



“Sisters & Brothers”

Genesis 29:15-28; Matthew 12:46–50 (NRSV)

Family. We are born into one . . . and reborn into another

Here is the story of the two sisters and two brothers from nearly four millennia ago: Leah and Rachel, Esau and Jacob. They are rich and fascinating stories from Genesis 27-33.

Esau and Jacob

A wife had been found for Abraham’s son, Isaac, from among kin to the north, the land from which Abraham had come to Canaan. Her name was Rebekah and Isaac loved her. But for many years, they had been unable to have any children. But Isaac prayed and God granted his wish. Rebekah conceived.

Her pregnancy was tumultuous and when Rebekah asked about it, God revealed to Rebekah that she wasn’t carrying one child but two. Indeed, not just two children but two nations. They would be more than sibling rivals, the twins would be the ancestors of two great but rival nations. Further, God told her that the younger child would have power over the older, for twins are not born in the same instant.

They named the older twin Esau, for he was covered in red hair. The second-born twin they named Jacob.¹ Esau grew up to be a man’s man, the outdoors type, rough and ready, a skilled hunter; the joy of his father, Isaac. Jacob on the other hand was the quiet, contemplative type, who enjoyed hanging around the tents.

Isaac loved Esau because he seemed to be everything a real man was supposed to be, a skilled hunter and the rest. We’re not told why Rebekah loved Jacob. Perhaps she liked the stay-at-home type. Perhaps it is because of what God told her about the twins.

But already, just in these few sentences, we see the beginnings of family divisions that would soon come to full flower.

How hungry can he be?

One day, Esau comes rushing in the door. He is famished. He is so starved that he’ll do anything to get something to eat. Jacob has been busy in the kitchen preparing what must have been a deliciously smelling red stew.² Esau demands some of it.

Jacob is revealed to be an opportunist, as he tests his brother’s desire, demanding in turn a trade. A bowl of stew for Esau’s birthright, i.e., the rights and privileges that belong to the firstborn son. This would include not only the leadership of the family but a double-share of the inheritance, which in this case is a lot of money, for Isaac is wealthy, having been given all that was Abraham’s.

Esau doesn’t seem to give it a second thought. What good is the birthright if Esau is dead from starvation? Seems rather over-dramatic doesn’t it . . . and stupid . . . and impulsive. Jacob adds some legal protections to the transaction by making his brother swear to the transaction . . . and it is a done deal.

Trade one’s birthright for a bowl of stew? How hungry could you be? What kind of brother would pounce on such weakness? Neither twin comes off well in this story. In a way, it only sets the stage for what comes next. For some time later, Jacob conspired with his mother, Rebekah, to trick Isaac and steal the promise of the

¹ The name “Jacob” does not mean “heel” per se, but it sounds like Hebrew for “heel.” Even on the way out of the womb, Jacob was grasping Esau by the heel.

² The Hebrew word for “red” is *edom* and this will be the name taken by Esau’s descendants. They will be called Edomites and will settle in the land south and east of Canaan.

covenant that Isaac intends to pass on to Esau. And Jacob has to flee northward to the family's ancestral home, where he meets the girl of his dreams.

Leah and Rachel

Jacob arrives in the north and the first girl he meets is Rachel. She is enough and more. He meets her. He kisses her. He loves her. Such is the stuff of many a Hollywood hit.

Ok, so the kiss is one of those family kisses. Still, it soon becomes clear that Rachel is the girl who claims Jacob's heart. After all, we're told she is stunningly beautiful. All very Hollywood.

But there is a problem. Jacob is a bit short on cash and he knows that Laban, her father, is not about to marry off a prize daughter for nothing. So Jacob offers to work for Laban for seven years to earn Rachel as a wife and Laban agrees. We're told that though Jacob labored for seven long years, it seemed to him like only a few days. That's love.

When the big day came, Laban pulls a fast one on Jacob. On the wedding night, Laban slips Leah, Rachel's older sister, into the wedding tent in Rachel's place and Jacob never notices the switch. All I can figure is that there must have been a lot of veils and a very dark tent.

In any event, in the morning Jacob confronts Laban about the switch. What's been done cannot be undone. A marriage has been consummated and Leah is his wife now, not the beloved Rachel. But Laban still dangles Rachel out in front of Jacob, telling him that for another seven years of labor Jacob can marry her too. And he does. Jacob works another seven years, making it fourteen years total that he has sacrificed in order to be with Rachel.

Yes, Jacob is finally going to be married to Rachel, but Laban has made complete ruin of it all. Poor Leah was forced into a marriage she didn't want, knowing that Jacob's heart belonged to her sister. Rachel endured seven years of watching Leah as Jacob's wife alone. And Jacob gave fourteen years to the deceiving Laban. Can you imagine the dynamics in that household.

Further, out of all this there must come children, for Jacob is the bearer of the covenant and there must be heirs to the promise if Abraham's family is ever to be as numerous as the stars (Genesis 15:5).

Sadly, it is the need for children that deepens the sisters' rivalry. This time it will be sister against sister, as Leah is able to have children, but Rachel remains childless. The biblical writer tells us that God saw that Leah was unloved and opened her womb.

Leah gives birth to four sons. In her frustration, Rachel sends her maid into Jacob's bed to be a legal surrogate, to bear a child who will be Rachel's. When Leah proves unable to have more children herself, she also sends in a legal surrogate. It is a bona fide baby-making competition. If you've wondered how Jacob could end up with so many sons – here is your answer. It is Jacob's many sons who will be the patriarchs of Israel's twelve tribes.

In the end, Rachel herself is finally able to have a baby, a boy, whom she names Joseph. Knowing how much Jacob loved Rachel, we can understand why Joseph becomes his father's favorite and the envy of his brothers, who resent even a multi-color coat made for Joseph by his father.

For now, reflect on Jacob and Rachel. What a love they must have shared. Fourteen years they waited to be married. Though tricked and swindled, they pressed on, determined to be together. Through all the twists and turns, they never lost their love.

Family?

Read through the whole saga for yourself sometime. It may be the family of Abraham in view, but they had many of the same problems and joys that our families do. Without denying the importance of the family we are related to, Jesus has called us to a larger sense of family. In another of those hard sayings of his, Jesus drove home the truth that, in him, we can find our truest family. When Mary and some of Jesus' half-brothers

show up, expecting to get his attention, Jesus asks, “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” as he sits among his disciples.

Jesus proceeds to answer his own question. He accompanies it with the action of stretching out his hand and pointing at his disciples. Matthew frequently uses *Look* for greater vividness (see on 1:20), but here it may well be used in the sense “Look at these people” (the ones to whom he is pointing). Jesus transfers the name mother to those whom he respects and loves as a mother, or perhaps those who respect and love him as a mother would. This is an unusual way of using “mother,” but it is a not uncommon way of using brother. Jesus is saying that those with whom he is closely associated in the service of God have become “family” to him. He spells this out. Whoever means anyone at all: the way into the heavenly family is open wide and there are no restrictions on who may enter. When he speaks of “doing the will” of the Father, Jesus is not opting for salvation by works, but pointing to the importance of conforming to God’s way and not imposing one’s own pattern on heavenly things. It is relationship to the heavenly Father that constitutes membership in the family. He is emphatic, “he and no other”; he is the whole family, brother and sister (who appears for the first time in this paragraph) and mother. Jesus is not saying that earthly familial ties are unimportant, only that they are not all-important. Doing the will of God is all-important.³

Next week, we’ll take a closer at this new family of which all believers are part.

³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 331–332.