

Study I

God's twister: the Life of Jacob

Deceiving his Father: Robbing his brother

Genesis 27

The patriarchal narratives are a bit like Eastenders (not that I watch it- but I imagine there are similarities!) ie dysfunctional families; deceit; ambition; jealousy ; rivalry; favouritism ; sexual misdemeanours; match making ; love; passion; the longing for conception and the joy of birth; violence – it's all there! They would make an enthralling soap- and they are true! And this was the family through whom God chose to bless the whole earth, from them the Messiah would eventually come. And from them we learn basic spiritual first principles like what faith is; how righteousness comes(see Genesis 15: 1-6) and what Covenant is (see Genesis 15:10ff).

Jacob, or Israel as he became (meaning struggling with God!), became the father of the nation, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. He was the grandson of Abraham, the son of Isaac -about who little is written. Abraham and Jacob are the two most important Patriarchs and of then two Jacob is God's Twister.

Isaac and Rebekah

Isaac was the much longed for heir of Abraham conceived in old age by Sarah when Abraham we are told was over 99 years old! (See Genesis 17 v1 & 18:10) Isaac was the son whom Abraham was commanded to sacrifice as a test but for whom a substitute sacrifice was found (see Genesis 22: 13, 14). This happened on Mt Moriah on which Jews believed the Temple later stood- the place of sacrifice in Judaism!) Isaac's wife was Rebekah, an important character in this story, whom Abraham's servant found in Abraham's home country- near the town of

Nahor in Aram. She was very beautiful, see Genesis 24: 16, willing and energetic (v 19), but as we shall see very much had her own mind!

A struggle from the outset: sibling rivalry

Esau and Jacob were twins and they struggled it seems in the womb (see Genesis 25:22). Rebekah through prophetic insight understood the destiny of her two sons and that “the older will serve the younger” At the time of delivery Esau came out first but Jacob came out clinging to Esau’s heel (see Genesis 25 v26). Esau did not look very pretty for his whole body was covered with hair (25:25 – Esau means “Hairy”: “Come here Hairy !” may not have been an endearing name for him!. And maybe because of this, his hairiness and maybe a certain uncouthness that went with it, his Mother preferred his brother Jacob, the smooth man! (do you remember/know the Beyond the Fringe Sketch! Peter Cooke and Dudley Moore) Esau was in touch with his masculine side and Jacob his feminine , Isaac admired Esau’s prowess as a hunter and Rebekah the quiet more sensitive stay- at- home nature of Jacob – see Genesis 25:27,28. But Jacob was ambitious and crafty see Genesis 25: 29ff -the buying of Esau’s birthright for a bowl of stew!

But Esau gave grief to his parents by his seeming more wild and unbidable nature, nor did they appreciate his choice of wives see Genesis 26:34, 35

What have you learnt so far out about this family? Try and summarise your insights and conclusions? What lessons are there here for marriage, or parenting? Things to avoid, things to do. What was special about your parents and their parenting of you- or was anything there anything to avoid?

Stealing the blessing; Genesis 27

A conspiracy between mother and son against Isaac and Esau paved the way for this stealing of Esau’s blessing as the oldest son (see Genesis 27). It was crafty: the hairy hands; the right smell, taken from Esau’s clothes; a few lies. And Jacob got the blessing!

How do we reconcile the deceit employed by Jacob and Rebekah with the fulfilment of God’s purpose “that the older will serve the younger” (see Romans 9:10-13). Was it necessary to deceive so that God’s choice be fulfilled? How does God use our failures? Does his purpose for us excuse our failures? Was Rebekah right to use human and deceitful

means to further the destiny of her children as God had described (see Genesis 25:23) What do we learn from the chapter as a whole? How were the respective blessings of Jacob and Esau fulfilled? What was their relationship like? What did it precipitate in Jacob's life (see v42 ff)

Study 2

Blessed at Bethel

Genesis 28

Isaac seems to have responded to the changed circumstances quickly. Perhaps the beautiful Rebekah had pillow-talked Isaac with the word God had given her, that the “elder would serve the younger”; but despite her charm Isaac persisted in preferring the more manly, hairy older son with the difficult Hittite wives! After all the older son even by a few seconds was the older son. But maybe knowing all along Rebekah’s knowledge of her son’s destinies, Isaac finally adapted to God’s purpose. He blesses Jacob again see 28:3, and v4 especially.

