16-17, 19). “To dream” (verse 12) and the related noun “dream” are found 29 and 65 times, respectively. This is its first use. “Stairway” (verse 12) is a *hapax legomena*, which means it is found nowhere else in the Scriptures. “Leave” (verse 15; 214x) means to “leave, forsake, abandon.” It was first used in 2:24. “Vowed” and “vow” (verse 20) are related words; the first is the verb, the second, a noun.

“Tenth” and “tithe” (verse 22) are related words. In this case, the first is the noun while the second is the verb.

### GRAMMAR:

“Fearful” (verse 17) is not an adjective as we have translated it; it is a *niphal* (passive) participle.

### ARCHAEOLOGY:

Bethel (verse 19; 72 times) has a long history in Israelite religion (first seen in 12:8), but eventually it will become the center of idol worship (1 Kings 12:28-30) and its idolatry will be destroyed by King Josiah (2 Kings 23:15). “Luz” is found only eight times.

There are ideas similar to a “stairway to heaven” in Egyptian and Hittite sources. Some have suggested a ziggurat is behind the imagery here (as they believe it is in Genesis 11). What Jacob does see, at least, is perhaps similar to the *stairway itself* on the outside of the ziggurats. The phrase “gates of heaven” is not found elsewhere in Scripture.

### COMMENTS:

When Jacob arrives in Haran, he has probably traveled two or three days. It is over seventy miles from Beer Sheba. The whole trip would be about 400 miles. He takes stones to make a pillow, which does not sound very comfortable. Notice how many times “the place” is used in this text. It will prove to be a very significant place in the life of Jacob and in the life of the Israelites. But then God allows Jacob to have a vision.

He sees a stairway (probably larger than a “ladder”) and angels ascending and descending the stairway which pictures the same imagery as Zechariah 1:10; Job 1:6. These are God’s “ministering spirits sent out to minister to those who are heirs of salvation” (Heb. 1:14). Jacob gets a view of God’s patrol carrying out God’s work on earth.

God is standing above the stairway and gives Jacob a powerful blessing. In this blessing, God is the subject of a verb six times. He is actively taking care of Jacob since He is actively bringing salvation into the world through Jacob’s family. “Father” is used of Abraham here in a broad sense. He is Jacob’s “forefather.” The land will be Jacob’s land (not Esau’s) and the land for his seed. God had promised innumerable offspring to Abraham (22:17) and Isaac (26:4). That promise is here affirmed to Jacob and that seed will spread out in all directions. This is the fifth time God will promise Abraham or his family that the whole world will be blessed through Abraham’s family (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4). God promises Jacob “I am with you” (verse 15) as He had promised Isaac (26:3, 24). Finally, God promised Jacob that He would bring him back to this same place, after he goes to Padan Aram.

When Jacob awoke, he thought that God had surely been in that place and it motivated him to mark the place as special. We see the emotions Jacob felt, after having this experience with God. He was afraid and he called the place “fearful” or a “being feared” place. He then identified it as the “house of God,” which would be translated as a city name, Bethel. And he called it the “gate of heaven.” The expression “gate of heaven” is not found anywhere else in Scripture while it is found in ANE texts.

We are not sure of the significance of the anointing of the stone. It surely suggested the idea of consecrating the location to Jehovah God, making it a “place of worship” of God in the mind and heart of Jacob. Jacob is taking his relationship with God seriously now, if he did not

before. Here, he makes a vow (the only vow a patriarch makes to God) that if God fulfills His promise to Jacob, then Jacob will worship Jehovah God (probably exclusively, if he had not before). Jacob also illustrates his dedication to God by promising to give him a tenth of all his blessings. Jacob will return to Bethel in 35:1-7.

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - See comments on the tithe at 14:20. Jacob has now had an encounter with God which has opened up a new life for him, if he'll take advantage of it. This new life will include both staying faithful to God's commandments but also worshipping God and praying to Him as his father, mother, and grandparents did.

*Contemporaries of Moses* - The Israelites would experience "fear" at another place of worship, too. First at Mount Sinai, then as they built the tabernacle in which God's holy presence would dwell. On the other hand, the Law of Moses would forbid setting up pillars in relationship to worship of Jehovah God (Exo. 23:24; 34:13; Lev. 26:1; Deut. 12:3; 16:22). This is yet another example where a patriarch does what is latter forbidden in the Law, which argues that the events, even their record, happened before the Law was revealed from heaven. God will promise to be "with" Moses (Exo. 3:12).

*Later Hebrew writers* - Since Bethel will eventually become a center for pagan worship, Hosea will call it "House of wickedness" (Beth-aven) instead of "House of God" (Beth-El) as he denounces Israel's false worship (4:15; 5:8; 10:5). Amos will also denounce their idolatry there (3:14; 4:4; 5:5-6; 7:13). Micah will forbid using pillars in worship (5:13). God will promise to be "with" Joshua (1:5) and Gideon (Judg. 6:16). The promises God would give to Jacob would ring in the ears of the Israelites in exile. God will be with them there and He will bring them back to the Promised Land as He had promised.

*NT writers* - Jesus will allude to Jacob's stairway in John 1:51 as He pictures God's angels ascending and descending in service to Jesus Himself. Paul points out in Galatians 3:16 that the "Seed" of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who will bless the world is Jesus Christ.