

Jacob and Esau – brothers in arms!?

Genesis 25.19-34

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In recent weeks, we've been reflecting on the book of Genesis – stories of the patriarchs (or *ancestors* as they're sometimes called). Two weeks ago, we pondered Abraham and the *Akedah*, the perplexing tale of the 'binding' of Isaac. Last week it was Isaac and Rebekah in ordinary time. And this morning it's the birth and youth of rival brothers. The continuance of God's plan for blessing lies with this next generation, and in particular, the *second-born* son, so very different to his father (and his grandfather). Jacob is a wily character and we cannot but wonder at God's choice of him. Goodness, if God can partner with a Jacob, there seems no limit to who can be involved!!

Our story begins, as many of these narratives do, with a genealogy that sets the scene – thankfully short! *'And this is the lineage of Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac. And Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah.'* At this point, the complications begin, Rebekah is 'barren'. Now, I've spoken of this before; this inability of a couple to have children is a common initiating dilemma in the biblical drama. There are numerous examples in scripture, and whenever they occur, they serve as a cue that (paradoxically) someone significant is about to appear on the scene. In this case, Isaac prayed on behalf of his wife and, we're told, 'Rebekah conceived' – twins as it turned out. And then, more complication – *'the children clashed together within her'*. I can only imagine how uncomfortable this was for Rebekah!! In anguish, she protests, 'Why me?'. And, who of us hasn't cried that at some painful point in life... *Why me???* Rebekah's cry sounds down through history, and serves here to remind us that being caught up in God's purposes does not mean it's all 'smooth sailing'. Sometimes, it's deeply challenging. In this case, the trouble has an explanation. Rebekah is told that in these twins two incipient nations are represented; one of the children is stronger and will be first, but contrary to the natural order of things, *'the elder shall serve the younger'*. This

doesn't bode well, and even their birth is a fiercely rivalrous affair. After months of scuffling in the womb, finally, out pops Esau, (number one), ruddy and hairy. And, hard on his heels, literally, number two, 'Jacob' (the name means 'heel-grabber' or 'supplanter'). 'Jacob arrives trying to prevent Esau from being the first-born', writes Genesis scholar Leon Kass (2003.407), 'tripping him up or holding him back from behind'. This isn't to suggest conscious intention on this infant's part; the image is symbolic. Nevertheless, he is well-named!!

From the beginning, these brothers, though from the same womb, are very different in personality. Esau is big and hairy; a beast of a man; a front row forward; ruddy in complexion and in character. Esau is man's man! Huntin', shootin' and fishin' are his thing, and he's Dad's favourite for, we read, Isaac: '*was fond of game*' (28). Jacob is Mum's boy. Smaller, smoother, smarter, Jacob is the quieter one, the thinker, the brooder. While Esau is out hunting, Jacob is back in camp – cooking ... 'stewing'. By 'nature' – being born second – he was at a disadvantage. But that wasn't going to stop Jacob. He was ambitious, tenacious and ... sly ... What Jacob couldn't procure by birth, he would 'grasp' by other means. Lyin', stealin' and cheatin' were more his *modus operandi*, and as we're about to discover, he had a certain knack for turning things his way.

And, so the story focusses in on a particular day when these young men are going about their daily routines: '*Once... when Jacob was cooking a stew, (lit. 'stewing a stew' ... remember, he's been stewing since birth!!) Esau arrives home exhausted. It hasn't been a good day for this brawny hunter; he's tired and hungry ... and as he wearily lifts the flap of the tent, mmm, mmm – the enticing smell of Jacob's classic 'red' stew bubbling away in the pot (note the emphasis on 'red' here). 'I'm famished', he gasps, (lifting the ladle for a deeper draught) 'let me gulp down some of this red, red stuff'. This word 'gulp' is generally connected with the feeding cattle, only here is it used to describe a human eating. And in these subtle (and not so subtle) ways we're being told that Esau really is a bit of animal. In his*

maiden speech in Genesis, red-faced, *red-blooded* Esau is showing us that he is ‘a man of impatient and unbridled appetite’ (2003.409); a man driven by *desire*.

To be sure, Jacob is driven too, though the expression in him is different. Where Esau is red-blooded and impulsive, Jacob is cool and calculating. This likely isn’t the first time Esau has come home ‘famished’, and Jacob has ‘stewed up’ a way to exploit it: *Sure*, he says, dispassionately (I imagine), *help yourself... but before you do, ‘sell me your birthright’*. Huh? Birthright? *What’s the use of that in this state? I’m dying*, grunts Esau, dramatically. *Then swear to me*, Jacob says, keen to seal the deal. And, astonishingly, Esau did, just like that ... and ‘*he ate and he drank and he rose and he went off*’, says the text, ‘*and thus he spurned his birthright*’. And on that note, this episode ends... although clearly, it’s not over between these two.

So, what to make of it all? How does this story speak to us, so far removed in time and place?

Well, you’d have to say that Esau really does come across here as brutish and reckless. On one level, you could say, he deserved it. He was a fool! As Isaac’s firstborn son, in the normal course of things, he should’ve been the heir the promise - the one to incubate and pass it on to future generations (to us!). But this man has no sense of the magnitude of his role and responsibility. Could it ever have worked with him? Could he ever have been trusted? ‘A slave to appetite, he proves his unfitness by the contempt he shows for the birthright’, Kass writes (2003.411). And probably he’s right.

But is Jacob any better – any less self-seeking or rude? He’s clearly disciplined and thoughtful; not nearly as impetuous or brutish as his brother; he can plan, and wait, and cook (men take note!!); he’s gutsy, even ‘up front’ at times. But he’s also cagy and crooked, hardly a role model in trust! Can he really be trusted any more than Esau? For sure, none of the patriarchs were squeaky clean; they all did stupid, selfish and morally dubious things. But many of us, I suspect, find it easier to understand why God chose to entrust the promise of blessing with Abraham or

Isaac than with Jacob. He's not immediately easy to like. Still, as we proceed with these readings, I imagine we may also find ourselves identifying with Jacob, with his experience, and even aspects of his character. If we do, we're not alone. Here's how one man expressed his perspective:

I find Jacob the most interesting and likeable character in Genesis. I like his feistiness. I like his doubt. I like that he's going to test this God's voice that he hears. He sounds genuine, an actual human being. Why should he trust? He's certainly heard the story of Isaac's experience – he's seen the wounds his father has sustained at the hands of a crazy grandfather [Abraham] and a crazy God. He's going to take care of himself. Sounds a lot like me. (in Borgman 2001.136)

He's got a point. We may not speak as baldly as this, but in truth many of us know at least something of the fear that lay behind Jacob's scrambling efforts to procure his identity, his future, his existence for himself (even at the expense of others) – the fear of insignificance ... of missing out ... of being left behind. It stalks most of us in different ways, and surely affects our choice and behaviour. Jacob wasn't perfect, far from it, but neither are we. From that perspective, the fact that God chooses him ... takes the risk of trusting, forgiving and persisting with him is very reassuring. We can learn from his experiences.

And, in the end, I guess that's why we (as have hundreds of generations before us) persist with these puzzling tales. They speak to us; they touch and teach us. Importantly, they remind us of who we can be and become, and of what can unfold as we (with Isaac, Rebekah and Jacob) continue, albeit falteringly, to engage with the God who seeks to bless us, and for us to be partners in the blessing of the world.

References

- Borgman, Paul (2001) *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL.
Kass, Leon R (2003) *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*, University of Chicago Press.