

Jacob

When people write history, they sometimes show favoritism to their heroes. They exaggerate their virtues, or they are silent about the faults of their ancestors, their former leaders or their prophets. In the Bible, we find that the narratives about great men, even men of God, show us not only their strong points but also the weaknesses of these men. As the word of God tells us in several places, “God doesn’t show favoritism,” or “there is no favoritism with God” (Acts 10:34, Rom. 2:11, Eph. 6:9, etc.). This objectivity of the Bible is seen clearly in the story of the person who is the subject of today’s study—Jacob, the father of the people of Israel.

Jacob, or Ya’qub, is mentioned several times in the Qur’an, but most of the details concerning him relate to his son, Joseph. To know the story of the life of Jacob before Joseph was sold in Egypt, it is necessary to consult the Bible. But as we have just suggested, there is no need to doubt the truthfulness of the story simply because it was written and preserved for the Jews. It is very evident that the Jews have not modified or whitewashed the story of Jacob to protect the reputation of their ancestor. On the contrary, the biblical narrative presents a man whom God chose and used in spite of serious defects.

The story of Jacob is found primarily in chapters 25–35 in the book of Genesis. Obviously we cannot look at all these details in this study. We will try to touch on certain key events.

BIRTH—PURCHASE OF THE BIRTHRIGHT

Here is the story of the birth of Jacob:

“These are the family records of Isaac son of Abraham. Abraham fathered Isaac. Isaac was 40 years old when he took as his wife Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan-aram and sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was childless. The Lord heard his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. But the children inside her struggled with each other, and she said, ‘Why is this happening to me?’ So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her, ‘Two nations are in your womb; two people will come from you and be separated. One people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.’

When her time came to give birth, there were indeed twins in her womb. The first one came out red-looking, covered with hair like a fur coat, and they named him Esau. After this, his brother came out grasping Esau’s heel with his hand. So he was named Jacob. Isaac was 60 years old when they were born.

When the boys grew up, Esau became an expert hunter, an outdoorsman, but Jacob was a quiet man who stayed at home. Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for wild game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field exhausted. He said to Jacob, ‘Let me eat some of that red stuff, because I’m exhausted.’ That is why he was also named Edom. Jacob replied, ‘First sell me your birthright.’ ‘Look,’ said Esau, ‘I’m about to die, so what good is a birthright to me?’ Jacob said, ‘Swear to me first.’ So he swore to Jacob and sold his birthright to him. Then Jacob gave bread and lentil stew to Esau; he ate, drank, got up, and went away. So Esau despised his birthright.” (Genesis 25:19–34)

Certainly, everyone in this story had his share of blame. Esau, known by Muslims by the name Al Eis, was wrong to despise the heritage of his fathers, Isaac and Abraham, for this heritage was not only material, but also spiritual. God had promised to bless the whole world through the descendants of these men, but Esau didn’t hesitate to sacrifice for a simple meal his privileged place in this family lineage. It is a foolish trade—to sell oneself for the pleasure of a moment, a pleasure that satisfies for just a brief time. Much later, the Bible cites Esau as an example not to be followed, when it says, “And make sure that there isn’t any immoral or irreverent person like Esau, who sold his birthright in exchange for one meal.” (Hebrews 12:16)

But Jacob also acted badly. Finding Esau in a moment of weakness, he exploited his brother’s hunger for his own gain. He was lacking in brotherly love and treated him in a way he would not have wanted to be treated. But the unworthy behavior of these brothers did not stop there.

DECEPTION OF HIS FATHER

The narrative continues in Genesis 27, where we see that Isaac, being old and practically blind, calls his son Esau and tells him to go hunting. He says to him, "Look, I am old and do not know the day of my death. Take your hunting gear, your quiver and bow, and go out in the field to hunt some game for me. Then make me a delicious meal that I love and bring it to me to eat, so that I can bless you before I die." Now Rebekah was listening to what Isaac said to his son Esau" (Genesis 27:2-5).

Rebekah called Jacob and told him what she had heard. She suggested making a good meal for Isaac, putting some of Esau's clothes on Jacob, sending Jacob in to Isaac with the meal before Esau returned and leading Isaac to believe that he was Esau already returned to receive the blessing. Jacob was afraid to accept his mother's proposition. He said, "Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, but I am a man with smooth skin. Suppose my father touches me. Then I will be revealed to him as a deceiver and bring a curse rather than a blessing on myself" (Genesis 27:11,12). But with the skin of the goats whose meat she had just cooked, Rebekah covered Jacob's arms and the smooth parts of his neck. She and her son pulled it off, and Isaac took Jacob to be his first son.

