

# The Jacob Cycle

*A Critical Look at Jacob's Family System*

# Reading the Bible

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- ❧ Because we read the Bible as a religious text from within the faith community that holds it as the supreme authority for faith and life we tend to read it with rose tinted glasses - or more precisely, with religious tinted glasses.
- ❧ That can separate the biblical characters out from the rough and tumble of daily life and make them somehow “different” from us.
- ❧ We might even fail to see that *God does His transforming work in the lives of ordinary people* – people like you and the kind of people we meet every day in our families, homes, work, school and communities - every sort of person with all their individual propensities and quirks of character.
- ❧ How do we look at the Christmas story for example? We have transformed the horror of giving birth in unsanitary conditions in a stable into beautiful art and craft forms in cards and manger scenes

# Reading the Bible

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- ☞ Nowhere is this more true than in how we read the stories of the patriarchs.
- ☞ They are, after all, the fathers of our faith. Their stories have an epic like quality for us, and they, themselves, are the heroes of the “epic.” They have shaped for us what faith looks like, and as with all our heroes, from whatever context, we try to emulate them.
- ☞ Sure, we pay lip-service to their weaknesses or bad points and when we deal with them we point to these as evidence that grace can transform us too.
- ☞ The problem is we don’t pay sufficient attention to the real context of their lives in which their “growth in faith” took place.
- ☞ We admire Abraham’s faith in offering Isaac and laud his obedience to God, but spend so little time in contemplation of the *struggle and process* that Abraham must have gone through before he arrived at the point of obedience that would allow him to offer Isaac in the faith that God would raise him from the dead.

# Jacob's Family System

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- ❧ As we journey through the Jacob “cycle” this morning we’re going to take a realistic look at Jacob’s family and the dynamics that are at play within it to bring
  - ❖ a degree of realism to the Bible story
  - ❖ an understanding that God works through very ordinary people, families and communities, in all their brokenness and even their dysfunction, to further His purposes and establish his kingdom on earth.
- ❧ Some of you may be familiar with “systems thinking” as it applies to family counselling, etc. What I propose to do today is to take a look at Jacob through a family systems approach which will bring out some of the “*horror*” of how this family operated and yet how God through His grace transformed Jacob into a prince with God, Israel.
- ❧ In the process I will endeavour to do justice to the whole Jacob cycle

# Family Systems in a Nutshell

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- ☞ Within family counselling theory today there is growing awareness that in situations of difficulty within a family the problem is often not just with the family member exhibiting the problematic behaviour, but with the whole family system itself.
- ☞ The problem just surfaces and finds expression around one person, the identified “patient,” of the family system. Consequently, the family counsellor will often want to see the whole family and endeavour to treat the family system as a whole, not just the individual member.
- ☞ “That is all very interesting,” you may say, “but this is a Sunday morning church service and we’re supposed to be listening to the Word of God. What has family systems theory got to do with our study of Jacob and our worship? Shouldn’t this type of study belong in a counselling class?”
- ☞ Relationships are the “stuff” of life. It is where God’s transforming work takes place. Every significant event of Jacob’s life takes place in the context of his family relationships, so looking at them from within that context should be profitable and should lead us to worship.

# *Jacob's Family System*

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- ☞ The book of Genesis provides a window into Jacob's family system over several generations. The large amount of material, [Genesis 25:19-35:29], allows us to see Jacob function in a variety of interpersonal relationships in different family contexts. We see him as
  - ☞ a brother,
  - ☞ a son,
  - ☞ a nephew,
  - ☞ a husband, and
  - ☞ a father.

