

Chapter Twenty-Eight

With Rebekah's words about the Hittite women still echoing in her husband Isaac's ears, the scene shifts to the departure of Jacob in order that he may procure a bride. As noted earlier, more than marrying a native-born woman of Canaan is at stake...it is a matter of keeping worship of the one true God pure as possible. To intermarry meant the blending of the one God with the multiple gods of Canaan, strictly forbidden. As for Haran from where Abraham had originated, worship of God seemed to have remained untainted from the days after the flood and through the construction of the tower of Babel. Despite this wonderful tradition, God bade Abram to leave for Canaan, something that must have been difficult for him to accept. As for the departure of Jacob which opens this chapter, it happened at a fortuitous moment because Esau was out for revenge: the further away Jacob went, the safer he was. Though we get no direct response from Isaac concerning Rebekah's lament, it must have registered, for he called Jacob for a second blessing. This was followed by an order: "You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women." Actually Esau already had done this (Judith and Basemath), and Isaac seems to have had no grudge toward him, even to the point of not refusing the blessing of first-born son about which Jacob had outwitted him. Jacob was ordered to go Paddan-aram (first mentioned in 25.20), "to the house of Bethuel your mother's father and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban your mother's brother" [vs. 2]. In other words, Jacob was about to head for the same city and family from which his mother Rebekah had originated, the one to which the faithful yet anonymous servant of Abraham had gone for Rebekah. If he had such luck there, why not a second time? Surely this servant, if he were alive and by Isaac's bedside, would have concurred with the decision of his master's son and even offer wise counsel as what to do upon arrival.

As for Isaac's blessing, it ran the now familiar tone with mention of God Almighty (here rendered as El Shaddai) but with a different twist, to make Jacob "a company of peoples" [vs. 3]. *Qahal* is the noun for "company"—the first time used in the Bible—applies to a congregation or assembly gathered for the worship of God. As had been the case with Isaac, the lineage begun in Canaan by Abraham is brought a decisive step further. Esau never could have effected this; he was too attached to his hunting and the land of Canaan to which he fit in as a native son. That's why Isaac continues his blessing by mentioning Abraham in vs. 4, having in mind the ultimate aim of taking "possession of the land of your sojournings." *Magor* is the noun for "sojournings" noted in 17.8 with respect to the then-named Abram, and to take possession of it means putting an end to the nagging, insecure feeling of being an immigrant. At some time this constant perception of being a stranger in a strange land must come to a resolution that had begun with Abraham and included the wearisome task of returning to such places as Paddan-aran to fetch a wife. Once that stopped, Abraham's seed would cease being foreign and become natives. It was a question of when and how to do this, something that never had been resolved.

The trip to Paddan-aran was uneventful, for vs. 5 simply says that Jacob went there. They must have been curious about Esau; after all, Laban was his uncle and may have expected him instead as the first-born. The fact that Jacob showed up instead intimated that something had happened between the two brothers. At this point either Laban or someone of his household may have contacted Isaac to obtain an objective picture. Certainly Jacob wasn't going to let them in on how their daughter Rebekah had played such a decisive part in deceiving her husband.

Action now shifts from Jacob's arrival among Rebekah's relatives back to Esau who "saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aran to take a wife from there" [vs. 6]. This seeing reveals a certain distance that had developed between him and his father, including his mother whom he must have come to despise but couldn't manifest it. He thought Jacob a coward to return to his mother's family and wondered why she didn't accompany him. Surely Rebekah must have felt her life was threatened and kept a close eye on her son. The real rub was that Jacob "had obeyed his father and his mother" [vs. 7], something Esau never was capable of doing. So from this point onward Esau was a stranger within his own household. At least his love for the field and hunting kept him pre-occupied and relatively safe where he could blow off steam. Esau reveals his rebellious nature by going to Ishmael, the son of Abraham by Hagar, for a wife. The last time Ishmael was mentioned was his death in 25.17, so Esau had in mind his descendants. The two never knew each other but would have been intimates, given their rebellious natures, a trait that must have extended to Ishmael's clan. From there Esau took as a wife by the name Mahalath, Ishmael's daughter, who must have born striking resemblance to her mother, Hagar the Egyptian. In other words, Esau took this step in defiance of his father's prohibition as well as his brother who complied, the reason for him having received further blessings. Esau knew he was out of the loop and never could recover what he had forfeited. It must have been painful for him to live out the rest of his days. However, his later reconciliation with Jacob in Chapter Thirty-Three shows that he retained some humanity; not only that, Esau had prospered and showed no ill-will.

"Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran" [vs. 10], that is, toward the ancestral land of Abraham, and did so under cover of darkness to avoid Esau. Apparently he made this journey on his own since no other person is named. The closer Jacob drew to Haran, the further away he was from Esau who, though a lover of hunting and expert at tracking, respected the boundary between his favorite areas and those of other peoples. Even though Esau easily could have overtaken Jacob, he ran the risk of getting into serious trouble with those people outside his favorite hunting grounds. "And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night because the sun had set" [vs. 11]. The place (*maqom*: usually applied to an inhabited area) is unspecified though revealed later as Luz which Jacob changed to Bethel (vs. 19). Thus between the arrival of Jacob at this *maqom* and when he calls it Bethel, it is named Luz though he didn't know it at the time. The verb *pagah* for "came" connotes a striking or rushing, usually in sudden fashion. "Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him" [32.1]. That is, the angels came upon Jacob unawares. As for the case at hand,

sunset overtook—it *pagah* or struck Jacob—so he had no choice but to camp for the night. During the day Jacob had been intent on putting as much distance between him and Esau as humanly possible, so intent that he lost all sense of the passage of time. Thus when night *pagah* him, he was quite unaware that it had happened and had no option except to settle down. Vs. 11 continues with Jacob taking a stone for a pillow of sorts after which he fell fast asleep. He was so tired from fleeing Esau that barely he had time to make himself comfortable for the night. That was irrelevant in light of what is about to happen.

“And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven” [vs. 12]. *Sulam* is the noun for “ladder,” the only use of this term in the Bible; it is derived from the verbal root *sala*, to lift up. Note the passive use of the verb, “was set up” (*natsav*, to set in place)...by whom is not given; it just appears as such. This ladder was exceptionally long, for it reached from earth to heaven, that is, it touched heaven (*nagah*) thereby uniting it with the earth (*érets*; usually refers to earth as a place of inhabitation). Once Jacob perceived this ladder, “behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” A ladder allows for one-way ascent or descent, not for both going on at the same time. Thus one angel had to wait for another to descend from heaven to earth and *visa versa*. Also implied is that an angel (or more of them) was already upon the earth awaiting his turn to ascend. And so on both ends—heaven and earth—we can visualize a long line of angels awaiting their turn. This is what got Jacob’s attention, not so much the ladder or the angels going up and down it. With respect to the ladder, the Hebrew text has “in (*b-*) it,” not on it, implying that the angels were one and the same with the ladder, obviously a means of ascent and descent unlike any other device imaginable. If this is taken as so, angels could ascend and descend at the same time.

“And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, ‘I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac’ [vs. 13]. *Natsav* is the verb for “stood,” the same word used in vs. 12 as “set up” with respect to the ladder. Thus it could be the ladder and the Lord were one and the same though distinct. As for the Lord, the Hebrew reads “stood upon (*hal*) it” instead of above it. This can also be rendered as “beside it.” He was there at the top helping the angels both coming up and going down so as not to lose their balance and fall off. Those angels who did come to earth scattered about though we have no record of their mission. The same applies when they ascend to heaven. Being messengers by nature (*mal’ak*), they perform functions as in 24.7 when Abraham speaks of an angel accompanying his servant to find a wife for Isaac. The same applied to the three angels who met Abraham before heading toward Sodom and Gomorrah. And so all these angels were occupied with bring and sending messages.

As for the Lord, he identifies himself as in 26.24 as the God of both his father and grandfather, this being the first direct contact Jacob had with the divinity. Again we have the familiar words harkening back to Abraham when he entered Canaan: “the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants.” Canaan is identified as *érets*, and its possession by Abraham’s descendants takes a step closer to completion. These descendants

are likened to dust which covers the earth, words originally put to the then-named Abram in 13.16. These future generations will spread to the four corners of the land upon which Jacob is laying and having his dream. *Parats* is the verb for “spread abroad” originally meaning to break asunder (not unlike dust, the result of crushed stones). “O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses” [Ps 60.1]. As a result of this spreading-breaking, “shall all the families of the earth bless themselves” or as in the Hebrew, “shall be blessed.” *Mishpachah* is the word for “families” as in 12.3 when Abram was about to leave his native Haran for Canaan. Instead of being associated with *‘erets*, these families—the entire earth, really—belong to *‘adamah* or more precisely, the ground. So at this early stage of the process of taking over Canaan we see a movement from the more general and imprecise nature of *‘adamah*, common to every person on the earth, to the precise *‘erets* which later will be called Israel.

“Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land” [vs. 15]. Here we have the third and final “behold” (*hineh*) which is intended to get and retain Jacob’s attention or more precisely, not to allow him to wake from his dream so that the Lord may fully communicate his plan. First, the Lord is “with” Jacob. Second, he will keep or *shamar* him; this verb was last used in 18.19: “to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice.” As noted in that context, *shamar* often refers to a keeping of the Torah. Third and last, the Lord will bring Jacob back to “this land,” *‘adamah* being used instead of *‘erets*, signifying that Canaan remains un-possessed by his clan but eventually destined to be theirs. The Lord hints that Jacob will leave Canaan; that happens with his son, Joseph, who set in motion a migration into Egypt which lasted over four hundred years. It was beneficial that Jacob couldn’t foresee this future development, for if the Lord had revealed it to him, he would not have continued with the mission begun by Abraham, carried out by Isaac and now transmitted to him. Vs. 15 concludes with “I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you.” *Hazav* is the verb for “leave” and connotes abandonment: “Leave me not nor forsake me” [Ps 27.9]. This must have made Jacob uneasy, the prospect of God abandoning him, even though God says that he will bring to an end what he had spoken, and that which at issue is the promise to possess the land of Canaan.

Jacob awakes from his dream in vs. 18 yet first exclaims (apparently while still dreaming), “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it” [vs. 16]. That is to say, Jacob did not know of the divine presence before his dream. The form of this presence is the Lord standing “upon” the ladder with the angels lined up on earth below and in heaven above, each taking his turn at ascending and descending. Whether or not the angels commented upon the Lord’s words spoken to Jacob we do not know; we can assume they did encourage him, even if were a glance as they were on the ladder. Jacob next exclaimed that he was afraid—rightly so—and said “How awesome is this place” [vs. 17]! The word “awesome” is the verb *yare’*, the same as “afraid” in this verse. That is to say, the place (*maqom*) where Jacob stopped for the night was terrifying. Why wouldn’t it be with all the angels gathered at the ladder’s base, let alone those on top with the Lord himself on hand? Then Jacob continued in vs. 17 saying that this *maqom* was “the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” In

sum, the *maqom* went from being an anonymous place to one with a name, rather two names: a *beyth 'elohym* and a *shahar hashamaym* or House of God and Gate of Heaven. Yet use of the term *maqom* is revealing, for as noted above, it refers to an inhabited place...and indeed it was inhabited, not by people but by angels. As for the latter, Jacob calls the ladder (*sulam*) a gate or *shahar*. "Open to me the gates of righteousness that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord" [Ps 118.19]. So by identifying this particular place about to be named Bethel or House of God (cf. vs. 19), Jacob intimates that the house is a ladder whose roots are on earth yet reaches heaven. As just depicted, this ladder/gate has angels continuously ascending and descending: they come down (for example) the ladder and then exit the gate or exit to Bethel.

"So Jacob rose early in the morning" [vs. 18]. That is to say, he took that stone-pillow and "set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it." *Matsevah* is the word for "pillar" and almost always refers to an image or idol, this being the first use in the Bible: "He shall break the obelisks of Heliopolis which is in the land of Egypt; and the temples of the gods of Egypt he shall burn with fire" [Jer 43.13]. As for the stone/pillar used by Jacob, it must have been fairly small, not something like an obelisk. To make it more prominent for future use, he must have erected a supporting foundation after which he anointed it with oil. This oil (most likely olive oil) made the stone glisten in the sun and acted as a beacon in the harsh desert sun for all to behold. Only after erection of this stone/pillar did Jacob formally bestow a name upon the nameless *maqom*, Bethel, an abbreviation of *beyth 'elohym* in vs. 17. Only now do we know that the *maqom* had a name, Luz...not only that, it was a city, *hyr* being applicable to a place that is fortified, not necessarily indicative of a large urban area. We can assume that Jacob was hesitant to enter Luz but remained close by or outside its gates. The inhabitants were those angels who were both ascending and descending the ladder set up between earth and heaven, a very special city. That's why it hadn't been mentioned earlier nor is noted for anything, historically speaking. Once the angel inhabitants knew that a stranger had renamed their city to Bethel, they were delighted and made him something akin to an honorary citizen.

Right after having erected his small pillar, Jacob made a vow which begins in vs. 20. He puts a condition upon it, however, by using the word "if" (*'im*): "If God will be with me." Surely Jacob had in mind what the Lord said in the dream, namely, that "I will bring you back to this land" [vs. 15]. He wasn't quite sure what that meant but intimated it was an exile of sorts. Naturally enough, Jacob wanted some insurance as to the vow he was pronouncing here at the newly named city of Bethel. Right away he brought up the fact of being kept or *shamar* by God ('and will keep me in this way that I go') as in vs. 15. Mention of "way" suggests his journey to Laban in the next chapter while intimating the much longer journey-sojourn-in Egypt to be initiated by his son, Joseph. More immediately Jacob has in mind a return to his father's house. If that works out accordingly, "then the Lord shall be my God" [vs. 22]...but if not, then it will not be thus. To conclude his conditional vow, Jacob identifies the stone/pillar as God's house; not that this small-ish monument was the house itself but symbolic of it. Jacob promises to give one tenth of all that the Lord will bestow

upon him, words reminiscent of then-named grandfather, Abram, who gave one tenth of his possessions to Melchizedek (cf. 14.20). However, there is no specific mention of this later on.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

This chapter begins an account of the extended stay of Jacob in Haran which turns out to be considerably protracted, a time away from his aged parents but safe from his vengeful brother, Esau. Chances are Jacob didn't go to Haran alone but was accompanied by a retinue of servants. Some of these acted as messengers between Jacob and home, so both parties could be informed as to what was going on. Besides, Jacob had special concern for Rebekah, his mother, who might become the object of vengeance by Esau.

"Then Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the east." The Hebrew words which begin this chapter read literally "Then Jacob raised his feet" ...raised his feet from the newly named Bethel or the place where that ladder into heaven had been erected. Obviously Bethel would be a mandatory stop on the way home with his new bride-to-be. So despite this incredible experience of being among the angels, Jacob was more focused on getting a wife which indicates the power of that urge to marry. His trip from Bethel to "the people of the east" was uneventful...thankfully...and terse mention of it intimates Jacob's determination. Over the years while growing up he heard tales of Haran from his grandfather Abraham which were handed down to Isaac. Now he would find out for himself if they were true. As for the people who dwelt there, the phrase "people of the east" is a general expression applicable to the Arameans first found in 11.2: "Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there." Not only was Jacob entering a land he had never visited, the place of Abraham's birth, but was going to that place from which the one language spoken by all peoples had originated before the confusion resulting from the tower of Babel. In other words, now he was treading upon sacred soil, unlike Canaan, which for all intensive purposes was an alien place despite divine promises that it would not remain so.

