

The story of Jacob

Objectives of this lesson

1. Explain how Jacob's story contrasts with Abraham's story
2. Appreciate how Jacob struggled all his life against people and God
3. Value the meaning of the description, "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"

Some key terms

Birthright, blessing, Jacob, Laban, Israel

Introduction

Although the scriptures frequently refer to him as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," Moses skips one generation (Isaac) and focuses on Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. If the book were simply a history of the patriarchs then we would expect the former, but if Moses' purpose is to demonstrate various facets of God's personality then Joseph's storyline adds a dimension that Isaac's simple could not.

Abraham
Isaac
Jacob
Joseph

Additionally, Jacob does far more than simply extend the story of Abraham—he shows a completely different side of God because Jacob is so different from his father. Dare we say he is almost the opposite? Jacob is ultimately the un-Abraham, and in many ways, Jacob is us.

Genesis 25-28: Transfer of the promises to Jacob rather than Esau

Jacob's story actually begins before he was born!

21 Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was childless. The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. 22 But the children struggled inside her, and she said, "If it is going to be like this, I'm not so sure I want to be pregnant!" So she asked the Lord, 23 and the Lord said to her,

*"Two nations are in your womb,
and two people will be separated from within you.*

*One people will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger."*

24 When the time came for Rebekah to give birth, there were twins in her womb. 25 The first came out reddish all over, like a hairy garment, so they named him Esau. 26 When

his brother came out with his hand clutching Esau's heel, they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.

One of the first facts that Genesis offers about Jacob is the origin and meaning of his name. Drawing conclusions about a person's character from their name is *generally an unreliable practice* in the Bible but in this instance the author leads with Jacob's name and *repeatedly* reinforces what it means. Indeed, it is central to his character and the story. Literally his name means “heal-grabber” but figuratively it refers to the act of tripping someone else up or taking advantage of them through underhanded means. It is most frequently translated simply as “deceiver,” and nothing could describe Jacob any better! He is a deceiver and a manipulator and the spiritual implications of this are devastating.

The first two stories about him (the birthright and the blessing) demonstrate the truth of his name. First, we will look at the birthright story (25:27–34).

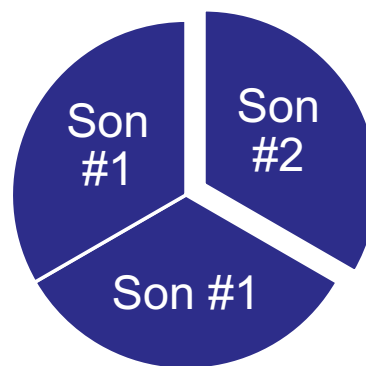
25:27 When the boys grew up, Esau became a skilled hunter, a man of the open fields, but Jacob was an even-tempered man, living in tents. 25:28 Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for fresh game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

25:29 Now Jacob cooked some stew, and when Esau came in from the open fields, he was famished. 25:30 So Esau said to Jacob, “Feed me some of the red stuff—yes, this red stuff—because I'm starving!” (That is why he was also called Edom.)

25:31 But Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.” 25:32 “Look,” said Esau, “I'm about to die! What use is the birthright to me?” 25:33 But Jacob said, “Swear an oath to me now.” So Esau swore an oath to him and sold his birthright to Jacob.

25:34 Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and lentil stew; Esau ate and drank, then got up and went out. So Esau despised his birthright.

Notice **first** how economical the author is with the story of the boys' childhood—he covers at least 20 years of history with the simple phrase “When the boys grew up” (25:27). His concern, of course, is not writing history *per se* but telling a more important story. The reason why the birthright is attractive to Jacob is that it represents a larger inheritance. Middle eastern custom stipulated that the firstborn son would receive a double portion of the inheritance because he had a place of prominence and it was his responsibility to care for the widow. For example, if two sons were involved then the inheritance would be divided into three portions and the oldest son would receive two while the younger brother only got one. The same principle would apply if there were 12 sons—the inheritance would be divided into 13 portions and the oldest would receive 2/13ths of it. The law still applied in the case of twins and it is easy to imagine how Jacob might have fumed about receiving only 1/3 of the inheritance just because of his bad luck of being 4 minutes younger than his brother! Whatever the motivation, he catches his brother at a weak moment and doubles his own inheritance from



one third to two thirds. Technically he doesn't deceive his brother, but he certainly selfishly uses Esau's hunger and disdain for his birthright to manipulate him for his advantage.

