

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 8

Jacob

Life is full of wonderful times. One time I greatly enjoy is beating Louis Miori in racquetball. Conversely, one of the things I really hate is when I lose to him. Racquetball is unlike team sports. It is one on one. If you win, then it is because you outplayed the opponent. If you lose, then he/she outplayed you. One day can vary wildly from another. I cannot count the times where I have beaten Louis convincingly, only to have him come back and make it look like the first time I ever picked up a racquet. Ultimately, it becomes a simple matter of measurement where the results are objectively quantifiable and known.

Faith reminds me of racquetball in some ways, and yet, it is very different in others. Like racquetball, faith is a personal matter; it is not a team sport. Each of us has our individual faith walk with the Lord. Some walk closely, others more distant. We vary in our faith not just in reference to others, but also in reference to ourselves. There are times where we are on our game, where our intimacy with the Father is warmly felt, and consciously confirmed. Then, other times we are “off.” The warmth is not so great, and doubts crowd the mind.

Unlike racquetball, faith is not easily measured with objective results. Absent some Vulcan mind meld, none of us are really able to climb into another’s body and understand the layers of their faith and the waves of struggle. Some people are quick to openly discuss such things, as time and opportunity appear. But for most, there never is a full disclosure, no real ability to measure or appraise “where we are” versus where others are.

The Bible offers insight on these issues, but even there it is often difficult to find and understand what is offered. Consider in this vein, the life of Jacob. We read of Jacob in over ten chapters of Genesis, yet to the extent we know the stories, we carry presuppositions that make it hard for us to fully understand who he was and what struggles he had in his life. This is true, even if we do not know the stories well because we realize he is the father of the modern Hebrew nation.

If we pause and read slowly and deliberately, then we can better appreciate Jacob’s life story in Scripture, his struggle with God, and the choices of life. He had faith, yet he lived in ways and made choices that have made scholars of Scripture uncomfortable for thousands of years. As we study and consider Jacob, it is instructive to understand not just his story, but also how that story compares to our lives, and how scholars have understood it in light of their own lives and theologies.

JACOB'S BIRTH, BIRTHRIGHT, AND BLESSING

Genesis 25 tells the story of Jacob's birth. Jacob's father (Isaac) and mother (Rebekah) had married when Rebekah was young and Isaac was already 40. For twenty years, Rebekah had not successfully given birth to a child. Isaac prayed and prayed for her and finally she was pregnant—with twins. The pregnancy was hard and difficult. The twins “struggled together within her” and a prophetic word from the LORD came to her:

Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger (Gen. 25:23).

Her twins were born and the first out was Esau, ruddy “red” and “hairy.” Immediately on the heels of Esau was Jacob, the second twin. Genesis 25:26 explains:

Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob.

The birth story has several puns of note. One descriptive word for Esau is “ruddy” or “red.” The Hebrew word (*adom*) is a pun on the name “Edom” which becomes another name for Esau (25:30) and eventually for the nation that proceeds from Esau. The other descriptive word for Esau is “hairy.” This word (*se'ar*) is a word play on the territory eventually occupied by the Edomites, “Seir.”

Meanwhile, the word play is even more telling in the case of Jacob. Although scholars have some level of disagreement about the original meaning of “Jacob,”¹ the Genesis text makes clear the associations relevant to understanding Jacob's life and actions. “Jacob (*y'akov*) is closely related to the Hebrew for “heel” (*'akev*), which also carries the idea of “overreaching” or “deceiving.”²

The story between the two brothers is forecasted well by these few verses of their birth. As Edward Fudge notes:

¹ A number of scholars assume an origination of “Jacob” (*Ya'aqob*) as meaning “God protects” (See, e.g., Alter, Robert, *The Five Books of Moses: a Translation with Commentary*, (Norton 2004) at 130). Regardless of the history behind the name, the puns involved in the Genesis account are not based on any such etymology, but rather on the simple word play set out above. See, Thompson, Thomas, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham*, (Trinity Press International 2002) at 36ff.

² *Ibid.*

In time, she [Rebekah] gives Isaac twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Esau is born first with Jacob clutching his heel. As the two grow to manhood, Jacob continues to grab what belongs to Esau.³

When Jacob makes the two major power grabs from Esau, he does so in a less than impressive manner, at least from a moral perspective. The first power grab comes right after the story of the twins' birth. Within two passing verses, the just born infant brothers are grown up, twins by birth, but as different as night and day in life. Esau is a hunter and Jacob a tent dwelling pastoralist. Esau becomes his father's favorite while Jacob is his mother's favorite.

