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February 5th: Genesis 35 & John 18:28-40

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Jacob returns home. Jesus before Pilate.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Genesis 35. God said to Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.

So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your garments. Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress, and has been with me wherever I have gone. So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears.

Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem. And as they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. And Jacob came to Luz, that is Bethel, which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him.

And there he built an altar and called the place El Bethel, because there God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother. And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak below Bethel, so he called its name Halam Beqath. God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan Aram, and blessed him.

And God said to him, Your name is Jacob. No longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name. So he called his name Israel.

And God said to him, I am God Almighty, be fruitful and multiply, a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you. Then God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him.

And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone. He poured out a drink offering on it, and poured oil on it. So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel.

Then they journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labour, and she had hard labour. And when her labour was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, Do not fear, for you have another son.

And as her soul was departing, for she was dying, she called his name Benoni. But his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath, that is Bethlehem.

And Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. Israel journeyed on, and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Edah.

When Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine. And Israel heard of it. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve, the sons of Leah, Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun, the sons of Rachel, Joseph, and Benjamin, the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's servant, Dan, and Naphtali, the sons of Zilpah, Leah's servant, Gad, and Asher.

These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan Aram. And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath Arba, that is Hebron, where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years.

And Isaac breathed his last, and he died, and was gathered to his people, old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him. In chapter 35 of Genesis, following the blood bath at Shechem, Jacob is sent to Bethel, to the place where God first appeared to him.

Note that he's also retracing the original journey of Abraham, who went from Haran to Shechem to Bethel. He's returning to points where he left earlier, as the story is going back to its origin. It's, as I have said before, a there and back again story.

And here he's on the return journey to arrive at the place where he began. Before he leaves Shechem, the people rededicate themselves to the Lord. They put away foreign gods, purify themselves and change their garments.

And the gods and the rings in their ears are buried beneath the terabinth tree in Shechem, which clearly was a significant site of covenant remembrance, as it also appears in the final chapter of the book of Joshua. In that story, they forsake their foreign gods and place a large stone beneath the terabinth tree, which is now next to the sanctuary of God. As we look through the story of Genesis, we'll see that trees are natural pillars of remembrance, they're landmarks.

It's one of the reasons why we so often see them mentioned in the Pentateuch. On several occasions they're associated with altars. They also provide the blessing of shade, like a cloud on a pillar, a tree with its canopy is something that has a natural symbolism to it.

We continue that symbolism in the way that we design churches, where you'll have the big trunk that is the pillar that holds up the roof, and then the vaulting of the roof as the tree canopy that shades you. And then the light coming through stained glass windows is like the light passing through the canopy of trees onto people beneath. So there are all sorts of symbolic associations that we see.

And also with particular trees, the specific type of tree can represent a particular period of Israel's history. The cypress, the oak, the terabinth associated with the oak, or we might think about the acacia or the gopher wood that's used for the building of the ark, the vine or the fig tree. All of these have particular associations.

The sycamore, even beyond particular types of trees, we have specific trees like the oaks of Moreh or we have the oak or terabinth here at Shechem. And so these associations are very important in Scripture. Scripture is a book about specific things and it pays a lot of attention to specific places, the events that occur there, the ways that one set of events can be connected to another set of events, and particular types of things in the world.

Not just trees as such, but specific types of trees and their associations. So it's important that we pay attention to these things. God promised Jacob that he would bring him back to the land in Genesis chapter 28 at the site of Bethel.

And now he returns to the place of that promise. But not now a solitary individual escaping from his brother, but surrounded by a large family, many people and extensive

possessions, returning home. God has made him rich in the land of Haran, Paddan Aram, and now he's going to be returning to his family.

God places a terror on the cities so that they don't attack Jacob. It's a similar sort of thing that we see in the story of the Exodus and the conquest of the land, that God goes before his people and he protects them. After the events of Shechem, it's not surprising that Jacob would need some protection.

He certainly feels very vulnerable at the end. And here God prepares for that. He gives protection as he walks on the way.

