

June 11, 2017 - Gen. 35:9 – 36:43 - Reuben's Incest, Esau's Descendants
Torah Reading: Gen. 35:9 – 36:43 - Reuben's Incest, Esau's Descendants
Psalm 29
Haftarah - (1) Isaiah 43:1-7 + 19-21
(2) Isaiah 61:2-9 + 62:1-2

God reminds Jacob/Israel to go up to Bethel (see **Genesis 28:20-22**). He instructs his family to give up their idolatry, and they buried their idols (possibly looted from the Shechemites, acc. to the Zohar) under a terebinth tree (a species that bears no fruit, so the idols could not be credited with improving its fruitfulness or success).

They also changed their garments, a type of death to self:

Zechariah 3:4 - "He spoke and said to those who were standing before him, saying, "Remove the filthy garments from him " Again he said to him, "See, I have taken your iniquity away from you and will clothe you with festal robes."

Isaiah 61:10 - "He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

Matthew 22:11 - "But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes"

Romans 13:12-14 - "The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light ... But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires"

Ephesians 4:22-24 - "That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness."

Colossians 3:9 - "Lie not one to another*, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; 10 And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him"

Colossians 3:12-14 - "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" ... "And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony"

Revelation 19:8 - "It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints."

Genesis 35:7 - "And he built there an altar, and called the place Elbethel: because

there God appeared unto him, when he fled from the face of his brother.”

"There God appeared (revealed himself) unto him." - The verb here is plural in the Masoretic Hebrew, and so it was in the copy of Targum Onkelos. (The Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint have the singular). This may be one of the few instances in which Elohim is construed grammatically with a plural verb, hinting at the mystery of the Trinity.

Then Jacob's new name is confirmed there as "Israel." Maybe it has to be repeated because Jacob is having trouble making the transition. Or perhaps his coming troubles are meant to test whether Jacob or Israel will respond, and he needs the reminder.

Another Blessing

Genesis 35:10 - "And God said unto him, Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and he called his name Israel. And God said unto him, I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins; And the land which I gave Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land."

Jacob/Israel is still traveling toward the country of Isaac, but again stops short of total obedience and settles "beyond the tower of Edar."

Thirty years at least had passed since Jacob's vow at Bethel; ten or twenty since his return. As before, domestic trouble finds him, perhaps because he has not fully obeyed.

Deborah Dies

Genesis 35:8 - "And Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, died, and she was buried beneath Beth el, beneath the plain; so he named it Allon Bachuth."

"Alon" means "another." The other death was Rebekah. Jacob was told about his mother, who died (Genesis Rabbah 81:5). The actual day of her death is not revealed "so that people should not curse the womb whence Esau had emerged."

Tradition says that Deborah had been sent by Rebekah to tell Jacob to leave and return to Hebron, and she remained with Jacob's entourage until her death.

Rachel dies in childbirth

Genesis 35:18 - And it came to pass, as her soul was in departing, (for she died) that she called his name Benoni: but his father called him Benjamin.

Ramban comments: "[H]is mother called him Ben Oni, and she meant to say, "the son of my mourning" . . . And his father made from "oni" "my strength," And therefore he

called him Binyamin, “the son of power” or of my right hand, “the son of strength.” . . . He wanted to call him by the name his mother had called him, for all his children were called by the names their mothers had called them, and he thus translated it to good and to strength.”

“The word *oni* in Hebrew means both pain and strength. It is the very nature of holiness to translate pain into strength — even to intuit the strength within the pain, the coherence within chaos.” (From ‘Genesis — The Beginning of Desire,’ pp. 214-15).

The new name Israel partly means being able to recognize this.

Remember, Jacob is “an expression of a man who comes with stealth and guile, but Israel is a term denoting a prince and a chief.” - (Zohar vol. 1, 1712, vol. 3, 45a)

Rachel Weeping for her Children

Genesis 35:19 - “And Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem.”

Rachel dies giving birth while on the road to Bethlehem. In the midst of her suffering, the midwife tries to comfort her with the news that she is having another son. In this way, her child is both her cause of weeping and her hope for the future.

In Jeremiah's day, Rachel weeps over her children once more, this time because they are being led into captivity and exile near the very spot where she is buried.

