

THE JACOB STORY

Genesis 25:19 to 36:43

[You are encouraged to read the biblical text before reading this commentary.]

Genesis chapters 12 to 50 are divided into three parts: the Abraham story, the Jacob story, and the Joseph story. You might ask: What about Isaac? After all, isn't he one of the Patriarchs? Indeed he is. But his role in the Genesis story is brief and rather passive. The two or three chapters that speak of Isaac have as much to do with his father Abraham and his son Jacob as with him. So that is the reason why there is no series of chapters dedicated to his life.

CHAPTER 25: Birth of Esau and Jacob

Isaac entreated the Lord on behalf of his wife, since she was sterile. The Lord heard his entreaty, and Rebekah became pregnant. But the children in her womb jostled each other so much that she exclaimed, "If this is to be so, what good will it do me!" She went to consult the Lord, and he answered her:

*"Two nations are in your womb,
Two peoples are quarreling while still
within you;
But one shall surpass the other,
And the older shall serve the younger." (vv.21-23)*

These verses begin with the genealogy of Isaac and are interrupted by a story about the birth of Esau and Jacob (25:19-25).

The barrenness of Rebekah reminds us of Sarah's barrenness. Diane Bergant comments: *"This apparent obstacle has both literary and religious significance. It heightens the suspense of the story and sets the stage for a miraculous conception. The resolution of this dilemma is the same as before: human limitation cannot thwart the plan of God. Just as Isaac was the child through whom God's promises would be fulfilled, so his son will carry those promises into the future."* (Israel's Story Part One p. 11)

Rebekah's joy at being pregnant is quickly turned into anxiety and depression when she notices the twins within her wrestling with each other. She turns to God for help. God responds in the form of an oracle which is the centerpiece of these verses. God tells Rebekah: *"Two nations are in your womb, two peoples are quarreling while still within you; but one shall surpass the other, and the older shall serve the younger"* (25:23).

The oracle tells Rebekah:

- She will be the mother of two nations, the Edomites (descendants of Esau) and the Israelites (descendants of Jacob). Furthermore, these two nations will be enemies.
- There will be a struggle between her sons in which the older one, Esau, will serve or be outwitted by the younger Jacob. Some scholars believe that the oracle anticipated the Gospel admonition that the "first will be last and the last first" (Lk 13:30).

Verses 24-26 state: "When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb. The first to emerge was reddish, and his whole body was like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. His brother came out next, gripping Esau's heel; so they named him Jacob."

A series of wordplay is used in the naming of the twins. The reddish Esau is so named from a word that sounds like the word for red. Jacob's is derived from a word related to "heel" as he is seen at birth as a "heel-gripper," grasper or supplanter. It is believed that one day he will supplant his brother as head of the family. Esau grows up to be an outdoor man which helps to make him his father's favorite. Jacob grows up to be more of a homebody and his mother's favorite – setting the scene for more tension between the twins.

Esau sells his birthright (25:29-34). In these verses, we get a clear insight into the character of the twins. The story shows the weakness of Esau who is willing to hand over his birthright (which entitles him to a double share of the family inheritance) for a bowl of soup. In his need for instant gratification, Esau loses all sense of proportion. To seal the deal, the manipulative Jacob gets Esau to swear an oath that he had given his birthright to his brother.

Pause: How does the need for instant gratification impact homes and society today?

CHAPTER 26: Isaac and Abimelech; Renewal Blessing

The Lord appeared to Isaac and said: *"I am the God of your father Abraham. You have no need to fear, since I am with you. I will bless you and multiply your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham."* (v. 24)

While this chapter is mainly devoted to Isaac, its contents are a duplication or echoes of stories about Abraham.

Verses 1-11 are very similar to the story about Abraham and Sarah in chapters 12 and 20. Famine is the reason for moving to a new territory. Like his father, Isaac lies about the identity of his wife for fear that Abimelech will take her into his harem. When Abimelech sees the couple fondling (26:8), he realizes that they are not just brother and sister. But Abimelech guarantees the couple protection (26:11).

In this chapter, God appears twice to Isaac (26:2-5, 24) and renews the blessing (the promise of abundance) he gave to Abraham. God's blessing on Isaac is immediately seen in the abundance of the harvest and his growing wealth (26:12-13). Verses 15-25 tell of a dispute over wells.

When Esau takes for himself two foreign wives it becomes a source of embitterment for Isaac and Rebekah (26:34-35).

CHAPTER 27: Jacob gains his father's deathbed blessing by deception

Isaac explained to Esau, "Your brother came here by ruse and carried off your blessings," Esau exclaimed, "He has been well named Jacob! He has now supplanted me twice." (vv. 35-36)

This chapter is divided into five scenes.