Esau comes in from the field exhausted and finds Jacob cooking a red stew. Esau asks to eat some, and Jacob allows it only in return for selling his birthright! Esau agrees, but Jacob requires an oath before giving any food. Only after the oath is given is bread and stew given to his famished brother.⁴

Most scholars see the "birthright" as "the privilege of the firstborn son to inherit a double share of the paternal estate."⁵ Certainly by the time of the Law of Moses, this was part of the birthright.

He [the father] shall acknowledge the firstborn...by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the first fruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his (Dt. 21:17).

Some understand it also to include the family "chieftainship, the rule over the brethren and the entire family."⁶ Esau's lack of caring about these things does not reflect well on him. The writer of Hebrews called him "unholy" for selling his

³ Fudge, Edward, *The Divine Rescue* (Leafwood 2010) at 57.

⁴ Some scholars point to texts excavated from the nearby town of Nuzi (which date near the time of Jacob) as indicating that others sold their birthrights in similar fashion. The footnote to the ESV Study Bible for Genesis 25:31-32 states, "The Nuzi texts from the fifteenth century B.C. in Mesopotamia give evidence for transferable birthrights, mentioning one particular case in which a man sells his birthright for a sheep." Other scholars debate the level of similarity of the transaction (see Thomas at 280-285), but even within their challenges, the point is still clear that birthrights could be sold.

⁵ Bromily, Geoffrey, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Eerdmans 1982) v.2 at 948.

⁶ Keil, C. F. and Delitzsch, F., *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Hendrickson 1996) vol. 1 at 172.

birthright for a single meal, likening it to those who walk in sexual immorality, choosing momentary sensual gratification over the moral responsibilities of life.⁷

Even though Esau was making bad choices, this was not a shining day for Jacob. Jacob's actions are so deplorable that early Hebrew scholars in the first century went to great depths to try and justify this action. One rabbinical tradition explained by returning to the fighting between the brothers in the womb. This teaching said that in the womb Jacob was the planned first birth, but Esau had promised to kill their mother once given the opportunity and Jacob, being the wonderful guy he was, cut a deal: Esau could be born first if he would promise not to kill mom! Under this teaching, the actions of Jacob were not out of line. He was merely retaking what was wrongly taken from him at the start.

Of course, there is no biblical basis for this reading. In fact, Scripture teaches the opposite. In Scripture, even the best of the holy people had days and times where their actions were less than exemplary, if not downright deplorable. Jacob may have been born to parents of faith. His grandfather may have had faith beyond measure, but Jacob did not live this part of life reflecting faith, at least as we read it in these versus.

The second power grab is related in Genesis 27. At this point, Isaac was old and his vision was gone. The blind Isaac called in Esau and asked him to go hunt some game for what might be Isaac's last meal. With the food, Isaac promised to give his blessing on Esau. Esau left to hunt and as soon as he left, Rebekah went to work with Jacob to deceive Isaac. Rebekah told Jacob what was going on and ordered him to go get two goats. Rebekah figured she could cook the goats in such a way that Isaac thought it game.

Jacob knew his father was blind, but feared that a physical encounter would uncover the deception because Jacob was not hairy as was Esau. Rebekah had the solution and Jacob went along with it. The goats were prepared, Jacob donned his twin's clothes, and some goatskin added the necessary hair to pass a touch test.

We should add here that to a westerner, this might seem an absurd effort, for European goats are clearly distinguishable from human hair. The "camel-goats" of the East have much different hair than was used by Romans, at least, as toupees for men.⁸

⁷ Heb. 12:15-16, "See to it...that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal."

⁸ The first century Roman poet Martial wrote of a friend, "You cover your temples and the top of your bare bald pate with a kid's skin [the skin and hair of a baby goat]. It was a witty saying when somebody told you, Phoebus, that your head is well shod." Martial, *epigrams*, xii at 45. (Loeb Classical Library 1993). See also footnote 1 in Kiel, *op cit.*, at 176.