It isn't clear if Isaac knew that Esau had sold his birthright to Jacob, but he certainly knew about the word the Lord had given to Rebekah concerning both sons before their birth. Nevertheless, Isaac preferred his favorite son and tried to get around the prophecy with his paternal blessing. According to the custom of the time, this blessing, validated by a ceremonial meal, was the way the father officially accorded the birthright to a son. Isaac blessed Jacob with the dew, agricultural abundance, and dominion over other nations and over his brothers (the Edomites, that is the descendants of his brother Esau). For Esau, Isaac predicted a more desert country, violence and conflict, and subjection to Israel.

FLIGHT TO LABAN AND VISION OF THE LADDER

The consequences of this deliberate deception were unfortunate. When Esau returned from the fields and learned what had happened, his heart was filled with bitterness and he cried out loudly.

"Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. And Esau determined in his heart: 'The days of mourning

for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.' When the words of her older son Esau were reported to Rebekah, she summoned her younger son Jacob and said to him, 'Listen, your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. So now, my son, listen to me. Flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran, and stay with him for a few days until your brother's anger subsides— until your brother's rage turns away from you and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will send for you and bring you back from there. Why should I lose you both in one day?'" (Genesis 27:41-45)

Jacob followed his mother's advice and left Beer Sheba where the family lived and arrived at a place that would be called Bethel, some kilometers north of what would become Jerusalem.

"He reached a certain place and spent the night there because the sun had set. He took one of the stones from the place, put it there at his head, and lay down in that place. And he dreamed: A stairway was set on the ground with its top reaching heaven, and God's angels were going up and down on it. Yahweh was standing there before him, saying, 'I am Yahweh, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your offspring the land that you are now sleeping on. Your offspring will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out toward the west, the east, the north, and the south. All the peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. Look, I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. I will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'" (Genesis 28:11-15)

Jacob was very impressed by this dream and by the place where it took place, to which he gave the name Bethel or "house of God." He set up a monument there and made a vow of faithfulness to God, promising to give back a tenth of all that God would give to him. The exact meaning of what Jacob had seen is not explained, but it seems to represent the continual intervention (or providence) of God by means of His messengers, the angels, in what takes place among men upon the earth. If God said to Jacob that He would not abandon him, it means that He would accompany him and send him help when he

needed it. Jacob began to understand that the God of his fathers is not limited to a single place, but that He is truly God of all the earth.

DECEIVED BY LABAN

In spite of God's help, Jacob faced trials where he went. He found his uncle Laban and was warmly welcomed. Having fallen in love with Rachel, Laban's daughter, Jacob proposed to his uncle that he work for him for seven years in a place of a dowry to be able to marry Rachel. Laban accepted this proposal and at the end of seven years, they had the wedding feast. But the next morning, Jacob discovered that he had spent the night with Leah, Laban's older daughter and not the one that Jacob loved and for whom he had served Laban. Laban defended his trickery by saying simply that it was not their custom to give the younger sister in marriage before the older one. Jacob was forced to work another seven years as a shepherd for Laban to have Rachel. In all, he spent 20 years with Laban, and his relationship with his father-in-law was not good. When he was leaving to go back home, he said to his uncle:

"I've been with you these 20 years. Your ewes and female goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams from your flock. I did not bring you any of the flock torn by wild beasts; I myself bore the loss. You demanded payment from me for what was stolen by day or by night. There I was—the heat consumed me by day and the frost by night, and sleep fled from my eyes. For 20 years I have worked in your household—14 years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks—and you have changed my wages 10 times! If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, the Fear of Isaac, had not been with me, certainly now you would have sent me off empty-handed." (Genesis 31:38-42)

Let us add that during this time of Jacob's exile, his mother Rebekah died.

CONCLUSION

We began by stating that the Bible reveals the faults as well as the virtues of the people of which it speaks. Now let us return to the episode when Jacob stole his father's blessing. It's important to not draw a lesson from this story that God would not want us to draw. Instead of thinking that Jacob sowed evil (the lie) and reaped good (his father's blessing), we should remember the trouble he endured: 1) Jacob and his

mother never saw one another again after the separation that was caused by their deception. 2) Jacob, who had tricked his father, was tricked himself by his father-in-law Laban. For those who know the rest of the story, they will recall that Jacob was deceived even more cruelly by his own sons, who sold their little brother Joseph as a slave and made their father believe that he had been torn by wild animals. 3) Finally, Jacob, who as son of an extremely powerful sheik had been a man of power and influence, was forced to work very hard as a servant for twenty years. He reaped a lot of misfortune for his sin.

And why did Rebekah and Jacob commit this sin? They knew that God had announced before the birth of Esau and Jacob that the descendants of the second son would be more blessed than those of the first. God had a plan for the children of Jacob, a people who He had already chosen for a specific purpose. The problem was that Rebekah and Jacob believed they had to help God fulfill His own promise.

In addition, they thought the ends justified the means and that all means were good if they obtained what they sought. But the Almighty doesn't need us to do wrong so that He can bring about what He has planned. Let us always trust Him and stay in the path of righteousness and integrity.