

Genesis 33

Limits of the Text

In Genesis 33 Moses recounts the reconciliation of Jacob with his brother Esau.

In Jacob's mind, his confrontation with his brother Esau was a continuation of his confrontation with God in 32:22-32. Jacob said to Esau, "I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me,"¹ (33:10) which is intentionally similar to what he said after his encounter with God, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered" (Ge 32:30). Another way to relate these: Esau's confrontation with God prepared him for his confrontation with his brother.

The final paragraph of the chapter, 33:18-20, belongs with the following chapter, as Jacob's disobedience, settling in Shechem instead of Bethel, sets up the story of the rape of Dinah.

Interpretation

There are two major movements in this narrative. The first movement is Jacob's reconciliation with Esau.

33:1 And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two female servants.

In the first part of the reconciliation, Jacob prepared to meet his brother. The time for this meeting arrived the morning after he had wrestled with God (32:22-32).

Here is the tension of the narrative: Esau was coming with four hundred men and Jacob, despite wrestling with God, did not know his brother's intentions or how things would be resolve. Would he be killed? Would his family and livestock be plundered? How would Jacob respond to this situation?

33:2 And he put the servants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all.

Jacob was still fearful of his brother (32:7), so he arranged his family strategically, hoping that some might escape by fleeing if Esau attacked (33:8). The favoritism that began at the start of his marriages (29:30-31) had not dissipated with time, so Rachel and Joseph were put in the safest position. This favoritism would continue (37:3) and later cause problems (37:23-24).

Why was Jacob fearful of seeing his brother again? The answer comes from a previous narrative, the one where Isaac blessed his sons on his deathbed. Esau knew that Jacob had cheated him out of both his birthright and his blessing (Ge

¹ All quotes from ESV unless specified otherwise.

27:36), thus he hated him and planned to kill him (Ge 27:41). Though Jacob had been gone for twenty years, he was afraid that his brother would take advantage of this opportunity to finally get his revenge.

Where has Esau been the last twenty years? Had he been nursing a grudge all this time? Moses revealed very little about Esau. He had moved to the land of Seir (32:3), and he had acquired enough wealth (presumably by war; 27:40) to make him content (33:9). Although Esau was Jacob's brother and was reconciled to him in this narrative, he was not an important character in God's redemptive story; thus Moses "blanks the life of Esau for the twenty years of Jacob's exile"² and his emotions as well.

Why did Jacob meet his brother at all? We didn't he run away (again)? There are two answers to these questions. The first answer is that he was fulfilling an oath. He had met God at Bethel and vowed that if God would return him to Bethel—Jacob was fleeing from Esau at the time—he would make it into a place of worship (28:10-22). Furthermore, God told Jacob to return to the land of his father, a command connected to Jacob's vow (31:3, 13). The second answer is that Jacob wanted reconciliation. His fight with God not only left him with an out of joint hip, it left him with a humbled heart (32:22-32) that needed to make things right. Jacob's new attitude was demonstrated by his posture (bowing down, 33:3), his submission ("your servant," 33:5; "my lord," 33:8), and his gift (33:11).

[33:3 He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.](#)

In the second part of the reconciliation, Jacob trusted God and humbled himself. Although Jacob put Rachel and Joseph in the safest position, he did not put himself there. He moved in front of the three groups and approached his brother first. In this position Jacob lived up to his new name, "God fights." He demonstrated his trust in God by approaching Esau openly, allowing God to handle the situation instead of following his customary approach of scheming and manipulating the situation.

Jacob also humbled himself by bowing to the ground seven times. Bowing seven times was the practice of a vassal to his lord; Jacob treated Esau as if he was Pharaoh himself ruling in his royal court. The irony here is that Isaac had blessed Jacob by saying Jacob's brothers would bow down to him (27:29).

Why did Jacob bow down? Two reasons for his actions can be discerned. First, he was acting diplomatically, wanting to deflect his brother's wrath (assuming it was still present). Second, "Jacob's reversal here expressed his sorrow over his shameful theft of Isaac's blessing."³ "Jacob, his face in the dust, is undoing his manipulative hold on the blessing he had take from Esau through deception."⁴

² Waltke, 451.

³ Hughes, 404.

⁴ Waltke, 453.

