

---

---

# Jacob and Esau

Gary Inbinder

## I. The Birthright

In *Genesis*, we are given a prophecy about the birth of Jacob and Esau that has echoed through the millennia: “Two nations are in thy womb, and two peoples shall be separated from thy bowels; And the one people shall be stronger than the other people; And the *elder* shall serve the *younger*” (emphases added). A foretaste and forewarning of the struggle to come is given in the twins’ struggle within their mother, Rebecca’s, womb and the odd circumstances of their birth, for Esau emerges first, red and hairy, followed by smooth Jacob holding firm to his brother Esau’s heel.

*Esau a man of  
the natural  
flux.*

Let us bracket for a moment the struggle, the contrast between ruddy hairiness and pale smoothness, and the grasping of the heel, while understanding that Esau grew to be a “natural man,” a man of the field and the hunt, an “elder” or more primitive image of humankind, while Jacob grew to be a “smooth” civilized man, a logo-centric man of the tent, or the *polis*, a “younger” or more evolved human. By understanding this, we understand why Esau sold his birthright for a “mess of pottage.” Esau is a man living in the realm of the senses, a man of the natural flux with all its diversity, mutability, temporality, finitude, contingency, and relativity. Thus, his ends are immediate, and his will is directed toward the satisfaction of those immediate ends.

Jacob is a man who, while also tied to this temporal and finite existence, strives within the realm of the intelligible toward that which is one, fixed and eternal, infinite, necessary and absolute. His ends, therefore, are transcendent and his means to achieving those ends, his *telos*, is by way of the logical ordering of the tem-

---

---

poral world through justice, charity, and love. His higher nature rules the lower, he strives with the divine *logos*, the creative intelligence of this world wherein may be conceived a universal moral law. His will is to make that law prevail.

*Jacob attuned  
to higher  
nature.*

Esau cannot know anything beyond the need of the moment. Esau's concupiscence is too strong to admit knowledge that transcends time and place. The bowl of lentil soup looks good, smells good, tastes good—it satisfies the needs and hunger of the moment.

Jacob, logical and spiritual, yet grounded in reality, is possessed of a dual consciousness of being. He knows the true worth of his birthright, which arguably is the very ascent of man from the primitive to the civilized, and such a birthright could not possibly pass to such as the emotive and concupiscent Esau. Thus understood, there is no theft or unfair advantage taken of Esau; rather it is providence that passes the torch of human progress to him who is fit to bear it, and Esau must be content to serve Jacob if there is to be order and harmony in this world.

There is an interesting corollary here to the Classical Greek understanding of virtue, in that the virtuous man understands that present pleasure must often be sacrificed, or present pain must be endured, for an ultimate good, whereas the man lacking in virtue will seize the present pleasure, or avoid the present pain, without thinking of the ultimate consequences of his actions. Thus virtue, to the ancient Greek, was equated with knowledge or *logos*.

Aristotle made a further distinction between the vicious man, who scorns virtue for his love of vice, and the incontinent man, who succumbs to vice through weakness and lack of knowledge. Further, the continent man can act virtuously through fear of punishment or for fear of violating right opinion, rather than through knowledge and love of virtue. Yet the merely continent can fall to vice when common opinion abandons virtue.

Jacob was the quintessence of the logo-centric man who both knew and loved, and therefore was drawn upward towards a transcendent virtue. Esau however was not vicious, but rather was incontinent and ignorant and this is an important distinction.

Now we must remember that Isaac loved and favored Esau as Rebecca loved and favored Jacob, and here the old Patriarch was blinded by his own concupiscence because his son Esau provided him with savory meat. It is at this point that I want to turn the

---

---

focus from conceiving of Jacob and Esau as two distinct individuals, or potentially two nations of individuals, and conceive of them as two aspects of human nature. For admittedly, we are all Esau and Jacob, and at one time or another one will dominate, the other serve, and this is something Isaac recognized and understood.

Jacob, with the complicity of his mother, succeeded in fooling Isaac into granting Jacob the blessing of the first born, "Let peoples serve thee, And nations bow down to thee. Be lord over thy brethren, And let thy mother's sons bow down to thee. Cursed be every one that curseth thee, And blessed be every one that blesseth thee."