The **second** way Jacob lives up (or down) to his name (the story of the blessing) is introduced for us with a short story about Isaac. In chapter 26 we have a serious case of déjà vu!

The first thing we notice is that God repeats the Abrahamic promise to Isaac (Gen 26:1–4):

26:1 There was a famine in the land, subsequent to the earlier famine that occurred in the days of Abraham. Isaac went to Abimelech king of the Philistines at Gerar. 26:2 The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; settle down in the land that I will point out to you.

26:3 Stay in this land. Then I will be with you and will bless you, for I will give all these lands to you and to your descendants, and I will fulfill the solemn promise I made to your father Abraham. 26:4 I will multiply your descendants so they will be as numerous as the stars in the sky, and I will give them all these lands. All the nations of the earth will be blessed through you.



The second thing we notice is that God cleverly signals that these are the same promises with the same "unconditionality" (26:5-11) by giving the same demonstration involving the man's wife that he used in both Genesis 12 and 20!

26:5 All this will come to pass because Abraham obeyed me and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws." 26:6 So Isaac settled in Gerar.

26:7 When the men of that place asked him about his wife, he replied, "She is my sister." He was afraid to say, "She is my wife," for he thought to himself, "The men of this place will kill me to get Rebekah because she is very beautiful."

26:8 After Isaac had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines happened to look out a window and observed Isaac caressing his wife Rebekah. 26:9 So Abimelech summoned Isaac and said, "She is really your wife! Why did you say, 'She is my sister'?" Isaac replied, "Because I thought someone might kill me to get her."

26:10 Then Abimelech exclaimed, "What in the world have you done to us? One of the men might easily have had sexual relations with your wife, and you would have brought guilt on us!"

26:11 So Abimelech commanded all the people, "Whoever touches this man or his wife will surely be put to death."

If we were only interested in teaching morality lessons from the text, we might draw from this story that children (Isaac) will do as parents (Abraham) do, not as they say. That's probably a valid parental lesson, but it obscures the bigger storyline of what God is doing. Isaac's failure concerning his wife is answered in exactly the same way that God answered Abraham's failure—supernatural intervention. There is no better way to show that God's promises, now transferred to Isaac, were just as unconditional as they move down the generations as they were at first!



We know that God is serious about giving these Abrahamic blessings to Isaac for three reasons: 1) he said so (26:1–4), 2) he demonstrated his commitment with Abimelech (26:5–11) and 3) because he directly blessed Isaac's efforts (26:12–14).

26:12 When Isaac planted in that land, he reaped in the same year a hundred times what he had sown, because the Lord blessed him. 26:13 The man became wealthy. His influence continued to grow until he became very prominent. 26:14 He had so many sheep and cattle and such a great household of servants that the Philistines became jealous of him.

And what is more, the Philistines aren't the only ones who saw the value of the blessing of God on Isaac's life and wanted it. So did his second son, *deceiver*.

Although Jacob had already secured the birthright, what he really wanted was the ongoing blessing that, if everything else went according to custom, would naturally go to his undeserving (at least in his eyes) brother. This is the reason why Jacob and Rebekah conspire in such a desperate way to wrest the blessing away from Esau in chapter 27. In order to understand all the goes on in this story you must realize how the blessing was passed from father to son. I don't understand exactly *why* it worked this way, but from looking at the text we can certainly tell *how* it worked. The father would verbally speak the blessing as it were onto the son and he would receive it with just once chance to do it right. If he gave it to the wrong person there was no going back. Look at the text (27:1–29) and count how many times Jacob lives out his name with his father!