- *Isaac and Esau (27:1-4)*. In this scene, Isaac who is old and blind, wishes to bless his firstborn and favorite son, Esau, before he dies. In the ancient world, deathbed blessings are considered to be very important. Before he imparts his blessing, Isaac sends Esau out to prepare one of his favorite meals.
- *Rebekah and Jacob (27:5-17)*. When Rebekah overhears Isaac's plan to give his special blessing to Esau, she hatches a plan by which Jacob will receive the blessing intended for Esau. Jacob goes along with the plan. His only fear is being caught in the act of deception.
- *Isaac and Jacob (27:18-29)*. In this central scene of the chapter, the suspense is heightened by each of Isaac's statements and questions: "Which of my sons are you?"; "Come closer that I may feel you"; "Although the voice is Jacob's, the hands are Esau's"; "Are you really my son Esau?" Jacob plays his role of deception very well. He even has the audacity to suggest that God is behind his trickery: "The Lord,

your God, let things turn out well for me" (27:20). Finally, after smelling his son's clothes, he bestows the blessing. The first part of the blessing pertains to agriculture, which speaks of the "fragrance of a field," "abundance of grain and wine." The second part concerns the domain of Israel over Edom, Esau's people. The blessing is sealed by a counter curse.

- *Isaac and Esau (27:30-40)*. This is a very emotional scene. When father and son become aware of Jacob's deception, Isaac is "seized with a fit of uncontrollable trembling" (27:33) and Esau "bursts out into bitter sobbing" (27:34). Esau adds: "He has been well named Jacob! He has now supplanted me twice" (27:36). What Isaac bestows on Esau is essentially the reverse of the blessing Jacob has received: agricultural infertility, strife, and subservience. Esau and his people, Edom, will serve Jacob's people until they finally break loose from Judah (2Kgs 8:20-22). We might wonder why Isaac didn't take back his blessing from Jacob. In ancient times, it was the strong belief that a blessing (or curse), once bestowed, prevailed (Num 22-24, particularly 23:19-20).

- *Rebekah and Esau*. Because of the dirty trick Jacob pulled on Esau in stealing both his *birthright and blessing*, Esau allows a big grudge to grow in him and he plots to murder Jacob. When Rebekah finds out Esau's plans, she strongly suggests to Jacob that he leave home and visit his uncle Laban until Esau cools down. Jacob may have been God's choice to carry forward his plan of salvation, but his act of deception has very serious consequences for him. He will spend twenty years in exile for his sin.

What are we to make of this story? The overall purpose of Genesis 12-50 is to show God's promise being carried out despite all obstacles. We should not be surprised then that Jacob, like Abraham, is himself one of those obstacles.

The oracle in 25:23 states that the elder son will serve the younger one. Is Rebekah to be condemned for assisting in the fulfillment of the Divine Word? Was Isaac not opposing God's will by wanting to give his blessing to Esau? The narrator leaves these questions unanswered. He simply tells the story. In his mysterious plan, God chooses whom he wills – in this case, one who manipulates his brother into selling him his *birthright* and tricks his blind father into giving him his special *blessing* – another example of God writing straight with crooked lines.

Pause: What thoughts and feelings does the above story stir in you? Have you ever had an experience in which you were cheated or outsmarted out of something that was coming to you? How do you feel about God using a deceptive event like the above to move forward his plan of salvation?

CHAPTER 28: Jacob goes in search of a wife and encounters God at Bethel

“Know that I am with you; I will protect you wherever you go, and bring you back to this land. I will never leave you until I have done what I promised you.” (v. 15)

In 27:46, Rebekah lets Isaac know how disgusted she is with Esau’s pagan wives. As a result, Isaac strongly encourages Jacob to go back to his mother’s people, also Abraham’s people, and find for himself a wife. He blesses him before he goes. In 28:6-9, we see Esau (who already has two wives) also going to his mother’s people in search of another wife. He too wants to please his parents. He marries the daughter of Ishmael, his grandfather’s son by Sarah’s slave woman Hagar.

Jacob’s dream at Bethel (28:10-22). Jacob is on his way to his mother’s people in search of a wife. As he journeys, he camps out for the night at a well-known sacred place. During the night, Jacob has a dream vision of what seems like a stairway or ladder reaching to the heavens. He sees angels going up and down the ladder.

Then the Lord himself appears and repeats the threefold promise given to Abraham and Isaac: the gifts of a promised land, innumerable descendants, and that his people will be a blessing for the nations of the earth. And for his present journey, which is about to become challenging, Jacob is to remember that “God is with him and will protect him wherever he goes” (28:15).

