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The Family of Abraham: Part 18—Jacob's Ladder

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Alastair Roberts

I comment on Genesis 28 and Jacob's Ladder.

Within my discussion, I mention Matthieu Pageau's book, *The Language of Creation*: <https://amzn.to/2VdAFE4>.

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Transcript

Welcome back to this, the 18th in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. We're looking today at chapter 28, which follows after the deception of Isaac by Jacob. Jacob has received the blessing over his brother Esau, who's furious with him and wants to take his life and is plotting to avenge himself.

And at this point, Jacob is sent to Paddam Aram by his father and his mother to find a wife there from the daughters of his uncle Laban. Jacob calls him in again—Isaac calls Jacob in again and blesses him and charges him, saying that he should not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. Now, I've already noted that the story of the deception of

Isaac is flanked by references to wives being taken from the daughters of Canaan.

We've seen at the end of chapter 26 that Esau takes two wives of Canaan. And this is a cause of deep distress and bitterness to his parents. But here, Jacob is charged to go out and to go to his uncle and marry one of his cousins.

To the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and take yourself a wife from there of the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. The reference to mother on two occasions here might be interesting. Jacob continues to have a very close association with his mother and his mother's house.

He was always favoured by his mother over his brother. And he was his mother's son in the way that Esau was his father's son. And at this point, that association with his mother continues even as he's sent away, even as he leaves the house.

He's still associated with his mother. He's given a blessing. And it's interesting, even after all that's happened, even after the fact that Jacob has deceived Isaac, his blind father, he is not judged, he's not berated.

You don't have that sort of judgment of Jacob by Isaac. Esau, of course, is furious, but Isaac seems to think, well, he trembles when he hears and he recognises that it was not Esau that he blessed. But when he thinks about it, I think he recognises it was the right thing to do, that Jacob is the son that should inherit.

And so he's blessed and he's sent away. May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may be an assembly of peoples and give you the blessing of Abraham to you and your descendants with you, that you may inherit the land in which you are a stranger, which God gave to Abraham. And so he's sent away to the house of Laban, the son of Bethuel the Syrian, the brother of Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau.

At this point, there's an interesting little note, which is about Esau. Esau sees that his mother and father have sent Jacob away to marry someone who is not of the daughters of Canaan. And he recognises his parents' wishes, that this is something that Jacob has obeyed them, he's gone out as instructed and that they were pleased with that.

He says that they gave him a charge, you shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. And Jacob had obeyed his father and mother and had gone to Paddan Aram. Also, Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan did not please his father Isaac.

So Esau went to Ishmael and took Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nebihoth, to be his wife in addition to the wives he had. So something has changed, seemingly, in Esau. He may still be furious with Jacob, but he's seeking to win his parents' affection on some level.

He's marrying not from the wives of Canaan, the daughters of Canaan, but from his uncle Ishmael's house. So if Jacob goes to his uncle Laban's house, we see Esau going to his uncle Ishmael's house. He's going to find a wife.

And this seems to suggest some degree of remorse, some degree of repentance, some degree of change on Esau's part. That Esau is now seeking to win his parents' approval in a way that he wasn't before. Jacob goes out from Beersheba and he goes towards Haran.

He comes to a certain place, stays there all night because the sun had set. He takes some of the stones of that place, puts it at his head, and he lays down and he sleeps. This is a famous and a very important story of Bethel and the vision of Jacob's ladder, a vision that really tells us a lot about Jacob and the significance of his mission.

And it connects with other stories elsewhere in Scripture, not least some earlier stories in the Book of Genesis, which I'll note in passing. When we're reading this story, it might be worth considering that Jacob himself is in the middle of an ascent. He's ascending from Beersheba to the land of Laban.

And Laban is associated with the colour white, that's what his name means. And he's leaving his brother Esau or Edom, whose name means red. And Matthew Pajot has written some very thoughtful remarks on this about the way that Esau is associated with the earth.

And Laban more associated with the heavens in some ways, the mountain tops, things like that. He's associated with the white of the mountains of Lebanon, for instance, that sort of thing. And so this ascent from Esau to Laban is a mediation between heaven and earth, between the upper reaches and the lower depths, between the land where strength and might and all these sorts of things come from, and the heavens where intelligence and wisdom and the seed come from.

And this is a challenge for Jacob to mediate between these two realms. He brings up strength from the soil and he brings down meaning from the heavens and he mediates between those two things. Now, there's a lot of ways in which this could be unpacked, but I think there's a point here that is borne out by some of the broader symbolism here that Esau and Laban represent realms.

They represent different opposing poles, as it were, that Jacob has to mediate between. Esau very much a man of the field, a man of the land, whereas Laban is the man who's a man of cunning, a man of wisdom, a man of brains in a way that Esau is not. Esau is a very earthy man.

