

Chapter II

JACOB

During a troubled pregnancy Rebecca sought guidance from the Lord. The answer was mysterious. Years would pass before she fully understood:

Two nations are in thy womb, ...and the elder shall serve the younger.
(Genesis 25:23)

Twin boys were born to Isaac and Rebecca. The firstborn was unusually hairy, so they named him Esau, "Hair." The second baby was holding to his brother's heel. They called him Jacob, which means "heel," and also "supplanter." This was the lad who was destined to become one of the great patriarchs of Judaism.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob travel together through ancient history as the founders of western culture. With their parents, Jacob and his twin brother followed their flocks through the deserts of the Negeb. For months at a time they pitched their goat hair tents farther north, near the caravan crossroads and flowing wells of Beersheba. They traded with other nomads, planting and harvesting food for themselves and their animals. When rain was scarce, pasture was sought toward the fertile Mediterranean coast, near what we now call the Gaza Strip. All this land, the boys were taught, would someday belong to their family. God had appeared to their father Isaac as he had to Abraham, promising homeland and multitudes of offspring which would be a blessing to all nations. Rebecca, watching the boys grow up, began to sense the meaning of that strange prenatal message.

THE BIRTHRIGHT

Jacob was a quiet man, warm, home loving and thoughtful. Esau's interests lay only in the rough life of the huntsmen. How Jacob must have brooded over the fact that to his crude brother, as firstborn, belonged the birthright! Not only would he inherit a double portion of their father's wealth, but he would be chieftain of the clan and intermediary between the people and their God. But Jacob knew, (as clay tablets have informed us), that a birthright could be legally purchased. When opportunity knocked he was ready.

It happened one day when he was cooking a pot of lentils. Esau came in from the hunt, exhausted and famished.

And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage; for I am faint... And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright. And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?...and he sold his birthright unto Jacob. (Genesis 25:30-33)

Thus Jacob bought his older brother's birthright for a meal of bread and lentils. The Biblical narrator drives home the point:

...Thus Esau despised his birthright. (Genesis 25:34)

THE STOLEN BLESSING

The years passed and Jacob's father, Isaac, grew old and blind. He was blind in spirit as well as in body. It seemed that the venison Esau often brought seemed more important to him than Abraham's teaching.

One morning he summoned Esau. In the customary ritual of a last testament, said to him:

Behold now, I am old, I know not the day of my death: Now therefore take, I pray thee, thy weapons, thy quiver and thy bow, and go out to the field, and take me some venison: and make me savory meat, such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat; that my soul may bless thee before I die. (Genesis 27:2-4)

Now this blessing of his son by a man near death was not a mere declaration of affection and goodwill. These were not meaningless or idle words. They expressed something which continued creatively. A careful blessing was a solemn ceremony, pointing out the goal and establishing the young man's way. No matter what the future held, the blessing was an irrevocable power toward success. To which son the blessing was given was, at that time, the father's choice. Later it would belong indisputably to the firstborn.

Rebecca overheard Isaac's words. Surely, Abraham's divine mission would fail in Esau's crude hands! The unforgotten prophecy slipped into focus. With characteristic quick decision and courage, she moved to annul her husband's uninspired plan. Urgently she called Jacob to her side. She told him:

Go now to the flock, and fetch me from thence two good kids of the goats; and I will make them savory meat for thy father, such as he loveth; and thou shalt bring it to thy father, that he may eat, and that he may bless thee before his death. (Genesis 27:9,10)

But Jacob objected. Esau was a hairy man, while Jacob was smooth. If his father were to touch him the deceit would be evident. He would incur not a blessing, but a curse.

And his mother said unto him, Upon me by thy curse, my son: only obey my voice, and go fetch me them. (Genesis 27:13)

Before such earnestness, even the willingness to bring upon herself the horrors of the curse, Jacob obeyed. His mother hurriedly prepared the meat. She bound bits of hairy goatskin on Jacob's wrists and on his neck. Then she dressed him in Esau's garments and sent him to his father with the tempting dish.