Jeremiah 31:15 - “Thus says the LORD, "A voice is heard in Ramah, Lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; She refuses to be comforted for her children, Because they are no more."

This prophetic incident was fulfilled in the New Testament:

Matthew 2:16-18 - “Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.”

Deeper Meanings?

“The words of Torah are “like a hammer that shatters a rock (Jer. 23:29). They divide into many meanings.” (Rashi on Genesis 32:20) And again, commenting on Exodus 6:9 : “Thus are the words [of Torah] like fire, says Adonai, and like a hammer striking a rock, splitting it into many sparks.”

[See <http://synagoguehamptons.org/category/rabbi-uhrbachs-writings/>]

Reuben commits incest in his father's house

Genesis 35:22 - "And it came to pass when Israel sojourned in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine, and Israel heard [of it], and so, the sons of Jacob were twelve."

This is an example of the Rabbis' search for the "many shards of meaning" that Rashi talks about.

Bilhah gave Jacob two sons and became the mother of Dan and Naphtali (see **Gen. 30:3-8**)

As with Simeon and Levi, Jacob/Israel remembered Reuben's offense when blessing his sons on his deathbed.

Genesis 49:3-4 - "Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the first fruits of my vigor, excelling in rank and excelling in power. Unstable as water, you shall no longer excel because you went up onto your father's bed; then you defiled it — you went up onto my couch."

It is interesting that the text in Genesis 35:22 says that Jacob "heard [of it]," but does not say exactly what Jacob heard, or did or said to Reuben in response to what his son had done.

Why?

The Rabbinical Explanation

There is a rare white space, a blank area, in the Torah text following the words "heard of it," even though the verse is not yet at an end. A sillûq is an accent that marks the end of a verse in the Hebrew Bible. In some texts of this verse, the sillûq indicate the verse was divided in two at one time, and later unified. There is confusion over whether Pārāšâ 8 (Genesis 32:4-36:43) has 153 or 154 verses.

Some Rabbis say Jacob "hears" the white space, the silence, all of the unspoken meanings and implications of Reuven's behavior. Jacob (as Israel) also hears the depth of Reuven's pain, and Reuven's sensitivity to Leah's pain. Was it not enough that Reuven, the first-born, grew up watching his father pass over his mother out of love for Rachel, his mother's sister? Is he now to stand by while even a handmaid is favored over his own mother, his father's first wife?

Gesenius wrote that the double accentuation "intended for public reading, aims at uniting vv. 22 and 23 into one, so as to pass rapidly over the unpleasant statement in v. 22."

The Talmud enjoins that this episode be "read but not translated" by the Targumim (Megillah 25b).

By leaving a gap between two sections of verse 22, the writer of Genesis was indicating that some of the text has been either lost or deliberately deleted. It is also possible that Jacob did or said something to his son, but unfortunately, we will never know Jacob's reaction since the details are missing from the text.

In order to protect the reputation of Jacob and Reuben, the Targum Pseudo Jonathan changes the text by saying that no incest occurred:

Genesis 35:22 (Targum Pseudo Jonathan, circa 8th century A.D.):

“And it was while Israel dwelt in this land that Reuben went and confounded the bed of Bilhah the concubine of his father, which had been ordained along with the bed of Leah his mother; and this is reputed with regard to him, as if he had lain with her. And Israel heard it, and it afflicted him, and he said, Alas, that one should have come forth from me so profane, even as Ishmael came forth from Abraham, and Esau from my father! The Spirit of Holiness answered and thus spake to him: fear not, for all are righteous and none of them is profane! So, after Benjamin was born, the sons of Jakob were twelve.”

The Talmud (b. Shabbath 55b) (written from the first to third century) also seeks to absolve Reuben of incest:

“R. Samuel b. Nahman said in R. Jonathan's name: Whoever maintains that Reuben sinned is merely making an error, for it is said, Now the sons of Jacob were twelve, teaching that they were all equal. Then how do I interpret, and he lay with Bilhah his father's concubine? This teaches that he transposed [disheveled and profaned] his father's couch, and the Writ imputes [blame] to him as though he had lain with her. It was taught, R. Simeon b. Eleazar said: That righteous man was saved from that sin and that deed did not come to his hand.”