When Jacob wakes up, he realizes that *“truly the Lord is in this place, although he did not know it. With a shout of joy he cries out: ‘How awesome is this shrine! This is nothing else but an abode of God...’”* (28:17). Then Jacob renames the place Bethel which means “House of God.” Jacob also blesses the stone and sets it up as a memorial stone. The chapter ends with Jacob bargaining with God: “I will serve you if you take care of my immediate needs for protection and food.” This dream experience of Jacob seeing angels going up and down a ladder, may have been

God’s way of communicating to him that his mission in life was to be like these messengers linking heaven and earth.

Pause: The Bethel event was probably the first time Jacob experienced God in a personal way. When and how did God become real and personal in your life?

Chapter 29: Jacob marries and becomes the father of twelve children

“Then Jacob kissed Rachel and burst into tears.” (v.11)

In this section of Genesis, we read about Jacob’s arrival in Haran (29:1-14), his marriages to his Uncle Laban’s two daughters Leah and Rachel, his acquisition of two proxy wives (29:15-30), and becoming father of twelve sons and one daughter.

Jacob arrives in Haran (29:1-14). When Jacob arrives in Haran, he happens by a water well, presumably the same well where Abraham’s servant found a wife for Isaac. This is the place where Jacob first sets his eyes on Laban’s daughter Rachel whom he came to love very much. When Abraham’s servant came looking for a wife for Isaac, he brought lots of gifts. Jacob comes empty-handed. If he thinks he can walk away quickly with a beautiful wife, he is in for a rude awakening.

Marriages to Leah and Rachel (29:15-30). When Uncle Laban invites Jacob to name his wages, Jacob foolishly offers to work seven years for Rachel’s hand in marriage, a ridiculously high price even if it seems like a few days (29:20).

In verses 21-27, the deceiver Jacob is himself deceived by his uncle and ends up marrying Leah. Most likely, Leah was veiled when she was brought into a dark tent on the wedding night and Jacob assumed it was Rachel. Laban is unapologetic, stating that it is not their custom to marry off the second daughter before the firstborn. This explanation should not have been lost on Jacob who, as the second born, supplanted his older brother. Then Laban tells Jacob he can have his second daughter Rachel, if he agrees to serve another seven years (29:27-28). This time Jacob gets his prize lady at the *beginning* of his seven-year period. How-ever, he finds himself in a difficult situation with his double marriage on account of the fact that Rachel, the love of his life, is barren, while Leah, whom he doesn’t love, is able to bear him sons.

Chapters 29:31-30:24: Birth and naming of Jacob's children

"When Rachel saw that she failed to bear children to Jacob, she became envious of her sister." (v. 1)

In these verses, we read how Jacob fathers eleven sons and one daughter with four women, with Leah and Rachel and with their maidservants. The Collegeville Bible Commentary writes:

Popular etymology is freely used to draw out the relationship between the names of the children and the bitter struggle between Leah and Rachel for love and recognition in the home. Laban has created a situation in which Jacob finds himself married to two women, only one of whom he loves. Ultimately, God controls the course of events by making Leah fruitful and Rachel barren, but at the human level the story revolves around the jealousies of Leah and Rachel. Jacob's role in the story is largely confined to fathering children.

The paradox of the story centers on the position of the two women. Leah, as first-born, first wife, and first mother, should have the love and recognition of her husband, but Jacob loves the younger, Rachel. Rachel, though loved, is barren and fears the loss of Jacob's love because of her inability to give him offspring. With each son that Leah bears, Rachel becomes more and more desperate, even to the point of demanding children from Jacob. He reminds her that it is God who gives children. Consequently, Rachel's struggle is not only for love but also for the favor of God. Rachel, like Sarah before her (ch. 16), finally becomes a mother through her maid. Likewise, Leah gives her maid to Jacob when she has ceased to bear children for a time. (p.66)

Things become so bad in the house that Leah has to pay Rachel to get a night with Jacob (30:14-21). Finally, Rachel gives birth to a son, Joseph, who will be the focus of the next section of Genesis.

Jacob outwits Laban (30:25-43). After spending about twenty years of his life working for Laban, Jacob tells him that he wants to leave and return to his family in Canaan. Laban does not want to let Jacob go but admits he has benefitted from Jacob's service and asks what compensation he wants. Then follows a rather complex story about sheep and goats in which uncle and nephew try to outwit each other. In the end, Jacob outwits Laban and becomes a very wealthy man.

Pause: Do you have a favorite story where you outwitted someone who was taking advantage of you?

