

Commentary on Genesis

JACOB (27.46-37.2a)

Jacob Flees to Haran to Find a Wife of His Own Kin And Remains There Over Twenty Years Establishing His Own Sub-Tribe Before Returning Home (27.46-37.2a).

Jacob's Departure (27.46-28.9)

27.46 'And Rebekah said to Isaac, "I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth. If Jacob takes a wife of the daughters of Heth such as these, of the daughters of the land, what good shall my life do to me?"'

It was always the intention of Isaac and herself to obtain a wife for Jacob from their kinsfolk. The way in which this is the constant aim of the family demonstrates a sense in which they felt themselves to be exclusive. They were like royalty in past days, but even more exclusive.

The purpose behind this was presumably the maintenance of the exclusiveness of the family tribe itself, and of its leadership within the tribe. To marry outside the family would be to introduce foreign elements. Canaanite daughters would introduce religious practises that were seen as evil, for Canaanite religion was debased. To marry within the commonality of their own tribe could damage the recognition of their own patriarchal status in the eyes of the tribe.

There is a lesson for all Christians here to ensure that they marry those who will deepen rather than challenge their faith. Marrying a non-believer is condemned in Scripture (2 Corinthians 6.14).

There had been no hurry in bringing this about, but events have now precipitated matters. For his own safety from a revengeful brother Jacob must be got to a place of safety. Yet Isaac must be kept unawares of the strains within the family, and Rebekah knew that he would probably dismiss the threat to Jacob out of hand. He would say he should be able to stand up for himself. And he certainly would not like the suggestion that they were all waiting for him to die (27.41). So she goes to Isaac with the suggestion that now is the time to consider a wife for Isaac. However, like any wise diplomat she wants him to think that the suggestion is his.

So she satisfies herself with telling him how distressed she is to think of Jacob marrying a Canaanite woman. 'Such as these' may even suggest that some have been showing interest in Jacob and have been visiting the tribe. And her plan succeeds. She knew she had only to plant the seed and he would act on it.

But she had no conception of the fact that Jacob would be away for so long.

Thus 27.46 is the opening introduction to the new covenant narrative which continues in chapter 28. But it is also important as a connecting link. The compiler clearly wanted it to be seen as connecting directly with the previous narrative. Yet it is equally the commencement of the following narrative.

Jacob Seeks a Wife in Haran and Marries Leah and Rachel (27.46-30.24)

This covenant narrative is based around Yahweh's covenant with Jacob in 28.13-15. He obtains wives and is abundantly fruitful, bearing many children. The initial covenant record was possibly 28.1-22 recorded by Jacob as solemn evidence of Yahweh's covenant with him. The second, which records the fulfilment of the promise of fruitfulness, may have been added

subsequently as a postscript, or may have been a separate record resulting from the vivid awareness by his wives of Yahweh's intervention in the birth of their children.

28.1-2 'And Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and charged him and said to him, "You shall not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Paddan-Aram, to the house of Bethuel your mother's father, and take for yourself a wife from there from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother."'

Having been prompted by Rebekah's words Isaac, unaware of the undercurrents around him, calls for Jacob and sends him to his wife's family, the family of Nahor, Abraham's brother, to find a suitable wife. The fact that he knows that Laban has daughters serves to demonstrate that the families kept in touch. (Compare for the detail 25.20).

But noteworthy is the fact that in contrast to the servant who went to Paddan-aram for Rebekah on Isaac's behalf Jacob bears no expensive wedding gifts. Isaac is clearly not pleased with him. He must make his own way. Alternately it may be that the family tribe was going through hard times and such gifts were not possible. In those days catastrophe, disease and human enemies could soon devastate the fortunes of wealthy semi-nomads as Job 1 demonstrates.

28.3-4 "And God Almighty (El Shaddai) bless you and make you fruitful, and multiply you that you may be a company of peoples. And give you the blessing of Abraham to you, and to your seed with you, that you may inherit the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham."

This charge now recognises that Jacob is to receive authority over the family tribe after Isaac has gone, not only the immediate tribe but over the wider family ('the company of peoples'), and has become the recipient of the blessings of the covenant. The mention of El Shaddai (the Almighty God) as in chapter 17, where the 'multitude of nations' is also mentioned, links it with the wider covenant given there. Compare also 35.11 where God reveals Himself to Jacob as El Shaddai and 'a company of nations' is mentioned. The term El Shaddai is thus used when 'many nations' are in view in contrast with the more personal name of Yahweh which is more closely connected with the national covenant. Yahweh is the name of God, but He is given many titles in relation to His activities.

Jacob is to become a company of peoples, and is to receive the blessing of Abraham, which includes inheritance of the land in which they at present 'sojourn' (that is, live without a settled place to call their own). This anticipates the fact that future Israel will be made up of many nations. We can consider the mixed multitude who united with Israel at the Exodus 12.38 and the nations later conquered and absorbed through history.

28.5 'And Isaac sent Jacob away, and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban, son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob's and Esau's mother.'

The continual emphasis of the detail confirms the importance put on the family connection. The repetition is typical of Ancient Near Eastern literature.

28.6-7 'Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take for himself a wife from there, and that as he blessed him he gave him a charge saying, "You shall not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan, and that Jacob obeyed his father and his mother and was gone to Paddan-aram.'

Up to this point Esau had not considered the question of the provenance of his wives. He appears to have acted independently in his marriages and with little thought to the covenant

community. Now the actions of Isaac bring him up short.

The writer is deliberately bringing out the contrast to establish the worthiness of Jacob to take over his father's position. Jacob does that which is right by the family and the covenant, Esau did not. It is to Jacob, by his actions, that the inheritance truly belongs. With all his failings Jacob was true to the covenant.

'That Jacob obeyed his father and his mother.' The writer lays great stress on Jacob's obedience in the marriage field. It demonstrates what a central feature it was in his thoughts. He sees Esau's failure in this a crucial factor.

28.8-9 'And Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan did not please Isaac, his father, and Esau went to Ishmael, and added to the wives that he had Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nebaioth, to be his wife.'

This verse demonstrates the close connection kept with the wider family. Esau is welcomed by Ishmael's family as a suitable husband for their daughter, and clearly knows fairly quickly where to find them in order to pursue his suit.

Esau's love for his father constantly comes over. He desires to please him and the feeling is reciprocated. Yet he did so in independence and not like Jacob in filial obedience. Here he seeks to remedy, rather belatedly, his error in marrying Canaanite women. This brings out how independently he had acted when he married the latter. But even here he acts independently.

This union explains why we next see Esau as leader of a band of men in Seir. He has found the independent lifestyle of the Ishmaelites to his liking. And he is aware that he has no future with the family tribe, thus fulfilling Isaac's words (27.40).

Jacob meets God at Bethel (28.10-22)

28.10 'And Jacob went out from Beersheba and went towards Haran.'

At this stage Isaac and the family tribe are still firmly situated in Beersheba. Twenty years later they will be found in Mamre near Hebron (35.27). That the tribe had kept in close touch with the children of Heth, who were connected with Mamre (23.17-18), is clear from 26.34; 27.46. Perhaps they had overstayed their welcome at Beersheba. That Jacob had kept in touch with his family comes out in that he later knows where to find them.

Jacob would not travel alone. In 32.10 he refers to crossing the river only having a staff, but that is probably because he did not see those who travelled with him as his own. They and the gifts were Isaac's. He would almost certainly have servants with him, together with suitable gifts to present to the wider family. (It would seem for example that Rebekah sent with him her own nurse, a typical motherly gesture - see 35.8). Not to take gifts would be a solecism of the worst kind. But he was without the expensive marriage gifts which would have made his way easier. This omission is quite startling. It suggests Isaac's displeasure with him. He did not want him back quickly and would be quite happy if he remained in Paddan-aram. Rebekah felt the same for a different reason. She wanted him where he would be safe. Alternately it may indicate a period of relative tribal poverty. It may be that Jacob is to restore the family's fortunes.

28.11 'And he lighted on a certain place and tarried there all night because the sun was set, and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place to sleep.'

The coincidental nature of the resting place is stressed. Though he knows it not an invisible hand is guiding him. The stone is mentioned because it will become a sacred pillar (verse 18).

28.12 'And he dreamed, and behold, a ramp set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God ascending and descending on it.'

The word 'sullam' ('heaped up) suggests a kind of ramp leading upwards. And moving up and down this ramp were angels of God. The general message is clear, that the messengers of God are watching over God's purposes in the world, and especially as regards Canaan. Compare 32.1-2 also the angelic messengers in Genesis 19 and Zechariah 1.8-11. But the use of 'God' rather than 'Yahweh' indicates general activity rather than specific covenant activity. It is Jacob who is being looked after by Yahweh Himself (verse 15).

We note in passing that there is no idea of these angels as having wings, that is why they need a ramp. In fact angels are never described as having wings. Wings are limited to the cherubim/seraphim.

28.13-14 'And behold Yahweh stood above it (or 'by him') and said, "I am Yahweh, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. I will give to you and to your seed the land on which you lie. And your seed will be as the dust of the earth, and you will break forth to the west, and to the east, and to the north and to the south. And in you and in your seed will all the families of the earth be blessed."'

Now Jacob has a theophany of Yahweh, as his fathers had had before him. He sees a vision of God in a dream, and God speaks to him directly as the God of his fathers. He confirms the promises made in the covenant. The land is to belong to their children, they will become countless as the dust of the earth, they will spread abroad widely in all directions, and through them the whole world will be blessed. The final purpose of God is always universal blessing. Jacob is now formally accepted as the seed through whom the promises would be fulfilled.

28.15 "And behold I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you again to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you of."

God's sovereign purpose in Jacob is revealed. It is not because Jacob is worthy but because God purposes it. Yet there is in Jacob that which will respond, and indeed has responded, and while his behaviour leaves much to be desired God will work on him to make him what he ought to be. Thus God will be with him and will keep and guard him, and will bring about His purpose through him. Jacob is Yahweh's personal concern.

We too may feel unworthy in our walk with God, but it is not our sense of worthiness that matters but the fact that God is at work on our lives and we are responsive. If we are His He will work in us to will and to do of His good pleasure (Philippians 2.13).

28.16 'And Jacob awoke from his sleep, and he said, "Surely Yahweh is in this place, and I did not know it". And he was afraid and said, "How awe-inspiring is this place. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven".'

Jacob awakes, still filled with the dread and awe that his experience has aroused in him. It is possible that he takes what he has seen literally and thinks that this is literally the place where heaven and earth conjoin and where there is a gate (in the sense of a city gate) through which angels can pass. But more likely he sees it as temporary. Yahweh is here, even though he had not been aware of it. And the place has thus become for the time being the dwelling-place of Yahweh, 'the house of God' (beth elohim) and the gateway to heaven.

All this must not be over-pressed. Jacob is aware that Yahweh has revealed Himself in a number of places, for example, at Shechem (12.6), in various unnamed places (15.1 on; 17.1 on) and in Beersheba (26.24). Each is in its own way as sacred as Bethel. And worship of Yahweh is not confined to Palestine (24.26, 48, 52. See also 29.32, 35 which demonstrate that Jacob has introduced his wives to the worship of Yahweh). The fact that Yahweh will be with him wherever he goes, and will not leave him, is a guarantee of that. But for him Bethel will always be special, for here was where he first met God personally and heard His voice speaking to him.

How often God comes to us when we least expect it. Like Jacob we wander to 'a certain place' and then God meets us there.

28.18 'And Jacob arose early in the morning and took the stone that he had put under his head, and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.'

The pouring of oil on the pillar was to sanctify it to God, to set it apart as 'holy' (Leviticus 8.10-11; Numbers 7.1). It was to become a sacred pillar, a pillar for a memorial of the covenant renewed with him. Setting up stones was regularly a physical reminder of covenants (compare Genesis 31.45-52; 35.14; 1 Samuel 7.12; Joshua 4.3; see also 2 Samuel 18.18). The pouring with oil gave it a special significance as a holy memorial.

Generally such stone pillars erected in this way were very large. If that is so here the stone will have been lying sideways when he used it as a pillow, mainly buried in the ground, and he put it up on end, no doubt with the help of his servants. In that case 'took' in verse 11 would simply mean 'selected'.

28.19 'And he called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.'

Jacob names the place where he is 'Beth-el' (the house of God) but the closest city is called Luz. Its name was later changed to Bethel because of this incident. But the name is not static. Joshua 16.2 still distinguishes between Bethel and Luz, although they are clearly very close (Joshua 18.13). The use of Bethel earlier in Genesis is a result of scribal updating. It was not uncommon for ancient names to be updated when documents were copied. This constant changing or re-adaptation of names in Genesis reflects the gradual taking over of the land by the patriarchs.

28.20-22 'And Jacob vowed a vow saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then shall Yahweh be my God, and this stone which I have set up for a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that you will give me I will surely give a tenth to you." '

Jacob makes a vow. If God will watch over him as He has promised (verse 15) then he will indeed be totally dedicated to Yahweh. The vow is threefold. Yahweh will be his God, the place where the stone has been erected will be a cult sanctuary to His worship, and he will give one tenth of all he receives to God.

We note that he says 'if God will be with me' where we might expect 'Yahweh'. The terms were interchangeable. But he is going into a foreign land where Yahweh is not acknowledged and thus thinks in terms of 'God' going with him. But if the journey is successful then he will establish His worship as the worship of Yahweh, the God of his fathers. He is not saying that Yahweh will become his God but that he will be reconfirmed as his God.

The verse demonstrates that Jacob sees 'Elohim' as firmly equated to 'Yahweh'. The idea of

the reconfirmation of Yahweh as his God parallels other examples where a similar idea is in mind (e.g. Exodus 6.3).

'This --- pillar shall be 'the house of God' (beth elohim).' As men approach the pillar they will recognise the presence of God and will engage in worship because it signifies that God appeared there and made his covenant with man. But Jacob does not limit God to a stone. His vision alone has made clear to him the transcendence of God. As 28.19 demonstrates he calls the area as a whole Bethel.

'A tenth.' A recognised percentage given to one to whom one owes dues, as with Abraham to Melchizedek (14.20). It was a principle recognised elsewhere in the Ancient Near East. He is acknowledging God as his overlord. The change from the third person to the first person in the last phrase reflects the depths of Jacob's personal dedication.

It is quite probable that this section was put in written form immediately as a covenant document, either by himself or one of his men, a guarantee to Jacob that his future is secured by Yahweh.

Jacob's vow brings home to us the importance of worship and measured Christian giving in response to the goodness of God.

Jacob Meets Come to His Relatives' Family Tribe and Marries Laban's Two Daughters (29.1-30). Jacob's Sons are Born (29.31-30.24)

This covenant narrative reflects the fulfilment of Yahweh's promise of fruitfulness to Jacob and is based on the covenant significance of the names given to the sons. It is not just a story. The names reflect their covenant relationship with God.

But it is noteworthy that, in remarkable contrast to Genesis 24, there is no mention of God until we come to the birth of the sons. It is as though the writer is telling us that, although God's purposes came to fruition through it, God was not directly involved in the chicanery that took place. When Abraham's servant sought a wife for Isaac, he went about it prayerfully and waited for God to show His will through the acts of another catering to the needs of his beasts. Here we have no prayer and Jacob pre-empts the situation. The contrast could not be more stark.

Then fourteen years pass very quickly with Jacob's pursuits not worth a mention, the only point of importance being his two marriages that lead up to the birth of his sons. It is not so much concerned with the life of Jacob as with the heirs of the promise. Yahweh first steps in at verse 31. So the text is firmly based on covenant records.

29.1 'Then Jacob went on his way and came to the land of the children of the East.'

'The children of the East.' A general term for people who came from lands to the East of Canaan. In 1 Kings 4.30 the children of the East are, along with Egypt, looked on as a source of wisdom (compare Matthew 2.1). This suggests reference to the peoples of the Mediterranean area. Job could also be called one of 'the children of the East' (Job 1.3).

But the term is also used of peoples connected with the Amalekites and Midianites (Judges 6.3; 7.12; 8.10), with Moabites and Ammonites (Ezekiel 25.9-10), where they are probably unidentified groups of nomads banded together in an alliance (verse 4), and with Kedar (Jeremiah 49.28). It is therefore a term used to designate conglomerate peoples, without being too specific, with reference to their direction from Canaan. In this passage the reference is to the general area in which Haran is situated seen as part of the wider area of 'Easterners'.

(Compare the use of 'Westerners' and 'Orientals' today). Consider how the magi also came 'from the East' (Matthew 2.1).

29.2-3 'And he looked, and behold, a well in the field. And lo, three flocks of sheep lying there by it. For from that well they watered the flocks, and the stone on the well's mouth was great. And to that place all the flocks were gathered, and they rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered the sheep, and put the stone again on the well's mouth in its place.'

It would appear that the stone was so large that it was not easy to move. So every day the various flocks would gather at the well (water-source), waiting until all were gathered, and then the stone guarding the well would be removed and all the flocks would water there. It was possibly a private cystem owned by a group, with restricted access.

29.4-6 'And Jacob said to them, "My brothers, from where are you?" And they said, "We are from Haran." And he said to them, "Do you know Laban, the son of Nahor?" And they said, "We know him." And he said to them, "Is it well with him?" And they said, "It is well, and look, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep.'

Although it is still before evening three flocks have already gathered there. So by questioning their keepers Jacob discovers he has arrived at his destination, Haran, and asks after the man he seeks. A water-source was the natural place to find people to question, for it was a place where many would come. We note elsewhere how many meetings take place at water-sources. (One way of ensuring you met people was to wait at a water-source).

'The son of Nahor.' Nahor is the head of the family. 'Son of' means 'descended from'. Laban is actually the son of Bethuel, and is Nahor's grandson.

29.7 And he said, "Look, it is yet high day, neither is it time that the cattle should be gathered together. Water the sheep and go and feed them."

Jacob is puzzled why they are sitting around waiting. Sheep would normally be brought towards evening, but these have come while the sun is still high. Why do they then sit and wait, when they could water them and then take them where they can feed?

29.8 'And they said, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together, and they roll the stone from the well's mouth. Then we water the sheep."'

The answer was that it was because the stone could not be moved. This may have been because there were not enough men there to move the stone. Most of the keepers of the sheep were probably women. Alternately it may have been because it was part of the agreement in respect of the private well that the stone not be removed until all were present. But we are probably intended to get the idea of the diligence of Jacob compared with the dilatoriness of the shepherds.

29.9-10 'While he yet spoke with them Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she looked after them. And so it happened that when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban, his mother's brother, that Jacob went near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered the flock of Laban, his mother's brother.'

Rachel, who had previously been spotted some distance away (verse 6), now arrives. So Jacob gets his men to help him to move the stone so that the flocks can feed. He is not used to having to wait and ignores any custom. He does not want to have to linger. Or it may be that a brief discussion has revealed that the well is Nahor's so that Rachel has the right to secure its opening. (Jacob would not kiss Rachel without at least some preliminary words).

29.11-12 'And Jacob kissed Rachel and lifted up his voice and wept. And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's brother and that he was Rebekah's son. And she ran and told her father.'

The meeting is emotional. In days when families were often out of touch for years such scenes were a regular feature of life when they came together. It must be considered certain that Jacob had said something introductory before he kissed Rachel, something like "I am your cousin". He has after all gone to great trouble to water her sheep and this would hardly be done without saying anything. But after his rapturous welcome he then explains his relationship in more detail. Then, quite excited for she will have heard of her wider family, Rachel runs to tell her father.

'Her father's brother', that is, a blood relation, his 'kinsman'. Strictly he was his nephew. The word for 'brother' had a variety of meanings, compare 29.4.

29.13-14 'And so it was that when Laban heard the news of his sister's son, Jacob, he ran to meet him, and embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. And he told Laban all these things. And Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh." And he stayed with him for the period of a month.'

Jacob is welcomed as the true born 'prince' that he is by a fellow 'prince'. They are both of the same stock. Then Jacob tells him 'all these things', presumably the general circumstances of his journey and his purpose in coming. Laban's stressing of the family connection indicates general agreement with the ideas.

'He stayed with him for the period of a month.' It was normal not to hurry such transactions as this. It would generally have been considered impolite to a relative to hurry the matter. But the hospitality offered indicates acceptance of the principle involved. (compare how Abraham's servant, who had been in a hurry, emphasised his own position as only a servant as a reason for not delaying).

