

## JACOB'S RETURN

### *Genesis 35*

This lesson requires more preparation on the part of the teacher than some. The teacher should be sufficiently familiar with the whole story of Jacob (Genesis 25:19 through Genesis 34) so that he can review it rather fully. He should also think out carefully the particular points in the lesson for the day which he thinks can be presented most interestingly and usefully to his class.

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#### **Doctrinal Points**

*The Lord uses even our selfishness at first to lead us to good.*

*Nothing in the Word is accidental or unimportant.*

*Everything comes to us first through our minds.*

*Nevertheless, our will is the primary cause of our thoughts as well as of our acts.*

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#### **Notes for Parents**

One of the best-known stories in the Bible is the story of how the lone young traveler Jacob slept one night in the open at Bethel and was given a wonderful dream of a ladder set up on earth whose top reached to heaven, and of the Lord at the top and angels ascending and descending upon the ladder. And in the morning Jacob vowed that if the Lord would prosper him and bring him safely home again, he would always serve Him.

Jacob's desire then was only to be spared to come home. Yet when he reached Haran, he immediately fell in love with his uncle's daughter Rachel and forgot all about going home. He stayed in Haran for twenty years. He became rich through serving his uncle, and by his two wives, Rachel and her sister Leah, and their handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah, he had eleven sons and one daughter. This story is a picture of something which happens in the lives of many young people. They are brought up in good homes, taken to

Sunday school and church, and given the religious principles they need to guide them through life. Perhaps they join the church. They mean to be faithful. But when they finish high school, they leave home for college or for some occupation. They fall in love and marry and take on the responsibility of providing for a growing family, and their minds and lives are so occupied with what seem the necessities of life in the world that they forget their early ideals.

But men have deeper and higher needs which the world cannot meet. Sooner or later the man or woman who has been rightly brought up remembers that this world is not his final home, and, like the prodigal son in the parable, says: “I will arise and go to my father.” Our chapter today tells of Jacob’s return, of his putting away the false ambitions and worldly satisfactions he has been striving for, and coming back to Bethel to fulfill his vow. Then he is ready to be reunited to Isaac and to inherit the land promised him by the Lord. In this story the Lord is telling each one of us that if we will only realize how unsatisfying the things of the world are and return home to Him, we shall be among those who hear Him say: “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

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### Primary

The younger children will not profit by so complete a review of Jacob’s life as the older ones. In the introduction, dwell on Jacob’s dream more than on the rest of the story, as the children may have some recollection of it, and it connects naturally with the return to Bethel.

Jacob was his mother Rebekah’s favorite.

Once she saved him from Esau’s anger by persuading Isaac to send him on a long visit to her brother Laban in Haran.

Jacob was welcomed by his uncle Laban and was so satisfied in Haran that he stayed there for twenty years. In those days people had forgotten that it is wrong for a man to have more than one wife at a time. Jacob married two of Laban’s daughters, Leah and Rachel, and he had two other wives, who were the servants of

Leah and Rachel—you may remember how Abraham had a son by Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian handmaid.

Eleven sons and a daughter were born to Jacob in Haran.

The eleventh son was Joseph.

After Joseph's birth Jacob decided to go home with his family.

He stopped at Bethel, where he had had a wonderful dream on his way to Haran.

What did the Lord promise him there?

What son was born to him near Bethlehem?

Who died there?

Joseph and Benjamin were Rachel's only children.

Where did Jacob find his father?

How old was Isaac when he died?

Esau and Jacob had become friends again.

Try to remember that the Lord gave Jacob a new name—*Israel*. That is how the descendants of Jacob came to be called “the children of Israel.”

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### Junior

In this class review by questions and comments the whole factual story of Jacob, as this is the age at which children should become thoroughly familiar with the whole Bible story. Be sure the children look up the Bible references in their notes and go over the names of the twelve sons of Jacob. Point out on your own Bible map the four cities named in the chapter.

In Haran Jacob was welcomed by his uncle Laban and decided to stay and work for him. He married two of Laban's daughters, Leah and Rachel. The people of those times had forgotten that it is wrong for a man to have more than one wife. Leah bore Jacob six sons and a daughter. He had four more sons by Bilhah and Zilpah, the handmaids of Rachel and Leah. Finally Rachel had a son, Joseph. Then Jacob decided to go back to his home in the land of Canaan, after having lived in Haran for twenty years. He was still afraid of Esau, but he found that Esau had long since forgiven him and welcomed him gladly.