And he came unto his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I; who art thou, my son? And Jacob said unto his father, I am Esau thy first-born; arise, I pray thee, sit and eat of my venison, that thy soul may bless me. And Isaac said unto Jacob, Come near, I pray thee, that I may feel thee, my son, whether thou be my very son Esau or not The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau Art thou my very son Esau? And he said, I am. (Genesis 27:18-24)

So Isaac sat up and ate and drank wine, and smelled the smell of Esau on the cloak that Jacob wore. Then he blessed him:

See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord hath blessed: Therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine; Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee: be Lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother's sons bow down to thee: cursed be everyone that curseth thee, and blessed be he that blesseth thee. (Genesis 27:27-29)

It was done. Jacob, the younger brother, held the tacit symbol of tribal authority and prestige. He hurried from his father's presence.

He'd scarcely left the room when Esau entered. He brought the fruit of his successful hunt. It was prepared for his father's pleasure and he said,

Let my father arise, and eat of his son's venison, that thy soul may bless me. (Genesis 27:31)

Isaac was seized with violent trembling, stunned by the realization of Jacob's deceit, and he said,

Thy brother came with subtlety, and hath taken away thy blessing. (Genesis 27:35)

In anger and disappointment, Esau wept aloud. But the words had been spoken, the blessing remained.

IN LABAN'S CAMP

Jacob's success was not based on the spiritual unfoldment that Abraham had proved. It was the unstable fruit of human will. When it became known that Esau was bent on killing him, Jacob had to flee.

Again Rebecca took charge. Jacob must go to Haran where Abraham and Rebecca had come from. There he would stay with Laban, Rebecca's brother. When Esau's anger decreased she would send for him.

Jacob set out for far-off Padan-Aram. The home lover parted from his family and friends. He was the heir to the accumulating knowledge of God returning to an environment where God was not known. His way led through the hills where men still remembered Abraham as the kindly, wealthy shepherd and caravaneer, who had talked with his God as a friend. Near Bethel, where his grandfather had camped, Jacob folded his heavy woolen cloak for a bed. He took a stone for a pillow and laid down to rest.

During the night he had a compelling dream that changed his whole outlook on life. He saw a stairway set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven. Angels moved up and down upon it. The Lord stood above it and said,

I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; and thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth ...and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of. (Genesis 28:13,15)

Jacob wakened astounded. The promise was to him! Abraham's God was not a local deity. It was not confined, like other gods, to the tents of his chosen people. Wherever his people acknowledged his presence, there would be his all-powerful protection. In deep reverence Jacob made a vow that if his material needs were met on this journey, and if he was enabled to eventually return to his beloved home, then he would be the diligent servant of the God of Abraham and of Isaac. From the small flask at his belt he humbly poured oil on the stone that had served for a pillow. This was a symbol of dedication to his wider view of life. Then he continued his journey. He went past the pagan shrines of Shechem, across the river Jordan, and north in the dust of the centuries old Kings' Highway.

Days later Jacob realized that his destination must be near. Three flocks of sheep lay in a sun-baked barren field nearby. Their herders were resting on the ground around a well. Jacob approached and engaged them in conversation:

"My brethren, whence be ye?"
 "Of Haran are we."
 "Know ye Laban, the son of Nahor?"
 "We know him."
 "Is he well?"
 "He is well: and, behold, Rachel his daughter cometh with the sheep."
 (Genesis 29:4-7)

Jacob did not run to meet his kinswoman. Meticulous animal breeder that he was, his first thoughts were for the neglected sheep. He scolded the lazy shepherds as he would have his father's servants:

Lo, it is yet high day, neither is it time that the cattle should be gathered together: water ye the sheep, and go and feed them. (Genesis 29:7,8)

However the men were unmoved. They pointed to the heavy stone that lay across the mouth of the well, protecting it from windblown sand. They explained that they would move it and water the sheep after all the other flocks had gathered.

Jacob turned from them to the beautiful young shepherdess coming near with her flocks. Without help from the other men, he rolled the stone away and watered her sheep. Then he revealed to her their kinship. They kissed and wept at the wonder of the moment, as is the custom with Easterners. Laban, her father, warmly welcomed his sister's son. Soon Jacob was settled in their home. It was a visit that was to lengthen into twenty long years.