Finding the right wife was a vital part of the future. Isaac gave instructions to Jacob as to how this was to be done. He should go and see Uncle Laban back in Paddan Aram. Uncle Laban had all the guile of his sister Rebekah without any of her more redeeming features and was to be a thorn in Jacob’s side. In any eventuality Jacob was not to marry a Canaanite woman- why was that? And Esau realising the displeasure his earlier marriages had had on his father now married a cousin, Mahalath- Abraham’s granddaughter through Ishmael – bit it was too late to change anything.

What role might we have in helping others find suitable spouses, husbands or wives?!!

The Blessing at Bethel

On his way to his Uncle Laban, Jacob had this vision (see v12ff) . What was the purpose of it? It gave a sense of destiny to Jacob for his life? Can you recall any events or occasions in your life that give you a sense of destiny? What effect would this have had on Jacob? Bethel means house of God and he marked the place as sacred by anointing his pillow- stone as an altar or marker, renaming the place too.

What do you think of Jacob’s vow in v 20-22.? The “if ... then” construction is a little self-interested?! More refining needed for God’s twister. Reflect on the refining that God brings to your life

Study 3

Finding a Wife

Genesis 29: 1-30

The Patriarch's wives were important personalities in their own right; no cipher or doormat were they! Sarah, Abraham's wife, was his half – sister (20:v12), often passed off as Abraham's sister because of his fear of being killed for her by local rulers ,because she was beautiful.(see The story of Abimelech and Abraham in Genesis 20) And Isaac did exactly the same with Rebekah passing her off as his sister for the same reason (see Genesis 26: 7ff) and once again Abimelech found out that this was not true-see Genesis 26:8ff .Sarah seems feisty and more than a little sceptical of Abraham's hope of a son (see Genesis 18: 10ff).

Rebekah , Isaac's wife was capable of considerable guile in support of her favoured son Jacob but also in fulfilment of the word she had received about the older serving the younger (25:23ff). She was no push over!

And now it was Jacob's turn to find a wife. Once again it was his mother Rebekah who seems to take the initiative, finding the Hittite women Esau had married uncouth! (see Genesis 27:46) She had strong opinions; if Jacob marries the wrong sort she thought “my life will not be worth living” (v 46c) So Rebekah and then Isaac (28:1) tell Jacob not to marry a Canaanite woman but go back to Paddan Aram to the house of Bethuel his grandfather and find a wife amongst Rebekah's brother's daughters. On the way he had his encounter with God at Bethel.

Jacob meets shepherds in the “land of the eastern peoples” ; eg maybe present day Iraq. They know Laban, Nahor's grandson, and are from Haran. (Haran was the place from which Abraham had left to go to the promised land see Genesis 12: 4). And then Rachel, Laban's second daughter turns up at the well with the sheep, for she was a shepherdess!

Jacob liked the look of Rachel! What did he do to make it clear? See v 9ff (i) watered her sheep (ii) kissed Rachel and wept! (iii) told Rachel he was a relative, in fact 1st cousin. What do you think Rachel thought? Laban then appears on the scene.

What was Jacob's courtship of Rachel like? Jacob promised to work 7 years for Rachel – a kind of bride price? “So Jacob served seven years to

get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days because of his love for her” v 20.

Laban like Rebekah was crafty, and not wanting Leah left without issue, presumably got Jacob drunk at the marriage feast and substituted Leah for Rachel. What do you think Jacob felt like when he discovered? And after a week with Leah Jacob was given Rachel but had to work for another seven years! He was not un-fond of Leah but “he loved Rachel more than Leah” v 30.

Before we look at the colourful family-life Jacob was to have, are there any tips in this passage about finding a husband or a wife? What are the heartaches, pitfalls, over-rulings, providences involved in finding a spouse here? What were the ingredients in this rather more complex situation in which it was permissible for a man to have more than one partner and the provision of issue was seemingly more important than an exclusive and high quality relationship?

How can we provide the conditions which enable people to find a husband or wife?

No 4

“Not the home life of our dear queen!”