He's a man of hair. He's a man of red, red skin. He's a man associated with the land, the Adama and the Edom.

He's that sort of person. He's someone who's very much a man driven by his senses and a man defined by his earthiness, his scent, his odour and these sorts of things. He's a hunter of gain.

And within these stories, we see, I think, a mediation between these figures as Jacob has to take on characteristics of both these characters. If you look at Jacob earlier on in this story, he does not really have much agency. I've remarked in the last chapter the way that his mother does almost everything for him.

She virtually pushes him in the door of the tent. Everything is done for him. She takes the burden of the judgment upon him.

She initiates the plan. She cooks the meal. She puts the clothes on him.

Absolutely everything she is doing. Now, there's a sort of priestly dimension here that she is offering up the son to the father to approve of or disapprove of. And there's a sacrificial element there.

But it's important to consider that Jacob is a man of tense, not really a man of action. He's not really a man who has much agency prior to this point. But when you see him developing after now, after this point, you'll see that he starts to develop limbs, as it were.

He starts to become a man of action. He starts to become a man who can operate in the field in a way that he wasn't before. It suggests he takes on certain characteristics of his brother, Esau.

Of course, Esau, Cain, they are associated in certain ways, as are Abel and Jacob. Abel and Jacob both associate with tense. And Cain, of course, associated with the field.

A man who's a man of the earth and a man who's doomed to wander in the earth. He's estranged from the land in the way that we see Esau has a similar judgment. And so these two characters are juxtaposed, Esau and Jacob.

And then we see that Jacob has to take on certain characteristics. And now he's ascending up to the heights. He's ascending back to find seed, to the origins, to the place of Laban, his uncle, the place where his mother came from.

And then he'll bring that down and he'll mediate that within the land. He'll take on characteristics of Laban, the source of seed. And he'll take on character and seed and wisdom and cunning and these sorts of things.

And he'll bring that into relationship with the strengths of Esau, the strengths of the land, the strengths of limbs. Esau is a man of the hand, a doer. Whereas Jacob, to this point, has been a man of his voice, a man who's associated with tense, a mild man, a smooth

man.

And so we'll, as we go through the story, see Jacob take on new characteristics. He becomes more of a complete character as this story progresses. This ladder that ascends into heaven.

Now, where might we have heard something that reminds us of this? What might this bring to mind? Where have we heard this story before? It isn't hard to find. It's the story of the Tower of Babel. In the story of the Tower of Babel, we read that the whole earth had one language and one speech and it came to pass as they journeyed from the east that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and they dwelt there.

Then they said to one another, come, let us make bricks and break them thoroughly. They had brick for stone and had asphalt for mortar. And they said, come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower whose top is in the heavens.

Let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth. So here you have a ladder whose base is on the earth and whose top is in the heavens. Very similar to the Tower of Babel.

And that's an initial connection. Is there anything else that fills that out? References to stones. Jacob gathers stones at the beginning of this.

He gathers stones, not just one single stone. Later on, we'll see he takes a single stone that has been used at his head and sets it up as a pillar. But at the very beginning, he takes a number of stones, it seems, depending on the translation in verse 11.

And he comes to a certain place and stays there. These are similar descriptions of arriving at a certain location. Maybe there's a play on Shinar Sheba.

I'm not sure. I'm not convinced on that front. But perhaps there is the ways that these words are playing off against each other.

And he dreams and a ladder is set up on the earth and its top reaches into heaven. The angel of God are ascending and descending on it. We have similar themes in the story of the Tower of Babel.

With God, let us go down and confuse their languages. The angels and God descending down, as it were, this ladder to confuse the languages of the people who are trying to build this tower that rises up to heaven. And they're trying to make a name for themselves.

And the name of the place ultimately that they create is called confusion, Babel. But Babel is also in Akkadian, it's associated with the name gate of God. And what does Jacob later call this place? He says, he called the name of the place.

He says, how awesome is this place? This is none other than the house of God, Bethel. And this is the gate of heaven. And he called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of that city had been Luz previously.

And that, I believe, helps us to see a further connection. That Babel was supposed to be a gate of God. It was then defined as confusion.

Here we have a place that is defined as the gate of God. It's the house of God. This is the true house of God, not a place pretending to be that, but a place that will truly be established as the place of God's presence.

Now, the question of where this place is, is a question we need to ask. It seems to be about an age journey from Beersheba. And that would suggest that it could actually be the Temple Mount.

When we think that it's about 42 miles or something like that, I think from Beersheba, it would be a solid day's journey. But it could be. It could be this particular site.

He meets this particular place and that particular place may be one that already has a significance. The dream he has is not one in which he is a participant. The angels are ascending and descending and it's as if it were perpendicular to him.