The first thing that Jacob noticed (the words of vs. 2 'as he looked, he saw' indicate paying close attention) was a "well in the field" around which were three flocks of sheep. Given his father Isaac's experience with wells, it is no small wonder that Jacob finds this sight compelling. What made it especially interesting was a lack of shepherds ('three flocks of sheep lying beside it'), but they appear shortly. Jacob was struck by the large stone on the well requiring a number of shepherds to gather in order to roll it back for the sheep to take water. It's size intimates a special well, one with abundant and pure water. Finally the shepherds show up, being from Haran. Jacob was now in that area, the "land of the people of the east," and wanted to make sure they were natives of the area instead of marauders or hostile shepherds not unlike those who had plagued his father Isaac. As soon as they identified themselves as from Haran, Jacob asked if they knew Laban, the son of Nahor (cf. vs. 5), and they did. The word *shalom* or peace is used for "well" as when Jacob makes this inquiry. The shepherds say that his daughter Rachel is about to arrive at the well with her

sheep, so this might be the candidate for wife Jacob had set out for. It was almost too good to be true.

Jacob remarks that “it is still high day; it is not time for the animals to be gathered together” [vs. 7]. “High day” reads literally, “great (*gado*) day” or around noon when the sun is greatest or hottest. Despite this, the shepherds say that Rachel is coming to the well with her sheep knowing full well that it is not time to roll back the huge stone. This was unusual practice because sheep aren’t taken out in the noonday heat; Rachel must have intimated that something out of the ordinary was up, so she came on that hunch. Her father, Laban, must have felt the same way and consented. Then she appears (cf. vs. 9) and once there with all the shepherds—perhaps they gathered early since they, like Rachel, knew something was about to happen—Jacob “rolled the stone from the well’s mouth and watered the flock of Laban, his mother’s brother” [vs. 10]. It was an extraordinary feat of strength for one man which must have impressed both the shepherds and Rachel. But from where did Jacob obtain his strength? Compared with his brother Esau, he was a homebody with no special endowments. If so, they would have been mentioned. The source lay in that vision of the angels at Bethel, he being privy to their point of contact between heaven and earth.

As soon as Jacob had rolled back that stone, he “kissed Rachel and wept aloud” [vs 11]. He didn’t pause to accept the accolades from the shepherds, being interested in Rachel alone. The Hebrew for “wept aloud” reads literally as “raised his voice.” That must have impressed the shepherds just as much as his feat of strength, showing that this man endowed with super-human powers was touched by love and compassion. Once Jacob told Rachel that “he was her father’s kinsman and Rebekah’s son” [vs. 12], she ran home to tell her father. Again, the shepherds were astonished and talked with Jacob during the interlude it took for Laban to meet Jacob at the well. It’s interesting to note that first Rachel ran home and then Laban ran to Jacob (cf. vss. 12 & 13). Upon reaching home with the shepherds trailing behind marveling at all this, Laban says to Jacob, “Surely you are my bone and my flesh” [vs. 14], words echoing the first man upon seeing the first woman: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” [2.23]. This dramatic encounter between long-lost relatives concludes with Jacob staying a month, a time of considerable joy touched with a desire to get back home to Rebekah with Rachel in tow as his bride.

So after one month Laban gradually reveals to Jacob his character: “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing” [vs. 15]? Jacob didn’t come to Haran to hire himself out; he could have done that in Canaan. At the same time, Laban was laying down the condition for Jacob to take Rachel as his bride. Vs. 16 comes in as a kind of after-thought: “Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah and the name of the younger was Rachel.” Of course we know about Rachel, but this verse comes from, as it were, Laban’s point of view. Jacob must have known about Leah before he arrived in Haran and wasn’t at all attracted to her: “Leah’s eyes were weak but Rachel was beautiful and lovely” [vs.17]. The adjective for “weak” is *rak* which alternately means tender but here implies a certain lack-luster or dullness of heart as revealed through the eyes. “A soft answer

turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” [Prov 15.1]. All in all, most biblical references to *rak* are positive. On the other hand, Rachel was “beautiful and lovely,” words not necessarily pertaining to her eyes but to her as a whole. The adjective “beautiful” is expressed by two words, *yephath-to’ar*, literally as “fair as form.” *Yapheh* can apply to both men and women, implying excellency as in Ecc 3.11: “He has made everything beautiful in its time.” As for the noun *to’ar*, usually it applies to humans and animals. “Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking” [39.6]. So if Leah were endowed just as much as her sister, Rachel, still she wouldn’t have stood out due to her weak eyes which betrayed so much of her character.

And so Jacob concedes to Laban’s request; rather, he outdoes him by saying “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel” [vs. 19]. That is, Jacob came up with the outrageous term of seven long years of exile in Haran, apparently having lost all thought of the mission entrusted to him. Although his devotion is impressive, it doesn’t put him in a good light at all. Eagerly Laban agreed to take on Jacob for seven years. Who could blame him? At the same time, this doesn’t put Laban in exactly the best light either. He was fully aware of his brother-in-law Isaac’s situation, that he was heir to continue Abraham’s original mandate to take over Canaan. Now Laban is just as much an obstacle as to that divine plan. “So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her” [vs. 20]. During this period some of that extraordinary strength revealed at the well must have manifested itself which contributed greatly to Laban’s household. Both he and Jacob seemed to have struck a happy bargain, happy with the exception of both Leah and Rachel. The former was shunted off to the sidelines whereas the latter had to endure seven years of waiting. But for Jacob these seven years were, as the text says literally, “as days ones,” *’echad* being the word for “few.”

Vs. 21 begins rather abruptly with “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” That is to say, the seven years as “days ones” came to an end for Jacob and just as quickly for Laban, for he was the one who benefitted from this service. The Hebrew for “time” is “days” (*yamay*) which for both men were as “ones.” To celebrate, Laban went along with Jacob’s request by gathering all the men of the place (*maqom*, vs. 22) which included those shepherds Jacob initially encountered at the well. They all testified to the wonderful deeds he had done over the past seven years and may have had a hand in Laban’s ploy to keep him on for another seven. But before this, Laban tries to pull yet another fast one on Jacob by bringing in Leah with her weak eyes by the dim light of evening. Jacob’s eyes must have been just as weak, for he had intercourse with Leah (cf. vs. 23). So if both had weak eyes, at least momentarily in Jacob’s case, it doesn’t say much about his character. Surely Leah could have been excused for not recognizing Jacob in the evening twilight (‘in the evening,’ vs. 23), but Jacob? His weakness was an inability to control himself. In the morning light he caught on to Laban’s trick and exclaimed, “Why have you deceived me” [vs. 25]? *Ramah* is the verb for “deceived” and fundamentally means to cast, throw or shoot with a bow. “I called to my lovers but they deceived me” [Lam 1.19].

Laban responded to Jacob's just complaint with the half-hearted excuse, "It is not done in our country (*maqom* or place as in vs. 22), to give the younger before the first-born" [vs. 26]. He continues by asking Jacob to "complete the week of this one" or the week of the marriage festivity after which he will give Rachel to him...after yet another seven years. At this point you'd think Jacob would either kill Laban or simply give up. However, readily he consented to this request, quite amazing when you think of it. As noted earlier with regard to the first seven year period, it's surprising to find Jacob so unmindful of his father's request to bring back a bride fairly soon in order to continue the lineage with a view to gaining control over Canaan. Jacob must have informed Isaac on both occasions as well as Rebekah, all this out of fear for Esau. After all, Esau still wanted to get revenge for having been cheated out of his birth right. So all tacitly agreed that a grand total of fourteen years would be sufficient for passions to cool. Once Jacob had completed his week pertinent to the marriage festivity, "Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to wife" [vs. 28]. Was this second stretch of seven years as "days one" (vs. 21) for Jacob? The text is silent on the matter implying it wasn't, for Laban had outwitted Jacob again by giving him the unwanted Leah. Nevertheless, vs. 30 re-affirms Jacob's love for Rachel.

Now the Lord himself steps in and makes known his preference. At first glance the Lord appears unconcerned with the people back in Canaan struggling along as best they can, but this proves not to be the case. He was more interested in Jacob having twelve sons, the source of the twelve tribes of Israel or very foundation of the future nation. However, those in Canaan must have felt deserted both by Jacob and by the Lord, even more so when they got wind of Jacob happily married and his failure to return home. The Lord saw that "Leah was hated and opened her womb, but Rachel was barren" [vs. 31]. This seeing implies that despite implicit lack of mention of the Lord for much of Chapter Twenty-Nine, he was there all along observing. It was Leah of the weak eyes that finally moved him to pity Leah. As for Rachel, the words "was barren" leaves open that the Lord may or may not have been responsible directly for this apparent tragedy. All this was reminiscent of Sarah and Hagar, a fact that must not have escaped Jacob's mind. Leah's fruitfulness was manifested by her bearing four sons.

The first son born of Leah of the weak eyes was Reuben who was the first of twelve sons, the other mothers being the maids Bilhah (belonging to Rachel) and Zilpah (belonging to Leah) in the next chapter. Twelve births translate into nine months pregnancy for each one. Even if the intervals is relatively short (and we get this feel from the narrative), we could posit some four to five months in between each birth. That totals to around one hundred and eight months of pregnancy in by itself coupled with another seventy months of interval time resulting in a final tally of approximately one-hundred and seventy-eight months or over fourteen years. And if we add the fourteen years of Jacob's service to Laban, that brings the amount of time higher. And to think that Jacob left his aging father Isaac who, as it turns out, is still alive!

As for the birth of Reuben, we have a derivation of his name by the circumstances of Leah's pregnancy, a pattern of bestowing names that follows for the next eleven sons: "Because the Lord has looked upon my affliction" [vs. 32]. This verse shows a correlation between the Lord seeing (*ra'ah*) Leah in vs. 31 and fulfillment of this seeing, of directed toward Leah's affliction. The word is prefaced by the preposition in (*b-*) rendering it more exactly as "has looked *in* my affliction" or has looked right into her soul. Wonderful as this *ra'ah* is, it doesn't remain abstract but assumes the form of a human being, Reuben, whose name translates as "see, a son." However, Leah's joy is tinged with some sorrow: "now my husband will love me." A hopeful exclamation, for Jacob had sexual relations with Leah by mistake, thinking she was Rachel. Leah names her second son Simeon after the verbal root for "to hear" which is *shamah*. To see involves greater distance from the object seen compared with hearing, so the Lord must have drawn closer to Leah that she may conceive and give birth to Simeon. Finally Leah gives birth to a third son named Levi: "Now this time my husband will be joined to me because I have borne him three sons" [vs. 34].

During her first two births Leah complains about Jacob's lack of love and her being hated due to her weak eyes compared with the gorgeous Rachel. The verbal root for the proper name Levi is *lawah* or "to join." It also means to borrow, receive as a loan or to lend. For a use similar to the one at hand, refer to Num 18.2: "And with you bring your brethren also, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may join you and minister to you." The fourth and final son is Judah: "This time I will praise (*hodah*) the Lord" [vs. 35]. Chapter Twenty-Nine comes to a happy conclusion with the words, "then she ceased bearing" and thus sets the stage for Rachel.

Chapter Thirty

This chapter is a continuation of the last one, that is to say, as related to the birth of Jacob's sons; to date four have been born to Leah who was known for her weak eyes (cf. 29.17). Now attention shifts to the younger Rachel: "When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister" [vs. 1]. *Qana'* is the verb for "envied" and often as is the case with jealousy when associated with anger. "And his brothers were jealous of him (Joseph), but his father kept the saying in mind" [37.11]. This jealousy/anger took voice in Rachel exclaims in the same verse, "Give me children or I shall die!" Such is the curse of barrenness, for it means that the family name will not be carried on. Her cry of desperation didn't mollify Jacob who blurts out, "Am I in the place of God who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb" [vs. 2]? The preposition *tachat* (under) is used for "in the place" of God or the equivalent of saying, "Am I a substitute for God?" By these words Jacob is saying that he is just as frustrated as Rachel which included awareness of having had sexual relations with Rachel's elder sister. If Jacob had been in God's place, surely he would have granted fertility to his wife.

Rachel breaks the tension with the words, "Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her that she may bear upon my knees" [vs. 3]. This is the second time Jacob would have intercourse with

a woman away from Canaan, something his father Isaac would not have approved. However, it was of vital importance to fulfil the divine commission with providing future generations. Though we don't pick up direct mention of this, surely it underlies Jacob's intention; in the end, it must have been a fairly difficult judgment call. A lingering doubt remains: can we be sure of Jacob's intention after being away from Canaan some fourteen years? Would he be accepted if he returned? Going there with a barren wife would be most shameful and invite special scorn from his brother Esau. As for Rachel wishing Bilhah to "bear upon my knees," it is a way of her to identify with her maid and give birth by a kind of proxy. There is nothing further said about Bilhah once she has given birth; though the child was hers physically, it belonged to Rachel because Bilhah was a slave without any rights. As for the word "maid," vs. 2 has *'amah* whereas vs. 4 has *shiphchah*. The former applies to a female slave in general whereas the latter to a maid considered part of the family. For the difference, see 1Sam 25.41: "Behold, your handmaid (*'amah*) is a servant (*shiphchah*) to wash the feet of the servants of my lord." That is to say, I (Abigail) am your household servant ready to wait upon you.

And so, Bilhah bears Jacob a son after which Rachel exclaims "God has judged me and has also heard my voice and has given me a son" [vs. 6]. Such was her response to Jacob's claim to being in God's place and have the capacity to decide human affairs. As for Bilhah who did the childbearing, she doesn't utter a word as she gave birth upon Rachel's knees which must have degraded her to the utmost degree. Furthermore, it reveals not just the cunningness of Rachel but her cruelty...this on top of her claiming that God had judged favorably on her behalf. So there was Bilhah on top of Rachel with her mistress giving birth by a kind of proxy which, given the fact that she possesses Bilhah, allows her to claim the infant as her own. While this is stated explicitly, the actual birth isn't mentioned. The presumed reason is that it is too humiliating. As for the child, Rachel named it Dan which derived from the verbal root *dyn* (to judge) as Rachel had uttered in vs. 6. Not exactly the best named to carry around, given the circumstances.

Verses 7 and 8 recounts the second humiliation of Bilhah at the hands of Rachel, the latter reading "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed." *Patal* is the verb for "wrestling" which fundamentally means to be twisted; just four other biblical references exist. "With the pure you show yourself pure, and with the crooked you show yourself perverse" [Ps 18.26]. By way of note, the noun *patyl* ('bracelet' is derived from it due to the twistings and turnings of such an ornament). If the proper name Dan is something to be ashamed above as noted in the last paragraph, being tagged with Naphtali is worse! However, Rachel's wrestling with Leah are based in reality yet again leave out poor Bilhah who did the actual child bearing. Certainly credit must be given to Bilhah for having to endure a second humiliation. Chances are quite a few people were standing around at these two births, one of whom was there ready to throw Bilhah off Rachel's knees as soon as she had given birth...not thrown away but thrown aside for future possible use. As for these wrestlings with Leah, Rachel had prevailed, *yachal* being the verbal root. "Sorely have they afflicted me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me" [Ps 129.2]. We haven't a

clue what Jacob may have thought except that he was enjoying all these sexual relations. If he had misgivings, surely they would have been recorded.