# Transformation

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- ❧ Before we go any further I think it is important to remind ourselves that Jacob, whose name is changed to Israel by God, is one of the most important of the Old Testament patriarchs. The whole nation of God's people will ultimately be named after him.
- ❧ Among other things, in his story we see the journey of a man from scheming selfishness to becoming a prince with God. Jacob was not a very commendable person but he was transformed by grace.
- ❧ We see also that God works the transformation through the normal events and relationships of life and through very ordinary means, teaching us that ...
- ❧ transformation does not usually happen through some sort of mystical experience taking place in a vacuum....
- ❧ .. but is worked out in our relationships with others, with those among whom we live and work, and play, especially the members of our families, as we receive and cooperate with God's grace in our lives

# *Struggle & Strife In Jacob's Family*



☞ In the Jacob cycle family relationships are dominated by struggle and strife - what Michael Fishbane calls the recurrent thematic emblem of the cycle as a whole. Thus, we see the brothers, Jacob and Esau, struggle

❖ **in the womb** [25:22],

*<sup>22</sup> The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?"*

❖ **at birth** [25:26],

*<sup>26</sup> Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob.*

❖ **and in their youth** [25:27-34],

*<sup>27</sup> When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. <sup>28</sup> Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob. ....*

<sup>27</sup> When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. <sup>28</sup> Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

<sup>29</sup> Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. <sup>30</sup> Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom). <sup>31</sup> Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." <sup>32</sup> Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" <sup>33</sup> Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. <sup>34</sup> Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

## *Struggle & Strife, cont'd.,*

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- ❧ Jacob's flight into exile in Paddan-aram is merely an exchange of his conflict with Esau for conflict with the master of deceit himself, his uncle Laban [chs 29-31].
- ❧ Jacob's beloved wife Rachel struggles with his first wife, Leah [cf. 30:8] in what becomes a horrifying battle with each wife wanting what the other has:
  - ❖ Rachel has Jacob's love but wants his children, while Leah has his children but wants his love
- ❧ Rachel's statement in v.8, when the slave wife she provides for Jacob, [her maidservant Bilhah], produces a second son, is nothing less than a triumphant boast, that allows us to see the level of tension in the relationship;

*<sup>8</sup> Then Rachel said, "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and have prevailed"; so she named him Naphtali.*

# Note

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- ☞ In Middle Eastern culture of that time a barren wife was required to provide a slave wife for her husband, and the children resulting from this union were regarded as hers.
- ☞ Indeed the fracas in the family played out in chapter 30, as we shall see, almost makes current daytime TV soap operas pale in comparison.
- ☞ How we will wonder, will this family ever become the descendants through whom all the peoples of the earth would be blessed [28:14]?

*<sup>13</sup> And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; <sup>14</sup> and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.*

# *Struggle & Strife, cont'd.,*

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- ☞ In the end it will take no less than a wrestling match with God himself to bring Jacob into submission [32:22-32], *from which will emerge a renewed relationship with God and his long estranged brother, Esau.*

# The Early Years

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- ☞ Genesis 25:28 gives us a direct insight into the beginning of the emotional triangles in the family. Isaac and his wife, Rebekah, each have a favourite child through whom they relate [or fail to relate], to each other;

*27 When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. 28 Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob. (NRSV)*

- ☞ Isaac himself probably learned his favouritism pattern from his father Abraham, although there are signs in the Abraham cycle [Gen 21:11] that Abraham's favouritism was not as pronounced as we see it in Isaac [and Jacob - 37:3; 44:20],

*3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age;*

*20 And we said to my lord, 'We have a father, an old man, and a young brother, the child of his old age. His brother is dead; he alone is left of his mother's children, and his father loves him.'*

- ☞ The reason for Isaac's preference of Esau is due to his physical appetites [*he had a taste for wild game and Esau was a skillful hunter, 25:27-28*], rather than any spiritual reasons.

## *Enter the Two Sons*

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- ☞ Hairy, [25:25], or Red, as his brother nicknamed him, [25:30], was the antithesis of his younger brother Jacob. He was the macho man of the patriarchal period, the outdoors man who loved to go hunting and loved life in the fields. We could describe him as a real “he-man.”
- ☞ Jacob on the other hand, was a quiet, reserved kind of guy. He was the stay at home type who liked life around the tents, which probably means that he enjoyed the company of the family community which would include the women and servants. It is not at all surprising that Rebekah loved him. He could be relied on to be there, to be company for her whenever she needed him.
- ☞ Accordingly, he was probably more cultured than his brother Esau. We would naturally expect in two such different characters a fair degree of rivalry and competition. What we encounter at the end of chapter 25 is sibling rivalry at its best [or worst].

