

The Fix is In, but the Holy reigns

by Jeff Taylor

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From Genesis 33: “Jacob looked up and there was Esau coming towards him, so Jacob went on ahead of his family and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother. But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they both wept.”

A genuinely touching story of the reunion of twin brothers made estranged by a system beyond their control.

When I considered our summer theme of “dangerous liaisons” I was quickly drawn to the story of the mixed relationship between twin brothers Esau and Jacob. Even this touching reunion I just read about was in fact very much a dangerous liaison - a tense diplomatic approach between life-long rivals involving spies, strategic formations, personal armies, and diplomatic peace offerings - I left that part out of the section of Genesis 33 I read as I began. Yes, the brothers embrace and exchange gifts and say differential things to each other; and they probably have a genuine sense of remorse about their estrangement.

But they didn’t get to that point easily and they remain uncomfortable in each other’s presence. Jacob does anyway, making excuses for not travelling on in Esau’s company and failing to arrive later at Esau’s home as he had promised he would. It’s not hard to imagine that guilt might be the source of Jacob’s discomfort, having taken costly advantage of Esau at least twice before. Or perhaps they just didn’t have much in common, with Esau most comfortable in the wilderness on the hunt, while Jacob preferred to be at home reading a good book. In any case, Esau had moved south of the Dead Sea, establishing what became the kingdom of Edom. Edom is Esau’s nickname and it means “red.” So Jacob, renamed Israel, became the father of the Israelites, and Esau, also called Edom, became father of the Edomites: two nations who remained enemies for much of the following several centuries.

Sounds like the explanation Rebekah got from the Lord about her vexing pregnancy was correct: two nations at war within her. We’re going to look at that explanation from the Lord a bit more carefully in a moment.

But first: what’s the deal with older brothers inheriting more land, wealth, and family authority than younger brothers, never mind sisters? That practice has a cool Latin name, btw: primogeniture. It was commonly used method for determining who would inherit land and titles (including that of monarch) in many cultures throughout history. But why? What’s the advantage of favouring the eldest son?

Was it a law? If it was, was it from God? What’s was the purpose of such a practice? What were the consequences of such a system?

Let’s take those questions one at a time:

First, was it a law? If it was, it wasn’t from the law of Moses because Moses wouldn’t be born for a few hundred years. And it doesn’t appear to be part of Babylonian law - the code of Hammurabi. I raise that possibility because these boys are only third generation emigrants from Babylonia. But no, it’s wasn’t a Babylonian law. This practice appears to be more of a cherished custom than a legal requirement.

Next then, what is the purpose of such a practice? What’s to be gained from favouring the eldest son?

Any guesses?

Those are all fine guesses. But you know what? None of the experts seem to know for sure why this was done or when or where it began. Though actually, this story of Esau and Jacob seems to be one of the earliest written examples of primogeniture; though it seems to have been a well-established practice by then.

As for the consequences of this practice, we've seen what those can be: in the case of this family, competition and deception - brother vs. brother, wife vs. husband.

Part of the problem here is that this was a very unusual situation: twins would not have been as common in the ancient world as they are today. The higher risk to lower weight babies would have compounded the already high infant mortality rate, working against the survival of twins. So the oldest son would often be a few older than the next surviving son (or daughter). He would have been more experienced and advanced in all sorts of ways throughout their youth and beyond.

But with twins we're talking about a difference of minutes. Jacob would not have felt younger and less competent than Esau. His brother's greater readiness to replace their father as head of the family would not have been obvious. Even the story of their birth draws our attention to this fact: with the second child, Jacob, grabbing the heel of this brother Esau, as if to try to thwart his earlier delivery. Jacob means one who obstructs or overthrows. The die of this relationship is cast from the start: they are equals in every way . . . except in inheritance rights.

Even before the birth while the twins were still in Rebekah's womb, animosity was incubating and she felt the turmoil. Let's look again at the Lord's explanation to Rebekah about her troublesome pregnancy.

"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger."

Now, is this a curse on Rebekah and these innocent nascent boys? Or is it a statement of rebellion against the normal ways power was gained and wielded? Were they genetically predestined to be enemies? Or did the family/social structure set them against each other? Was the animosity between them birthed even before there was to be a birth?

I suggest that the word from the Lord here does not condemn these boys to enmity, but acknowledges that they are condemned already by their family's power inheritance tradition. Then the Lord announces a reversal of that power system: "The elder shall serve the younger."

And that is what happened. That power switch was agreed to by the elder brother himself who surrendered his birthright for some lentil stew. The deception of blind old Isaac near his end was his wife's doing, and even that might be seen as a reversal of power - the woman gaining the advantage over the man so as to put into full effect what the Lord told her must happen. And so, unwittingly, Isaac blessed Jacob, confirming what Esau had already agreed to and reversing a cherished tradition.

What is amazing to me about this story is not that people did the things they did: everyone here is behaving in quite typically human ways, especially given the extreme power imbalances at work. What amazes me is that this story is in the bible at all. And yet, the bible is often doing this: giving voice to competing ideas and ways of understanding justice and holiness. In this case, the little guy gets the blessing of the Lord, and his decedents, not his older brother's, become the Lord's favoured ones (at least for a time). In other places post-Moses you will read stories where this inheritance tradition of primogeniture is upheld. Though even Moses makes exception to his own law: in the case of the complaining sisters, for example, who would have had no inheritance at all had Moses not changed the law. Even the law-giver gives voice to sometimes competing approaches to justice and holiness.

There's more than one way to be just and holy, God's imagination seems to know almost no bounds in that regard. Here we have a story for the powerless: for the young, for women, for anyone who's starting out behind. The Lord has not forgotten you and may have a surprising way of blessing you. May it be so! Though . . . there may be some danger involved in procuring the Lord's blessing. Courage, friends.