Jacob – Session 7

Jacob is in many ways the first real character in the Bible—and perhaps the last until we meet David in the books of Samuel. Unlike Abraham, who is somewhat uninteresting, and Isaac, who is borderline nonexistent, Jacob has a life full of adventure, ups and downs, and entertainment. What's more, unlike most other biblical characters, Jacob's persona develops over the course of his life story.

What defines Jacob's character most of all is his somewhat mischievous nature. To put it in broader folkloristic terms, Jacob is a classic trickster. He takes advantage of those around him for his own benefit. The first inklings of this character trait are clear in his emergence from his mother Rebekah's womb, as he grasps on to the heel of his older brother Esau, whom we have already been told Jacob will supplant. Esau is indeed the "heel" of the Jacob story. As the older brother, he holds the birthright—the larger portion of Isaac's inheritance that is due to the eldest son. But Jacob knows Esau's weakness: his unintellectual physicality, which leads him to unthinkingly trade his birthright for a bowl of stew at a moment of intense hunger.

Later, Jacob will use his wiles to take Esau's paternal blessing as well. These blessings, though perhaps less tangible than the land holdings that come with the birthright, were still enormously important. It was the father's dying wishes for his sons that were thought to determine the course of future events and status, as we can see clearly in Jacob's own dying blessings to his twelve sons in Genesis 49, or Noah's blessings (and curse) of his sons in Genesis 9. The blessing dominance over the other siblings was highly desired; words were thought to have very real power. Jacob once again attacks the weak spot: in this case not Esau's brutish nature, but Isaac's elderly blindness.

Later still, when he has gone to his relatives in Aram to find a wife (and to escape Esau's wrath over the theft of Isaac's blessing), Jacob finds himself again in a position to outsmart those around him—again a family member—to his own material advantage. Laban may not have a stellar reputation in the biblical account, and certainly in the history of interpretation that followed, but Jacob's tricking of him can feel somewhat mean-spirited anyway. Laban's weakness is his greed: his desire for Jacob to work for him (for twenty years!) for virtually no wages. (This sounds particularly harsh and unkind, but it should be remembered that Jacob does agree to these terms at the beginning of the story—Jacob, at least, isn't being swindled.) Jacob takes advantage of Laban's greed by proposing a division of the flocks that would appear to leave all the healthy animals in Laban's possession and all the weaker ones in Jacob's. But Jacob has a trick up his sleeve—in this case, something fairly close to a real magic trick, which results in his flocks multiplying at the expense of Laban's.

Jacob's behavior in these episodes can at times lead to some ethical concerns: is this really how we want to picture our beloved and admired ancestors behaving? Would we not rather that they were, perhaps, more noble than this? It should be remembered, however, that the folk figure of the trickster is indeed an ancient and well-respected one, and moreover one that carried no negative connotations. It is also important to recall that while these stories are now part of what we consider Scripture, they did not originate as such. They belonged, rather, to the oral literature of ancient Israel, the folk tales that were passed down from generation to generation and around from community to community. They were not told for moral or ethical edification, but for entertainment: it would undoubtedly have given the audience much pleasure to hear about their ancestor besting those around him, especially through the use of his intellect and wiles—for

most of its history, after all, Israel was never really capable of besting anyone by direct force (in the style of an Esau) or by the exertion of power (as with Laban).

The ethical question of Jacob's behavior is also mitigated somewhat by the rest of the narrative of his life, in which he is as much the victim of trickery as he is its perpetrator. The two most notable such episodes are Laban's replacement of Rachel with Leah on Jacob's wedding night—just as Jacob took advantage of Isaac's inability to see, so too Laban used the darkness as a cover for his tricking of Jacob—and, most prominently, Jacob's own sons convincing Jacob that his beloved son Joseph had been attacked and killed by a wild beast. This latter deception has a special ring of comeuppance to it: just as Jacob used animal skins to trick his father Isaac into being unable to recognize him as the younger son, so Joseph's brothers use animal skins to trick Jacob—this time, however, by a false act of recognition, the seeing of Joseph's coat in its mangled state and the inference that Joseph must be dead.

By the end of his life, Jacob has gone from trickster to tricked, and has generally slowed down considerably. The man who was once practically a pure schemer is, after the births of his twelve sons, far more passive. This comes to light particularly in the story of the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34, where Jacob hears about the rape but keeps silent, and even rebukes his sons for acting rashly when they exact revenge against Shechem.

One of the prominent stories about Jacob, and certainly one of the most famous, is the encounter with the divine beings at Bethel: the angels going up and down the ladder, and Jacob's statement, "Surely God is in this place and I did not know it" (Gen 28:16). While this story has come to serve as a reflection on the ubiquity of the divine presence, it originally served virtually the opposite function: it was, like so many of the stories in the patriarchal narratives, an

explanation for the existence in Bethel of a cultic site, a sanctuary. These types of stories are known as cultic etiologies, and they litter the patriarchal accounts. Every time a character stops at a certain place and builds an altar, or sets up a pillar, or finds a significant tree, it is probably a cultic etiology. It is in these moments that we can see the great antiquity of so many of these patriarchal traditions. Certainly in the post-exilic period, when there was really only one functional sanctuary, the Temple in Jerusalem, stories like this would make little sense. Even in the pre-exilic period, if we take the arguments of Deuteronomy seriously, there would be significant opposition to the celebration of sanctuaries outside of Jerusalem—these cultic sites inaugurated by the patriarchs are what Deuteronomy condemns as the "high places," "under every green tree."

But in the stories of the patriarchs, these sites are not condemned at all. What we see here are probably the local legends about how the sanctuaries came into existence—the ancient equivalent of "George Washington slept here." Bethel was clearly a significant cultic site from an early period (and one that would later become rather infamous as one of the sanctuaries set up by Jeroboam in opposition to Jerusalem). There must have been a legend, undoubtedly originating from Bethel itself, that it was founded by a patriarch. The antiquity of this legend is clear, however, from the fact that Genesis itself cannot decide which patriarch actually established the altar at Bethel. In Genesis 28 (E) and 35 (P) it is decidedly Jacob; but according to J in Genesis 12, it is Abraham.

The patriarchal narratives do more than simply explain the etiologies for Israelite sanctuaries. One of the prominent features of these stories is that the characters almost always stand for larger ethnic or national entities. Abraham's nephew Lot begets two sons, Ammon and Moab, who are quite clearly the neighboring nations of the same names. Ishmael represents the

Arab tribes of the wilderness between Canaan and Egypt. Esau is explicitly identified as Edom. Laban stands for Aram, the great power to the north. Jacob, of course, is Israel, and his sons the twelve tribes. The relationships among the individuals in the patriarchal stories represent the relationships among the peoples and nations within and surrounding Israel.

It is noteworthy that among the immediately neighboring peoples, the only two that are not somehow genetically connected with Israel according to the patriarchal narratives are Egypt and Canaan. The absence of Egypt is easily explainable as the result of the Exodus story, in which Egypt is the absolute enemy. But Canaan is more interesting, especially as scholars now agree that the community of Israel emerged from within Canaanite society. In other words, the people with whom Israel was in reality most closely connected is the same people that Israel explicitly excludes from its familial history in Genesis. (Note that the story in which the Canaanites play the most prominent part is the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34, where the potential for kinship between Jacob's people and Shechem's people is strongly considered, but ultimately rejected in favor of a far more aggressive stance.)

Much of the concern in the patriarchal stories is for the explanation and understanding of the social world of ancient Israel, both within the family structure and between tribes and peoples. One might observe the repeated emphasis on marriage within the family, what is known as endogamy: in Genesis 24 Abraham sends his servant to ensure that Isaac marries from within the family; in Genesis 27 Isaac and Rebekah do the same for Jacob (and are dismayed that Esau does not). This is a well-established principle of tribal and clan-based societies. Marriage entailed the exchange or division of land, and it was generally of utmost importance in that agricultural context that land remain in the clan. This concern is probably at the heart of many patriarchal stories, in which the right to possession of various towns and fields and burial places

is attributed to the earliest cultural memories, way back to the first founders of the family line, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But it was just as important to establish the continuity of land possession looking forward. Thus the push for endogamy, so as to keep familial property within the family.

The problem, however, is that it is eventually impossible to marry solely within the family. Eventually outsiders must be brought into the fold. In order to keep these exogamous relationships at least theoretically part of the established social order, the notion of "fictive kinship" was employed: the creation or admission of a common ancestor back there in the mists of time. This process of fictive kinship is probably behind the patriarchal corpus as a whole. The individual tribes of Israel most likely only coalesced into a single self-identifying nation relatively late in history, perhaps some time in the eleventh or even tenth centuries BCE. It was this self-identification as a single people that would have inspired the idea of a common ancestor: hence Jacob, probably a local ancestor from the region of Bethel, became Israel, the forefather of all twelve tribes. So too most likely the local ancestors Isaac (perhaps from the Beersheva region) and Abraham (often associated in the stories with Hebron) were included in the ancestry. As social groups intermarried and intermingled and began to think of themselves as unities, so too their ancestry became united by the genealogical linking of their respective ancestral figures.

Thus although the literary stories of the patriarchs may be of limited historical value—there is no evidence that anyone named Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob ever did any of the things with which they are credited in Genesis—the existence of these stories and their relationships to one another may very well give us a window into the history, or at least the social history, of premonarchic Israel. In the spread of oral traditions, in the connections between characters, and

in their movements across Canaan, we can see growth of the increasingly complex web of relationships among early Israelite tribes.

Reading:

Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 181–210.

Further Reading:

Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987) p. 70-125.