27:1 When Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he was almost blind, he called his older son Esau and said to him, "My son!" "Here I am!" Esau replied. 27:2 Isaac said, "Since I am so old, I could die at any time. 27:3 Therefore, take your weapons – your quiver and your bow – and go out into the open fields and hunt down some wild game for me. 27:4 Then prepare for me some tasty food, the kind I love, and bring it to me. Then I will eat it so that I may bless you before I die."

27:5 Now Rebekah had been listening while Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau went out to the open fields to hunt down some wild game and bring it back, 27:6 Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "Look, I overheard your father tell your brother Esau, 27:7 'Bring me some wild game and prepare for me some tasty food. Then I will eat it and bless you in the presence of the Lord before I die.' 27:8 Now then, my son, do exactly what I tell you! 27:9 Go to the flock and get me two of the best young goats. I'll prepare them in a tasty way for your father, just the way he loves them. 27:10 Then you will take it to your father. Thus he will eat it and bless you before he dies."

27:11 "But Esau my brother is a hairy man," Jacob protested to his mother Rebekah, "and I have smooth skin! 27:12 My father may touch me! Then he'll think I'm mocking him and I'll bring a curse on myself instead of a blessing." 27:13 So his mother told him, "Any curse against you will fall on me, my son! Just obey me! Go and get them for me!"

27:14 So he went and got the goats and brought them to his mother. She prepared some tasty food, just the way his father loved it. 27:15 Then Rebekah took her older son Esau's best clothes, which she had with her in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob. 27:16 She put the skins of the young goats on his hands and the smooth part of his neck. 27:17 Then she handed the tasty food and the bread she had made to her son Jacob.

27:18 He went to his father and said, "My father!" Isaac replied, "Here I am. Which are you, my son?" 27:19 Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau, your firstborn. I've done as you told me. Now sit up and eat some of my wild game so that you can bless me." 27:20 But Isaac asked his son, "How in the world did you find it so quickly, my son?" "Because the LORD your God brought it to me," he replied. 27:21 Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come closer so I can touch you, my son, and know for certain if you really are my son Esau." 27:22 So Jacob went over to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's, but the hands are Esau's." 27:23 He did not recognize him because his hands were hairy, like his brother Esau's hands. So Isaac blessed Jacob. 27:24 Then he asked, "Are you really my son Esau?" "I am," Jacob replied. 27:25 Isaac said, "Bring some of the wild game for me to eat, my son. Then I will bless you." So Jacob brought it to him, and he ate it. He also brought him wine, and Isaac drank. 27:26 Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come here and kiss me, my son." 27:27 So Jacob went over and kissed him. When Isaac caught the scent of his clothing, he blessed him, saying,

*"Yes, my son smells
like the scent of an open field
which the Lord has blessed.
27:28 May God give you
the dew of the sky
and the richness of the earth,
and plenty of grain and new wine.
27:29 May peoples serve you
and nations bow down to you.
You will be lord over your brothers,
and the sons of your mother will bow down to you.
May those who curse you be cursed,
and those who bless you be blessed."*

After the deed is done, brother Esau comes back triumphantly to his father and asks for the blessing. Jacob instantly realizes that something has gone drastically wrong as the wrong person (he doesn't know exactly who yet) has impersonated Esau and stolen the blessing which explains his reaction (27:33):

Isaac began to shake violently and asked, "Then who else hunted game and brought it to me? I ate all of it just before you arrived, and I blessed him. He will indeed be blessed!"

In just a matter of moments they pieced things together and concluded Jacob was to blame. Notice carefully how this text is written and the play on the second brother's name!

*27:34 When Esau heard his father's words, he wailed loudly and bitterly. He said to his father, "Bless me too, my father!" 27:35 But Isaac replied, "Your brother came in here deceitfully (**Jacobly**) and took away your blessing." 27:36 Esau exclaimed, "'Jacob' is the right name for him! He has tripped me up (literally, "**Jacobed** me") two times! He took away my 1) birthright, and now, look, he has taken away my 2) blessing!"*

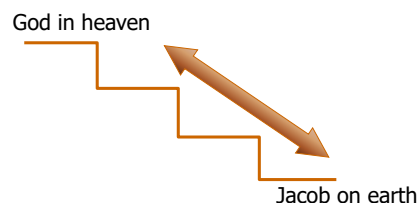
You might think that God would overrule the situation not allowing such deception to be a part of his plan, but he doesn't. You might also think that the story would have a happy ending. Perhaps Jacob would have second thoughts and repent of his deception to his brother, but he doesn't. It doesn't appear that he is anything but pleased with himself and even more confident in this kind of behavior. When his life is threatened by his brother, he doesn't deal with the problem honestly by acknowledging his poor behavior, he simply does what he does best and sneaks away.