Never one to loaf, Jacob pitched in with the work in Laban's camp. At the end of the month, his uncle said to him:

Because thou art my brother (kinsman), shouldest thou therefore serve me for naught? Tell me, what shall thy wages be? And Jacob loved Rachel; and said, I will serve thee seven years for Rachel thy younger daughter.
 (Genesis 29:15,18)

Seven years he served for Rachel. This was a bride price, to compensate her father for the loss of her services. The Bible narrator comments that the years seemed to him as only a few days, so great was his love for her. When the time was completed Laban gathered all the men of the place together for a great feast. In the evening, after a day of merriment, singing and dancing, the procession brought the bride, in all her finery and heavily veiled, to Jacob's tent.

The next morning as day dawned, Jacob gazed at his wife in the dim light. This was not Rachel! It was Rachel's older sister Leah, for whom he had no affection at all. He who had tricked his father and his brother was now himself the victim of cruel trickery. When he angrily accused his uncle of duplicity Laban coolly reminded him:

It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. (Genesis 29:26)

It was finally agreed that Jacob would marry Rachel as soon as the ritual week of wedding festivities was over, on condition that he serve another seven years. Jacob apparently became his uncle's legal heir, for Laban had no sons.

The promise to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob himself of multitudes of offspring began to be fulfilled. Abraham's mission would no longer be the responsibility of one man. Eleven sons were born. Each child was given a name expressing his mother's thoughts at the time of his birth. These names march forward through the Old Testament as the nucleus of the Hebrew people. The unwelcome wife, Leah, bore Reuben, Simeon and Levi. But when the fourth son was born she said, "Now will I praise the Lord." She called him Judah (Praise). (Genesis 29:35)

All this time, Rachel, the beloved, remained barren. Desperately unhappy, she invoked the laws of the time, and gave Jacob her slave, Bilhah, whose children she could claim as her own, and Bilhah bore Dan and Naphtali. Then Leah gave Jacob her servant, Zilpah, as concubine, and the family grew to include Gad and Asher, Issachar, Zebulun and a daughter called Dinah. At long last, to Jacob's great joy, Rachel bore a son and named him Joseph (adding), saying, "The Lord shall add to me another son." (Genesis 30:24)

Jacob loved Joseph above all the others.

THE HOUSEHOLD GODS

The second seven-year period of servitude drew to an end at last. Jacob longed for his native land. Appealing to Laban he said,

Send me away, that I may go unto mine own place, and to my country.
Give me my wives and my children, for whom I have served thee, and let me go. (Genesis 30:25:26)

But Laban knew well that it was Jacob's intelligent management of his flocks that had brought him prosperity beyond all his dreams. He persuaded Jacob to stay on. The agreement this time was that Jacob should count as his own every brown lamb among the white ones, and every kid that was spotted or streaked. Laban promptly removed all streaked, spotted and brown animals from the flocks. He gave them to a young kinsmen who kept them at a distance of three day's journey.

In the next six years Jacob built up an exceedingly large flock. Although some of his methods seem tricky to us he was able to proclaim himself to Laban as a perfect shepherd:

Thy ewes and thy she-goats have not cast their young, and the rams of thy flock have I not eaten. That which was torn of beasts I brought not unto thee; I bare the loss of it; of my hand didst thou require it, whether stolen by day, or stolen by night. Thus I was; in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep departed from mine eyes.
(Genesis 31:38-41)

Yet Jacob did not attribute to himself the intelligence which brought him ability and success, He gave all credit to the God of Abraham and of Isaac.

At last, one spring day, the divine voice came to him again:

I am the God of Bethel, where thou anointedst the pillar, and where thou vowedst a vow unto me: now arise, get thee out from this land, and return unto the land of thy kindred. (Genesis 31:13)

Jacob was unwilling to be coaxed again into staying. He was also aware that, according to law, Rachel and Leah and all their children belonged to Laban, the tribal head. Jacob called his wives out into the field for a conference. Then swiftly, they gathered their possessions and hurriedly departed for Canaan.