While Rachel had been observing her fruitful elder sister giving birth to four sons, Leah decided to take matters into her own hands and imitate her. As with Billhah, we have no response from Jacob, most likely happy to oblige two desperate women. “When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife” [vs. 9]. That is to say, Leah lost her fertility sometime after having given birth to Reuben, Simeon and Judah. It shows just as much cunning for a woman with weak eyes as her younger, more attractive sister. However, we don’t see Leah stooping to such as low as placing her maid upon her knees while pretending to be the woman giving birth. Usually the man is the one giving and taking a woman in such affairs, yet here we have two women engaged in it that activity which is below their dignity and reveals the depth of their desperation. The name of this fourth child born by way of proxy is Gad due to Leah’s exclamation “Good fortune” or *gad* which seems to have been taken from the Babylonian god for fortune and worshiped by the Jews when they were taken captive. There is one other biblical reference: “But you who forsake the Lord, who forget my holy mountain, who set a table for Fortune and fill cups of mixed wine for Destiny” [Is 65.11].

Without missing a beat, Leah matches Jacob, technically the husband of her sister Rachel, by presenting Zilpah yet again for the purpose of begetting a second son whom Leah calls Asher: “Happy am I! For the women will come to me happy” [vs. 13]. “Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight” [Mal 3.12]. The verbal root is *’ashar* (to be straight, successful, prosper) and reveals Leah’s attitude, her desire for respect among her female peers who without a doubt had been monitoring closely this duel between Leah and Rachel with two helpless maids as their pawns. Still, this drama has plenty of action to go until the full complement of twelve sons are born, fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel.

“In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah” [vs. 14]. Reuben is the first son born of this “dual” between Leah and Rachel which to date had witnessed the birth of six children. It must have been confusing for a youth, a strange competition between two women in their desire to become pregnant, even it was by proxy. Mention of the wheat harvest implies late summer or early autumn with Reuben as eldest son possibly being in charge of it. *Duday* is the word for “mandrake,” all but one biblical references occurring in these story, the other being Sg 7.13: “The mandrakes give forth fragrance, and over our doors are all choice fruits.” This word is derived from the verbal root *dod* (to love). The impression we get from Reuben’s discovery of this fruit is it had been there prior to the wheat which sprung up later and concealed it. Since the workers were in haste like all other harvesters to bring in the crop, they focused on the job at hand, nothing extraordinary. However, the mandrakes left behind caught Reuben’s attention or it was brought to his attention by one of the harvesters. He knew their amatory property so decided to bring them to his mother, Leah, who was losing that competition with her younger sister or Reuben’s aunt. Rachel got notice of her nephew’s

discovery of these mandrakes because she said “Give me, I pray, some of your son’s mandrakes” [vs 14]. Leah responded harshly as expected: “Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband?” Rachel offered a deal to this retort: “Then he may lie with you tonight for your son’s mandrakes” [vs. 15].

This offer demonstrates how desperate Rachel had become, to hire out her husband to her sister in exchange for mandrakes which she believed would cure her inability to bear children. Jacob, as had been the case throughout this drama, simply complies to lie with whomever asks him! Now it’s his turn with Leah who initially had been rejected over the fairer Rachel. With the conception of this, Leah’s fifth son (the first two technically were hers whereas the others came from her maid, Bilhah), God enters the scene: “And God hearkened to Leah” [vs. 17]. Apparently the morality of what had been transpiring didn’t concern God; he was more focused on getting twelve sons into the world, legitimate or illegitimate, and using Jacob as a kind of stud for this purpose. Once all had been born, the drama could continue with a detour—and a major one at that—into Egypt from the promised land of Canaan. The name of this fifth son was Issachar because Leah exclaimed “God has given me my hire because I gave my maid to my husband” [vs. 18]. *Sakar* is the verbal root for “hire” from which Issachar is derived and certainly not a flattering proper name. “Because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor...to curse you” [Dt 23.4].

Leah found her eldest son’s mandrakes effective, for she bore Jacob a sixth son and exclaimed “God has endowed me with a good dowry; now my husband will honor me because I have borne him six sons” [vs. 21]. The name of this son was Zebulun from the verbal root at hand (i.e., ‘endowed’) being *zavad*, the only instance in the Bible. Reuben’s mandrakes continued their effect with the birth of the first daughter whom Leah named Dinah who will figure predominantly in Chapter Thirty-Four. Her birth must have come as a surprise...a disappointment...for in the eyes of Leah, Jacob and the others, Dinah set back what they perceived was an unstoppable advancement to give birth to twelve sons, all being aware to one degree or another of this quota. All this began, it must be kept in mind, with Isaac sending his son Jacob to Laban that he may marry and return home as soon as possible. If he had someone like that anonymous yet faithful servant of Abraham returning home with Rebekah as a bride for Isaac, things would have turned out differently.

Now it was Rachel’s turn, for God remembered her, vs. 22. The verb here is *zakar* from which is derived the noun (same spelling) “male” and has clear application for the drama at hand. It was Rachel in her desperation who asked for those mandrakes her nephew had discovered in the field after the wheat harvest. With this tussle between two sisters going on before Reuben, he must have been amazed at the power of this fruit and secretly kept an eye-out for any other mandrakes spotted in the fields for his own use. The birth of this the final of the twelve sons between Leah and Rachel, Bilhah and Ziphah, is the one who will figure most prominently in the rest of the book of Genesis and beyond, namely, Joseph. As for this proper name, Rachel associates it with the words “May the Lord add to me another son” [vs. 24]! The verbal root *yasaph* is the word for “add.” The adding, as it were, applies to

the two sons borne through Bilhah, Dan and Naphtali. Surely there must have been tension between these two and Joseph, a foreshadowing of the greater tension between him and his brothers.

So with the birth of twelve sons, all of whom will end up in Jacob's custody, they have a less than desirable origin as indicated by their names. Though in many ways fanciful, the way they obtained their names reveals less than desirable human qualities at the service of in a larger scale of things, the tribes which would participate in the Exodus from Egypt and the population (rather, re-population) of Canaan destined to become Israel.

After such an ordeal Jacob finally said to Laban, "Send me away, that I may go to my own home and country" [vs. 25], that is, after about half his life span away from Canaan which he calls his *maqom* (home or place) and *'erets* (country). Both terms are revealing in that Jacob, unlike his father and grandfather, had come to accept Canaan as his native soil; the land from which they had come and where he now found himself was alien to him despite having spent so much time there. Jacob's request comes right after the first words of the same verse, "When Rachel had borne Joseph." These words mean that Joseph's birth was a signal to Jacob; though no divine intervention is noted, he intuited that at last his mission had been accomplished. Also he figured that his brother Esau's wrath would be abated by now, provided he was still alive. If Esau had died—and chances were high due his love of hunting—word would have reached Jacob, so that option was ruled out. Furthermore, Jacob asks of Laban his wives (that is, Leah and Rachel) and his thirteen children, Dinah being the sole female child born to him. His appeal to Laban was "the service which I have given you" [vs. 26]. The word for "service" is *havodah*, a word referring both to deeds accomplished as well as bondage, and here is in reference to 29.27: "Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years."

Laban counters Jacob's request with a claim that he has "learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you" [vs. 27]. A verb is used for "divination" or *nachash* and referred to the serpent which tempted the first woman: "Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made" [3.1]. As noted there, the verbal root means to whisper or hiss; also it means to practice divinization or sorcery. The idea is that a sorcerer hisses or whispers quietly while performing an incantation so other people may not be privy to what's going on. Laban was a dual blessing to Jacob: two daughters by which he (and through the medium of their respective maids) had children and a subtle, wily individual who did his best to keep Jacob in his service as long as possible. The means by which Laban had obtained this *nachash* isn't disclosed though Jacob had intimations of his deceit early on which is why he doesn't question him as to its source. After making this rather cryptic statement, Laban asks Jacob with what will turn out as feigned to "name his wages," the verb being *naqav*. This word is a bit unusual insofar as it refers to piercing as well as making a curse. "And he who blasphemes the name of the Lord" [Lev 24.16]. On the positive side, *naqav* suggests making a direct request minus the prospect of bargaining.

Jacob points to his service of minding Laban's cattle, the first time this is mentioned as opposed to watching sheep which one would expect by the first encounter Jacob had with the shepherds at the well with the huge stone. "For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly; and the Lord has blessed you wherever I turned" [vs. 30]. Apparently Jacob's chief task was to increase the small herd of cattle in Laban's care. The Hebrew for "increased abundantly" is *yiprots larov* or "overflowed to excess," the verb *parats* implying that the small herd spread out in all directions. As for the verb "turned," it is lacking in the text which reads "blessed you to (or at) my feet." Immediately after this statement and in the same verse Jacob asks "When shall I provide for my own household also?" Such a question took Laban by surprise and showed Jacob's determination to move on. So for payment Laban agreed that Jacob would "feed your flock and keep it" [vs. 31], this time referring to sheep, not cattle. Presumably that would involve working with the shepherds of Haran and that large stone which Jacob could remove unassisted.

Now the remainder of Chapter Thirty goes into considerable detail where Jacob separates "speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my wages" [vs. 32]. As a footnote to the **Oxford Annotated RSV** has it, "stripped or speckled coloration was unusual, and Laban seemingly had nothing to lose." Yet again Laban reveals his true colors. He put the sheep desired by Jacob under the care of his sons and "set a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob" [vs. 36]. This readiness to get up and go isn't unusual for nomads, so with some preparation Laban figured he could outrun Jacob. Besides, his sons would offer protection. Vs. 36 ends on an unexpected note: "and Jacob fed the rest of Laban's flock" which suggests that he had a trick in store for Laban. So vs. 37 to the conclusion of this chapter go at length as to how Jacob managed to raise stronger sheep and leave the feebler with Laban. Actually the separation of three days' journey worked out well for Jacob; he could get working at this tedious though vital breeding process unhindered. "Thus the man (Jacob) grew exceedingly rich and had large flocks, maid servants and men servants and camels and asses" [vs. 43]. *Parats* is the verb for "grew rich," the same verb used in vs. 30 when Jacob claimed that he was responsible for Laban's increase of cattle. And so this last verse of Chapter Thirty shows that the last word and last laugh of Jacob was on Laban for whom he had labored so diligently. You'd think Laban would have known Jacob's ingenuity and resourcefulness by now but apparently did not.

Chapter Thirty-One

Vs. 26 of the last chapter has Laban putting "a distance of the three days' journey between himself and Jacob" while Jacob remained in his uncle's encampment tending the flock that had been left behind. Despite the distance between the two, Jacob got wind of Laban's sons claiming they were cheated of their wealth which presumably was a potential inheritance. This worried Jacob, for years earlier he had cheated his brother Esau from his birthright and knew firsthand what vengeance that could instigate. Note that Jacob heard—he didn't have direct contact—and knew the report could be filtered with all sorts of exaggerations, etc. The

bone of contention at hand was “wealth” or *kavod* which more familiarly means “glory” (and literally, heaviness) and involves the reputation of the person possessing the wealth. Should Jacob not return the *kavod* to Laban’s sons (their number is unspecified), they would lose that honor as well. This incident discloses yet again Laban’s cunning and cowardice, thinking he could get away with cheating Jacob not directly but through his sons. Vs. 2 continues with a kind of understatement, “And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favor as before”...as if he had held Jacob in regard to begin with or better, honored him only to squeeze as much work from him as he could. The Hebrew text for “did not regard him with favor as before” reads literally “behold, there was not with him as before.”

Now the Lord himself decided to intervene without Jacob having asked for divine assistance which means he had a vested interest in the matter at hand: “Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you” [vs. 3]. These words must have reminded Jacob of his grandfather Abraham’s divine calling only in the latter case, the “land” had been completely alien. What’s interesting here is that despite piecemeal efforts to establish themselves, Abraham’s descendants were now on a surer footing. Personally the Lord’s words were reassuring for Jacob, that is, “and to your kindred” or to those in Canaan whom he haven’t seen in some twenty-six years. The Lord knew them as well as Jacob, that they continued to remember him as one of their own. Yet there loomed in the background Esau, an uncomfortable threat that could upset everything.

Jacob accepts the divine intervention without giving a response. He must have been delighted to at last get this confirmation to rid himself once and for all of Laban and the memory of having been tricked so many times. Immediately Jacob called both Leah and Rachel “into the field where his flock was” [vs. 4]. That may have been risky, given the intense rivalry over who could get pregnant first and produce the most children for Jacob, and explains the situation which runs through vs. 13. First Jacob tells them that although he has lost favor in their father’s eyes, “the God of my father has been with me” [vs. 5], that is, the God of Isaac. Surely Jacob must have in mind Isaac’s experience as a youth when placed by his father upon the altar as a sacrifice, an unforgettable memory, which was drilled into his mind as a life-changing event. If the Lord could rescue Isaac at the very last minute, why couldn’t he do the same for his son? Jacob then reminds the two sisters of having served Laban “with all my strength” [vs. 7]...not an exaggeration but literally as we had seen with the stone he removed from the well, strength that was directed to other tasks. Laban had both cheated Jacob and changed his wages ten times, the former verb being *talal* which also means to mock. “A deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself” [Is 44.20]. True words, yet Jacob knew this early on and decided to remain with Laban out of love for Rachel which unexpectedly resulted in him being responsible for the birth of twelve sons and one daughter. At the same time, Jacob acknowledges God’s role in not permitting Laban to harm him (cf. vs. 7), the verb being *rahaḥ* as noted in 26.29, this word being the root for *rah* or evil (adjective). Though the Lord was protecting Jacob against this potential, Laban never seems to have wished evil, just to milk him for what he was worth.

Next Jacob recounts to Leah and Rachel the story about the animals from their father's flocks as his wages and the dream he had of the spotted he-goats which leaped upon the flock (cf. vs. 11). The literal way of putting "saw in a dream" is "I raised my eyes and saw in a dream." That is, first Jacob raised his eyes after he had gone asleep or raised attention away from the usual dreams we all experience shortly before he beheld the situation at hand. While distinct, the two form a whole and correspond to reality, a fact that is confirmed by an angel of the Lord who first summoned him by calling out his proper name (cf. vs. 11). The intent was to grab Jacob's attention within the dream after which Jacob responded with "Here I am." That is to say, despite being asleep, Jacob was fully attentive to anything the Lord might communicate to him. The angel's words were reassuring: "I have seen all that Laban is doing to you" [vs. 12]. Such words come from an angel and correspond to the Lord who is watching the situation as well, the angel being an intermediary or message as is his task, *mal'ak*. The identity between the angel who addressed Jacob and the Lord fuse into one, if you will, with vs. 13: "I am the God of Bethel where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me." For Jacob, these words were just as good as having been uttered an hour ago despite the fact that it occurred twenty-six years earlier before he had met Laban. Indeed this was a powerful experience, of seeing the angels ascending and descending upon a ladder and the name of place changed from Luz to Bethel. If Jacob did not have that dream—note that reference to it takes place within a second dream—never could he have survived such a prolonged ordeal outside his native homeland. The vow to which the Lord/angel refers is that of 28.20-22, of giving a tenth of all what the Lord gives to him back to the Lord. Apparently that turned out to be quite significant over the coming years. If it weren't for mindfulness of that vow, Jacob have faltered in his promise, something to his credit.