# *Sibling Rivalry*

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☞ <sup>29</sup> Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. <sup>30</sup> Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) <sup>31</sup> Jacob said, "First sell me your birth-right." <sup>32</sup> Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birth-right to me?" <sup>33</sup> Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birth-right to Jacob. <sup>34</sup> Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birth-right. (NRSV)

# Brothers or What???

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- ☞ What would it have cost Jacob to feed his brother? After all, the stew was made, and it was probably large enough to feed the whole family.
- ☞ In reflecting on this incident we also need to remember the cultural context of the patriarchs. We are dealing here with a context where extending hospitality to the visitor or even stranger was a cultural norm. To fail to provide for the visitor, even if he was unexpected, would be a source of shame for any household. If necessary the family would go without themselves in order to entertain the visitor as lavishly as their means would allow. [This is also the background to Jesus' parable of the friend at midnight!!]
- ☞ But we are not talking “stranger” here, we are talking “brother.” Jacob was treating his brother in a way he would never dream of treating a stranger. For him Esau's hunger was an opportunity to be used to his advantage but at his brother's expense - and he used it to the fullest extent, wangling the birth-right from him.
- ☞ In biblical understanding this is “wickedness,” pure and simple.

# *Uncle Laban*

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- ❧ But if we think Jacob can be scheming and deceitful, wait until we meet wonderful uncle Laban who will treat his own flesh and blood [29:14] worse than his enemies.
- ❧ But aren't families like that sometimes?
- ❧ And because they are, there are times, it is sad to say, when we will need to counsel married couples to treat their spouse as they would a total stranger, and brothers as if they had never met each other before.

# *The Contribution of Isaac and Rebekah*

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- ✧ Although the strife between Jacob and Esau in Gen 25:29-34 is based on Jacob's greed, the very fact that we know each son was "triangled" by the parents would have greatly increased the natural reactiveness the twin brothers would have to one another.
- ✧ How could the brothers have failed to pick up the contrary ambitions for their lives that was born in their parents favouritism? This is clarified even more in chapter 27 where Rebekah encourages and helps Jacob to steal the blessing.

# Several Years Later....

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## *A Bad “Heir” Day*

- ✧ Journeying into the future, past the famine in Canaan and the family’s consequent sojourn in Gerar with Abimilech, where Isaac denies that Rebecca is his wife and so risks the possibility that she might be taken by Abimilech or one of his people, *[I wonder what that did for the relationship???*] we come to that fateful day when *the dysfunction in Jacob’s family will finally cause it to break up.*
- ✧ The family, as we shall see, has soured over time. The theme of family conflict, between the parents, between parents and children, and between the twins, now becomes full blown in pursuit of the patriarchal blessing.

<sup>1</sup> When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called his elder son Esau and said to him, "My son"; and he answered, "Here I am." <sup>2</sup> He said, "See, I am old; I do not know the day of my death." <sup>3</sup> Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me. <sup>4</sup> Then prepare for me savoury food, such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may bless you before I die."

<sup>5</sup> Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, <sup>6</sup> Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I heard your father say to your brother Esau, <sup>7</sup> 'Bring me game, and prepare for me savoury food to eat, that I may bless you before the LORD before I die.' <sup>8</sup> Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you. <sup>9</sup> Go to the flock, and get me two choice kids, so that I may prepare from them savoury food for your father, such as he likes; <sup>10</sup> and you shall take it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies." <sup>11</sup> But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, "Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of smooth skin, <sup>12</sup> perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing." <sup>13</sup> His mother said to him, "Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my word, and go, get them for me."

<sup>14</sup> So he went and got them and brought them to his mother; and his mother prepared savoury food, such as his father loved. <sup>15</sup> Then Rebekah took the best garments of her elder son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob; <sup>16</sup> and she put the skins of the kids on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. <sup>17</sup> Then she handed the savoury food, and the bread that she had prepared, to her son Jacob.