*Hierarchy  
is natural.*

When Esau learns of Jacob's deception he cries out to his father in despair, because it is only at that moment that Esau appears to realize the extent of his loss and Jacob's apparent gain. Esau is to be a servant forever in bondage to his brother. His primitive baseness renders him a "man of iron" fit only to serve his brother's "golden" nobility.

But Isaac knows that Jacob has taken upon himself a birthright and a blessing that can also be a curse, for in truth he bears both his own burden and that of his brother, and this is seen clearly in the blessing that Isaac grants to Esau: "And by thy sword shalt thou live, and thou shalt serve thy brother; And it shall come to pass when thou shalt break loose, That thou shalt shake his yoke from off thy neck." Note most particularly "... *when* thou shalt break . . ." There is great significance in this prophecy and warning that has foretold conflict throughout human history: both the conflict within each individual and the conflicts between cultures, civilizations, and nation states. For implicit in the two blessings is the warning that pride brings a fall, and that the master who is unjust and uncharitable will some day come under the sword of the servant, the head of the oppressor will fall beneath the blade of the oppressed. Moreover, this is a universal historical struggle that is constant within the individual as well as between one individual and another, between cultures, civilizations, and nation states. In addition, this conflict is inevitable and inescapable as long as humankind endures.

---

---

## II. *Jacob's Dream*

Jacob flees Esau's vengeance and goes to the land that is to be his inheritance. And there he dreams of the ladder with Angels ascending and descending and hears the voice of God confirming his birthright. This is Jacob's *nexus* to the divine *logos*, the revelation of that which lies beyond the temporal, sensible world. "And behold I am with thee, and will keep thee withersoever thou goest, and will bring thee back unto this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of." Jacob calls the place Beth-El, consecrates the ground, and promises a tithe to God, for to Jacob and his seed that *nexus* is forever conceived of as the land of Israel.

*Knowledge  
must be  
supplemented  
by faith.*

Jacob has glimpsed the "Gate of Heaven," the portal from that which is seen to that which is unseen, a portal to which knowledge and reason can lead but only faith can enter.

## III. *The Reconciliation*

When Jacob returns to his homeland, having won prosperity and his wife Rachel by twenty years of hard labor, he faces the prospect of a meeting with his vengeful elder brother. Jacob approaches Esau fearfully and respectfully. "Thus saith thy servant Jacob: I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now." Jacob returns as a "sojourner" and supplicant rather than a conquering lord, for Jacob has reason to fear his brother when Esau greets him with four hundred armed men. It is important to note that rather than fully rely on himself, Jacob humbly calls on God's protection, for, having obeyed God's command to return to the land of his birth, he has put himself in danger of his brother's vengeance. Yet Jacob is also determined to fight, if fighting is necessary. It is by virtue of all his qualities, his faith and trust in God, his superior intellect, and his steadfast courage that Jacob reconciles with his brother. Here we see the significance of Jacob's grasp on Esau's foot and of Jacob's struggle with the Angel that is described in Genesis 32:24.

## IV. *Jacob's Struggle*

When Jacob struggles with the Angel, he is reaching above himself, striving to climb the ladder toward the presence of the divine *logos*. Jacob's will, therefore, is in accord with God's will;

---

---

he strives not against God but towards Him. Therefore, God gives him strength to prevail and receive the blessing of the Angel: "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but 'Israel'; for thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed." Israel's obligation from that day forward is not only to raise himself but also to raise his brother along with him.

It is not just Israel's duty to exercise Justice in holding his brother back by the heel to keep him continent (*Mishpat*) but to pull him upward toward virtue, order and harmony by Love and Charity (*Hesed* and *T'Zdakah*).

For restraining concupiscence we have the negative commandment, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow," whereby we restrain our impulses as we confront a myriad of circumstances in this world of flux. This negative commandment, or inner check, is similar to the Greek poet Hesiod's rule, "For himself doth a man work evil in working evils for another." Bad acts have bad consequences both for us and for others. This check is intuitive and is present in all human beings.