CHAPTER 31: Jacob's exodus from Haran

God appeared to Jacob and said: *"Up, then! Leave this land and return to the land of your birth."* (v. 13)

Even though Jacob has become very wealthy, he is not in the land promised to his father Isaac and to his grandfather Abraham. But returning to Canaan will most likely involve an encounter with his brother Esau whom he cheated long ago, and who has threatened to kill him. Despite this threat, Jacob knows he must return.

The chapter opens with Laban's sons becoming very jealous of their cousin's great wealth. In verse 3, God tells Jacob it's time to return to Canaan and promises to stay with him on the journey. So Jacob prepares to depart with his family and animals to return home. He reminds Leah and Rachel how God has stayed with him and blessed him with great wealth. In verses 12-13, God appears again to Jacob and reminds him that it is time to get away from Laban. Knowing that they will never receive any inheritance from their father, Leah and Rachel take with them the family's household gods (31:14-21).

Laban chases after Jacob and cuts a deal with him (31:22-51). When Laban hears that Jacob has left with his daughters and with the household gods and flock, he takes flight after them. But then God appears to Laban and tells him to not "threaten Jacob with any harm" (31:24). He catches up with Jacob in Gilead and confronts him for running off with his daughters and grandchildren without allowing so much as a parting kiss from him. Jacob tells Laban he was afraid he would be prevented from leaving with his daughters (31:31). In the next ten verses, Laban and Jacob argue back and forth but, finally, enter into a treaty. At the beginning of chapter 32, Laban kisses his daughters and grandchildren goodbye, and sets out for home. Jacob also continues on his journey and prepares to meet Esau whom he has not seen in twenty years.

CHAPTER 32: Jacob prepares to meet Esau and wrestles with God

"I will not let you go until you bless me." (v. 37)

Jacob sends messengers to meet Esau, hoping to gain his favor. When the messengers report that Esau is coming with four hundred men, Jacob understandably

becomes alarmed. After all, the reason he left home was to escape the death threat put out on him by his brother, as revealed by his mother after he stole Esau's birthright and their father's blessing.

Jacob responds by dividing his camp into two to avoid total disaster and he turns to God in prayer (32:8-13). Jacob's prayer is quite beautiful and shows that he is growing spiritually. In a time of danger, he has a deep sense of his need for God. Then he seeks to appease his brother who he assumes is still very angry at him, by sending him numerous gifts.

Jacob wrestles with God (32:23-32). We now come to one of the best known texts in the Old Testament. Jacob sends his messengers ahead with many gifts for Esau hoping this would soften his brother's heart.

Having decided on a place for his large family to settle for the night, Jacob is alone with his thoughts. Then a strange thing happens. He enters into a wrestling match with a stranger (a heavenly creature in human form). The man who wrestled his brother out of his birthright and outwitted his uncle now wrestles with the Almighty. They grapple all night until dawn. When the stranger sees that he cannot prevail, he asks to be let go. But the warrior Jacob says: *"I will not let you go until you bless me"* (v. 37). The blessing comes in the form of a name change. *"Henceforth, you shall no longer be spoken of as Jacob, but as Israel, because you have contended with divine and human beings and have prevailed"* (v. 29). Jacob will no longer be called by his old name (connoting "heel-gripper," "trickster," or "supplanter.") Now he will be remembered as one who wrestled or contended with God and prevailed. His being is profoundly changed by his wrestling experience.

Jacob asks the stranger his name but he refuses to give it to him. Some other remarks on this event:

- Jacob (now Israel) reveals in his life Israel's own struggle with God in living as the people of the covenant.
- When the struggle is over, Jacob renames the place *Peniel*. This indicates that he realizes that the experience was a theophany, an encounter with God. In verse 31, he says: *"I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been spared."*
- In the wrestling match with God, Jacob's hip is dislocated. He leaves with a wound or limp that will forever remind him of his life-changing experience with God. Even though the wrestling match does not

produce a winner. Jacob's injury will remind him that God is the stronger one.

- This story should be a source of encouragement for us whenever we struggle in our relationship with God. The *Catechism* states: *"From this account, the spiritual tradition of the church has retained the symbol of prayer as a battle of faith and as a triumph of perseverance"* (2573).
- We can also say every wound has the potential for blessing or curse. A festering wound breeds bitterness and negativity. A nursed wound heals and brings strength and blessings.

Pause: What has been one of the biggest and toughest wrestling matches of your life, whether with God, self or another?

CHAPTER 33: Jacob reconciles with Esau

"Esau ran to meet him, embraced him, and flinging himself on his neck, kissed him as he wept" (v. 4).

