

Nothing Can Separate Us

Romans 8:26-39

Genesis 29:13-30

July 24, 2011

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Can God work here? Here in the encounter of wandering Jacob and conniving Laban, who sells off his two daughters Leah and Rachel for a total of 14 years of virtual slave labor? Can God be in this, this contest, this conflict between two men equal in deceit. Here the trickster Jacob meets his match in the devious Laban, brother to his mother who becomes his father-in-law, twice-over. It is a funny story fit for a light summer Sunday. But there is a serious question, can God be at work in it?

If you don't think God has a sense of humor then you probably have not read the Bible carefully enough. This is a story that invites readers ancient and modern to enjoy and get a good laugh from. The name of God is never mentioned in this passage. And yet the same God who, as we read last week in Chapter 28 of Genesis, meets Jacob at Beth-el in his dream, and promises him a future and a hope, and promises generations upon generations to follow him, so that he will be perpetual memory of the promises of God and the reality of God, the one God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Yes, this very God is at work here, hidden but working, in this hilarious story of Jacob in Haran.

Scholar Walter Brueggeman calls this a story that "should be heard as a humorous narrative designed for entertainment. It permits the Israelites not only to laugh with the success of their hero, but to laugh at Laban. And through Laban they laugh at their perennial antagonists, the Arameans."

John Calvin, not one exactly known for his humor, always wanting to make clear how God is sovereignly at work, describes the narrative purposefully - as about "the arrival of Jacob in Mesopotamia (current day Iraq) and the manner in which he was received by his uncle; (adding) and although the narrative may seem superfluous; it yet contains nothing but what is useful to be known."¹

And that is surely the case; all this is useful to be known in this light, funny story of deceit and deception, yet of deliverance and divine design. All this is a vehicle through which God is yet working his purpose out, and unfolding his Covenant History. In the verses and chapters which follow, Jacob and his two wives and their two maids, (yes, a rather crowded bedroom to be sure), together sequentially not simultaneously, produce the births of the 12 sons of Jacob who become the 12 tribes of Israel, and especially of that late and least likely son, Joseph, who will be sold off into slavery, betrayed, forgotten. But yet not the end of the story. Through and in spite of the brothers' treachery, Joseph will become the hero in Egypt, raised to become Prime Minister, second only to Pharaoh and will be the means by which Jacob and his sons and their families will be preserved from famine, and the story continues.

Today's Old Testament text of Jacob's arrival and early life in Haran working to earn a couple of wives set, alongside today's New Testament text of Paul's supreme affirmation in the midst of suffering of God's victory and triumphant love through Jesus Christ our Lord against whom nothing on earth or in heaven or in hell can separate us, pairs the silly with the sublime. But, since it is summer, let's go through the silly to get to the sublime.

I

When last we left our hero Jacob, the fugitive is running away from older brother Esau, who is trying to kill him because he has stolen his birthright and blessing. Jacob falls asleep heartbroken and alone out in the desert, and has a dream in the night where he sees a vision of a stairway between earth and heaven with angels traveling back and forth, and then the appearance of the Lord God beside him and God promising him a future and a hope. God saying Jacob's offspring will spread far and wide as the dust of the earth, and this God will be with him and bring him back home. Jacob awakens a new man, suddenly aware of God's presence and power. Early in the morning he turns his stone pillow into an altar and worships and makes a bold, if rather self-serving, profession of faith. God if you will take care of me, clothe me, see that I get enough to eat and bring me back to my father's house, then God you will be my God, and, "Of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you."ⁱⁱⁱ Not exactly the most noble covenant, but a sincere one, and an early teaching on stewardship, returning 10% to God.

Now, in Chapter 29 Jacob continues his journey traveling eastward, and God continues his providential work, traveling with him, bringing Jacob to a place where he meets shepherds at a well, preparing to water their flock. He learns these shepherds come from Haran, where, wonder of wonders Laban lives. Hmm – is God at work here? He asks if they know Laban son of Nahor, who is his uncle, and they answer, not only do we know him, but his daughter is approaching right now with the sheep. There is an interesting side note here that gives us a first hint into the character of Laban. Here he is a wealthy rancher who has put his own beautiful younger daughter to work in the fields tending the sheep.

When Jacob sees Rachel, he wastes no time. He goes over and opens that well taking the covering stone aside so the sheep can get water. After that gesture of hospitality, another, he kisses Rachel and weeps aloud, and says, "Hi, Cousin!" He tells her he is her Aunt Rebekkah's son, and she runs ahead and tells her father family is coming.

II

Laban's initial response is warm and welcoming. He runs out and embraces his sister's son, hugs and kisses him and brings him into the house. Jacob catches Laban up on the family news, likely omitting a few details about why he is in flight, or the fact that this is more than simply a summer visit to see the relatives. He likely fails to mention that he had stolen his older brother's birthright and blessing. Whatever he says satisfies Laban and Laban replies, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!"ⁱⁱⁱⁱ And Jacob enjoys a marvelous first month there in his uncle's house. He begins to help out with the sheep, just doing his part.

But after a month, Laban abruptly turns to being the businessman. “Nephew, here you are my flesh and blood, and, well, it is not right that you should be helping out and working for free. What should your wages be?” All this time Jacob has had his eye on Rachel the younger daughter whom first he met at the well, and he boldly says to Laban, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter or Rachel.” It sounds crude even barbarian, to talk about selling off your daughter or buying your wife like that, though in parts of the world today such things as this are still routinely done. Well, Laban agrees. Seven years of labor for Rachel. The time flies by for Jacob and the years seem like but a few days. Such are the ways of love. And with the end of the seven years Jacob calls in his payment, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, (the Living Bible puts it in more common terminology of today, “so I can sleep with her,”) for my time is completed.” Laban agrees and right away calls together the whole community and puts on a lavish wedding feast.