When Jacob went in to see his father taking the food and asking for the blessing, Isaac was at first suspicious. Jacob lied to his father and once Isaac felt and smelled Jacob, he was fully deceived and gave his blessing:

May God give you of the dew of heaven□ and of the fatness of the earth□ and plenty of grain and wine.□ Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!" (Gen. 27:28-29).

After this blessing, Jacob left his father just as Esau was returning. As Esau and his father understood the deception and betrayal of Mom/wife and brother/son, Isaac “trembled very violently” and Esau pointed out the double deception/power grab of Jacob and begged for some remnant of blessing that Isaac might have. The blessing was hardly a blessing:

"Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be, and away from the dew of heaven on high. □ By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you grow restless you shall break his yoke from your neck." (Gen. 27:39-40).

Esau hated Jacob for this and fully intended to kill him once Isaac died. When Rebekah learned of this, she sent Jacob away to live with her brother in Haran. This was “officially done” by Isaac who sent Jacob so he could find a wife from among family rather than among the Canaanites.

JACOB'S DREAM

Jacob left home, fleeing his brother before Esau could execute his wrath upon Jacob, and seeking a wife from his family back in Mesopotamia. At nightfall, Jacob stopped and slept having a most peculiar dream:

And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Gen. 28:12-15).

Consider the import of this dream without any knowledge of the end of the story. As we consider the introduction to this class, what can we assess about Jacob and his faith? Jacob is over 40 years old. He had wrangled from his brother, schemed with his mother, lied to his father, and stole the family inheritance/blessing, all for his own enrichment.

He then did the opposite of his grandfather Abraham. In faith, Abraham had left Haran for Canaan. In fear, Jacob fled Canaan for Haran. No doubt this was a time of great crisis for Jacob. He was traditionally a tent dweller, not a hunter living on the ground. He had fled for his life and went from being a mama's boy to life on the run, headed to impose on unknown relatives.

In the midst of this faith walk (or lack thereof), Jacob has a dream of the LORD. In this dream, God identifies himself as "the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac." God identified himself as God of the first generation of promise (Abraham) and God of the second generation of promise (Isaac). But God was *not* the God of Jacob at that time, at least not in what we see from Jacob's life or God's self-identification.

Yet, God still proclaims his choice of blessing through Jacob. God explains that the promises made to Abraham and Isaac will find fulfillment through Jacob. These promises of land, innumerable descendants, and the offspring through whom all the fallen earth will be blessed, will flow from Jacob and his seed.

No doubt, the events that brought Jacob to this point in time where he fled for his life reacted in his mind with his dream. The text says that Jacob was "afraid," and that he suddenly considered the previously unassuming place to be "none other than the house of God...the gate of heaven" (Gen. 28:17).

Jacob named the place "Bethel" which meant "house" (*beth*) of God (*El*). He erected the stone pillar where he had dreamed of the ramp to heaven and then poured oil on it. When this event is retold in Genesis 31:13, the word used for anointing the pillar with oil is the Hebrew root *m-sh-h*, the root also for "messiah" or anointed.

This story finds an echo in the New Testament gospel of John. In John 1:43-51, we read:

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ... Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no

deceit!" Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

At first blush, this account of Nathanael's calling seems far removed from Jacob, but scholars note a likely connection. The context is consistent with the idea that Nathanael, before hearing the call of Jesus through Philip, was sitting under a tree studying or thinking about the episodes of Jacob, especially those at Bethel.

Jesus clearly knew these thoughts of Nathanael as Jesus greets him with the declaration, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit." Although we have not reached the point in Jacob's life where it occurs, we can note here that God does change Jacob's name to Israel. For Jesus, to speak of an "Israel-ite" in whom is "no deceit" is to use phrases and words laden with meaning from Jacob. Jacob was the deceitful one, whose name ultimately gets changed to Israel at a time when he has grown out of his ready deceitfulness.

Nathanael is stunned that Jesus could have read his mind for his study and asks, "How do you know me?" Jesus explained that he saw what was in Nathanael's mind even before the call, when Nathanael was "under the fig tree." In his amazement, Nathanael readily proclaims Jesus as "the Son of God! The King of Israel!" Jesus then returns to the Jacob narrative proclaiming a true prophetic reading of the dream,

Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

The real Bethel, the real house of God, the real ladder where God descends to meet his people, the nexus between heaven and earth, was to be the cross of Christ. The anointing, the Messiah would not be Jacob's stone, but the "stone the builders rejected" (Acts 4:11).

