

Jacob Back in Canaan. From Penuel to Shechem.

Genesis 32-34

Meeting with Angels

After Jacob and Laban had parted, for ever, on Mount Gilead across the Jordan, Jacob travelled southwest, heading straight for a ford he knew of on the Jordan, just north of the mouth of the narrow Jabbok. He had been saved from the hand of Laban, but now that he approached the land from which he had departed as a lonely fugitive twenty years earlier, he saw a new peril to his life in the person of his brother Esau. This time also, however, he would discover that the God of his fathers would lead him in safety.

When he and all his men and cattle had come to within 25 km of the Jordan, angels of God met him. We probably should imagine it this way: fully conscious, he suddenly saw, in a vision, a large army of angels approaching him. He expressed his amazement in these words: “This is God’s army!” The great importance Jacob ascribed to this event is indicated by the name he gave to the place: Mahanaim; that is, two armies, or, a double (large) army. Calvin’s opinion that Jacob saw a double army—an army which deployed itself to two sides, to surround, as it were, Jacob and all that was his, has some merit (compare Psalm 34:7). This happened to the north of the Jabbok, for the patriarch had not yet crossed it. Later a city was built to the south, known as Mahanaim from the account of David, and from Joshua 13:26. It is to be noted that neither the Author of Scripture, nor Jacob, gave any further comment on this. This is not a word of revelation, but a vision of revelation as a confirmation of a promise contained in an earlier command (31:13). If there were any others with Jacob—and this is very likely—they did not see the vision,

but only heard Jacob's startled exclamation. It is clear that the LORD wanted to encourage Jacob, while we, too, may learn from it. Thus Jacob, in approaching Canaan, was escorted by heavenly beings.

In the meantime, this did not mean that Jacob could just wait to see what would happen. God's promises do not paralyse human activity. God's providence does not exclude man's cautiousness.

Jacob, therefore, sent messengers to the land of Seir, the region called Edom. This indicates that Jacob knew where Esau lived. This was very possible, considering the heavy traffic along the trading routes. In a most servile way the deputation was to herald Jacob's arrival in order to win Esau's favour. That Esau had to hear of Jacob's wealth was probably because Jacob wanted to make it clear that he was not about to claim his father Isaac's possessions.

The reply brought back by Jacob's messengers was not encouraging. Esau was on his way with 400 armed men, which was not the customary way to welcome one's brother. However . . . the angels had arrived first!

Yet Jacob made his preparations. He divided everything into two groups. If Esau destroyed one, perhaps the other might escape. These measures, however, did not relieve his anxiety. In the quietness of the night he poured out his heart to the LORD. In a moving prayer, in deep distress, he called upon Him as the God of his fathers, upon Whose command he had returned to this country with the promise that the LORD would do him good. Gratefully, he said that he was not worthy of the least of the steadfast love and faithfulness of his God, but now Esau, of whom he was afraid, was on his way, and he had fled to God, so that the mothers would not be slain with the children. In other words, he begged that his descendants, of whom God had said that they would be as the sand of the sea in number, would not be wiped out: "Deliver me . . . from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau" (32:11).

The next morning he sent out slaves, each group with a gift of cattle, at long intervals; meeting Esau, they were instructed to say that these were presents from his brother Jacob, who himself was coming behind them.

By this, Jacob hoped to work reconciliation. Reading this, we have seen how wealthy Jacob had become: if we add together the amounts of the animals, including the colts, we come to a total of 580, and this was but a part of his possessions. This also shows that Jacob's actions were not so much "done in despair, but rather, show a prudent management of his affairs" (Calvin).

"And a Man Wrestled with Him"

At night, after sending away the slaves with the gifts for reconciliation, Jacob let his family, his slaves, and all his cattle cross a ford to the south bank of the Jabbok. According to Calvin, this should teach us the following sequence: "in the first place, one flees to God; then one uses all means given to serve the moment; and thirdly, one is prepared for any eventual conclusion, and fearlessly turns in the direction ordered by God." Also: "Upon his example, fear should be conquered in a dangerous situation, that it may not keep us from our duty, or obstruct it." Jacob himself stayed there, alone, to concentrate in prayer.