29.15 'And Laban said to Jacob, "Should you serve me for nothing because you are my kinsman? Tell me, what shall your wages be?"'

Once a decent time had passed Laban brings the matter up. He has now realised that Jacob has not come laden with expensive marriage gifts. These words are a delicate indication that Jacob is going to have to earn his wife by a period of service. (The question of wages would not normally arise between relatives of this standing. Those were for hired servants). He is asking how long he is prepared to serve as compensatory payment for a wife. When Abraham's servant came he brought rich gifts which were accepted as recompense for the loss of a daughter and sister. It appears that Jacob has not brought such valuable gifts. Compensation would thus be made by service (compare Joshua 15.16; 1 Samuel 17.25), a practise well testified to elsewhere.

29.16-17 'And Laban had two daughters, the name of the elder was Leah and the name of the younger was Rachel. And Leah's eyes were tender, but Rachel was beautiful and well-favoured.'

The word for 'tender' can mean soft, weak, delicate. This may indicate some weakness in the eye or it may simply mean timid or gentle-eyed (compare Deuteronomy 28.56). The point was that while Leah was not unattractive she paled in comparison with Rachel.

29.18 'And Jacob loved Rachel and he said, "I will serve you for seven years for Rachel your younger daughter."'

Jacob replies that he has made his choice as to which daughter he wants. He is prepared to offer seven years service in exchange for Rachel whom he loves. This may appear a long time but he knows that during the period he will be treated as a relative and equal ('you are my brother' - verse 15) and he has brought little with him. Offering service in exchange for a man's daughter was a regular feature of the times.

In fact a period of seven years service appears to have been an accepted one in 'Hebrew' circles. Consider the stipulations re a Hebrew slave in Exodus 21.2; Deuteronomy 15.12, although the circumstances are not the same. (See [Hebrews](#)).

29.19 'And Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to another man. Remain with me."

The offer is accepted and it may be that at this stage Laban thought that Leah might be married within the seven years to someone else thus clearing the way for Jacob. The elder daughter was often more attractive status-wise. Thus it may be that at this point in time his aim was honest.

29.20-21 'And Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days for the love he had for her. And Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife, for my days of service are completed."

Jacob works out his seven years and demands his wages, the hand of Rachel in marriage. The comment about the depth of his love is touching.

29.22-24 'And Laban gathered together all the men of the place and made a feast, and so it was that in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to him, and he went in to her. And Laban gave Zilpah his handmaid to his daughter Leah for a handmaid.'

The wedding feast is arranged. It will last for seven days (verse 27). And it is now that we first begin to see Laban's deceitful ways, although we must be fair and recognise that he has been put in a difficult position. He had hoped that Leah might be married off, but it had not happened, and custom forbade Rachel being married first.

As he ponders the problem he sees the solution. Instead of being open and honest he foists Leah, who would be heavily veiled for the wedding, on Jacob. When they go to bed it is dark and presumably Leah kept silent. Thus Jacob does not realise until daylight that his silent and submissive companion is Leah. And by then it is too late. He is legally committed to Leah.

The mention of Zilpah is to indicate that she no longer belongs to Laban but to Leah, and thus indirectly to Jacob. She joins those whom Jacob has brought with him as a member of his 'household'. But noteworthy is the meagreness of the gift. There is no mention of any other dowry. Laban is getting rid of his daughters on the cheap. (Rebekah was provided with a number of young women - Genesis 24.61). Jacob has come with little in the way of gifts. Laban returns the compliment.

29.25 'And it happened in the morning that behold, it was Leah. And he said to Laban, "What is this that you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?"'

When Jacob realises what has happened he is no doubt furious and immediately marches in to where Laban is to lay his complaint. The terms of his contract have been broken. The reader, however, knowing the story of Esau will recognise that he has received as he gave. The trickster has been tricked. He who deceived a blind man, has himself been deceived when

blinded by a veil. He who supplanted an elder kin has an elder kin planted on him. What a man sows he reaps. And he learns his first lesson in dealing with Laban.

But Laban was no doubt waiting for the visit and has his excuses ready. He is a smooth-tongued liar and confident because the strength is on his side. He is master here. Jacob can do nothing.

29.26-27 'And Laban said, "It is not so done in our place to give the younger before the firstborn. Fulfil the week of this one and we will give you the other also for the service which you will serve with me, yet seven more years."

The taking of a second wife is well witnessed elsewhere, as is the later taking of slave-wives. But for the main wives there would be legal stipulations in the marriage contract, either written or oral and made in the presence of witnesses, preserving their position and relative freedom. The marrying by one man of two sisters was, however, later forbidden (Leviticus 18.18).

Laban knew that Jacob would have to recognise the strength of his argument. Custom could not be broken. Every one in the tribe would know the situation, and they were no doubt smiling behind Jacob's back. And behind his triumphant but partly concealed smile is the implication that Jacob should have known, and that had he been smarter he would have known. It was probably not an uncommon requirement, although marriage to the elder daughter did in fact place Jacob in a more privileged position. (An argument which Laban might well have called on when placating Jacob. Marriage was not on the whole looked on as a romantic affair).

However Laban is not averse to Jacob and placates him with a further offer. Let him go through the seven-day wedding feast (see Judges 14.12) without trouble, giving Leah her full due, and then he can also marry Rachel. After which he must work another seven years for the privilege, as a now privileged member of the tribe.

It has been suggested in the light of parallels elsewhere that Laban adopts Jacob as a son, but there is nothing in the narrative to suggest this and much to demonstrate that he retained a level of independence. He was an established member of the family tribe, connected by marriage, but his services had to be retained by contract. Thus the new seven year contract.

29.28 'And Jacob did so and fulfilled her week, and he gave him Rachel his daughter to wife.'

Jacob carries out his part of the bargain. He gives Leah due deference for the week of the marriage ceremony, and fulfils his responsibilities as a husband. Then he also marries Rachel. Leah's part was not a happy one for she knows it is her sister that Jacob wants, but she was used to the fact that a woman could be married off by her menfolk, and would accept her lot. She knew she could have done a lot worse. What grieved both her and Rachel was the particular way in which it was carried out so that neither of them received any financial benefit. Only a handmaid each. They felt that Laban had withheld from them some of their rights (see for this 31.14-16).

29.29 'And Laban gave Bilhah his handmaid to his daughter Rachel to be her handmaid.'

Once again Laban provides a handmaid for his daughter from his household, and another person is added to Jacob's group. Again the suggestion is that that is all that she receives. Laban is hard-nosed. This prince has come among them bringing nothing, he will therefore receive nothing, apart from the privileged membership of the tribe due to his ancestry.

29.30 'And he went in also to Rachel, and he also loved Rachel more than Leah and served with him yet seven more years.'

Jacob plants his seed in both women as custom required, but his heart was with Rachel. And it needed to be for he had to serve another seven years for her.

Jacob's Wives Are Fruitful As Yahweh Had Promised (29.31 - 30.24)

29.31 'And Yahweh saw that Leah was unloved and he opened her womb. But Rachel was barren.'

The bearing of a son was of vital importance in Jacob's day for such a son or sons would inherit the family tribe and wealth and maintain the family name. A man felt he lived on in his sons. They would also eventually strengthen Jacob's position. Thus Leah is delighted when she bears not one but four sons. But Rachel, who was barren was devastated.

The writer sees what has happened to Leah as a sign of God's goodness to her. But it is noteworthy that he does not directly suggest that Rachel's barrenness is God's handywork, although others would see it that way.

'Unloved.' The word regularly means 'hated' but the previous verse suggests that although Jacob preferred Rachel he still had some love for Leah. Thus the translation 'unloved' is more likely. There is no suggestion that he treated her badly (contrast his words to his beloved Rachel in 30.2).

29.32-34 'And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, "Because Yahweh has looked on my affliction (raah beonyi), for now my husband will love me." And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Because Yahweh has heard (shama) that I am unloved he has therefore given me this son as well." And she called his name Simeon (Shimeon). And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Now this time my husband will be joined (lavah) to me because I have borne him three sons." Therefore his name was called Levi.'

The names given by Leah are used to express the pain in her heart by a play on words. She is afflicted, Yahweh has heard that she is unloved, and she feels that her husband is not really one with her. But now that she has borne a full complement of sons - three is the number of completeness - she is confident that he will now regard her. She knows how important sons will be to him and is aware that she has fulfilled her responsibility.

'Reuben'. As vocalised in the text it means 'behold, a son'. But Leah also, by a play on words, reads a more bitter meaning into it. 'Shimeon' means 'heard', that is 'God has heard.' It initially celebrates the fact that Yahweh has heard in the giving of a son, but again Leah interprets it somewhat bitterly. The name Levi is associated with the verb 'lavah', to be joined. Possibly it indicated that Leah now felt joined with her husband's God, Yahweh, but again she gives it her own bitter interpretation.

Note the reference to Yahweh. She now worships her husband's God, for Yahweh can be worshipped anywhere.

It is possible that we are to see these three sons as triplets, born at the same time. This would explain why they are treated together and help to explain how Jacob had so many sons in seven years. But if so it is not made clear in the text. ('Conceived and bore' three times in succession does not exclude the possibility. Chronology was only secondary in Hebrew tenses). More probably we may see Simeon and Levi as twins. Note how they are coupled in Jacob's blessing

(49.5).

29.35 'And she conceived again and bore a son, and she said, "This time will I praise (hodah) Yahweh." Therefore she called his name Judah (Yehudah), and she ceased bearing.'

With three sons her confidence had returned. Everyone would be congratulating her. So when a fourth is born she can express praise to Yahweh. Her husband's God has been good to her and she acknowledges His goodness in the name of her son. The cessation of bearing is temporary (30.17), although lasting for some fair period, so that she seeks to maintain her position by bearing children through her handmaid.

30.1 'And when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister, and she said to Jacob, "Give me children or I die.'

Rachel's great distress at the way things have turned out is apparent. She feels she has failed Jacob and is conscious of the congratulations being heaped on Leah. Her words here probably reflect a continual period of nagging, which to someone who loved her so much became exasperating.

'Give me children or I die.' Rachel sees little point in life and is suffering mild depression. And she seek partly to put the blame on Jacob. He too is aware of a feeling of guilt. But he feels he has proved his ability to have children. The fault must be Rachel's. The account smacks of an eyewitness account.

30.2 'And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, "Am I in God's place? Who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?"

Rachel's accusations stir up Jacob's anger. He too no doubt feels frustrated. So he reacts with an outburst. He points out that it is God who is withholding a child not him. There is possibly a hint that Rachel is somehow to blame.

'God'. The word is Elohim. Failure cannot be laid at the door of God as Yahweh. Indeed from now on the whole passage uses Elohim until we reach Rachel's vindication in the bearing of a blood child (verse 24). What happens is no longer looked on as the direct intervention of Yahweh (compare 29.31), it is more pious comment.

30.3-4 'And she said, "See my maid Bilhah, go in to her that she may bear on my knees and I also may obtain children by her." And she gave him Bilhah her handmaid as a wife and Jacob went in to her.'

'Go in to her.' A euphemism for sexual intercourse.

'Bear on my knees'. This confirms what we earlier saw with Sarah. When the maid bears a child she does it on her mistress's behalf. The child is Rachel's. But as Sarah's case demonstrated, the consequences were not always so simple when a blood child was later born. So the child does not rank fully with the true born unless fully accepted. It is to Jacob's credit that he does not differentiate between his sons. On the other hand in his case the slave children were not the firstborn. There is not the same rivalry as with Ishmael and Isaac.

The handmaids are subsidiary wives. There is no marriage contract, they but do the bidding of their mistresses. But their status and position improves.

30.5-6 'And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son, and Rachel said, "God has judged (dan) me and has also heard my voice and has given me a son." Therefore she called his name Dan.'

The depth of Rachel's feelings comes out in her expression of vindication. She has shown that she is not morally to blame after all. He has not withheld a son through Bilhah. She sees her 'son' as God's judgment passed on her situation. He has vindicated her. But there is not the intensity of feeling shown by Leah with her first four children, nor by herself when Joseph is born. Then it is Yahweh, the covenant God, Who acts, and her faith is renewed.

30.7-8 'And Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid, conceived again and bore Jacob a second son, and Rachel said, "With powerful wrestlings (literally 'wrestlings of God') have I wrestled (niphtal) with my sister and have prevailed." And she called his name Naphtali.'

The rivalry between the two sisters comes out vividly. Rachel feels that she is having a great battle with her sister, and that she has now succeeded. The wrestlings must be seen as through prayer. She has fought for her position before God. Jacob will later be seen as wrestling with God although the Hebrew word is different (32.24).

30.9-13 'When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing she took Zilpah her handmaid and gave her to Jacob for a wife. And Zilpah, Leah's handmaid, bore Jacob a second son. And Leah said, "It is fortunate (gad)." And she called his name Gad. And Zilpah, Leah's handmaid, bore Jacob a second son, and Leah said, "Happy am I! For the daughters will call me happy (to call happy = asher)." And she called his name Asher.'

The names reflect Leah's growing contentment. No longer torn at heart she now feels triumphant. She has done well by her husband. We note that the namings are by the two main wives. The slave wives take a secondary place.

30.14 'And Reuben went in the days of wheat harvest and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said, "Give me, I beg you, of your son's mandrakes."

'The days of wheat harvest.' As with Abraham and Isaac these shepherd rulers also harvest the land.

Reuben is by this time just a few years old, four or five at the most. He discovers in the fields little, strongly smelling yellow fruits and he brings them to his mother. We do not know whether he knew what they were, but his mother knew immediately. They were mandrakes, well known for their supposed aphrodisiac qualities. They have been loosely called 'love-apples' because they look like small apples. Rachel, on seeing them, pleads for some so that she can quicken her sexual drive and effectiveness.

The mandrake is a perennial herb of the nightshade family which grew in fields and rough ground (compare Canticles 7.13). It had large leaves, mauve flowers during the winter, and these were followed by the development of fragrant round yellow fruits of the type found by Reuben.

30.15 'And she said to her, "Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? And would you take away my son's mandrakes also?" And Rachel said, "He will therefore lie with you tonight for your son's mandrakes."

Leah feels cast aside. Perhaps Jacob has decided she is beyond bearing. Certainly he seemingly refuses to sleep with her, preferring Rachel. So Rachel, aware of her power over him enters into a contract that if she receives the mandrakes Leah can sleep with Jacob that night. Indeed the next verse suggests that the contract may well have been in accordance with tribal custom between two wives.

30.16-18 'And Jacob came from the open country in the evening and Leah went out to meet him and said, "You must come in to me for I have surely hired you ('sachar' - to hire for wages) with my son's mandrakes." And he lay with her that night. And God listened to Leah and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. And Leah said, "God has given me my hire (sachar) because I gave my handmaid to my husband." And she called his name Is-sachar (hired man).'

Leah clearly has a sense of humour. Personally she sees the name as resulting from her hiring of Jacob with the mandrakes, but in God's eyes and in the eyes of others she sees it as her reward for allowing her handmaid to bear children on her behalf.

'The open country' or 'field'. It may well be that he had been labouring in the wheat fields where Reuben had found the mandrakes.

30.19 'And Leah conceived again and bore a sixth son to Jacob. And Leah said, "God has endowed me with a good dowry. Now will my husband dwell (zabal) with me because I have borne him six sons." And she called his name Zebulun. And afterwards she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah.'

Now that Jacob realises that she can still be fruitful he lies with Leah again and she produces a sixth son. She clearly conceives easily.

'God has endowed me with a good dowry.' The suggestion has been that the wives brought little dowry with them. But now she feels God has made amends for this by giving her six sons, twice the perfect three. She has brought Jacob better than wealth.

'Now will my husband dwell (zabal) with me.' It seems that the bearing of further sons has established her status. She is no longer put to one side, but receives the honour due as a wife. The word zabal connects with a similar word used in Assyrian marriage law.

The mention of Dinah so abruptly is noteworthy. It prepares the way for the later event (chapter 34). But it may arise from the fact that she grew to be famous as an outstanding personality or beauty. Everyone knew about Dinah! Or the reference may stress that Jacob is a bearer of sons, with Dinah the exception, stressing his masculinity.

But more likely is that Dinah is mentioned to make the number of Jacob's children up to twelve (see below). Twelve is seen as the full complement of tribal rulership.

30.22-24 'And God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. And she conceived and bore a son and said, "God has taken away my reproach." And she called his name Joseph (yoseph), saying, "Yahweh add (yoseph) to me another son."'

The bearing of children through her handmaid has its own effect on Rachel's body and at last she herself bears a son. Now she feels she can identify herself with Yahweh and His covenant. And in her exultation she looks to Him for more sons. Her words show once again how keenly she had felt her barrenness. It is now seven years since she was first married (verse 25).

We note in all this the stress laid on the fact the Leah's first four sons and Rachel's first son are from Yahweh Himself. These are the seal of Yahweh's covenant with Jacob. And we note further that there are twelve children. Confederations of twelve are a recognised grouping of tribes in Genesis (22.20-24; 25.12-16) and the fact that Jacob's sons and daughter provide a full tribal confederation does not go unnoticed. He has been truly blessed.

We know from elsewhere the concept of the amphictyony, a grouping of tribes around a

central sanctuary, and this was the basis of these tribal federations. We later receive fuller details of such arrangements after the Exodus when Moses formally establishes such a confederation based on association with the twelve sons of Jacob. It should be noted that however the lists of names are changed, there are always twelve names on the list in order to maintain the whole.

But it should be carefully noted that there is no reference to tribal affairs in the comments made on the names of the sons in this passage. They are purely individual. This, together with the inclusion of Dinah to make up the twelve (prior to the birth of Benjamin), is proof of the ancientness of the narrative.

Jacob Prospers and Decides to Return Home (30.25-32.2).

This passage is centred around two theophanies and two covenants. In the first theophany Yahweh appears to Jacob and tells him to return home (31.3). Then Jacob, describing the theophany to his wives, amplifies what God said as the God of Bethel, emphasising the command to return home (31.11-13). And the second is when he meets the angels of God at Mahanaim (32.1-2). The passage also contains details of the two covenants made between Jacob and Laban (30.31-33 and 31.44-53). Originally separate covenant records may well have been involved.

Jacob Prospers (30.25-43).

30.25-26 'And it happened when Rachel had borne Joseph that Jacob said to Laban, "Send me away that I may go to my own place and to my country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me go. For you know my service with which I have served you." '

Jacob's servitude has come to its end. Now he seeks to clarify his position with Laban and his tribal confederation. He has fulfilled his dues and should be free to return home with all he has earned. His case is a little different from the normal 'Hebrew bondsman' for the latter would, on completion of his servitude, be required to leave his wives behind. But in this case they are his wages, and he is a relative of equal standing.

Note how carefully Jacob words his request. He is making clear the terms of the covenant between them and his complete fulfilment of it. He recognises the rights of the tribe but stresses that he has fulfilled all their requirement and therefore has the right to leave along with his family even though they are part of the tribe.

30.27-28 'And Laban said to him, "If now I have found favour in your eyes, stay with us. For I have divined that Yahweh has blessed me for your sake." And he said, "Fix what your wages will be and I will pay them." '

Laban does not directly dispute Jacob's right to leave along with his family (but see 31.43. The position was decidedly unusual). But it is to Jacob's credit that Laban does not want him to leave. He recognises the prosperity that has come to the tribe through Jacob's presence and activities. And he acknowledges that this is partly due to the God whom Jacob worships, even Yahweh.

'Stay with us.' Not actually in the text but to be read in by implication.

'I have divined.' By means of divination Laban has become aware of Yahweh's influence in all this. He is not a worshipper of Yahweh but as with Balaam later (Numbers 22-24) Yahweh makes His way known through those who are not His.

'Fix what your wages will be.' Negotiations begin again. Jacob can name his own price for further service and participation in tribal activity and it will be considered.

30.29 'And he said to him, "You know how I have served you, and how your cattle have fared with me. For it was little which you had before I came, and it has broken forth as a multitude. And Yahweh has blessed you wherever I have turned. And now when shall I provide for my own house as well?" '

Jacob puts his case. His activity has turned their fortunes and their flocks and herds have multiplied. And he agrees with Laban that this is due to Yahweh his God. But now it is time for him to consider his own prosperity. He wants flocks and herds of his own for the benefit of his family.