Do you remember the story of the wonderful dream which Jacob had when he first left home—the dream of the ladder reach-

ing from earth to heaven, with the Lord at the top and angels ascending and descending upon it? Read in Genesis 28:16-22 about Jacob's vow. *Bethel* means "house of God." Now in our chapter for today we learn how Jacob kept his vow.

Where did the Lord tell Jacob to go?

How did Jacob prepare his family for worship?

Who died at Bethel?

What other name did the Lord give Jacob?

What promise did the Lord make to him?

Who died near Bethlehem?

Who was born there?

Who else was born at Bethlehem hundreds of years later?

Benjamin was the twelfth and last of Jacob's sons. You will find the names of all twelve in verses 23 to 26 of our chapter. You want to read them and become familiar with them, because these twelve sons became the heads of the "twelve tribes of Israel" about whom we shall hear a great deal as we go on. You want also to remember that Joseph and Benjamin were the last two of the twelve, and that they were the only children of Rachel, who was Jacob's favorite wife.

Where did Jacob find his father Isaac living?

Who buried Isaac when he died?

Isaac was buried in the cave of Machpelah, which Abraham had bought for a family burying place when Sarah died. After Isaac's death Jacob became head of the family. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are called the three *patriarchs*.

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### Intermediate

This class can be given the general correspondence of the Jacob period and something of the application of the particular incidents in his history. The important lesson for them in the chapter for the day is that mere worldly success never satisfies the mind and heart and that when we realize this, we must recognize and put away the thoughts and habits into which we have fallen as a result of putting worldly ambitions first.

In the Bible story Abraham represents our spiritual state in our

infancy and very early childhood, and Isaac represents our state when we are old enough to have learned our need of recognizing the Lord's laws and have begun to form our judgments of right and wrong according to them. If we are developing properly, we should reach the Isaac stage before we are through high school.

But we know that after high school there is a time when we have to think a great deal about how we are to get along in the world. We leave home and go to college or into some occupation and, although we are not yet really grown up, we are pretty much "on our own." This period is called the development of the natural plane of life and is described in the stories about Jacob.

Jacob married the two daughters of Laban, Leah and Rachel, who represent affections for exterior and interior truths, and was also given their two handmaids. By these four women he had one daughter and twelve sons, only the last two of whom—Joseph and Benjamin—were the children of Rachel, Jacob's first love. He also became rich in flocks and herds. Jacob's sons picture the various faculties which we develop in this period of beginning our independent lives; and the flocks and herds, the abilities and knowledges which come to us.

Then suddenly after twenty years Jacob decided to go home. The young man or woman who is inwardly good cannot be satisfied just to enjoy his own success in the world. He knows that he must take his possessions and abilities home to his Father's house—back to the service of the Lord.

The first thing that happens in this homecoming—on the very border of the land—is Jacob's reunion with Esau. Jacob, remembering the wrong he had done Esau, was afraid, but Esau welcomed him gladly. This pictures the time when we realize that our good intentions and our understanding of the truth are really in harmony and can work together. Then comes our chapter for this lesson. You remember that when Jacob left home, he slept one night at Bethel and had the wonderful dream of the ladder reaching to heaven, and that in the morning he vowed that, if the Lord would prosper him and bring him safely home again, he would

worship and serve Him. So now that he has been prospered and brought back, he goes first to Bethel, builds an altar there, and worships the Lord.

Two things come into the story before the altar can be built. The first is easy to understand. All Jacob's people must put away "the strange gods that were in their hand and all their earrings which were in their ears" and these were hidden "under the oak which was by Shechem." In the first part of the Jacob period we develop a good many worldly ideas and ambitions; these are the "strange gods." And we listen to many worldly and selfish promptings and do wrong things because of them; these are the "golden earrings." We must recognize these as unworthy and put them away before our worship of the Lord can be pure.

The second incident seems a strange one: "Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried beneath Bethel under an oak." Why should Rebekah's nurse, who came long ago with Rebekah from Haran (Genesis 24:59), appear suddenly in the middle of this story of Jacob? From the literal sense we find no explanation, but in the spiritual sense this incident has a wonderful meaning. Rebekah's nurse represents hereditary evil. We are all born with selfish inclinations, but the Lord uses this natural selfishness of ours to induce us to form good habits. A child is led to behave rightly mostly by fear of punishment and hope of reward, and in the Isaac stage these same selfish motives also lead him to learn what the Lord would have him be and do. So our affection for doctrinal truth, which is Rebekah, is nursed by our hereditary selfishness. But when, as adults, we decide to bring our worldly achievements back into the service of the Lord, this selfish motive is put away forever.