And a man wrestled with him. The action did not originate with Jacob, but with the stranger who approached him. This wrestling continued throughout the night, until morning came. When the man could not prevail, he struck Jacob's hip-joint, dislocating it, and crippling Jacob. Then he said: "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob answered: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

This remark indicates that Jacob had come to the realization that his opponent was a divine manifestation. His eyes had been opened to this. Hosea 12:3b, 4a reveals: "In his manhood he strove with God. He strove with the angel and prevailed, he wept and sought his favour." Hosea used this as an example to an apostate people (verse 7).

This struggle was for the *blessing*; we should relate this to the situation in which he found himself—that he hoped to be saved from Esau's hand, in order to see the fulfilment of the promise given earlier regarding his descendants. It would not have been right, however, if Jacob had not, at the same time, sought forgiveness for the sins he had committed. He knew he was guilty; that is demonstrated by his efforts at

reconciliation through gifts and humiliation of himself, instead of a standing on his lordly rights; it is also demonstrated by his begging for mercy (Hosea 12:4); furthermore, each prayer includes clear knowledge of our misery, which goes deeper than the need merely to be saved from some immediate danger.

This wrestling should be seen as a test of faith, in which God strikes with the one hand, but keeps one standing with the other, in order to make us conquerors in faith; but then in such a way that we persevere in our struggle. “This is the lawful manner of striving, that we do not tire until the LORD, out of free will, stands back” (Calvin).

This is an astonishing way to win, but it happened so that Jacob would glory in the grace shown to him; but not without receiving the visible sign of being crippled. Scripture here teaches us that no one is so mighty a wrestler that he, in the spiritual struggle, does not suffer one dislocation or another (Calvin). The Jews always kept that in mind by not eating that part of the slaughtered animal. This receives Calvin’s approval because under the old covenant the believers in this way were also kept, by the LORD, under the discipline of teaching.

Jacob was also given a new name, Israel, that is, Prince of God, for he had acted princely towards God and man, and had prevailed. His asking for God’s name was not accepted, because that name could not yet come to full revelation. Jacob did receive the blessing; and he called the place Peniel, that is, I have seen God.

Meeting with Esau

Probably on the following day, Jacob saw Esau and his fearsome band approaching in the distance. It cannot be said that Jacob had by then completely conquered his fears, “for those who imagine that faith is free from all fears have never experienced true faith” (Calvin). Jacob prepared his family to receive Esau with honour. The slave women and their children he put in the front, behind whom Leah and her children had to follow, and finally came Rachel and Joseph. Jacob himself went ahead, and politely bowed himself to the ground, seven times, as befits the lesser one.

But Esau, whose heart had been softened by the LORD, hurried to meet him, embraced him, and then wept with Jacob over this moving reunion. Jacob then introduced his family, the members of which reverently bowed down.

Still, this is not true reconciliation. Old matters are not raised, injustices are not discussed, sins are not confessed. Esau, with his descendants, would remain a hater of Jacob and his seed. Jacob suffices with showing Esau honour and insisting on acceptance of his gifts. He wisely refuses Esau's offer to accompany him. At the slow pace his flocks and herds required, he would find his own way to Seir; a promise which, as far as we know from Scripture, he never kept. Jacob travelled on, but in the opposite direction.

First he came to *Succoth*, a few kilometres closer to the Jordan, on the north bank of the Jabbok. The name originates in the house and the booths for cattle which he built there. Perhaps Jacob first wanted to let his cattle rest after the long trek.

Then he crossed the fords of the Jordan, and went to the north, to *Shechem*, to set up his encampment more easterly, in the luxuriant region, on a piece of land which he purchased from the sons of Hamor, father of a Shechem (who will be mentioned again later), for 100 pieces of money. Here he erected an altar for his people's worship services, and called it, God, the God of Israel.

Terrible Deformation of the Church

How long Jacob lived near Shechem is hard to say. Altogether his time at Succoth and Shechem may be estimated at eight to ten years. No new divine revelation is spoken of during this time. On the other hand, one can deduce from Scriptural evidence that there was a decay in the worship of God. Jacob himself did not even think of Bethel any more, and we also do not read of a visit to his father, although this would not have been impossible. The altar should not have been erected at Shechem, but at Bethel, where God had appeared to him when he was fleeing for fear of Esau; but the land around Shechem was more attractive, in spite of the fact that it was dangerous for a God-fearing lifestyle.

