

THE CHARACTER OF JACOB

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The Story Begins

At the very beginning of the Jacob story, the great struggle that is the patriarch's life is foreshadowed. First, Jacob is a twin, and he is found struggling with his twin brother inside their mother's womb. When Rebekah discovers this, she is also told by God that "the older will serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). This is in the context of the two baby boys in Rebekah's womb being identified as "two peoples" by the divine oracle, but Rebekah has no way of knowing whether this exaltation of the younger Jacob over the elder Esau will take place during the lifetime of her two sons or at some time after their deaths. What their parents and the readers of Genesis do get is a glimpse into the character of the younger son Jacob, as he emerges amidst a prenatal struggle second born, clinging to the heel of firstborn Esau with one hand.

The narrative immediately shifts from the birth of Jacob and Esau to a brief characterization of the two now grown men. Esau is an outdoorsman and hunter, while Jacob preferred to stay close to home (Gen. 25:27). One day, when Esau was famished from being out "in the field," he comes upon Jacob cooking, and he asks Jacob to share the stew with him. Jacob likely does not recall the grasping of his elder brother's heel at their birth, but the reader can hardly forget it, for it was just a few lines earlier in the same chapter. Here we see the ambitious, sly character of Jacob that was hinted to us in the birth narrative. Rather than gladly rushing to the aid of his own flesh and blood, confident that Esau would do the same if the situation was reversed, and rather than being interested in the supreme cultural value of hospitality, Jacob is first concerned with what he stands to gain from exploiting his brother's desperation. He requires that Esau swear to sell him his birthright as the firstborn of the family, to which Esau hastily agrees.

In the description of the brothers' next encounter, their mother gets involved in Jacob's swindling of the firstborn's blessing from their father Isaac's preferred Esau. While Jacob seems nervous to go along with his mother's plan to trick his blind father into thinking that he is Esau, it is obvious that Jacob's main concern is not so much the morality of the plan but fear that the plan might not succeed, thus provoking his father to curse him (Gen. 27:11-12). That Jacob carries out his mother's plan fits consistently into the picture of Jacob's character that was seen in the previous event and the evaluation offered in the previous paragraph. As with the birthright in the previous episode, this time Jacob emerges with possession of his brother's blessing.

In evaluating the first occurrence, the reader might be quick to condemn Jacob for his selfishness and lack of concern for his own brother. However, it is easy to look back and judge the actions of others in the past, without noticing our own selfishness and exploitation of others. One observation from the text is that Jacob is a strikingly authentic human character. That is, he behaves as many other young men likely would in a similar

situation, looking out for his own self-interests. Jacob displays the common character traits of an immature young man who has not yet encountered much of life's hardships firsthand. How much more might one expect a "spoiled rich kid," all the more shielded from the hardships and cruelty of the world, to grow into a somewhat self-centered, immature young adult, and Jacob does not come from a poor family. These statements are not meant to excuse Jacob's actions. They are merely a characterization of the historic person meant to put his actions and probable motivations into proper perspective.

In the second episode, Jacob's character is unchanged, although it is worthwhile to note his caution about the possibility of being discovered and the plan backfiring. We can only speculate whether Jacob has tried to pull a few more fast ones in the time between the two episodes. This time the reader gets a look at his mother's tendency toward the same behavior. Perhaps the origin of Jacob's conniving personality is part nature and part nurture. Here Jacob is still seeking to one-up his elder brother, reminiscent of the heel grab, and he is still driven to attain the elder brother's status denied to him at birth.

The Swindler is Swindled

As a result of his swindling and at the request of both his parents, Jacob is forced to flee to his uncle Laban's house in Paddan-aram. On the way, Jacob has a dream in which he sees a vision of Yahweh, the God of his fathers, standing atop a ladder reaching to heaven on which angels ascended and descended. Yahweh speaks to Jacob and passes to him the Abrahamic promises (Gen. 28:12-15). When Jacob awakes, he names the place Bethel (House of God) and responds by making a deal with God. If God will keep the promises he made to Jacob in the dream, then Jacob vows his allegiance, worship, and a tithe of all his increase to Yahweh (vv. 20-22).

