

## **“GOING HOME AGAIN”**

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Dean Feldmeyer

“But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.”  
Genesis 33: 4

### **PREVIOUSLY, ON “JACOB’S LADDER”**

Last week we met Jacob, the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham, the third patriarch of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition.

Jacob, you will recall, was a quiet and thoughtful man who abhorred confrontation and violence, a man who preferred to live by his wits. History remembers him as a trickster, a manipulator, and something of a lovable scoundrel.

The story begins when he and his mother, Rebekah, cheat his twin brother, Esau, out of his birthright as the oldest son. They pull a scam on Isaac so that Jacob receives the official blessing but he has to flee the country when Esau vows to kill him.

He goes from Beer-sheba in the southern part of what is, today, Israel, all the way to northern Syria to the home of his uncle Laban. There, he meets Rachel, his cousin and the love of his life and works seven years for the privilege of marrying her only to be scammed by his uncle into marrying Rachel’s older, plainer sister, Leah. The privilege of marrying Rachel costs him another seven years working for his uncle. Jacob is not above employing some gamesmanship of his own, however, and after a series of tricks and counter tricks, he ends up owning much of his Uncle’s herds of sheep and goats.

Twenty years after leaving Ber-sheba, Jacob is a prosperous and powerful man and he is ready to return home and reconcile with his brother and parents.

When he first came north to Syria Jacob had a dream where he saw God standing at the top of a ladder. In that dream, God told him to get serious about his life because whether he wanted it or not, he was part of an important plan of salvation for all humankind.

Now, on the way back home, Jacob is accosted one night by a stranger and they fight all night long. Jacob is victorious but left with a permanent limp. His attacker, as it turns out, is none other than God, himself, who gives Jacob the new name, Israel, which means “contends (or wrestles) with God.” And that, says the man, will be how the relationship between Jacob’s descendants and God will always be – authentic, genuine, but contentious.

When we left Jacob/Israel last week, he was limping across the river to rejoin his family after a night of fighting. His eleven sons and his servants have come to join him and they bring troubling news: “Your brother, Esau, has been told of our coming. He is on the road, moving toward us with 400 armed men.”

### **TWO STORIES**

The saga of Jacob/Israel concludes with two stories. After them he will fade into the background and his sons will take center stage. These two stories, however, set the tone for all that is to follow. One is a story of forgiveness and reconciliation that leads to peace. The other is a story of violence and retribution that leads to disruption, distrust, and a legacy of violence and antipathy that, even four thousand years later, has never been completely redressed.

Peace and reconciliation, we shall learn, is a seed that, once planted, must be constantly nurtured and cared for and can never be ignored if we want to see it in full flower.

Violence and vengeance, however, are bells that, once rung, cannot be un-rung.

### **THE REUNION WITH ESAU**

The story of Jacob/Israel’s reunion with his twin brother, Esau, is one of those that is so beautifully told and so wonderfully picturesque that I cannot help wonder why Hollywood has never snatched it up.

Hearing that his brother, who, twenty years ago, vowed to kill him, is on the march with four hundred armed men, Jacob/Israel made some preparations for the meeting. First, he divided his entourage into two groups and sent one group upstream. If Esau attacked one group, he reasoned, perhaps the other will survive.

Then he put together a huge gift for his brother, what amounted to five small herds of livestock – sheep, goats, cows, camels and donkeys and sent them ahead of him, one at a time, with servants whom he instructed to say, when they met Esau on the road, “We come from your brother, Jacob, and he sends this herd of livestock as a gift to you that he might find favor in your eyes.”

A clever ploy, when we think about it. Not one big herd but five small ones, each presented separately. While Esau might not have been impressed with one big gift, he might be softened by a series of five smaller ones given in succession.

