

Reading Genesis: Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25. 19-34)

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‘I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’ is a formula that sounds again and again through the Scriptures. It’s one of the prime ways that God identifies who God is. We have been reading Genesis and so far, we have focused on stories of Abraham and Isaac. Today’s reading brings us to Jacob, the third of these figures who loom so large in Israel’s self-understanding. Jacob is the most complex of them all. For if Abraham is remembered for his faith, and Isaac for his solid if passive carriage of the family destiny, Jacob is remembered for his proclivity for conflict, his wrestling for place and for blessing.

His story begins, as so many of them do, with God’s overcoming of impossibility. Rebekah, his mother, is barren and conceives (after twenty years of childless marriage) in response to her husband Isaac’s prayer. Having done so, she wishes she had not. ‘The children struggled together within her; and she said, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?”’ (Gen. 25. 22). The Hebrew says: ‘the children clashed together within her, and she said, “Then why me?”’¹ She goes to inquire of the Lord, and receives an ominous oracle of annunciation: ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided ... the elder shall serve the younger’ (Gen. 25. 23).

This thread in the drama of Jacob and of his brother Esau functions a bit like an explanatory story of origin – a ‘how the camel got its hump’ kind of tale. Esau is identified with the nation of Edom and Jacob with Israel. Scholar Robert Alter writes, ‘the story of two rival brothers virtually asks us to read it as a political allegory’,

¹ Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 127.

justifying the antagonism between the two nations.² The name 'Edom' is related to '*adom*, the colour red. It characterised negatively by the biblical writer with reference to the ruddy Esau's uncouth and animal appetite, hungry for the red red stew. Early Jewish commentaries, Alter says, 'tend to make Esau out to be a vicious brute, while Jacob the tent-dweller becomes the model of pious Israel pondering the intricacies of God's revelation in the study of the Law'.³ But this neat moral distinction between the two brothers and, so by implication, between 'animal' Edom and pious Israel doesn't do justice to the text itself, which 'presents matters rather differently'.⁴

Jacob is described as a 'quiet man' living in tents. The Hebrew word *tam*, 'quiet', conveys the sense of integrity or even innocence. It is the adjective used to describe pureness of heart. Yet embedded in Jacob's name, *Ya'aqob*, is the word '*aqob*, which is the adjective used for a heart that is crooked. Alter suggests that the text is playing with 'recognized antonyms' or contrasting terms – both commonly used in describing the state of the heart. Jacob, characterised as mild, innocent, quiet is about to act in a way that is, if not crooked, at least shrewdly calculating. The ironic clue is in his very name, and a hint of moral ambiguity sets in.⁵

In fact, the dialogue between the brothers suggests it is Esau who, though somewhat gross, is 'simple' or 'innocent' of heart – no match for his brother's subtle 'smoothness'. (He oiled his way across the floor, oozing charm from every pore). The Hebrew here is more revealing than the English. Esau asks for the stew with a verb used for the feeding of animals. In Australia we'd talk about stuffing your face – snouts in the trough, putting on the nosebag In the text, Esau can't even think of the word for stew but points to it pantingly, calling it "this red red stuff".⁶ By contrast with Esau's hot-blooded impulsiveness, Jacob is cool, clear and calculating.

² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981), 42.

³ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 43.

⁴ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 43.

⁵ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 43.

⁶ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 44.

He withholds food until Esau swears away his birthright. Esau, too famished to care, thoughtlessly consents. The scene ends in a flurry of verbs: 'he ate, he drank, he rose, he went off. So 'Esau spurned the birthright'.⁷ Of course, as you know, things get worse for Esau. In this episode, his rights of primogeniture – the rights pertaining to being first born – are lost. Later on, Jacob robs him of his father's final solemn blessing, significantly aided and abetted by their equally cool and calculating mother Rebekah in a spectacular instance of maternal favouritism. And thus Jacob makes a clean sweep of his brother's right of inheritance.⁸