*<sup>18</sup> So he went in to his father, and said, "My father"; and he said, "Here I am; who are you, my son?" <sup>19</sup> Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me." <sup>20</sup> But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" He answered, "Because the LORD your God granted me success." <sup>21</sup> Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not." <sup>22</sup> So Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." <sup>23</sup> He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him. <sup>24</sup> He said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am." <sup>25</sup> Then he said, "Bring it to me, that I may eat of my son's game and bless you." So he brought it to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank. <sup>26</sup> Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come near and kiss me, my son." <sup>27</sup> So he came near and kissed him; and he smelled the smell of his garments, and blessed him, and said,*

*"Ah, the smell of my son*

*is like the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed.*

*<sup>28</sup> May God give you of the dew of heaven,*

*and of the fatness of the earth,*

*and plenty of grain and wine.*

*<sup>29</sup> Let peoples serve you,*

*and nations bow down to you.*

*Be lord over your brothers,*

*and may your mother's sons bow down to you.*

*Cursed be everyone who curses you,*

*and blessed be everyone who blesses you!"*

<sup>30</sup> As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of his father Isaac, his brother Esau came in from his hunting. <sup>31</sup> He also prepared savory food, and brought it to his father. And he said to his father, "Let my father sit up and eat of his son's game, so that you may bless me." <sup>32</sup> His father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" He answered, "I am your firstborn son, Esau."

<sup>33</sup> Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, "Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him? -- yes, and blessed he shall be!" <sup>34</sup> When Esau heard his father's words, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, "Bless me, me also, father!" <sup>35</sup> But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing." <sup>36</sup> Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright; and look, now he has taken away my blessing." Then he said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?"

<sup>37</sup> Isaac answered Esau, "I have already made him your lord, and I have given him all his brothers as servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son?" <sup>38</sup> Esau said to his father, "Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!" And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.

<sup>39</sup> Then his father Isaac answered him:

"See, away from the fatness of the earth shall your home be,  
and away from the dew of heaven on high.

<sup>40</sup> By your sword you shall live,

and you shall serve your brother;

but when you break loose,

you shall break his yoke from your neck."

*<sup>41</sup> Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob."<sup>42</sup> But the words of her elder son Esau were told to Rebekah; so she sent and called her younger son Jacob and said to him, "Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you."<sup>43</sup> Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran,<sup>44</sup> and stay with him a while, until your brother's fury turns away --<sup>45</sup> until your brother's anger against you turns away, and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send, and bring you back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?"*

*<sup>46</sup> Then Rebekah said to Isaac, "I am weary of my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women such as these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?"*

- ☛ This type of blessing which both Jacob and Esau desired were usually end of life blessings and were a kind of bequest to one's sons. As they were closely associated with the birth-right they were very significant indeed, and were normally given in public. Jacob's blessing of his sons in chapter 49 is a good example, as is Joseph's in chapter 50;

*Then Jacob called his sons, and said: "Gather around, that I may tell you what will happen to you in days to come. [49:1 (preliminary to blessing)].*

*Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." [50:24]*

## *A Bad “Heir” Day, cont’d...*



- ☞ The very fact that Isaac is giving the blessing in secret should cause red warning lights to go off in our minds.
- ☞ This should have been a very important moment in the life of this family at which all the members were present and participating. It was not something Isaac should have done in secret without the knowledge of his spouse and his other son. The secrecy allows us a glimpse into the true state of this family’s relationships.
- ☞ Family secrets are a sign of emotional anxiety in the system and become transmitters of anxiety from generation to generation, *[as is happening before our eyes in this case]*.
- ☞ With what appears to be an obvious emotional cut-off between Isaac and Rebekah, their differences over who should receive the birth-right and blessing are fought through their children rather than dealt with between themselves.
- ☞ On the surface Rebekah seems to have good intentions. After all, the prophecy given in 25:23 which foretold that the older will serve the younger, gives her some justification, at least in her own mind, for her actions. *She is merely helping God out!!*

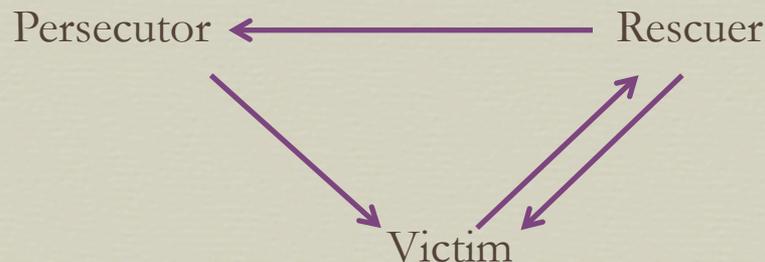
## *A Bad “Heir” Day, cont’d.*

∞ But the end does not justify the means though Rebekah clearly thinks it does.