He's lying down and the angels are ascending and descending perpendicular to the earth. And the Lord is above at the top of this great ladder. And this dream that he has is different from what we see later on in his story when he returns to the land.

When he returns to the land, he meets more directly face to face with angels. Not just in the wrestling with angels, but at Mahanaim. And I'll mention that later on in my discussions of that chapter.

But bear that in mind that there are two stories here that should be read alongside each other. He's given a blessing at this point. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth.

You shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And in you, all your seed and in your seed, all the families of the earth should be blessed. Behold, I'm with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land.

For I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you. And this would seem to recall some of the themes of the Tower of Babel, although reversing them. Because in the Tower of Babel, what you see is them trying to gather together in a certain spot and make a city and a tower so that they will not be scattered abroad around the earth.

Here we have God saying that he will spread out the seed of Jacob over all the face of the earth and then gather them back, that they will be brought back to this particular

land. And maybe there are also resemblances between this and the appearance of the angel of the Lord in the burning bush to Moses, where he's given a sign that they will later worship at this particular place. That just as Sinai or Mount Horeb was a sign to Moses in the future that they'd gather together in that place, so the people of Israel would be gathered together at that Temple Mount.

They'd be gathered together to worship God at that particular site, however far they scattered abroad. This may be a connection that we're supposed to be drawing. Jacob awakes from his sleep, says, surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.

How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven. So he rises early in the morning and takes the stone he'd put at his head, sets it as a pillar and pours oil on top of it.

He calls the name of that place Bethel, but the name of that city had been Luz previously. Jacob, as we read through his story, we'll see that Jacob is a man of stones. Throughout his story he's associated with setting up stones at particular spots.

He's associated with removing stones in the next chapter, we'll see that. And this is the first key stone that he's associated with. The stone that is established as a pillar at Bethel.

And he renames the place. The name had previously been Luz. We'll come across the name Luz again.

Just bear that in the back of your mind. He makes a vow saying, So he's at the gate of God, the gates of heaven. And God dwells in this place and he doesn't directly interact with God.

And it'll directly interact with the angels, he will later on. God speaks to him and addresses him in the dream. But there isn't the same sort of interaction that we'll see later on in the story.

Where he comes and interacts with God more face to face. He makes a vow at this point and this is a key vow that he will, This stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house. And of all that you have given me, I will surely give a tenth to you.

This again, I think, would point forward to a future time when the temple is associated with the site of God's name. The place where God sets his name. And we never read of Jacob giving a tenth of all that he possesses.

There are references to tithing in chapter 14. Where Abraham gives Melchizedek a tenth of his spoils. And here we have a tenth mentioned again, a tithe.

And this would seem to connect with Deuteronomy 14. Which concerns the law of the

tithe. And the tithe of the grain and the field year by year.

And then they celebrate in the presence of the Lord. The place where he chooses to make his name abide. And you bring all these things to that particular spot.

That you may learn to fear the Lord your God always. It's a strange connection. That you should learn to fear the Lord your God.

That that is what the tithe is connected with. But yet if you look in this particular account, it may help to draw that connection. That the principle of tithing is associated with Jacob's vow to serve the Lord.

And it's associated with the place of Bethel. The place of God's house. The place of God's name.

And in the future, the descendants of Jacob will come to that place. Gather together at that place. And they will, as Jacob feared the Lord.

And saw how awesome that place was. They would come to this place. And they would bring a tithe of all they possess.

And celebrate before God. That this is, in the tithe laws, we see a reaffirmation of this principle. The bringing into effect of what Jacob had determined to do.

That Jacob had determined when God fulfilled his purpose with him. Come back to that place. It would be established as a temple.

And then there would be a tithe of everything. And I think in Deuteronomy what you're seeing is these things brought together. And the significance of the gates.

Those who are within your gates. I mention again and again. If this is the gate of God.

And if God takes concern for those poor wanderers at his gates. As Jacob is at this point. So the descendants of Jacob should show the same concern.

For those poor people. Those people who are depending upon the support of the community. The Levites and others.

As God shows for Jacob. There is a principle here that underlies the broader principle of tithing. That God is the one that takes pity.

And shows mercy to the people at his gates. And in the same way we should extend the same mercy. And love and compassion to those who we find at our gates.

And that principle that as God does to us. So we should do for others. And forgiveness we see that with.

But also with mercy here. I think this will ultimately be a larger presentation of Israel's mission. Israel is supposed to be a ladder between heaven and earth.

And the temple will be a ladder between heaven and earth. Things ascend up to the presence of God in the temple. Things go up in smoke in the ascension offering.

You have the table of incense and things like that. With a smooth, a good aroma going up into the presence of God. You have going up into the most holy place.