'Yahweh has blessed you wherever I have turned.' There seems little doubt in view of this and Laban's previous confession that we are to see Yahweh at work throughout the following narrative.

30.31a 'And he said, "What shall I give you?"

The bargaining begins. Laban wants to know Jacob's terms. It may be that here there is a subtlety in Laban's offer. Once Jacob has accepted a specific payment as 'wages' it may be that it would have bound him to the tribe.

30.31b 'And Jacob said, "You shall not give me anything." '

Jacob is equal to his subtlety. He does not want anything specific now, he is prepared to wait for the future to decide in the terms of the bargain he will now outline. He will accept what God gives him.

30.31c-33 "If you will do this thing for me I will again feed your flock and keep it. I will pass through all your flock today removing from it every speckled and spotted one, and every black one among the sheep, and the spotted and speckled among the goats. Then my hire will be of such. So will my righteousness answer for me hereafter, when you shall come concerning my hire that is before you. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats, and black among the sheep that is found with me shall be counted as stolen."

Jacob is not here saying that the sheep and goats he separates out will be his. He expects nothing at this point in time (verse 31b). They can be removed from the flocks. They will go with Laban (verse 35). But he is saying that he is prepared to accept any future speckled and spotted goats and black sheep once the flocks have been first purged of the ones that are alive at present.

'So shall my righteousness answer for me --' The righteous position in the eyes of the tribe will be that in future any speckled goats and black sheep found in the part of the flocks over which he has care will be his and his righteousness before them will be demonstrated by his only retaining these separately as his own.

Considering the fact that most sheep were white, and most goats were dark brown or black, and that, separated from the speckled and black such were unlikely to bear black sheep or speckled offspring, the bargain must have seemed a good one to Laban and his sons. Jacob seemed to be deliberately making things difficult for himself. But what Jacob does not feel it necessary to explain is that he has probably made sure that the non-speckled and spotted goats and the non-black sheep have been carefully impregnated beforehand by the speckled and spotted goats and the black sheep, and that he has thus stacked the odds in his own favour.

Two master tricksters are at work.

Throughout the narrative five different words are used to designate the features that distinguished what belonged to Jacob (speckled, spotted, striped, ringstraked, grised and so on). These were no doubt technical terms clearly recognisable to shepherds in the area who would know exactly what was indicated.

30.34 'And Laban said, "Behold, I would it might be according to your word."

Thus Laban accepts the contract proposed by Jacob.

30.35-36 'And he removed that day the he-goats that were ringstraked and spotted, and all the she-goats which were speckled and spotted, every one that had white in it, and all the black ones among the sheep, and gave them into the hands of his sons. And he set three days journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob fed the rest of Laban's flocks.'

There is no suggestion in the narrative that Laban has played false with Jacob, although he does the separating himself to make sure that it is done properly. Indeed it assumes that Laban is simply following out the terms of the contract, which must thus be read in this light (any deficiency in our understanding of it tells us more of our lack of knowledge of ancient Hebrew than of the failure of Jacob to express himself properly). The 'three-days journey' means a comparatively short distance while ensuring adequate distance between the flocks.

30.37-39 'And Jacob took him rods of fresh poplar, and of the almond and of the plane tree., and peeled white strakes in them, and made the white appear which was in the rods. And he set the rods which he had peeled over against the flocks in the gutters in the watering troughs where the flocks came to drink. And they conceived when they came to drink. And the flocks conceived before the rods, and the flocks produced ringstraked, speckled and spotted.'

How far he thought that this was a method of actually producing speckled offspring (it would not explain the black sheep), and how far it was a red herring to disguise the fact that he was achieving his results by inter-breeding, we do not know. We know of no method of achieving this today. But there remains the possibility that something from the trees used entered the water and assisted the required effect.

It is quite clear that Jacob had developed into an expert shepherd and it may be that had observed certain things which he knew he could utilise to produce the kind of animals he wanted. We need not doubt that breeding was one of them. He may never have known what actually achieved the results but he used a successful combination. His contemporaries noted the most striking method.

'Made the white (laban) appear.' There is probably a subtle play on the word for white and the name Laban. Laban had been out-Labaned.

Alternately this may all be a device for deceiving Laban. Having assiduously made sure that the sheep had been properly impregnated perhaps he wants to be able to provide some other explanation of what would follow than his own subtlety. However, what follows suggests that he did have some faith in his white straked rods.

30.40 'And Jacob separated the lambs, and set the faces of the flocks toward the ringstraked and all the black in the flock of Laban. And he put his own droves apart and did not put them into Laban's flock.'

Once the lambs had been weaned Jacob 'set the faces of the flocks' toward the ringstraked

goats and black rams. This is a clear suggestion of a deliberate breeding policy. He did not trust to his gimmicks only, if at all.

He then maintains two flocks side by side, that which was now his and that which was Laban's. The sentence seems a little ambiguous. The idea would seem to be that the lambs which were designated as his were kept apart, although the ringstraked he-goats (verse 35) and black rams were kept in Laban's section to assist the work of breeding further gain to Jacob from Laban's she-goats and sheep.

There is no real need to see this as a later addition. The writer is most taken up with Jacob's more spectacular methods but here mentions in passing other tactics he has observed. Jacob was using every method at his command to produce speckled and black beasts.

30.41-42 'And it happened whenever the stronger of the flock conceived Jacob laid the rods before the eyes of the flock in the gutters so that they might conceive among the rods. But when the flock was feeble he did not put them in. So the feebler were Laban's and the stronger Jacob's.'

The description shows with what care Jacob bred the young. He took individual care to ensure that the right males studded the right females. He trusted inter-breeding and the white rods used in connection with the water troughs. And it worked. We may recognise the inter-breeding as the important factor, but there may well have been something in the trees used which got into the water supply and assisted the process. And there may even have been something in the psychological factor which is hidden from us today. Jacob trusted the whole. But there is the underlying assumption that his prosperity was due to Yahweh's blessing (verses 27 and 30).

30.43 'And the man increased exceedingly and had large flocks and maidservants and menservants and camels and asses.'

Jacob managed what is his efficiently. As his flocks grew he took on his own maidservants and menservants and purchased camels (a sign of prosperity) and asses, building up his own 'household' (family tribe). But the tribal confederation of which Laban was a part would now begin to see this as part of the confederation. Wives, sons and a few sheep and goats earned by a contract of service were one thing. But this was something else.

'The man.' This may be what he was now being called by his 'brothers'. He was the outsider who was becoming too wealthy and was causing jealousy.

So on the one hand Jacob still saw all he now possessed as non-tribal and his own possession, while on the other others were seeing them as part of the tribal possessions. This would cause a problem when he wanted to leave, as he well knew.

Jacob is Commanded by Yahweh to Return Home and Tries to Slip Away (31.1-21).

31.1-2 'And he heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, "Jacob has taken away all that was our father's, and he has obtained his wealth from that which was our father's." And he beheld the face of Laban, and behold, it was not as friendly towards him as it had been before.'

The building up of wealth always provokes jealousy, especially from those who feel that they have lost by it. What had seemed a good bargain, and even rather clever, had now turned against them, and Laban's sons were not amused. And Jacob could see that even Laban had cooled towards him. He was decidedly unpopular, which considering that he had not looked after Laban's section of his charge very well (they were the weaker ones) was not surprising.

He was beginning to feel uneasy.

31.3 'And Yahweh said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your near family, and I will be with you."

Jacob must therefore have been quite relieved when Yahweh appeared to him and told him it was time to return home. That Yahweh may have said a little more possibly comes out in verses 11-13.

But he was aware that his going would not be easy. He must first win over his wives, and then he would have the problem of his position in the tribal confederacy. They would not be happy with him if he sought to diminish the confederacy. So he concocts a convenient story for his wives based loosely on the truth.

31.4-9 'And Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to the countryside, to his flock, and he said to them, "I see that your father's face is not friendly towards me as it was before. But the God of my father has been with me, and you know that with all my power I have served your father. And your father has deceived me and changed my wages ten times. But God would not let him hurt me. If he said, "The speckled will be your wages," then all the flock bore speckled. And if he said thus, "The ringstraked shall be your wages," then all the flock bore ringstraked. So God has taken away your father's animals and has given them to me."'

'Called Rachel and Leah to the countryside.' They would come accompanied by their servants. The order of names is interesting, we would expect the elder first. But this probably arises from the fact that Rachel is Jacob's favourite wife.

Had Jacob gone back to their permanent home at the time of shearing there would have been much comment and many questions, which is why he calls his wives to come to him. Ostensibly they are coming out to see what is happening, and to 'pleasure' Jacob. But they then return to their homes and secretly prepare for their journey. This is evidenced by the fact that Rachel steals her father's gods.

Jacob's summary of the situation which follows is rather tongue in cheek. He has, as we know, played his part in manoeuvring the situation but now he puts all his success down to God. He is trying to win his wives over. His arguments are wide ranging and extensive.

'Your father's face is not friendly towards me as it was before.' Things have become decidedly unpleasant.

'The God of my father has been with me.' He believes, and wants them to see, that his success has come through Yahweh.

'And you know that with all my power I have served your father.' Outwardly this appeared true. They did not know of his subtleties.

'Your father has deceived me and changed my wages ten times.' He wants them to recognise that their father has not quite dealt fairly with him. This may have in mind the deceit over Leah. But it clearly also indicates that there has been some manipulation of the terms of the contracts by Laban, possibly over the meaning of some of terms such as 'speckled', 'ringstraked', and so on. 'Ten times.' This means 'a number of times'.

'But God would not let him hurt me.' God has clearly come out on his side as the results prove.

So Jacob carefully puts the position to his wives without introducing any suggestion of his own

manipulations. He is clearly not certain how they will feel about things. He wants them to think that all is of God and that he has had little to do with it. Then he introduces the theophany he has experienced.

31.10-12 “And it happened at the time that the flock conceived that I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream, and see, the he-goats which leaped on the flock were speckled and grised. And the angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob.’ And I said, ‘I’m here.’ And he said, ‘Lift up your eyes and see, all the he-goats who leap on the flock are ringstraked, speckled and grised. For I have seen all that Laban has done to you.’

This may have resulted from a genuine dream, but it is Jacob’s interpretation of the situation for his wives’ consumption. He is representing a mythical picture of he-goats acting on their own volition under God’s control, when in fact it was he and his men who carefully ensured what happened. It may well have been through a dream that he came to recognise the importance of interbreeding but he does not want his wives to realise that he has manipulated the situation with regard to their father, and therefore he ignores the human connection. He then incorporates his theophany in this mythical ‘dream’ to give the ‘dream’ a sense of validity and sacredness.

31.13 “I am the God of Bethel where you anointed a pillar, where you vowed a vow to me. Now arise, get you out from this land and return to the land of your birth.”

He now adds strength to his supposed dream by incorporating into it the word he had received from Yahweh.

‘The God of Bethel where you anointed a pillar and where you vowed a vow to me.’ Not quite the simple words of verse 3. He has told his wives of his vivid experience of God at Bethel and now uses that to impress them. Whether God actually spoke these words at the recent theophany we do not know. They were for the wives’ consumption. Yet they are on the whole true nonetheless. But their importance lay in their association with the command to return home. It is that which he wishes to impress on his wives.

31.14-15 ‘And Rachel and Leah answered, and said to him, “Is there yet any portion or inheritance for us in our father’s house? Are we not counted by him as strangers? For he has sold us and has quite devoured our marriage portion.” ’

Jacob is very conscious that his wives are part of their tribe and that they may elect to remain with them. That is where their portion is and their inheritance. But he need not have worried. It is clear that they feel that Laban has demonstrated by his actions that he sees them as no longer having a part in the tribe. Laban had behaved badly and it would now rebound on him. They felt that they owed him no loyalty.

‘Counted to him as strangers.’ He has demonstrated by his actions that, like Jacob, they are now ‘foreigners’ living among the tribe with no permanent rights. This brings out a rather unpleasant side to Laban’s character and behaviour, possibly resulting from the slow increase of his dissatisfaction with Jacob.

‘He has sold us and quite devoured our marriage portion.’ The marriage portion was for the wife’s benefit but Laban has purloined it. Thus he has in effect received a price for them and treated them as having been ‘sold’. They feel very bitter at having been so treated as chattels. Their complaint can be paralleled in other texts from the Old Babylonian period, Nuzu, and Elephantine, where on occasion a father would withhold from his daughter a part of the bride payment which was normally handed on as a dowry.

31.16 "For all the riches which God has taken away from our father, they are ours and our children's. Now then, whatever God has said to you, do."

Because of his behaviour towards them Laban has lost the loyalty and love of his daughters. They are quite content to feel that God has reimbursed them in another way and that all is therefore theirs by right to take away as they wish. Long years of mistreatment had broken down their sense of belonging permanently to the tribe.

31.17 'Then Jacob rose up and set his sons and his wives on the camels, and he carried away all his substance which he had gathered, the animals he had obtained, which he had gathered in Paddan-aram, in order to go to Isaac his father, to the land of Canaan.'

It is difficult for us to appreciate this step that Jacob was taking. He knew that while he could justify it to himself he would be seen by others as breaking the confederation and decimating the tribe, which was why he left in secret. Such behaviour would not be tolerated, for the wholeness of the tribe was a crucial element of men's lives. On the other hand he probably did not feel bound by the tribal treaty, for he had seen himself always as there with Laban on a 'temporary' basis and felt he had fully earned for himself what he possessed. But it was a far cry from when he had merely obtained wives and a comparatively few animals by his working contract. What was leaving was a substantial family sub-tribe (see 30.43 - For camels see on 12.16).

31.19-21 'Now Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole the teraphim which were her father's. And Jacob stole the heart of Laban the Aramean in that he did not tell him that he fled. So he fled with all that he had, and he rose up and passed beyond the River and set his face towards the hill country of Gilead.'

Jacob chose a good time for his departure. It was the time of sheep shearing. Everyone would be busy with shearing the sheep and with the subsequent feast (see 1 Samuel 25.11; 2 Samuel 13.23 on). And he was helped by the fact that Laban with his flocks was some distance away, by Laban's choice (30.36). This explains how so great a move was achieved in some secrecy.

'Rachel stole the teraphim which were her father's.' Teraphim were linked with divination and spiritist practises (Judges 17.5; Ezekiel 21.21; 2 Kings 23.24). They were almost always condemned in Scripture (1 Samuel 15.23; 2 Kings 23.24; Judges 17.6). We do not know what form they took or what material they were made of, although they are clearly here linked with household gods (verse 30). It is probable that they took on different forms. 1 Samuel 19.13 on may suggest that they were often in human form or like a human face, possibly a mummified human head but this is uncertain. The word probably links with the Hittite 'tarpis', a type of spirit sometimes seen as evil and sometimes as protective. The reason that Rachel stole the teraphim may have been in order to enjoy their protection.

There is an interesting example from Nuzu of the importance attached to these household gods. There a man called Naswi adopted Wullu, because he had no sons of his own. He thus became Naswi's heir and responsible to care for him. However it was stipulated that if a son was born to Naswi Wullu would have to share the inheritance with him and the gods which Wullu would otherwise have inherited are to belong to the real son.

So at Nuzu right to possession of the household gods belonged to the blood relation, and it may be that they were seen as conferring special status. But if Rachel stole them for this reason it was in order to pay her father back for his ill treatment of his daughters, not in order to bestow any benefit on Jacob, for there is no suggestion that that status passed with illegal possession of the gods. The theft certainly stirred Laban to his depths. They were possibly the symbols of his authority and he felt it deeply.

'And Jacob stole the heart of Laban.' A second theft, though of a different kind. He causes great distress to Laban by stealing away unawares and depriving the tribe of what it saw as part of itself, without negotiation. He was stealing what was closest to Laban's heart, part of his tribe.

'Passed over the River.' That is, the River Euphrates.

31.22 'And on the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled.'

Jacob's initial success comes out in that Laban does not learn of his departure until 'the third day'. The sheep shearing and what accompanied it had kept all his men busy. This may indicate a period of about one and a half days, or even longer. 'On the third day' may be like 'three days journey', not to be taken too literally but simply meaning a short period.

31.23 'And he took his brethren with him and pursued after him seven days journey. And he overtook him in the hill country of Gilead.'

Jacob had been making good progress and it took Laban some time to gather his 'brethren', that is his fellow confederacy leaders, together. It therefore took them 'a seven day journey' to overtake them. A 'seven day journey' indicates a longish journey as opposed to the shorter 'three day journey'. It had therefore required greater preparation. It does not mean it was literally accomplished in seven days.

It would possibly take a little more than seven days to reach the hill country of Gilead (not the same as the later Gilead) although they would be moving at forced pace. This hill country was split into two halves, north (Joshua 13.31; Deuteronomy 3.13) and south (Deuteronomy 3.12 RV; Joshua 12.2, 5) of the Jabbok.

It is an indication of the seriousness of the situation that such a force should make such a journey. This was more than just something personal between Jacob and Laban. The whole tribal confederacy was involved. They were losing a part of themselves.

The picture is a vivid one. Jacob, aware that pursuit will come, urging his men and his flocks to ever greater efforts; Laban and his small army pounding through day and night, all the while becoming ever more determined to prevent their escape. The situation was extremely serious. They were angry at what they saw as treason. But then comes divine intervention.

31.24 'And God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream of the night, and said to him, "Take heed to yourself that you speak not to Jacob either good or bad."'

This is a crucial intervention. Laban is warned by God in a vivid dream, no doubt during a short period of snatched sleep, to be careful how he speaks to Jacob. That this awesome experience affects him deeply comes out in the subsequent narrative. His whole attitude is transformed. He ceases to be the powerful avenger and becomes the wary negotiator and broken-hearted parent. It changes his whole approach to the situation. Jacob is one thing, but to fight with the manifested supernatural is another.

'Either good or bad.' Compare 24.50; Numbers 24.13. He must not say what he wants to say but only what he is told. He must remember that he is speaking to one under God's protection.

31.25 'And Laban came up with Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in a mountain, and Laban with his brethren pitched in the hill country of Gilead.'

Aware of the approaching threat, which he had long anticipated, Jacob takes his men and his

possessions into a mountainous place. He knows that there may be fighting and he wants to protect his possessions and to have the advantage of the most strategic position. So he pitches his camp 'in the mountain'. Then he watches as the forces of Laban arrive and camp below them.

31.26-28a 'And Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done that you have stolen my heart and carried away my daughters as captives of the sword? Why did you flee secretly, and steal me, and did not tell me that I might have sent you away with mirth and with songs and with tabret and with harp, and have not allowed me to kiss my sons and daughters?"'

Laban arrives at his camp with other confederacy leaders, mainly his sons. But Jacob must have been very surprised at the way Laban approaches the matter. These words are very different from those Laban had originally planned and are not what Jacob was expecting. The armed force makes it clear that the intention had been to force Jacob back to Paddan-aram in ignominy, and Jacob knew it. And that is what he expects. But unknown to him Laban's awesome experience has made him wary. He no longer dares to demand that Jacob return, so instead he seeks to put Jacob in the wrong socially and personally, and to demonstrate the deep hurt that Jacob has made him suffer.

'Stolen my heart.' Probably having in mind the tribal possessions Jacob has taken with him, but possibly including his daughters and grandsons.

'Carried away my daughters as captives of the sword.' Nothing makes clearer that he sees what Jacob has done as similar to an act of war. It was, of course, untrue, for they had gone willingly, but Laban cannot bring himself to believe that. Like many powerful men he did not perceive the harm he himself had done. He is trying to demonstrate that he is in the right.

'And stole me.' He is saying that Jacob had stolen what was a part of Laban himself. The unity of the tribe and family was very heartfelt.

'And did not tell me that I might have sent you away ----.' This idea results from the change of heart brought about by his experience with God. He is now in two minds. On the one hand he wants to restore the wholeness of the tribe, but on the other he recognises that, in the light of the theophany and the divine threat, he is restricted. So he seeks to salve his pride by putting Jacob in the wrong on other counts. Thus he suggests that Jacob has behaved dishonourably by leaving without proper farewells. But both he and Jacob are aware that had Jacob approached in the way he described, his departure with all his possessions would have been prevented.

'With mirth and with songs and ----.' The picture is a brazen fiction and brings a smile to the face for its very effrontery. This was the way in which Rebekah had gone to Isaac (24.60), but the situations were very different. She was going to marry a powerful man who has paid handsomely in marriage settlements and guarantees her safety and protection. The tribe was not diminished but rather enriched. The thought of Laban and his confederates rejoicing at the departure of Jacob with all his possessions, together with his wives and children, all connections of the tribe, is ludicrous. He might have been allowed to leave, but he would have been allowed to take little with him, as both of them well knew.