Here God's election of Jacob is clear, but Jacob's response is not one of particularly great faith. He promises his allegiance and service to God on the condition that God will first keep his promises to Jacob. While this is not the picture of spiritual maturity, it does show a discerning heart on Jacob's part. Perhaps he desires to verify the authenticity of his unconscious encounter with God. This is commendable. However, would have been more commendable if Jacob were mature enough to offer himself to God first, before needing God to prove himself to Jacob. Jacob's faith obviously has some growing to do, and he probably needed this divine encounter to as a focal point to help him endure the coming difficulties in the years ahead.

When he arrives at his destination, Jacob's tumultuous life begins. First, Jacob seeks the hand of Laban's younger daughter Rachel, serving his uncle seven years for her hand. On the wedding night, Laban swaps his younger daughter for the elder, Leah, and in the morning Jacob realizes that the swindler has been swindled. Jacob is immediately given his beloved Rachel, but is required to work another seven years for her (Gen. 29:15-28). Next, there is conflict between Jacob's two wives as the unloved Leah bears many children while his beloved Rachel goes through an initial time of bareness (v. 31). Then, Jacob's uncle is reluctant to allow his nephew to take his wives and children and

move away. Laban desires more of Jacob's labor, which has led to increased prosperity. This time Jacob, with a little help from God, takes Laban's flocks as his wages (31:4-10), but eventually the family has to flee Laban's attempted exploitation when the Lord instructs Jacob to return to Canaan (vv. 11-21). Laban pursues, but the two eventually agree to part ways (vv. 22-55).

As most people come to realize, actions have consequences. Jacob learns this firsthand as conflict is introduced into his previously peaceful life in the form of animosity from his elder brother Esau, who now wants to kill him (Gen. 27:41). As a result, Jacob is forced to get acquainted with his uncle Laban who gives him a dose of his own medicine. Perhaps Jacob learns a little bit more about himself, as he can presumably see that the dishonest exploitation of family members is somewhat of a common family trait. Yet, through Jacob's difficulties, he emerges once again triumphant, and God has kept his first two promises to Jacob and has made him a wealthy man. Jacob has worked hard, encountered several setbacks, and has probably learned the consequences of swindling and being swindled through his dealings with his not-so-different uncle Laban. Growth often comes through difficulty, and since Jacob has encountered considerable difficulty during his years working for his uncle, it is likely that he has matured considerably in the process.

Jacob Learns Humility

Jacob's troubles are far from over as he is reminded of his brother's vow to kill him. After an encounter with God's angels (Gen. 32:1-2), Jacob begins to send emissaries bearing gifts and messages of peace to his brother Esau (vv. 3-5). The only message that comes back to Jacob is that Esau is on his way to meet him with a group of 400 men (v. 6). Afraid, Jacob responds by separating his group into two companies, and then he prays to the God of his fathers that both he and his family be spared (vv. 12). Jacob then sends his family and all his possessions across the Jabbok River and remains alone where he wrestles with a mysterious "man" all night until daybreak (vv. 22-24). The man touches Jacob's hip and dislocates it, prompting astute Jacob to cling to the man until he blesses him. The man responds by changing Jacob's name to Israel, and Jacob names the place where this occurs Peniel, and said, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered" (vv. 25-30).

So, what has Jacob learned in his past twenty years of adversity? Both Jacob's messages to his elder brother and his prayer to God are littered with tokens of humility. He refers to himself as "servant" to God and then to Esau. When Jacob wrestles with the mysterious man by the Jabbok and receives his famous name change, he is told by the figure that he has struggled with both God and man and has prevailed. Jacob has prevailed in his struggle against man because he has come out on top. He has gained a family and material wealth of his own. Jacob has prevailed with God because God is come out on top in the patriarch's life. Jacob has learned to submit to God and to humble himself before God. Jacob receives the covenant promises of Abraham, which were not conditional, but more than that, having both seen God's favor at work in his life and developed a humble heart, Jacob has emerged as not only heir to the physical patriarchy

of Abraham, but also as a father of the faith of the Abraham and the priestly role at conduit of the Abrahamic blessing meant for all people.

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