Then finally Jacob is ready to be united to his father Isaac in Hebron and to inherit his father's place as head of the family. Isaac dies, and his sons Esau and Jacob bury him. This does not mean that we stop using our spiritual rational which Isaac represents, but that it has now become so much a part of our everyday thought—so natural to us—that it no longer stands out as a



separate function in our minds. It is in us just as Abraham—our early trust and obedience—is in us.

*Basic Correspondences*

Esau	=	natural good intentions
Jacob	=	natural understanding of truth
strange gods	=	worldly ambitions
Rebekah	=	affection for doctrinal truth
Rebekah's nurse	=	hereditary evil
golden earrings	=	promptings of selfishness which we have obeyed

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**Senior**

The Seniors are themselves in the beginning of the Jacob state, and the spiritual lessons involved in our chapter are especially important for them. Many of them think now that they will never be led away from serving the Lord. Call their attention to the fact that Jacob's desire when he left home was only to return as soon as possible, but that he became so involved in his activities and accomplishments in Haran that it was twenty years before he actually made the effort to go back to the Holy Land.

In the writings Swedenborg explains the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph for the most part in the celestial sense in which they tell us of the inner life of the Lord as He was developing from infancy to adulthood; but he tells us that our own individual development is analogous, and so they apply to us also. The Lord took on from Mary all the natural human heredity just as we have it, and dealt with its temptations one after another as they came to Him. So the Lord is our pattern.

After the period of Ishmael and Isaac comes the period of Jacob and Esau. Jacob and Esau represent the natural plane of our lives in its relation to the Lord—Jacob as to truth and Esau as to good—especially that period in our lives when we are just beginning to take our places in the world as independent individuals.

In our early childhood, represented by Abraham, we experience and store up in our subconscious the states of innocence and trust. In our early youth, represented by Ishmael and Isaac, we acquire

knowledges and develop the power of reasoning, first in a very external and superficial way and later more deeply, with a truer perception of values. When we begin to grow up and to “live our own lives,” we are at first necessarily very much concerned with establishing ourselves in the world. We turn our back on the Holy Land, so to speak, and devote ourselves to the practical problems of everyday life. This is Jacob’s sojourn in Haran.

But Haran is not our home. Always in the back of our minds is the vision with which we started, and sooner or later we become dissatisfied with our bondage to the “practical” life, and turn our faces homeward. Like Jacob, we travel slowly, checked at first by the pull of old ideas and somewhat hindered by our flocks and herds, the very riches we have worked so hard to acquire in Haran. Finally we reach the borders of our homeland. But before we actually enter it, Jacob must be reconciled with Esau. Heavenly life consists in the union of both will and understanding in the Lord’s service. Then follows our chapter for today.

We remember that when Jacob, fleeing from Esau, was granted his first encouraging vision at Bethel—the dream of the ladder—he promised that if the Lord would take care of him and bring him safely back to his home, he would serve Him. Now the Lord’s part of the covenant is fulfilled. Jacob has been prospered and has come back with great wealth to settle peacefully in his own country. So he returns to Bethel and builds an altar there, requiring all his household to give up their idols and be clean and change their garments. This is a picture of the effort we should make, if we are trying to live a heavenly life, to reform all our worldly ways of feeling, thinking, and acting so that there shall be no divided allegiance to turn us astray. The people did give Jacob their idols and also the “earrings which were in their ears.” This seems a strange addition, unless we know that the ear pictures obedience and the earrings the delight of obedience, so that what is pictured is the willingness to stop listening to and acting upon the dictates of self-will. Jacob buried all these things under the oak at Shechem before he went on to Bethel. Swedenborg tells us that to bury



something under an oak pictures rejection of it forever. Jacob's stop at Shechem represents his coming to a state of peace, and we cannot come into this state so long as our minds are divided in their allegiance. "Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

After Jacob reached Bethel and built his altar there, it is written that Rebekah's nurse Deborah died and was buried at Bethel under an oak. This seems a completely irrelevant incident. In the letter we find no suggestion of a reason why Rebekah's nurse should suddenly appear in the story of Jacob. But her death and burial just at this point picture the rejection of the hereditary evils in which we have grown up. Deborah, you remember, was sent with Rebekah from Haran when Abraham's servant took Rebekah away to become Isaac's wife. It is part of the Lord's providence that our evils are never separated from us suddenly or violently but are allowed to go on until we see and reject them ourselves. The same lesson is taught in the Gospels in the parable of the tares among the wheat.

Benjamin is born at Bethlehem because he represents the highest type of good which can be exercised on the natural plane of our lives. This cannot be produced until we get back to the Holy Land, although Joseph—the truth which leads to this good—can be seen before we have attained our goal. Rachel's death, like Sarah's, pictures the end of one stage of our development, the affection proper to that stage subsiding into the background of our experience as we go on to new interests.

