

When I began researching some basic information about the setting for Genesis 28, I encountered some difficulties in orienting myself on the Biblical Maps I had available to me. I am reminded of the days before online maps, where we actually had to look around the map to find the place we were going to. It's like playing a game of "Where's Waldo?", so many place names and labels to sift through before finally finding the place I needed. I could only imagine how thrilled people would have been if they had GPS in those days. Before I get into Jacob's time in Bethel, let me explain the context behind the passage.

Abraham's son Isaac called for his son Jacob and asked him to travel to Paddan Aram (which is Northwest Mesopotamia, now Modern-Day Northern Syria) to meet with his Grandfather Bethuel. Jacob was also instructed not to marry a Canaanite woman, instead, he was to take a wife from among the daughters of Laban who was his Uncle. Isaac then said to Jacob "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham".

This sounds awfully familiar to another blessing earlier in Genesis. Genesis 12 verses 1-3 says "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you". Both of these blessings sound familiar and that is on purpose, for as Isaac is a descendent of Abraham, he too wished that his descendent Jacob shared in that blessing; the blessing of many children and taking possession of the land which will become his to reside.

After being blessed by his father, Jacob sets off from Beersheba and sets out for his destination. The passage tells us that Jacob stops for the night because the sun had set, and we assume he did not wish to travel at night. It is not known if Jacob is travelling alone or if he had company with him. We also don't know the name of the place where Jacob stayed, at least not right away. All it tells us in the beginning is that its "a certain place". Not very descriptive, but we will learn more a little later.

The scripture tells us that Jacob took one of the stones and put it under his head and went to sleep. I don't know about you, using a rock as a pillow doesn't sound very comfortable. Nevertheless, Jacob went to sleep and had a dream. In his dream, Jacob sees something which differs depending on which translation of the Bible you are using. After going through 28 translations of the Bible, 18 of them said Jacob saw a ladder, 9 of them say he saw a stairway, and 1 said he saw "a raised highway", which we are safe to assume doesn't mean that God built the 401 going from Earth to Heaven. For our purpose, let's imagine a ladder.

Jacob sees this ladder with the bottom resting on the earth and the top reaching up to heaven. He sees angels going up and down the ladder. Then Jacob sees God and God says to Jacob “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

This echoes what Isaac wished for his son, that God would make the same promise he made to Abraham unto Jacob. Jacob hears this and sees the angels ascending and descending between Earth and Heaven. He sees this hub of activity, angels travelling, and above it all, God stood above it all, speaking out to Jacob and promising him the same agreement that he gave to Abraham. Jacob then wakes up from his dream. Think about how you feel when you wake up from a really powerful dream. Often times, we want to remember every detail about what our dreams were like. Some people use Dream Journals to write everything they can remember before it slips from their mind. But if you’ve experienced waking up in the middle of the night, you know how difficult it is to do anything.

Jacob was amazed by the dream that he had. “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it” he said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.” Not wanting to forget what he had seen; he took the stone that he used as a pillow and set it up as a marker and poured oil on top of it. This is where we learn that the city that he was in was called Luz, but he renamed it Bethel which means House of God.

Why does Jacob use a stone to mark Bethel? Why not rally the citizens of Luz to re-name their town? Why not go to the temple and have the name changed? Why not write it down on a scroll or carve it into a tree? Jacob wanted something more permanent than a piece of parchment that could wither away with time or a tree that could be cut down or public opinion which could change with a new ruler. Jacob wanted a permanent reminder in that place not only for his sake, but for the sake of his descendants. God promised to give him the land that he was laying on, and what differentiated the spot where Jacob was compared to other similar looking areas? What stopped Jacob for mistaking one piece of land for another? It is the stone, the stone upon which Jacob laid his head and God spoke to him. Oil is poured on top of it, purifying and signifying it to be the reminder to Jacob of God’s promise to us.

What does this mean for us? For some of us, it may be difficult to remember the important things. With so much going on, so much on our to-do list, we sometimes don’t put our attention in the right places. Jacob was undergoing a massive trip which would take weeks if not months to get to. If Jacob had not placed the stone at Bethel, there would be no identifying marker to allow him to remember the importance of that place. Like placing a bookmark in a book, Jacob ensured that he would remember the House of God.

But sometimes we may feel overwhelmed and defeated because there is so much to remember. We are often bombarded by so much information we don't know what to do with it all. Which is important and which can be put aside. In the Gospel reading we read today, Jesus teaches us that The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire. I propose we do the same with the piles of information being thrown at us. We must remember what is right and toss aside what is wrong. The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. But the question remains: What is good and what is bad? It seems like an obvious question, but when so many claim that what they say is true and everyone else is wrong, where do we go?

We must acknowledge that we have weaknesses. We must remember that we have weaknesses. To say otherwise would be foolish and short-sighted. Rather, we must allow God to work within us. Romans 8:26-27 says "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

We must allow the search within ourselves, to find what is right and what is good. And we have been given the greatest marker of all time. That marker is Jesus. Jesus is the stone upon which we shall remember our Bethel, our House of God. Let him be your stone, your bookmark, your reminder of what is good. Because neither death, nor life, angels, or rulers, things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen