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A Thoughtful Birthright

“The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle” (New Revised Standard Version, Gen. 25:25). In this way, Esau is born to Isaac and Rebekah. Under the standard cultural institution attributed to the Bible, Esau is guaranteed a double portion of his father’s inheritance. Yet, Esau’s younger brother, Jacob, exploits a famished Esau by demanding his birthright in exchange for a bowl of stew (Gen. 25:29-33). Not stopping there, Jacob deceives his aged father into bestowing the blessing intended for Esau onto himself (Gen. 27:18-29). Nonetheless, God[[1]](#footnote-1) extends the promise of a great nation, once given to Abraham and Isaac, to Jacob, calling him Israel (Gen. 35:10-12).

Upon first glance, a negative reaction to this story is quite common and well taken. After all, why would a God who is often desired to follow rules and judge fairly bestow his blessing on a liar and a manipulator? Surely God should smite Jacob and return the birthright to Esau. However, it is important to consider the context of the story and attempt to ignore our preconceived notions to yield more meaningful conclusions. When the story of Jacob and Esau’s birthright is carefully considered, it is clear that God respects human nature when accomplishing His goals, teaches several meaningful lessons through the situation, and acknowledges there was no other way to bestow the birthright.

Ever since Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden, humans have had the “knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:9). With this knowledge, they begin to work against the will of God. With this change, God begins to work with human nature to accomplish his will. In the story of Jacob and Esau’s birthright, He consistently chooses to follow the decisions made by his people, acting through them. When Rebekah pregnant, questions the ﻿Lord about her children and He says to her, “the elder shall serve the younger” (Gen. 25:23). Yet, Isaac loves Esau and chooses to give his birthright to him, which would contradict the prophecy (Gen. 27:4). Rebekah, in her love for Jacob, intervenes and decides to deceive Isaac into giving his blessing to Jacob (Gen. 27:18-29). Thus, through the choices presented by human nature, the ﻿Lord’s prophecy is fulfilled.

This theme is often repeated throughout the remainder of the book of Genesis. Consider the how the line of Judah leads to King David. While Judah was travelling, he encountered a woman he believed to be a prostitute and he slept with her (Gen. 38:15-19). He later comes to realize that she was his son’s wife (Gen. 38:26). As cited later in Ruth 4:12, Perez, the son of Judah and Tamar, becomes the ancestor of King David. Once again, whether through Jacob and Esau or Judah and Tamar, God’s will is carried out through the choices made from indisputably impure human choices.

Continuing with the idea of God’s respect for human nature, God demonstrates an apparent lack of desire for perfection (or at least an acceptance of its futility). Jacob is certainly not without his faults, yet he is chosen by God to be the ancestor of His people. Specifically, Jacob is known to be a manipulator or, to put it more strongly, a liar. He is quick to take advantage of his brother when he is in need, purchasing his birthright at an unfair price (Gen. 25:29-34). Furthermore, he does not hesitate when his mother suggests he impersonate Esau to steal his father’s blessing (Gen. 27:11-24). All throughout his life, Jacob consistently shows a distrust in God, relying on himself to stave off Esau’s rage or adding conditionals to his faith in the Lord stating, “if God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and … then the Lord shall be my God” (Gen. 32:9-23; Gen. 28:20-21; Harris 88). By choosing such an imperfect being to father his people, God is demonstrating that humans need not be perfect to be chosen by Him.

This idea is strengthened elsewhere in the Bible, particularly when considering a story about Moses in the book of Exodus. Before Moses is called by God, he witnesses an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. He is moved by the scene and, when he realizes no one will see, he kills the Egyptian and hides the body (Exod. 2:11-12). Certainly, by many interpretations, Moses must be a sinful man whose is not deserving of God’s love. Nonetheless, the angel of the Lord appears to Moses and calls him to take the Israelites from Egypt (Exod. 3:2-10). This furthers the notion that God does not only seek those who are perfect, or merely those who are good, to carry out His will. In the case of Jacob and Esau or Moses, God works through human nature and sinfulness.

With God’s respect for human nature aside, the story of Jacob and Esau’s birthright provides Him an opportunity to teach several valuable lessons not only to Jacob and Esau but also to everyone exposed to the story throughout history. The first lesson is commonly repeated through Benjamin Franklin’s words as, “God helps those who help themselves.” Since Esau was born first, he naturally expects to receive the birthright. By choosing such a convoluted deliverance of His promise to Jacob instead of Esau, God emphasizes the importance of making oneself worthy. Consider the character differences between Jacob and Esau: Jacob actively seeks to acquire his brother’s birthright and his father’s blessing (Gen. 25:29-34; Gen. 27:11-24). Later in life, he often works under the assumption that he is alone, like when he struggles to protect himself and his family from the wrath of Esau (Gen. 32:22-26). On the other hand, when Esau learns that his blessing has been taken, he resorts to complaining and pleading, “Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!” (Gen. 27:38). Since he assumes his birthright is guaranteed, he doesn’t work for it, he pities himself over its theft.

The idea of God helping those who seek their own help resonates with the stories of the other patriarchs’ difficulty with conception. With Abram, Sarai has considerable difficulty in conceiving a child (Gen. 16:1). To succeed in giving Abram a child, she presents him with her slave, Hagar (Gen. 16:2). This is undoubtedly considered rape in today’s context, yet God rewards Abram and Sarai with a child, Ishmael, through Hagar (Gen. 16:15-16). Ishmael was later made into a great nation by the hand of God (Gen. 17:20). This situation is repeated similarly with Jacob and his wives’ servants Zilpah and Bilhah (Gen. 30:3-10). Just as in the case with Jacob’s reward of the nation of Israel for deceptively acquiring the birthright, the patriarchs are given children through their concubines, reinforcing God’s preference to those who act over those who are passive.

Another powerful lesson developed in the story with Jacob and Esau’s birthright is a lesson of forgiveness. By stealing Esau’s birthright and blessing, Jacob understandably made Esau angry to the point of murderous rage (Gen. 27:41). Yet, when Jacob and Esau meet up again several years later, Esau’s rage has subsided. Not only has he merely overcome his anger, he welcomes Jacob with open arms, even offering him some of his possession and denying Jacob’s gifts (Gen. 33:8-11). This is certainly a powerful lesson demonstrating the importance of forgiveness. Without the deception over the birthright in the first place, there would not be such an opportunity for forgiveness.

The message of forgiveness coming forth after times of deceit and sinfulness arises through the book of Genesis and the rest of the Bible. A significant parallel to this story is the case of Joseph and his brothers. After Joseph reveals to his brothers his dream of them bowing down to him, they begin developing methods to get rid of Joseph (Gen. 37:18-28). After selling him to the Ishmaelites, Joseph eventually makes his way to Egypt and becomes a close advisor to Pharaoh (Gen. 41:40). When a famine came to the land, Joseph’s brothers came to him asking to purchase grain to survive (Gen. 42:7). Joseph was kind to them and forgave them of all their wrongdoing (Gen. 50:19-21). Such an opportunity to demonstrate selfless forgiveness, like in the case of Jacob and Esau, would not have existed without the sinfulness. This builds on the theme of using less-than-ideal situations to teach valuable lessons.

A final realization when studying the story of Jacob and Esau’s birthright is that it might not have been possible to happen any other way. Consider if Jacob was born first. Was the reason Isaac chose Esau to receive his blessing because he was his firstborn? Although it is possible, the Bible gives a couple hints to the contrary. It is stated that Isaac loved Esau because of his love for hunting (Gen. 25:28). However, it is never stated how Isaac feels about his son Jacob. It can only be deduced that his feeling for Jacob are less than his feelings for Esau. Thus, if the order of birth was different and Jacob was entitled Isaac’s birthright, it is likely given the evidence in Genesis, that Isaac would’ve given his blessing to Esau no matter what. In fact, he might have even been emboldened by the prophecy insisting the, “the elder shall serve the younger” (Gen. 25:23). Therefore, the order of birth really wouldn’t have changed the situation much if at all.

It often appears that God in the book of Genesis acts in ways involving the most trickery and deceit. Would it not be easier and more consistent with the image of God one typically expects if He didn’t work in this way? Following this idea, God should have had Jacob be born first and circumventing this whole business of lying and deception. However, as seen throughout other stories in Genesis, God does not prefer to work against human nature, but to work with it in all its bad decisions and imperfection. It’s also clear that important lessons arise from such sinful origins that wouldn’t exist or be nearly as impactful without them. Lastly, Isaac’s love for Esau was likely the most important component as to why Jacob required trickery to secure the birthright, not the order in which they were born. Thus, the trickery and deceit is too important to the story of Jacob and Esau that it can’t be overwritten.

1. In this essay, I will use ‘God’, ‘Lord’, and ‘Lord God’ when referring to passages in which the deity is specifically mentioned respectively. In general, I will use ‘God’ to refer to the deity when no specific passage is mentioned or when the passage mentioned uses two or more of ‘God’, ‘Lord’, or ‘Lord God’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)