

The Lost Matriarch: Supplement D

Midrash on the Robbery of Jacob and His Night at Bethel

All the Bible tells us about Jacob's flight from Canaan to Haran is the miraculous story of Jacob's night at Bethel, marked by his Ladder dream. (Gen. 28:10-15) But as vivid and wondrous as that biblical story is, the Rabbis still feel the need to insert a midrashic tale into the story of Jacob's travels in order to explain a later difficulty in the text.

The Bible later tells us that after Jacob arrived at Haran, he labored for seven years for each of his first two brides, Leah and Rachel. The Rabbis conclude that he rendered this labor to Laban as a bride-price. This implies that Jacob had no wealth when he arrived. But if Isaac sent Jacob off with his blessing, why didn't Isaac or Rebekah provide Jacob with some of the family wealth for the journey and as gifts for Laban (as Abraham had earlier provided his servant sent to fetch a bride for Isaac, Gen. 24:10)?

One view (the *p'shat*, plain reading) is that Isaac didn't furnish any property to Jacob because Isaac needed it for himself, suggesting that by that time Isaac was relatively poor.¹ But other commentaries develop a fascinating story of Esau's first attempt at revenge against Jacob: Enraged even more at Jacob for having received a second blessing from Isaac, or perhaps simply because Esau saw the vulnerability of the fleeing Jacob, Esau instructed his firstborn son, Eliphaz, to pursue Jacob and kill him. (An alternative version has Esau himself pursuing Jacob.)²

By that point, the twins' sibling rivalry seems to have become focused upon their competition to inherit Abraham's covenantal relationship with God. Since Eliphaz was the firstborn son of Esau, he would be next in line to receive his father's special spiritual inheritance rights, plus the double inheritance portion of the birthright. So Eliphaz would have an important personal stake in removing his father's sole rival for the birthright. On the other hand, Esau may have sent Eliphaz simply because he was the oldest, and because Esau himself (perhaps mindful of the power of Isaac's first blessing to Jacob) feared that Jacob could prove stronger and would triumph in any physical conflict.³

In the midrashic tale, God intervenes in a series of miracles to protect Jacob from pursuit and ambush by Eliphaz and his men. Finally Eliphaz catches Jacob, robs him of all of his possessions, but leaves him alive. Different midrashic versions of the story offer different explanations of why Eliphaz didn't kill Jacob. Perhaps Eliphaz felt a moral reluctance to kill because he had studied Torah with his grandfather Isaac. Or Eliphaz was bought off when Jacob gave him all his wealth. Or Eliphaz was fearful that Jacob would prevail, as his mother, Adah, had warned him. Or Jacob may have convinced Eliphaz not to kill him by relating God's prophecy that the descendants of Abraham would be exiled and enslaved in Egypt for 400 years, so if Jacob were killed before having children, it would have to be Esau's descendants who would be suffer punishment in Egypt.

Finally, some of the Rabbis see the incident as an opportunity to enhance the rabbinic teaching process: They explain that Jacob convinced Eliphaz that he could technically obey the command of his father, Esau, to kill Jacob without actually killing him. Esau could merely rob

rather than kill him because, as a rabbinic proverb states, a man with no property is equivalent to a dead person.⁴

Another feature of the biblical text describing Jacob's flight to Haran provides the foundation for much of the midrashic interpretation of the subsequent competition between Leah and Rachel for producing Jacob's sons. The Bible describes Jacob sleeping at Bethel in a space marked by twelve stones, with only a stone serving as his pillow (certainly consistent with the legend of Jacob having no possessions by that time). That night he experiences his dream-vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder to heaven, and God promising him and his descendants the blessings of land and protection. (Gen. 28:12-15)

According to midrash, the grammar of the text implies that the twelve stones that Jacob placed around his sleeping place miraculously fused into the single pillow stone, signifying a prophecy that Jacob would father twelve tribes that would fuse into a single nation.⁵ The Rabbis later assert that Leah and Rachel were given prophetic knowledge of this divine promise of a nation to be founded from the twelve sons of Jacob/Israel. In midrash, the sisters' prophetic knowledge provides convenient explanations for several developments in their intense competition to be the mother of Jacob's children.

When Jacob awakens in the morning after his Ladder dream at Bethel, he is awed by his experience of divinity. Jacob raises the miraculously fused pillow stone as a pillar to pledge his loyalty to God. (Gen. 28:18) The format of Jacob's pledge to God is noticed by the Rabbis. It seems to be a calculated, conditional pledge ("If God will be with me, ..." Gen. 28:20-22).⁶ So, rather than offering a free and unlimited expression of his faith and obedience, Jacob's promise at Bethel becomes another of the bargaining contracts that mark so much of his life.* A critical element of Jacob's pledge is his vow of tithing (to set aside one-tenth of his future wealth for God). (Gen. 28:11-22) Midrash will later return to Jacob's delay in honoring this vow of tithing in order to explain his varying fortunes when he eventually returns from his exile.

Notes to Supplement D

¹ Isaac had become poor: Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 177.

² Eliphaz (or Esau himself) pursued Jacob to kill him: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 5-6; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 274-5; Weissman, *Midrash Says*, 273.

³ Why Eliphaz was sent: Weissman, *Midrash Says*, 273.

⁴ Why Eliphaz didn't kill Jacob: Culi, *Torah Anthology*, v. 3a, 6; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 274-5; Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, 176; Weissman, *Midrash Says*, 273.

⁵ The twelve tribes prophesy: Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 311, n. 11.

⁶ Jacob imposes a condition upon his covenant with God: Rashi, *Commentaries*, v. 1, 317, n. 22.

* Jacob seems to be the Bible's prototypical lawyer. Besides his pledge to God at Bethel, some of the other significant contract negotiations in his life as reported in the Bible and midrash involve obtaining Esau's birthright for some lentil stew, convincing Eliphaz to let him live because he'd become a man without property, working seven years in exchange for marrying Rachel (but receiving Leah), working another seven years in exchange for marrying the real Rachel, working another six years to be compensated by becoming the owner of the spotted and striped animals from Laban's flock, deflecting Laban's anger over the stolen *teraphim* by promising death to the thief, and placating Esau with a series of lavish gifts upon the family's return to the Land. After Dinah's abduction, Jacob's sons are the ones who actually negotiate the diplomatic wedding agreement that leads to the slaughter of the Shechemites, but this contract is made in Jacob's presence and is presumed to have had his silent acquiescence.