In addition, in Love and Charity we see the positive commandment, "Do unto others that which you would have done unto you" and "Love thy neighbor as thyself." This is a more altruistic expression of a law that is universal and present in all human beings. It is the "natural law" referred to by the Apostle Paul as follows, "When Gentiles who have not the Law (Torah) do instinctively what the Law requires, they are a law to themselves. . . . They show that the essential requirements of the Law are written in their hearts and are operating there with which their conscience also bears witness."

*Law written  
in the heart  
and confirmed  
by conscience.*

If we are by nature both Jacob and Esau, we must learn to govern ourselves accordingly—with justice tempered with love and charity. This process is only a matter of recovering and developing that intuited virtue which is, in a sense, already there. Plato referred to this process as *Anamnesis*, the recovery of a preconscious memory implanted in the human soul.

Yet taking up this burden of governance is a great responsibility, and thinking oneself capable of bearing this burden alone reflects *hubris* or the sin of pride. If Israel fails in any of these obligations—if it fails to raise Esau towards a transcendent, universal virtue, order, and harmony—it is inevitable that Esau will pull Israel down towards vice, chaos, and discord. Israel does not have

---

---

the strength to perform these obligations on its own, so without God's help both brothers fall together. "Shall mortal man be more just than God? Shall a man be more pure than his maker?"

### *V. Modern Times*

In the preceding, I have considered the conflict of Jacob and Esau within the context of the pre-modern world where God, or gods, were presumed to exist. What is to be said of this conflict in the modern and so-called postmodern era in which the presumption has shifted to the non-existence of a Supreme Being? Jean-Jacques Rousseau was the first great modern thinker to give profound consideration to this problem, and Martin Heidegger was perhaps the last. The problem as I see it is the difficulty of achieving unity of the human soul, the reconciliation of Jacob to Esau, in a purely secular human culture, without the mediation of a higher being.

Professor Richard L. Velkley states the problem as follows:

. . . the enduring problem is that there can be no perfect harmony between the particular celebrated by the poetic spirit and the universal apprehended by the philosophical intellect: between the human desires "to be at home in the world" and "to behold what is." Modern notions of a wholeness grounded in freedom are intended to resolve that tension. Yet this goal can be conceived as attainable only by thinking of "wholeness" as separable from natural order, and thus as founded on ideal possibilities emancipated from human actuality. The resulting schemes of wholeness express, in the end if not at the start, spirited self-assertion rather than erotic openness to nature and Being. Because these resolutions are fundamentally artificial, they can only temporarily satisfy. The suppressed human tensions always reemerge. Such considerations bear witness to the precariousness of the modern attempts to justify philosophy through a culture (or its primordial source) that would endow the eros of philosophical seeing/questioning with the universal "document" of poetic embodiment.<sup>1</sup>

Alternatively, how does Jacob solve the problem of his own existential crisis, as well as that of his brother Esau, once he has decided to "go it alone," i.e., without revelation? If there was ever a thought that the study and interpretation of "primordial" texts would, by way of *Aletheia*, disclose a deep hidden meaning that

---

<sup>1</sup> R. Velkley, *Being after Rousseau: Philosophy and Culture in Question* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 7.

---

---

*Historical  
experience  
confirms  
ancient  
wisdom.*

would provide a key to solving this problem, that project was doomed to end in *Aporia*. If those texts, including the story of Jacob and Esau, disclose anything to our modern/postmodern understanding, it is that lawlessness is contrary to the will of the gods, and is punished. And those texts themselves are the product of the Jacobs of a long past, i.e., the products of human culture and civilization.

So now that “we know that we don’t know,” where are we? If I understand postmodernism correctly, we are back to Thrasy-machus. “Justice is simply the interest of the stronger.” If we accept that “might-makes-right” philosophy—and I would argue that the evidence of the last two centuries militates strongly against that position—we should recall the blessing/warning of Isaac: “And it shall come to pass when thou [Esau] shalt break loose, that thou shalt shake the yoke from off thy neck.” The burden of bearing the torch for civilization and progress is thus both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is a glorious birthright; the curse is facing the wrath of Esau alone.

When venturing forward into dangerous territory and engaging in a struggle of which the outcome is uncertain, perhaps we can gain some guidance from the poet Horace, who wrote: “As soon as a man perceives how much the things he has discarded excel those which he pursues, let him return in time, and resume those which he relinquished.”