

THE PATRIARCHS
ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB
STUDY 3 - JACOB PART 3

The Promise in Parenthesis

Read Genesis 33;1 - end

Here we have the final act in the story of the two brothers. We left Jacob exhausted by his struggles with the 'Man' through the night, but having elicited from that Man a blessing. This Jacob however, is not the same Jacob, (The one who struggled with man), we knew before, and yet he is the same man. He has a new name ('Israel' - One who struggles with God) The new name reflects a new understanding and a new relationship. Jacob is not longer the man who has gained by his own skills in deception, but is a Prince who is Blessed by God. He also now walks with limp and needs a staff to support him as he crosses the brook Jabbok.



But... what about his brother Esau? A man who is at least Jacob's equal in stature and strength, and who is presently waiting the other side of the stream with 400 men-at-arms. The way Esau is described is as a Prince amongst his own people, and he has the army to back up such a claim!

What does Jacob do on perceiving the presence of Esau and his 400?

Maybe Jacob is again buying time and covering eventualities, but also he may be displaying his family thus to impress and overcome, or at least, pause his brother's violent and murderous intent? Jacob does however keep his best loved soul-mate to the last, and the (?dispensable?) slave-girl's and their families are the most exposed.

Esau would appear to have done exactly what Jacob intended. His elder brother stops in his tracks in front of this display to survey them. Then, and only then, does Jacob step forwards. He walks across in front of his family and places himself between the wives and children (NB - many are no longer 'Youths!') and the 401 men and it is Jacob who makes that last, long-walk. As he does so he abases himself seven times before his elder brother. **Why?**

But this is not the same Esau who we left breathing out threats and murder over 20 years ago. The traditional view of Esau as a brute of a man with no ability to control his instincts and who might well carry a grudge that far from abating over the years, would fester and grow would appear to be wrong. **What does Esau do next? - & does it remind you of a parable of Jesus?**

It would appear that news has been slow to reach Esau over the years. He has to ask whose the families are, and he asks an odd question next - and he uses a keyword from earlier in the story - 'Camp' *'Who are these with you and what does this Camp mean?'*

And it certainly seems that all is going to be well, and the two great families might now be reunited... but...

Well, what did you expect? This is still Jacob! He has a limp, and now, when asked where all this wealth came from he gives his companion and friend and LORD the credit, so he is indeed a changed man, but underneath Jacob is still Jacob! When God changes us it is to lead us to be the full character and person He always intended. God does not over-write our character - He gives us a new nature, yes, but...

When Esau realises Jacob's intent to buy grace from him through the wonderful gifts, this Prince's reply is 'Brother, I have enough already! Keep what you have'

Now whether there is a little sibling rivalry still in this exchange I will leave you to decide, but Jacob's reply is informative -

'O no, pray, if I have found favour in your eyes (echoes of his Uncle Laban's words to him

only a few years before!) take this 'tribute' from my hand, for I have seen your face (A 'key-word' remember!) as one might see God's face, (i.e. to see that face and have to die!), and you received me in kindness??? Pray, take my blessing that has been brought you, for God has favoured me and I have everything!' (NB - Jacob's one-up-manship! Esau has all he needs, but Jacob has 'Everything!')

Jacob's speech, echoing indeed as it does (and deliberately so in the story context) Laban's reply to Jacob when Jacob asked for release from his 14 year contract, is almost too obsequious for words! Esau has lowered himself from his Princely standing to be seen running to meet his runaway brother, and has used colloquial and warm language. Jacob continues with the language of the royal court and of formal introduction and courtroom plea.

Jacob goes on to use exactly the language that, some 21 years earlier, Esau is recorded as using when he wails his discontent about being robbed of his blessing. Is Jacob attempting to reset the clock at least, even if he cannot undo all he has done! But our actions always have their effects, and those repercussions may echo down the timeline and not easily be erased! Jacob, the New Man, cannot undo all he has done. Maybe Esau deliberately scuppers Jacob's plan and will not allow his personal exoneration? or maybe it is his God who is reminding Jacob that some things just cannot be undone, - at least, not by mere mortals!

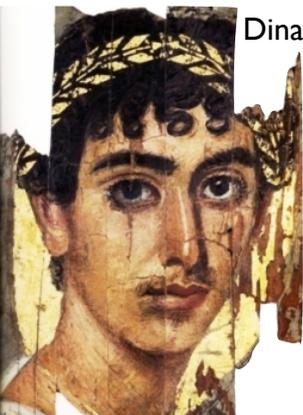
And Jacob still cannot quite play a straight bat with his brother either! Esau genuinely wishes Jacob to go with him, but Jacob cannot! God has told him to go home, and Esau is not living at home! So Jacob pleads the impossibility of keeping up with those 400 warriors and tells his brother he will catch up once they have had some rest. Jacob has no intention of doing so however and leaves in the opposite direction... and we hear no more of Esau until their father Isaac is dead.