The argument is: “He lay.” Because he disheveled the bed, Scripture accounts it to him as if he lay with her - i.e. the dishonor caused by the troubling of Jacob's household was on a par with incest.

In essence, once Rachel died, Jacob took his bed, which had regularly been placed in Rachel's tent and not the other tents, and placed it in the tent of Bilhah. Reuven came and demanded satisfaction for the insult to his mother, saying, “If my mother's sister was a rival to my mother, should the maidservant of my mother's sister be a rival to my mother?” Therefore he “disheveled the bed.”

When Jacob heard, he began to tremble, and said, ‘woe is me that there be such an unfit one among my children.’ Until he was informed by God that Reuven had done teshuvah (repentance), as it says, “the sons of Yaakov were twelve” (Sifre Devarim 31a).

“The Sages interpreted that these words are intended to teach us that all of them (Jacob's sons) were equal, and all of them were righteous, for Reuben had not sinned.”

— [from Shab. 55b]

The earlier Book of Jubilees (33:1-23) written about 160–150 BC, tells the story as an act of incest:

“And Reuben saw Bilhah, Rachel's maid, the concubine of his father, bathing in water in a secret place, and he loved her. And he hid himself at night, and he entered the house of Bilhah [at night], and he found her sleeping alone on a bed in her house. And he lay with her, and she awoke and saw, and behold Reuben was lying with her in the bed, and she uncovered the border of her covering and seized him, and cried out, and discovered that it was Reuben. And she was ashamed because of him, and released her hand from him, and he fled. And she lamented because of this thing exceedingly, and did not tell it to any one. And when Jacob returned and sought her, she said unto him: "I am not clean for thee, for I have been defiled as regards thee; for Reuben hath defiled me, and hath lain with me in the night, and I was asleep, and did not discover until he uncovered my skirt and slept with me." And Jacob was exceedingly wroth with Reuben because he had lain with Bilhah, because he had uncovered his father's skirt. And Jacob did not approach her again because Reuben had defiled her. ... And let them not say: to Reuben was granted life and forgiveness after he had lain with his father's concubine, and to her also though she had a husband, and her husband Jacob, his father, was still alive. For until that time there had not been revealed the ordinance and judgment and law in its completeness for all, but in thy days (it hath been revealed) as a law of seasons and of days, and an everlasting law for the everlasting generations.”

So does The Testament of Reuben, written circa 100 B.C.:

“Give ear to Reuben your father in the commands which I give unto you. And behold I call to witness against you this day the God of heaven, that ye walk not in the sins of youth and fornication, wherein I was poured out, and defiled the bed of my father Jacob. And I tell you that he smote me with a sore plague in my loins for seven months; and had not my father Jacob prayed for me to the Lord, the Lord would have destroyed me. ...after this I repented with set purpose of my soul for seven years before the Lord. And wine and strong drink I drank not, and flesh entered not into my mouth, and I ate no pleasant food; but I mourned over my sin, for it was great, such as had not been in Israel.”

Reuben lost the prerogative of his birthright, although he continues to be referred to as firstborn. Simeon and Levi were poor candidates for leadership because of the cruelty they displayed at Shechem. Later, Judah commits incest with his own daughter-in-law.

Joseph is given the birthright blessing, Levi was still given the priesthood and Judah still was given the kingship.

1 Chronicles 5:1 - “Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel, (for he was the firstborn; but for as much as he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph the son of Israel: and the genealogy is not to be reckoned after the

birthright).”

There could have been more involved than simply lust:

Bilhah was much older than Reuben. And it is difficult to believe that Bilhah consented on the sex act. As a secondary wife, she would be cast out of the house and probably be stoned to death for committing adultery.

One way that a person asserted political leadership was to sleep with the concubine of the previous leader. Hence Absalom slept with his father David's concubines, and Adonijah seeks to have Abishag, David's later concubine, an act Solomon correctly understands as an attempt on his throne and to which he responds by executing Adonijah for insurrection.

Moses' farewell address mentioning Reuben is similarly ambivalent.