Returning to Jacob, it is interesting to note his "deal" with God. Jacob is "willing" to have Yahweh as his God, but only under certain conditions!

Jacob made a vow, saying, "***If*** God will ***be with me*** and ***will keep me*** in this way that I go, and ***will give me bread*** to eat ***and clothing*** to wear, ***so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then*** the ***LORD shall be my God***, and this stone, which I have set up for a

pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you" (Gen 28:20-22).

Wow! Ever the deal maker, and only slowly the trusting servant, Jacob cuts a deal that he will keep with God only so long as he feels God is living up to his end of the bargain.

Ultimately, we will see throughout the rest of the Jacob story that crisis after crisis finally beats this distrust from him and it is replaced by reliance on God. But the deceit that Jacob has repeatedly wielded so craftily in his life certainly comes back to him – he reaped what he sowed.

CONCLUSION

I would like to have Vulcan mind meld capabilities with Jacob. What was going through his mind when he was so conniving? How did he justify his worldly desire for wealth that drove him to destroy his relationship with his twin? How did he rationalize his selfishness that drove him to unethical conduct? What caused him to give God conditional Lordship in his life as long as God lived up to his end of the bargain, as stipulated by Jacob?

Faith is an individual matter. It is not inherited, nor is it readily transferable. We do not have an objective score like we might in a ball game. We have only our own faith walk with the Lord. But within that, we have opportunities to share and grow.

With Jacob, we will see later in the story, how he becomes a wise man of deep faith late in his years. Like many wonderful saints, heavily used by God, he almost seemed to have stumbled into faith. After bouts of unethical dealing with his father-in-law, after four wives and a dozen children, after becoming a hurt and embittered father, Jacob emerges with a faith in Yahweh and a deep spirituality.

POINTS FOR HOME

First things first: It's Father's Day. Do something nice for your Dad, in memory of your Dad, or for someone who is a Father figure to you!

1. *"The older shall serve the younger"* (Gen. 25:23).

Almost two thousand years later, Paul quoted this statement God made to Rebekah. In Romans 9:12, Paul uses the passage to underscore that God set out and achieved his purpose according to his plan. God's plan was never based on the actions of man, but always the decisions of God. No one is going to thwart the promises of God. He is reliable to keep his word, because of who he is.

2. *“He said, ‘Are you really my son Esau?’ He answered, ‘I am’”* (Gen. 12:1).

Jacob flat-out lied to his father. He did it to take something that was not rightfully his. It is amazing to think about. Do we write it off to the frivolity of youth? Not when we consider that Jacob was 40 years old! Do we consider it an indicator that sin is not all that bad after all? Absolutely not! As Paul indicated, sin was the reason Christ died. We are left with a flawed man who needed the sacrifice of Christ as much as any of us.

We need to take time for personal assessments. Do we fluctuate between godliness and worldliness? Do we live one way until the crises come and then live by our own rules? Maybe it’s the opposite! Maybe we live by our own rules until the crisis comes, and then we live focused on God. The right course of action, of course, is to acknowledge God as Lord and live consistently with that affirmation of faith day in and day out.

When Jesus spoke of his apostles as calling him “teacher and Lord” he added that they were right, but then transposed the order to instruct them as their Lord first, then teacher (Jn. 13:12-13). We need to make and keep God as Lord.

3. *“You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man”* (Jn 1:51).

Jacob named the location of his dream “Bethel” (“house of God”) thinking God certainly was doing something special there. Jesus lets us know that God did something special, but it was not in a geographic location on a piece of real estate in the Middle East. It was and is in the lives of everyone who embraces the crucified Jesus, the true bridge from God to man.

This is the reference in the old hymn “Beneath the cross of Jesus” where we sing, “As to that holy patriarch that wondrous dream was given, so seems my Savior’s love to me—a ladder unto heaven.”

This is where faith is made strong. This is where we need to dwell.

WANT MORE?

Frequently we see that God uses crises to bring people into a deeper understanding and appreciation of him and his decrees. As we finish Jacob, reread Genesis chapters 29-37. Can you identify 5 major crises Jacob faced? What is your insight on them? Email me and let me know! Email is: wantmore@biblical-literacy.com.