Jacob and family and flocks settle in Succoth for long enough to have 'built a house' (not pitched his tent!) but cannot settle for long there and must go on until he reaches Canaan at last! and there he does pitch his tent, and he buys the land it sits upon. **Does that remind you of something?**

Genesis 34

Remember the 'Child Wars' between Leah and Rachel? Amongst all those sons there is one daughter mentioned - Dinah, daughter to Leah. As Jacob and his family settle amongst the people of the land, who so far in these stories have proved to be

honourable beyond expectations, and with whom Jacob and his people must try to co-exist, we find another of those odd 'sister-wife' stories, but again, with a twist.



Dinah is a young, attractive woman, and she *'went out to go seeing among the daughters of the land'* But Dinah was not a 'Daughter of the Land' and although doubtless she tried (as young people do) to fit in with the other girls, her dress, culture, even perhaps her belief system would set her apart. She was noticed, and as an immigrant maybe she did not have quite the protection of the other girls that local custom would provide those who belonged. Shechem, son of the local lord, Hamor the Hivvite, *'saw... took... lay with and abused her...'*

That torrent of verbs is a deliberate ploy by the narrator to show how quickly this happened. Maybe this was just youthful lust overcoming proper process, but Dinah, by the mores of both clans, had been abused! However, Shechem himself is not painted in a bad light. This story reminds me of the story of Romeo and Juliet. Foolishness beyond and outside the character of the young people concerned is not well received by the Traditions of the Families!

Directly the word 'abused' is used however, the narrator tells us that Shechem is instantly Love-Smitten! And it is the real thing, and it appears to be mutual! The lad is honourable after all! In fact, the Hebrew word for his reaction is *'his very life-breath (nefesh) clung to her'* This throws us off balance completely in our attempt to seek the moral right in this story. Like those 'Sister - Wife' stories of the previous generations, it is difficult to place either blame or praise; or at least, we find it so because we want to always find the moral high-ground amongst the people of God.

Shechem, and his father and family, prove to be honourable to a fault! Much later on the outcome that they seek for the two young people, is enshrined in the Israelite Law. A rapist has to pay the Father off and has to marry the offended party (without any recourse to divorce ever!) and be a good husband ther! In fact, this is exactly what Jacob and Hamor arrange. But Jacob the 'Dealer' is outdone here, not by Hamor, but by his own sons! Their honour has been impeached! So they, without Jacob's knowledge, seek to expand the deal, but the narrator makes it very obvious that they intend from the start to deal deviously with Shechem and his family (and people).

The Hivvites however, are like lambs to the slaughter! It seems that Jacob's genes have rubbed off again! The twisted dealings of Dinah's siblings are seen as an offer

of peace and of entry into (Abraham's!) clan and destiny! Accepted as such the men, young and old, take upon themselves the sign of the 'Hebrews' in circumcision - which for an adult is very painful and debilitating for some time. They are left

exposed and are slaughtered - 'raped' - by Dinah's brothers. And all this is against Dinah's wishes too. She too is 'taken against her will' by her brothers. I do wonder whether Shakespeare knew this story well, as it ends like many of his tragedies and most operas too!

Jacob is moved to curse his own sons for their actions. In fact one, the elder son, Simeon, never becomes a 'Tribe' and the other, Levi, as a tribe, never inherits land in Canaan.

Genesis 35...

After the debacle over Dinah and Shechem, the violence meted out by Jacob's sons and Jacob's unexplained inaction, Jacob fears for the future existence of his family (nation?) But God does not desert Jacob. In fact, this action seems to move God to push Jacob on the last stage of his journey. God tells Jacob,

'Rise, go to Bethel and dwell there and make an altar there to the God Who appeared to you when you fled from your brother, Esau'

Jacob seems to realise that this is a key point in his story and that when they all move off this time they need to leave the old life and old ways behind and not return to them. It is not God, but Jacob, apparently independently, who tells all his people to

'put away the alien gods that are in your midst and cleanse yourselves and your garments.'

Now were some of those gods the ones that Rebekah had taken from her father's household? Two things in this little statement are of interest...

First, these gods are described as 'alien' Rebekah's gods were her own family gods and so not strictly 'alien' Possibly Jacob's household now includes some of the people of the land and they would have their household gods with them. Here Jacob is implicitly stating that his 'camp' is a no-go area for these alien gods, and so is defining his group as exclusive - as a nation or tribe 'set apart' and whose God is the God of Bethel, to whom he will set up an altar.

A small detail that is initially a puzzle is the inclusion of their ear rings. This was a way of carrying gold around. Probably not insignificant little rings, but heavy gold

erings. Perhaps these too carried the images of their gods? But can you think of an incident after the Exodus that might be connected? - Yes, the Israelites will, in something over 400 years time, give Aaron their gold earrings to make a god for them - and which Aaron claims he 'just threw into the fire and out came this calf image!'

Secondly, and I think for the first time in scripture, we get a close connection between cleanliness and godliness! Even the smell and the dust of the Alien environment is to be left behind on this journey. Later on this aspect would become a key theme in the Mosaic Law.

