

## ANCESTOR JACOB

Whether we're old or young, one of the things we all enjoy is hearing or telling stories about each other—and sometimes about ourselves. Quite often these stories are about people we have met, or could meet; but there are hundreds, possibly thousands of people we know *only* through such stories, people we will *never* meet because they live in some distant part of the world, or because they lived long ago—people whose stories have come down to us from the past.

Such a person is the man we know as **Jacob**, or by his other name, **Israel**. That name we know well, because **Israel** gave his name first to an emerging Middle Eastern nation, and now to a modern state. **Jacob** means 'One protected by God', (it's a very old name, found in Babylonian and Egyptian records); it can also mean 'The Heel-grabber'. **Israel** means 'The one who struggled with God'.

The ancient text we know as *Genesis* tells us almost everything we now know about Jacob, though it doesn't make plain that its authors, writing many centuries after the event, blended much older accounts of Jacob's life from at least three different sources. Most of the Jacob saga is written in such a detailed, realistic kind of way that we almost think we know Jacob as fully as we might know a real-life character, or a major character in a novel—though when you come across long lists of the names of the children of Esau (36) or the families of Jacob's twelve sons who migrated to Egypt (45) you begin to realize that the 26 chapters of *Genesis* dealing with Jacob and his family are a mixture of ancestor lists (the sort of family trees that Maori can still recite from memory), historical records, myths and legends, and early literature—a sort of ancient documentary masquerading as a novel...and none of it dictated or inspired by a divine author.

Jacob is no fiction. Historians are agreed that behind the tales of Jacob lies a real person, a clan leader, the chief of a nomadic tribe, living in Bronze Age Mesopotamia (that is, modern Syria, Israel and the Palestinian territories). The real Jacob lived about 4000 years ago, so it's remarkable that we have any stories about him at all! But this is a life story with all the boring bits left out.

It starts with the miraculous birth of twin brothers to Rebekah and Isaac, now both in their forties. The boys have been sent by God in answer to prayer after Rebekah had failed to conceive children, but the story says they started fighting while they were still in the womb and Esau emerged first with Jacob hanging on grimly to his heel. Their mother is informed by God (who chats to her just as he does to Adam and Eve one evening in Paradise; a rare instance in the Bible of God talking to a woman) that although Jacob is the younger of the two by a few seconds he will become top dog, and both boys will be the founders of new tribes, Israel and Edom, and the one shall be stronger than the other.

Rebekah doesn't inform her husband about this and when father Isaac favours his oldest son Esau, because he's a good hunter, the mother backs the second son, a stay-at-home, clever child. (I am irresistibly reminded of Alan Bennett's, 'Now Esau was an hairy man, but Jacob was a smooth man'.)

One hundred and forty seven years later (these patriarchs certainly outlived any other human beings), Jacob dies in Egypt, driven there by a terrible famine in Canaan, but not before he distributes blessings and maledictions on his sons—Reuben, 'unstable as water', Simeon and Levi, violent men who slay others and hamstring oxen for sport (they were the ones who slaughtered the men of Shechem to revenge their sister Dinah), Judah, 'a lion's whelp', Isachar, 'a strong ass', Joseph, 'a fruitful bough', Benjamin, 'a ravenous wolf'...and so on. Joseph arranges to carry out his father's wishes, and has him embalmed Egyptian-style and carried home to be buried in the family cave in Canaan, with Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebekah—and Leah. (Rachel had already been buried near modern-day Bethlehem.)

In the course of his extraordinarily long life, Jacob cheated his older brother of his birthright and his father's final blessing, and had to flee his anger, but later made up to Esau with a

massive peace-offering—220 goats, 220 sheep, 30 camels and their calves, 40 cows and 10 bulls, and 30 donkeys, a pastoralist's dream. They agreed to leave peacefully apart.

Driven north by fear of Esau (warned to do so by his doting mother), Jacob himself was cheated by his uncle Laban, who got him to work off the dowry price for his younger daughter Rachel (Arab villagers still make such bargains) then swapped her for her less attractive sister Leah, getting another seven years service out of the determined young man. (Famously Leah's eyes were soft and tender but Rachel was the good-looker). After twenty years, the two men attempted to double-cross each other again when the matter of settling up Jacob's wages arose. Eventually, while Laban was off stage, sheep-shearing, Jacob made off with his two daughters and as much livestock as he could muster—and to add insult to injury Rachel stole her father's household gods. (Interesting because it reflects a time when these people did *not* worship one God.)

Family conflict—of the sort we can easily understand—characterizes the whole of Jacob's life. His mother supports him against his father and older brother; he outwits his older brother and they nearly come to a pitched battle when Esau pursues him with 400 fighters. Jacob's wives (two sisters) compete over giving this alpha male children, and they do so (so the story says) with God playing a fertility game with them. First Leah proudly produces four sons ('When the Lord saw that Leah was hated he opened her womb'); the desperate Rachel sends in her maidservant who bears Jacob two more sons ('Then Rachel said, "I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed"). Leah, who seems to be past childbearing age, now plays the same card: and *her* maidservant bears Jacob two more sons. With God's explicit assistance and the help of some herbal aphrodisiacs Leah rekindles Jacob's sexual urge and conceives two more sons and a daughter. Finally God remembers Rachel, and in answer to her fervent prayers enables her to produce one last son, the famous Joseph, future Viceroy of the Egyptian Empire.