When he arrives at Bethel, he builds an altar, naming it for the God of Bethel, the God he first encountered on his way out to the land of Paddan Aram. And the place still seems to be called Uz. And it's called Bethel in part in anticipation of its fully becoming that later.

And it's at Bethel that Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, dies and is buried. And she is probably the last remaining connection that Jacob has to his mother. Deborah seems to have accompanied Rebecca in chapter 24 as she goes down and meets with Isaac.

But presumably after Rebecca's death, Rebecca seems to have died in this interim period, she goes back to the house of Laban in order to look after the favoured son of Rebecca and also to help him raise his children. There are other possibilities for how this might have worked out, but I would suspect that's the most likely situation. But with the death of Deborah, that one last remaining connection to his mother has gone.

And so it's a tragic event for Jacob. It has a very deep personal significance to him. Jacob has always been deeply connected with his mother and his mother's side of the family in his going to Paddan Aram to be with his uncle Laban.

But now that tie has been cut and he has to move on. There's also a fulfilled transition here to Rachel and Leah as the new matriarchs. It's no longer Rebecca as the key matriarch of the covenant people.

Now it's Rachel and Leah. And that transition to the new generation is completed later on in this chapter with the death of Isaac. God appears to Jacob again at Bethel and declares that he will be fruitful and multiply, will receive the land and the kings will come from his body.

We might think that this is in certain ways playing out the pattern of the call to humanity to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth, to subdue it and to exercise dominion over its creatures. He will be fruitful and multiply. He will receive the land that his people will fill.

And then kings will come from his body, which will both subdue the land and will give dominion over the land. And so this is the creation calling that's being fulfilled in this small context of the land of Israel. God reiterates the changing of Jacob's name.

And once again, as in the case of Bethel, it seems that the name change anticipates things that are yet to fully take place. He still has to be made into a political entity. Israel refers primarily to Jacob as he becomes a political entity.

And that has yet to be fully realised. He sets up a pillar here and pours a drink offering and oil upon it. It's in the place that God goes up from him.

I would suggest that this is connected with the story of Jacob's ladder earlier on, that there is this ascending and descending at a particular point. Elsewhere we see God going his way when he leaves talking with Abraham at the end of chapter 18, for instance. But here God doesn't go his way, rather he goes up, which suggests that this site has a particular importance as a connection between heaven and earth.

As they travel on from Bethel, Rachel goes into labour, but she dies before reaching Ephrath. She gives birth to a child who she calls Benoni, whose name is then changed by his father to Benjamin. Think about Jacob's own name, which was not a favourable name.

He was born under inauspicious conditions and his name that was given to him was later changed by God. And he changes the name of this second born son of his wife, Rachel. She's buried there and a pillar is set up over her.

Once again, Jacob is very strongly associated with stones. He's someone who sets up pillars, who gathers stones and who also removes stones, as in the story of the well. After the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel, Jacob is referred in the next few verses as Israel.

Now his name has been changed before, but we've not generally seen him referred to as Israel. And I wonder whether the connection with Benjamin, who is the one who represents the tribe that will give rise to the first kings, whether that is seen as a transition into this more political identity, that Israel can now call himself Israel, now that this son from which the first kings will arise has been born. There have been ominous themes throughout the story of Rachel that maybe foreshadow this in different ways and different aspects of the event.

First of all, we can think about the way she's replaced by Leah. Her statement, give me sons or I die. There's a certain foreshadowing there.

The death sentence that's cast over her by Jacob when he's pursued by Laban. And then in a more positive way, there's foreshadowing when she says in naming Joseph that the Lord would add to her another son. And that's fulfilled in the words of the midwife to her, who says, do not fear, you have another son.

As we read further on in the story, I think we'll see further ways in which Rachel's story foreshadows later events. Benjamin's story will be tragic, like Rachel's in many respects. They will almost be wiped out as a tribe at the end of the Book of Judges.

After this, Reuben lies with Bilhah, his father's concubine, the handmaid of Rachel. Why do this? It seems that Reuben is the firstborn, but the firstborn of the unfavoured mother. Rachel has just had another son, who has been favoured as the son of the father's right hand.