∞ One thing is for certain:

♥ *The way this family is behaving, not one of them will come out of this episode smelling like roses.*

∞ Now a brief digression to take a look at how emotional triangles work. Triangles in relationships always have three categories of people, (1) a persecutor, (2) a victim, and (3) a rescuer, so that the triangle looks like this;



# *The Marriage Relationship: Jacob's Parents*

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- ☞ As we have said, there is an *emotional cut-off between Isaac and Rebekah* in what appears to have become a very conflicted relationship.
- ☞ The tragedy is that if ever there was a *match made in heaven*, this was it. We saw 2 weeks ago in our character study of Isaac how Abraham sent his servant to his relatives to find a wife for his son Isaac, and how that servant prayed for and received the Lord's guidance to Rebekah who is clearly portrayed in the narrative as God's choice [Gen 24].
- ☞ Our expectations for this marriage are high. We expect it to work out, but instead we discover serious conflict and communication problems.
- ☞ The example of Jacob and Rebekah brings home to us the sobering truth, that *while a match may be made in heaven the marriage still has to be made on earth* and is the responsibility, with God's grace, of the husband and wife.
- ☞ It takes commitment, preferring each other in love, and continuing communication to keep from growing cold.

# The Slippery Slope



☞ From love at first sight [see esp. 24:63-64] where Isaac and Rebekah's eyes meet for the first time -- *and all of this before Hollywood !!!*,

*<sup>63</sup> Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. <sup>64</sup> And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, <sup>65</sup> and said to the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. <sup>66</sup> And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. <sup>67</sup> Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.*

and children conceived in prayer [25:21] after a 20 year wait,

*<sup>21</sup> Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. (NRSV)*

the family relationships take a turn for the worst.

# *Fracas in the Family*



- ☞ Isaac is the common enemy [persecutor] in the Rebekah/Jacob triangle and Rebekah is the common enemy in the Isaac/Esau triangle, with each parent trying to rescue their “*victim*” son from the “*persecuting*” spouse.
- ☞ Isaac wants to bless Esau because he is his favourite and, besides, the special blessing belongs to the oldest who has the right of inheritance.
- ☞ Rebecca, with the prophetic word to back her up, stands in the way. She for her part, wants her favourite, Jacob, to receive the blessing, and Isaac with his stubborn refusal to listen to God’s will stands in her way.
- ☞ Each parent is forced to become the rescuer of their favourite against the unreasonableness of the spouse.
- ☞ And just in case the reader of the saga hasn’t picked up on the dynamics at work, the narrator – the biblical writer - even refers to Esau as “*his [Isaac’s] son Esau,*” [27:5] and Jacob as “*her, [Rebekah’s] son, Jacob*” [27:6].
- ☞ The effects of such dysfunctional relationships will continue to unfold in the story

- ☞ The repetition of the phrase *“tasty food”* in the narrative, [27:4, 7, 9, 14, 17, 31], proves that Rebekah knows what every woman knows; that the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach! [*Not much has changed in the last 4,000 years!!*].
- ☞ Actually, it shows how fickle the foundation of Isaac’s favouritism really was.
- ☞ If the effects of such foolishness weren’t so tragic we might even laugh; instead we *weep at a family system about to go mobile* [family systems’ pun].
- ☞ Isaac acts on his physical rather than on his spiritual sense and, as has become the pattern of his life, is too passive and irresolute in his leadership position.
- ☞ Rebekah, for her part, acts on domination, [of Jacob – *“Do what I say,”* (27:8, 13)], and deception, [of Isaac], which was probably necessary in a patriarchal system if she was to have any hope of getting her own way, [27:14-17].
- ☞ Esau reveals his character by breaking the oath he made to Jacob in 25:33 [the birth-right and blessing always went together],  
*<sup>33</sup> Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore to him, and sold his birth-right to Jacob,*  
and later resolves to kill his brother, [27:41].
- ☞ And good old Jacob, - he is a very willing co-conspirator with his mother, and he blasphemously lies to his father in order to get the blessing, [27:20; cf. vv. 19, 24]. As a consequence he will pay a heavy price for his deceitfulness.

