

Jacob Marries Laban's Daughters

¹⁵Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" ¹⁶Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷Leah's eyes were lovely,^[a] and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. ¹⁸Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." ¹⁹Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." ²⁰So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

²¹Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." ²²So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. ²³But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. ²⁴(Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) ²⁵When 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?" ²⁶Laban said, "This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." ²⁸Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. ²⁹(Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her maid.) ³⁰So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban^[b] for another seven years.

Jacob's Dream at Bethel (Genesis 28, not 29)

¹⁰Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a ladder^[b] set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And the LORD stood beside him^[c] 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; ¹⁴and 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^[d] in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." ¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" ¹⁷And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

32 Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him; ²and when Jacob saw them he said, "This is God's camp!" So he called that place Mahanaim.^[a]

Jacob Sends Presents to Appease Esau - summarize

³Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, ⁴instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; ⁵and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.'"

⁶The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." ⁷Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, ⁸thinking, "If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape."

⁹And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,' ¹⁰I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. ¹¹Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. ¹²Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.'"

¹³So he spent that night there, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau, ¹⁴two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, ¹⁵thirty milch camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. ¹⁶These he delivered into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on ahead of me, and put a space

between drove and drove.”¹⁷ He instructed the foremost, “When Esau my brother meets you, and asks you, ‘To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?’¹⁸ then you shall say, ‘They belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to my lord Esau; and moreover he is behind us.’”¹⁹ He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, “You shall say the same thing to Esau when you meet him,²⁰ and you shall say, ‘Moreover your servant Jacob is behind us.’” For he thought, “I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me.”²¹ So the present passed on ahead of him; and he himself spent that night in the camp.

Jacob Wrestles at Peniel

²²The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.²⁶ Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”²⁷ So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.”²⁸ Then the man^[e] said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,^[e] for you have striven with God and with humans,^[e] and have prevailed.”²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him.³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel,^[e] saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.³² Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

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Jacob: Deception, Drama, and Dreams

Genesis 28:10-17, 29:15-30; 32:1-32

Kerra Becker English

In the introduction to Gene Marshall's book, *Jacob's Dream: A Christian Inquiry into Spirit Realization*, the author suggests that Jacob is an ordinary person drawn into the extraordinary journey of the spirit. He calls Jacob a "very ordinary figure who struggles with all the mundane issues of sibling rivalry, survival, marriage, work, intrigue and counter-intrigue, cheating and being cheated, enmity and reconciliation, fear and courage, and more." But in my opinion, Jacob would be the perfect soap opera character. He marries the sister of the woman that he loves – mistakenly. He has a blood feud going with his twin brother. He's cheated his nearly blind father, and been cheated by his uncle. He has wild dreams, and an even wilder life with at least 13 named children from four different women, only two of whom are his wives.

This is God's chosen one. Really? So God picks the "Days of our Lives" leading man to lay the genealogical groundwork of the human race. I'm not sure this is what some folks mean when they talk about establishing biblical values. Jacob and his family were a hot mess, all of them willing to lie, cheat, and retaliate with an incredible amount of violence. This is not a biblical role model we're talking about here, and yet, maybe he is. Maybe we've gotten it wrong. Maybe we expect God to come to us when our lives are worked out and all pretty, but it doesn't quite work out that way. Maybe God chooses to walk most closely with us when we

are at our absolute worst, when we have gotten our lives into a twisted mess, when we have been horrible to the people that we love and hit, as Jacob did, rock bottom.

/ In his first dream sequence, Jacob is fleeing from the family drama, a drama that he created. He angered his father and brother by listening to his mother and cheating his way into the family birthright. His brother Esau was mad enough to kill him, so he fled his father's house, and went in search of his mother's brother, his Uncle Laban, so he could find a wife within the family. I know how weird that sounds to us now. I remember getting married in West Virginia and being asked to look at the family tree diagram to make sure there were enough branches between Chuck and me to allow for our marriage. But Jacob goes out in search of a first cousin to make his wife. On the way there, he stops for the night and lays his head upon a rock, and he begins to dream.

In this dream, he sees a ladder between heaven and earth with angels ascending and descending on it. Then, he gets a message from God about fulfilling the promises for land and offspring made to both his father and grandfather. Much has been made of this dream, particularly in schools of thought around spiritual development. These days, the metaphor of a two-tiered universe with heaven above and earth below is not so meaningful. Our universe has expanded with our understanding of just how small a part we play in it, and up and down have become irrelevant. And yet I wonder, what are these sub-conscious angels telling Jacob about his journey, about his life? They reach toward heaven and they come back to earth. Some say they represent the gifts of human nature, the attributes that take us toward a mature spirituality and drag us back down into our baser natures. Jacob certainly was familiar with a family that

had its ups and downs – blessings and promise, but also trickery and woundedness. He was accustomed to the travel patterns on this ladder.