So what does this unsavoury sibling rivalry have to do with us? What meaning can we make from such fractious fraternity? Some see it as a lesson in what kind of person can carry out God's purposes. On this reading, it is said that Esau's lustiness, his enslavement to his base bodily needs make him spiritually unfit 'to be the vehicle of divine election He is altogether too much the slave of the moment and of the body's tyranny to become the progenitor of the people promised by divine covenant His selling of the birthright in the circumstances here described is in itself proof that he is not worthy to retain the birthright'.⁹ At issue, writes Walter Brueggemann, is the age-old matter of delayed gratification: 'Esau is hungry and cannot wait'. Perhaps Jacob is also hungry, but he can wait, thus mirroring the posture of faithful waiting by Israel for fulfilment of the promise of God.¹⁰

Taking a different tack, St Paul frames the spiritual meaning of the story in terms of the inscrutability, scandal and radical freedom of God. Commenting on the favouring of Jacob over Esau in Romans 9, Paul reasons that God is free to elect who God will: 'Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God's purpose of election might continue, not by works but by his call', Rebekah was told, "The elder shall serve the younger". What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I

⁷ Alter, *Genesis*, 130.

⁸ Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 138.

⁹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 45.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 219.

have mercy, and ... compassion on whom I have compassion” (Rom. 9.11-14). Which doesn’t, to my mind, quite answer the question; though Brueggemann struggles on: ‘There is no way to seek behind this for explanation. The justification is hidden in the purposes of God. That is what the Jacob narrative is about. The world is filled with “practitioners of primogeniture” ..., who insist on their culturally bestowed rights and privileges ... [But] God has inscrutable mercy on “younger ones”.’¹¹

Well, there’s something in these explanations, but I’m not sure if I find them totally convincing. The first explanation glosses over Jacob’s ‘crookedness’ too easily; the second, while insisting on God’s freedom to choose, is in danger of downplaying the impact of who we are, as if God just uses who God wills, and we either get chosen as vehicles of divine purpose or we don’t.

What really strikes me in the story is the way it not only leaves in, but actually emphasises the ambiguity of Jacob’s character, which is by implication an ambiguity about *Israel*. The origins of Israel are not air-brushed away here, nor made to fit some tidy moral schema.

Contrast this with idolatrous religion, which is blind to its own faults and always functions to prop up the identity and assumed ‘goodness’ of the ‘in-group’. Idolatry imagines a god who is on our side, in whose eyes we are ‘good’ and right – not like *them*, all those nasty pagans and Edomites. The Hebrew Scriptures refuse this tendency, showing little interest in making either Jacob or Israel out to be all-good, all-virtuous, justified in all they do. God chooses Jacob, yes, and works in and through his flaws as well as his strengths. But God is never simply identified with Jacob, and nor is Jacob unquestioningly legitimated – a truth revealed in the slow, at times painful way he is transformed throughout his story. God, in other words, remains Other to Jacob, continuing as his judge, calling him to deeper integration and truthfulness, even as he works through him for the blessing of the world.

¹¹ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 220.

We live in a world deeply troubled by tribal religious identifications. So-called divinely sanctioned forms of rivalry, exclusion and violence abound, from honour killings in Pakistan to suicide bombers in the Middle East, from the homophobic rhetoric of the Christian right to ethnic cleansing by fundamentalist separatists. Tribal religion claims that God is identified with its cause and that it is therefore beyond judgement – this is idolatry. It can be the same with us. We want to know ourselves as ‘good’, ‘right’, ‘justified’ in all we do – think how easily we take offence if someone questions or criticises us; how many good reasons we can muster to justify ourselves and our actions, how difficult it is to let go of an image of ourselves as being in the right in any conflict. The God of Jacob, the God of Jesus, **will** not be co-opted for these purposes.

To be called by the God of Abraham, Isaac and **Jacob** is not a divine legitimation of me, or of us and our identities. It is much more like coming to know more deeply the *ambiguity* of my motives and my actions, the *distance* between who I am and who I am called to be if I am to be truly a bearer of divine blessing for the world. This story was early days for Jacob. As for him, so with us there was a long way to go. So let us be on our way, on the journey of continuing transformation, in the company of brothers and sisters of every tribe, and of him who is the Way.