'And have not suffered me to kiss ---.' Laban adds one fiction to another. The picture of him as the fond grandfather longing to kiss his grandchildren goodbye is simply a way of putting Jacob again in the wrong, and is equally ludicrous, although family ties were very strong and in its right place this would have been true.

So Laban is trying to put things in the best light for himself in view of the limitation placed on

him by God. Yet we must be fair to Laban. He has much right on his side. The breaking away from the tribe was against all convention, as Jacob himself well knew. Indeed had it not been for God's intervention there would have been no such sentimental thoughts on Laban's part. Jacob would either have had to fight for it or have been put under arrest and brought on his way back to Paddan-aram, along with all he had, to face his punishment. But God's intervention has made the difference.

31.28b-30 "Now have you done foolishly. It is in the power of my hand to do you hurt, but the God of your father spoke to me yesternight, saying, 'Take heed to yourself that you do not speak to Jacob either good or bad. And now, though you desire to be gone because you are very homesick for your father's house, yet why have you stolen my gods?'"

Laban knows that all the right is on his side although he would no doubt have admitted, if pressed, that any attempt by Jacob to get away with his possessions openly would have been in vain. So he still takes the position of the aggrieved party, albeit warily. He now has in mind the confederacy leaders. They must have been wondering at his attitude. Why did he not just insist on the return of the miscreants? So he stresses Jacob's homesickness. He had other tribal loyalties.

Laban is not, of course, aware that Jacob left at God's command but he does know that Jacob had put himself in a dangerous position by deserting the tribe secretly, and that the confederacy leaders will have to be pacified. Then he explains why he is being so lenient. He has had a vivid experience of God which he must obey.

It is at this point that he mentions the stolen gods. That the gods were the last thing on Laban's mind comes out in that he has not mentioned them until now, but they provide a further grounds for complaint, a further means of blaming Jacob, and they were unquestionably important to him. Their theft is a flouting of his authority as well as being an insult to his family. And it would be seen by the confederacy leaders as a grave offence. Thus if he could get these back it might satisfy the confederacy leaders that their journey had not been in vain. Poor Laban. He now has to pacify his own supporters because of the change of mind produced in him by his dream.

31.31 'And Jacob answered and said to Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I said 'lest you should take your daughters from me by force.'" '

This is the answer to 'why did you flee secretly?' (verse 27). Jacob had rightly feared that if he left openly it would have been with very little. The daughters were seen as belonging to the tribe and his service for them had clearly not been seen as sufficient to recompense the tribe for their loss. Nor was their protection sufficiently catered for outside the tribe.

31.32 ' "With whoever you find your gods, he will not live. In front of our brothers discover what is yours among my possessions and take it to you." For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.'

On the other hand he asserts his innocency on the charge of the theft of the gods, and gives permission for a search and agrees that any thief will suffer the death sentence. Let the confederacy leaders be witness to what happens. The hearer and reader, who are aware of what Rachel has done, now feel a mounting in tension. The death sentence has been passed on Rachel! But Jacob does not know what Rachel has done.

31.33-35 'And Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two maidservants, but he did not find them. And he left Leah's tent and went into Rachel's tent. But Rachel had taken the teraphim and put them in the camel's furniture and sat on them.'

And Laban felt all about the tent and did not find them. And she said to her father, "Let not my lord be angry that I cannot stand up before you, for the way of women is on me." And he searched but did not find the teraphim.'

Laban is still convinced that it is Jacob who has stolen them. He searches all the tents thoroughly without exception. The teraphim were clearly too large to be hidden on the person, although not so large that they could not be hidden in the camel's furniture. It is clear that Jacob watches the process in anger. He does not like all his personal belongings being searched (verse 37).

Entering women's quarters was only justified in extreme circumstances and Laban does it himself. They are members of his family. But he finds nothing. Then he enters Rachel's quarters. That he accepts his daughter's word suggests that he cannot bring himself to believe that his own daughters would deceive him, for had he doubted it he would have been more than suspicious. But like many arrogant people he is oblivious to how badly he has treated them and never suspects for one moment that they are resentful. We must always remember that how we treat people will at some time rebound on us.

There is possibly in the description an underlying contempt for such idols. They are hidden under a woman in her uncleanness. They are a nothing, and can do nothing.

It is interesting that only the leader and his wives have tents. The servants and their wives sleep in the open for they are on a journey. (When Jacob was travelling as a single man he also only used a stone as a pillow).

31.36 'And Jacob was extremely angry and berated Laban. And Jacob answered and said to Laban, "What have I done wrong? What is my sin that you hotly pursued after me? In your feeling about among all my things what have you found of all your household possessions? Set it here before my brothers and your brothers that they may judge between us two. This twenty years I have been with you. Your ewes and your she-goats have not cast their young, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks. What was torn of beasts I did not bring to you, I bore the loss of it. You required it of my hand whether stolen by day or stolen by night. I was thus. In the day drought consumed me, and by night the frost. And my sleep fled from my eyes. I have been in your house these twenty years. I served you fourteen for your two daughters and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. Unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac had been with me surely you would have sent me away empty. God has seen my affliction and the labour of my hands and rebuked you yesternight."'

Having watched his possessions being mauled by Laban without result Jacob is very angry and makes clear his grievances in front of the leaders of the confederacy. Laban is necessarily on the defensive. He has been proved 'wrong'. He has failed to justify his charge of theft.

Jacob's arguments are:

- 1) Laban has failed to prove the charge of theft as the remainder have witnessed.
- 2) Jacob had paid well for what he has, both in wives and flocks and herds, by long and faithful service in which he endured much hardship. The hardship of the shepherd's life is well depicted. Indeed Laban had demanded recompense for any failure to the full and constantly changed the terms of the contract, yet Jacob bore with it. Animals taken by wild beasts did not normally need to be accounted for (Exodus 22.10-14).
- 3) He has not taken advantage of his position. While as shepherd he had the right to eat of the flock he has not taken the fat rams. And he has tended the ewes at birth so that there was no failure in the birth process. This may suggest that not all shepherds were so

fastidious.

- 4) Nevertheless when he left Laban would have sent him away with nothing apart from his own personal possessions and would still do so were it not for God's intervention.
- 5 God has passed judgment on the situation, having seen what he has put up with and the price he paid, and has justified Jacob.

These arguments were important. The remaining confederacy leaders (mainly Laban's sons and relatives) need to be aware of the justice of his position, for the fact was that he had still absconded from the confederation of tribes with his possessions as Laban now argues.

'The God (Elohim) of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac.' Each patriarch had his own description of Yahweh. To Abraham he was 'the God', the Almighty (El Shaddai), because of what he had done for him and promised to him, to Isaac he was 'the Fear', the One to be held in awe. Isaac never forgot his rare experiences of the manifested presence of God. (The alternative translation 'kinsman' has been suggested which would emphasise his close relationship with his God). To Jacob He was 'the Mighty One' (49.24), possibly partly because of this incident. He had protected Jacob when he was defenceless. We can compare with this how easily Abraham can see Yahweh as El Elyon (14.22) which demonstrates that Yahweh can be given different titles.

31.43 'And Laban answered and said to Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters and the children are my children and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. And what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children which they have borne." '

Laban's case is based on recognised tribal custom. As head over the confederacy all that is in the confederacy is 'his', that is, belongs to the confederacy, and he is responsible for it. This is especially true in this case when they had all been personally his. While Jacob by his service has obtained certain proprietary rights over them they are still the confederacy's and should remain within the confederacy. Indeed Laban as the patriarch has the responsibility for their protection and must watch over them, which he cannot do if they leave the confederacy. Compare how Delilah remains in her father's house when married to Samson (Judges 14.2 on; 15.1). But because God has spoken to him so vividly he is now prepared for these rights to be overridden.

31.44 "And now, come, let us make a covenant, I and you, and let it be for a witness between me and you."

This change of heart of Laban, who had originally intended to drag Jacob and his household back to Paddan-aram, has already been explained as arising from his vivid experience of the awesome presence of God (verses 29, 42). Thus he does not exert his rights but ensures the safety and status of his daughters by means of covenant. Such a covenant was seen as solemnly binding in the sight of the gods of both parties (verse 53) who would exact revenge if it was broken. Its terms are found in verses 49-52.

31.45-46 'And Jacob took a stone and set it up for a pillar, and Jacob said to his brothers, "Gather stones." And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap.'

This was clearly acceded to by Laban (31.51). It is clear that a stone was set up for each person, one for Jacob and a heap for Laban as the leader, and for the heads of sub-tribes involved in the making of the covenant. Thus Jacob first sets up his pillar to represent his side of the covenant, then the remainder set up stones together in a heap to represent their side of the covenant. We can compare the twelve stones for the twelve tribes in Joshua 4. So there are two silent witnesses to the covenant, the pillar and the heap. As we have seen the setting up of stones was a regular method of having a physical reminder of a covenant (compare Genesis

35.14; 1 Samuel 7.12; Joshua 4.3; see also 2 Samuel 18.18).

'They ate there by the heap.' The eating was a solemn recognition of the peaceful nature of the covenant, as necessary a part of the process as the setting up of the stones. This was probably a ceremonial eating at the setting of the stones, a preliminary to the feast, although it is possible that it simply parallels the feast described later in verse 54, mentioned here as part of the ceremony.

31.47 'And Laban called it Jegarsahadutha ('heap of witness' in Aramaic), but Jacob called it Galeed ('heap of witness' in Hebrew).'

This is interesting testimony to the fact that the Arameans spoke an early form of Aramaic while Abraham's family had adopted an early form of Hebrew, which parallels Canaanite, as their mother tongue. Jacob has been using Aramaic but now resorts to Hebrew as testimony to the change that is now taking place. He is no longer an Aramean by adoption, he is an Abrahamite by birth.

31.48 'And Laban said, "This heap is witness between me and you this day." That is why its name was called Galeed and Mizpah (place of watching), for he said, "Yahweh watch (zaphah) between me and you when we are hidden (i.e. out of sight) one from another."

Laban, as head of the confederacy of which Jacob had been a part, takes the leading role in declaring the significance of what is happening. The heap is mentioned because that represents Laban's part in the covenant. It is their witness to Jacob. Thus it is now given another name, 'place of watching', for it not just a witness to the covenant but the place from which God will observe for the fulfilment of the covenant. He will, as it were, stand on that border and guarantee the fulfilment of the covenant on both sides.

'Yahweh watch between me and you.' Laban cites Jacob's God for it is Yahweh Who will watch for Jacob and see to the observance of the stipulations that follow.

31.50 "If you will afflict my daughters, and if you will take wives besides my daughters, no man is with us. See God is witness between me and you."

Laban deals with his first concern, the security and protection of his daughters. He hands them over to God's protection for their tribe can no longer protect them. God will see whether Jacob treats them rightly. Note especially the provision against Jacob taking other primary wives (concubines would not matter, they are of lower status and would not affect the status of the primary wives).

This can be paralleled to some extent from Nuzi where 'Nashwi has given his daughter Nuhuya as wife to Wullu. If Wullu takes another wife he forfeits Nashwi's land and buildings.' The parallel is not exact, but it examples restriction being placed on further marriage with a cost involved. Laban clearly does not expect Jacob to marry a further primary wife and would consider it a breach of the covenant, theoretically at least nullifying the promise of non-interference.

31.51-52 'And Laban said to Jacob, "See this heap, and see this pillar, which I have set between me and you. This heap be witness, and this pillar be witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and that you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, for harm."

Previously the guarding has been against the threat from Laban if his daughters are not rightly dealt with, thus the heap was mentioned. Now the guarding is two way and so both heap and pillar are mentioned. It is significant that Laban fears Jacob. The intervention of

God on Jacob's behalf on a dream is not something he can pass over lightly, and he knows how Yahweh has prospered Jacob in the past. Thus he himself wants some warranty that peace will be maintained both ways. The pillar is, as it were, Jacob's signature to the covenant of peace.

'Which I have set.' This does not mean that Laban placed the pillar, only that he sees himself as having caused it to be set as part of the covenant signs. As leader of the confederation, releasing Jacob from it, it is he who sets the terms of the covenant and he sees himself as responsible for all connected with it.

31.53 '“The God of Abraham and the god of Nahor, the gods of their father, judge between us.” And Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac.'

Each now swears by the God he worships. Jacob swear by Yahweh, the God of Abraham, in the title 'the Fear' ('the Awesome One') given by his father Isaac, and Laban swears by the god of Nahor. Each swears by the God of his father.

31.54 'And Jacob offered a sacrifice in the mountain, and called his brothers to eat bread, and they ate bread and tarried all night in the mountain.'

The offering of sacrifice to seal a covenant is well known (see chapter 15). Compare the words of a government official to Zimri-Lim of Mari (18th century BC) "I have killed the ass with Qarni-Lim, and thus I spoke to Qarni-Lim under the oath of the gods. 'If you despise Zimri-Lim and his armies I will turn to the side of your adversary'." There too a covenant of peace was involved.

This is Jacob's response to Laban's offer. By offering sacrifice and eating with the confederate leaders he fully accepts his part in the covenant, while their eating with him is a sign of their peaceful acceptance of the terms. All are now agreed and the deed is done. The feast goes on through the night (compare 24.54).

31.55-32.2 'And early in the morning Laban rose up and kissed his sons and daughters, and blessed them. And Laban departed and returned to his own place. And Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. And when he saw them Jacob said, "This is God's host." And he called the name of that place Mahanaim ('two hosts').

When the feasting was over Laban said farewell to his sons and daughters giving them the patriarchal blessing. All is now at peace. 'Sons' probably includes Jacob his son-in-law, and also his grandsons. No doubt daughters included his granddaughter Dinah. Words depicting relationship were not as specific then as now.

'Returned to his own place.' There is a contrast between this normality and the supernatural experience of Jacob ('the angels of God met him'). For Laban it was over and he returned to normal life and to the daily grind. But for Jacob there was a new beginning. He was to find that God was truly on his side.

'The angels of God met him.' The hearer is suddenly made aware of what would have happened to Laban if he had been belligerent. Angels of God such as Jacob had seen at Bethel had been held constantly in reserve ready to act on Jacob's behalf. But they had not been needed and Jacob is now made aware of them. God had indeed been watching over him as He had promised (28.15; 31.3). This meeting with God's host confirms the promises he had received at Bethel. God's angels are still active and will bring about His purposes.

'This is God's host.' In contrast the 'host' of Laban was paltry. But Jacob's own meagre 'host' had been supported by the angelic host - there had been 'two hosts', an earthly and a heavenly.

At this revelation he named the place Mahanaim - 'two hosts'.

We note that Jacob is still east of the Jordan.

Note. It will be noted that throughout this section the writer has in general used Elohim for God with the name Yahweh being introduced only when personal covenant matters were in mind or when Laban is referring specifically to Jacob's God. This was partly due to the fact that Jacob has been outside the covenant community, not rejoining Isaac until much later (35.27), although still very much part of the covenant. But it may also reflect writer preference at this period. This will on the whole apply, with notable exceptions, through the remainder of the records. It is the God of the whole earth Who is at work.

Events in Jacob's Life Up To the Death of Isaac (Genesis 32.3-35.1)

Jacob Meets With His Brother Esau (Genesis 32.3-33.17).

This section is built around two covenants. The covenant made with God at Peniel and the covenant of peace made between Esau and Jacob. It is probable that the covenant with God was the central one. But Jacob being a careful man (compare 25.33 and the passage built around it) would certainly want on record the details of his covenant of peace with Esau.

Even after so long a time Jacob is wary of his brother Esau. He does not know what fate Esau plans for him nor what will be his reaction to his return. But we note that he is aware of his brother's whereabouts. He has clearly kept in touch with his family who have kept him informed.

For Esau, recognising that he now had no part in the rulership of the family tribe (27.39-40), had aligned himself by marriage with the confederate tribes of Ishmael (28.9). He moved to the desert region and there built up his own tribe, no doubt with Ishmael's assistance and had thus become a minor ruler over a band of warriors with whom he lived out the active life that he had always desired. With their assistance he was able to build up his wealth. Many rich caravans would pass near their territory on the King's Highway (see Numbers 20.14-21) which by one means or another would contribute to their treasury (either by toll or by robbery) and they necessarily built up flocks and herds for their own survival.

Eventually they would gain ascendancy over neighbouring peoples until the land becomes known as the land of Edom (36.16, 17, 21, 31) i.e. of Esau (Genesis 25.30; 36.1, 19, 43), although originally called the land of Seir (here and 37.30). The latter name is connected with the Horites who originally lived there (36.20) who were clearly absorbed into the clan or confederacy.

32.3-5 'And Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau, to the land of Seir, the part possessed by ('the field of') Edom. And he commanded them saying, "Thus shall you say to my lord Esau. "Thus says your servant Jacob, I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now. And I have oxen and asses and flocks and menservants and maidservants, and I have sent to tell my lord that I may find grace in your sight.' " ' "

Jacob sends to Esau offering terms of peace. He wants Esau to know that he is wealthy on his own account, and that he can therefore expect generous gifts. There may also be the hint that he is well able to defend himself - 'menservants and maidservants', those who serve in the family tribe. We may remember that from the equivalent Abraham was able to raise three hundred and eighteen trained fighting men.

'The land of Seir, the part possessed by Edom.' The land where Seir the Horite and his tribe

and descendants dwelt, part of which was now controlled by Esau's men. See remarks above. Esau appears to lead an itinerant life, partly at home with his father who was blind and needed his assistance, and where he had his own herds and flocks, and partly out with his men adventuring in the season of such activities when the demands of farming were less. It was only after the death of his father that he finally forsook the family tribe (36.6).

'My lord Esau.' A title of respect due to an important personage.

32.6 'And the messengers returned to Jacob saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and moreover he comes to meet you and four hundred men with him." '

The fact that the messengers were allowed to return without a threatening reply should have assured him that Esau's intentions were not evil. And indeed had they been so Esau and his men would have arrived first. The only purpose then in allowing the messengers to return first would have been to tell Jacob what would happen to him. Esau necessarily comes accompanied by his men. He wants his brother to know that he is powerful and respected. But there is nothing like a guilty conscience for distorting the facts. What is natural behaviour takes on an ominous significance for Jacob.

'Four hundred men.' A round number meaning a goodly company. The 'four' may indicate that Esau's men are seen as being outside the covenant community. (Compare on the four kings in Genesis 14).

32.7-8 'Then Jacob was greatly afraid and was distressed. And he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two companies. And he said, "If Esau comes to the one company and smites it then the other company which is left will escape." '

Jacob is seized with terror and he decides on a strategy to deceive his brother. He divides his possessions into 'two companies'. There may well be a deliberate contrast here with verse 2 where Mahanaim also meant two companies. He has forgotten that his reliance is on God and his angelic messengers. But his policy is to let Esau arrive and think he has captured all Jacob's possessions not knowing that there is a second which hopefully survives.

32.9-12 'And Jacob said, "Oh God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, Oh Yahweh who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred and I will do you good,' I am not worthy of the least of all your mercies and of all the truth which you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I passed over this Jordan and now I am become two companies. Deliver me I pray you from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau. For I am afraid of him lest he come and smite me, the mother with the children. And you said, "I will surely do you good and make your seed as the sand of the sea which cannot be numbered for multitude."

Jacob speaks to Yahweh by name and as the God of his fathers Abraham and of his father Isaac. This immediately links with his experience at Bethel (28.13). (He does not here call God 'the Fear of Isaac' as in 31.53. That name must not be overemphasised. It was particular to Isaac and useful for communication to foreigners).

He now also aligns himself particularly closely with the covenant in relation to the family tribe and reminds God of the particular promise made to him on his leaving Paddan-aram (31.3). As He has watched over him with regard to Laban, let Him now watch over him in the face of the new threat.

The impact on his life of his experiences now comes out in a new humility. As he considers all

he has received at God's hand (with a little help from himself) he is profoundly grateful. He recognises that he is not worthy of it. He had started off personally owning nothing but a staff, and now he is exceedingly rich and wealthy.