On his way to his Haran Jacob spends the night at Bethel and has a famous and mysterious dream about God and the angels walking on a stairway to heaven (28:11–15):

28:11 He reached a certain place where he decided to camp because the sun had gone down. He took one of the stones and placed it near his head. Then he fell asleep in that place 28:12 and had a dream. He saw a stairway erected on the earth with its top reaching to the heavens. The angels of God were going up and coming down it 28:13 and the Lord stood at its top. He said, "I am the Lord, the God of your grandfather Abraham and the God of your father Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the ground you are lying on. 28:14 Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west, east, north, and south. All nations of the earth will be blessed in you. 28:15 I am with you! I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you!"

The interpretation is not a straightforward one, but when we include how this story fits in to the rest of Jacob's life and how Jesus uses it in the New Testament a clearer message emerges. God is in heaven at the top of the stairway while Jacob is at the bottom with angels ascending and descending. God affirms that the blessing that Isaac conferred upon his son from God will come true. More importantly there is a distance between God and Jacob, but there is a way that the gap can be bridged as demonstrated by the angels that are going back and forth upon the stairway.

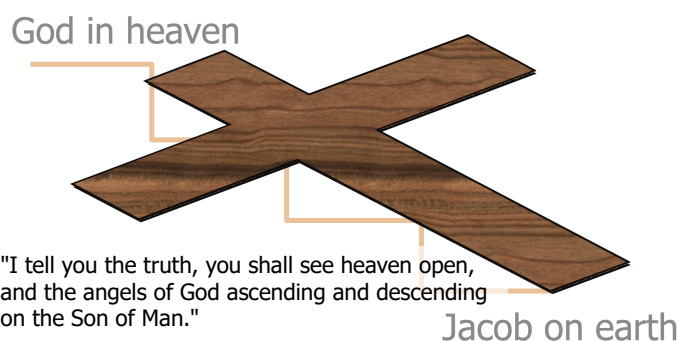
It appears to me that God is offering Jacob the opportunity of a relationship with himself. This understanding is rarely acknowledged or



considered simply because most people assume that the patriarchs were all *born* in a relationship with God. But just because God superintends the birth of a person and has plans for him certainly doesn't mean that he or she doesn't need to come to know God personally. Every person (patriarch or not) must exercise faith in God's promise of redemption (Messiah) to be justified (Rom 3—4). Certainly, Paul is a good example for us here (Gal 1:15). Another reason I think this is an offer of a relationship with God is how Jesus uses the story in John 1. When Jesus met Nathanael he remarked,

"Here is a true Israelite in whom there is no guile [read deception/Jacob, 1:47]. When Nathanael recognized Jesus as the Son of God and the King of Israel Jesus replied, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that. I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (1:51).

Jesus is saying that Nathanael will come to understand that the actual access from earth to heaven is Jesus himself. Later in the gospel of John he says the same thing in these words: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the father except by me" (14:6).



Jesus was not making anything up or offering a fanciful reinterpretation of the passage as he referenced the words of Genesis but was actually giving the right interpretation in light of the whole story of redemption. In short, God was offering a relationship to Jacob because even though he had made unconditional promises to him and would use him as a channel of the ultimate redeemer, Jacob still had not come to terms with who God was and how much Jacob needed him. I say this because of how self-sufficient Jacob has demonstrated himself to be up to this point in the story and because of his next response to God's offer.

28:19 He called that place Bethel, although the former name of the town was Luz. 28:20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God is with me and protects me on this journey I am taking and gives me food to eat and clothing to wear, 28:21 and I return safely to my father's home, then the LORD will become my God.

