



Meditation— Genesis 29.¹⁵⁻³⁰

¹⁵And Laban said unto Jacob, “Because thou art my brother, shouldest thou therefore serve me for nought? Tell me, what shall thy wages be?”

¹⁶And Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷Leah was tender eyed; but Rachel was beautiful and well favoured. ¹⁸And Jacob loved Rachel; and said, “I will serve thee seven years for Rachel thy younger daughter.”

¹⁹And Laban said, “It is better that I give her to thee, than that I should give her to another man: abide with me.”

²⁰And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her.

²¹And Jacob said unto Laban, “Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her.”

²²And Laban gathered together all the men of the place, and made a feast. ²³And* in the evening, he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her. ²⁴And Laban gave unto his daughter Leah Zilpah his maid for an handmaid. ²⁵And* in the morning, behold, it was Leah: and he said to Laban, “What is this thou hast done unto me? Did not I serve with thee for Rachel? Wherefore then hast thou beguiled me?”

²⁶And Laban said, “It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷Fulfil her week, and we will give thee this also for the service which thou shalt serve with me yet seven other years.”

²⁸And Jacob did so, and fulfilled her week: and he gave him Rachel his daughter to wife also. ²⁹And Laban gave to Rachel his daughter Bilhah his handmaid to be her maid. ³⁰And he went in also unto Rachel, and he loved also Rachel more than Leah, and served with him yet seven other years.

prolegomena

In this series of meditations on Genesis 29.¹⁵⁻³⁰,²⁴, we are going to have an intimate peek into the family that gave its name to one of the best known and most closely studied nations in western civilization: Israel, aka, Jacob. To fully understand and appreciate the dynamics of Jacob’s family, we need first to go back for a quick overview of the man, Jacob, and his life to this point.

genesis 25.¹⁹⁻³⁴

Jacob was one of two twins—the other being Esau—born to Isaac, son of Abraham, and Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel and sister of Laban. While in the womb, the twins’ movement was so violent that Rebekah came to understand they were wrestling in the womb for dominance and that this competition would be a defining feature of their relationship.

Even as Rebekah delivered the twins, the wrestling for dominance continued. Esau emerged first, but Jacob grasped onto Esau’s heel—the proverbial weak spot, as typified by the famous Achilles—as if trying to hold him back and pull him back into the womb so that he, Jacob, rather than Esau could be firstborn and have dominance over his brother. This presumptuous act at birth earned Jacob his name:

“heel grabber,” “supplanter,” “replacer,” “he who finds others’ weakness and takes advantage of their weakness for his own gain.”

Though Jacob’s effort to be the dominant firstborn failed, it did not end Jacob’s striving to “supplant,” and “replace” his brother. As a lad, Jacob continued to stir the pot, convincing Esau to sell his birthright for a bowl of soup—a presumptuous act in itself since Esau had no right or authority to sell what did not belong to him, but to their father.

genesis 27

As the boys grew, Rebekah showed favoritism for Jacob while Esau was Isaac’s favorite son. Finally, in one of the Hebrew Bible’s most tragic comedies, Jacob, with his mother as accomplice—took advantage of his father’s weakness—blindness—to supplant Esau by literally substituting himself for and masquerading as Esau. As a result of this deceptive and tricky mimicry, Esau concluded that the only way to check his brother’s constant power grabs was to murder him. Thus, in order to save his own life, Jacob was forced to go into exile in Syria, where he became a hired hand in his uncle, Laban’s, family enterprise.

more of the same

We now come, finally, to today’s text. We have taken the time to recall the backstory because it is central to understanding Jacob’s experiences in Syria. It is especially important for understanding the dynamics of Jacob’s growing family in Syria. In the narrative covering Jacob’s time in Syria, attempts to supplant are repeated over and over again. The attempt to supplant by substitution, masquerade, mimicry, and trickery repeats itself. The idea of competition and the desire for dominance, natural enough between siblings, is once more exacerbated through favoritism.

So far, Jacob’s life has been one in which he and everyone around him are at odds. Jacob and Esau have been at odds since the womb. Rebecca and Isaac, each favoring a different twin, have been at odds about which son is to have preeminence in the family hierarchy. There can be little doubt that the parents’ displays of favoritism have created tension between Esau and Rebekah and between Jacob and Isaac. As we will see, this family dysfunction will travel with Jacob to Syria and permeate nearly every relationship in Jacob’s marriage and growing family. It is almost as if Jacob carries in himself an infection. Wherever Jacob is and wherever he goes, conflict seems to arise.

We already wonder—and our wonder will only grow—at God’s choice of this dysfunctional family to serve as His ambassador and servant to the nations of the world. Can’t God find a less dysfunctional family to represent him to the world? Perhaps not. Perhaps all the world knows is dysfunction. Dysfunctional individuals. Dysfunctional families. All living on a dysfunctional planet.

This wonder might set us to thinking about our own call, coming, as it does, in spite of our own dysfunctional. We are reminded that our call leaves no room for arrogance or self-righteousness. For we find in our lives and in our own families the same truth we find in Jacob’s. Indeed, the same truth that we find in every individual and every family God calls to the work.

“For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are...”¹

¹ 1 Corinthians 1.²⁶⁻²⁹

Apparently, he must choose the weak, not only because that's all he has to work with, but because we too often believe those who boast that they are part of a "great and noble" minority that roams the planet. And believing their propaganda, we glory in them. But God calls the weak so that

"No flesh should glory in his presence... that, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him a glory in the Lord."²

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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² 1 Corinthians 1.^{29, 31}