But he expresses the fear of what Esau intends to do to him. He thinks that he intends to slay Jacob and all his family. (This will be necessary so that Esau can get back his inheritance). And he points out that this would be contrary to what God had promised about the multitude of his descendants.

This prayer is a pattern prayer. It begins with a sense of humility and unworthiness, it continues with a reminder of the promises and faithfulness of God and it seeks help on the basis of those promises. We too must ever remember that our prayers must be in accordance with the will and purposes of God. Then, and then only, can we confidently claim His faithfulness. The prayer is a sublimely personal and private prayer. There is nothing cultic about it. It is spontaneous and heartfelt.

'The least of all your mercies and of all the truth ---.' The word truth should here be rendered faithfulness. God has been merciful and faithful in what He has given Jacob.

'With only my staff --.' All he permanently possessed which was his own when he left Canaan was his staff. The servants were not his. The goods and presents were not his. Only the staff he carried was his.

'I passed over this Jordan --.' As he speaks he is looking at the river in front of him. This river is probably the one which is later called the River Jabbok (Deuteronomy 2.37; 3.16; Joshua 12.2) but it is possible that as a tributary of the Jordan it was in Jacob's time known only as the Jordan. Jabbok is here the name of a particular ford over the river (32.22), the name which later became attached to the river.

'And now I am become two companies.' Now his possessions are so large that he can divide them into two companies, each of which appears to be complete in itself.

32.13-15 'And he stayed there that night and took from what he had with him a present for Esau his brother. Two hundred she-goats and twenty he-goats, two hundred yews and twenty rams, thirty milch camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty she-asses (or donkeys) and ten foals.'

The giving of a gift to honour someone important was a regular custom of the time (compare 43.11) and its acceptance would indicate a willingness to treat peacefully.

The present was munificent. Again the numbers are round numbers indicating approximate quantity, although he may have numbered them exactly. But exact counting was not a feature of the times except among learned men and men of business and is therefore unlikely. It is noteworthy that of the camels and donkeys he does not provide males (except possibly as colts and foals). This may indicate that he had few of them, and those for breeding. This is evidence of the accuracy and genuineness of the narrative.

32.16-20a 'And he delivered them into the hands of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass over before me and put a space between drove and drove." And he commanded the foremost, "When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, saying, 'To whom do you belong? And where are you going? And whose are these animals before you?' Then you will say, 'They are your servant Jacob's. It is a present to my lord Esau, and behold he also is behind us.' And he commanded also the second and third, and all that followed the droves saying, 'in this way will you speak to Esau when you find him.' And you will say, 'Moreover,

behold your servant Jacob is behind us.'

Jacob's tactic was simple. A munificent present received in sections so as to build up goodwill and conciliation. First Esau would receive the goats, then the sheep, then the camels which would greatly impress him for they were comparatively rare, then the cattle and then finally the valuable donkeys. And each time when Esau questioned the servants they would inform him that the gifts were for him from Jacob and that Jacob followed after.

'The second and third and all that followed.' The threeness was an indication of the completeness of the gift, the remainder a sign of full measure and running over.

32.20b-21 'For he said, "I will make reconciliation with him ('cover his face') with the present that goes before me ('goes before my face'), and afterwards I will see his face. It may be that he will accept me ('his face will be towards me')." So the present passed over before him and he himself stayed that night in the company.'

Jacob is quite clear that the purpose of the gifts is appeasement and reconciliation so that when they meet there will be no trouble. He hopes that they will make him acceptable to Esau. So the presents move on and he himself awaits in his camp along with one of the 'companies' he has set up.

Note in the Hebrew the constant reference to 'face'. He is concerned with the face to face situation between the two. But this will pale into insignificance when he meets God face to face (32.30).

32.22-23 'And he rose up that night and took his two wives and his two handmaids and his eleven sons and passed over the Ford of Jabbok. And he took them and sent them over the stream and sent over what he had.'

The verse hides a more complicated manoeuvre. Jacob wants to see everyone and everything safely over the ford and he himself no doubt crossed it a number of times both ways. It was a difficult river to cross. But he himself finally remains on the side away from the others. The repetition is typical of much ancient literature where hearers rather than readers had to be kept in mind. Movement at night was commonplace for caravans and for herdsmen and shepherds. It avoided the heat of the day.

'Eleven sons.' Only the sons are in mind. Dinah is ignored. Daughters are regularly ignored in ancient literature as unimportant. Dinah had only been mentioned previously to make up the number 'twelve' as we have seen.

'The Ford of Jabbok.' A place where it was possible to cross the swiftly flowing river which Jacob has called the Jordan, being its tributary. This river flows through a deep gorge and is difficult to cross. This tributary flows east of the Jordan.

32.24-25 'And Jacob was left alone and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he did not prevail against him he touched the hollow of his thigh, and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was strained as he wrestled with him.'

Jacob was left alone with his thoughts. The approach of Esau lies heavily on his mind and he feels the future is very much in doubt, the future that was linked with the covenant of Yahweh. This is why he has come here alone. This is something that he must resolve.

Then he experiences a vivid and continual theophany that makes everything else relatively unimportant. Very little of the detail is actually provided. This is one of those times in

Scripture when euphemisms are used to indicate something far deeper. Jacob describes it in terms of wrestling with a man all night but we are probably wrong to totally literalise the description. It signifies some awesome experience of the presence and might of God, possibly appearing, as to Abraham, in human form (see 18.2), or possibly appearing in some dream or vision of the night, an experience which we can never grasp or understand, possibly a combined physical and spiritual wrestling of awesome effect. Certainly he is aware that he is somehow wrestling with God and so powerful is the impact on his body that his thigh is put out of joint.

There can be little doubt that this wrestling is related to his seemingly doubtful future in the light of Esau's approach. It is the depth of his uncertainty and fear about the future that brings him to this point. He had had such hopes for the future, but now he is fearful that they will all fail. It is this that results in this pneumatic experience.

To picture it in terms of some strange man who arrives and wrestles with him whom he afterwards discovers to be God is to trivialise the whole scene. It is quite clear that Jacob knows from the start that he is dealing with God Himself. Thus it may be that we are to see it as some vivid dream which portrays a spiritual reality that is unfolding. Jacob is clearly a man who receives dreams and visions (28.12; 31.3 with 10-11). Or it may be that God does appear physically in some unique way for some unique purpose. We remember how He so appeared to Abraham (18.2). We can never finally know. What we can know is that God came with an offer to Jacob that demanded extreme effort and sacrifice and that Jacob finally prevailed.

'When He saw that he did not prevail against him.' The first 'He' is God. This can hardly be in the wrestling. No one would suggest that God could not defeat Jacob. The point was that though Jacob could not defeat God he clung to Him and would not himself accept defeat. God could not, as it were, escape because Jacob was so desperate. He was clinging to God.

'He touched the hollow of his thigh.' That is, God touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh. The touch need not have been physical. It simply means that God disabled him to further bring home to him his weakness.

32.26 'And he said, "Let me go for the day is breaking." And he said, "I will not let you go except you bless me."

'The day is breaking.' The exertions that are possible at night become unbearable during the day. God is not thinking of Himself but of Jacob. But Jacob continues to hold on even though crippled and exhausted so that God finally says, 'Let me go.' But He says it, not because He wants to be released, but because He knows what Jacob will reply. His purpose in being here is finally to strengthen and bless Jacob.

'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' Jacob is clinging on because he wants with all his being the blessing of God, not just as a 'blessing' but as a life-changing experience. He is deeply aware that he has been face to face with God in the closest of encounters, and now he wants it to impact fully on his future life. He will not rest until he is sure that his future is secure in God's hands, until God guarantees that future. God has come to him in a deeply personal way and he does not want to rest until he has obtained the full benefit of what God has brought.

32.27-28 'And he said, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." And he said, "Your name will no more be called Jacob, but Israel (isra-el), for you have striven (from the verb sarah) with God and with men and have prevailed." '

The asking of the name in such circumstances is to seek the character of the person. Jacob meant 'he who clutches' and refers to the supplanting of the man Esau. Israel means 'he who

strives with God' or 'God strives'. This change of name marks the culmination of the change whereby 'the grasper' becomes the one who is determined to fulfil his purpose within the will of God. Not that he is yet perfect. But his life has taken on a new direction. He is now a man of God, 'he who strives with God', and his future is secure within the sovereign purposes of God, 'God strives'. Thus is he now 'Israel'. And this change of name is the guarantee of his future hopes.

'With God and with men.' 'With men' may refer to his previous tussles with Esau which have resulted in his seeming predicament, or to his struggles with Laban. But they also refer to his future struggles. The word is prophetic. The point is that he has been, and, what is equally important, will be, victor in all with God's help because he has prevailed here in prayer.

Hosea describes the incident thus. 'In the womb he took his brother by the heel. And in his manhood he strove with God. Yes he strove with the angel and prevailed. He wept and made supplication to him.' (Hosea 12.3-4). As often 'the angel' is introduced to refer to the immediacy of God.

32.29a 'And Jacob asked him and said, "Tell me, I pray you, your name."

Jacob's purpose in asking the name is so that he can worship and appreciate what God is doing in the correct way (compare Judges 13.17-18). He is asking, 'what are you revealing yourself to be?' He knows that this is Yahweh, but he has never had this kind of experience before. Yahweh had been the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac. He had been El Shaddai, the Almighty God in His sovereignty over the nations in the wider covenant. What is He now to be to Jacob? He is seeking an even greater special relationship with God.

(There is no suggestion here that he is trying to get power over God by knowing His name. We must not judge relationships with Yahweh by primitive ideas. To know a name could signify a total relationship. Compare how often covenants were prefixed by 'I am --' followed by a name.).

32.29b 'And he said, "For what reason do you ask me my name?" And he blessed him there.'

God does not want to introduce to Jacob a new conception of Himself. There is no need for a change of relationship. He wants to be known by the names by which He was known of old. He wants continuation not change. He is the God of Abraham and he wants Jacob to realise that he is to continue the old covenant and purposes, not become involved in new ones as a result of God revealing more of His inner nature. He is still the God of Bethel. Jacob knows all he needs to know about Him.

He had revealed Himself as El Shaddai, the Almighty God, to Abraham when sealing the wider covenant (17.1), for then a new covenant was involved. Not that the name was new, it was the significance that was new. He had revealed Himself as Yahweh, the One Who is, and Who will be what He wants to be. He would reveal Himself as the 'I am', revealing the essential nature of the name Yahweh, when He delivered Israel and established His covenant with them. Again it would not be the name that was new, but the significance of the name. But Jacob is to continue the covenants given to Abraham under the names of Abraham's God.

'And he blessed him there.' Having settled the issue of His name He now 'blesses' Jacob. He confirms that the covenant promises will go on through him and that his future is certain. The deceitful way in which he obtained his first blessing is now forgotten. He is a new man.

32.30 'And Jacob called the name of the place Peni-el ('the face of God'), for he said, "I have seen God face to face and my life is preserved."

This was a play on words. The site was called Penuel (verse 31) and was probably an important pass for fortresses were built there (Judges 8.8 on) and eventually a city. Jacob takes the name and changes it to fit his experience. The two forms differ only in the archaic nominal ending in verse 30. Seeing the face of God did not just mean seeing God. It meant that God's heart was right towards him. Thus did he know that he was not about to die at Esau's hand.

'My life is preserved.' Esau will now not be able to harm the favoured of God. Indeed he will later be able to say to Esau, "I have seen your face as the face of God and you were pleased with me" (33.10). He believes that his acceptance by Esau is because of his acceptance by God.

Alternately the words may reflect amazement that he has seen God and lived (compare Exodus 33.20; Judges 6.22 on; 13.22). But the way God reveals Himself in Genesis never seems to cause this problem.

32.31 'And the sun rose on him as he passed over Penuel and he limped because of his thigh.'

'The sun rose on him.' This may well be intended to reflect more than the weather. He had come from night into sunrise (compare 19.23).

'And he limped because of his thigh.' Jacob bears a reminder of this encounter with God.

32.32 'That is why the children of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the hollow of the thigh to this day, because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh in the sinew of the hip.'

This explanatory information was a later comment probably added when the whole was brought together, either in the time of Moses or earlier.

33.1a 'And Jacob lifted up his eyes and behold Esau came and with him four hundred men.'

The opening phrase is general. There is no necessary direct connection with a previous statement. Thus we not know how long he had to wait for the arrival of Esau. But eventually he came and with him his band of warriors. Esau has come a long way to meet his brother, seemingly out of the great love he has for his brother after twenty years of separation. But this is something Jacob cannot conceive of. He only fears his brother Esau.

Such a band of warriors would live off the land to the detriment of the inhabitants. Only the stronger groups would be safe from their depredations (compare 1 Samuel 25.15-16 which portrays what could have been the situation without David's protection). Esau's kindness to Jacob was probably not reflected in his behaviour towards others. He may well have seen this foray as a means of increasing his wealth as well as being as a welcome to Jacob.

33.1b-2 'And he divided the children to Leah, and to Rachel and to the two handmaids. And he put the handmaids and their children foremost, and Leah and her children after, and Rachel and Joseph at the back.'

Jacob now prepares his family ready for the brotherly meeting. There can be no doubting the purpose of the arrangement. If there was trouble those at the back would have a better chance of escaping. But no one would have expected Jacob to do any other apart from his preference for Rachel.

33.3 'And he himself went before them and bowed himself to the ground seven times until he came near to his brother.'

Bowing seven times was reserved for extremely important people who demanded great

subservience. The petty princes of Palestine 'bowed seven times' to Pharaoh in the Amarna letters (14th century BC). Usually a single bow would be given (18.2; 19.1). Jacob was giving Esau royal treatment.

33.4 'And Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.'

Esau had dismounted which must have been a great relief to Jacob. Esau is clearly genuinely pleased to see his brother and feels very emotionally about it. But we cannot doubt that Jacob's tears had within them something of relief.

Esau's pleasure appears to be real. He has long forgotten any falling out and is happy to see his brother. He runs to embrace him. He is quite satisfied with his life as it is and holds no grudges. This is one of the many things in Esau we must admire. Yet the fact that he cares so little about what he has lost demonstrates how little the covenant promises meant to him. He would not really have been suitable to carry on the succession.

33.5 'And he lifted up his eyes and saw the women and the children and said, "Who are these with you?" And he said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant."

When Esau sees the women and children he is impressed. To have many children was a sign of someone's importance. But even here Jacob is wary. The children are of course Esau's nephews and nieces, blood relatives, while the wives are less meaningful for him. So it is to the children that he refers. We notice his continuing subservience. He is still being cautious.

33.6-7 'Then the handmaids came near, they and their children, and they bowed themselves. And Leah also and her children came near and bowed themselves, and after came Joseph near, and Rachel, and they bowed themselves.'

The wives and children are now introduced. The sevenfold bowing is no longer felt to be necessary.

33.8 'And he said, "What do you mean by all this company which I met?" And he said, "To find favour in the sight of my lord." '

Esau here refers to the droves which had been sent in front (32.13-21), some of which at least he had come across. Jacob makes no pretence. They were as gifts to an important person in order to ensure favourable treatment. Note the use of 'my lord.' The watchful subservience is still there. Outwardly all is well but Jacob is well aware that what is on the surface is not necessarily the reality. He judges the straightforward Esau by his own standards.

33.9 'And Esau said, "I have enough. My brother, let what you have remain yours."

Esau does not want such favours from his brother. They are not necessary, for he is reasonably wealthy and has the means of obtaining more. This may have brought a chill to Jacob's heart. The rejection of a gift was often followed by direct action. Notice Esau's 'my brother.' He requires no formality between relatives.

33.10-11 'And Jacob said, "No, I beg you. If now I have found favour in your sight then receive my present at my hand, because I have seen your face as one sees the face of God and you were pleased with me. Take, I beg you, my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have abundance." And he urged him, and he took it.'

Jacob continues to urge Esau to accept his gift. He knows that if the gift is accepted graciously

he will be that much safer. In the light of the customs of the time even Esau would not accept a gift and then indulge in hostility. But there is in it a sense of gratitude to God who has brought about this situation. He had seen God face to face and God had blessed him. Now he sees in this friendly meeting a part of that blessing, and he desires to pass some of the blessing on. Besides, he urges, he is very wealthy. The suggestion is that such a small gift means nothing to him. To his relief Esau accepts the gift.

'I have seen your face as one sees the face of God.' In context this can only have in mind his struggle at Penuel. Esau, who does not know what he is referring to, probably see is as a rather extreme compliment. He is like God to Jacob. But inwardly Jacob is full of praise to God and reflects it in these words. He remembers that significant meeting and sees it reflected here in his friendly reception. He had seen the face of God, and had been reassured of his safety, so now he can look on the face of Esau with equanimity.

'God has dealt graciously with me.' To Esau this indicates that his wealth has built up satisfactorily, thanks to God's help. But Jacob is probably equally thinking of this present change in his fortunes, different from what he had expected.

33.12 'And he said, "Let us take our journey, and let us go, and I will go before you." '

Esau is well meaning and offers his protection. He is unaware of his brother's fears, although no doubt amused at his seeming subservience. But then, he thinks, that is Jacob. But his intentions are all good. They will go on together. He may well, however, have been secretly hoping that Jacob would not accept his offer. The laws of kinship demanded the offer. It was not necessarily intended to be accepted.

33.13-14 'And he said to him, "My lord knows that the children are of tender age, and that the flocks and herds with me are feeding their young, and that if they overdrive them one day all the flocks will die. Let my lord, I beg you, pass on before his servant, and I will lead on slowly according to the pace of the cattle who are before me, and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord, to Seir." '

We may gather from this that Esau has invited Jacob to join him in Seir where he is at present residing. This would simply entail continuing South along the east side of the Jordan. But Jacob has no intention of going to Seir immediately. He shudders at the thought of what might happen to him there.

However, there is possibly more to it than this. It is all very well to move around protected by four hundred men, but the four hundred men have to be fed and he could hardly refuse the wherewithal, and besides, he must be aware that they have possibly sullied their reputation before the inhabitants of the land on their journey here. He would not want to be connected in men's eyes with their doings.

Besides such men do not like to remain idle, and Esau least of all. He might soon regret his good intentions, and what then?

So he points out how slow the journey is going to be. (He had been a bit quicker when fleeing from Laban). He will not delay Esau who must surely have something better to do than journey at the pace of shepherds. Let him go on and he will join at some stage him in Seir.

33.15 'And Esau said, "Let me now leave with you some of the folk who are with me." And he said, "What is the need? Let me find grace in the sight of my lord." So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir.'

Esau recognises the wisdom of what Jacob says, and is probably somewhat relieved. But at least he feels he can leave some of his people to help with the herding and provide further protection, although this may again have been a gesture between kinsfolk.

But Jacob certainly does not want to have Esau's men there ensuring that they go to Seir. Nor is he certain what secret instructions they might be given. He is still all suspicion. He judges others by his own complicated make up. But the fact that he is able to make a case ('what is the need') demonstrates that he has a reasonably satisfactory band of men himself.

'Let me find favour in the sight of my lord.' A polite way of requesting that his wishes be honoured.

'So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir.' No doubt both were relieved. The one because he would not be tied down to a laborious and boring task and, having fulfilled his family obligations, was now free to go his way unhindered. The other because he was free from what he would have seen as a constant threat, and would not have to go to Seir after all.

Seir was a mountainous area South of the Dead Sea. It was well suited to Esau's men who no doubt saw it as a good land. It was away from strong cities and larger groupings of peoples, provided a safe refuge when he had been on his raids, and yet provided sufficient reasonably fertile land for feeding herds and planting crops for the maintenance of the group. But this was not Jacob's idea of the ideal land at all. He believed firmly in the promises of Yahweh and they did not relate to Seir. And he preferred to be peaceable rather than belligerent. And who could tell when Esau's attitude might change? He could always provide some excuse in the distant future as to why he had not continued his journey southward.

(As mentioned previously, Esau spent part of his time with the family tribe, assisting the blind Isaac and overseeing the tending of his own herds and flocks at crucial times, and part of the time in Seir 'in the time when men go forth to battle' (2 Samuel 11.1), adventuring with his men. He was connected by marriage to the Hivites who dwelt there (36.2). It is hardly conceivable that a doting son like Esau has shown himself to be would leave Isaac totally alone without assistance when Jacob was absent, and the fact that Esau's whereabouts is known demonstrates that he keeps close connections with his family while enjoying his wilder life with his men).