# *Reaping the Fruit of Their Actions*

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- ❧ The divine verdict on the actions of each member of this family is, *“guilty,”* as the resulting fall-out will demonstrate. The family is about to reap the consequences of its failure to deal with its dysfunctionality.
- ❧ Rebekah’s self-proclaimed prophecy, *“Let the curse fall on me,”* [27:13] will come true as she loses both sons and will die without ever seeing her favourite son, Jacob, again.
- ❧ Esau will have no part in the sacred history because he treated the birth-right, [*which included the right of priesthood in the family*], and the promises that went with it so lightly.
- ❧ Isaac lives on for another 103 years, but without significance [*“Now the days of Isaac were one hundred eighty years,”* (35:28)], and with a fractured family for most of his life.

# *Reaping the Fruit of Their Actions*

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- ❧ As for Jacob, he will experience this same pain, that of a fractured family, *as a direct consequence of following the same pattern of favouritism in his own family.*
- ❧ It was the favouritism he had for Joseph that led to his brothers' plot to kill him, - although they settled for selling him as a slave.
- ❧ *We need to keep in mind that unresolved behavioural patterns and issues are transmitted from generation to generation and will continue to reap destruction in future family relationships until they are dealt with.*
- ❧ The most immediate result for Jacob is that he has to flee his brother's fratricidal wrath [27:41] as the identified patient of a sick family system. Years later Jacob will also be deceived in like fashion by his own sons, [37:31-33], *in what seems to be clear poetic justice, .....*

# *Reaping the Fruit of Their Actions*

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*<sup>31</sup> Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. <sup>32</sup> They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." <sup>33</sup> He recognized it, and said, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces."*

*To be Continued*

*The Jacob Cycle*  
*Part 2*

# *Becoming Parents: Kids of the Kingdom?*

- ☞ The account of the birth of Jacob's eleven sons in Paddan-aram [29:31-30:24] provides insight into the transference of patterns and problems from his family of origin into his own family.
- ☞ The real complicating factor is the rivalry between Rachel and Leah that their father, Laban, has exacerbated exponentially by using his daughters for selfish gain. He enriched himself by selling his daughters to Jacob for fourteen years of work.
- ☞ Ironically, just as Jacob took advantage of his father's blindness [27:1] to deceive him, so Laban uses the cover of the night to deceive Jacob into marrying the wrong woman.

<sup>21</sup> Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed."

<sup>22</sup> So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. <sup>23</sup> But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. <sup>24</sup> (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) <sup>25</sup> When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" <sup>26</sup> Laban said, "This is not done in our country -- giving the younger before the firstborn. <sup>27</sup> Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years."

- [Talk about your sins coming home to roost!!!].

# Leah



☞ Tragically, Leah becomes a real victim as she is reduced to the status of a mere pawn and her life will be spent longing and grasping for the love and acceptance, that neither her father nor her husband will ever give her.

- *“surely my husband will love me now,”* (29:32; etc.),

☞ Much later, when Joseph has risen to power in Egypt, Jacob’s on-going disregard for Leah and her sons is reflected in Judah’s statement to Joseph, [44:20];

*<sup>20</sup> And we said to my lord, 'We have a father, an old man, and a young brother, the child of his old age. His brother is dead; he alone is left of his mother's children, and his father loves him.'*

# Rachel

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- ☞ Rachel's struggle to overcome her older sister mirrors Jacob's earlier struggle to overcome his brother Esau.
- ☞ The two sisters will compete for the supremacy of their husband's affection by bearing him sons.
- ☞ Thus once again the patterns of rivalry and favouritism arise taking root in Jacob's own household.