Now in those times the decisive moment of the wedding came after the banquet, when the veiled bride, her face covered throughout the celebrations, goes into her new husband’s bedroom as he waits for her there. Well, Laban leads his veiled daughter, this new bride, to the door and lets her enter. She goes in. Only Uncle Laban has pulled a fast one. The wedding nuptials are consummated in the dark that night, and next morning, what a surprise. “When morning came, it was Leah!”^{iv} Not Rachel in bed with Jacob!

Needless to say, Jacob is not pleased. He shouts at Laban, “Did I not serve you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” Laban answers humorously, “This is not done in our country- giving the younger before the firstborn.”^v Something like, “Hey, when in Rome do as we Romans do.” Yet Laban, dear loving father that he is, makes a deal to sell off his second daughter Rachel, too, in return for another seven years of work.

Jacob the trickster has been tricked! He the younger brother usurped the birthright and the blessing from his older brother and father. Now – seeking to marry the younger sister, Laban tricks him into marrying the older sister. The irony is that trickster Jacob has been outdone. The deceiver has been deceived. He has found his match in Laban. And Laban has effectively married off both his daughters for a total of 14 years of indentured servitude by his twice over now son-in-law. Now Jacob has wives a plenty.

The serious point behind the humor is the way God overturns the natural power structure of the culture which so valued primacy of the first-born. Through a series of scandals and deceptions God’s way and work are being carried out. You see the Gospel is not about a logical “therefore,” but is always about the divine “nevertheless.”

Nevertheless, even as happens with the coming of Jesus the divine nevertheless. Even as Mary sings in her Magnificat, “My souls magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”^{vi} As Jesus taught in his sermon on the mountain, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the persecuted.” Throughout Scripture God is continually at work overturning the logical structures of power and primogeniture, making out of nothing the things that are. The Divine Nevertheless.

III

The story then shifts to the issue of an heir. Everything in this culture depends on having children to carry on the family line. A little more humor is in order. Older sister Leah, because she is not loved by Jacob becomes pregnant, but the loved younger sister Rachel remains barren. The jealousy and rivalry between the two sisters escalates, as they vie for a night with Jacob. Go read chapters 29 and 30 for yourself. If nothing else, you will come away appreciating the wisdom of monogamy.”

However, the main silent character at last surfaces. God. “God remembers.” God at work here. The shame of Rachel’s barrenness finally is overcome because God remembers her. All that unfolds in this is not because of human efforts but because God remembers and God fulfills his promises. God remembered. God heard. God opened. Genesis 30:25,

“Then God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son, and said, ‘God has taken away my reproach’, and she named him Joseph.”^{vii}

The story continues with Jacob and his rapidly growing family deciding to pack up and go back to Jacob’s home and country. Laban tries to talk Jacob out of it, but Jacob, who has become prosperous during his years with Laban and also increased the wealth of Laban, strikes a bargain with Laban over how many and what type of sheep and goats are due him. Here again Laban pulls a fast one on Jacob, and Jacob pulls a fast one on Laban his father-in-law. Read Genesis 30 and 31 for the full account. Finally God clearly tells Jacob it is time to go home. Long and short of that is Jacob heads out with his family and all the best animals from Laban’s flock.

Thus Jacob the trickster out-tricks his devious father-in-law, and heads home without saying goodbye. But Laban goes after them and catches up with Jacob and the family, and there are more outlandish stories about household gods and the One God. It turns out that Rachel has taken the little household idols from Laban, sort of like a person takes along with them the family high school trophies. When Laban comes to Rachel’s tent, she is hiding these little statues beneath her in the camel’s saddle on which she sits. Another moment of humor follows as she says, to her father, “Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me.” Laban searches everywhere but beneath her, and naturally does not find the household gods. Again humor at work as God is at work!

When they prepare to depart, out of that final confrontation comes the passage many of us remember from children’s Sunday School, as the Mizpah blessing. It is uttered by an exasperated Laban, “The Lord watch between you and me, while we are absent one from the other.”^{viii} This really is not a sweet way to conclude a Sunday School class at church but a warning between quarreling parties not to go back on their covenant because the Lord is here watching should the other misbehave.

Thus Jacob, who departed a penniless fugitive returns a wealthy man, blessed with family and flocks, and will continue the line of Israel through whom God will work.

IV

The silly story told, let us turn in conclusion, to the sublime. From the blunt, humorous narrative of God at work through a flawed dysfunctional family to Paul reminding the church of Rome, in the midst of suffering, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” And we are convinced of the promise that nothing in heaven or hell, in life or nevertheless in death, not angels nor rulers, not present things nor future things, “nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”^{ix} Nothing can separate us. The Divine Nevertheless.

God is at work!

The point is God is at work and God will have God’s ways with us and with this battered, bruised, broken world. All things really do work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called by God. God’s promises are sure. Believe this, dear friends, and live in light of and in relationship with this one who is persistently at work in and for you and your life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ John Calvin, Commentary on Genesis, p.127

ⁱⁱ Genesis 28:22

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 29:14

^{iv} Genesis 29:25

^v Genesis 29:25-26

^{vi} Luke 1:52-53

^{vii} Genesis 30:25

^{viii} Genesis 31:49

^{ix} Romans 8:39