33:4 But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

In the third part of the reconciliation, Jacob received Esau's forgiveness. Jacob had prayed that God would deliver him from the hand of his brother (32:11), and here he received God's answer. Somewhere along the way God had fought on Jacob's behalf and changed Esau's heart.⁵ Esau made no mention of the past, but simply forgave his brother. Jacob treated Esau like a king, but Esau treated Jacob like a brother. Thus they were reconciled.

Although Esau was as gracious as he could possibly be, everything was not well with him. "Esau is presented as a forgiving man. However, he lacks the one essential virtue to please God, faith."⁶ "Jacob's awareness of God and his grace is all over the Genesis passage. Esau never once mentioned either grace or God directly."⁷

At this point in the story, Moses began to slow down and give more details, thus leading to the climax of the story.

33:5 And when Esau lifted up his eyes and saw the women and children, he said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant."

When Jacob had fled from his brother, he had nothing; when he returned, he had wives, children, servants, and flocks. In response to Esau's question, Jacob gave credit to God (as he had done previously; 32:10), who had been gracious (*hanan*) to him. This verb means to have mercy, take pity, or show kindness and compassion. Having received grace from God, Jacob hoped to receive grace from his brother; the same root is used in 33:10 and 33:15, where it is translated as favor.

33:6 Then the servants drew near, they and their children, and bowed down.

33:7 Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down. And last Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down.

33:8 Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor in the sight of my lord."

There is probably a play on words here. The word for "company" (*mahaneh*) sounds similar to the word for "present" (*minhah*) used in 33:10; the company Jacob prepared in 32:13-15 was his present to Esau.

Why did Jacob give this present to his brother? He gave in order to find favor; he was looking for grace, particularly forgiveness, for his previous deceptions.

⁵ Hughes, 404.

⁶ Waltke, 453.

⁷ Hughes, 406.

33:9 But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself."

Esau continued his gracious acceptance of his brother, both in calling Jacob "my brother" as opposed to "my vassal" and in turning down the gift. Waltke, however, suggests that Esau's response is "perhaps a double entendre⁸ for 'keep the droves' and, more subtly, 'keep the birthright and blessing'."⁹

33:10 Jacob said, "No, please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me.

As Jacob did not let God go without a blessing (32:26), so he did not let Esau go without accepting his present. Why did Jacob press Esau to take the 550 animals? He wanted to know if Esau had truly forgiven him. If he had found favor, if he had found grace, if Esau was pleased with him, then Esau would accept the present.

Why did Jacob need this assurance of Esau's forgiveness? Jacob had seen the face of God, yet his life had been delivered (32:30). Jacob connected that event to this one. If, against all odds, Esau had forgiven him for his past deceptions, Jacob would know that God had indeed been fighting for him (32:28). This is the climax of the story; Jacob, formerly the schemer and manipulator, was now relying upon God to fight his battles for him. "Jacob's explanation, that seeing Esau's face was like seeing the face of God, showed he knew this deliverance from harm by Esau was of God...Esau's favorable reaction was God's gracious dealing."¹⁰

33:11 Please accept my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough." Thus he urged him, and he took it.

Jacob again insisted that Esau take the animals, but here he used a different word. In 33:10 he called them a present, a word for a gift that often had cultic overtones, referring to a sacrifice offered to God (4:3). In 33:11 he called them the animals a blessing, deliberately using the same word that Esau had used to refer to the blessing Jacob had stolen ("he has taken away my blessing," 27:36). "Jacob subtly makes reparation by offering a 'blessing' to Esau in exchange for the 'blessing' he had taken from him."¹¹ "Jacob showed that he was deliberately wanting to share his blessing with Esau, trying to soften his earlier actions."¹²

⁸ "A double entendre is a figure of speech similar to the pun, in which a spoken phrase can be understood in either of two ways." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_entendre.

⁹ Waltke, 455.

¹⁰ Walvoord, 1:82.

¹¹ Waltke, 455.

¹² Walvoord, 1:82.