It has been translated as a positive pronouncement: “May Reuben live and not die, and may his men be numerous” (cf. King James translation); Alternatively, “let his men be in the counting,” i.e., the tribe of Reuben will still be considered a part of the nation of Israel. Or as a negative: “May Reuben live and not die, but may his numbers be few” (cf. English Standard Version); or the more neutral “May Reuben live and not die, though his numbers be few” (cf. New Revised Standard Version; New JPS).

Perhaps Moses is meant to be saying: Reuben deserved to die (i.e., to leave no posterity),^[6] but as part of the nation of Israel, he has been spared, and so may his sons multiply. Or perhaps, Moses is intended to be expressing an idea similar to that in Chronicles: Reuben deserved to die; although he has been permitted posterity, he has lost his first-born's privilege, and his numbers will be meager.

The later distribution of the land among the sons of Jacob can be a little confusing. Joseph received two portions (a double portion) of the land. This means that he received the rights of the firstborn. Reuben also received his allotment of the land and so did Simeon. The tribe of Simeon received its allotment south of the land of Judah. Since Simeon was a small tribe, it assimilated with Judah and practically disappeared. Levi was chosen as the priestly tribe so they lived among the other tribes. They also received several cities, the so-called “Levitical cities.”

Unstable as Water

Though Reuben later moderated his brothers' intention of killing Joseph, he did not oppose them. Later he points the finger at his brothers while never acknowledging his own role. He made rash pronouncements: “Slay my two sons, if I bring [Benjamin] not [back] to thee: deliver him into my hand, and I will bring him to thee again” (Gen. 42:37). Trying to appear noble, he only looked foolish.

In that crisis, Judah redeems his own character in volunteering to exchange his life for Benjamin's in Gen. 44:18, 27-34. Thus Judah inherited the kingship scepter, along with the self-sacrificial character fulfilled in his descendent, the Messiah.

The tribe of Reuben inherited only a small plot of land outside the formal boundaries of the Promised Land. During the period of the Judges, the men of Reuben went "missing in action" during a critical war with King Jabin of Hazor, earning them the vocal scorn of the prophetess Deborah (Judges 5:15-16). From this tribe came no judge, no king, and no prophet.

See an interesting examination of Reuben's character here:
<https://www.unbrokenfaith.org/what-it-means-to-be-noble/>

In the 'Testament of Reuben,' Jacob charges his sons "to worship the seed of Judah, who should die for them in visible and invisible wars; and should be among them an eternal king." - an apparent reference to the Messiah, and thus to Christ.

Whitewash, or perceptive interpretation?

In fact, the Talmud tries to whitewash a lot of these uncomfortable incidents.
(Or, are they seeing through to the real meaning of repentance?)

Sanhedrin, f.55,56 - "Whoever says that Reuben, the sons of Samuel, David and Solomon have sinned is decidedly in error."

In one sense, this was a symptom of the kind of racial pride and the elevation of tradition over scripture that Jesus condemned: "For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men." (**Mark 7:8**)

More specifically, from John the Baptist:

Matthew 3:9 - "And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham."

Notwithstanding Rabbinic effort to absolve Reuben of incest, the words of Jacob to Reuben in **Genesis 49:3-4**, clearly shows that Reuben violated his father's marriage bed. He "defiles" it, from a word that means "profane, defile, pollute."
[But really, to "violate the honor of" Bilhah and Jacob's bed, could also be true of the Rabbinical explanations above.]

This kind of incest is later proscribed with a death sentence:

"You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is the nakedness of your father" (Lev. 18:8). In addition, **Leviticus 20:11** says that any man who sleeps with his father's wife shall be put to death. **Deuteronomy 27:20** says that "The one who sleeps with his father's wife is cursed, for he has violated his father's marriage bed."

After all this, Jacob finally returns to his father.

Genesis 35:27 - "And Jacob came to his father Isaac, to Mamre, Kiriath arba, which is Hebron, where Abraham and Isaac dwelt."

Rashi: "There is no order of earlier and later events (chronological order) in the [narrative of] Torah. The selling of Joseph [actually] preceded Isaac's demise by 12 years"

Generations of Esau - Genesis 36:1-43