# *The Sister's Rivalry*



- ☞ While Edwin Friedman may be right when says that all human beings are programmed for far more pathology than could possibly become manifest in a lifetime, *this family takes a good run at maximum manifestation.*
- ☞ The jealousy that has been building between the two sisters, [*about which Jacob, like his passive father, Isaac, had taken no steps to resolve*], maximizes the emotional reactivity in the system *with Rachel finally exploding* on Jacob,

<sup>1</sup> *When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister; and she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" (Genesis 30:1)*

## *The Sister's Rivalry, cont'd.,*



- ☞ Whereas, in a similar situation with his wife Rebekah, Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren, [25:21], Jacob only becomes outraged at his barren wife.
- ☞ In this tension filled atmosphere something has to give, and Rachel, desperate for children and the respect within and without the family circle that goes with having children, draws her maid servant into the triangle.
- ☞ When her action succeeds, Leah, not to be outdone, counters by doing the same.
- ☞ Watch how the situation escalates;

*<sup>2</sup> Jacob became very angry with Rachel and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" <sup>3</sup> Then she said, "Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her." <sup>4</sup> So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife; and Jacob went in to her. <sup>5</sup> And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. <sup>6</sup> Then Rachel said, "God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son"; therefore she named him Dan. <sup>7</sup> Rachel's maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. <sup>8</sup> Then Rachel said, "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and have prevailed"; so she named him Naphtali.*

<sup>9</sup> When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. <sup>10</sup> Then Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. <sup>11</sup> And Leah said, "Good fortune!" so she named him Gad. <sup>12</sup> Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. <sup>13</sup> And Leah said, "Happy am I! For the women will call me happy"; so she named him Asher.

<sup>14</sup> In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." <sup>15</sup> But she said to her, "Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes also?" Rachel said, "Then he may lie with you tonight for your son's mandrakes." <sup>16</sup> When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him, and said, "You must come in to me; for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he lay with her that night. <sup>17</sup> And God heeded Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. <sup>18</sup> Leah said, "God has given me my hire because I gave my maid to my husband"; so she named him Issachar. <sup>19</sup> And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son. <sup>20</sup> Then Leah said, "God has endowed me with a good dowry; now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons"; so she named him Zebulun. <sup>21</sup> Afterwards she bore a daughter, and named her Dinah.

<sup>22</sup> Then God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. <sup>23</sup> She conceived and bore a son, and said, "God has taken away my reproach"; <sup>24</sup> and she named him Joseph, saying, "May the LORD add to me another son!" (Genesis 30:2-24)

## *The Sister's Rivalry, cont'd.,*

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- ☞ This stuff would make the producers of the Hollywood soap operas blush.
- ☞ The women have reduced Jacob to being a stud and his marriage to Leah to a mere commercial contract [she hired him with her son's mandrakes].
- ☞ The production of children becomes the battle field on which they fight for Jacob's affection.

*[No wonder the New Testament says that the church leaders should be the husband of only one wife!!!!].*

- ☞ Jacob's family system gives a whole new meaning to the word dysfunctional.

*The next time you're in the middle of a family counsellor's nightmare, remember, it could be worse – it could be like Jacob's family!!!!*

## Jacob & Laban [Genesis 32]



- ☞ We skip over the trickery and deceit, the cut and thrust of Jacob's relationship with his uncle Laban, as each sought to cheat the other.
- ☞ When the dust settles on that debacle Jacob has become a wealthy man and his ill-gotten gains inspire the jealousy and wrath of his cousins, Laban's sons.
- ☞ Here again the pattern of trickery and its consequences is repeated and proves that Jacob has not yet learned his lesson.
- ☞ Just as he had to flee the wrath of his brother Esau after he had cheated his way to his father's blessing, now he has to flee Paddan-aram and the wrath of his cousins because his trickery has cheated Laban of much of his wealth.
- ☞ Laban pursues him but when he finally catches up with him they reconcile and make a covenant of peace.