Contact with the Canaanites had a decaying influence. Rachel no longer had to hide her teraphim. Strange gods were brought into the camp. Canaanite clothing became the fashion, and rings were worn in the ears as amulets. Life had adapted to heathendom (35:2, 4).

On a certain day, *Dinah*, daughter of Leah, went to visit the daughters of the land. She had been born in the fourteenth year of Jacob's stay with Laban (30:21), and was, therefore, six years old at Jacob's departure. By now she had become a girl of 14 or 15 years of age, about as old as Joseph, of whom we read in 37:2 that a few years later he was 17 years of age; both were born at approximately the same time (30:21, 22). According to the customs of the time, it was improper for a girl to go out alone, so this, too, is indicative of the deterioration of Jacob's family. Her heart's desires drove her to Shechem, for if one has a beautiful dress on, one would like to be noticed.

Then follows the sad story that she is raped by someone also named *Shechem*, a son of *Hamor*, a notable landowner, a prince. Because he had come to love Dinah, not casting her off, but taking her into his house, he went with his father to Jacob to ask her to wife. Jacob had already heard about it, but wanted to wait for his sons to return home from the field before making a decision. These, too, had already heard the rumours, and hurried home, greatly angered. They considered this action as one done to a whore, a disgrace, a folly in Israel, "for such a thing ought not to be done."

At the negotiations, Hamor offered Jacob's family the privilege of marrying into the Shechemites, permanently settling there, so that they would become one people; there was plenty of room for the cattle. And Shechem offered, above this, to give anything they required, let the dowry and the marriage gift be ever so large.

But the sons of Jacob, who had apparently taken the leadership, insisted that, if they were to become one people, the Shechemites would allow themselves to be circumcised. With this message, Hamor and Shechem returned to the city, to propose this to the population. The men of the city agreed, lured by the wealth in cattle that would be theirs,

and let themselves be circumcised. *In this disgraceful manner the sacrament of circumcision was being exploited.*

It was so much the worse because they acted falsely, using circumcision to obtain revenge. On the third day, when the fever and pain made the men powerless, Simeon and Levi entered the city (they were the ones who had thought of this trick to quench their desire for revenge), and murdered all the fighting men, including Hamor and Shechem, and with the other sons of Jacob plundered the city, carrying away all the women and children into slavery.

Dinah's little outing had ended in a blood-bath, in murder, and in robbery. Jacob cursed this later (49:7). At the time, he sufficed with blaming them for bringing trouble on him. If the people of the land should unite to take revenge, he, being the lesser in number, would be destroyed. But the two brothers to whom Jacob had been speaking disrespectfully replied, "Should he treat our sister as a harlot?"

That was the church of those days. It had sunk to great depths. If God, in His mercy, had not called Jacob away to Bethel, and put His terror on the Canaanites, Isaac's seed would have been shamefully destroyed. But wasn't their salvation because of the Christ?

Questions

1. (32:2) Why a host of angels, and not just one?
2. Did those angels disappear immediately, or did they (perhaps invisibly) remain for awhile?
3. What comfort is it that angels are mentioned so often?
4. Can we agree with Rome that each person has his guardian angel?
5. (32:7, 11) Was Jacob's fear (even after his heavenly vision!) not contrary to faith in God's faithfulness?

6. (32:13ff.) Was Jacob's self-humiliation not contrary to the promise that he had received, that he would be lord over his brothers?
7. (32:10) What did Jacob mean when he said that he had become two companies?
8. (32:20) Does this act of reconciliation demonstrate a feeling of guilt? If so, why was this not mentioned?
9. When was the conflict between Jacob and Esau resolved? by whom? how?
10. (32:34) Who was this man? Can we speak of the incarnate Word in this context?
11. When and to whom did God reveal the full riches of His name, "LORD"?
12. (33:13, 14, 17, 18-20) Did Jacob have a sincere motive here, or was this a cunning move that Esau would have understood?
13. (34:1) Does it occur often that desire for the world leads to terrible results; e.g., destruction of life, even in posterity?
14. (34:14-16) Does such desecration of the sacraments still occur? If so, how?
15. Was Simeon and Levi's great anger not terribly beyond measure? Why did God not prevent this explosion of sin? May we see this as a punishment over the house of Jacob?
16. Why was the guilt of Jacob's house so much greater than that of the men of Shechem?