Something strange happens as the Camp is raised and moves through the land. A deep fear descends on the people of every town and city that they pass by along the way. Jacob has spoken of his fear that all the people of the land would now turn against them and destroy them but God's assurance of His presence with them seems to instil that fear on all who see them. Jacob's family, large as it is, would have been no match for all the people of the land, and revenge would have been the motive for such an action. Instead the doors are barred to them and the people shiver and quake within their walls.

The violence of stories like that of Jacob's sons and Dinah and the Peoples of Shechem are difficult for our modern ears to contemplate. Why are they there, and does it mean that God condones such actions? He seems to do so in this case by preserving His people from otherwise almost inevitable annihilation.

One answer is that they are in the Bible to remind us that life is a mess! That God's People must somehow deal with this whilst looking forward to a time when it will not be so. It helps us to talk about the same problems, but in terms of our own age and experience. I am sure this is part of it, but also, I think, it is simply part of the story, and that despite the failings of His People, God still strives with them, but must now somehow work around the outcomes - the mess - that we leave behind us. Which brings us back to the promise, as central to that promise is the Blessing of the Nations.

Just at the very point where it seemed that this Blessing would work its magic and bind the Hebrew and the Canaanite together as one family through Jacob's mediation, murder, deception, rape and deceit take over. God has to fill the vacuum formed with a fear - a dread - of His Holiness and Power to protect His flawed peoples. Those Canaanites, whilst not perfect, were once again more honourable than expectations might dictate. In fact, they were in the end innocent victims themselves.

In the next part of the story the word used for the pain the Hivvites experienced at the hands of the Hebrews is used for the pain felt by the enslaved Israelites in Egypt!

But I jump far too far ahead for our work here!

God assures Jacob of the sureness of the promise that the LORD made to him at Bethel. And then God rolls up all the aspects of the Promise as revealed over the generations into one.

From here on in Jacob and Co. will only have one God (i.e. for the real Jacob, not the Nation 'Israel' - they would be another matter altogether!) and so Jacob, once back at Bethel, builds an altar there, just as his Grandfather had always done whenever he 'arrived', to *EiBethel* - The Creator God who lives amongst us! And there God said to Jacob...

*'I am El Shaddai. Be fruitful and multiply.
A Nation, an assembly of nations shall stem from you,
and kings shall come forth from your loins'*

'And the land that I gave to Abraham and to Isaac, to you I will give it, and to your seed after you I will give the land.'

And they all lived happily ever after, sort of!...

Well, you didn't really expect that, did you???

Jacob's life would never be an easy one.

Just before this final promise giving, we have a strange obituary notice for Rebekah's nurse. Life, (and death) go on, woven into the larger story. Deborah was probably the last of her generation. She is not in the story as a character, but her burial place will be named 'The oak of weeping' Maybe that time of mourning became a motivation for Jacob to complete his journey home?

Even then Jacob would have to endure more sorrow when there should have been rejoicing. Rachel is ready to give birth. Another son to go with Joseph, by Jacob's favoured wife. Previously God had 'Remembered' Rachel, but now her own prophetic prayer for 'Sons' works out its end. She will only survive the birth by a few hours. Just enough to name the child, but even then Jacob turns her last action to point towards the hope of better times - 'Ben-Oni' - Son of my strength' or '...of my sorrow' - both are possible and both work as all her

strength to live is invested in this son. - becomes 'Ben-yamin' 'Son of my old age' or '...of my right hand' Rachel is buried near what will be Bethlehem, and so the prophecy, still centuries away, of 'Rachel, weeping for her children' is possible, to be picked up again 2000 years ago when wicked Herod initiates the slaughterer of the innocent and God's people remember this sorry tale of slaughter, loss and sorrow!

In **Genesis 36** shortly, we will find one more of those Genealogies that form a punctuation of the larger sections of the story, preparing us for the next act. This one, oddly, is Esau's family line, plus many other origin and history stories of the nation in the area, some right up to the date, not of the end of Jacob's tale, but of the age of the narrator, many centuries later.

But first, even at the end of this part of Jacob's saga, fate it seems has one more twist for this, the third of the patriarchs. Reuben, Jacob's eldest son, makes a play for leadership of the Camp by taking Bilhah, Jacob's concubine for himself. Co-habiting with a ruler's consort was a direct challenge to that ruler's authority. King David's son, Absalom, will do exactly the same thing centuries later. Oddly, we are told that Jacob 'hears' but nothing else.

These last few little cameos of the closing actions of this section of the Big Story do two things for the narrative. They tie up the lives of some of the characters, as in the last one of them, where Jacob and Esau bury their father, Isaac at 180 years old, but also some of them set the scene for the next act of the play that began back in Eden, and now leaves us with Jacob, all his family and flocks and even those camels, living in Canaan, but owning just two small plots - one a burial plot, and one of them just enough to pitch a tent or two.