Genesis 29: 31- 30:24

I am not sure that we can hold this up as exemplary family life! There is a curious irony running through the Patriarchs lives which is that each of their wives whom they loved were both beautiful but had difficulty conceiving children so were reliant on the intervention of God. This led in turn to jealousies eg Sarah’s jealousy of Hagar, the mother of Ishmael and her being thrown out of Abraham’s household (see Genesis 16:6ff & 21:8ff).

Rebekah also conceived with difficulty see Genesis 25:21ff). And again although Leah readily had children, Rachel did not (Genesis 29:31c) and this made for anguish and jealousy of her sister (see Genesis 30:1). Can you imagine the household vibes with Jacob married to two sisters one having children and the other not! Can you describe the dynamics in the tent or tents? There was anger (Jacob to Rachel see v 2), jealousy , frustration, “ a great struggle with my sister and I have won” see v 8 and bartering over mandrakes as to who could sleep with Jacob that night! (see v 14-17)

All this seems very dysfunctional to us; but from these four women and Jacob came the 12 tribes of Israel! And only towards the end does Rachel bear a son, Joseph, and then later Benjamin (see Genesis 35:16ff) during whose birth she died. Would this be a model of family life you would wish for? If not, why not? What does this whole episode teach us about God? What were the persistent weaknesses in the Patriarchal families? Do weaknesses persist in families and re-occur. What can we do about them?

Maybe split into small groups and pray about any difficulties you face in family life.

Few of Jacob's relationships with the exception of Rebekah, his mother, and favourite wife Rachel seem to be peaceful. He had deceived his Father and brother Esau and was at odds with Laban his father-in-law who himself had been crafty replacing Rachel on his wedding night with Leah. It certainly would be a colourful film if ever made- with plenty of scope for conflict, sex and family drama.

After more than 14 years serving Laban at Haran it is not surprising that Jacob wanted to return home with his very extended family: "Send me on my way so that I can go back to my homeland" (30:25) . Laban was not going to be easy to leave, and by process of divination he knew things had gone well with Jacob around (see 30:27ff). Jacob settles for the wages of all "speckled, spotted and dark-coloured sheep or goats" (v 32). Laban agreed, little knowing Jacobs "cunning plan" of a breeding system whereby he increased his flock greatly! (see 37 ff – the stock breeders amongst you can explain the system !) Once more jealousy arose this time from Laban's sons who saw Jacob's flock flourish beyond theirs (see 31:1). Not only that , but Laban himself grew more hostile. It was time to go and this was confirmed by a word from the Lord (see 31:v 3-9). Jacob explains the success of his husbandry of the stock by the divine origin of the breeding system to Rachel and Leah (see v10ff). Also Leah and Rachel are feeling some what alienated from their father and brothers – their loyalty is now with Jacob and their children. Jacob then sets out for home with his family and flocks riding camels- what a scene it must have been?

What things do we learn about family life, loyalties and marriage from this section? How is that Leah's and Rachel's loyalties move from Father to husband? What does this remind us of in connection with marriage? Is there anything else you glean from this section?

The pursuit of Jacob

Laban now pursues with a posse of relatives, like a sheriff going after a convict or criminal, and catches up with him in Gilead- a long way on! Laban is aggrieved (see 31:v 25ff). But Laban is warned by God to leave Jacob well known (see v 24). But Laban is aggrieved that his household Gods have been stolen! And Jacob promises that the one who has stolen them should be put to death , little knowing that it was Rachel!! Laban

conducts a thorough search but Rachel, employs some female cunning to hide the household gods! (see v 36): Laban not having found anything , Jacob takes the opportunity for a rant (see v 36ff)

How is a settlement made between Jacob and Laban? What is the significance of the heap of stones? How does Laban ensure good treatment of his daughters? What are your thoughts or feelings about Jacob and Laban at this point? How can we make settlements with people with whom we may be in dispute? What have you learnt from this rather unusual chapter?

Once again we find Jacob having to be reconciled to a member of his family. At the end of Genesis 28 having deceived his Father, Isaac, and stolen his brother's Esau's blessing Jacob was told "Your brother Esau is consoling himself with the thought of killing you" (Genesis 28: 42b). Jacob then to Paddan Aram for in the end twenty years! But the time came to return to Canaan with his family- wives, children, servants- and flocks! And he must now face up to Esau; and although twenty years had elapsed he had had no contact with Esau and his relationship , he presumed, was the same as when he had left 20 years previously! Relationships do not necessarily change with the passing of time unless we have done something to improve them! Is that right?