33.17 'And Jacob journeyed to Succoth and built himself a house and made booths for his cattle. That is why the name of the place is called Succoth (booths).'

Succoth was later a city in the territory assigned to the Gaddites, east of Jordan, in the Jordan valley not far from a water crossing (Joshua 13.27; Judges 8.4-5) and not far from Penuel (Judges 8.8).

Here he sets up a permanent residence. He has been through much, as have his family and herds and flocks, and this gives him the opportunity for recovery. He builds a house for himself and provides permanent accommodation for his flocks and herds. The 'house', permanent living quarters, may well have been fairly extensive needing to provide accommodation for his wives and family. His men could see to their own needs and would need to protect the herds. It is clear that he was in no hurry to join his father Isaac, and spent some years here while his family grew up. The name Succoth appears to have come from this period. Thus the event that follows at Shechem occurs some time after.

The position had the added advantage that if Esau came back he could always say that his herds and flocks, which had previously been pushed hard, needed recovery time.

Jacob Moves Into the Land of Promise - Revenge for Dinah (Genesis 33.18-34.31)

Some years have passed and now Jacob feels the time has come to return to the land of the covenant. This particular record was made as a permanent record of the covenant between Hamor and Jacob which resulted in the establishment of a permanent altar to God and ownership of the land on which it was built. The episode that follows was seen as permanently connected with this arrangement. Alternately the central covenant may have been seen as the one between Hamor and Jacob in respect of Dinah (34.8-12). This may have been seen as necessary to establish Dinah's innocence. The ancients would view the central theme of the passage as totally justified, and indeed required to purify the tribe. This was what Hamor and Shechem, as Canaanites, failed to realise to their cost.

33.18-20 'And Jacob came in peace to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram, and encamped by the city. And he bought the parcel of land where he had pitched his tent, at the hand of the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred pieces of silver. And he erected there an altar and called it El-elohe-Israel (God the God of Israel).'

'The city of Shechem'. This may mean the city Shechem lived in, the city remaining unnamed, but Shechem was well known as a city elsewhere and it is therefore probable that the man Shechem was named after the city in which he dwelt as its potential ruler.

The stress that Jacob came in peace is never made elsewhere. The writer is preparing for what follows and stressing that in it all Jacob was guiltless. He had no intentions of belligerence. (The translation could, however, alternatively be 'to Salem, a city of Shechem').

'When he came from Paddan-aram.' This is a general note referring to the fact that this is Jacob's first contact with the Promised Land after leaving Paddan-aram. It does not necessarily signify immediacy.

Jacob sets up camp by the city. He is so moved by the fact that he is now back in the land of God's covenant that he determines to set up a permanent shrine there. Thus he buys a piece of land so that he can build a permanent memorial. The fact that Hamor is willing to sell him land is a sign of the good relations between the two, although the purpose for which it was bought would influence the situation. This may well have brought Jacob into a position of indebtedness to Hamor for land did not usually pass in this way without feudal obligations.

'A hundred pieces of silver.' Strictly 'money' is not correct as payment was made in quantities of silver. The uncommon Hebrew word probably indicates a weight measure.

'He built there an altar to El-elohe-Israel.' From this time on Shechem is a sacred place to the family tribe and later to Israel. It was in the neighbourhood of Mount Gerizim (Judges 9.7) in the hill country of Ephraim (Joshua 20.7). It was the place where God first revealed Himself to Abraham when he initially entered the land, and where he built his first altar to Yahweh (Genesis 12.6). That indeed may be why Jacob came there and why he was determined to establish a permanent altar to God. It was where Joshua would later renew the covenant and where the bones of Joseph would be buried (Joshua 24). By establishing this altar in the name of God the God of Israel Jacob is confirming his new name and applying it to the family tribe. From now on they will proudly call themselves 'Israel' (34.7)

In order to put the following story in context it is necessary to appreciate the strong feelings aroused by the sexual misuse of a prominent member of a tribe. Such an act was looked on as a raping of the tribe itself. Probably the people of Shechem, more used to sexual misbehaviour (the Canaanite religion was sexually debased) and to the behaviour of petty princes, did not

appreciate the intense feeling that Shechem's act would arouse in a family tribe such as Jacob's. But to Dinah's two blood brothers, Simeon and Levi, there could be only one reply, justice and vengeance. Blood was required. By his cavalier behaviour Shechem brought deep shame on them, indeed sacrilege had been committed, and only his death could wipe it out.

We have already seen how careful the patriarchs were in finding wives for their sons. We need not doubt that they were as careful about their daughters. Thus what happened to Dinah was a dreadful blow to the family. Had it been a member of the covenant community some lesser penalty might have been possible as long as she was not betrothed to another (Deuteronomy 22.25-29). But they saw marriage to a Canaanite prince as out of the question. The only other possible penalty was death.

From the point of view of the story of the covenant, however, this was a moment of crisis. Absorption into the community at Shechem would have signalled the end of the covenant. The covenant people would have been absorbed into a community whose religious practises were debased. Thus the determination of the brothers to have justice done, and sacrilege dealt with, preserved the covenant community.

34.1 'And Dinah, the daughter of Leah, whom she bore to Jacob, went out to see the daughters of the land.'

Note the stress on her pedigree. She was the chief's daughter by his primary wife. It was not really wise for her to slip away from the camp alone to mingle with the women of Shechem, but she was young and thoughtless. The story indicates that she was now of marriageable age (twelve or thirteen) so Jacob clearly spent some years at Succoth. She was curious to meet these sophisticated town women, unaware that the morals of the tribe were very different from the morals of cities.

34.2 'And Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her. And he took her, and lay with her and humbled her.'

Like many petty princes Shechem was proud and arrogant and considered he did not have to behave as others did. When he saw the tribal girl who aroused his feelings more than any woman had before, he did not think twice about taking her and having his way with her. To him she was simply a 'stranger' in the land and therefore not very important. It may well be that he felt that by taking her he would render it impossible for her to marry anyone else.

'Humbled her.' That is, changed her status. There is an advancement in thought. First he took her, that is sent his men to fetch her, and then he raped her. And the final result was that she was 'humbled' and lost her status. She was morally and socially degraded and lost the expectancy of a fully valid marriage. No act to a woman of Dinah's status could have been more cruel. We must recognise this when we consider the passage.

'Hamor the Hivite.' He was clearly the 'king' of Shechem. We do not know who the Hivites were but they are regularly mentioned as one of the tribes in Canaan. They were possibly connected with the Horites (compare Zibeon in Genesis 36.2 with 36.20-21, and indeed the name may be an alternative rendering, 'v' instead of 'r', either as an error in copying or otherwise. The LXX of Genesis 34.2 here and Joshua 9.7 renders Hivite as Horite which may suggest an original different reading).

34.3 'And his soul was powerfully attached to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl and spoke kindly to the girl.'

The love was genuine, and his final aim was honourable. But as his actions showed it was a

selfish love which had not considered the consequences of its actions. He possibly even thought that the girl should be grateful for his interest. He could probably hardly conceive that Jacob might not want his daughter married to a prince, even if he was a Canaanite and not of the tribe.

34.4-6 'And Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, "Get me this girl for my wife." Now Jacob heard that he had defiled his daughter Dinah, and his sons were with his cattle in the countryside, and Jacob held his peace until they came. And Hamor, the father of Shechem, went out to Jacob to discuss things with him.'

'Get me this girl for my wife.' Shechem would have done well to take this step before the other. Then the problems would not have resulted. But when the sex drive controls men it inevitably leads to evil.

'Now Jacob heard that he had defiled his daughter Dinah.' When the news reached Jacob the shock would be total. Never would he have agreed to his daughter marrying a Canaanite, even a ruling prince. And to have the treasure of his heart defiled in this way would be unbearable. What was acceptable to Canaanites was the most blasphemous of acts to the family tribe. To defile their princess was sacrilege.

So Jacob immediately sends messengers to his sons. Then he waits and does nothing until his sons with their men have returned from the countryside. Without them he is powerless to do anything. Meanwhile Hamor comes to see him to discuss the situation. But behind it all lies the terrible thing that has been done to Dinah.

34.7 'And when they heard it the sons of Jacob came in from the countryside. And the men were very grieved, and they were furiously angry because he had wrought folly in Israel in lying with Jacob's daughter, which thing should not be done.'

When the news reached the sons of Jacob their anger reached fever pitch. In their eyes what had been done was unforgivable. It was a grievous sin. They came in from the countryside bent on doing something about the situation.

'They were furiously angry because he had wrought folly in Israel.' The phrase 'wrought folly in Israel' refers to what is seen as the most grievous of sins. It usually has in mind sexual sin of the worst kind but is also used of Achan's sin in retaining what was devoted to Yahweh (see Deuteronomy 22.21; Judges 20.6; Joshua 7.15). The word for folly is *nebala*, seemingly an expression for what is basically sacrilege.

It has been suggested that the reference to 'Israel' might suggest that the last part of the sentence was a note appended later to emphasise the depth of the sin in order to explain why the brothers behaved as they did, and that may be so. On the other hand the brothers had fresh in their minds the dedication of the altar to 'God, the God of Israel', which could explain the use here with the tribe having a new sense of their identity as 'Israel'. In other words they saw the sacrilege committed on Dinah in the light of the recent dedication of the tribe as Israel and it made the sin even more heinous. They had become established under a new name in the eyes of their God and now almost immediately this slight on the new name had occurred. Shechem had taken that which was devoted to Yahweh. Thus the phrase 'folly in Israel' may well have arisen from this incident.

(That the use of the name Israel is now fairly regular comes out in 35.21-22; 37.3. Thus its use here when the setting up of a permanent altar to 'God, the God of Israel' has recently taken place is to be expected, especially in a context referring to sacrilege).

'Which thing should not be done.' This re-emphasises the awfulness of the crime. It was clearly felt very bitterly.

34.8-10 'And Hamor entered into discussion with them , saying, "The soul of my son Shechem longs after your daughter. I beg you, give her to him to wife. And you make marriages with us. Give your daughters to us, and take our daughters to yourselves. And you will dwell with us, and the land will be before you. Dwell and trade in it, and obtain your possessions in it." '

Hamor's words are addressed directly to Jacob ('your daughter' - although 'your daughter' might mean a daughter of the tribe as with 'your daughters' and 'our daughters', compare the brothers' use in verse 17) but intended to include all the brothers (them). He recognises that great offence has been caused and seeks to defuse the situation by offering very favourable terms. The invitation to become full members of the community might have been welcomed by many semi-nomadic tribes. It would no doubt include having land of their own and a settled future, being absorbed, like Lot was, into the community, although not all semi-nomads would be pleased so to lose their independence.

But from the religious point of view it would have been the end of the covenant and the destruction of what they stood for. Inter-marriage would have introduced the tribe practically to Canaanite religion of the most debased kind, and settling down and being absorbed would have cancelled the covenant.

There are interesting contrasts in the story that unfolds that are psychologically accurate. Hamor and Jacob, the wise patriarchs, concerned to put the matter right as far as possible and reduce the tension, ready to compromise and wishing to settle the matter peaceably. Shechem, still not fully aware of how deeply he has offended. After all it was only a tribal woman and he was offering her a great privilege, and so he was thinking that all could be settled by marriage and a sufficient payment. The brothers, totally unwilling to compromise, believing that a dreadful sacrilege has been committed and determined that at any cost they will have vengeance. These were the constituent members of that meeting. And it was the brothers who took over. Jacob finds himself thrust to one side, but is willing to go along with his sons, not realising their full intentions, and only too relieved that a possible solution can be found.

Meanwhile Dinah is being held in the king's house (verse 26). This may have been for protection, or because of her distressed state, or possibly to ensure that the marriage went forward. Either way it is clear that hidden pressures are being put on Jacob.

34.11-12 'And Shechem said to her father and to her brothers, "Let me find favour in your eyes, and what you say to me I will give. Ask me never so much dowry and gift and I will give in accordance with what you say to me, but give me the young woman to wife." '

Shechem too can see that the brothers are infuriated and consider that he has offended. But he has no doubt that they can be bought over. And he is ready to pay whatever they ask as long as he can have Dinah for his wife. She has inherited the beauty of Sarah and Rebekah. He is probably bewildered by all the fuss. He is after all the darling of the people.

34.13-17 'And the sons of Jacob answered Shechem and Hamor his father with guile, and spoke, because he had defiled Dinah their sister, and said to them, "We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a reproach to us. Only on this condition will we consent to you, if you will be as we are, that every male of you be circumcised. Then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters to us, and we will dwell with you and we will become one people. But if you will not listen to us then we will take our daughter and we will be gone." '

'With guile.' It is unusual in Genesis for an explanation to be given for the motive of what is said. Thus the reference to guile shows that the writer wants us to know that what later happened was the brothers' intention from the start. It is again stressed that their motive is based on what has been done to their sister Dinah. She has been defiled, both socially and religiously. All that follows is thus but preparation for their revenge.

The issue that they take up is circumcision. It is probable that more explanation was actually given at the meeting but the writer is aware that such was not really in question and omits any mention of it. There was no real idea of the men of Shechem entering the covenant community. The fact was that the brothers simply saw it as a means of disabling the men of Shechem. Outwardly they are agreeing to the terms outlined by Hamor, but inwardly they have only one purpose in mind, justice and revenge, for before we judge them too harshly we must recognise that this was a case where justice and revenge went hand in hand. A terrible sacrilege had been committed and they required justice to take its course. They felt that they had no choice. Sacrilege must be expiated. And that involved the death of the offender. And because the offender was the king's firstborn and the darling of the people, they knew that they too would have to be dealt with.

We rightly cringe at what follows. But we must remember that it was then a regular occurrence for cities to be invaded and taken over, and that it was necessary for semi-nomads to make clear to others that they could not be trifled with. All too often they were the sufferers. But unquestionably here this is all exacerbated by the sense that a great sacrilege has been committed against 'God, the God of Israel'.

'We will take our daughter and be gone.' Here 'daughter' is used to signify a daughter of the tribe. This last phrase is a deliberate attempt to accomplish what they want, the disablement of the men of Shechem. They clearly hoped that Shechem's passion was enough for him to agree to their proposal. Had he not done so murder might have taken place on the spot regardless of the consequences. They did not really intend to 'be gone'.

34.18-19 'And their words pleased Hamor, and Shechem, Hamor's son. And the young man did not seek to put off doing the thing because he had delight in Jacob's daughter, and he was honoured above all the house of his father.'

Both Hamor and Shechem were taken in by the deception and were willing to accept the terms, Hamor as the doting father, and Shechem as the love-sick suitor. Indeed the thought of being circumcised did not daunt Shechem one bit because he was so in love. And his position would ensure acceptance by others in his household, for if he would do it why should they not? They would all do as they were told. This description has the air of being written by an eyewitness to Shechem's enthusiasm. But it would not be so easy to persuade the men of Shechem as a whole to agree to the act. That required diplomacy.

34.20 'And Hamor and Shechem his son came to the gate of their city, and consulted with the men of their city, saying.'

The gate of the city was where the leading men would meet in dealing the city's affairs. Hamor could not just dictate terms. Most petty kings were subject to the guidance of their counsellors and had to take their people along with them in major decisions. Thus although he and his son have agreed to the terms they now have to carry their counsellors along with them.

34.21-23 "These men are peaceable with us. Therefore let them dwell in the land and trade in it. For behold, the land is large enough for them. Let us take their daughters to us for wives, and let us give them our daughters. But only on this condition will the men give consent to us to live among us to become one people, and that is if every male among us be circumcised as

they are circumcised. Will not their cattle and their substance and all their animals be ours? Only let us give consent to them and they will live among us."

These words remind us once again how large a family tribe Jacob has. His wealth is clearly sufficient to impress a small city and its inhabitants and make their continued presence worthwhile. There is no suggestion of a threat (Hamor is totally taken in) it is all promise. They will be given spare land of which there is a plentiful supply and be absorbed into the community along with their wealth. And the city as a whole will gain by this increase in its wealth, for once they are an established part of the community the possessions will be looked on as in a sense the community's as well as Jacob's.

Thus the subtle Hamor and the influential Shechem convince the townsfolk of the benefit of the agreement without admitting the real reason. And the only thing they have to do is to be circumcised, something which was clearly a well known practise elsewhere. Two prisoners of a Canaanite king on a 12th century BC Megiddo ivory were circumcised, as is an Egyptian boy on a sixth dynasty tomb relief which depicts his circumcision. A flint knife was used there as among the descendants of Abraham (see on chapter 17).

34.24 'And all who went out of the gate of the city paid heed to Hamor, and Shechem his son, and every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city.'

'All who went out of the gate of the city.' That is the freemen. The slaves would have no option. All were circumcised as Hamor and Shechem had suggested. It was a small price to pay in return for such an increase in riches, and their king and prince were clearly convinced that it was for their good.

34.25 'And it happened on the third day , when they were sore, that two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took each man his sword and came on the city unawares and killed all the males. And they killed Hamor and Shechem his son with the edge of the sword, and took Dinah out of Shechem's house and went out.'

The third day was when the circumcision operation laid men lowest and they were feverish with their wound. Then it was that Dinah's brothers Simeon and Levi moved in to exact justice and demand blood to expiate the sacrilege against Dinah. They would be accompanied by their retainers, possibly supplemented by other tribal members, but because of their status as full blood-brothers to Dinah it was seen as their right and responsibility to exact punishment.

The other sons of Leah are not mentioned. Simeon and Levi were seemingly the most warlike of them and most suitable for the enterprise, and they would appear to have been appointed by general agreement to carry out the enterprise. (Jacob will later decry the attributes that made them seem so suitable (49.5-7).)

No one in the city, which would be an open unwalled city, was prepared for the assault and inevitably the men were caught unready in no condition to put up a good fight. It is specifically stressed that Hamor and Shechem were put to death. This was necessary expiation. At the same time Dinah was released from her 'imprisonment'.

'They killed all the males.' It was a bloody business, but this was necessary to prevent retaliation.

34.27 'The sons of Jacob came on the slain and spoiled the city because they had defiled their sister. They took their flocks and their herds and their asses, and whatever was in the city and whatever was in the surrounding country. And all their wealth and all their little ones, and their wives, they took captive, and spoiled even all that was in the house.'

Once the expiation had been carried out the remainder of Jacob's sons moved in to plunder the city. They despoiled the city and took possession of all the belongings of the inhabitants, including their wives and children. And the reason is again made clear. It was due to their sacrilege.

34.30 'And Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me, to make me an unpleasant odour among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites, and I being few in number, they will gather themselves together against me, and smite me, and I will be destroyed, and my household."

Jacob is not pleased at what his sons have done and had clearly not been expecting it. They had not brought him in on their plans. But his concern is not so much over what has been done as with its consequences. If the surrounding close neighbours gather together to take revenge they are not strong enough to fight them and thus Jacob will lose all he has as well as being in danger of being killed himself. It was not for this that he had built up his wealth. So he rebukes them severely. Was the rape of Dinah worth it?

34.31 'And they said, "Should he deal with our sister as with a common prostitute?" '

They are justifiably indignant. It is they who have been wronged. What else could they do and retain their honour? Their sister had been treated like a common prostitute, available for men whenever they desired. The tribe had been insulted and violated. The covenant had been besmirched. We may decry what they did, but men in their day would have fully understood its necessity.

We may pause to consider that sometimes the way of compromise is necessary, but when deep sin is involved such compromise is unacceptable. In the terms of their day Simeon and Levi were justified in what they did. And by it, although it was not their motive, they protected the ongoing of the covenant and preserved the purity of the tribe. As ever God moves in mysterious ways in the bringing about of His purposes.

(It would in fact be a mistake to assume that the patriarchs never killed anyone. It was sadly a normal part of life when people were wealthy and vulnerable. We certainly know that Abraham would have done so in rescuing Lot and all the patriarchs had riches and herds to defend and we can be sure that attacks on them were many. Their men were trained to fight for that very reason. Bloody fights would have been fairly commonplace. The difference here is that a whole town (but very small by our standards) was involved. But as we have seen the circumstances were very special.

Jacob Returns to Bethel and Erects an Altar There. God Renews His Covenant With Him. He Finally Joins With Isaac. The Death of Isaac (35.1-36.1a)

This covenant record is based around the theophany and covenant in verses 35.9-12. It is a moment of extreme sacredness on Jacob's return to Bethel after so long an absence from the promised land and results in his finally joining his father Isaac and the main family tribe at Mamre.