However, Rachel realized that her father had cheated his daughters and his son-in-law out of much that was legally theirs. So she secretly took matters into her own strong willed hands. In a niche in Laban's house, as in every pagan home, stood the household gods (little figurines which were believed to watch over family affairs and help in divination, and whose possessor was accounted as the householder's heir.) Unknown to Jacob, Rachel packed Laban's gods with her personal belongings.

Jacob's caravan was nearing its destination, tenting on the hillside of Mount Gilead in Transjordan, when Laban and his kinsmen came storming up, demanding:

Wherefore didst thou flee away secretly, and steal away from me; and didst not tell me, that I might have sent thee away with mirth, and with songs, with tabrets, and with harp? (Genesis 31:27)

Jacob pointed out Laban's record for broken promises, adding,

...I was afraid: for I said, Peradventure thou wouldest take by force thy daughters from me. (Genesis 31:31)

His uncle's next, and basic, accusation caught Jacob by surprise: "Wherefore hast thou stolen my gods?"

Indignantly, Jacob denied any knowledge of the gods. Sure of the innocence of all his people, he swore to Laban, "With whomsoever thou findest thy gods, let him not live!"

Unconvinced, Laban searched Jacob's tent, then Leah's. In Rachel's tent, he found his comely daughter reclining forlornly on a saddle. With the figurines tucked beneath her, she prettily asked her father's forgiveness for not rising with the respect due to him, explaining that she felt unwell. Laban searched her tent in vain, and then left.

Rachel had tried to be a helpmeet for her husband. But his reliance on a strange, invisible God was still beyond her understanding.

Frustrated but helpless Laban gave up the search. On a friendlier note the two men set up an altar. This was to serve as a boundary line, beyond which neither should ever venture to harass the other. They partook of a ritual meal by the heap of stones. They solemnly swore to the treaty, Laban by the old gods and Jacob by the new One. The words of their pact are well known to Christians everywhere:

The Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another. (Genesis 31:49)

Early the next morning, Laban kissed his daughters and grandchildren, blessed them, and turned homeward.

JACOB BECOMES ISRAEL

Jacob journeyed on toward Canaan. He had a strong awareness of the challenge that lay ahead. The wrong he had done Esau had never been righted. The threat from which he had fled had never been faced. The birthright and the blessing were gained by trickery. They were not honestly his own.

He sent messengers south to Seir, Esau's country. They told of his success and asked for his brother's favor. Back came word that Esau was coming to meet him with a company of four hundred men. This was no friendly greeting, thought Jacob. Greatly distressed, he divided his caravan into two companies. If Esau's men destroyed one, the other might escape. However, there was no real comfort in this solution. With humble sincerity he turned to prayer. He did not pray for his wealth, but for the safety of the family he loved.

O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the Lord which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee: I am not worthy of the least of all thy mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast showed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands. Deliver me, I pray thee, for the hand of my brother, the hand of Esau: for I fear him, lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children. (Genesis 32:9-11)

His riches were no longer important to him. He sent large droves of cattle, sheep and goats to Esau. He hoped this would appease him. However this was not the answer and Jacob knew it. He spent a restless night in fear and indecision. Then he sent his wives, children and all his possessions across the Jabbok river. He himself stayed behind, alone beneath the stars. He must explore his relationship with Esau, in the light of twenty years' experience under Abraham's God.

Beside the river a man wrestled with him all night. As Jacob fought his confidence in his own ability, symbolized by the strength of the "hollow of his thigh," was dealt a crippling blow. As the night wore on he longed to give up his search for truth. Yet thoroughness and self-discipline were his way of life. "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me," he told his unseen adversary. (Genesis 32:26)

At last morning dawned. The angel blessed him:

Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. (Genesis 32:28)

This new spiritual identity would be a flame of special knowledge. It would be flickering at times, but always alight. No other name, no other nation in the history of the world has so long and so notably survived the wars, oppressions and social changes of the centuries as has Israel.

Jacob named the place Peniel, "for I have seen God face to face," he said. As he left, he limped on his wounded thigh. To this day, devout Jews do not eat the flesh of the sciatic muscle on the hip socket of an animal. This is done in commemoration of their ancestor's ordeal.

In the morning Esau with his four hundred men drew near. Israel went out alone to meet him; He bowed low seven times before him. This acknowledged him as the tribal head. Then suddenly the old love the twin brothers held for each other burst forth.

