

CHAPTER 7

BETH-EL AND PENI-EL

(Gen. 28, 32)

The sun's rim was just touching the waters of the Great Sea to the west as a man in shepherd's dress trudged along the rough road to the height where stood the small town of Luz on its *tel*.¹ He turned and looked south along the road to Jerusalem and satisfied himself that there was no sign of his being followed. He then looked over to the single gate of Luz, where its guardians were preparing to close it before darkness fell. "I do not want to be caught like a rat in a trap," he said to himself and looked around for a sheltered spot where he could spend the night.

Jacob was accustomed to sleeping rough, when he was out with his sheep, so with a suitable stone as pillow and his shepherd's cloak wrapped around him he was soon sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. It was the second, if not the third, night since he had left his father's tents near Beer-sheba. Though he had gone at his mother's wish (Gen. 27:42-45) and with his father's blessing (28:1-4), he had left as though the hounds of hell were at his heels, for his conscience imagined a vengeful Esau hunting him down. Only now could he sleep quietly with a confidence that he had really escaped the danger that threatened his life.

¹ *tel* in Hebrew means a mound, and it is used for those man-made mounds which hide the remains of ancient cities. At all times the ground-level of inhabited places rises, but when from the first they were built on hills, the result is a mound easily recognizable by the trained eye.

Suddenly in a dream he found himself bathed in a light which showed him a ladder stretching from the place where he lay right into heaven. (The suggestion that the local rock-formation lay behind his dream may well be correct, but it is irrelevant.) As he watched he became aware of God's angels ascending and descending on the ladder. For most of us the story is so familiar that we do not recognize the strangeness of the language. Any normal child, in retelling the story, would make the angels come down before they mounted up again. This abnormal order is preserved in Jn. 1:51.

It was just this reversal of the normal that was a revelation to Jacob. Suddenly he realized that all the time he had been planning, toiling, deceiving, the angels of God had been around him, protecting him and leading him to the accomplishment of God's purposes, even though it had been along crooked ways of his own choosing and making. They had been with him also on his flight from home, and after reporting to their Master they had returned to go with him on his further way.

As this humiliating yet comforting fact sank into his consciousness, the Glory at the head of the ladder seemed to descend it and stand by him and speak to him, "I am Jehovah, the God of Abraham, your father, and the God of Isaac". This was the guarantee to Jacob that he stood firmly in the succession of the purposes of God and his salvation. The linking of "your father" with Abraham rather than with Isaac probably stresses less the priority of Abraham in God's purposes and more that Isaac's misunderstanding of God's will had not compromised Jacob's standing in the working out of God's purposes. Then God renewed the promises of blessing and of the land to Jacob and his descendants (verses 13-15). Finally there came the promise of the divine presence, protection and carrying out of his purposes.

Silence fell, the light vanished, and Jacob woke with a start. Trembling with awe he said, "This is a terrifying

place, the very house of God (Beth-el)". He lay awake until the first light of dawn showed in the east. He rose swiftly, not now because he feared that Esau might come, but because the fear of the presence of God was upon him. He up-ended the stone that had served as his pillow and anointed it with oil, so as to mark for all who passed by, that a theophany, a divine revelation, had taken place there. It is clear that the inhabitants of Luz so understood it, for centuries later, after the conquest, Israel was able to claim the site as one of its chief sanctuaries. For the polytheist it was not important which god had claimed a few square yards of earth by his presence, but they recognized that they had been so claimed and thus rendered holy.

Before he went on his way, Jacob made a solemn promise. If God's promise should prove true, and he experienced God's presence in going, in sojourning and in returning, then Jehovah, and Jehovah alone would be his God, i.e. he would acknowledge that Jehovah alone was the source of all power. He would recognize in Beth-el his centre for worship, and he would express both his dependence and his gratitude by the giving of tithes.

Repeatedly Jacob has been criticized for his vow. We are asked to recognize the old schemer as he tries to drive a bargain with God. In all too many circles we are invited to show our superiority over him, by omitting, when we sing "O God of Bethel" its last verse,

"Such blessings from Thy gracious hand
Our humble prayers implore;
And Thou shalt be our chosen God,
And portion evermore."