As Jacob proceeds to meet his brother, he is worried about what's going to happen. So he divides his family into three groups. But then it occurs to him that God must also have worked a great change in Esau. The reunion of the brothers is quite touching. *"Esau ran to meet Jacob, embraced him, and flinging himself on his neck, kissing him as he wept"* (33:4). Jacob is so touched by this wonderful experience, which felt like another theophany – another encounter with God.

Esau kindly offers to accompany his brother on the rest of his journey but Jacob declines. Perhaps he is afraid that they might get into a spat again. Jacob settles in Shechem, a name we will come across a few more times in the next books of the Bible.

Pause: What helps you to let go of past hurts? What hinders us from letting go?

Chapter 34. The rape of Dinah and her brother's revenge.

"Then the other sons of Jacob followed up the slaughter and sacked the city because their sister had been defiled." (v. 27)

Jacob's daughter, Dinah, is raped by one of their new neighbors, Shechem, who then falls in love and asks to marry her. Jacob's family is incensed, but no price

is too high for Shechem's dad to pay as dowry. Jacob's sons, strongly opposed to the idea of marrying off their sister to an uncircumcised man, declare that they will only agree to the marriage on condition that all Shechemite males will be circumcised. This would not only legitimize intermarriages between their children but also benefit the families economically. The citizens heard the father's proposition and agreed with him.

While the males are still recuperating from the procedure, Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, without provocation, proceed to attack Shechem and kill all the men of the city. Jacob reprimands his sons but worries about retaliation (34:30). Simeon and Levi show no contrition for their murderous behavior (34:31).

Pause: Rape is a violent crime. What causes a man to rape a woman? What can help us let go of feelings of revenge?

CHAPTER 35: Bethel revisited

God said to Jacob: Go up to Bethel. Settle there and build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau” (v. 1).

God tells Jacob to revisit Bethel and to build an altar there. During his visit to Bethel, God appears to him, blesses him and renews the promises he has made to Abraham and Isaac (35:9-12).

Jacob's Family (35:16-28). As Rachel is dying, she gives birth to another son (the fulfillment of her prayer when Joseph was born (30:24). Jacob now has twelve sons. Rachel calls her son Benoni, “son of my sorrow,” because of her pain in bearing him. But Jacob renames the child Benjamin, “son of my right hand.” The Collegeville Commentary writes. “*In the ancient world it was thought that there was a mysterious relationship between a name and its bearer; a name could determine the destiny of its bearer. Rather than mark the life of the child by the sorrow surrounding his birth, Jacob wisely gives the child a name that suggests an honorable and successful future* (p.70).

Dying while giving birth, Rachel comes to represent, for future generations of Israelites, the suffering of motherhood. “Rachel weeping for her children” is an Israelite proverb. It is mentioned in Jer 31:15 and in the New Testament in Mt 2:18 to express the horror of Herod's massacre of the innocents. In our church, the

Rachel Ministry is dedicated to bringing healing into the lives of women who have had an abortion. Isaac dies. Both Esau and Jacob attend his funeral (35:29).

CHAPTER 36: Genealogy of Esau

The Jacob cycle ends with a genealogy of Esau. As in Gn 25:12-18, in which the descendants of Ishmael are recorded (following the account of Abraham's death) to prepare for the history of Isaac and Jacob, so does the author list down the descendants of Esau to prepare for the history of Joseph. The genealogy consists of six lists. Verse 6 notes once more that Jacob and Esau go their separate ways.

Reflecting on the life of Jacob, *Break-Through – A Bible for Young Adults*, states:

Jacob was not the most honest guy in the world. Most of what he had he got from tricking or cheating other people:

- *He took advantage of Esau's hunger to get Esau's rights as a firstborn son (25:27-34).*
- *He tricked Isaac into giving him the blessing that was rightfully Esau's (27:1-29).*
- *He cleverly arranged to receive Laban's strongest sheep as payment for his service to his father-in-law. After twenty years of working for Laban, Jacob was a rich man (30:25-43).*

Jacob's trickery had consequences. His brother, Esau, hated him and wanted to kill him. His father-in-law tricked him into working for him for fourteen years. Yet with all his shortcomings, Jacob loved God deeply, and God had big plans for him. The twelve tribes that made up the great nation of Israel were descendants of Jacob's sons. Jacob's story teaches us something important: God can work through everyone – not just those who appear to be saintly or perfect. As long as we keep working on our relationship with God, God will work through us!” (p.43)

We may be imperfect and weak like Jacob, but with God's help we can daily work to overcome our imperfections and weaknesses.

Pause: What strikes you most about the Jacob story?