Jacob's dream ends with an echo of vs. 3 or a return to "the land of your fathers" though there is no hint of a dream in that communication: "Now arise, go forth from this land and return to the land of your birth" [vs. 13]. These words are more significant than those of vs. 3 because the issue of ownership of the flocks is settled now. The command "arise" is something like the Lord saying to Jacob, wake up and get moving at once. And to hear those words "land (*érets*) of your birth" were even more welcome. Both Rachel and Leah were present as soon as Jacob had woken up after this dream, standing around him in anticipation. At the same time, they knew not to rouse him from slumber and hence from his dream which would have spoiled everything.

The sisters had two pressing questions, the first one being "Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house" [vs. 14]? *Cheleq* and *nachalah* are the words for "portion and inheritance," the first last noted in 14.24 though in a sense different from the one at hand. This is the first time *nachalah* is used, an important term in both the books of Numbers and Joshua to drill into the Israelites that the land which they occupy is indeed theirs; more specifically, that it was passed down to them from earlier generations. "Joshua gave it (the whole land) for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments" [Jos 11.23]. The second question put to Jacob is "Are we not regarded by him (Laban) as foreigners" [vs. 15]? *Nakry* is the singular for "foreigner" or the exact opposite of one with

the right to *cheleq* and *nachalah*, portion and inheritance. “I have been a stranger in a strange land” [Ex 2.2]. Most likely Leah and Rachel were referring to how their father offered Jacob as a husband, not caring about their welfare, but to milk Jacob for what he was worth. Their association with Jacob make them like objects in their father’s eyes, a sad state of affairs but consistent with Laban’s character. Both women continue with another lament in the same verse (15), “For he has sold us, and he has been using the money given for us.”

Despite the lament to Jacob by Leah and Rachel, they’ve managed to come off nicely: “All the property which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children; now then, whatever God has said to you, do” [vs. 16]. *Hosher* is the word for “property” and alternately means “riches;” the verbal root *hashar* means to be happy. The instrument, of course, by which the Lord has defrauded Laban is Jacob who manages to turn the tables on him. Since the two women...wives...have a collective authority of sorts, they could urge their husband to do what he wants, and that is to get away from Laban as quickly and as far as possible. Vs. 17 lends a certain tenderness to this haste: “and (Jacob) set his sons and his wives on camels.” Next Jacob rustled up the cattle and livestock he had acquired in Paddan-aram (cf. vs. 18) and headed to Canaan and his father as vs. 18 states. Jacob must have wondered considerably about Isaac; the last time they had met some twenty-six years ago Isaac was confined to his bed seemingly on the verge of death. Would he still be in the same bed as Jacob had left him? And what about his mother, Rebekah, and more importantly than all, his brother Esau?

While Jacob had been preparing his family and possessions for the trek back to Canaan, Rachel decided to play the ultimate dirty trick on her father, that is, she “stole her father’s household gods” [vs. 19]. Perhaps she conjectured that without them, her father would be powerless when he sought their consultation, especially as to the route she and her retinue. This context seems different from the one of 30.36 where Laban put a distance of three days’ journey between him and Jacob. The idea seems to be yes, Laban did move on to escape any vengeance from Jacob yet remained sufficiently close for both parties to have some interaction. The three days’ journey is more the setting up of a buffer zone between two conflicting parties than an outright escape. With this in mind, vs. 19’s words “Laban had gone to shear his sheep” makes more sense. The word for “household gods” is *teraphym* and applies to images in the idolatrous sense whose Western counterpart are the Roman Penates. “For the teraphim utter nonsense, and the diviners see lies; the dreamers tell false dreams and give empty consolation” [Zech 10.2].

Another indication that Jacob and Laban were within speaking distance, albeit a situation where each was wary of the other, is that Jacob “did not tell him that he intended to flee” [vs. 21]. These words are prefaced in the same verse with “And Jacob outwitted Laban the Aramean.” The Hebrew has for “outwitted” *yignov ‘eth-lev* or literally “stole the heart.” Combine this stealing with Rachel’s stealing (*ganav* is the verb used twice here) of the *teraphym* belonging to her father, and you have a double-whammy bestowed upon Laban for all the trouble he had caused...not with the intent to harm people but to put them and

keep them in his service, pretty much reduced to serfs just short of being slaves. Furthermore, calling Laban an Aramean was an insult, identifying him as an inhabitant of Mesopotamia compared with the relatively newly established group of emigrants from Haran, also of the Mesopotamian region. Thus “Aramean” suggests not just that a distance from Abraham’s heritage but a distance from that culture with a view towards the future or establishment of Israel in Canaan. This preference for the future, although still fraught with uncertainty, applies to both Leah and Rachel. The latter’s stealing of her father’s gods wasn’t a desire to bring them to Canaan but can be understood within the larger implication of getting rid of that idolatrous past. Vs. 21 bears that out with “He fled with all that he had and arose and crossed the Euphrates and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.” First comes fleeing (*barach*: connotes a passing through) followed by a rising (*qom*) which can intimate determination at the banks of the Euphrates followed by a crossing (*havar*) of that river and finally, a setting (*sum*: to put) of face toward Gilead. Gilead is the mountainous region east of the Jordan River, the first time noted in Genesis. All terms suggest determination and a desire to get away from Laban and reach the safety of Canaan.

“When it was told Laban on the third day.” Such are the opening words of vs. 22, significant because the verb “was told” implies that some of Laban’s party was spying continuously upon Jacob. It wasn’t difficult to spot a large group of people, cattle and sheep making their way toward Gilead, so either way, Laban got wind of this exodus. The two groups encountered each other “in the hill country of Gilead” or close to the border with Canaan, tantalizingly close to home. The two verbs describing Laban and his band’s pursuit are parallel in meaning to those relative to Jacob’s departure: “pursued” and “followed close” or *radaph* and *davaq* (to cling as in 2.24: ‘Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife’). And so, Laban wasted no time in an attempt to overtake Jacob before he got within the safe confines of Canaan. At the same time, perhaps he tried to contact Esau and make an alliance against Jacob, but there’s no record of that. Should this alliance had materialized, Jacob would be in dire straits.

Now the Lord himself decides to intervene not directly but indirectly or through a dream just as he had done with Jacob: “Take heed that you say not a word to Jacob, either good or bad” [vs. 24]. Note that Laban is identified yet again as an Aramean, this time by God. As noted above, this identification sets Laban apart from the divine preference for the newly established generations in Canaan descended from Abraham. Given Laban’s character, communicating with him through a dream was the only way to reach him or to be more blunt, only when he was asleep and not up to mischief. The Lord cautions Laban to *shamar* or to “take heed” not to speak about Jacob whether it might be good or otherwise. The last time this verb had been noted was 28.15, co-incidentally in a dream: “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” Here *shamar* is more in tune with the way Laban operates, that is, his love of spreading lies; he’s not outrightly evil but prefers to slander people indirectly in order to profit from them.

“And Laban overtook Jacob” [vs., 25]. Such is the haste at which Laban arises from his dream, possibly pursuing Jacob that very night, the verb being *nagash* last noted in 18.23: “Then Abraham drew near and said.” The latter sense of *nagash* is more accurate insofar as Laban did not overtake Jacob but simply drew closer to him. Jacob had pitched camp in the hill country whereas Laban did so “in the hill country of Gilead” inferring that Laban indeed advanced further into Gilead and thus closer to Canaan than Jacob. Perhaps he wished to outflank Jacob and prevent entry into that country. Instead engaging in outright conflict the two men decided to meet, again, in that hill country. Distance between them could have been very close, given the rugged terrain. In typical fashion Laban began whining that he had been cheated or literally, why did Jacob steal (*ganav*) his heart, the same words used in vs. 20 (‘And Jacob outwitted Laban’). This *ganav* applied to Jacob supposedly having stolen Leah and Rachel, a sentiment Laban must have wanted to communicate to them. Surely Jacob foresaw this and kept both daughters out of ear shot of their conversation, easy to do amid the hilly landscape. Laban continues his whining that Jacob had fled secretly and had cheated him, the second instance of *ganav* which is ironic for someone who had defrauded Jacob over so many years. If Jacob had shown signs of hesitation as to how he treated Laban, quickly they dissolved with the words “that I might have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre” [vs. 27]. The third and final lament—and by this time Jacob must have been privately smirking to himself—“Why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell” [vs. 28]? Laban concludes his three-fold lament to Jacob with “Now you have done foolishly” or *sakal*. “Behold, I have played the fool and have erred exceedingly” [1Sam 26.21].

Any feelings Jacob may have entertained of having gotten the better of Laban evaporated with his threat, “It is in my power to do you harm.” Note the word for “power” (*el*) which literally reads “God.” This doesn’t mean that Laban has God in control to do his bidding but is a term showing that the divinity is identified with (almighty) power or lordship. Also Laban may have been feigning that he had found his household gods and was about to unleash them against Jacob. Still, the threat coming from Laban it is menacing. Fortunately for Jacob and unknowingly to him, the Lord had appeared to Laban, a fact which Laban acknowledged readily: “but the God of your father spoke to me last night.” Looking back on that dream, God didn’t identify himself with Isaac (i.e., Jacob’s father) but somehow he intuitively knew it was so. Anyway, who else would stick up for Jacob? Laban elaborates upon this dream in accord with its content, that is, “take heed that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad” [vs. 20]. If it weren’t for this divine intervention, never could have Laban done otherwise; it was simply not part of his character. He is correct, however, with what comes next: “And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father’s house” [vs. 30]. The verb *kasaph* (actually twice, the second standing for ‘greatly’) which means to become pale, the idea being that blood drains from one’s body when intense desire is present. “My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord” [Ps 84.2]. Laban could understand that but throws in the question (same verse), “why did you steal my gods,” *éloyah* (singular) being the term. In vs. 19 Rachel had stolen the gods belonging to the household or *teraphym*, a term associated with idolatrous images. Laban knew this was true

and wanted to save face before Jacob by using *'eloyah*, not *teraphym*. That would be especially embarrassing if Leah were nearby listening in to this conversation.

In this tense situation with each party facing each other Jacob figured it was best to be honest with Laban, so he exclaimed “Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force” [vs. 32]. The fundamental meaning of the verb *gazel* (‘take by force’) is to pluck off or to despoil. Certainly that was within the realm of possibility. “Rob not the poor” [Prov 22.22]. To show his earnestness, Jacob continues “In the presence of our kinsmen point out what I have that is yours and take it” [vs. 32]. That is to say, Jacob summons both his family members and those of Laban as witnesses who by this time must have gathered around each man. However, it was unknown to Jacob that Rachel had stolen her father’s gods (cf. vs. 32). At this point Jacob was pretty much at the mercy of Laban and this in the hill country of Gilead, so close to the safety of home.

Because Laban had the upper hand, he took it upon himself to search the tents first of Jacob (the prime suspect) followed by the tents of his two daughters, Leah and Rachel as well as their maid servants. After having search Leah’s tent—and this must have embarrassed her considerably, her own father invading her own space—Laban entered the tent of Rachel who must have felt the same embarrassment and outrage. “Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel’s saddle and sat upon them” [vs. 34]. Here the term *teraphym* is used again, not the gods or *'eloyah* (singular) claimed by Laban in vs. 30. Thus we have a rather humorous picture of Rachel sitting upon the saddle within the tent though not unusual because chances are she used it as a seat. “And Laban felt all about the tent but did not find them” [vs. 34]. *Mashash* is the verb for “to feel” and connotes a groping about without the ability to see. “Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him” [27.12]. This *mashash* suggests that Laban knew the feel of his idols and immediately would recognize the small figures either of clay or metal. Rachel knew this as well and came up with a quick excuse: “for the way of women is upon me,” that is, Rachel claimed she was in her menstrual period. According to Lev 15.19-23 written later on, a woman was considered unclean: “And everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean” [vs. 20 of Leviticus]. Perhaps the Lord had this in mind when bidding Moses to record this and not without some irony. Rachel’s ploy was sufficient to ward off her father who continued his *mashash* but without luck.

“Then Jacob became angry and upbraided Laban” [vs. 36]. *Ryv* is the verb for “upbraided” and suggests both rebuke and strife. It was noted last in 26.22, “And he moved from there and dug another well, and over that they did not quarrel.” The source of this *ryv* lay in accusing Jacob who supposedly offended and sinned against Laban, the reason for having “hotly pursued” him. The verb here is *dalaq*, to burn, flame. “They pursued us upon the mountains” [Lam 4.19]. Jacob continues taunting Laban, that he produce evidence of supposed deceit as well as the stolen gods. If Laban could do that, he had to set them out in the open for all to see and the two parties (‘kinsmen,’ vs. 37) were to decide. Admittedly that would be tough, each side being predisposed to follow its leader. Next Jacob recounts

the fidelity given Laban, for many years faithfully he had watched over Laban's flocks. It is to Laban's credit that he listened patiently and did not intervene with some excuse for which he's famous.

"If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed" [vs. 42]. Jacob calls as witness the God both of his father (Isaac) and the God of his grand-father, Abraham...not two separate gods but one identified with his immediate forebears. In addition to acknowledging the monotheistic nature of God, Jacob adds the "Fear of Isaac" which belongs to his father. As a footnote to the RSV says, this expression "is an old epithet for the God of the fathers, appropriated as a title for Israel's God." *Pachad* is the noun and derives from the verb "to tremble." "There is no fear of God before his eyes" [Ps 36.1.2]. The Hebrew for "on my side" reads literally "to me" (*ly*) thereby signifying direct relationship. Then Jacob presents Laban, the one seeking his idols, with his own experience of the God of Abraham and Isaac: "God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night" [vs. 42]. A different verb for "rebuked" is used here compared with the sense of *ryv* of vs. 36, *yakach*, last noted in 21.25: "When Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water." As for the rebuke at hand, it consists of not saying "a word to Jacob, neither good or bad" [vs. 24] but to maintain a spirit of even-mindedness.

After this rather long rebuke of Laban for which Jacob deserves due credit, he must have felt fear of reprisal from Laban who now responds. After all, Laban's two daughters and their respective children were not in his control. What he says shows the powerful effect of the Lord's intervention in that dream not to speak ill of Jacob. However, Laban begins typically thinking of himself saying that the daughters, children and flocks with Jacob are his as well as "all that you see is mine" [vs. 43]. Right after this statement designed to put Jacob on guard Laban changes his position: "But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have born?" In other words, they have opted for Jacob, and Laban accepts this...but given his character, one isn't certain until he's left well behind. Laban accepts reality by proposing a covenant (*beryth*) between him and Jacob, the actual words being "cut a covenant" which is to be a witness between the two men or a *hed* between them. "These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand, that you may be a witness for me that I dug this well" [21.30]. Yet another quote is made relevant to the uneasy alliance between Abraham King Abimelech which parallels the one at hand.