35.1 'And God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there, and make there an altar to God who appeared to you when you fled from Esau your brother." '

Jacob is still at Shechem (verse 4) but it would not have been wise to remain there in view of what has happened. It is thus timely that God appears again to Jacob with the command to move on. God's motive is however slightly different. He had seen that Jacob had been ready to compromise. Now He requires him to go back to Bethel to reconsecrate himself and his tribe. A

dangerous and covenant-wrecking situation has been averted.

We should note that the narrative is fully aware of Jacob's previous visit to Bethel (verses 1, 7 and 9). It is, of course, only 'Bethel' at this time to Jacob because of his experience there. To the outside world it is still in the region of Luz (verse 6).

The command then is to return to where he had had his previous vision. This will take him well away from the neighbourhood of Shechem. God is calling Jacob to a new dedication of himself. And indeed Jacob is aware that he cannot approach that holy place without re-examining his life for there he had met with God in an unusually vivid way.

35.2 'Then Jacob said to his household, and to all who were with him, "Put away the strange gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your clothing. And let us rise and go to Bethel, and I will make there an altar to God who answered me in the day of my distress and was with me in the way in which I went."

Jacob is aware of the solemnity of this moment. He is travelling back to where he had seen Heaven and earth meet, where he had made a solemn covenant with God, a place he could never forget. And this causes him to take a new look at the family tribe. The distinction between 'his household' and 'those who were with him' is interesting. His household, which would be those with whom he left Paddan-aram, would include his servants and retainers and would be quite large, but clearly others have joined up with them resulting in an even larger group, including the remnants of Shechem.

But this solemn moment must be prepared for. All is not well. Many are secretly worshipping strange gods, superstition is rife, loyalty to Yahweh is in abeyance. These strange gods may indeed include the teraphim stolen by Rachel which she may have begun to worship, although she may well have been doing so only in secret without Jacob's knowledge. But they cannot go to that sacred place with these abominations (the name later given to idols). There can be no idols in Beth-el. There must be a new dedication.

So they are to put away these gods (it is not enough to stop heeding them, they must be got rid of). Then they are to ritually purify themselves, including changing their clothes, in preparation for the journey to Bethel. We have no hint of the method of ritual purification but it may well have included ritual washing and a period of abstinence from sexual activity, removing the 'earthiness' so that they can be fit to approach Bethel and God. The washing is to remove 'earthiness'. The re-clothing suggests a presentation of themselves before God having rid themselves of the past (such semi-nomadic men did not regularly wash or change their clothing. Indeed the passion for cleanliness is a modern virtue). All would be aware that this was a life-changing moment.

As they did, it is good for us too to take time to re-examine our lives and rid ourselves of those things that have begun to hinder our walk with God. Then we too may have deeper experience of God.

The final purpose is to go to Bethel, where the God Who has continually watched over him had appeared to him, as they would all know, and to build an altar where he had erected the pillar. Shechem no longer holds a welcome for them so that a new sanctuary is required. And Jacob recognises that this is a call to return back to what Yahweh had intended for him from birth as previously confirmed at Bethel.

35.4 'And they gave to Jacob all the strange gods which were in their hand, and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem.'

These would include small images, amulets, and other superstitious objects, which included earrings, which had idolatrous religious connections, and which would have been bought from passing merchants. These were collected together and buried under an oak in Shechem. Such trees were often connected with important events. They represented outstanding landmarks. Thus when they left Shechem they left their past behind them. It reminds us that God cannot be approached casually. If we would approach Him all hindrances must be removed.

35.5 'And they began their journey, and a terror from God (or 'a great terror') was on the cities that were round about them, and they did not pursue after the sons of Jacob.'

They made their escape from Shechem without interference. This was because of the fear that had spread round as a result of their activities. Stories about the raid by Jacob's sons were probably spread from mouth to mouth, expanding as they went, so that by the time the other cities heard them a large, fierce army had been involved. And this was added to and used by God. Thus they kept away, and by the time the truth was known it was too late. Jacob's sons had made their escape. Such a terror from God is witnessed to elsewhere in Exodus 23.27; 1 Samuel 14.15. It is implied in Joshua 10.10; Judges 4.15; 7.22. God can work in men's minds in many ways.

35.6 'So Jacob came to Luz, which is in the land of Canaan, (the same is Bethel), he and all the people who were with him.'

Luz was the name of the city in the area in which Jacob had erected the pillar on his first visit. Later it was changed to Bethel and a compiler's note added here.

35.7 'And he built there an altar and called the place El-Bethel because there God was revealed to him when he fled from the face of his brother.'

Previously Jacob had erected a pillar as a personal witness to his personal covenant with God. He had named its site Bethel. Now he erects an altar as a place of worship for his family tribe. And he calls the site of the altar 'El-Bethel' which means 'the God of Bethel'. This was in memory of the fact that he had named the place where the pillar was Beth-el (house of God) when God had revealed Himself to him there. This is a public naming, with full solemnities of sacrifice and worship, in contrast to the previous private naming. Now the name is generally recognised in the tribe and not just personal.

35.8 'And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak, and the name of it was called Allon-Bacuth.'

The ceremony was marred by a sad event, the death of Rebekah's nurse. It is probable that Rebekah had sent her nurse to keep a motherly eye on Jacob on his flight to Paddan-aram as she could not do so herself. Thus she had been with him many years. It was the end of an era. (Alternately Rebekah may have come with her nurse to see Jacob on his return to Canaan). She had watched over Jacob these many years and now he has returned to Bethel her work is done She has done what God required. The writer probably saw it as the final evidence of the end of the past and a new beginning.

It may be that the death of such a faithful retainer at such a time was seen as somehow a fitting offering to God for she was buried under an oak tree 'below Bethel'. The place was thus called Allon-Bacuth - 'the oak of weeping', an indication of the sorrow that accompanied her departure. Possibly it became for the people a place where they could weep when they were enduring sorrow.

35.9 'And God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him.'

'God appeared to Jacob again.' The 'again' refers back to the previous theophany at Bethel before he left Canaan (28.10-22). This is now God's renewal of that covenant on his return to the promised land at the place where he had first made His promises to him. Thus the writer is very much aware of Jacob's experience then and what went on (compare verses 1 and 7). He is aware that part of the site has already been called Beth-el.

'When he came from Paddan-aram.' The writer wants us to have the whole context. This is not just another step in the journey, it is in direct relation to his leaving Paddan-aram to return to the promised land. It is the confirmation of the return of God's chosen one from the far country.

'And blessed him'. This sums up what follows. Thus Jacob's obedience to God and detailed preparations for the pilgrimage to Bethel to build the altar to His name is rewarded with a vivid experience of the divine, a great theophany, accompanied by great promises. This is the definitive experience. In it is summed up all that has gone before. In it is summed up all his hopes for the future. Both the name Israel and the name Bethel are as it were reconsecrated in recognition of the uniqueness of this occasion.

35.10 'And God said to him, "Your name is Jacob. Your name will not any longer be called Jacob, but Israel will be your name. And he called his name Israel."'

A change of name for Abram occurred at God's first revelation of Himself as El Shaddai, and here a second change of name is referred to on God's second revelation of Himself as El Shaddai. It would appear that such revelations required the transformation of the recipients resulting in a change of name.

But as we know, Jacob had already been given this name after wrestling with God at Penuel (32.28), and he had subsequently erected an altar to 'God, the God of Israel' (33.20). But he had delayed in returning to the family tribe and as so often in men's lives such life-changing events can dim with time. The idea of him as Israel has become faded. It is almost forgotten. The old Jacob had reasserted itself. Thus at this crucial renewing of the covenant at Bethel the change of name is renewed and emphasised. It is emphasising that what happened at Penuel is now to come into fruition. He is to *be* Israel.

A change of name in ancient days was seen as having deep significance. This is why at this crucial moment in the life of Jacob and of the tribe God emphasises his changed name. He must remember that he is no longer Jacob, but Israel. The past is behind him. The old Jacob is behind him. This is a new beginning. He is the one with whom God has striven and through whom He will carry out his purposes (Israel means 'God strives').

We may see here an implied rebuke against Jacob's long stay in Succoth and Shechem. He had previously been given the new name of Israel preparatory to returning to the family tribe. But he had not done so, he had delayed. Now it is necessary for him to be renamed after the period of backsliding. It is a salutary thought that had he previously been faithful the shame of Shechem would not have occurred.

This change of name is emphasised later in the following verses. Once his twelfth son has been born and the full complement of sons made up he will journey on as Israel (35.21). This also coincides with the death of Rachel. It is as though with her death, with the great hold she had had on him, he is now free to be what God wants him to be.

35.11-12 'And God said to him, "I am El Shaddai (the Almighty God). Be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations (goyim) will be from you, and kings will come from your loins. And the land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, to you will I give it, and to your seed

after you will I give the land.” ’

The meaning of ‘El Shaddai’ is not yet apparent to us but the LXX translates it as ‘the Almighty’. God only reveals Himself under this title twice, to Abraham in connection with the greater covenant and to Jacob here, and in both cases there is stress on a change of name for the recipient. To receive a covenant from El Shaddai means a whole new direction in life.

So Jacob is confirmed as the inheritor of the greater covenant. Whenever God is mentioned under the name of El Shaddai it is in relation to many nations, not just to the family tribe. To Abraham in chapter 17 ‘you shall be the father of a multitude of nations (hamon goyim)’, and Ishmael is a part of that covenant, to Isaac as he blesses Jacob in 28.3 ‘that you may be a company of peoples’ (liqhal ‘amim), and again to Jacob in 48.4 reference is made to ‘a company of peoples’ (liqhal ‘amim). It is in recognition of this fact that Jacob speaks of El Shaddai when he sends his sons back to Egypt to obtain the release of Simeon and entrusts them with Benjamin (43.14). It is Yahweh as El Shaddai, the sovereign God over the whole world, who has the power to prevail over the great governor of Egypt. This may also be why Isaac used this title of Yahweh when he sent his son into a foreign land.

So Jacob is not just inheriting the promises related to the family tribe but those which relate to God’s worldwide purposes. However, as always, this includes these local promises, thus he will bear both a nation and a company of nations. His direct descendants will be kings and his seed will inherit the promised land.

These promises relate closely to those mentioned by Isaac in 28.3-4 in the context of El Shaddai. To be fruitful and multiply, to be a company of peoples, and to receive the blessing of Abraham in the inheritance of the land. Thus God confirms that he is speaking to him as the God of Isaac.

Less directly they also relate to the promises made when he first came to Bethel, for there too he was promised that he and his seed would receive the land (28.13), that he would multiply greatly and especially that through him and his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed (28.14).

‘Be fruitful and multiply.’ This has more the sons of Jacob in mind than Jacob himself. But their sons would be his sons, and their seed his seed. He would proudly look on further generations and finally they would become an innumerable multitude.

‘A nation and a company of nations.’ His family tribe would become a nation. But this would not be all, for a company of nations would also come from him. And later Israel was to be a company of nations, for it was to include not only his descendants but large numbers of peoples of other nations who joined themselves with Israel (e.g Exodus 12.38), and even further on peoples from all nations would gladly form the true Israel, the ‘Israel of God’ (Galatians 6.16 with 3.29; Ephesians 2.11-19).

‘Kings shall be descended from you (come from your loins).’ Nationhood would result in kingship, and those kings would be his own descendants. Indeed from him would come the greatest King of all.

And he and his seed would inherit the land. We cannot fully appreciate what it meant to a sojourner (alien and non-landowner), a wanderer, a landless person who must trust to the good nature of others and whatever bargains he could arrange and pay for in one way or another, to become the possessor of land. And here the promise to Abraham and Isaac is confirmed to Jacob. He and his seed will one day possess the whole land.

We note here that the promises are unconditional. At these great moments God does not lay down any terms. He is sovereign and will bring about His purposes. The only hint that response is required comes in the reference to Jacob's change of name to Israel and its significance. But even this was part of God's sovereign purpose and Jacob was the recipient. And this is recognised especially in the fact that Jacob makes no response as he had done previously at Bethel (28.20-22). This is not a time for man to make his promises and bargains. This is a moment of receiving in awesome silence.

35.13 'And God went up from him in the place where he spoke with him.'

This is confirmation that here was a physical manifestation of God. Once God had finished re-establishing His covenant with Jacob He 'goes up', a recognition that He is leaving the world for His own realm. For 'went up' compare 17.22; Judges 13.20.

35.14 'And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he spoke with him, a pillar of stone. And he poured out a drink offering on it, and poured oil on it.'

This is the second pillar that Jacob has set up. The first commemorated his first vision when he saw the angels of God ascending and descending on a ramp as they went about their heavenly business in the world, and was assured of God's presence with him and watch over him and his participation in the covenant (27.18). It was set up in the place where he slept. This one commemorates an even greater occasion, the awesome visible manifestation of God in renewal of that covenant now that he is back in the land of promise. Again the pillar is witness to the covenant that has been made. It is set up at the very site of the theophany. As we have seen earlier, Jacob was a great one for requiring evidence of covenants (26.33).

'And he poured out a drink offering on it, and poured oil on it.' The first pillar was set apart to God by the pouring of oil on it and it marked God's visit and presence, but there was no thought there of an offering. It was a reminder of what had happened and of the covenant made. Here the offering comes first. Jacob pours out a drink offering to God, and only then does he sanctify it to God. It is a recognition of God's continued presence.

35.15 'And Jacob called the place where God spoke to him 'Beth-el'.'

The previous naming had been in private (28.19) and was of the spot where he had had his vision. It was an extremely personal thing and was accompanied by a personal response. Now the naming is more public and covers a wider area where the altar has been set up. We cannot doubt that the whole tribe was involved. Thus the wider site becomes more widely recognised as 'Beth-el', the house of God. Later the name will be transferred to the neighbouring city of Luz as well.

The confirmation before all of the name he has previously given it establishes the new name. It is seen as sacredly connected to the important ceremony that has just taken place in the sanctifying of the altar. That had been named El-Bethel (God of the house of God) because of the previous naming. Now the vivid theophany has confirmed the whole place as Beth-el, the 'dwelling place' of God.

Now that he and his tribe are reconsecrated he begins the final part of his journey back to the mother tribe, to Isaac, via Ephrath (later to be Bethlehem) and the Tower of Eder.

35. 16-19 'And they journeyed from Bethel, and there was still some way to come to Ephrath, and Rachel began to experience birth pains and she had hard labour. And it happened that when she was in hard labour the midwife said to her, "Don't be afraid, for now you will have another son. And it happened that, as her life was departing, for she died, she called his name

Benoni (son of my sorrow), but his father called him Benjamin (son of the right hand). And Rachel died and was buried in the way to Ephrath, the same is Bethlehem.'

The journey from Bethel to Mamre is interrupted by sad experiences of which the first is the death of Rachel in childbirth. But as she dies she is able to rejoice in the birth of a son, calling him Benoni - product of my sorrow. Understandably however Jacob does not want a continual reminder of the loss of his beloved wife, and changes the name to Benjamin. This name, 'son of the right hand' is probably intended to indicate good fortune. Jacob wants him to be connected with good fortune rather than with mourning. Note that it is not said she was buried in Bethlehem itself. She was buried in 'the way to Ephrath', ('there was still some way to come to Ephrath' - Genesis 48.7), the Bethlehem Road on the way from Bethel, which goes through Benjaminite territory (1 Samuel 10.2-3; Jeremiah 31.15).

'The same is Bethlehem.' A later note added by a scribe to identify Ephrath.

The name Benjamin is attested elsewhere in the Mari texts (eighteenth century BC) as binu yamina which probably means 'sons of the South', but there is no good reason for identifying them with the later tribe of Benjamin. It is a name that could be given to many tribes for identification purposes, looking from a particular standpoint (compare 'children of the East').

35.20 'And Jacob set up a pillar on her grave. The same is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day.'

The loss of Rachel is a deep blow and when she is buried he sets up a memorial stone. The setting up of such stones was a custom widely practised in Canaan in those days. The significance attached to such a pillar would vary between tribes as with so many customs and we are given no hint here what is in Jacob's mind. It may well have been just because he did not want her burial place to be forgotten. Later Israel was certainly decidedly against any funerary cult. Possibly he felt that in some way it kept her alive. Consider how even today the loss of a very dear loved one results in people praying at the grave. They cannot believe the loved one has gone.

'The same is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day.' 'To this day' may signify a long or a short time. It merely says that the writer is aware of the pillar and declares it is still there. We may therefore see it as the comment of the recorder of this covenant record within a relatively short time of the occurrence or as an added comment made later by the compiler.

This is the second death of someone important to him preparatory to his being restored to his family (compare 35.8). If only he had returned earlier what might have been avoided. Now he returns surrounded by grief. We must always beware of delay when dealing with God.

35.21 'And Israel journeyed and spread his tent beyond the Tower of Eder.'

The name means 'cattle tower.' It is unidentified but clearly obtained its name from some well known local landmark. But what is significant is that we see Jacob's new name applied to him in an historical record for the first time. He has come home as a new man. It is not Jacob who is coming home, but Israel. The contrast with 'Jacob' in the previous verse may well deliberately indicate that the death of Rachel brings in a new era. In some way he is a better man for being free from her influence. But this final step in the journey is mentioned also for another reason. A reason of shame.

35.22a 'And it happened, while Israel dwelt in that land that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine, and Israel heard of it.'

The homecoming is marred. Israel may be coming home a new man but there is still sin in the camp. His son Reuben commits a great sin, and the news reaches his father. It is a sin that Israel never forgets even on his deathbed (49.4) for it would bring great shame on him. It would seem that Reuben takes advantage of Bilhah's new insecurity, for now that her mistress is dead she may well have lost status and be vulnerable and in no position to deal with the advances of her husband's eldest son.

The significant use of Jacob's new name 'Israel' stresses the final success of his period away. He is a changed man. The sin of Reuben warns against over exuberance.

'Israel heard of it.' The total lack of comment or of any indication of Israel's reaction speaks volumes. The writer is aware of Israel's shame and in deference to his master pulls a veil over the incident. It is enough that all will pass the same judgment and be appalled. It had to be mentioned because of the appalling nature of the sin, for it would colour the whole of Reuben's future. But it was passed over without comment because of deep sensitivity for Israel.

The record finishes with a genealogy of Jacob's sons, followed by the final homecoming and the death of Isaac. Such genealogies were commonly included in written records at that time and here it is especially pertinent. Jacob had left as a young man with only a staff to call his own, he comes home as the leader of a confederation of sub-tribes.

35.22b 'Now the sons of Jacob were twelve.'

The writer reverts back to the name Jacob. The name Israel will be take up again later. It was Jacob who had gone out, and now he returns a fully fledged confederation of tribes in the recognised twelve-fold pattern. His sons, apart from Benjamin, have grown up and are leaders of their own sub-groups, as what happened at Shechem (chapter 34) had demonstrated, and even Benjamin has those who watch over him. The picture is somewhat idealistic to demonstrate his outstanding success and the faithfulness of the God Who has been with him.

35.23-26 'The sons of Leah: Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, and Simeon, and Levi, and Judah, and Issachar, and Zebulun. The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. And the sons of Zilpah, Rachel's handmaid: Dan and Naphtali. And the sons of Zilpah, Leah's handmaid: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob which were born to him in Paddan-aram.'

'Born to him in Paddan-aram.' That is all but Benjamin. But the idea is rather that they were all born prior to his full return to the tribe after being sent to Paddan-aram. The writer views it as one seeing them all return home 'from Paddan-aram'.

35.27 'And Jacob came to Isaac his father, to Mamre, to Kiriath-arba (the same is Hebron) where Abraham and Isaac sojourned.'

At last Jacob is home. He has come to take up his now rightful place as heir to the family tribe and the covenant promises. He is now in the line of Abraham and Isaac.

For Mamre see 13.18; 14.13; 18.1. Kiriatharba means 'city of four', possibly of four parts. It was as an annotator tells us the later city of Hebron. Compare for its use Joshua 14.15; 15.54; 20.7; Judges 1.10.

35.28-29 'And the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years, and Isaac yielded up his breath and died, and was gathered to his people old and full of days. And Esau and Jacob his sons buried him.'