And all the holy of holies. And all these different things are associated with a theme of ascent. You go up to Jerusalem.

You go up to the temple. You go up in smoke in the ascension offering. And then you go up into the holy of holies.

And at each stage there is this ascension of a ladder. Into God's presence. And God stands at the top.

We see similar themes in the story of Sinai. Where God meets with the elders of Israel. And they eat a meal before him.

And God is above them. And they see the God of Israel and survive. But they are eating below as it were.

And there is this mountain that ascends up. And there are different layers. So the general people of Israel are gathered around the base.

Then the elders of Israel go up. Halfway up the mountain. Then some people go further with Joshua and others.

And then Moses goes to the very top. There is an ascent into God's presence. And a ladder up to where God is.

Between earth and heaven there is this structure of ascent. And here in Jacob's ladder we have the same principle. Now when we get to John chapter 1. We will see that Christ himself describes himself as Jacob's ladder.

Behold an Israelite indeed in whom there is no guile. Speaking of Nathanael. And Nathanael says hereafter you will see more wonderful things.

You will see angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. That Christ himself is the ladder between heaven and earth. The means by which God comes down to us.

And the means by which we can ascend to God's presence. And if we see this movement in the story of John's Gospel. Even within John 1 we see a movement where Christ has come down.

Tabernacle among us. Then as Christ comes down the Spirit descends upon Christ. And then after the Spirit descends upon Christ.

Angels ascend and descend upon the Son of Man. There is a gradual sort of an invasion party of earth. As Christ comes down and then all the forces of heaven come down with him.

And here we see a reversal of Babel. If man sought to storm the gates of heaven. By bringing up this great tower from the base of the earth.

Here we see God coming down to mankind from heaven. And this conduit between heaven and earth. This great ladder that brings together these two realms.

It is established in a way that is associated with Jacob. It's above him. It's the means by which he will be called out as part of this people.

That are themselves supposed to be a conduit between heaven and earth. At their very heart they will have this temple. Which symbolises the human body.

It symbolises the nation of Israel. It symbolises the nature of the heavens. And it symbolises the relationship between the heavens and the earth.

And as they play out this greater identity and this calling. Israel is fulfilling what this prophecy involves. Which is ultimately fulfilled in the story of Christ.

If the people of Babel did not want to be scattered. God will spread his people all abroad. They will fill the earth.

But then he will gather them back in. They will be brought back to this point. And we see this in a similar way in the Garden of Eden.

The people are supposed to ultimately go out and bring the treasures in from the land. But they will always return to that spot. That place is as it were the navel of the world.

The place where the world is connected to its origins. Where it's the place where God's name dwells. And here I think we may see a further connection.

Which is something that Rabbi David Forman pointed out. Which I thought was quite neat. At the very end of this you have Jacob saying that he will give a tithe of everything he possesses.

A tenth of everything he possesses. Is there a way in which we might see a parallel between this and the story of the Tower of Babel? In the Tower of Babel what you have are people trying to make a name for themselves. They're trying to establish their name.

And then ultimately God descends and scatters them. Descends with the angels

presumably. Let us go down and confuse their languages.

And what we have here is God establishing a tower or ladder between heaven and earth. And spreading out his people. And he's going to make them a blessing.

As the Tower of Babel was a cause of... It provoked judgement and curse. So this will provoke blessing. But at the very end of that story you have immediately afterwards the genealogy of Shem.

And Shem is... His name is associated with name. Shem. The names are associated with each other.

So his name means name. And if they were going to make their name great. What we see in the story of Shem's generations is in the tenth generation we find Abraham.

That God takes that tenth generation. And that is his portion as it were. And he will make that portion great.

And it will be the means by which all the rest are blessed. And this might be a similar principle. That Jacob is going to take a tenth of everything and give it to God.

And in the same way as God took that tenth of the name of Shem. And then caused that to be made great. And will give it as a means of blessing all the rest.

Maybe there is a connection there. Maybe not. But I thought it was quite neat.

And I'm leaning in favour of there being a connection. There are several other things that could be mentioned about this chapter. There are a lot of details here that spread out into further parts of scripture.

The fact that there is a dream. We don't have many references to dreams. We have the dream of Abimelech.

We have the dream here of Jacob. We have the dreams of Joseph. And we have the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker and Pharaoh.

And as you look at those dreams more carefully. You will see that they seem to be connected with each other. In subtle ways.

So bear that in mind. Consider ways that they might be connected. That this dream might be connected with what we see later.

Particularly in Joseph. The son of Jacob. Hope you found this helpful.

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Just send me a message using the contact sheet on my blog. Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow. With a further talk on the story of the meeting with Rebekah.

And the story of Rachel in Padamaran. Thank you very much for listening. And God Bless.