

The Greatest Story Ever Told

A Back-to-Basics Catechesis

Jacob and Esau

Rebekah, the wife of Isaac, is in travail. In her womb twin sons are struggling and fighting, later known as Jacob and Esau. The commotion is so severe that she cries to the Lord seeking a reason: *If it is thus, why is this happening to me?* And the Lord said 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.”* (Genesis 25:22-23)

Here then is a prefiguring of ancient battlelines: The Israelites (Jacob) and the Edomites (Esau). “Blood is thicker than water” cuts both ways. Some of our greatest loyalties are in the family, and some of the worst conflicts are also in the family line. Family is personal and betrayal is felt most powerfully there. The rivalry in Rebekah’s womb will extend down the centuries, to Jesus’ time. We do well to recall this ancient rivalry and see how it reflects in our own struggles and rivalries.

Where There’s a Will...There’s a Relative!

Scripture describes their birth: *When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau’s heel, so his name was called Jacob.* (Gen 25:24-25)

Yes, in the womb, and even in the birth canal the fight is on to be the “firstborn.” To the firstborn in ancient times went the bulk of the family inheritance so that homesteads would not be depleted by equal division among all siblings. To be the firstborn

was to become the patriarch. Other brothers and siblings would be subservient to the firstborn male in the family when their father died. Though infants, their struggle to emerge first signifies what they would later know and live. Esau came forth first and it would seem he had definitively secured the birthright.



But Jacob came forth from the womb grabbing his brother’s heel, as if to say, “This isn’t over yet.” And it wasn’t, as we shall see. Esau’s name means “red,” but Jacob’s name means “grabber... usurper.... cheater...or shyster.” You get the point, not exactly a flattering name, but one that was fitting.

Isaac was sixty years old when Jacob and Esau were born. Of Isaac, only a little is known. This is surprising given that he was the child of promise to Abraham and Sarah, the one who would usher in an innumerable progeny to Abraham (*cf* Gen 22:17). Isaac seems to have been a shy and retiring sort, perhaps overprotected. He still had not married at age 40 and Abraham had resolved to find a wife

for him, sending a servant back to Haran to find a wife among his clan there. Rebekah was brought to him, and she became his wife. Here too she seemed much stronger and more determined than he, and this figures in the story that is about to unfold.

Playing Favorites

The Scripture continues our story: *When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he ate of his hunting, but Rebekah loved Jacob.* (Gen 25:27-28)

It’s not usually a good scene when parents take sides with their children or play favorites. Add to this a strong mother and a weak father and it’s not hard to predict where this is going. For this reason, let’s turn our focus on Jacob who will assume the pivotal role in the history of Israel.

Although he was a “mama’s boy,” Jacob was also a schemer, a trickster, and an outright liar. With his mother Rebekah he managed to steal the birthright from Esau. The Scriptures record: *Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. And Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!” Jacob said, “Sell me your birthright now.” Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” Jacob said, “Swear to me now.” So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew...Thus Esau despised his birthright.* (Gen 29-34) So the Scriptures assign to Esau a disregard for his own birthright and a blame for its loss without reference to the desperate hunger that Jacob exploited.

Be that as it may, Jacob compounds his exploitation by conniving with Rebekah to deceive his now blind father, Isaac, into giving him the patriarchal blessing. He poses as his brother Esau. When asked if he is really Esau, he claims he is and by lying, obtains the irreversible blessing under false pretenses.

Esau sought to kill him for this, leading Jacob to flee north to live with Laban, an uncle and kin to Rebekah, who was an even greater trickster and schemer than he was!

For fourteen years Jacob labored for Laban, in the hopes of winning his beloved Rachel, Laban's daughter. In a wonderful payback, Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Rachel's "less attractive" sister, Leah, by hiding her appearance at the wedding. Jacob had thought he was marrying Rachel, but when the veil was pulled back ... surprise! It would be another seven years before Jacob would finally secure Rachel from Laban.

Frankly, Jacob deserved it. He was a schemer and was himself out-schemed by someone more devious than he.

Yet God still seemed to have a heart for Jacob. In the story of Jacob—a hard case to say the least—God demonstrates that His love is not based on human merit. God knows and loves us long before we are born (*cf* Jer 1:5). His love is not the result of our merit, but the cause of it.

A Crucial Night

There came a critical moment in Jacob's life when God's love reached down and worked a transformation: For reasons too lengthy to describe here, Jacob had reached a point in his life when he realized that he had to try to reconcile with his brother Esau. He understood that this would be risky, and that Esau might try to kill him. Our sins have a way of catching up with us. If we indulge them, sooner or later we are no longer able to sleep the

sleep of the just, and all the promises of sin now become like overdue bills. Now that Jacob has come to this distressed and critical place in his life, God goes to work on him, to purify and test him.

Jacob arose, left Haran and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He sent them across the stream...and Jacob was left alone. On this dark and lonely night suddenly, a mysterious man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day (see Gen 32:21-24).

Who is this "man"? The Book of Hosea answers the question and supplies other details of the event, saying that Jacob "strove with the angel and prevailed, he wept and sought his favor. In truth, he met God at Bethel, and there God spoke with him. (Hos 12:4-5).

Isolation, Confrontation and Desperation

So, God brings Jacob to a kind of isolation to think, to pray and look to deeper issues. God also brings Jacob to a place of confrontation, wrestling with him until the breaking of the day. Here is an image for the spiritual life. Too many today think that God only exists to affirm and console us. But God also needs to wrestle us to the ground at times, to throw us off balance to get us to think, to try new things, and to confront our sins.

God brings Jacob to a place of desperation – The text says, *When the angel saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him* (Gen 32:25). Since Jacob is a hard case, God disables him. By knocking out Jacob's sciatic muscle, God leaves him in a state in which he will lean on a cane for the rest of his life. He will never forget this lesson because he must physically lean from now on.

Thus Jacob, a distressed man on a dark desert night, wrestles with God and learns that the answer to his distress is to strive with God, to walk with Him, to wrestle with the issues in his life. Up until this point, Jacob has not trusted and walked with God. He has schemed, manipulated, and maneuvered his way through life. Now he has learned to lean and to trust. God needs to get all of us to this place.

A Different Man

The text then says, *And the man said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed"* (Gen 32:27-28).

Here is the critical moment: Jacob finally owns his name. When his blind father Isaac had asked him his name, Jacob had lied, saying, "I am Esau." But after this encounter with God, Jacob finally speaks the truth: "My name is Jacob." In this response is a kind of confession: "My name is Jacob. My name is deceiver, grabber, usurper, con artist, and shyster"

Having received this confession, God wipes the slate clean and gives Jacob a new name, Israel, a name that means, "He who wrestles or strives with God." Renamed, Jacob becomes a new man. He will walk a new path and walk in a new way: with a humble limp, leaning on his staff, leaning on the Lord, and striving with Him rather than against Him. He will also reconcile with his brother Esau.

And thus Jacob (Israel) wins by losing! God had to break him to bless him, to cripple him to crown him. Jacob would never be the same again. He would limp for life, always remembering how God blessed him in his brokenness.

Our story will continue with these images of God's people encountering God who heals the brokenhearted.