Jacob takes the initiative and "took a stone and set it up as a pillar" [vs. 45]. Surely he had in mind his experience long ago at Luz where he had his dream of the ladder extending between heaven and earth and angels descending and ascending upon it. There he took the pillow he had used and set it up as a pillar or *matsevah* (cf. 28.18-22) which signaled the change of names from Luz to Bethel or House of God. This *matsevah* stood in sharp contrast to Laban's images or *teraphym* and must have awoken greater awareness in Laban as to the monotheistic God of Abraham. It thus served to turn his attention from these *teraphym* he so ardently sought after. Shortly after Jacob had used a single stone for a

pillar—and we don't know its size, great or small—he bade those with him to gather stones and make a heap by which the two parties sat down for a meal. *Gal* is word for “heap” and suggests something rolled up or away. “And they raised over him (Achan) a great heap of stones that remains to this day” [Jos 8.27]. So Jacob laid the foundation, as it were, after which his kinsmen finished the job. Laban, despite not being involved with the work at hand, was the first to name this heap, Jegar-sahadutha, an Aramaic term for The Heap of Witness. Next Jacob put a name to it, Galeed, The Heap of Witness. Laban seems to have concurred with the name of Galeed (much shorter) and like the proposed covenant with Jacob in vs. 44, agrees it to be a witness or *hed* (Gileed: *gal* or heap + *hed* or witness).

In addition to Gileed or Heap of Witness either Jacob, Laban or both had constructed Mizpah, apparently a place-name as opposed to an inhabited city (NB: the English translation has ‘pillars’ in addition to Mizpah). This proper name means watch post, the reason for which is given in vs. 49: “The Lord watch between you and me when we are absent from the other.” The idea seems to be that the watch post will be out here in the wilderness, the hill country of Gilead, far from human habitation. Still it was a sensitive area because people from Jacob's side could cross over undetected and visa versa. Thus Mizpah...the watch post...was to be manned by no one other than the Lord himself. He will be there “when we are absent” or not paying close eye on each other. This doesn't forebode well for either side even with the Lord standing in between them both. Laban, after all, is the one who insists on Mizpah and is yet another reflection of his suspicious nature. He continues with a threat that God will be a witness (*hed*) should Jacob take wives other than his daughters (cf. vs. 50), something that must have insulted Jacob though we don't hear of it.

Laban even has the temerity to claim responsibility for construction of the *gal* or heap of stones: “See this heap and the pillar which I have set between you and me” [vs. 51]. It is a border beyond which neither man will pass over to do harm or *rahaḥ* (connotes evil) not just physical damage. Finally Laban invokes “the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father” [vs. 53]. That is to say, he summons the God of Jacob's grandfather whom apparently he had worshiped while in Nahor, the land from which he left at God's call. After all, it was to Laban that Abraham's faithful, anonymous servant had come, he being the brother of Rebekah. Thus Laban's words were uttered not so much out of loyalty or submission to the God of Abraham but to the fact that Abraham procured a wife from his family. After all, Laban invocation is done tongue-in-cheek because don't forget...he had *teraphym* or images of divinities and didn't subscribe to the God of Abraham. All the while Jacob was listening patiently biding his time and wanting to get this meeting over and return home. “So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac” [vs. 53; cf. vs. 42]. That means the swearing between Jacob and Laban included both Abraham and his son Isaac who, remarkably, was still alive.

The final gesture—and this was done at Jacob's initiative—was for him to offer a sacrifice on the mountain (cf. vs. 54); which one is unspecified and could be any in this hilly territory of

Gilead. Jacob summoned his kinsmen to “eat bread” there even though a sacrifice involves an animal. Perhaps Jacob made a sacrifice not unlike Abraham of Isaac which at the very last minute was halted by divine intervention. Thus everyone ended up by eating bread (this term can refer to the eating of any food). Afterwards they stayed on the mountain, perhaps out of fear that Laban catch them off guard and make an assault. As for Laban and his party, both are conspicuously not mentioned as partaking of this sacrifice. Finally this prolonged drama comes to and end. “Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and hid daughters and blessed them; then he departed and returned home” [vs. 55. NB: in the Hebrew text this verse is 32.1]. From the way Laban had comported himself since he came on the scene, he was an unsavory character though not outrightly evil. His grandchildren and two daughters (Leah and Rachel) dutifully received their father’s kiss and despite being kin, were glad the saga was over and gladly followed Jacob home.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The numbering of verses of this chapter differs from the Hebrew text, 31.55 being its first verse. However, the enumeration of verses here follows the **RSV** text.

“Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him” [vs. 1]. That is, finally—and this after several decades—Jacob broke free of the long, oppressive influence of Laban. However, he had one last encounter that almost thwarted his escape right at the border between the two men’s respective countries amid the hills of Gilead. While making his way from there to Canaan he must have thought, “Was it worth all the effort to procure a bride?” Emphatically “no” on the human level but necessary to fulfil the divine intent manifested to the then-named Abram of first inhabiting and then taking over the land of Canaan. The sons or presumed heirs of Canaan have been born while Jacob was away for so long. Now he returns at their head, ready to take their rightful places as future princes. However, the story of Joseph and exile into Egypt which will begin shortly stymies a definitive return, putting it on hold for many generations. We as readers of Genesis know this whereas Jacob does not. If he had known that his descendants were to spend some four hundred plus years away from Canaan, he may have considered the semi-bondage under Laban as a better option; perhaps he might have reconsidered of his plans. After all, Jacob spent a good part of his life in his grandfather’s ancestral homeland, much preferable than Egypt which, it should be recalled, was good to Abram insofar as providing sustenance during a famine (cf. 12.10+).

When Jacob and Laban had cut their covenant, the latter called the pillars connected with the heap of witness Mizpah where the Lord acted as a watchman in the middle of the Gilead hill country, this being an isolated area. The same applied with Jacob’s vision at Luz-turned-Bethel. To human eyes the desert appears vacant but to divine eyes, a place teeming with activity. Another sign of this activity was Jacob’s encounter with “the angels of God” who had met or *pagah* him, a verb used in the just mentioned connection of Luz/Bethel which connotes a striking or rushing: “and he came to a certain place and stayed there that night.” Thus this unspecified number of angels *pagah* Jacob—rushed upon him—almost immediately

after he had left Laban, a welcome-home group, if you will. These angels had come from Bethel, newly descended from that ladder set up into heaven, and turned out to be larger than expected: “This is God’s army” [vs. 2]! *Machaneh* is the noun for “army,” the name Jacob gave to the place but altered more specifically to *Machanyim* (Mahanaim in the **RSV**) or “two armies.” So Jacob surmised that Luz-turned-Bethel had been a military staging area more than a city. As for *machaneh*, also it means a camp. “He let them fall in the midst of their camp, all around their habitations” [Ps 78.28]. It should be noted that it is a man (Jacob) who is responsible for either changing the name of a place or giving a name to a previous unnamed place associated with angels, first as with Bethel and then with Mahanaim.

Now the text appears to change abruptly a second time early in a new chapter, as though the encounter with the angelic army were intended to encourage Jacob for what was to follow: “And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom” [vs. 3]. Actually the change isn’t that radical because the word for “angel” and “messenger” is *mal’ak*; Jacob met the army of angels, named the place Two Armies and picked out several angel/messengers in advance. Chances are it was they who recommended this precaution. Esau continued his life in-the-wild for the same twenty-six years that Jacob had been absent, so he was a formidable force to contend with. Jacob knew just the right place to send the angels, Seir, which had been mentioned in 14.6 in conjunction with the kings who allied themselves against Abram. Jacob had no idea as to the location of his brother; certainly the angels knew, given their quasi-divine status. It was they who went out to Seir which had been unknown to Jacob.

Jacob gave instructions to the angels/messengers as follows: “I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now” [vs. 4]. In other words, they are to speak in the first person singular (of Jacob), direct mouthpieces, not simply representatives. Mention of Laban is important for Esau, for at last it resolved the issue as to Jacob’s location who earlier must have tried frantically to hunt him down. Then again, in later years Esau had realized that the location was well beyond his reach. *Gur* is the verb for “sojourn” and used last 26.3: “Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you.” Obviously *gur* is akin to being in exile, albeit self-imposed and less than welcoming which doesn’t mean one can be comfortable in that alien place. Thus by using the verb *gur*, Jacob hopes that his brother will have some pity upon him, that he had sojourned for many years yet was on the threshold of returning home. Next the angels are to speak of Jacob’s bountiful possessions: oxen, asses, flocks, men servants and maid servants. If Esau may harbor any resentment toward his brother, mention of his wealth might do the trick and assuage him. Jacob puts this in terms of “favor” or *chen* (also as good-will) in the sight of Esau.

“And the messengers returned to Jacob” [vs. 6]. The time between the previous verse and this one must have seemed an eternity to Jacob, even longer than his extended absence in Laban’s service. Despite having angels as his messengers, one could never tell how Esau might respond (react seems more accurate). Despite their semi-divine status, they had to

appear to Esau in the guise of human beings, perhaps just as formidable as Esau's retinue must have been, in order to match it. To some degree this is reminiscent of Abram's dealing with the visitors prior to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah who at one time are described as men and at another time as angels. The response from Esau had an ominous note about it: "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him" [vs. 6]. We don't know the size of the contingent Jacob had after he left Laban but can assume it was not like Esau's which was tempered by living outdoors much of the time. And so Jacob, in addition to being afraid, was distressed or *yatsar*, a verb which connotes pressing or binding together, and an apt description of how Jacob felt at the moment, all wrapped up in fear. "Your steps shall not be straightened" [Prov 4.12]. Fear drove Jacob to take immediate action. He divided the people and various herds of animals "into two companies" [vs. 7], *machaneh* being the word for "company," the same word used in vs. 2 ("This is God's army") and related to the name Mahanaim. While *machaneh* has non-military connotations here, certainly each group must have armed itself just in case. "If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company which is left will escape" [vs. 8]: not a pleasant prospect but a precaution based upon past experience with Esau.

Between vs. 9 and 12 Jacob implores the Lord, possibly at the request of the angel/messengers. After all, he has his back up against the wall: it's either Laban or Esau. Jacob invokes the Lord as the "God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac" [vs. 9]. He calls Abraham his father who, biologically speaking, is his grandfather. The point is that Jacob doesn't care at this juncture; he's more interested in obtaining guidance from the same God who helped his grandfather and father in their distress. If they came off well as they said they had done, the same might apply to him. However, there remained a nagging fear that his extended absence from home and his family might have turned God against him. Jacob decides to use God's own words for his benefit, that is, when God had said "Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good." The exact quote Jacob had in mind was "Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you" [31.3]. Perhaps Jacob deliberately altered the words "I will be with you" to "I will do you good," the latter reading literally, "I will do good with you." Also the original, if you will, contains "your fathers" which in the current request isn't necessary because Jacob is invoking the God of his "two fathers," Abraham and Isaac.

Next Jacob states his humility with "I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness which you have shown to your servant" [vs. 10]. *Qatan* is the verb for "not worthy" (only three other biblical uses) and applies to something small. One such verse is Amos 8.5: "that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great." Jacob claims himself to be small in light of divine "steadfast love" or *chesed*, that close to untranslatable word which here is plural and used in 24.12: "I pray you, and show steadfast love to my master Abraham." Jacob couples *chesed* (again in the plural, possibly for effect) with "faithfulness" or *emeth*. "Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master" [24.49]. In the verse at hand Jacob claims that "with only my staff I crossed this Jordan" [vs. 10]. The word for

“staff” is *maqel*, alternately as a twig or sucker, a term found in Chapter Thirty-One where Jacob uses rods with regard to the sheep entrusted to him by Laban. This claim to poverty contradicts such references to his wealth as in 31.17-18 and is to be taken with some self-serving.

Now Jacob gets right down to business with the Lord: “Deliver me, I pray you, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him” [vs. 11]. *Natsal* is the verb for “deliver” and connotes a sense of pulling, of snatching. “Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog” [Ps 22.21]! Actually *natsal* was used earlier in 31.16: “all the property which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and our children.” Jacob utters these words without having had any direct contact with Esau for the twenty-six years since he left his father Isaac, that is, after having cheated Isaac from bestowing the birthright upon Esau. Certainly the two must have kept an eye on each other over the years through spies or by word of mouth. That seemed to have re-enforced fear of his brother, not mitigate it. As for Esau, we have no inkling of what he felt which means that Jacob never got any accurate information about his disposition. To remind God of his favor toward him, Jacob ends his prayer with a second reminder, the first being in vs. 9: “But you said, ‘I will do you good and make your descendants as the sand of the sea which cannot be numbered for multitude’” [vs. 12]. Jacob is referring to 28.14: “and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south.” Of course, that promise was made at soon-to-be-named Bethel or at the threshold of Jacob’s prolonged service under Laban. It was wise for him to remind God of that promise as well as that place so long ago in order to stir up divine assistance which he needs now more than ever.

At the conclusion of his prayer, Jacob “lodged there that night” [vs. 13], that is at Mahanaim or the place where he had exclaimed “This is God’s army” [vs. 2]! The verb *lon* for “lodged” is used (it connotes a tarrying as well as dwelling), the same one as in 28.11 when Jacob was about to have his dream of the angels on the ladder. Surely he had recollections of that long-ago dream which was to find echo in one he is about to have. Beforehand Jacob decided upon a present or *minchah* from what he had in his possession, that is, from one of the two parties he had made for safety. *Minchah* was noted last in the offering of both Cain and Abel: “In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground” [4.3; also cf. vs. 4]. And so the present Jacob had in mind was a kind of offering—an appeasement—to Esau consisting of various animals in his possession. If what is recounted of these animals in vss. 14-15 appears impressive, it gives an idea of the sizeable other half left to Jacob after he split his fortune into two. Then again, Jacob went over-board in his desire (and fear) to impress his brother.

The next step was to entrust “every drove by itself” [vs. 16] among his servants, a further way of breaking up into smaller groups more difficult to track or one half of Jacob’s possession. As for the other half, presumably it was removed some distance from Jacob but not terribly so, just in case it had to rush back in an emergency. That group Jacob did not

divide up into small components but remained as a formidable reserve. With regard to the half that stayed with Jacob, in between each drove was to be a “space” or *rewach*, a word closely akin to *ruach* (wind, spirit). One other biblical reference of this word exists, Est 4.14: “If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s house will perish.” As for the verse at hand, the interval can be taken as a “breath” separating each group of animals, the breath each breathed forth as they moved along. As for the first group...the point-group...Jacob entrusts a servant with words to communicate to Esau should they cross paths. Perhaps Esau had gotten wind of Jacob being in the hill country of Gilead. Who wouldn’t, with such a large group of people (let alone Laban’s retinue) in a deserted place? This may have roused Esau’s curiosity further as to the identity of these people. Jacob may have entertained similar thoughts, that his movements from the Gilead region home to Canaan would not go undetected. The servant in the lead was instructed to say that the possessions in hand “belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to my Lord Esau” [vs. 18]. Even the word “meets” which Jacob says when speaking with this servant is revealing of his fear: *pagash* which means to rush upon, attack. “I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs” [Hos 13.8].