Then, Jacob/Israel prays a prayer that I have always found amusing. I paraphrase:

*O God, God of my father, Isaac, and my grandfather, Abraham – I just wanted to remind you that this whole “going back home” thing was your idea. I know that I’m lowly and unworthy but you came to me, you know? I left my homeland with nothing but my staff in my hand and you let me get rich and you gave me eleven sons and one daughter and two wives and two concubines and so many servants and so much livestock that we could make up two complete tribes if we wanted to. In fact, that’s just what I’ve done because I’m kinda worried about Esau.*

*I just wanted to remind you that you promised that my progeny will live in the land of Canaan and multiply and become a great nation and that isn’t going to happen if Esau comes riding in here and kills us all, which I think he’s going to do – men, women, children and everyone – if you don’t intervene. He was really mad the last time I saw him and I gotta tell you I’m scared.*

*So, uh, anything you can do, well, you know...*

The next day he is making his way along the road, going slowly what with all the women and children and lambs and calves and whatnot and he looks off in the distance and here comes Esau and his 400 armed men, raising a big dust cloud as they come.

Jacob/Israel comes to the front of his party and there is this wonderful moment when the two brothers see each other from afar off and stop and just look at each other. Then Jacob/Israel drops his staff and falls, face down on the ground. Then he gets up, takes a couple of steps and does it again. And again, and again. He’s going to do this until he’s covered all the ground between him and his brother. It is an act of contrition. It is a way of saying, I am sorry and I am at your mercy.

Before he can cover all the ground between them, however, Esau jumps from his horse and runs to his brother. He lifts him up from the ground and looks into his eyes and then they both burst into tears and “fall upon each other’s necks and weep.”

“And who are all these people?” Esau asks. “And what’s with all this livestock?”

“The Lord has been good to me,” says Jacob/Israel. “I’ve been fortunate.”

“And what about all these herds of goats and sheep and camels and cattle and donkeys that you sent ahead?”

“They are gifts from me to you. I hoped that you would accept them as a sign of my contrition.”

Esau laughs. “Ha! What am I, poor? I’m a rich man in my own right. The Lord has been good to me, too. Keep your livestock.”

Then there’s this back and forth – No, take it. No, I couldn’t possibly. Oh, please. No, no. Yes, I insist. Oh, okay. Esau finally accepts the gifts and then says, “Let’s ride along together to wherever you are going.” This is, presumably, to offer his protection.”

Jacob/Israel seems to believe that traveling with 400 armed men is just asking for trouble. He responds that his group is big and slow because of all the babies and nursing calves and lambs and “you’re a busy man, no need for you to wait around for us.”

Esau says, well, let me at least leave some men with to travel with you. Again, Jacob/Israel demurs. No, no. We’ve just got a little ways to go and we’ll be fine.

So they part friends, though still distant ones. Their reconciliation leads to a peaceful relationship though not a close one. Perhaps a lesson for us, huh?

Sometimes we find ourselves estranged from our brothers and sisters in the faith – a slight, a disagreement, a poorly phrased comment, a forgotten name or date, a lapse in etiquette – anything can cause such a division. As people of God we are called to be reconciled to each other and to all of God’s children – to close the gaps that have separated us.

This does not mean we are called to be best friends, to go fishing together, or even to exchange Christmas cards with everyone we meet. It does mean that we are to approach and interact with each other – and with people we may not agree with or even, necessarily, like -- with an attitude of humility and respect. We are to live in peaceful coexistence with one another.

Following their reconciliation and parting on, at least, civil terms, Jacob/Israel makes his way with his huge tribe down to the city of Shechem in the land of Canaan and there he buys a plot of land from the local king, a guy named Hamor the Hivite who has a son after whom he named his capital city, Shechem.

This plot of land is fairly large and Jacob/Israel names it “Elohim is the God of Israel.” This is the first occasion of the land in that region being associated with the name “Israel.” It is here that our second story takes place, the story of the rape of Dinah.

### **THE RAPE OF DINAH**

*As an introduction to this story, let me just say that it must be heard in the context of its time and place. If we insist on bringing our modern, 20<sup>th</sup> century sensitivity and morality to it we will lose the point. So please, put your natural and very correct indignation aside for just as long as it takes to hear and understand the point of the story.*

Dinah was the only daughter of Jacob/Israel. Her mother was Leah, his first wife.

One day she decided she had had her fill of men in her life and she left her father’s camp to go out and meet the Canaanite women who lived in the area.