Of course, as you'll remember from Sunday School days, 17 year-old Joseph becomes his father's favourite, so the other boys gang up and sell him into slavery in Egypt; what you may not recall is that later even Joseph gets angry with his father when the old man deliberately gives his best blessing to Joseph's *younger* son— so annoyed that he tries to shift Jacob's hands from one son's head to another. Two of the other boys behave much more badly: Reuben, the oldest, sleeps with his father's concubine, dishonouring his bed; Judah, the fourth son, commits what was regarded as incest with his own daughter-in-law. What an appalling dysfunctional family!

Jacob probably comes across to a modern person as a clever, ambitious pragmatist: a born survivor. When two of his sons, Simeon and Levi, initiate a massacre of all the men and boys in a Canaanite village and loot and enslave the women and children, in revenge for the supposed rape of their sister by the local prince, Jacob merely tut tuts and tells them he is worried by the bad publicity this will generate and the possibility of reprisals. (Recent scholarship suggests that Dinah was present at one of the sacred orgies or fertility rites regularly performed in Canaanite culture, which was where she attracted the affection as well as the lust of the young Canaanite prince.)

But this tough old manipulator, seasoned politician rather than a warrior, has another side to him: a *deeply spiritual side*. God hovers over him and his story. Not a god we could recognize or believe in today, but God nonetheless as the people of Jacob's time saw him.

Who can forget the report of Jacob's tremendous dream-vision at Bethel, of a ladder leading up to heaven, with the angels of God ascending and descending; and standing at the summit, God himself. What a setting for **the crucial divine promise in the Old Testament**: God's continuing blessing on the people of Israel (the chosen people), and God's own promise to Jacob and his descendents of the land on which the dreamer is sleeping (right in the middle of the modern West Bank, to the north of Jerusalem). 'Behold I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land'.

So the writer of *Genesis*, creating a record of the history of the nation after the return to Palestine from Babylonian captivity, throws back his people's claim to existence on its own

territory by more than a thousand years to the time of Jacob, the legendary ancestor. And he underlines that claim by repeating it. In a later and little known passage (35) immediately after the savage destruction of Shechem (a warning to the Canaanite occupiers of Palestine?) God reappears to instruct Jacob and his whole household to return to Bethel, giving up all their foreign gods for the one God. God renames Jacob Israel and repeats the blessings and the promises.

The other deep moment in Jacob's life is his encounter or 'wrestling match' with a mysterious 'man' as he waits alone, dreading the approach of Esau. The struggle goes on until dawn, when the stranger physically disables Jacob. Despite this, Jacob hangs on grimly (just as he did at birth) and forces a blessing out of his opponent. Was he Jacob's conscience, a human being, an angel or God himself? Jacob himself declares that he has seen God face to face, 'and yet I am alive'. As the sun rises he limps away from that sacred place. And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. What an instinct for drama this ancient writer has!

**But apart from the fascination of a tale well told, what does Jacob matter to modern Christians?**

We can guess that Jesus regarded him with the deep respect given by all Jews to one of their legendary founding fathers. He quotes a stock phrase from *Exodus*, 'I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob' (Matthew 22:32); and after his encounter with a Roman centurion who asked him to heal his paralysed servant, tells his Jewish listeners, 'truly I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness' (Matthew 8).

As we have already seen, two of the gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, following the good practice of their Old Testament antecedents, and wanting to show Jesus' impeccable Jewish ancestry, trace his line back to **Jacob** and beyond, to Abraham and even Adam. But Jacob cuts no ice in the New Testament, as it focuses more and more on the non-Jewish world to which Jacob meant nothing.

Jewish people still read the life-story of Jacob as the symbolic story of their whole history: God forever presides over the disasters and triumphs of Jacob and his family, leading them towards the promised land. The God of Jacob was present as the long lines struggled towards the ovens of the holocaust, as he will be when the Messiah returns—'next year'.

Christians can find in the story plenty of moral lessons: that God can use for God's purposes even terribly flawed human beings; that God is always present working out his good purposes for the human race and for our world. That these ancient sacred scriptures, show human behaviour and human character as hardly changed in 4000 years; or that in those 4000 years we have changed some things for the better. That it is impossible and ridiculous to try to perpetuate ancient biblical social values and structures into the modern world; and that we had better not leave our children to a selective, sentimental reading of the Bible.

But enough of moralising. I leave you with two questions.

**Do you identify with any part of Jacob's story?**

**When you encountered God, what was it like for you?**

Colin Gibson