Vs. 18 just quoted above ends with the telling words, “and moreover, he is behind us.” That would allow sufficient time to gauge the reaction of Esau not so much as to the gifts but to the news that Jacob is close at hand. All in all, Jacob sent forth three droves, each instructed with the words “You shall say the same thing to Esau when you meet him” [vs. 19]. Each was to say the same as the first group, “Moreover, your servant Jacob is behind us.” These words differ from vs. 18 by including “your servant Jacob” intending that the further Esau gets back with regard to the retinue, the closer he comes to Jacob. Jacob’s reckoning was that the further behind, the safer he will be. All this carefully planned strategy was to appease Esau with the present after which Jacob will “see his face” [vs. 20]. The verb for “appease” is *kaphar* (literally, to cover) and often applies to the making of atonement. Ps 78.38 has a related use: “Yet he, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them.” So what Jacob brings to Esau are more than gifts; they are “atonements” for twenty-six years of estrangement instigated largely by Jacob and his mother. As for Rebekah, the next we hear of her is her death towards the end of Genesis in 49. 31; nothing else is recorded of her. Surely Jacob must have been anxious about his mother, whether or not Esau had treated her well or even had her done away with. The words “see his face” are telling, too, because Jacob could determine immediately from past experience whether Esau would react favorably or not. So the three droves arranged themselves consecutively, one after the other in a long line, and made their way toward Esau. The precise point of meeting isn’t given yet—that depends upon the incident Jacob has that night with the angel—and turns out to be in his favor. But before that happened, the three droves passed before Jacob as armies before a general. The idea of having them strung out was deliberate, that is, making the droves less threatening. If they were grouped together, they could appear as an army. Now the stage was set for meeting Esau. However, a most important event had to take place before that intimated by the concluding words of vs. 21, “and he himself lodged that night in the camp.”

Note that in “the same night” Jacob rose in total darkness and moved these people across the Jabbok (a tributary of the Jordan River), no small feat given how small children would react not just in the darkness but making their way across a river.

Vs. 23 describes this mini-exodus further by adding “everything that he had.” Once this had been completed successfully, vs. 24 says dramatically yet simply, “And Jacob was left alone.” Immediately after the arduous task of sending men, woman and children across the Jabbok, Jacob had no time to rest: “and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.” *ʾavaq* is the verb for “wrestled” whose verbal root means “to pound, make small” from which is derived *ʾavaq* or dust. The only other biblical reference is in the next verse, 25. The obvious image that comes to mind is the dust raised by two persons wrestling on the ground. Also *ʾavaq* connotes not so much deadliness but an earnest competition, all the more mysterious since it took place in darkness and lasted until daybreak. That may have not lasted too long, however, for earlier that night—and we have no specific details—Jacob had sent his two wives, children and others across the Jabbok. “When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob” [vs. 25]: words echoing Jacob’s strength demonstrated at the well with the shepherds (cf. 29.10). *Yakal* is the verb for “prevail” as noted in 30.8: “With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister hand have prevailed; so she called his name Naphtali.” Interestingly, we have a not dissimilar situation where the verb for “wrestled” is *patal* (to be twisted; has just four other biblical references). Thus *ʾavaq* describes the intensity of the wrestling whereas *patal*, its form though in two very different circumstances. So when this unknown being—we cannot determine with accuracy whether he was a man or angel—could not get the better of Jacob, “he touched the hollow of his thigh” which put his thigh out of joint. *Nagah* is the verb for “touched” which also means to smite: “For all the day long I have been stricken and chastened every morning” [Ps 73.14]. This verb was also used in 20.6: “Therefore I did not let you touch her.” As for “hollow,” the Hebrew is *kaph* which can refer to the hollow of a hand, so touching...striking...this part of Jacob’s thigh caused a sprain. The unknown wrestler did not prevail (*yakal*) nor did Jacob; the match turned out to be a draw.

“Let me go, for the day is breaking” [vs. 26]. The association of this request prior to daybreak intensifies the mystery of his identity even further. Never do we learn his name which makes the character of Jacob all the more powerful. Even though the first beams of daylight are on the horizon and Jacob’s thigh has become strained, he threatens to keep on wrestling his mysterious partner: “I will not let you go unless you bless me” [vs. 26]. A wise ploy on Jacob’s part, for if the wrestler had been some kind of demon or god of the night, he would have been repelled at the notion of a blessing (*barak*, the verb noted several times earlier). Without responding—and while still wrestling—the man replied “What is your name?” to which Jacob identified himself. That gave occasion for the wrestler to say “Your name shall no more be called Jacob but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed” [vs. 28]. Chances are this man knew Jacob’s name beforehand but wanted him to utter it so that his new name of Israel might be that more significant, a name which means “He who strives with God” (a footnote to the **RSV** gives the alternate, ‘God strives’).

The verb for “strives” is *sarah* with the sense of placing in a row or ordering; from it derives a common noun *sarah* (princess; *sar* or ‘prince’ does not; from *sarar*, to hold dominion). As for the verb, the only other biblical verse is one which pertains to Jacob, Hos 12.3: “He strove with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor.”

This striving or *sarah* of which the wrestler speaks says it is with God himself as well as with men, a *sarah* in which Jacob prevails, *yakal*. Though the wrestling match which lasted until daybreak appears to be a draw, the man yields victory to Jacob. That is, he had hitherto unheard of power strive with God as well as men, something that forebodes well for the morrow when he meets Esau. It should be noted, however, that to strive necessarily doesn’t mean victory but indicates the determination Jacob to give his all. Finally, Jacob asks the wrestler his name to which the question comes, “Why is that you ask my name” [vs. 29]? Without further ado, the wrestler blesses Jacob as requested in vs. 26. Finally the day breaks before which the wrestler had vanished. Upon reflection, Jacob may have thought this man an angel, having encountered not just one but a multitude at Luz-turned-Bethel prior to his service with Laban. Still, Jacob had in mind the wrestler’s words “have striven with God and with men” which makes him name the place of this encounter at the Jabbok Peniel, the Face of God: “for I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” [vs. 30]. “Have seen” is not quite accurate, for the wrestling match had taken place at night amid all that “dust” (*’avaq*) kicked up, certainly unfavorable conditions for catching a glimpse of someone’s face. Not only that, they were in constant motion. However, this glimpse at the divine face which Jacob claimed to have seen is the first face-to-face encounter between God and man since before the flood when the Lord walked with Noah. Previous encounters had been in the form of visions or dreams, not the one-on-one encounter described here, all the more dramatic by reason of having taken within the context of a wrestling match. The next face-to-face encounter won’t be until Ex 24.11 or Moses and the elders on Mount Sinai: “they beheld God and ate and drank.” However, the verb there is *chazah* which applies more to a beholding, a taking in of the whole, compared with the direct verb of the verse at hand, *ra’ah*.

Vs. 30 concludes with “yet my life is preserved” or *natsal* which was noted in vs. 11 above (‘Deliver me, I prayer you, from the hand of my brother’). Perhaps Jacob had in mind those words addressed to God and stated here shortly before encountering Esau. After having made this statement which surely he must have communicated to Leah, Rachel and some of the others whom he sent across the Jabbok. At least that would explain his limping from that injured thigh. The image of Jacob passing Peniel (Face of God) as the sun was rising upon him (cf. vs. 31) was a sign that indeed Jacob had prevailed over both God and men and set himself forward to the encounter he had been dreading for so many years.

Chapter Thirty-Two concludes with a statement about Jacob’s sprained thigh, the reason why Israelites do not eat “the sinew of the hip,” a command which does not seem to have a specific reference. In many ways this requires no command, for it refers to the very source of the name of Israel, He Who Strives with God.

Chapter Thirty-Three

“And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked and behold, Esau was coming and four hundred men with him” [vs. 1]. Several references to this lifting up of eyes had been noted already, the references being 13.14, 18.2, 22.4 & 23 and 24.63. While they don’t occur terribly often, their appearance reveals the state of mind of the persons involved, that they are preoccupied with something. In the case at hand, Jacob just came off the most unusual wrestling bout in history, not knowing exactly what to make of it except that he had to follow through on what had been communicated to him. And that communication involved a change of name. Note that later on God appeared to Jacob saying that his name will be Israel, not Jacob (cf. 35.10). However, the two names are used interchangeably for the rest of Genesis. With this change of names the land of Canaan is destined to be called by this notable descendant of Abraham whose foothold there had been tentative for several generations.

The gesture by Jacob is threefold: first he lifts up his eyes and looks (the common verb *ra’ah*) which is followed by behold (*hineh* signifies astonishment). It seems to occur almost immediately after Jacob’s wrestling match as he limps away from the newly named Peniel onward to meet Esau. Jacob knew this encounter was to happen, the reason why he had sent his family to safety across the Jabbok. Leah, Rachel and the children must have wondered about Jacob’s injury but no time to explain it now. He had seen Esau off in the distance, easy due to the dust kicked up by four hundred men in his company. Now was the time to divide everyone into two pre-arranged groups with the maids and their children in front. As for the three droves of animals laden with gifts, we have no account of them having crossed the Jabbok with Jacob and his family. Presumably they took a different route with a pre-arranged place and time to meet. Once Jacob’s family and attendants were hastily put in order, “he himself went on before them” [vs. 3]. No hesitation here. Jacob had gained a confidence not experienced before his wrestling match. Nevertheless, Jacob went through the customary acts of humble welcoming by “bowing himself to the ground seven times until he came near to his brother.” The verb *shachah* is used for “bowing,” and has religious as well as social applications. It was last noted in 24.52: “When Abraham’s servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the earth before the Lord.” Jacob must have set in order his family quickly—chances are they had practiced this dreaded encounter numerous times—so without further ado he was able to approach Esau alone giving homage. While we get the impression that Jacob prostrated himself on the ground, got up and repeated this constantly, in part he did this out of a way to relieve his understandable nervousness. Obviously Esau was curious about the two groups (the family and the three droves) out in the wilderness, his home territory if you will, and ran ahead as quickly as possible to check it out.

“But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept” [vs. 4]. During his running, Esau probably didn’t quite know if it was his brother. However, once both men saw each other clearly, Esau took the initiative of embracing Jacob,

chavaq being the verb which also means to fold one's hands (in idleness). "His right hand does embrace me" [Sg 2.6]. Next Esau fell on his neck, a sign of both relief and gladness, followed by a kiss or *nashaq*, a verb fundamentally meaning to dispose to, arrange and put in order. Ironically this verb had been used back in 27.27 when Jacob "came near and kissed him (his blind father Isaac)," that is, in the guise of Esau to steal his blessing. Esau ran toward Jacob silently which must have unnerved Jacob, despite the short distance between them now. Then relief came with an embrace—still Esau may have feigned brotherly love and had a dagger in hand—yet did not feel relieved until the kiss which brought back memories. Still, both men had cause for weeping and weeping profusely. Though we have been following the saga of Jacob, not that of Esau, it is to the latter that credit belongs for having demonstrated straight-forward, unfeigned brotherly love. While Esau may have been hot-headed as was the case twenty-six years earlier, his experience of being out in the wilderness tempered his wild disposition, perhaps more than Jacob's.

At the beginning of this chapter several references were made to lifting up one's eyes and then seeing. Now comes another: "And when Esau raised his eyes and saw the women and children" [vs. 5]. Jacob responds that God had given them to him "your servant" or one in service to (*heved*: can apply to a slave) Esau, a way of demonstrating publically his humility. Just as Jacob had approached his brother with multiple acts of bowing, now the maids and their children came to Esau followed by Leah and Rachel who was accompanied by Joseph, the favorite son who soon is to dominate the rest of Genesis. This experience of awe and the potential of being either enslaved or put to the sword must have impressed Joseph greatly. He saw in Esau, an unlikely person, someone who was merciful, perhaps more so than his father Jacob. That experience stuck with Joseph and influenced his relationship with his brothers who had betrayed them. "What do you mean by all this company which I met" [vs. 8]? An expression of amazement at Jacob's family and various servants. The verb *pagash* is used as was the case in 32.19 ('You shall say the same thing to Esau when you meet him') only here the meeting is one that overwhelmed Esau favorably. Then again, always he was suspicious of his brother who outwitted him and deep down was not surprised. So there was Esau pretty much put on the spot by all these women and children. If their pleading eyes didn't move him, nothing would. Things might have turned out very differently if Jacob were alone or with a smaller contingent.

Jacob comes right out and answers his brother's question as to such a multitude: "To find favor in the sight of my lord" [vs. 8]. *Chen* is the word for "favor" as used in 32.5 with reference to the gifts sent along separately from the women and children. So that means Esau ended up with a double *chen* which overwhelmed him. Esau responded by saying that he had sufficient possessions; it isn't clear whether he was referring to those with Jacob or the three droves he entrusted to servants as gift offerings. Chances are it was the latter which encountered Esau before Jacob ran into him. Nevertheless, Jacob insisted that his brother "accept my present from my hand" [vs. 10]. In the same verse Jacob comes off with a piece of flattery that clinched the relationship between the two brothers: "for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, with such favor have you received me." Esau knew

what Jacob was referring to in a general sort of way, that is, through the obeisance and generous offerings. However, Jacob feigned humility to some degree and wanted to make a good impression on his powerful brother that would preclude any foul play. Yet in many ways Jacob is correct. Esau did receive his brother with favor (*ratsah*), the very person who had cheated him of his birthright. One gets the impression from the narrative—taken obviously from the side of Jacob—that he would have acted differently if in Esau’s position. As for the verb *ratsah*, another reference showing its fundamental meaning of taking delight is Prov 3.12: “For the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.”

Jacob continues to insist that Esau receive the gifts brought to him: “Thus he urged him, and he took it.” Finally Esau relented in the face of Jacob’s urging or *patsar* (“The angels urged Lot,’ 19.15). Once this transaction finally had been completed—much to the relief of both brothers—Esau said “Let us journey on our way, and I will go before you” [vs.12]. The place which Esau had suggested isn’t given but presumed (cf. vs. 14, Seir in Edom), that is, his home. In addition to the two journeying there, Esau’s troop of some four hundred men (cf. vs. 1) must have accompanied them along with the gifts Jacob had presented. Certainly that made up quite a large contingent of men, women, slaves and various types of animals. However, Jacob besought Esau due to the burden of children and flocks “giving suck” which “are a care to me” [vs. 13]. The Hebrew text lacks the noun “care” and has in its stead “on me” (*halay*). Jacob says with regard to the flocks, “If they are over-driven for one day, all the flocks will die.” The verb for “over-driven” is *daphaq* whose fundamental meaning is “to knock” with two other biblical references, one of which is Sg 5.2: “Hark! My beloved is knocking.” While true, Jacob was fearful that once in Edom, he and his retinue would be firmly in the power of Esau...in other words, no escape. Jacob elaborates in vs. 14: “Let my lord pass on before his servant, and I will lead on slowly.” Here is yet another example throughout this dialogue of a formal title (lord or *adony*) with respect to “servant,” a way of speaking Jacob uses deliberately both to curry favor and show that he is no threat to his brother. The verb for “will lead slowly” is *la’at* or to wrap around in the sense of to muffle. “And the people stole into the city that day as people steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle” [2Sam 19.3]. The *la’at* Jacob had in mind, however, had another meaning hidden from Esau. Jacob wished to *la’at*—walk softly past Esau—and thus make good his escape along with his retinue. Now the agreed upon destination is clear, Seir of Edom.

A problem quickly developed for Jacob when Esau responded, “Let me leave with you some of the men who are with me” ...some of the four hundred who comprised Esau’s bodyguard. That was the last thing Jacob wanted to hear. Quickly he responded, “What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord [vs. 15].” Jacob had many years experience dealing with Laban who tricked him at virtually every turn, so he uttered these words without betraying his intent. Jacob appeals to that *chen* or favor mentioned in vs. 8, a way of saying to Esau something like, “Trust me that I will meet you in Seir.” Surprisingly, Esau consented and let Jacob go. You’d think that having been robbed of his birthright Esau wouldn’t have

trusted his brother. Yet it demonstrates again his openness which may have been tinged with some naivete.