Quite apart from the fact that Jacob could hardly have believed that his tithes would mean so much to God, that he could buy his favour by offering them – if we are to believe what some Christians say, they do believe this! – we must not forget his position. His grandfather had begun the

pathway of faith, but he cannot have been much more than a memory of a very old man, for Jacob was fifteen, when he died at the ripe old age of a hundred and seventy-five. Isaac, however, had done his best to frustrate the divine purpose, so there was far more excuse for any doubts that Jacob may have felt than there is for most of us. Quite apart from that, we must recognize that our prayers are very often on the same level.

Jacob stayed twenty years in Haran with Laban (31:41). Little that is told of him during this time throws much light on his attitude towards God. Clearly he still believed that God helps those that help themselves, yet there is nothing to make us question the honesty of his motivation for return given to his wives (31:3-13). He is seen as a man who has come to realize that his prosperity has been created by God. Yet this was still bound up with a real element of doubt and fear (31:31). In the moment of crisis, however, his faith shone out (31:42), and there is no reason for doubting that his words to Laban represented his real feelings. In other words Jacob was in the position of so many today; true faith and human effort and fears were strangely mixed. Even if we do not recognize this contradiction in ourselves, we meet it so often in our friends, that we should beware of condemning it too strongly in Jacob.

Laban had caught up with his son-in-law somewhere in the hills of Gilead. When they parted, Jacob moved southwards towards the gorge of the Jabbok. This was the point of decision. Once he had reached the point where it opened out and made a way to the Jordan valley and so to Canaan, he was committed to going on or turning back. In addition, when he had brought his flocks down to the stream level, it would be very difficult to extricate them quickly, should he be attacked.

That is why, while he was resting his flocks after the forced march from Haran, Jacob sent messengers to Esau to announce his return (32:3-5). He evidently moved on down into the Jabbok valley, while he waited to hear Esau's

reaction. When his returning servants came with the terrifying news that Esau was hard on their heels with four hundred men (32:6), Jacob knew himself trapped. We have grown accustomed to the large numbers in our modern civilisations and armies, that Esau's retinue of four hundred seems little out of the ordinary to us. It is modern archaeology that has brought such figures to life. It has shown us that the average population of a Canaanite town at the time was round five thousand. In the Amarna letters some centuries later we find Canaanite kings begging their Egyptian overlord for eighty, forty, or even twenty trained soldiers to help guard their cities against the barbarians that had broken into the land. So Esau's retinue could hardly mean less than dire vengeance on his brother.

In his 1984 George Orwell has as one of his central thoughts that in every person there is some concealed fear, which, if it is brought into the open, will break him down and destroy him. Whether this is, or is not, a universal fact, it is certainly very common. In Jacob it was his fear of his brother. Away in Haran Esau had seemed a long way off. In all probability God's command to Jacob to return seemed to him an implied guarantee that Esau had in some way been neutralized. Now his hurried approach at the head of his troop threw Jacob out of his stride. His first impulse was to divide all his possessions, including his wives and children, into two separated groups (32:7, 8). He knew his brother's temperament well enough to expect that his anger, hatred and injured honour would be sated and satisfied by one blood-bath, and so the other group would be spared.

This was not good enough. The plan might miscarry, and in any case the price to be paid was too heavy to be contemplated with equanimity. So we find Jacob turning to God in what may be regarded as a model prayer (32:9-12). In it he reminded God of His purpose and promises. He acknowledged his unworthiness and God's faithfulness. He concluded with a cry for help and a new reminder of God's promises.

Though he had committed all into God's hand, his heart was not at rest. As night drew on, he chose out a princely gift – Jesus' parable of the Good Shepherd (Matt. 18:12–14, Lk. 15:4–7) clearly implies that in his time a flock of a hundred sheep was a large one – which he disposed to the best effect and sent on ahead (32:13–21). But even so he could not sleep. In his restlessness he sent his wife and children across the Jabbok as though to hasten the inevitable confrontation; he waited alone for what might ensue. The story simply tells us, "Jacob was left alone". Man has a tremendous skill in using friends, work and circumstances to come between him and his God, to avoid confrontation with the all-revealing holiness of his Maker.

