

Jacob

Some stories (like the one about God's testing of Abraham when he was told to sacrifice) illuminate the great mystery of Christ. Others like the one we are about to embark on this week, seem an odd fit with the story of salvation history. As always, we will be dealing with various levels of meaning in this account. Each level helps illuminate the others; each level tells us a little bit more about God and His plan for creation.

Initially the story of the brothers, Esau and Jacob, was a very Jewish story designed to explain the presence of two races of people, the Jews and the Edomites. The Edomites were descended from Esau - your bible notes may give you the plays on words in the Hebrew language, which linked Esau with Edom. It is a very old story used by the Jewish people to explain the presence of the people on the region bordering Moab. The Israelites had tense relations with the Moabites throughout their history. They were two peoples related by blood (albeit the blood of a distant ancestor) yet separate. This story also served to give readers their first glimpse of perhaps the most important patriarch of the Jewish people, Jacob. If you recall I mentioned in the introduction that the Patriarchs were a very colorful group of people in the Old Testament and Jacob was no exception.

Jacob the Crafty

You will encounter many characters as you read the Old Testament that do not strike you as terribly honorable or admirable. Some (like the Jewish hero Samson or the great King David) tend to act on occasion in ways that are unbecoming of one chosen of God. They do things that, if done by either you or I today, would be regarded as terribly unsettling and in many cases just plain wrong. Yet, and this must be stressed, God is working through them for a greater purpose even though we cannot always see the end of the path the Lord has set for these men.

Let's take a look at the Patriarch Jacob who began life with great promise. He was the fruit of yet another birth miracle. Rebekah became pregnant even though she was sterile (Genesis 25:21) and gave birth to twin boys: Esau (who was "reddish") and Jacob (whose name means something along the lines of "heel-grabber" or "one whom God protects"). Yet from the outset, the younger brother seems a bit crafty, a bit sneaky. In a scene familiar to all who have children, especially little boys, Jacob plays the "I have something you want, what can I get for it" game with his twin Esau, which results in Esau losing his birthright as firstborn over a bowl of stew (Genesis 25:27-31).

Further along in the story of the two brothers we have an even more underhanded action. Jacob impersonated his brother and fooled his blind father Isaac into giving him the paternal blessing instead of the rightful recipient Esau. Neither story would seem to cast Jacob in a flattering light. Before we ask the question of how God would choose to work through a person who at least on the surface is not terribly honorable, a little (and by little I mean a very little) ancient Near Eastern sociology is in order.

You have to know that “crafty” or “wily” characters were very common in the literature of the Mediterranean peoples. All cultures had characters that always seemed able to get the better of their adversaries through their wits. Being crafty, being able to get the best end of a deal was applauded in the ancient near east. We see this not only in characters like Jacob, but also in characters from Sumerian and Greek literature such as Gilgamesh or Ulysses whose wiles allowed them to emerge triumphant even in the face of the gods themselves. For the ancient Israelites, having a crafty forefather the likes of Jacob had to have been a tremendous source of pride – the younger brother, the underdog emerges victorious in the struggles with his older and stronger brother.

This also brings up a theme that we will begin to see throughout the Old Testament, namely God’s selection of someone you would not expect to be elevated in status. The promises of God and the people who will carry out this promise are, more often than not, the individuals that you would not pick if given the choice. Jacob, the younger brother, carries on the promise of Abraham and Isaac, not the firstborn, the normal choice in their culture.

Later in Genesis we will see Joseph (another odd fit of the Near East) the youngest brother elevated in status above all his brethren. Further along in the biblical story we will see other seemingly minor siblings (most notably the young shepherd David) rise to great heights indeed. With few exceptions (Joseph being primary among them) the Lord works through some fairly checkered individuals in not only the Book of Genesis but throughout the Old Testament. This brings up two terribly important ideas. First, why would God choose these individuals and second, to what end? What happened to the promise of Abraham and where are we headed?

Thankfully, the Divine Author never lets the activities of the characters in the story interfere with the main thrust of this section of Genesis, namely, that through this family, this line of people, God’s promises will be fulfilled. We see this emphasized yet again in Genesis 28:10-15 when the promises to Abraham and the promises to Isaac were repeated to Jacob in a dream at Bethel. This re-iteration of the promise came on the heels of Jacob’s deception of his brother. It showed that God’s plan would proceed, often despite the actions of the people he chose to work with. His grace abounds and thank God for that.