Esau's actions in 33:4 were genuine; he had truly forgiven his brother, so he accepted the blessing. "The fact that Esau accepted it and did not reciprocate tells us that this was not a mere exchange of civilities, but that the old score was settled. Restitution had been made in full."¹³ Jacob had truly been forgiven, Jacob had truly seen God fight for him, and Jacob had truly been changed by his encounter with God. "Whereas conflict with Laban is resolved through a treaty of nonaggression, conflict with Esau is resolved through genuine expressions of repentance, extravagant gifts, and exaggerated humility."¹⁴

The second movement of the narrative is Jacob's disengagement from Esau.

33:12 Then Esau said, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go ahead of you."
33:13 But Jacob said to him, "My lord knows that the children are frail, and that the nursing flocks and herds are a care to me. If they are driven hard for one day, all the flocks will die.

33:14 Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, at the pace of the livestock that are ahead of me and at the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir."

Having just been gloriously reconciled to his brother, Esau naturally assumed that Jacob was coming to live with him, much like Abraham and Lot had lived together (13:5-6), so Esau offered traditional hospitality to his brother. But Jacob declined, using his flocks and herds as a convenient excuse. Hughes' assessment is that Jacob exaggerated the difficulties of traveling together¹⁵ because he did not want to go to Seir with his brother.

Perhaps the look on his brother's face was skeptical, because Jacob quickly moved from simple exaggeration to outright deceit, claiming he would join his brother in Seir in time. Whether he rationalized in his heart that might go to Seir one day¹⁶ or simply intentionally deceived his brother, this was sin on Jacob's part. There was no reason for Jacob to deceive his brother; he could have simply told his brother that he was fulfilling a vow (28:10-22) and obeying the command of God (31:3, 13). "Jacob's facile lie contradicted his stunning experience and affirmations of the previous day. He was both Jacob and Israel."¹⁷

33:15 So Esau said, "Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me." But he said, "What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord."

Esau made his second offer, which was to leave some of his men with Jacob for protection. Jacob declined this offer as well, using the same phrase about finding favor that he had used previously (33:8). At this point, Esau probably realized that Jacob did not want to come with him, and "that this is Jacob's polite way of declining his proposal."¹⁸ Since Esau did not make a third offer, it is assumed

¹³ Hughes, 406.

¹⁴ Waltke, 455.

¹⁵ Hughes, 406.

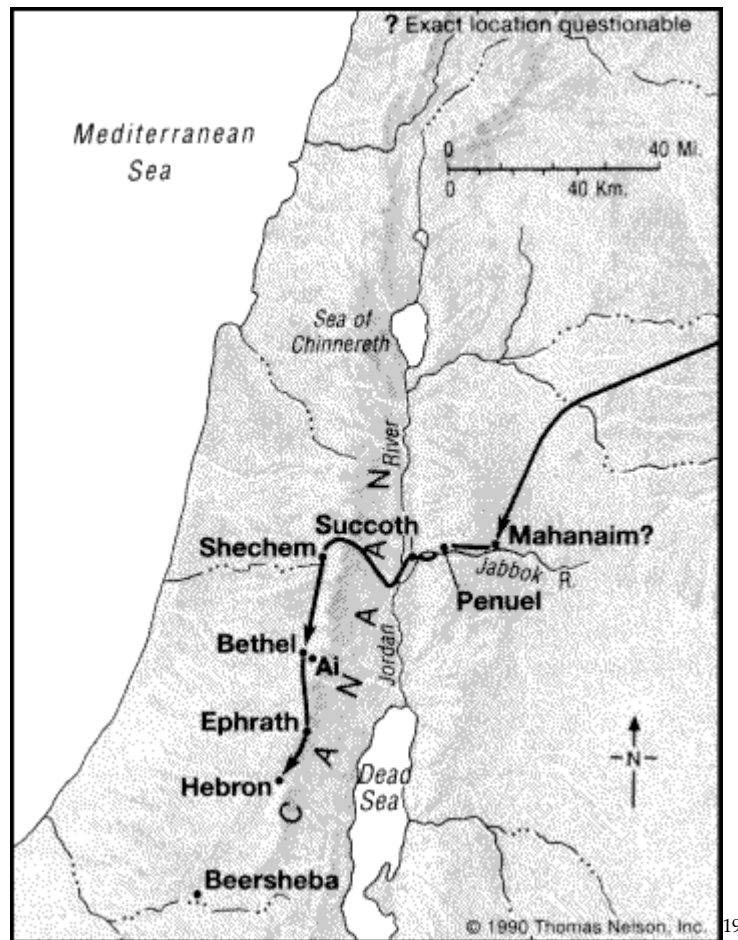
¹⁶ Kidner, 171

¹⁷ Hughes, 406.