The death of Isaac is the final act in the drama of our development from infancy into a full adult state. From Genesis 49:31 we learn that Isaac and Rebekah were both buried in the cave of Machpelah, and that Jacob and Leah were both buried there also. This suggests that, although Rachel was Jacob's first love and his ideal, Leah—the affection for external truth—was actually his proper wife. The death of Isaac does not mean that at this stage we have given up our spiritual reasoning, but that this faculty has become a part of our everyday life. Jacob has come into the qualities possessed by his fathers, Abraham and Isaac. A truly good

external life has within it both the innocence and trust which are Abraham and the rational understanding of spiritual values which is Isaac.

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### Adult

Most of the Adult class will be more familiar with the other stories about Jacob than with chapter 35; so the teacher should begin immediately with the current lesson, only touching in passing on the earlier part of Jacob's life. Call attention especially to the burying of the idols and earrings at Shechem, the burial of Deborah at Bethel, and the burial of Rachel at Bethlehem. These three burials, followed by the burial of Isaac and by Jacob's final entry into his birthright, form excellent discussion material, especially in relation to the popular tendency to make external good works the first thing of religion.

The story of Jacob is a very important one for our thought about our everyday life, for Jacob and Esau represent the natural plane of life—Jacob this plane as to truth and Esau the same plane as to good. There is much emphasis in churches today upon external good works, and we all know that these should be done. But if good works are genuinely good they must be an outgrowth of love to the Lord in the heart and an understanding of His nature and will in the mind—not a substitute for these inner qualities of religion. Those who love the Lord and the neighbor and think about their own shortcomings and the Lord's mercy do their external good works as a matter of course and do not talk about them.

Jacob and Esau were at first rivals and even enemies. Our natural good impulses are eager to express themselves and impatient of instruction, and our natural understanding of the truth is pleased with itself and not too scrupulous in its methods of advancing itself. Esau was a "hairy" man and Jacob a "smooth" man. Hair represents the part of the life which is most external. Jacob's long sojourn in Haran was necessary to teach him the true value of his home and the necessity of reconciliation with his brother. So a young person goes out self-confidently to make his place in the world, and it may take him a long time to realize that life is more than material success, and that he needs to go back and reclaim

the good states and the spiritual principles of his childhood period of instruction.

In interpreting the story of Jacob, Swedenborg deals primarily with its celestial sense, in which it is a description of the Lord's progress toward the glorification of the natural degree. But he is careful to point out that the order of glorification with the Lord was the same as the order of regeneration with man. We recall that Jacob's name was changed to Israel after he wrestled with the angel (Genesis 32:28), and this change is repeated in our chapter for today. In the celestial sense this change marks the completion of another step in the Lord's glorification. Jacob represents the Lord's natural as to its external; Israel, His internal natural. This is why both names are used frequently in the rest of the Bible story, sometimes even in the same verse, Jacob coming to stand for the church of that day as a mere representative of a church, while Israel stands for the true internal which the ancient Hebrew rites represented. The names are not interchangeable and are never used in the letter of the Word without clear purpose.

The sons born to Jacob in Haran picture the faculties developed by each of us as he "finds himself" in the life of the world—Joseph being the final faculty of receiving and understanding genuine spiritual truth. It is after Joseph's birth that Jacob decides to return to Canaan. But Benjamin, who represents the good proper to genuine truth, is not born until after Jacob has returned, become reconciled to Esau, and performed his worship at Bethel.

Four very familiar places are mentioned in our chapter: Shechem, Bethel, Bethlehem, and Hebron.

The strange gods and the earrings which the people surrendered to Jacob were buried "under the oak which was by Shechem." The strange gods and the earrings represent falsities held in the mind and falsities made actual in life, and to bury under an oak is to put away forever. This was accomplished at Shechem because Shechem, Abram's first stop in the Holy Land, represents "the first of light, which is interior truth." Before we can worship the Lord truly we must be willing to put away every false idea and

bad habit which we find to conflict with His wisdom and love.

Then Jacob advances to Bethel. Jacob in his return is following the same course which Abraham followed when he came into the Holy Land from Ur so many years before, stopping first at Shechem, then at Bethel, and finally at Hebron, and building altars as he went. This pictures of course an advance, little by little, into holy states of innocence and trust. Abraham's journey was a child-like following of the Lord. Jacob's is a more mature, though more worldly or natural obedience. Abraham was being led into these states out of ignorance and idolatry. Jacob is coming back to them after a long period of wandering, caused by his own transgression. The Lord tells us: "Except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." When Jacob comes back to Bethel, the "house of God," the Lord appears to him again and renews the promises He had made to Abraham and to Isaac.