And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept. For therefore have I seen thy face, as though I had seen the face of God, and thou wast pleased with me. (Genesis 33:4, 10)

said Jacob, using the words of a servant to his exalted master.

The wives and children were introduced to Esau. Then the brothers parted, for they no longer stood on common spiritual ground.

HOMECOMING

It was more than twenty years since Jacob had walked through the valley of Shechem alone, awed at the vision and the message at Bethel. He was returning as a wealthy tribal chieftain. He rejoiced in the power and the promise of the God of Israel. He tried to share with his family the solemn importance of that first night of revelation.

Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments: and let us arise and go up to Bethel;... (Genesis 35:2, 3)

They brought to him not only the god-figures, but also their personal adornments. These things Israel buried beneath an oak in the valley. Then he led his caravan along the olive-clad hills to Bethel. There he built an altar and received again the conviction that, through his new spiritual identity as Israel, God's promises to Abraham and Isaac would be fulfilled. They pressed on southward toward home.

At Ephrath, which is Bethlehem, sorrow struck. Rachel gave birth to a second son and died. He placed a stone pillar on Rachel's grave to mark his personal loss and traveled sadly on.

JOSEPH

Among the hills near Hebron, where Abraham and was buried with Sarah, Jacob finally pitched his many tents. The older sons went off with their flocks to find forage. Jacob stayed behind in the companionship of young Joseph, his favorite.

Even as a child Joseph had exhibited traits of leadership. He had a strange ability to transcend the ordinary. Once Jacob had felt forced to rebuke him for a dream. In it Joseph said that the sun, the moon and eleven stars bowed down to him.

What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth?
(Genesis 37:10)

The matter remained in his mind and was vividly recalled years later.

To give him special honor Jacob wove for Joseph a long robe. It was called a "coat of many colors." It was the garment of an aristocrat, not of a workingman. He was oblivious to the envy and jealousy which his favoritism evoked in his other sons.

When Joseph was seventeen Jacob summoned him one day and said:

Go, I pray thee, see whether it be well with thy brethren, and well with the flocks; and bring me word again. (Genesis 37:14)

Joseph obediently set out in search of them. It was a lonely, weary journey for the over sheltered lad. From the rocky hillside where their flocks were grazing, the brothers saw him. They recognized with anger the hated cloak. Some were for killing him outright. Reuben and Judah urged that there be no bloodshed. Nevertheless, they pulled his fine coat off and dropped him into an old cistern that no longer held water. A caravan of merchants came by carrying goods down into Egypt. The brothers drew Joseph out of the pit and sold him to the traders for twenty pieces of silver.

Day after day Jacob waited for Joseph. At last the older sons returned. They brought the beautiful coat which they had dipped into the blood of a goat. Convinced of Joseph's death at the claws of some wild beast, Jacob succumbed to grief. The light and joy of his life had been extinguished.

ISRAEL GOES TO EGYPT

Several years went by. The crops were good, and Jacob and his family remained in the hill country of Canaan. Then the rains failed and famine struck... Hunger came to Jacob's camp. Then one day he heard good news.

Behold, I have heard that there is corn in Egypt: get you down thither and buy for us from thence; that we may live, and not die. (Genesis 42:2)

With a string of donkeys and money for the grain, ten of the young men set out for Egypt. Jacob kept Benjamin with him, for he couldn't bear the thought of any harm coming to Rachel's surviving son.

In due time the caravan returned. The sacks were plump with grain. But only nine of the brothers had come home! Simeon had been held hostage in Egypt. Then they found that the money each man had paid for the grain lay in the mouth of his sack. Moreover the memory of their secret treachery to Joseph was tormenting them afresh. They reported to their father;

The man, who is lord of the land, spake roughly to us, and took us for spies of the country. The man ...said unto us, leave one of your brethren here with me, and take food for the famine of your households, and be gone: And bring your youngest brother unto me: then shall I know that ye are no spies, but that ye are true men: so will I deliver you your brother, and ye shall traffick in the land. (Genesis 42:30-34,36,37)

Jacob mourned bitterly and said,

Me have ye bereaved of my children; Joseph is not, and Simeon is not, and ye will take Benjamin away: And Reuben spake unto his father, saying,

Slay my two sons, if I bring him not to thee: deliver him into my hand, and I will bring him to thee again. (Genesis 42:36,37)

However, Jacob refused to let Benjamin go.