So instead of heading for Seir, Jacob “journeyed to Succoth and built himself a house and made booths for his cattle” [vs. 17]. That is to say, Jacob headed east of the Jordan River to in the plain north of the Jabbock. He had to do this with some stealth despite the large number of people and animals in his care. However, that was difficult; Jacob must have waited a while, perhaps until the cover of nightfall, before setting out. Once in Succoth, Jacob constructed a house...not a tent...compared with the booths (from which Succoth derives its name) for everyone else, which implies the relative comfort he lived compared with everyone else. As for a *sakah* or booth, it refers to a shelter less permanent than a tent, something made from branches and leaves. “You shall dwell in booths seven days; all who are Israelites born shall dwell in booths” [Lev 23.42]. However, Jacob did not remain in Succoth despite having settled down there. “And Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem which is in the land of Canaan...and he camped before the city” [vs. 18]. The adverb for “safely” is *shalem*, derived from *shalom* or peace; besides, *shalem* is a kind of play of words on Shechem. This place was mentioned in 12.6 in conjunction with the oak of Moreh, the place where Abram first built an altar upon arriving in the land of Canaan. It was natural for Jacob to head for Shechem, this ancestral place, valued for its symbolism of being the first real settlement in a foreign land by his grandfather. As for Esau, we don’t hear about him—and this for the last time—until 35.29 when he and Jacob bury their father, Isaac.

Note that Jacob did not enter the city of Shechem but camped before it. He had been absent from Canaan a very long time and was afraid that the inhabitants wouldn’t recognize him. Besides, even if they did, they would be forced to provide for a large contingent of women, children, slaves and herds. The sight of so many huts made of brush and the like must have shocked them, a sign of their poverty, perhaps a way of gaining sympathy from the Shechemites. This vicinity was to be Jacob’s home until 35.1 when God bade him to dwell in Bethel. In the meantime, Jacob bought that land on which he pitched his tent from the father after whom Shechem was named, that is, outside the city itself. “There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel” [vs. 19] or God, the God of Israel. Note that Abram had erected an altar in Shechem earlier “to the Lord who had appeared to him” 12.7]. That earlier altar may have been in place occasionally used by Isaac and his family. Because it was the first one erected in Canaan, it was natural for Jacob to build one near it, not to supplant it, but close by and more modest out of respect for Abram. The name he bestowed upon it came in large part from that mysterious midnight wrestler who changed his name to Israel and represents a genuine take-over, albeit only in part, of the land of Canaan and foreshadows its renaming by the tribe of Abram.

Chapter Thirty-Four

As this chapter develops, we see that things didn’t turn out well for Jacob in Shechem; actually his experience there was worse than those years of service to Laban, having left him

and his clan in a precarious position among the Canaanites. As for the time spent in Shechem, no clear duration is given. Perhaps not mentioning this is deliberate, wishing to pass over it as quickly as possible and conclude the Jacob saga so that we may get to the important story of Joseph which heralds a completely new development rooted in Abram's call to leave his homeland. Important as the creation account and what followed it, in many ways it is a kind of introduction to Abram (Abraham) and Joseph, whose story concludes the Book of Genesis.

“Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the land” [vs. 1]. This verse starts off a new chapter innocently enough with Dinah (daughter of Leah), but that is to change almost at once. Just the fact that Dinah “went out” or left the camp—presumably still consisting of booths before Shechem—implies she entered the city on her own, unheard of by a woman of that time. The word for “visit” is *ra'ah* or to see: “to see the women of the land” which can mean anything from simple observation to interaction with them. Almost as soon as Dinah entered the city, “Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her” [vs. 2]. This is the same person after whom the city is named as well as the son of Hamor from whom Jacob had purchased “the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent” [33.19]. Being a notable person after whom the city is named, Shechem and most likely successor to his father's throne, he had freer dealings with Jacob and his retinue than his subjects. That means he knew who went in and out of the city, especially a solitary woman which caught his attention. Once Shechem saw Dinah, he, as vs. 2 continues, “seized her and lay with her and humbled her.” In other words, he raped her forcefully. The verb *hanah* for “humbled” has various shades of meaning, a fact mentioned elsewhere in this document. “The enemy shall not outwit him, the wicked shall not humble him” [Ps 89.22]. Actually the seizing and laying takes place simultaneously with Shechem humbling (*hanah*) Dinah. Also it can refer to the abuse she was forced to endure after her rape.

The three-fold mistreatment of Dinah by Shechem seems to contrast with the verse at hand: “And his soul was drawn to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob” [vs. 3]. Apparently Shechem allowed Dinah to return to the encampment of booths outside the city. Usually the drawing at hand occurs before seduction; however, it follows Dinah's humiliation and the continued attraction of Shechem for her. *Davaq* is the verb for “drawn” which means “to cling to” and is used to describe the attraction between man and woman: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh” [2.24]. Use of the word *nephesh* or “soul” intensifies the sense of *davaq*, that a word with vivid, material connotations should apply to something which is immaterial. Such intense longing forced Shechem to “speak (spoke) tenderly to her” which reads literally in Hebrew, “he spoke on the heart of the maiden.” That means Shechem attempted to find the right words to make Dinah consent to being his mistress or play-thing, figuring that she was a foreigner or daughter of some long-lost migrant whose clan had designs on taking over the land. He was right as far that was concerned, Abraham and his descendants.

Not only did Shechem attempt to woo Dinah, he appealed to his father Hamor, “Get me this maiden for my wife” [vs. 4]. Note *yaldah*, the word for “maiden,” compared with *naharah* used in the previous verse. The former is derived from the verb *yalad* (to bring forth, give birth) and suggests a closer tie with the family or possessors of the maiden involved whereas the latter refers to someone who is simply young. It seems that a *naharah* could be a *yaldah*, not so much the other way around. In the case at hand, Shechem uses in direct speech to his father the noun *naharah*, probably a way to assuage him and not upset relations with Jacob camped outside the city. If Shechem had used the word *yaldah*, that would have aroused a red flag and the possibility of conflict with Jacob...which unfortunately happens a bit later.

“Now Jacob heard that he had defiled his daughter Dinah” [vs. 5]. Word got out quickly about Dinah having been abused by Shechem by reason of having entered the city alone, an easy target. Some of the women with whom Dinah met—for that was her original intent—got word back not so much to Jacob himself but to either Leah or Rachel, most likely the former who was Dinah’s mother. In addition to being enraged, Jacob was angry at Dinah for having left without permission. Weak-eyed Leah could be excused for many things but certainly not for this gross negligence. *Tame’* is the verb for “defiled” meaning to be polluted and often refers to pollution of a ritual variety often found with various shades of meaning in the Book of Leviticus. “Then the priest shall pronounce him unclean” [Lev 13.8]. Jacob got wind of Dinah’s defilement alone, that is, while “his sons were with his cattle in the field.” That means word reached him while either early in the morning or after the midday siesta or rest during the hottest time of day. Jacob managed to restrain himself but with difficulty. This inner struggle is revealed through use of the verb *charash* (‘held his peace’) which was noted regarding 24.21: “The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether the Lord had prospered his journey or not.” So *charash* implies an inner silence maintained with struggle but a struggle that pays dividends if kept. Thus Jacob maintained *charash* until evening or when his sons returned home from the field instead of running out to tell them or having those who informed him do the task. That would have created an even worse crisis for which Jacob was not prepared.

“And Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him” [vs. 6]. That means Shechem hid behind his father’s authority, afraid to confront Jacob about his rape of Dinah. Nevertheless, he was with him according to vs. 12. A real danger existed that Jacob might have slain him on the spot and thus start a feud between the two peoples; Jacob’s family was in a weaker position outside the city walls dwelling in booths and couldn’t afford that. As for Hamor from whose sons Jacob had purchased land for his tent, he didn’t want trouble as well, just to allow these strangers continue on their journey. So after probably rebuking his son for such carelessness, Hamor agreed to meet Jacob. By that time Jacob’s sons had come in from the field and “were indignant and very angry because he had wrought folly in Israel by laying with Jacob’s daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done” [vs. 7]. Jacob’s attitude isn’t revealed, only those of his sons: indignant and very angry or *hatsav* and *charah*. The former was noted in 6.6: “and it grieved him (the Lord) to his

heart” and the latter in 4:5: “So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.” Both resulted from Shechem’s folly or *nevalah*; from the verbal root *naval* meaning “to become withered, faded” which colors the meaning of folly as in this instance as a losing of courage and respect...not all at once by gradually over time. “Nabal is his name, and folly is with him” [1Sam 35.35]. Here the proper name and “folly” derive from the same verbal root. Note that Israel is mentioned for the second time, the name given to Jacob by that mysterious wrestler at the river Jabbock. And so for the first time we have a shift—a gradual but significant one—from the person Jacob/Israel to the corporate identity of him and his retinue which could be applied to those family members in Canaan from whom he had been absent a good part of his life.

The beginning of vs. 8 begins with “But Hamor spoke with them,” that is, Jacob and his eleven sons, on behalf of his son whose “soul longs for your daughter; I pray you, give her to him in marriage.” Such words are couched in the best diplomatic terms Hamor could muster which continue in the next few verses where he proposes inter-marriage between the two groups. However, Hamor made a fatal mistake by mentioned Schehem’s “soul” or *nepshesh* which “was drawn to Dinah” [vs. 3] which reveals the intensity of his misdirected desire toward Jacob’s only daughter. The soul of Schehem “longs” for Dinah or *chashaq*, a verb which connotes a cleaving, almost sticking, action. “Because he cleaves to me in love I will deliver him” [Ps 91.14]. Hamor continues in vs. 10 with a proposal for Jacob and his entourage to “dwell with us” and that the “land shall be open to you; dwell and trade in it and get property in it.” Now Shechem himself breaks in with words directed to both Jacob and his sons, “whatever you say to me I will give” [vs. 11]. He was so desperate for Dinah (who was back in one of those booths watching this nervously from a distance) to be his bride that he was willing to do anything.

It is to the credit of Jacob and his sons that they kept their cool, though signs of future action are indicated by the words “The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully” [vs. 13]. The noun *mirmah* is used here for the adverb (literally, ‘in deceit’) which connotes fraud. “Neither was there any deceit in his mouth” [Is 53.9]. The fact that all were speaking “in deceit” reveals that already they had planned vengeance against both Hamor and his son, Shechem. But instead of making their plan known—that would spoil the element of surprise—Jacob and his eleven sons made a counter-proposal: “We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us” [vs. 14]. The practice of circumcision goes back to the covenant the Lord made with Abraham in Chapter Seventeen, and the question at hand is more specific in vs. 14 of that chapter: “Any uncircumcised male...shall be cut off from his people; for he has broken my covenant.” Chances are Hamor and Shechem had gotten wind of this practice from Abraham’s descendants living in Canaan, so it wasn’t unfamiliar to them. Instead of allowing this “disgrace” (*cherphah*: noted with regard to 30.23) to stand between Jacob’s clan and the Shechemites, they agreed to the proposed condition or *’oth*, a verb used three times in this verse but with one other biblical use: “So the priests agreed that they should take no

more money from the people” [2Kg 12.8]. Should the people consent, then Dinah could become the wife of Hamor’s son.

“Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor’s son Shechem [vs. 18]. This verse reads literally, “And went well their words in the eyes of Hamor and in the eyes of Shechem, son of Hamor.” That is to say, what was proposed in the form of words became visual, and that caused the proposal of circumcision to be agreeable. Despite the pain involved, “the young man (Shechem) did not delay to do the thing because he had delight in Jacob’s daughter” [vs. 19]. *Chaphets* in the verb for “delight” which connotes an inclination and is used more often in more acceptable circumstances such as Ps 18.19: “He delivered me because he delighted in me.” The verse at hand continues with another sentence: “Now he was the most honored of all his family” which meant Shechem had influence with the men of the city with whom he spoke to persuade them. Towards the end of his little speech, Shechem made his own proposal borne of deceit: “Will not their cattle, their property and all their beasts be ours” [vs. 23]? That trick worked, and the men went outside the city walls to be circumcised. They left the safety of their walled town for the open space in which Jacob’s retinue were camped in booths which acted favorably as camouflage for the latter. Some must have had misgivings once they saw up close the poor living conditions but were compelled to go along with Shechem and his father.

Vs. 25 begins with “On the third day when they were sore” or when the Shechemites were recovering from their circumcision. Jacob and his sons waited for an interval of two full days before they implemented their *mirmah* or deceit mentioned in vs. 13. They didn’t wish to take action all at once but wait until the Sechemites were at their most vulnerable. Not all Jacob’s sons or other members of his group sprang into action, just Simeon and Levi, who sneaked into the city “and killed all the males” [vs. 25]. Two men were all that was required to carry out this *mirmah*—no more—simply by reason of them still “being sore” or in pain (*ka’av*). “But I am afflicted and in pain; let your salvation, O God, set me on high” [Ps 69.29]! As for Levi, later on when the Israelites had made a golden calf and worshiped it, Moses dispatched that tribe to slay them (cf. Ex 32.28). Surely the Levites must have recalled the incident at hand and made it a part of their heritage. Later when Jacob was on his deathbed he said of Simeon and Levi, “(They) are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords...Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel” [49.5 & 6]. As for these two brothers, not only did they slay the Shechemites, they got Hamor and his son as well after which they set Dinah free. Finally, the “sons of Jacob came upon the plain and plundered the city” [vs. 27] which means they took away the women, children and flocks as prey, the same verb for “plunder,” *bazaz*.

Apparently Simeon and Levi acted on their own, not following orders from their father, Jacob, who rebuked them. “You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land” [vs. 30]. *Hakar* is the verb for “have brought trouble” which alternately means “to disturb.” “My father has troubled the land” [1Sam 14.29]. As for “odious,” the verb is *ba’ash*, literally, “to stink.” “He has made himself utterly abhorred by his

people Israel” [Isam 27.12]. Thus the stench...the *ba’ash*...rose from Shechem and spread throughout Canaan. However, to those of Jacob’s clan who resided there, this *ba’ash* was as a sweet-smelling fragrance. But as for Jacob and his immediate concern, rebuking Simeon and Levi weren’t enough; he had to get away from Shechem as far and quickly as possible before other found him. Eventually that happened though we have no record of it. Those who came upon the slain Shechemites knew Jacob had caused the massacre by reason of the freshly circumcised corpses. So despite some faltering by Jacob, his sons responded boldly with “Should he (Shechem) treat our sister as a harlot” [vs. 31]?

Chapter Thirty-Five

Word made its way back to Esau as to what Jacob had done to Shechem and its inhabitants, for given Esau’s preference for dwelling outdoors, either he or one of his companions must have found out rather quickly and was horrified at the violence his brother had unleashed. It must have upset Jacob as well, for he just came off an unexpectedly pleasant reunion with his brother which now could be put in jeopardy. As noted toward the beginning of the last chapter, no specific length of time is given for Jacob residing in the vicinity of Shechem; presumably it was short as intimated by the story about Dinah. After all, Chapter Thirty-Four was devoted in its entirety to her plight; she passes off the scene not to be heard of again though presumably remained in the retinue belonging to Jacob.