And perhaps what Reuben is attempting to do here is an attempted coup. He humiliates his father, but also presents himself as the man of the house, the one who controls and protects the people within it. All the people of the household and the clan, the sheikdom, he's the one in charge.

Absalom does something very similar to his father's concubines in the Book of 2 Samuel. It's again part of a coup, an attempt to gain power and assert his supremacy. Here, I think Reuben might be spurred to his action by his recognition that his father prefers the sons of Rachel over him and his side of the family.

Once again, we're seeing the tensions that arise within the family as a result of Jacob's favouring of Rachel over Leah. We've seen this already in the previous chapter in the story of Dinah and her two brothers. And now we're seeing it again in a far more ugly form.

What we're also seeing is that Reuben is disqualifying himself from the firstborn status by his action. If Simeon and Levi came under judgement because of what they did in chapter 34, here Reuben comes under judgement. Which means that the first three sons of Jacob have disqualified themselves in different ways.

At the end of this, Jacob's story finally comes full circle. This is why the list of his descendants is given at this point. It's the fulfilment of his journey and now things can move on to his sons.

Now that his journey has been completed, his 12 children have been born and he's returning to the house of his father. He finally comes to his father and Isaac finally dies. Before he departed for Paddan Aram, he was expecting his father's death was imminent.

But his father was still alive and so he returns and now his father dies. And at this point, the brothers Jacob and Esau join together to bury their father. So they're reunited and their father finally dies.

Which calls our attention back to the events of chapter 27, now resolved. Esau has forgiven Jacob so he's no longer threatening to take his life as he once did when his intention was to take Jacob's life after the death of their father. Now they've come to peace.

Isaac dies at the age of 180. We've commented upon the significance of these numbers before. Abraham dies at 175, 7 times 5 squared.

Isaac dies at 180, which is 5 times 6 squared. Jacob will die at 147, 3 times 7 squared. And then Joseph will die at 5 squared plus 6 squared plus 7 squared.

So we're seeing a connection between these characters, an ongoing development. The numeric connection between the characters should alert us to the fact this is a continuing story. Generation after generation are building upon each other.

Just as we've seen that Jacob retreads the path of his father Abraham. And also he's retreading the path that he once walked himself. These are united stories, a single story developing generation after generation building on what has gone before.

A question to consider. The death of Rachel is an event that casts a shadow over the rest of scripture. How might a reading of Micah chapters 4 and 5, Jeremiah 31 and Matthew 2 make more sense against the background of this passage? John chapter 18 verses 28 to 40.

Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover.

So Pilate went outside to them and said, What accusation do you bring against this man? They answered him, If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you. Pilate said to them, Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law. The Jews said to him, It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.

This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die. So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, Are you the king of the Jews? Jesus answered, Do you say this of your own accord or did others say it to you about me? Pilate answered, Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done? Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world.

If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world. Then Pilate said to him, So you are a king? Jesus answered, You say that I am a king.

For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice. Pilate said to him, What is truth? After he had said this he went back outside to the Jews and told them, I find no guilt in him.

But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews? They cried out again, Not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber.

At the beginning of John chapter 18 Jesus has been arrested and faced Annas and Caiaphas and Peter has denied him. Jesus is then sent from Caiaphas to Pilate. This is done early in the morning, probably around dawn, so that this would be the first thing on Pilate's desk in the morning.

They are dealing with Jesus as a matter of urgency. Now they have a concern to be able to eat the Passover, which raises chronological questions. How do we relate this account to the account that we find within the Synoptic Gospels? There are some details in Mark that might support John's chronology, but it seems difficult to reconcile the fact that Jesus eats the Passover with his disciples and then at this point the people are preparing to eat the Passover, after Jesus has eaten with his disciples and been arrested.

There have been a number of suggestions put forward. Some have suggested that the Last Supper is an early Passover, that it's connected to the Passover but not actually the Passover meal itself. Others have suggested that the disciples were using a different calendar from that of the Judeans.