The symbolism is rich here, and I am grateful that in this instance the Bible lets the dream speak for itself, because now YOU get to be the dream interpreters and play around with the fun questions. What would this dream mean to you? What would it mean to you if you were painfully ousted from home to begin your own life and you dreamed about a ladder? Is it a reminder that God's promises made to us are real no matter at what point we find ourselves caught among the angels? I'm not going to give too many answers here, because I think the questions we can ask of this dream are what's far more interesting. I hope you'll give it some thought.

In the narrative between his two dreams, Jacob gets married (twice) and has at least 11 of his children, the ones he fathers before Rachel is able to get pregnant. His mid-life happens, a big swath of it. And then his long-estranged brother wants to see him again. As much as it scares him to do it, he plans to meet Esau. Esau comes looking armed and dangerous, accompanied by 400 men. So he pleads to God, profusely and apologetically, for a peaceful reconciliation. He is ready to return to his homeland. As an offering, he sends gifts, lots and lots of gifts, to his brother in hopes of making peace. Then while he waits for the gifts and emissaries to go ahead of him, he makes camp, and later that night, crosses the Jabbok with his closest family and waits.

It is there, recognizing that potentiality of either death or reconciliation, that Jacob has another spiritual experience. Maybe a dream, maybe a vision, maybe a full out spirit quest. In this experience, he is up wrestling with someone until daybreak. And just before the dawn, he

demands that this nightly visitor bless him. Not only does the stranger bless him, the stranger renames him. No longer will he be called Jacob; he will be called Israel because he has striven with God and prevailed. I love this dream. I think I know this dream. It is the dream of holy transformation when your old life must give way to a new life. This isn't just the transition of place that Jacob had before, leaving his father's house to make his own way, this is a transformation of his life. He can't live his lies anymore. It will put his hip out of joint. It will put his ego in a head-lock. It will absolve his anger and set him on a path toward wholeness. He will know an even deeper pain moving forward, but his desire to have it all, even if it belonged to someone else, will no longer toss him about. He wrestled. He won, or at least was spared a debilitating loss.

I see a pattern in these dreams that is representative of the spiritual journey. In one's youth, it's important to discern up from down, to learn what helps you climb and what will knock you down a few pegs. Jacob's ladder is a perfect symbol of leaving the family home and starting a life on your own. But his second dream happens as he shrugs off the necessity of "winning" against his brother. He wants reconciliation. He's ready to live with the paradox that he is chosen for a purpose and that he doesn't have to strive or connive or manipulate for that purpose to come to pass. God blesses and humans receive that blessing, including his estranged brother who had been tricked out of his father's blessing. There may be no rhyme nor reason for how that happens, but it happens.

On that point, Reformation theologian John Calvin connects with an important truth. Some may call it fatalism, accepting one's fate in life, and on the surface it sounds like that, but Calvin makes it clear that it's not simply about the winds blowing where they will. Instead

our lives are intertwined with the God of the Universe, the Source and Ground of all Being, who knows us, and loves us, and may at times even direct our paths in ways that we didn't even know we were going. We are pre-destined for blessings, caught up in a covenant of chosen-ness, and adopted into a brotherhood, into a sisterhood that reminds us that God is love, and love is ultimately stronger than the powers of this world that would have us suffer and die.

Jacob, deceitful Jacob, drama king Jacob, playboy Jacob with his wives and handmaids who were treated as commodities for fulfilling God's promise, wrestled with God and still came out blessed. I almost don't want it to be true. There are turns in Jacob's life where I don't want him to come out smelling like roses. I want him to fail, to fall flat on his face, but in this second dream, we get an inkling that Jacob has had his comeuppance. He walks away, but he walks away both injured and with a new name. He gets knocked off his pretty-boy pedestal, and has a reckoning where he will either be killed or forgiven. And what happens is that he is forgiven and I like to think that's what helped to make him into a different person. He discovered his vulnerability and made life changes because of it.

Jacob's transformation to accepting his role as Israel, the father of a nation – the one called “God contended” is a meaningful pattern in human existence, almost no matter how you understand God in the story. There's a reason people still are drawn into family dramas – be they the overacted soap operas of daytime television or the binge-worthy updates you can find in a Netflix series, it doesn't matter. We love a good “change” story. We want to know that jerks can learn new behaviors, that mean girls can become wise women, and we like seeing just how far the drama can really go. It's humanity in all its glory.

So then, who is the God of Jacob? The God of Jacob sends dreams. The God of Jacob allows us to see ourselves and our world through different lenses. The God of Jacob fulfills promises, and builds us up seemingly without a care for whether we deserve it or not. The God of Jacob knows our humanity and is willing to contend with all the difficulties created by us living by our own free will and stupid ideas. It's OK to not be OK according to this family history. It's OK to think that Jacob is an awful representation of our ancestry, and recognize that even he had to face the challenge of letting his past come back to literally haunt him into a new way of understanding. The God of Jacob – is still the God of Esau – is still the God of Leah and Rachel – and Zilpah and Bilhah. The surrounding cast of characters contend with him just like God contends with him at the Jabbok. Surprise, surprise – we learn and grow from the drama in our lives, and maybe, just maybe God has something to do with that wrestling to help us grow in faith and love and forgiveness. Amen.