# Quantum Leap: Jacob Meets Esau



- ☞ But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, [Romans 5:20]. Because of grace not even this family is beyond hope. Indeed Jacob's encounter and conversion at Peniel years later marks a dramatic turning point for this family system.
- ☞ Jacob was returning to the land of promise but was greatly afraid of meeting with Esau.
- ☞ He divided his people and animals into two companies and sent them on ahead of himself. He thought that if the first company, which contained those to whom he was less attached, were attacked the second might escape. But then messengers he had sent to Esau returned with rather disturbing news, Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men.
- ☞ This really put the wind up Jacob and his scheming mind thought up a plan - he would buy off his brother with a gift,
  - <sup>14</sup> two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, <sup>15</sup> thirty milch camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. (Genesis 32:14-15)
  - *That's a heavy duty present!!!!!!*

# Jacob Meets Esau



- ❧ That night while Jacob is alone on the north side of the stream, Jabbok, he encounters God, and wrestles with Him all night.
- ❧ There are two significant things that happen in this encounter,
  1. Jacob is forced to give his name.

Remember, that in this culture the name and nature of the person are intertwined. In giving his name Jacob is also revealing / admitting who he is.

It means he is acknowledging his nature. Jacob designates him as cheat, trickster, supplanter, heel-grabber.

After revealing his name God gives him a new name, Israel, the meaning of which is not that certain. It is either, may God rule or prince with God, but in this passage it is explained by *“for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed”* [32:28].

# Jacob Meets Esau



2. The second thing to note about the passage is that Jacob sought to know the name of God but is not given it.
- ❖ The ancients thought that if they knew the name of a god they could control him.
  - ❖ In this refusal Jacob learns that he cannot in any way control God or use Him for his ends.
  - ❖ However, God does bless him and Gerhard Von Rad writes that in the blessing;

*Jacob's stolen blessing becomes legitimate, the promise at Bethel is confirmed, and the petition [32:11f] is heard.*

- ❖ Whatever else we are to make of this encounter *it brought about a deepening of conversion in Jacob*. There is something of a surrender here as subsequent events make clear.
- ❖ This encounter *did not make him perfect*. He would still have a long way to go. In fact he walked, or rather limped away from the encounter, in some way a broken man.
- ❖ Nevertheless, something profound has taken place and the evidence of his conversion is seen most dramatically in the shift from his wanting to send everyone else ahead of him to meet Esau - *“Pass on ahead of me,”* (32:16) - to his taking the lead - He himself went on ahead [33:3].
- ❖ He has moved from trying to protect himself to *protecting the members of his family and community*.
- ❖ He has moved from giving himself the best hope of escape *to giving himself no hope*, if Esau should prove hostile. He cannot even run away, for the encounter with God has left him physically disabled.
- ❖ Jacob now meets his brother *face to face in humility* rather than in a triangled relationship he could manipulate for his own gain.
- ❖ Bowing seven times, [*the common practice of a vassal to his lord in ancient court protocol*], with his face in the dust he seeks reconciliation with his brother Esau whom he has not seen or spoken to for over 20 years.

- ❖ We do not know all the dynamics at work in this miracle and why Esau is no longer bitter, but we have seen the grace of God at work changing Jacob and thus effecting the necessary ingredients for reconciliation to occur.
- ❖ Jacob's repentance is accompanied with the return of the blessing that he had formerly stolen from Esau.

His action of bowing and addressing Esau as “my lord” cannot be underestimated. It acknowledges that Esau is lord in their relationship and reverses the pattern of Isaac's blessing [Genesis 27:29],

<sup>29</sup> Let peoples serve you,  
and nations bow down to you.  
Be lord over your brothers,  
and may your mother's sons bow down to you.  
Cursed be everyone who curses you,  
and blessed be everyone who blesses you! (NRSV)

- ❖ This is further evidence of Jacob's surrender to God. For the first time in his life we see Jacob abandoning the old grasping pattern, [*the diabolical paradigm*], for the giving pattern [*the heavenly paradigm*], trusting God for the results.
- ❖ Jacob is now truly a prince of God

# Conclusion

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- ∞ This family still has a long way to go in its march out of dysfunctional mania, but we have here in chapters 32-33 significant signs of hope that by God's grace the past can be changed.
- ∞ Sins need not be transmitted from generation to generation, the downward cycle can be broken if there is a willingness to forgive and to change.
- ∞ Perhaps the most encouraging message from this story is that if God can redeem this family, then, yes, yes, yes, there is hope for every family.
- ∞ And each and every one of us can become a prince or princess of God