Isaac lives on for many years with Esau and Jacob as his support. He was not much more than

one hundred when Jacob left for Paddan-aram and he had thus many years of life ahead of him. But he was blind and old before his days and there were no special covenants to record. However, as with all the ages of the patriarchs, the number is a round number and therefore probably contains a meaning of its own. The aim is to show a long and successful life. How close he came to those exact years neither he nor we would know. It is extremely doubtful that records of age were kept over so many years.

Meanwhile, after the return of Jacob their wealth of possessions and cattle and herds was so great that Esau eventually removes permanently, with all he possesses, to his well established base in Mount Seir (36.6). His visits to his family home will now be far fewer and less protracted. Previously he has shared his time between assisting his father in times of necessity, lambing, sheepshearing, harvest and so on, and leading his band of warriors. Now that can be left to Jacob. But he remained in touch with his family and when his father died he came to join Jacob, and they buried him together.

These words may well have been added as a postscript to the previous covenant record.

36.1 'Now this is the family history of Esau, the same is Edom.'

Here again we have evidence of a colophon, a heading or final phrase that indicates content and ownership of a tablet. Esau was still the eldest son and head of the family and the family records would as such be his responsibility after the death of Isaac, Thus it may be that his name is now subscribed to the previous record to indicate ownership, although the actual recording would be made by a tribal member more suited to it. (Even if he did happily hand over the task to a tribal record keeper, or even to Jacob, the colophon would be in his name).

The fact that the later compiler had these covenant records available for putting together his narrative demonstrates how carefully they were preserved, some no doubt being read out at the family festivals as they renewed their covenant with Yahweh. It is significant that the last hint of a colophon and of covenant records occurs in 37.2. From then on we have a continual story. This is easily explained by the fact that that is basically the record of the life of Joseph, put together in Egypt as befitted such an important personage and written on papyrus. There were no longer then the limitations of clay and stone.

Alternately it may be a heading to define the content of the following genealogical history (compare 'the same is Edom' in 36.19, and 'this is Edom, the father of the Edomites' in 36.43). But 36.9 probably refers back to verse 8 and is therefore itself the colophon to that section. Thus we may have here the combination of a colophon and a heading, 'this is the family history of Esau' as the closing colophon and 'Esau, the same is Edom' as a heading. Either way they are evidence that we are dealing with written records.

If this latter be so then 37.1-2a may be seen as originally ending the record we have just been looking at with chapter 36 being incorporated by the compiler in order to sum up the life of Esau after his mention in 35.29. The covenant record from 35.1 then ends with 'this is the family history of Jacob' (37.2a). This may seem more satisfactory from a modern point of view, for we like everything to fit a pattern, but it may not accord with ancient practise.

The Descendants and Allies of Esau (36.2-43)

This chapter now deals with the history of Esau prior to putting him to one side. This fits in with the compiler's methods all through Genesis where he deals with secondary lines first before concentrating on the main line (e.g. the Cainite line and then the line of Seth - Genesis 4 & 5).

It is an interesting chapter and raises complex questions for the reader. We can understand why a record should be kept of the family of Esau, for he was closely connected with the family tribe at the time of the death of Isaac and was clearly on good terms with Jacob, but why should a record be kept of the genealogy of Seir the Horite (36.20-30) and of the kings of Edom (36.31-43)? For these records must finally have been in the hands of the family tribe in order to be compiled with the other records and be recorded here. The only time when these would have been of such interest was when Esau was in close contact with them and in the process of amalgamating with them (and was connected with them by marriage), or possibly if some Edomites were included among the slaves in Egypt and in the mixed multitude of Exodus 12.38.

There would appear to be a number of records utilised, all genealogical. These comprise verses 2-9, the sons of Esau; 10-19 the descendants and chiefs (or dukes) of Esau; 20-30 the sons and chiefs of Seir the Horite; 31-39, the kings who reigned in the land of Edom; 40-43, chiefs that came from Esau.

The Sons of Esau (36.2-9)

36.2 'Esau took his wives of the daughters of Canaan; Adah the daughter of Elon the Hittite, and Oholibamah the daughter of Anah, the daughter of Zibeon the Hivite, and Basemath, Ishmael's daughter, sister of Nebaioth.'

In 26.34 Esau's Canaanite wives are named Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite. Ishmael's daughter is called Mahalath, sister of Nebaioth (28.9). Thus Basemath has become Adah, Judith has become Oholibamah (Beeri the Hittite may well have been married to Anah), and Mahalath becomes Basemath.

One possibility we must consider is that on marriage Canaanite wives often took on another name indicating their change of status. Thus Judith may have become Oholibamah ('tent of the high place'), a suitable marriage name due to its connection with the holy tent, and a name connected with her mother's family, and Mahalath may have become Basemath (possibly 'the fragrant one'). Basemath may have thus changed her name to Adah (meaning unknown).

As Basemath probably means 'fragrant' it is also very possible that this was a nickname regularly used by Esau. He may have called Adah this as a love name, and later applied it to Mahalath when his affections varied (compare our use of 'honey' or 'sugar') causing confusion to the record keepers. Or he may have liked the name and when Basemath relinquished it on marriage have suggested it to Mahalath as a married name.

As mentioned Oholibamah means 'tent of the high place' suggesting a tabernacle similar to some extent to that later in use in by the Israelites. It is also the name of one of the 'dukes of Edom' (36.41) and of one of the daughters of Anah the Horite (36.25). The dual name theory would account for why a Canaanite woman bears an Edomite name due to Esau's early connections with Edom prior to his marriages. Consider also how Beeri the Hittite appears to have been married to an 'Edomite' woman, Anah daughter of Zibeon the Hivite (compare Zibeon the Horite in 36.24 who also had a son called Anah. There seems to be some parallel between Hivites and Horites).

That Anah was an important person due to her connections comes out in the constant reference to her (verses 2, 14, 18). She was the daughter of Zibeon the Hivite (verse 2) who is probably the same as Zibeon, the son of Seir the Horite (verse 20). We do not know who the Hivites were but they are regularly mentioned as one of the tribes in Canaan, and their connection with the Horites is suggested here. Indeed the name may be an alternative rendering, 'v' instead of 'r', either as an error in copying or otherwise. The LXX of Genesis

34.2 and Joshua 9.7 renders Hivite as Horite which may suggest an original different reading.

36.4-5 'And Adah bore to Esau Eliphaz, and Basemath bore Reuel. And Oholibamah bore Jeush, and Jalam, and Korah. These are the sons of Esau who were born to him in the land of Canaan.

The sons born to Esau by his wives in Canaan are now listed. 'Reuel' appears to mean 'friend of God'.

36.6-8 'And Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters, and all the folk in his house, and his cattle and all his beasts and all his possessions which he had gathered in the land of Canaan and went into a land away from his brother Jacob, for their substance was too great for them to dwell together and the land of their sojournings could not bear them because of their cattle, and Esau dwelt in Mount Seir. Esau is Edom.'

This combination of genealogy and snippets of historical events is a feature of early genealogies, compare the Sumerian king lists where the same occurs.

As we have seen Esau had divided his time between his band of warriors in Mount Seir and helping his father in Canaan. But now that his father is dead, and we cannot doubt that he left a generous legacy to Esau, he removes to Mount Seir permanently. This was necessary anyway because their joint possessions were so great that there was not room for both Jacob and Esau. Once again we have brought home to us the wealth of the patriarchs and their sizeable 'households'.

'Esau is Edom.' A constant refrain in this chapter. See verse 1, verse 19. Compare verse 9 and verse 43 where 'Esau is the father of Edom' that is of the Edomites. Esau was nicknamed Edom because of his red colouring, and this name passes on to those who are connected with him.

36.9 'This is the family history of Esau the father of Edom in mount Seir.'

Again we have a colophon showing to whom the tablet belongs. (Alternately it may head the following tablet).

The Descendants and Chieftains of Esau (36.10-19).

36.10 'These are the names of Esau's sons: Eliphaz the son of Adah the wife of Esau, Reuel the son of Basemath the wife of Esau.'

For these sons of Esau compare verse 4.

36.11-12 'And the sons of Eliphaz were Teman, Omar, Zepho, and Gattam and Kenaz. And Timna was concubine to Eliphaz, Esau's son, and she bore to Eliphaz Amalek. These are the sons of Adah, Esau's wife.'

This is a list of Esau's grandsons through Eliphaz.

36.13 'And these are the sons of Reuel: Nahath and Zerah, Shammah and Mizzah. These were the male descendants (sons) of Basemath, Esau's wife.'

This is a list of Esau's grandsons through Reuel. We note that they can be called 'sons' of Basemath for they are her grandsons, a regular usage of the word 'sons'.

36.14 'And these were the sons of Oholibamah, the daughter of Ana, the daughter of Zibeon, Esau's wife. And she bore to Esau, Jeush and Jalam and Korah.'

For these sons of Esau compare verse 5.

36.15 'These are the chieftains of the sons of Esau, the sons of Eliphaz the firstborn of Esau. Chief Teman, Chief Omar, Chief Zepho, Chief Kenaz, Chief Korah, Chief Gatam, Chief Amalek. These are the chieftains that came of Eliphaz in the land of Edom. These are the male descendants of Adah.'

For this list of chieftains compare verse 11-12. We note that Chief Korah is not mentioned there. He is thus related in some way to Adah but not one of her grandsons (although he may have slipped in somehow due to careless copying, from verses 5 or 18). In 1 Chronicles 1.36 a Timna is mentioned as a son of Adah additionally to the six, but he may have died in childbirth. So Esau's sons and grandsons achieve chieftainship in Edom.

36.17 'And these are the sons of Reuel, Esau's son: Chief Nahath, Chief Zerah, Chief Shammah, Chief Mizzah. These are the chieftains that came of Reuel in the land of Edom. These are the male descendants of Basemath, Esau's wife.'

Compare verse 13 for these as grandsons of Esau.

36.18 'And these are the sons of Oholibamah, Esau's wife: Chief Jeush, Chief Jalam, Chief Korah. These are the chieftains that came of Oholibamah, the daughter Anah, Esau's wife.'

For these sons of Esau compare verses 5 and 14. The constant mention of Oholibamah's mother Anah suggests that she was very important. She was related to the Hivites/Horites and possibly Esau's marriage connection with her was very important in amalgamating the tribes to finally form Edom. No sons of these chieftains are recorded. It may be that they were childless when slain on a raid or in battle.

36.19 'These are the male descendants of Esau and these are their chieftains. The same is Edom.'

Thus ends the list of male descendants and chieftains of Esau, and once more we are reminded that they compose Edom.

The Descendants and Chieftains of Seir the Horite (36.20-30).

Seir the Horite was leader of the tribe of Horites who dwelt in Seir, which was presumably named after him. His sons were their chieftains and the daughter of one of them had a daughter who became the wife of Esau. Thus Esau was connected with this powerful family. This explains his ready access to Seir and why he spent some considerable time there, while still helping his father Isaac in tribal affairs. (His connection with Ishmael was also important).

36.20-21 'These are the sons of Seir the Horite, the inhabitants of the land: Lotan and Shobal and Zibeon and Anah, and Dishon and Ezar and Dishan. These are the chieftains that came of the Horites, the children of Seir in the land of Edom'

We are now given the genealogy and status of the family of Seir the Horite. One of them is Zibeon, father of Anah whose daughter married Esau (verse 2). It is a very interesting fact that this genealogy is recorded in 1 Chronicles 1.38-42 even though they were not directly related to the patriarchs. They were somehow looked on as 'family'.

36.22 'And the children of Lotan were Hori and Hemam, and Lotan's sister was Timna.'

The children of the eldest son are mentioned first. The mention of his sister Timna may suggest that among the Horites women had a more prominent place than usual.

36.23 'And these are the children of Shobal: Alvan and Manahath and Ebal, Shepho and Onam.'

These are the children of the second son.

36.24 'And these are the children of Zibeon: Aiah and Anah. This is the Anah who found the hot springs in the wilderness as he fed the asses of Zibeon his father.'

The historical reference to the finding of an important water source is again typical of ancient genealogies.

But there is here a slight puzzle. Anah has the same name as Anah the daughter of Zibeon (verse 1). We note that the word 'children' is now being used and not 'sons' and had it not been for the masculine verbs in this verse we might have thought that this was Anah the daughter. Indeed we must ask whether this is not the case in spite of the verbal use. Perhaps in Seir among the Horites certain women were treated as men and spoken of accordingly.

In the Hebrew of 36.2 Anah is the daughter of Zibeon. However the Samaritan Pentateuch, the LXX and the Syriac all read 'son' (thus RSV). But that is the easier reading and the reason for the change is obvious. It is to remove a problem. This would equate him with Beerli the Hittite and 'beer' does mean 'well' so that Beerli may have been a name given to him on the discovery of these important springs. The idea is attractive but fails to take into account how the then very difficult rendering 'daughter' ever got into the text. Thus it would seem to us that a better solution lies in seeing the Horites as giving women a special prominence not accorded elsewhere.

Alternately it may be a coincidence of names. If Anah the daughter was given the same name as Anah the son, and Anah the uncle (verse 20) it is not inconceivable that Anah's daughter might take the same name on marriage as Anah the uncle originally gave to his daughter. Its strangeness or its religious meaning may have appealed to her.

36.25 'And these are the children of Anah: Dishon and Oholibamah.'

The parallel verses show that these are the descendants of Seir's fourth son Anah not of the Anah in the previous verse. Anah was clearly a popular name among the Horites.

36.26 'And these are the children of Dishon: Hemdan and Eshban and Ithran and Cheran.'

These are the children of Dishon, Seir's fifth son, not of Anah's son Dishon. Repetition of names was clearly popular with the Horites, as elsewhere.

36.27 'These are the children of Ezer: Bilhan and Zaavan and Akan.'

These are the children of Seir's sixth son.

36.28 'These are the children of Dishan: Uz and Aran.'

These are the children of Seir's seventh son.

36.29-30 'These are the chieftains that came of the Horites: Chief Lotan, Chief Shobal, Chief Zibeon, Chief Anah, Chief Dishon, Chief Ezer, Chief Dishan. These are the chieftains who came of the Horites according to their chieftains in the land of Seir.'

This confirms verse 21. Repetition was common in narratives in the Ancient Near East. Possibly the fact that chieftainship stops with the sons suggests that authority then passed over to Esau and his descendants, but it may simply arise from the fact that the tablet was written before the chieftainship could be passed on.

Thus in these tablets we are given a full picture of the leadership of the confederate tribes in Edom over two generations. Esau was clearly proud of his sons' achievements and of his extended family.

The Kings Who Reign in the Land of Edom (36.31-39).

We have no means of knowing over what period these kings reigned other than that it was before a king reigned over the children of Israel. The kingship was clearly a kingship that depended on the quality of the candidates rather than on dynastic succession. It was necessary for the king to be a capable war leader for the people needed to be able to defend themselves and themselves probably engaged in raids. With people like Esau to contend with they had to be capable. The switch from verses 39-40 may suggest a time before the chieftainships of Esau's sons. The section is transferred, with few changes, en bloc to 1 Chronicles 1.

36.31 'And these are the kings that reigned in the land of Edom before there reigned any king over the children of Israel.'

This phrase does not necessarily require that at the time of writing there was now kingship in Israel. The promise to Jacob (35.11), and the promise to Abraham before him (17.6, 16), which Esau would know well, was that their descendants would be kings. Thus this boast could well have been made by Esau in the light of that fact to point out that while there were, and had been, kings in Edom, and thus settled statehood, none such had yet arisen among the children of Israel, thus demonstrating his own status. Indeed the very unusual phrase 'king over the children of Israel' (only here and 1 Chronicles 1.43 where it is copied from this verse) is a sign of the age of the narrative. We could argue that later generations would have used the regular stereotyped phrase 'king over Israel'.

But who were these kings? We neither know that nor when they reigned. Their lives may well have been fairly brief for they were war leaders in rugged territory, and the fact that they came from so many backgrounds and reigned in different 'cities' suggests the nature of the people they ruled. It may well be that as Esau integrated with the tribes in Edom, eventually to become their leader, 'the father of the Edomites', he came across a record of these kings or heard their lineage recited at the installation of a new king, and boastfully included it here to demonstrate that his new people were more civilised than those of his family tribe.

36.32-34 'And Bela the son of Beor reigned in Edom, and the name of his city was Dinhabah. And Bela died and Jobab the son of Zerah of Bozrah reigned in his place. And Jobab died, and Husham of the land of the Temanites reigned in his place.'

The 'city' of Dinhabah need only have been a group of dwellings or even a tent encampment. Bozrah similarly, although a long time later it was an established city. Whether the Temanites were named after Teman (36.11), or Teman was named after the Temanites, we do not know. Eliphaz the Temanite was one of Job's comforters (Job 2.11). Much later on Teman was an established city (Jeremiah 49.20).

36.35 'And Husham died and Hadad, the son of Bedad, who smote Midian in the field of Moab, reigned in his place, and the name of his city was Avith. And Hadad died and Samlah of Masrekah reigned in his place.'

The fact that Hadad smote Midian in the countryside of Moab dates him after the time when Midian and Moab were established as tribes. Midian was a son of Abraham by Keturah and Moab was the son of Lot, but there were tribes in Moab in settled villages before that and they probably gave their names to the tribes they eventually took leadership over. How easily a capable leader from any background could take over a tribe in the right circumstances here in Edom is demonstrated by this king list.

36.36 'And Hadad died and Samlah of Masrekah reigned in his place. And Samlah died and Shaul of Rehoboth by the River reigned in his place. And Shaul died and Baalhanan, the son of Achbor reigned in his place. And Baalhanan the son of Achbor died and Hadar reigned in his place, and the name of his city was Pau, and his wife's name was Mehetabel the daughter of Matred, the daughter of Me-zahab.'

If The River means the Euphrates as it usually does in Scripture then Shaul has come some distance, but it is quite possible that people would enter this warring, raiding tribe from many sources. Alternately it may refer to a local river known as The River. We note again that daughters are important in this area and may well have been influential.

The Chieftains Descended From Esau (36.40-43).

36.40-43a 'And these are the names of the chieftains who came of Esau, according to their families, after their places, by their names. Chief Timna, Chief Alva, Chief Jetheh, Chief Oholibamah, Chief Elah, Chief Pinon, Chief Kenaz, Chief Teman, Chief Mibzar, Chief Magdiel, Chief Iram. These are the chieftains of Edom according to their habitations in the land of their possession.'

The introduction may suggest that once there were place names present in the lists as with some of the kings previously. But it may simply be pointing out that they ruled in different places, descended from one or other of the sons, not one after the other. The placing of the names may suggest that these chieftains followed and replaced the kings. Both Timna (verse 12) and Oholibamah (verse 25) have previously been females. This may well confirm the idea that women were influential in this society. Apart from these only Kenaz is elsewhere mentioned (verses 11, 15) and he may not have been the same one. We may therefore assume that these are later descendants of Esau, possibly great-grandsons.

36.43b 'This is Edom the father of the Edomites.'

This may well be a concluding colophon showing that the tablet belongs to Esau, possibly with 36.1 as the opening heading. 'The father of the Edomites' simply indicates that he became their patriarch (but see 37.1). Alternately note the unusual phrases that occur in the chapter which appear abruptly, 'the same is Edom' (36.1a), 'Esau is Edom' (36.8), 'the same is Edom' (36.19), 'this is Edom the father of the Edomites' (36.43b). These may well be remnants of headings and colophons.

37.1 'And Jacob dwelt in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan.'

In contrast with Esau Jacob remains in the promised land. This is the crucially important statement that keeps Jacob firmly established as the inheritor of the promises. He remains where God purposes are being outworked.

This verse could well in the original tablet have immediately followed 35.29 with chapter 36 inserted by the compiler to explain what happened to Esau before carrying on the Jacob story. Alternately it could be the conclusion to chapter 36, for it is of similar import to 36.8. This would then make the chapter part of 'the family history of Jacob' (37.2a). Jacob may well have been responsible for the tablet that recorded the Esau story as the elder brother and head of the family once Esau had died, just as Esau could have been responsible for the tablet that told the Jacob story (36.1) because he was the elder brother and head of the family at the time. But the important fact as far as we are concerned is the fact that colophons to tablets are indicated.

37.2a 'This is the family history of Jacob.'

This verse is extremely important as establishing that 'toledoth' means family history. It is clearly a colophon identifying the tablet to which it refers and in our view equally clearly refers backwards. The following narrative begins with 'Joseph' and contains his story in a continuous narrative.