What may at first appear to be a very pious answer to God's offer is most likely the response of an unregenerate heart. Notice first that Jacob does not express faith in or commitment to God; rather, he says that "if" God does X and Y "then" he will *become* my God, because he hadn't trusted him yet. If we compare his response to his grandfather's, the contrast becomes apparent. Abram's response in Genesis 15:6 was immediate:

15:5 He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." 6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Jacob rather holds out on God. I believe the story gives us good reason to understand why. Up to this point he has been very successful at getting what he needs through his own means. When he needs a birthright, he catches his opponent in a weak moment and tempts him appropriately. When he needs a blessing, he manipulates and deceives those around him to get what he needs. Now, even with God, his response is one of an independent, self-sufficient person, “**IF** God does this and this, **THEN PERHAPS** we’ll enter into a relationship, but right now I’m doing just fine.” Jacob basically refuses God’s offer of a relationship with him. The plotline of the story now follows what God will have to do to Jacob for him to see how much he needs God!

Genesis 29-32: God blesses Jacob in spite of himself

This story (like all of life) is more complex than we first realize. Rather than being a simplistic story of a God who blesses good people we have a much more realistic account of how a gracious God deals with flawed people. We tend to assume that God blesses the righteous (the orange people if you remember our previous charts) and disciplines the unrighteous (the blue). What we’ll see is that God blesses Jacob *in spite of* his behavior. God has promised to bless Jacob, but this doesn’t mean that Jacob deserves it, even though Jacob may misunderstand the reason for his good fortune. As Paul notes in the second chapter of Romans, it is often the kindness of God that leads us to repentance (Rom 2:4), and as Jesus says, God sends rain on the just and the unjust (Matt 5:45). Jacob continues in his selfish, manipulative ways and although there are tacit references to God it is clear that Jacob’s functional savior, that is, the one upon whom he is actually depending is still himself. Just because God blesses Jacob does not mean that he is orange any more than it meant Cain was orange.



What we assume



What is true

Genesis 29: God’s discipline of Jacob

The first experience that God uses to show Jacob his own limitations is the encounter with his uncle Laban. Since Jacob is so smitten with Rachel, he is an easy target for the conniving Laban. Although the agreement is clear that Jacob is working seven years for Rachel, Laban takes advantage of Jacob by giving him Leah. I don’t know exactly how to explain Jacob’s lack of awareness. Maybe the tents are *really* dark, or maybe he’s celebrated a little too hard! Whatever the reason, he doesn’t realize that a terrible switch has taken place until morning. The literary brevity of the text is brilliant (29:23–25):

But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob, and Jacob lay with her. And Laban gave his servant girl Zilpah to his daughter as her maidservant. When morning came, there was Leah!

I wish I could have seen Jacob's face and heard the distress in his voice, "So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?" (29:25). In this single verse, so carefully written, you can catch the point of the lesson. Notice his angst, "Why have you deceived (literally "jacobed") me? God's strategy is so pointed and perfect—he's bringing into Jacob's life someone who can do to him what he has always done to others. God is giving him a taste of his own medicine, not to punish him, but to begin to open his eyes to the truth of his own limitations. Jacob simply cannot negotiate life on his own. As clever as he is, there is always someone even more clever. His only hope is to name and turn from his self-reliance and turn to God's ways, but Jacob doesn't yet get that. As far as he's concerned this is just a bump in the road from which he can recover and get back to the business of living his best life by cheating others.

Genesis 29-30: God's blessing of Jacob

Through Leah and Rachel God built the twelve tribes of Israel. This alone makes the birth of these 12 boys significant, but God also takes the opportunity to show how Jacob's character is reflected in his family. As the story unfolds the two sisters enter into a kind of fertility contest and "Team Leah" takes an early and decisive lead! Poor Rachel grows more frustrated because of her perceived failure and insignificance. To be a barren woman in this culture was to have failed in one's most significant function—to provide offspring, which were the key to family prosperity and even survival. Every child became a laborer in the field and, when necessary, a soldier for protection. This barrenness then led to personal desperation and family friction (30:1–3) and eventually led to following incident between the sisters.