She made her way to the city of Shechem and met the young man after whom the city was named, the prince of the city, Shechem, himself. So smitten was he by her beauty that he could not control himself and he seized her and raped her. Immediately, he felt remorse for his actions and, realizing that he was in love with the girl, offered to marry her and asked his father to go to her family and arrange the marriage.

Hamor was not happy with his son but he did as he was asked, realizing that the son was trying to do the right thing according to the laws and customs of that time and place. He went to Jacob/Israel when his sons were all out working in the fields but by the time he got around to talking about what he had come to talk about the sons were back and they were mad.

They had heard what had happened to their sister and this was now a matter of family honor. "Your son," they told Hamor, "has *treated our sister like a whore* and now he wants to marry her?"

Hamor is contrite. Please, he says, my son loves the girl and wants to do right by her. Then Shechem speaks up for himself: "Name your price. Demand any wedding gift you can think of and we will make it happen." Finally, Hamor points out that this marriage would be politically profitable for both parties. Their people will be joined together and they will intermarry and be as one big tribe, more powerful than ever before.

The brothers think this over for a few minutes and, I read from the text: "*The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah. <sup>14</sup>They said to them, 'We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us. <sup>15</sup>Only on this condition will we consent to you: that you will become as we are and every male among you be circumcised. <sup>16</sup>Then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves, and we will live among you and become one people. <sup>17</sup>But if you will not listen to us and be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and be gone.'* Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor's son Shechem."

Hamor ordered that all the men of Shechem be circumcised so that the two tribes or clans can be united through the marriage of Shechem and Dinah. Three days later, while the men of Shechem were still in pain and recovering from the surgery, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, snuck into town and murdered Hamor and Shechem in their sleep and took Dinah back to their camp.

Once the blood was spilled the other brothers decided that no one could be left alive to exact revenge so they went to the city and killed every male in the city, raped the women and enslaved them with their children and took all the livestock and valuables before burning the city to the ground.

Swift and terrible was the revenge which the sons of Israel took that day. And it was Jacob/Israel who spoke the truth of the matter to his sons: We gave our word and you broke it – no one will trust us. Your revenge overreached our most basic ethic of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth – no one will make peace with us again. Even now the peoples of Canaan are joining themselves together, preparing to strike us out of fear that we will strike them. This land, this home we have made is now a strange place to us and we can no longer stay here.

### **BACK TO BETHEL**

One more time, God steps in to save Jacob/Israel. He tells him to take his tribe to Bethel, the place where God first spoke to him from the top of the ladder in the dream. God protects Jacob/Israel on the journey but the protection is a mixed blessing as it comes from fear.

The Canaanite tribes do not attack the Israelites but this is a tenuous peace bought with fear. They do not trouble Jacob because they are afraid of him and his sons and, as we all know, fear breeds resentment and resentment breeds hate and, sooner or later, hate breeds violence.

The revenge which the sons of Jacob took and the violence they perpetrated in Shechem have traveled with them. They have tracked it like blood on the soles of their shoes and it has stained their coming and their going. And the stain is permanent stain that will color all that that they do and no bleach will ever clear away.

It does not take long for things to begin falling apart.

Shortly after they reach Bethel, Deborah, Rachel's maid dies mysteriously and is buried with much mourning and weeping. Rachel, herself, becomes pregnant and dies giving birth to Benjamin, the 12<sup>th</sup> son of Jacob/Israel. Reuben, the oldest son, has an affair with Bilhah, his step mother's maid and father's concubine, the mother of his half-brothers, Dan and Nephthali – an act of utter disdain, disrespect, and insult to his father.

Finally, violence and deceit will poison the brothers' relationships with each other. One of them will become the father's favorite and the other eleven will rise in resentment and jealousy, fake his death and sell him into slavery.

With a few small exceptions, Jacob's story ends here and his sons take center stage. So riven are they with jealousies and petty differences, however, that it will fall upon one son to carry forward the plan which God has set in motion.

His will be a painful and difficult journey but he will make it with honor and dignity. His name is Joseph.

**AMEN**