“God said to Jacob, ‘Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there’” [vs. 1]. Right away God takes the initiative, giving Jacob much-needed advice and direction. Actually the Lord directs Jacob away from Shechem which he had just devastated to a place where he had his famous dream of the ladder reaching into heaven with angels ascending and descending. More specifically, Bethel was the formerly named Luz which Jacob changed to its present name (cf. 12.8, Bethel as a place where Abram had built an altar). As far as human beings is concerned, Bethel is located in a deserted place, not even an encampment, but to the angels it is a true metropolis with that special ladder placed dead-center within it as a point of contact between the heavenly and earthly realms. Always that place remained special for Jacob as he looked back during his extended service under Laban. It was a natural refuge for Jacob from his brother Esau who years ago had been hot on his trail and might be so again after what had transpired at Shechem. Note that God bids Jacob to “dwell” at Bethel, *yashav* suggestive of living there permanently compared with (more recently in Jacob’s case) residing in booths before Shechem. Jacob jumped at this opportunity to be with the angels as they ascended from Bethel into heaven and from heaven to Bethel despite the fact that others of his retinue were blind to the spectacle.

The second command in vs. 1 is “make there an altar to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.” That is to say, arise and go to the place where God was seen on top of the ladder with the angels ascending and descending upon it (cf. 28.12). In the verse at hand the word “there” (*sham*) appears twice with respect to Jacob dwelling and his making of the altar, a fact which stresses the importance of Bethel. This differs from

Jacob's first visit when he erected a pillar from the stone he had used as a pillow (cf. 28.18). Jacob had no problem finding that pillar set up so many years ago since his dream was so vivid and life-changing. Indeed, God reminded Jacob of his flight from Esau which intimates that despite the change of heart Esau has displayed, there remained the possibility that things could change for the worse. Erecting an altar beside the pillow/pillar would ensure Jacob against this threat. But before Jacob went about this task, he bade his "household and those with him" (the latter possibly being those who had joined up with Jacob after his departure from Shechem, even a few survivors from the recent slaughter) with the words "Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments" [vs. 2]. At this juncture, it would be considered too much to abandon the familiar deities which had the potential of starting a rebellion. "Put away" or *sur* suggests a turning aside or withdrawal, not especially destroying them. "Put away the gods which your fathers served" [Jos 24.14]. The word "among" or *tawek* implies that a presence-among the people of these divinities, hard to eradicate all at once. Indeed Jacob realizes how attached some in his company were to the gods they had acquired; for example, some may have follow Rachel's example who had stolen the household gods. These were the *teraphym* (cf. 31.34) which seem to be different from the "other" gods Laban accuses Jacob of stealing in 31.30. Laban was so upset at not finding his *teraphym* he just blurted out his frustration using the more general term *'eloyah*. Regardless if there was an actual distinction, Jacob wanted both put away. There may be someone in his company doing what Rachel had done, sitting upon the *teraphym* while Laban—now ironically Jacob—was searching in vain (cf. 31.34: in that instance we don't know if Rachel subscribed to Laban's divinities or was out to get revenge for the difficult he caused Jacob).

Both the adjective "foreign" (*nekar*) and the noun "gods" are pretty much one and the same to Jacob, that is, they are strange or alien to the singular divinity revealed to Abraham, Isaac and now Jacob both through his vision at Bethel and his encounter with that mysterious wrestler (*nekar* is included in that quote above from Jos 24.14). Such putting away or *sur* is the first of three steps, the second being a purification or *taher*, a verb which fundamentally means to be bright, to shine and has pre-echoes, if you will, of prescriptions Moses lays down in the Book of Leviticus, for example, "the priest shall pronounce him clean" [Lev 13.6]. The verse at hand, in fact, is the first mention of this practice which later assumed ritual dimensions. The second command is for the people to make a change of their garments, *simlah* applying to a large outer piece of clothing for both men and women. "Then Shem and Japheth took a garment...and covered the nakedness of their father" [9.23]. Even if the people managed to stuff any "foreign gods" in their garments, first their purification and then stripping away of garments, would have revealed them on their persons.

Once this threefold purification process had been carried out, Jacob bids the people "let us arise and go up to Bethel" [vs. 3]. This verse has two verbs with reference to an ascent, *qum* (arise) and *halah* (go up), a way of telling the people to get moving as quickly as possible to the safety of Bethel and away from the potential threat of Esau's wrath, let alone any allies of

Shechem which might seek vengeance. Although this threat is real, Jacob wished himself and his people as close as possible to that heavenly ladder. Should Esau or anyone else pose a threat, God was right there ready to have one of his angels snatch them up into heaven. That *qum* and *halah*—arise and go up—just might apply literally in this instance, not just advancing to Bethel, House of God. Before they ascend to Bethel, Jacob reveals to his people that God commanded him to make an altar, that is, to God who “answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.” That “day of distress” (*tsarah*) was when Jacob had to flee his brother Esau for the safety (followed by the quasi-enslavement) of Laban. The verbal root of *tsarah* means to cleave, a rather graphic word as in Ps 25.17: “The troubles of my heart are enlarged”...the cleavages of my heart are enlarged, causing wide ruptures. Nevertheless, Jacob proclaims that God had been with him in all places he had gone, undoubtedly referring to time spent with Laban. As for the words “wherever I have gone,” the Hebrew has “in the way (*derek*) I have gone,” “way” being synonymous for exile from both his native land and parents. These words were sufficient for everyone to concur with people giving to Jacob “all the foreign gods they had and the rings that were in their ears” [vs. 4]. The rings were taken as part of the booty from Shechem, proud symbols of what the people had done, and must be left behind. Instead of destroying them, Jacob “hid them under the oak which was near Shechem” [vs. 4]. Perhaps he did this out of superstition, of offending the foreign gods, or even keeping them as security for melting down at a later time.

Once having freed themselves of the foreign gods and having taken off their earrings, Jacob and his retinue continued their ascent to Bethel. En route “a terror from God fell upon the cities that were round about them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob” [vs. 5]. The Hebrew text lacks the preposition “from” but has simply “terror (of) God,” the verb being *chitat* which means to break or be broken down by fear. “Be broken, you peoples, and be dismayed; give ear, all you far countries” [Is 8.9]. Such broken-ness was not unlike the physical bodies of all these inhabitants being paralyzed but not suffering destruction, just long enough for Jacob to pass through unharmed. So Jacob—no specific time is given—“came to Luz (that is, Bethel) which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him” [vs. 6]. Shechem itself was in Canaan as well as the other cities whose inhabitants had been “broken” (*chitat*). Even though this paralysis had passed and Jacob was in the midst of their native land, memory of it remained sufficiently long to prevent them from assailing him. Note that the text mentions Luz and puts in parentheses Bethel. Those in Jacob’s company might have been more familiar with the former, unaware that Jacob had changed its name back in 28.16.

So finally Jacob make that altar as he had been commanded close by the stone pillar but changed the name of Bethel slightly to “El-bethel” [vs. 7] or God of Bethel. This never could have taken place without first having buried in the ground the foreign gods acquired by Jacob’s people, for it was the place where God had revealed himself [cf. vs. 7] or *galah*, first use of this verb in the Bible which fundamentally means to make naked. “I revealed myself to the house of your father” [1Sam 2.27]. Once Jacob settled his company at El-Bethel under

the protection of God located at the top of that ladder, everyone could breathe a sigh of relief. “And Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse died and she was buried under an oak below Bethel” [vs. 8]. This is the first and only time Deborah as a person is noted though earlier she is mentioned as having gone with Jacob and Rebekah in 24.59. Deborah remained important to Jacob who could have been with him during all those years of servitude to Laban. She was a direct link to his mother in her function as nurse or *meniktah* and must have been considerably older, the reason for her death. With that, Jacob’s direct connection to his mother is severed, for presumably she died sometime after his departure from his father and burial in 49.31. Hopefully Deborah would continue to “nurse” the land from her grave near Bethel and therefore protect it. As for the name of this site, “It was called Allon-bacuth or Oak of Weeping” [vs. 8] and differs considerably from that oak near Shechem under which Jacob had buried the foreign gods and rings.

“God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram and blessed him” [vs. 9]. These words introduce a second account of Jacob’s encounter with God in 32.24-30 where he is given his new name, Israel. Paddan-aram is the birth place of Rachel and where Jacob had subjected himself to Laban. Vss. 1-15 form a recap which can be taken in the context of the recent burial of Deborah, her closeness to both Rebekah and Jacob. Also it is a benefit for the people with Jacob including his two wives, Leah and Rachel. Prior to this they may have gotten just bits and pieces of the special relationship Jacob enjoyed with God, not the full picture, for Jacob doesn’t seem to have shared it with anyone else. Even if he did, no one would comprehend it.

In this second account God says directly to Jacob—not through the intermediary of that mysterious wrestler—“Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob but Israel shall be your name” [vs. 10]. This explanation is more acceptable to Jacob’s family and retinue; they would have mocked him if he spoke what seemed to them gibberish after (all things) a wrestling match. Next God identifies himself as El Shaddai (cf. vs. 11), the name Jacob’s father had used in 28.3 and found earlier in 17.1 when the Lord introduces himself to Abram prior to the covenant of circumcision (cf. 17.1). And so Jacob was familiar with this title which was used by both his father and grandfather though perhaps little known by those outside their immediate circles. El Shaddai fits in nicely with Abram’s original call and has personal ramifications for Jacob: “Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you” [vs. 11]. Note that Jacob merits not just being made into a nation (*gohy*) but a company (*qahal*) of nations which echoes the blessing of his father, Isaac: “that you may become a company of peoples” [28.3], the first time *qahal* appears in the Bible often associated with a religious gathering. So the idea is that Jacob is destined to make an indefinite number of nations, disparate as they might be, into a single *qahal* which recognizes God as El Shaddai. In addition to this assembly, kings will spring from Jacob, *chalatsayim* being the verb (feminine dual) which translates as “loins.” “Gird up your loins like a man” [Job 38.3].

After this recap of the change of names from Jacob to Israel and implying that God himself was the wrestler, “God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him” [vs. 13]. Two words with similar sound for “went up” and “from him:” *yahal mehalayu* or “went up from upon him.” It took place at Bethel (now changed to El-bethel) designated as a place or *maqom* which can be taken alternately as a home, and this particular home is where the angels dwell upon earth, the angels who have descended on the ladder from heaven. With this ladder in mind, God used it to ascend and take his customary position in heaven at the top of it. Once God has ascended, Jacob—still he is referred to as this name, not Israel—“set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone” [vs. 14]. This second pillar (*matsevah*) seems not so much to replace the original one of 28.18 but another right beside it to commemorate renaming Bethel to El-bethel as well as God’s recent communication with him concerning the change of names. *Yatsav* is the verb for “set up” (to put in place) compared with *sum* which applies to a putting in place. Thus the pillar associated with *yatsav* is a larger one compared with smaller one associated with *sum*. Both pillars formed a kind of image of that invisible ladder enabling not just Jacob and his retinue to worship at the place but as a memorial for future generations. The next step was for Jacob to pour a “drink offering on it” in addition to oil [vs. 14]. The former pillar had just oil; the drink offering or *neseq* is a libation. “And the drink offering with it shall be of wine, a fourth of a hin” [Lev 23.14]. This second offering was a mark of communal celebration when Jacob informed his two wives and those with him of his change of name as had been noted above. Once accomplished, Jacob reverted to the former name Bethel in place of El-bethel, the latter name being associated with the altar he had built in vs. 7.

Not long afterwards—no specific time is given but presumably it was brief, just enough to set up the altar and second pillar—“they journeyed from Bethel” [vs. 16]. Bethel was a place of contact between heaven and earth, an angelic metropolis, not suitable for human habitation except as a pilgrimage for worship and sacrifice. The place to which they journeyed isn’t mentioned until the end of this chapter, Mamre, where Isaac had his home (cf. vs. 27). Somewhere en route Rachel “travailed, and she had hard labor” [vs. 17] or “some distance from Ephrath” which may or may not refer to Bethlehem (cf. vs. 19, ‘that is, Bethlehem’). While in the midst of this pain her midwife consoled her by saying that she will give birth to “another son:” “And as her soul was departing (for she died), she called his name Ben-oni” [vs. 18]. The imagery is striking: the *nepesh* of Rachel was leaving her at the very same moment she gave the name to her son, Ben-oni (Son of my sorrow). However, “his father called his name Benjamin” (Son of the right hand or Son of the south). Benjamin is thus the last and only child among those given birth by both Rachel and Leah to have been born in Canaan. Now the twelve sons have been born to Jacob, the foundation upon which the twelve tribes of Israel would rest. To commemorate Rachel, Jacob “set up a pillar upon her grave” [vs. 20], another *matsevah* similar to the one where God had spoken with him in Bethel and earlier in 28.18 after boding the ladder set up at Bethel. The words “which is there to this day” in reference to Rachel’s tomb show that the author of the text was quite familiar with the site.

Vs. 22 has a brief but curious statement, a kind of interlude en route to Mamre: “While Israel dwelt in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine; and Israel heard of it.” Supposedly this incident shows the loss of prestige as first-born. It affected Jacob profoundly because years earlier he had tricked Esau out of his first-born privilege. No action is recorded, just that Israel—not the two uses of Israel as a proper name instead of Jacob—“heard of it.” Surely he’d love to do something, but refrained himself. At this delicate point a disruption might hinder or even bring to nought all that had happened before.

Vss. 22 (that is, the second half of it) through vs. 26 sum up the descendants of Jacob through their respective mothers, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah (Rachel’s maid) and Zilpah (Rachel’s maid). Note mention of Bilhah, the woman with whom Reuben had sexual intercourse (‘Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her that she may bear upon my knees’). These sons are recounted shortly before Jacob and his retinue reach Mamre so as to have them in position for taking over the land through the formation of twelve tribes. Shortly afterwards “Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre” [vs. 27]. Nothing at all is said about how Isaac had greeted his son, the one who had tricked him many years earlier of Esau’s birthright. Perhaps just the sound of Jacob’s voice was too much for him; after all, Jacob had deceived his father so naturally Isaac would have been wary. It is surprising that Jacob did find his father alive, for when he scurried away, Isaac seemed to be on his deathbed. Those long intervening years of wanting to resolve the birthright problem in favor of Esau must have kept Isaac going, but never did it turn out his way. As for Jacob’s mother Rebekah, we had no mention of her except in 49.31 in reference to her burial. So presumably Rebekah had died. The words “he was gathered to his people” [vs. 29] are significant here for indeed the people of Isaac had been gathered at last in one place. Even Esau is mentioned who helped bury Isaac. Nothing is said about the relationship between the two brothers at this point. Earlier Esau had shown magnanimity toward Jacob which Jacob had declined by leaving him stealthily. Perhaps now with hindsight that was the correct strategy; should Jacob remain with him and that formidable group of four hundred men (cf. 33.1), chances are he would never escape and Esau would have reclaimed his birthright by violence. As for Isaac’s burial, there must have been some pre-arrangement; those four hundred men must have been absent as well as Jacob’s retinue. Thus only Jacob and Esau were left alone to bury their father.

Chapter Thirty-Six

This chapter begins with the words “These are the descendants of Esau (that is, Edom).” It continues for forty-two verses outlining Esau’s heritage, if you will, a fitting conclusion for someone who had been cheated out of his birthright. Despite his wild character and unsuitability for this birthright, Esau did turn out to be the more gracious of the two brothers as when they met many years later. Still, Jacob’s wariness of him betrayed a latent tendency within Esau for taking revenge when everything fell into line with his schemes. And so from these descendants of Esau/Edom the narrative returns to Jacob who is

approaching the end of his life and from whom the mantle, if you will, will be handed over to Joseph.