The famine continued relentlessly and again the grain jars were empty. Again Jacob directed his sons to go down to Egypt. Judah reminded him that it was useless without Benjamin.

Eventually Jacob gave in. He told them to take double the money and gifts of balm, honey, pistachio nuts and almonds. Benjamin went with them.

How anxiously Jacob watched the quiet road over the hills toward Egypt! At last the familiar caravan came in sight. His sons were hurrying ahead, calling to him:

Joseph is yet alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt. (Genesis 45:26)

The brothers said that the man from whom they had bought the grain had sent all his servants out of the room. Then he broke into uncontrollable weeping. Then he told them,

I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. Now, therefore, be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life. ...and he hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt. ...and ye shall haste and bring down my father hither. (Genesis 45:4,5,8,13)

The aging Jacob and his family traveled down to Egypt in the Egyptian wagons which Joseph had sent, with their remaining flocks. At Beersheba, Jacob's childhood home, he paused to sacrifice to the God of his father Isaac, and in a vision he was reassured .

...Fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation: I will go down with thee into Egypt; and I will also surely bring thee up again:... (Genesis 46:3,4)

Thus Israel came to Egypt with his clan. He settled by Pharaoh among the palm trees of the land of Goshen. It was choice land of the Nile Delta.

What a joyful reunion he had with his beloved son! How happy he was to learn that in Joseph's life, his own teachings had been put to the test and proven practical. Sold into bondage by his brothers, Joseph had refused to surrender to bitterness. He had been raised to honor and influence in his master's household.

He had met with temptation, treachery, injustice and undeserved imprisonment. But even in prison he had risen to authority and respect. His father's God had shown him the meaning of Pharaoh's troubling dreams which the court wise men could not interpret. He had been enabled to warn Pharaoh of seven years of impending famine. The he outline for him wise measures for meeting them.

Pharaoh had given him his own ring, symbol of authority over all Egypt. Then Joseph, with his God-given wisdom, had stored the grain of plentiful harvests to feed Egypt and her neighbors during the years of famine.

The perfidy of his older brothers was freely forgiven. The test which he had devised, the returning of the money to their sacks, the threat of holding Benjamin as his servant and their earnest offer to be hostage for him, had proven beyond a doubt their repentance and reliability.

BLESSING THE TRIBES

Joseph was told one day that his aging father was ill. He took his two sons to visit their grandfather. Jacob gathered his strength and sat up in the bed to bless the lads. They were Rachel's grandsons, therefore doubly dear to him. To insure their inheritance he adopted them as he blessed them saying,

God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God which fed me all t my life long unto this day, the Angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and let my name be named on them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth. (Genesis 48:15,16)

Once more the customary right of the eldest son was set aside. Israel insisted on placing his right hand on Ephraim On Manasseh, who was the firstborn, he place his left.

From his deathbed Jacob addressed each of his twelve sons. He gravely pointing out the ways their paths would take. Reuben he rebuked for adultery. Simeon and Levi he cursed for their cruel treachery at Shechem. To Judah, his fourth son, he gave the blessing which has been transmitted from very ancient times:

Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise:...thy father's children shall bow down before thee. The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be. (Genesis 49:8,10)

After his death, Jacob's body was mummified. All Egypt mourned for seventy days. There was an impressive escort of dignitaries from Pharaoh's household with chariots and horsemen. Joseph and his brothers carried Israel's body up to Canaan. They put him in the cave of Machpelah. There lay the bones of Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebekah and Leah. Most of the Israelites then returned to their homes in Egypt.

Their return marks the end of the first phase of discovery by Abraham and his family. They were the earliest students of the one God. Centuries would pass before the children of Israel would be called upon for further progress. In their tight knit little colony on Egypt's delta, they kept alive the stories of their valiant ancestors. When the call to action came, the knowledge of their God had dimmed. But it had not disappeared.