

The adventures of Jacob
Beth-el: a thin place (Genesis 28.10-22)
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In the unfolding Jacob narrative, much has taken place since a youthful Jacob duped his twin-brother Esau into selling his birthright for ‘a mess of pottage’ (as the saying goes). Sometime after that incident, Jacob made a clean sweep of the inheritance process by tricking his father Isaac into giving him the blessing that was also due to Esau. Isaac by that stage was blind. With time running out, he told Esau to prepare his favourite game meal, that he might eat it and bless his son before he died (27.4). Rebekah overheard that conversation, and while Esau was still out hunting, she hatched a plan to deceive Isaac and ensure that Jacob got in first. You can read all the details in chapter 27. Things are a bit fraught; Isaac is suspicious but eventually convinced that it is Esau before him. He gives his blessing, and the die is cast. When Esau lumbers in to discover what’s happened, he cries out *‘with a great and very bitter outcry’*. *‘Bless me, too, father!’*, he begs, but it’s too late. *‘Your brother has come in deceit and has taken your blessing’*, Isaac replies. *‘Was he not rightly named Jacob?’*, Esau laments bitterly, *‘for he has now twice grabbed me by the heel [twice supplanted me]. My birthright he took, and look now he’s taken my blessing’*. Esau was born first but Jacob has been getting in ahead ever since.

Unsurprisingly, Esau is incensed; he completely despises his devious brother. He consoles himself with plans to kill Jacob as soon as their father dies. Jacob needs to get away if he’s to survive this murderous wrath. And once more, his mother comes to his aid, justifying the need to leave with a demand that he go find a wife. And that’s where today’s reading picked up.

Jacob is a fugitive on the run, alone in the world with nothing but his wits to help him. He’s secured a birthright and a blessing, but very little to show for it. Leaving the family home in Beersheba he heads into the desert, north towards Haran (his mother’s ancestral home). Jacob, the settler, has become a wayfarer, a wanderer, a reluctant pilgrim. And we wonder what he’ll learn, what it will amount to; this necessary and perilous journey?

Already a good distance away, out in the wilderness he pauses to camp for the night. It doesn't sound like a great spot – it's clearly rocky and doesn't have a name. In Australia we might refer to it as a bit of a 'hole'. Still, with darkness drawing in he has no choice. Let's hear again how the text describes it (v. 11): *'He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones from the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place.'* It's a curious use of repetition here. He's out in the desert, the middle of **nowhere**, and the word 'place' recurs three times in quick succession (6x in the story). This text, mostly so spare, seems to be labouring a point. But what is it? Let's hold on to this question.

Arranging a stone 'from the place' under his head, Jacob lies down to rest. Why anyone would use a stone for a pillow is beyond me, and how they could possibly sleep on one is even more baffling?!?! Nevertheless, sleep, he does. And, in this state of 'vulnerable yielding' (Brueggemann 2010.240), Jacob dreams of a ladder (or ramp) extending from earth to heaven, with angels or messengers (same word) continually ascending and descending. And connected with the visual image, he hears a voice:

I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you ... and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west, east, north and south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you ... Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I've done what I've promised you. (vv. 13-15)

Wow! A promise completely aligned with the covenant made to his father and grandfather, and so pertinent to his current need. Until now it's been all *self-procuring* for Jacob. He stole the birthright, and the blessing; did nothing to deserve it. And now, as if from nowhere; this divine legitimation; it's all pledged to him as *gift*. The unconditional promise of God.

You might think this experience would transform Jacob, that he'd be a new man from here on. When he wakes, he declares, *'Surely the Lord is in this place - and*

I didn't know it! How awesome is this place!' He sets the stone pillow upright, pours oil over it, and names the place *Beth-el* – 'house of God'. He sounds full of enthusiasm! He even makes a vow ... But tell me, how do his words strike you?

If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way ... and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.

This doesn't sound quite as wholehearted to me. God's promise is unconditional, Jacob is hedging his bets. God's promise is about blessing **all** the families of earth, Jacob is fixating on himself – 'my bread', 'my clothing', 'my God'. It seems the old 'heel-grabber' – the withholding, shrewd, self-seeking Jacob – hasn't entirely disappeared. There is some evidence of change; he's actually addressing God now. That's a first. But it's not complete conversion. I can relate – the grasping-self dies hard.

So, what can we learn from his experience? For a start, this dream is potent with meaning. A ramp between earth and heaven; and messengers ascending and descending. It surely signifies connection; the possibility of communication *to and from* God. The fact that it's a dream suggests it is mystical experience. In the dream, heaven and earth are connected, there's no hard and fast separation. The Celts were onto it millennia ago, with talk of 'thin' places. 'Heaven and earth are only three feet apart', the saying goes, and 'in thin places the distance is even shorter'. The text emphasises the place where Jacob had this dream. It seemed like no place, but was in fact, 'a thin place', a Spirit-filled, sacred place. *Beth-el* (he called it) – the house of God ... a gateway to heaven.

So, is it stressing the peculiarity of *this* place, or is it suggesting that *any* place, regardless of appearances, can be a meeting point between earth and heaven? I imagine most of us have been in places that felt 'thin' and filled with Spirit – a church building, a sacred site like Uluru or Kata Juta, a garden, a headland, a forest... There do seem to be special places – sacred sites. But in the

Christian story, God left heaven to inhabit the world and love all its people. And having risen from the dead, Christ continues to dwell among us by his Spirit. This means that any place can be a house of God, a gateway to communion – a slum; ugly industrial area; operating theatre; dementia ward; lonely cell; dusty dry paddock; a church hall; your home; mine. ‘The *world* is charged with the grandeur of God’, proclaims English poet/priest Gerard Manley Hopkins.

In the end, perhaps it’s more to do with our sensitivity and openness than the peculiarity of location. ‘*The Lord is in this place*’, Jacob acknowledged, ‘*but I didn’t know it*’. And maybe that’s what it’s like for many of us much of the time. God everywhere, present and communicating, and we’re blithely unaware!! Designated ‘holy’ places can help us to be more receptive. But nowhere is god-forsaken in the Christian story. And no life either, as God’s persistence with Jacob (and a host of other rascals in Genesis) reveals.

What Jacob is gradually learning, what Christ revealed, is that God is with us in every place – communicating, listening, presiding, blessing. And that, wherever we find ourselves on this earth, we too can connect, listen, learn and pray. ‘*How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God... the gate of heaven.*’

References

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