

Exegetical Notes – Genesis 32:1-21

“Jacob Was Afraid”

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(Now all three of the basic theological questions Genesis asks have been presented and answered in the text. The first question is, “Whose world is it anyway?” The text answers the question by affirming that it is God’s world by right of creation. It is God’s world because God made it. The second question Genesis asks is “How do we get along in God’s world God’s way?” The answer is by trusting God and obeying Him. The third question Genesis asks is “How do we get along in God’s world God’s way with other people, particularly with the members of our own family?” The answer is we get over the offense, forgive and forget. The rest of the book of Genesis shows us how this process works out.)

Genesis 32:1-21

Verses 1-2

¹ Jacob also went on his way, and the angels of God met him. ² When Jacob saw them, he said, “This is the camp of God!” So he named that place Mahanaim.

- Jacob met with his Uncle Laban and resolved the differences between them. Although the resolution was not entirely honest, the two separated in peace, agreeing to forgive and forget the offenses between them (see Genesis 31).
- Jacob is now on his way home. He is about to meet his brother, Esau, against whom he committed great wrongs (see Genesis 27 & 28). The night before Jacob set out to meet Esau, “angels of God met him.” The Hebrew word “translated angels” means messengers. The English word, “angels” implies that these beings were divine beings. The Hebrew word does not carry that connotation. These “messengers” may have been or appear to be human.
- After the encounter with the “angels/messengers,” Jacob named the spot “Mahanaim.” This Hebrew word means “a double camp.”
- The entire encounter is nebulous. We do not know for sure what happened or who was involved. But the meeting impressed Jacob. Somehow, YHWH

was at work in Jacob to prepare him and to change him. The Lord moves in strange ways. This meeting was not coincidental, but providential. It was part of God's plan to work change in Jacob.

Verses 3-5

³ Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. ⁴ He instructed them: "This is what you are to say to my lord Esau: 'Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now. ⁵ I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, male and female servants. Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes.'"

- Jacob was led to send a conciliatory gift ahead of him to his brother Esau. The "messengers" (see the notes above about angels and messengers) were given a specific message from Jacob to Esau.
- They were to greet Esau as "my lord." The word, "lord," was a respectful form of greeting acknowledging the place of the one to whom the greeting was given. It is equivalent to the English greeting, "sir." The messengers were to describe Jacob as Esau's "servant." The word is equivalent to the English word, "slave." It implies that Jacob is in debt to Esau.
- The gift was in payment for the indebtedness Jacob rightfully owed Esau and was given in acknowledgement of the debt. Jacob admitted that he is seeking Esau's favor.

Verse 6

⁶ When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, "We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."

- When the messengers returned to Jacob, they told Jacob that Esau, who had apparently accepted the gift, was following them with a company of 400 men.

Verses 7-8

⁷ In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. ⁸ He thought, "If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape."

- The news that Esau was approaching him with 400 men frightened Jacob. He did not know if Esau was coming in peace or in anger. The 400 men with Esau do not comfort Jacob.

- So, Jacob divided his camp into two groups. His hope was that if Esau attacked one group, in revenge for the wrongs he committed against his brother, that the other group might escape.

Verses 9-12

⁹ Then Jacob prayed, “O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, ‘Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,’¹⁰ I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps.¹¹ Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children.¹² But you have said, ‘I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.’”

- Then Jacob prayed. He addressed the prayer to the God of his father and grandfather and uses the holy name of God, “YHWH.” He reminded God that God told him to go home (see Genesis 28:14-15). He humbly acknowledged that he was not worthy of the kindness and faithfulness that God had shown him. God had been working on Jacob. He was not the same person as he was before. He asked God to save him from his brother Esau.

Verses 13-21

¹³ He spent the night there, and from what he had with him he selected a gift for his brother Esau:¹⁴ two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams,¹⁵ thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys.¹⁶ He put them in the care of his servants, each herd by itself, and said to his servants, “Go ahead of me, and keep some space between the herds.”

¹⁷ He instructed the one in the lead: “When my brother Esau meets you and asks, ‘Who do you belong to, and where are you going, and who owns all these animals in front of you?’¹⁸ then you are to say, ‘They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us.’”

¹⁹ He also instructed the second, the third and all the others who followed the herds: “You are to say the same thing to Esau when you meet him.²⁰ And be sure to say, ‘Your servant Jacob is coming behind us.’” For he thought, “I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he

will receive me.”²¹ So Jacob’s gifts went on ahead of him, but he himself spent the night in the camp.

- Having divided his camp in two, and having prayed, Jacob selected another large gift for Esau. He divided the gift by kind and sent it off to Esau. He instructed those in charge of the gift to tell Esau that the gift was for him from his servant Jacob and to address Esau as “lord.” They were to tell Esau that Jacob was coming to meet him.
- The text makes it clear that Jacob hoped to appease Esau in hopes of his being received by Esau. But Jacob is unsure of Esau’s reception.

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