How did Jacob go about achieving at most reconciliation or at least a grudging acceptance of his presence in the area? Can you see any "strategies" that Jacob employed to mollify his brother? (eg addressing him as " my lord" (32v5b) , prayer (32v9ff), preparing substantial gifts (32v13ff) and *bigging himself up* be stringing out the gifts with a view to impressing Esau with his wealth (32:17ff)). What do you think of these "strategies"?

What things have you found helpful in bringing reconciliation with family members or others with whom you have been at odds?

Esau approaches

Esau is not without his support either; his retinue numbers 400! Jacob still fears the worst. He divided his family so that if half are set upon, the other half might get away (see 33:1-3) But something had happened: Esau ran to meet Jacob , "threw his arms around his neck and kissed him" (v 4). Although there seems a genuine reconciliation you get the feeling that complete trust is not quite restored. Jacob 's gifts are not readily accepted , possibly quite simply from politeness or maybe Esau did not want to be indebted in any way to Jacob (see v 8ff) and equally Jacob is not comfortable in having any of Esau's men around or for that matter Esau himself ; perhaps in Jacob's mind protection could easily turn into captivity (see v 12ff)

We hear little more of Esau. It seems they lived in slightly uneasy proximity but with enough space for each not to trespass on each other, but there does not seem to be any “coming round to tea” between the two families (see Genesis 36:6ff for an important insight). Is this the most that could be hoped for given the circumstances? Esau became the father of the Edomites, and as such his family remain outside the Covenant with Israel (see Romans 9:10ff). Is that unfair asks Paul, see his answer.

Reconciliation is hard to achieve but it is worth struggling for, perhaps you can pray for anyone in the throes of reconciliation.

Study 7

A new name: a renewed Covenant

Genesis 32:22-32 & 35: 1-29

Underlying everything is the choice of God. This is Paul's point in Romans 9- God is free to choose whomever he wishes to bear his name. He chose Abraham, he chose Isaac – the heir of promise -and he chose Jacob. His choice did not proceed from deserts or morality; it was and always is purely of grace. And faith is trust in God's choosing or promise and it produces righteousness- in other words we are made righteous through faith (see Genesis 15:6- a seminal verse in the Bible).

On his return to Canaan God met with Jacob. Jacob was anxious about his meeting with Esau. Jacob crossed his family over the stream Jabbok and then stayed himself on the other side of the stream in order to seek God. A mysterious period of prayer ensues marked by struggle, a wrestling match with seemingly an angel of God or a manifestation of God, the renaming of Jacob as Israel (meaning one who struggles with God- so the whole life of Israel –the nation – is characterised as a people who struggle with God- apt?) and lastly his wounding in the hip which was put out in the struggle. What kind of things do these things signify? It was a very significant moment or re-calling for Jacob and at this meeting his destiny and that of his family's was made clear. Do you look back to any special moments in your life in which your destiny was made clear? In some cultures you are given names which characterise an individual eg in Uganda , what kind of name might you be given that would characterise your gifting or your calling? What do you think was the significance of Jacob's wounding, so that he walked with a limp thereafter? At what points of our lives do we struggle with God?

Renewed covenant at Bethel

Jacob was to go back to a place of previous significance to him, Bethel. Does God take us back to places which have been important to us in our lives? What was it that Jacob had to do to consecrate himself and his family to God (see 35:2ff)?. A covenant was made with Jacob/Israel in which descendants and land was promised (v 10-13). It appears to have been a very personal and intimate conversation between God and Jacob (see v13). What is the covenant that God has made with us and what are

its main features? (see Jeremiah 31:31ff and Ezekiel 36:24ff which was fulfilled in Jesus Matthew 26:28). This covenant with Jacob would be the context for all God's dealings with the nation of Israel till the coming of the Messiah. It under girded all their national and family life. In this chapter the next stages of the story unfold: the death of Rachel his beloved wife in giving birth to Benjamin; her burial at Bethlehem; the death of Isaac, buried by both his sons -,a moment of unity at a family funeral?

Looking back over the life of Jacob, what is your overwhelming impression about his life? What will you take from it for your own life?