The death of Rebekah's nurse Deborah at Bethel tells of the passing of former affections when new ones are developed. Deborah is the hereditary evil from the mother. Hereditary evil lies back of all our acts in childhood. We do things largely for the sake of self. Though children are directed by their parents and led by the Lord through angel associates, yet hereditary evil is within everything they do. But it does not become actual because they do not act from their own free will. This is the innocence of infancy. The difference between the innocence of infancy and the innocence of wisdom is that in the former "the innocence of infancy is without, and hereditary evil within," whereas in the latter, "the innocence of wisdom is within and evil both actual and hereditary without." (AC 4563) The natural, purified of its falsities and evils, has come into a new state. Bethel—"house of God"—signifies this new state of the natural, for the house in which truth dwells is good. The altar Jacob built at Bethel is the worship of the Lord by the natural mind.

Our lesson marks the first appearance of Bethlehem in the Bible story. The birth of Benjamin and Rachel's death are the first incidents we connect with it. Bethlehem is near the border of the two

lots later assigned to the tribes of Benjamin and Judah. As the birthplace of Benjamin, and later of David, and still later of the Lord, it marks the beginning of great changes. The death of Rachel near Bethlehem in the celestial sense pictures the expulsion by the Lord of whatever was hereditary and human in the affection for interior truth. In the human affection from the mother is the glory of self and the world. Good is done for the sake of self. The Lord felt this temptation and put it away, and we should recognize this evil in ourselves and try to overcome it with His help.

Isaac died at Hebron and was buried by his sons Esau and Jacob in the cave of Machpelah. (See Genesis 49:29-32.) Jacob became head of his family. It is helpful to fix in our minds the fact that of the three patriarchs Abraham pictures the celestial, Isaac the spiritual, and Jacob the natural plane of life, the planes through which we pass from infancy through youth to maturity. When we first consider ourselves “grown up,” we are in the Jacob stage, when natural and worldly things are most interesting and absorb our time and thought. We branch out into many fields of interest, as Jacob’s twelve sons headed families and eventually divided the land. Still we have in us our inheritance from our infant and childhood states and we have in us the deeper affections, represented by Joseph and Benjamin, to link us to spiritual and celestial things. Our early states are in us and affect all we do. So the places that are mentioned in the early chapters of Genesis recur again and again throughout the Bible story.

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### From the Writings of Swedenborg

*Arcana Coelestia*, n. 4563: “It is known that man derives evil from both his parents, and that this evil is called hereditary evil. He is therefore born into it, but still it does not manifest itself until the man becomes an adult and acts from his understanding and the derivative will, and meanwhile it lies hidden, especially during infancy. And as of the Lord’s mercy no one is blamed for what is hereditary, but for what is actual [nn. 966, 2308], and what is hereditary cannot become actual until the man acts from his own understanding and his own will, therefore infants are led by the Lord by means of infants



and angels from Him, and hence they appear in a state of innocence while hereditary evil still lurks in everything they do. This hereditary evil yields them nourishment, or is as a nurse, until the time when they judge for themselves; and then if they are being regenerated they are brought by the Lord into a state of new infancy, and at last into heavenly wisdom; thus into genuine infancy, that is, into innocence; for genuine infancy or innocence dwells in wisdom. The difference is, that the innocence of infancy is without, and hereditary evil within; whereas the innocence of wisdom is within, and evil both actual and hereditary is without.”

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### Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. Why did Jacob leave home and go to Haran? *afraid of brother*
- P. How long did he stay there? *twenty years*
- P. What two wives did he marry? *Leah, Rachel*
- P. How many sons were born to him in Haran? *eleven*
- P. Who was the youngest of these? *Joseph*
- P. Where was his twelfth son born? *near Bethlehem*
- P. What was his name? *Benjamin*
- J. Why did Jacob go to Bethel when he returned from Haran?  
*to worship God*
- J. Before he reached Bethel at what place did he stop? *Shechem*
- J. What did he make the people do at Shechem? *give up gods, earrings*
- J. Who was buried at Bethel? *Deborah*
- P. What did Jacob do at Bethel? *built stone altar*
- J. What did the Lord promise him there? *to father great nation*
- J. Where did Jacob find Isaac? *Hebron (Mamre)*
- J. Where did Jacob and Esau bury Isaac? *cave of Machpelah*
- I. What does Rebekah’s nurse represent? *hereditary selfishness*
- S. Why is her death and burial mentioned at this point in the story of Jacob?  
*when we return voluntarily to spiritual living we must get rid of selfish motivation*