Outwardly the story that follows is one of the most mysterious in the Bible. We are told that "a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day". Jacob himself recognized that he had been wrestling with God (32:30), while Hosea interprets it, "In his manhood he strove with God. He strove with the angel and prevailed" (12:3, 4), so suggesting that the man was an angel directly representing God. This seems to be something completely alien to anything we may be called on to experience, until we remember that Jacob stood right at the beginning of God's deeper revelation to men and that he had very little spiritual tradition behind him. When we grasp this, it is not too hard to understand that what we have to experience within us had to find external expression for Jacob. In varying measure this is something that happens repeatedly to the young believer in contrast to mature Christians, to the isolated disciple in contrast to those in a strong Christian fellowship, to early converts from heathendom in contrast to those in lands where the Church is firmly established. Jacob's experience was one that very many have had to share; only its outward form was exceptional.

God was saying to Jacob, as they wrestled under the light of the moon, "Do you trust me, Jacob?"

"Lord, you know I do!"

“What about Esau?”

“Lord, you know I cannot; you must get him out of the way somehow.”

“No, Jacob; you must trust me for him also.”

“No, Lord! That I can't.”

“If you want my help and blessing, you must!”

“No, Lord, you ask too much; only get Esau out of the way, and you may ask what you will”.

If there is a deeply hidden fear in any one of us, God must bring it to the light, if we are to see our profession of trust made a reality and we are really to be transformed by the power of Christ. When this challenge comes to us, it may well involve a wrestling with God fully comparable with Jacob's and which in its intensity can sometimes almost take on a physical dimension.

So it went on the livelong night until the first light of dawn began to show. It had to be now or never. Esau was at hand, and if Jacob did not trust now he never would. So the strange wrestler touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh and put his leg out of joint. “I must leave you now, for the day is breaking”. But Jacob clung to him desperately; “I will not let you go, unless you bless me. You have crippled me; you have handed me over helpless to my brother's anger; now you must meet my need.” Behind all Jacob's struggles lay the conviction that somehow he could yet circumvent his thick-skulled brother. If the worst came to the worst, he could take to his heels and escape, but now —! In spite of all his fears there was nothing left to him but to trust.

“What is your name?” “Jacob”, the smart fellow. Again and again he must have boasted to his friends that he was well named, for none had been able to outsmart him in the long run. Now his world lay in ruins around him as he drank to the dregs of the cup of the vanity of human effort, wisdom and skill. “Your name shall no more be called Jacob but Israel (God strives), for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” The name Israel could equally well mean “He who strives with God”, but since it

is clearly intended to be honourable, "God strives" is obviously preferable. Yet the other is implicit in it, for there would have been no need for God to have striven had Jacob not resisted him. Jacob had prevailed at the cost of becoming a cripple, and he would prevail against men by yielding to God.

This was not enough for Jacob. "Tell me, please, your name". His subsequent explanation (32:30) why he called the place of his wrestling Face-of-God (Peni-el), "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved", shows that he knew well enough with whom he had been wrestling. It may be considered almost certain that he shared in what was probably a universal superstition at the time – another example may be found in Exod. 3:13 (cf. p. 91) – that knowledge of the hidden, secret name of a god gave some control over him and could ensure his help in time of need. This is magic and the true God has no truck with magic. The only way in which a man can be sure of the help of the one true God is to come before him in utter weakness, trust and dependence.

So, as the sun rose, Jacob went limping to meet his great fear. Wonder of wonders, Esau fell on his neck and kissed him (33:4). Over the letters of "and-he-kissed-him" (one word in Hebrew) in Hebrew stands a row of dots, which tradition explains as the marks of Esau's teeth, i.e. he did not kiss Jacob but bit him. While we may dismiss this piece of rabbinic fancy without further discussion, we may accept the implied judgment on Esau's behaviour. There is no suggestion in Scripture that his character had really changed. The most likely suggestion is that God had spoken to him as he had to Laban (31:29) and had warned him against taking any violent action. We cannot really ignore the implications of the four hundred men who followed him.

When all is said and done, what is important is that God had solved Jacob's pressing problem, not by leading him away from it, but by bringing him to face it in weakness

dependent on God's strength. Tragic is the fact that the whole story lives in Jewish memory not as the indication of what God expects of his people Israel but rather as something that affects their diet. Hindquarters' meat has to be porged, i. e. have the sinew removed, which in many countries means that the orthodox Jew does not eat hindquarters' meat. The Israelites of old did not eat the sinew as a reminder how their ancestor became Israel; if this is forgotten, it becomes a mere bit of ritualism, which is not even commanded by the Law.