

The Original “Rolling Stone”

A stone appeared to follow Jacob everywhere, like a rolling stone. From the time he fled from the land promised his forefathers, to his return, a stone was with Jacob. Though many have noted the presence of a stone in the annals of Jacob, its significance eludes them. If, however, we read the Jacob narratives from beginning to end, we may unravel the stone’s meaning at the climax of Jacob’s life.

The stone initially appeared on the heels of a disastrous development in Jacob’s life. He was fleeing from his brother Esau whose first-born right to the family blessing has been fleeced by Jacob (Genesis 27). Isaac, Jacob’s father, therefore, charged him, “Arise and go to...your mother’s father” which was in Haran, east of the Promised Land (28:2). Jacob arrived at “a certain place,” while still in the Land, and decided to spend the night there. He therefore, selected “one of the stones,” placed it “under his head,” and fell asleep “in that place” (v. 11).

Suddenly, the LORD appeared above a ladder reaching into Heaven (28:12-15). The LORD presented to Jacob what He had previously promised to Abraham and Isaac: land (the Promised Land), seed (descendants that would extend to the birth of the Messiah), and blessing (His presence wherever Jacob would go).

When Jacob arose early the next morning, he used “the stone that he had put under his head” as a pillar (28:18). He commemorated the place by pouring oil on the stone’s top and naming “that place” Bethel (the house of God). He pledged that if God would be with him and restored him safely back to his “father’s house,” then “the LORD will be my God” (v. 20-21). Twenty years would expire before he returned to his father’s house.

Another stone appears at the end of Jacob’s journey to Haran. This time a stone sits atop a well (29:2). The well was used by shepherds who would roll “the stone from the mouth of the well” so they could water their sheep (v. 3). Furthermore, the stone was so heavy that the strength of all the shepherds was needed to remove it. Yet, when Jacob was informed that his cousin Rachel was coming with the family sheep, and he saw her, he rolled “the stone from the mouth of the well, and watered the flock of ...his mother’s brother” (v.10). Thus, a stone was not only with Jacob in the Promised Land, but outside it.

Twenty years of servitude to Jacob’s mother’s brother Laban (who has become Jacob’s father-in-law) culminated in a drastic and potentially perilous resolution—Jacob fled Laban’s home. The flight is precipitated by multiple deceptions inflicted upon Jacob over the two decades. After serving Laban seven years for Rachel, Laban deceived Jacob on his wedding night by swapping the loved Rachel for Laban’s first-born daughter, Leah. Jacob must then labor seven more years for Rachel. Additionally, Laban had guaranteed payment in livestock for Jacob’s service, and reneged on his wages each time God blessed Jacob with additional flocks (31:7). Hence, the LORD’s directive to “return to the land of your fathers” met with Jacob’s approval (31:3).

A three-day head start did not provide Jacob, his wives, little ones, and “acquired livestock” with enough time to escape the pursuing Laban (31:18). Because Laban has been warned in a dream to “Be careful that you do not speak to Jacob either good or bad,” Laban initiates a peace covenant between them (v. 44). Subsequently, Jacob orders his kinsmen, “Gather stones” (v. 46). This “heap...of stones” becomes a witness that Laban and Jacob will never overstep the boundaries between them “for harm” (v. 52).

Returning to the initial “place” of retreat—Bethel—Jacob again “set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with God” (35:14). As at first, Jacob set up “a pillar of **stone**” (v. 14) since the LORD had brought him back to his family and land as He had promised.

Within or without the land of promise, a stone seems to tag Jacob. Yet, it is not until the completion of Jacob’s life that he reveals what this “rolling stone” may symbolize. On his death bed, Jacob summons and blesses each of his twelve sons. Addressing Joseph, Jacob identifies God as the “Mighty One of Jacob,” as the “Shepherd,” and finally, as “the **Stone** of Israel” (49:24). It was the LORD who had been with Jacob all along.