¹⁸ Waltke, 456.

that Esau was fine with Jacob's refusal; Jacob had again found favor in the sight of his brother.

Why did Jacob disengage? Why did he not want to go with his brother to Seir? There are two reasons for his refusal. The first reason is that Seir was not in Canaan; it was not a part of the promised land. God had promised this land to Abraham (17:8 and others), and Jacob was supposed to possess it. As noted in the commentary on 33:2 above, Jacob had an oath to fulfill that required him to return to Bethel; Seir was in the wrong direction. Seir was south and east of the Dead Sea, but Bethel was across the Jordan and then to the south.



The second reason is that Esau and his family were not the people of God, and "God's chosen people were to remain separate from those who were not people of faith."²⁰ The blessing of Abraham belonged to Jacob and his descendants (28:4); Esau had no part in this inheritance. Esau "inherits no God-inspired dream, no vision of the transcendent. He reacts to the immediate, without reflection on the future. He despises his right to take part in Abraham's promised destiny."²¹

¹⁹ Nelson's.

²⁰ Hughes, 406.

²¹ Waltke, 375.

33:16 So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir.

33:17 But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house and made booths for his livestock. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth.

Jacob did not enter the promised land; he did not obey God immediately and return to Bethel. Instead he stopped short of crossing the Jordan river. Why did Jacob stop here? Moses recorded that Jacob built booths for his livestock. The word booth (*sukkah*) refers to a rude or temporary shelter.²² The children of Israel lived in booths when God brought them out of Egypt (Lev 23:34,42-43). David's soldiers lived in booths while campaigning (2 Sa 11:11). Jonah built a booth to avoid the sun while waiting for God to zap Nineveh (Jon 4:5). Jacob made booths to keep and protect his animals. These booths gave their name to the location, thus it was called Succoth. These booths give an indication of why he stayed here. Perhaps his animals did need a rest, and his statement to his brother in 33:13 was not too much of an exaggeration. Perhaps he desired to replenish the animals that he had given to his brother. Perhaps he simply wanted to take advantage of the fertile valleys located there.²³

But whatever the reason, Jacob disobeyed God. His stay in Succoth lasted several years. Dinah was born after Leah's six sons (30:21); she was perhaps six or seven years old when Jacob left Laban (31:41). When she arrived in Shechem, she was old enough to be sexually mature and attractive, a change of several years. "His sojourn in Succoth suggests he was still a man who did things his own way."²⁴ Jacob's disobedience proved to be costly.

²² Brown, 697.

²³ Hughes, 407.

²⁴ Hughes, 407.

The Gospel

1. What does this text teach us about ourselves? What need or deficiency in our lives does it expose? We tend to fight for ourselves, to scheme and manipulate to get what we want, and do things our own way.
2. What does this text teach us about God? How does it reveal God's grace to meet our need? God wants us to trust in him and to allow him to lead us and fight on our behalf.
3. How does this text stand in relation to the gospel? This text reflects a key aspect of our need for redemption through the gospel. We need to be saved and changed so that we will trust God more completely and allow him to fight our battles for us.

Textual Outline

1. Jacob reconciles with Esau (1-11).
 - a. Jacob prepares (1-2).
 - b. Jacob trusts God and humbles himself (3).
 - c. Jacob finds forgiveness (4-11).
2. Jacob disengages from Esau (12-17).
 - a. Esau offers hospitality (12-14)
 - b. Esau offers protection (15)
 - c. Jacob builds booths (16-17)

Central Truth of the Text

Moses wrote Gen 33:1-17 in order to teach the children of Israel that when God changed Jacob, he trusted God to fight his battles and kept his family separated from Esau's family.

Teaching Outline

The gospel changes the people of God, and God wants this church to allow the gospel to change us. From this text in Gen 33, we see two of the results in people who are changed by the gospel.

1. When the gospel changes us, we will let God fight on our behalf.
2. When the gospel changes us, we will be a separated people.

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