And so the Jews are using a lunar calendar, Jesus is using a solar calendar perhaps. Both John's and the Synoptic's accounts would suggest that this occurred on a Friday. The question then is not what day of the week this occurred on, but how it relates to the celebration of the Passover.

Now the different Gospel accounts do have their differing purposes. John, as elsewhere, focuses more upon the relationship between the symbol of the Passover and the fulfilment with Christ as the Passover lamb himself. Christ is our Passover, sacrificed for us.

In the other Gospels however there's more of an emphasis upon the new symbol of the Last Supper, which is then connected to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. And so there's a connection more between two symbols, rather than between the symbol and the ultimate reality to which it points. This fits into John's theology more generally, which connects Jesus with the Lamb of God, the Passover lamb that's sacrificed for us.

And it helps us to understand a bit more of the theology of the cross that John is operating in terms of. Jesus is the Passover lamb, he's the firstborn son, and this gives a very clear Passover context for what takes place on the cross itself. Such a theology is also seen in places like 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul speaks about Christ, our Passover, sacrificed for us.

Pilate asks for an accusation against Christ. He isn't particularly keen to get involved, and this might serve an apologetic purpose, highlighting this fact. The true enemies in John's Gospel are not the Romans, and as the Gospel went throughout the world and the Roman Empire, this might actually have been a helpful point to emphasise, that Jesus was not fundamentally someone opposed to the Romans, his main enemies were found

among his own people.

The leaders of the Jews didn't have the authority to give a death sentence, and so they brought Jesus to Pilate so that they might have a death sentence delivered upon him. And once again we're reminded that Jesus' word is being fulfilled, even as he is condemned to death. Pilate questions Jesus, presumably after hearing the accusation that he presents himself as the king of the Jews.

And naturally Pilate would interpret this as revolutionary on the surface of it, that his claim is a political one, and that as such Jesus needs to be challenged as such a figure. There are details within John's Gospel that would seem to give some substance to such a claim. Jesus has a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which suggests some sort of royal aspiration.

But yet as he speaks with Pilate it becomes clear that his kingdom is not what Pilate might have expected. Jesus defines himself not primarily as the king of the Jews, this is a title that's given to him, and he never fully owns it. Rather he thinks of his kingdom in terms of truth, rather than in terms of ethnicity.

His is a different sort of kingdom, he is the king of the Jews, but that's not primarily the way to understand him. If he was the king of the Jews in the way that the Judean leaders were presenting him to be, and in the way that Pilate initially understood, his servants would have fought to protect him. But they didn't.

Rather Jesus' kingdom is a kingdom of truth. Truth might mean different things to different ears. To the ears of a Greek it might be associated with philosophical claims about the nature of reality.

To a Roman it might be more about factual accuracy of things that occurred. And to a Jew it might be more about God's covenant faithfulness, which does have certain political ramifications. Pilate's response, what is truth, is ambiguous.

Probably he's dismissing Jesus as a mere philosopher, harmless and innocuous figure for his political purposes. He's not really a challenge to the Romans, rather he's just someone who's an annoyance to the Judean leaders who have their religious objections against this figure for some strange reason. And to avoid having to cast any final sentence, Pilate speaks of the custom of absolution at the time of the Passover.

The Jews insist that he release Barabbas, the insurrectionist, instead. They falsely presented Jesus as a political revolutionary. But then they ask for an actual violent revolutionary to be released to them instead.

Now this is an example of some of the irony that's going on in John's Gospel. John often uses irony within his work to highlight and to contrast certain things, to help us see what is really taking place. So a question for you to reflect upon.

Sometimes in John's Gospel people say more than they know they're saying. Sometimes there are contrasts between the surface meanings and the intentions of people's actions or statements and the deeper things that are happening or being communicated through them. I want you to think about some of the cases and instances where we do see irony in the Gospel of John.

And I want you to reflect upon the theological purpose that John has in using irony so extensively. A second question. Jesus here speaks about his kingdom.

And at this point we might start to wonder why is this such a rare occurrence within John's Gospel? Jesus does not usually speak of his kingdom, nor does John. In the other Gospels we have constant references to the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God, etc. And we find it very rarely in John.

Why?