

**Jacob & Esau**  
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I'm an oldest child. We're supposed to be dutiful overachievers according to some of the so called "birth order" research. Years ago, I read an article that said firstborn children were so overrepresented in Ivy League schools that some were actually considering quotas. This made me feel a little better about not taking some younger sibling's place at Brown, opting instead for John Brown University, which was a half mile from our house, granted free tuition to faculty kids, and had an acceptance rate that hovered right around "Y'all come!" at the time.

The Austrian psychotherapist Alfred Adler began studying and hypothesizing about birth order a little over a century ago. Adler believed firstborns to be neurotic, dutiful, and somewhat conservative. Youngest children were thought to be overly ambitious, while those in the middle got the prime positions and were the emotionally stable ones. Adler himself happened to be the second of seven children, if you're curious. Middle child syndrome hadn't been invented yet.

In the mid-1990s an American psychologist named Frank Sulloway looked for historical figures that fit their birth order types as he understood them. He thought later born children would be groundbreaking thinkers and revolutionaries, and found Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Mahatma Gandhi among their ranks. He expected oldest children to be overrepresented among strong leaders. Turns out that both Joseph Stalin and Benito Mussolini had their parents' undivided attention for the first years of their lives.

I prefer the associations with exclusive colleges to those with murderous tyrants. But realizing I haven't been responsible for any genocides quite yet, does make me feel a little better about being such a relative slacker as a firstborn. After all, my younger brother Kirk is the one of us who somehow got the PhD and the basketball skills.

We're not twins, but that image of Jacob coming into the world gripping his older brother's heel has long felt familiar. The younger ones are in hot pursuit of our place of honor from the beginning. By the time Kirk beat my best high school cross-country time — a sport he wasn't even all that into, by the way — his heels were already too far out front for me to grasp.

Some of a person's identity seems knit into the bones. Some of it is the result of cultural norms and customs. Like giving the first-born male the lion's share of the inheritance, which seems only reasonable to me, given all the heel grabbing we have to endure. Some of a person's identity comes from negotiating a place within our families of origin. Some results from who loved us and who didn't. Some of it comes from blessings we've received by luck, or cunning, or grace. And some comes from the blessings we think we deserve, but never got.

What the story of Jacob and Esau teaches us is that none of these elements of identity is sufficient. We're some admixture or amalgamation of them all and probably plenty more over time. And, as so many of these old stories drive home, God is not to be found in our deliverance from the forces of family and culture and history that shape who we are in wonderful and in terrible ways from before our births. If God is to be found, it's right in the midst of them.

Rebekah and Isaac's two sons are born with recognizable traits. They're almost clichés. Esau is hairy and ruddy at birth. He grows up to be a man of the outdoors. He pleases his father with the game he brings home and prepares for him. Later in Genesis, in another moment of trickery, we're told Jacob is a "smooth man." Not so hairy and stereotypically masculine. Jacob prefers life inside the tents with his mother. There's even a Midrash about the lentil soup he tempts Esau with. The rabbis said he was trying to cook something delicious to compete with Esau's game and win the affection of his father that had eluded him all his life. But he cooks lentils and vegetables, because the smooth, indoor son is no hunter. He's hopeless.

So, consider what we've learned in these few short verses about what has shaped who Jacob is in particular. The culture had strong opinions about birth order. It said the firstborn son was made to be the heir. The particular personality of his strong, rugged firstborn son was also much more what Isaac in mind when he prayed for a son. I don't think I need to remind you that this was a very patriarchal culture since we are literally talking about "The Patriarchs." So, Rebekah's preference for Jacob could almost be read as another strike against him. One more indication that he's just not going to be up for the job of fathering the nation of Israel. Patriarchy is a man's man's work, you know?

Such are the dynamics that shaped Jacob. Shaped him to be a bit of a trickster. How else was he to make his way in a world in which everything conspired to keep the family's wealth and power and even respect from him?

There are trickster motifs in literature and myths across all kinds of cultures. From Coyote in Native American myth, to the Greek God of wine, Dionysus, to Br'er Rabbit in African American storytelling, to Jack and the Beanstalk, to Bart Simpson and Roadrunner cartoons. And part of what tricksters do is find ways to disrupt the structures that define who matters and who holds the power. It is precisely because they don't hold that power and position that they learn other, sometimes morally questionable, ways of life.

But remember, the ones in power are almost always the ones who make the mores. Or at least decide which ones to enforce.

Which is why what may be most stunning about the Jacob story is who passed it down to us. The Hebrews did. Spoiler alert. This Jacob will be renamed Israel after he wrestles with God at the river Jabbok. So, in passing down this story, Israel is saying, "Jacob the younger, smooth, indoor, mother's son, and trickster... we are his heirs. We are Jacob."

In Israel's story, and in ours as their spiritual heirs as Christians, the trickster is not a peripheral character who sneaks in occasionally to make corrections. He is our namesake. Which means that there is a disruption built into the foundation of our faith tradition. And this disruption should be a comfort and a challenge at once to all of us in the spiritual lineage of Jacob.

To insert some more contemporary categories, whether you see yourself as more conservative than liberal in your faith and worldview, or whether you see yourself as more liberal than conservative in your faith and worldview, the disruption at the base of our tradition should be both a comfort and a challenge.

The story is conservative in its acceptance of handed down structures. We are all born into families and customs and expectations and moral systems, and we are shaped by our places within them from before we know who we are. We're fools to pretend otherwise. Some birthrights and blessings aren't made up on the fly by free individuals. They exist within ethical and religious codes that are bigger than any one person's interpretation... bigger even than any one generation's interpretation. Esau, the text says clearly, despised his birthright. And so he lost it. Because, like it or not, that's just how some birthrights work.

The story is also liberal in the way the accepted structures can still be challenged and disrupted. They are stable and even sacred, but they are not eternal. And the trickster undermines or alters the tradition according to the terms of the tradition, even if the loophole is in the fine print. Jacob tricked his brother out of his birthright, and Esau lost it. Because, like it or not, that's just how some birthrights work.

There is an element of acceptance and an element of disruption in the life of faith. Both are essential. We need people in our lives who tend more toward one than the other. We need firstborns and we need tricksters. Maybe what we need to accept first is that there's some of each of them in each of us. And maybe if we can learn to befriend the Jacob and the Esau in ourselves our lives will grow toward the wholeness God has made us for.

A wholeness that looks like... Well, you'll have to stay with this story a little longer to see. Suffice to say for today that neither the older brother who sold off his identity for a bowl of lentil stew nor the trickster brother who pulled off the infamous sting will know real wholeness until the birthright loses its claim on both of their identities. When they embrace at a river in the one transforming miracle that is equal parts disruption and acceptance. The miracle we know not as birthright nor as blessing, but as forgiveness.