

In the previous chapter we discussed Jacob's craftiness in his dealings with his (slightly) older twin brother, Esau. After the story when Esau lost his birth right to Jacob for a bowl of lentils (in some translations porridge), we have what must have been for Esau the final straw that sealed the rage he felt toward his duplicitous younger brother. This story, in my estimation, tells a lot about how the Jews perceived themselves and their history. If you recall, the final editions of these stories were compiled over the span of nearly fifty years during the time of the Babylonian captivity. Throughout this period the Jews were looking back over their history for answers. One central question they felt could be answered by examining their history concerned the traditional enmity between the Jews and their distant relations the Edomites. The story recorded in Genesis 27 establishes the background that lay behind this conflict. It also sets up the dramatic tension that existed between the two brothers, which fortunately ended in reconciliation.

As I have mentioned a few times before, we sometimes encounter unintentional humor in the Bible, and I believe we have one of those passages here. The story is set up much like cases of mistaken identity that formed the basis of comedy (and also tragedy) in the Western tradition from at least the time of the Greeks. Shakespeare himself would have appreciated the theatrical deceptions, costumes and misinterpretations that set the scene for Jacob to steal Esau's birthright. Isaac at this time is bent with age and obviously hard of hearing as well as nearly blind. He requests his elder son Esau (the manly outdoorsman covered with hair) to secure some game for his dinner at which point he will give Esau the promised blessing. But then things begin to go awry. And I am sorry to say, the deception begins with Rebekah, the sweet young girl - now a mother of two grown sons - that we first encountered at the well in Mesopotamia. It is her idea to disguise her younger (and obviously favorite son) to look like his brother Esau in order to steal the blessing that was intended for him. In an almost unbelievable scene of chicanery, the skins of goats are used to give Jacob the "hairy" appearance that Isaac expects of Esau. And Isaac is duly fooled and made happy with a savory dish prepared by Rebekah. Isaac then bestows his blessing on Jacob:

*"May God give to you of the dew of the heavens and of the fertility of the earth abundance of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations pay you homage; be master of your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be those who curse you, and blessed be those who bless you!"*

Genesis 27:28-29

This is indeed a powerful blessing and marks the final time Isaac will play a major role in our story. He dies after the interval in the narrative that tells of Jacob's meeting with his future wives, Leah and Rachel. This blessing for the most part determines the history of the Israelites (at least as they perceived it) up to and including the formation of the Kingdom of David. For example, they become a powerful people who rule over the peoples surrounding Israel, including for a time the Edomites, (the descendants of Esau). On a historical level this story explains for the Jews why there was enmity between the two peoples. To us today (and obviously to Esau) this blessing was stolen, stolen from the rightful heir, and his indignation is plainly seen in verses 30-41. What then are we to make of this story in which some of our favorite characters-and indeed God's chosen like Rebekah and Jacob - do some reprehensible things? We must remember that the first hearers of these stories as well as those who wrote them down were not looking for a book of morals in these chapters. They rightly believed that God had a plan for them. The plan that had been worked out over thousands of years took a few odd turns now and then depending on the characters in the stories. The Jews, as descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, believed that the promise was made solely to them and stories like this reinforced that belief. We must also remember, as I alluded to in an earlier chapter, what we see as duplicity would have been seen by the original hearers as cunning or craftiness, moral traits that were highly valued in the ancient world. The story of the underdog using his wits to take what he wants in spite of improbable circumstances is as old as time itself.

Perhaps one way to understand the fuller meaning of this story - in spite of all the intrigue - is to concentrate on the promise in Isaac's blessing to see if indeed Jacob received it after all. Did the younger brother steal something from his elder brother or was something more significant being accomplished in the words of the promise? St. Hippolytus of Rome (170-235 A.D.) gives us the following interpretation, which I have found helps me understand this difficult story:

*And also the words "Let people serve you, and princes bow down to you" have been accomplished now. Whom else do the faithful people serve and the princes of the church worship but Christ, in whose name they also receive their salvation? The Word has predicted this through Isaiah by saying, "My servants shall be called by a new name, which will be blessed on the earth; for they shall bless the true God, and those who swear upon the earth shall swear in the name of the true God"... But nobody adored Jacob, nor did he become lord of his brother Esau; on the contrary, he ran away from him in a fright and was the first to adore him for seven times. Therefore the words of Isaac have been accomplished in the Savior: He has become lord and master of those who are considered to be his brothers by the flesh, in order to be adored by them as their king. The Blessings of the Patriarchs, 7*

The enmity that arises between Jacob and Esau sets up the next few stories in Genesis. Esau, angered at his brother, marries the daughter of Ishmael (the son of Abraham by his wife's maidservant Hagar). Jacob, rightfully fearing for his life, with the help of his mother, flees into the lands of his kinsmen. He returns to the household of Laban whom we first met when Abraham's servant went to find Rebekah, Isaac's future bride. Between the time Jacob flees and eventually reconciles with his brother, much water will have passed under the bridge in terms of the overall story we have been following in Genesis. The promise of a great people inheriting a great land is in the process of being worked out and we must be patient as it takes its' twists and turns.