30:14 At the time of the wheat harvest Reuben went out and found some mandrake plants in a field and brought them to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, "Give me some of your son's mandrakes." 30:15 But Leah replied, "Wasn't it enough that you've taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes too?" "All right," Rachel said, "he may sleep with you tonight in exchange for your son's mandrakes."

30:22 Then God took note of Rachel. He paid attention to her and enabled her to become pregnant. 30:23 She became pregnant and gave birth to a son. Then she said, "God has taken away my shame." 30:24 She named him Joseph, saying, "May the LORD give me yet another son."

One doesn't have to be a scientist to know that mandrake plants really don't increase one's fertility! But the most important question for our story isn't "Do mandrakes cause one to conceive," rather it is "*Does Rachel believe* that mandrakes cause one to conceive?" The answer to this one is a definitive "yes!" Yet in the context we're clearly told that God actually makes the conception take place.

What makes the interpretation complicated is that on the surface Rachel gives God some credit for "taking away her shame," but her method for securing God's blessing was not simple dependence upon him, expressed through prayer, but clever manipulation with the mandrake plants. Likewise, the text reports that indeed God was the one who enabled her to become pregnant, but it doesn't ascribe a particular motive to him. That is, God notices that she is

desperate and has mercy on her, but he does so **in spite of** her belief in magic not **because** of it. If this seems as though God is mis-handling the situation it is probably because of our misunderstanding that God only blesses those who honor him in every way. The problem with this assumption is at least twofold: it overestimates humanity and it underestimates God. First, none of us are nearly good enough to hope for absolute justice in our lives. Our best deeds are usually cloaked in a ghoulish mixture of selfish motives. Second, God always works from a standpoint of grace toward us. The scriptures, especially the Psalms, reveal that God sends rain on both the just and the unjust and that he remembers that we are but dust! Every parent deals with children on the basis of grace rather than justice. God is working with Jacob to fulfill His purposes and bless him unconditionally and these things require grace that is undeserved and often unrecognized. Only the most extreme arrogance contents itself that the goodness of God in one's life is naturally deserved. So, where does this leave us with Rachel? Probably with a mixture of satisfaction that she has children, with a somewhat mis-placed confidence that because of her knowledge of how the world works (mandrakes to the rescue!) she is able to get what she needs. But this is OK because God has time and a plan on his side to bring the whole family to himself.

We certainly can't blame the girls for their competitive ways because it's likely that they learned the finer points of deception from Jacob himself. He certainly demonstrates the prowess of one who is practiced in the art! Just look at how he handles Laban and the goats. Jacob makes a deal that he'll take the streaked and spotted animals and leave the rest with Laban. His deal appears honest until he begins to implement it by cleverly (or so he thinks) having the strong animals mate in front of striped objects. Jacob's strategy is fairly apparent. He believes that animals which mate in front of the peeled branches will have striped offspring.



Again, one doesn't have to be a genetic scientist to know that Jacob's method doesn't really work. But the most important question for our story isn't "Do striped objects cause striped offspring," rather it is "*Does Jacob believe* that striped objects cause striped offspring?" The answer to this one is a definitive "yes!" Yet in the context we're clearly told that God actually prospers Jacob's flocks. Once again, the story is complicated, just as life is, because God's unconditional love blesses Jacob, in spite of himself. Just because God's name is referenced doesn't mean these people are relying upon God. A more likely interpretation is that they're using God or following him when it suits their own ends. And if that seems unlikely to you, then humbly and courageously ask God to gently allow you to see what he sees in your heart.

When the time comes to return to the land of Israel Jacob and his family steal away from Laban. The interaction between the family and Laban is quite revealing. His first response to Jacob is he has lives up to his name.

31:26 “What have you done?” Laban demanded of Jacob. “You’ve deceived me and carried away my daughters as if they were captives of war! 31:27 Why did you run away secretly and deceive me?”

One wonders why Laban seems so surprised. To ask Jacob, “Why did you *deceive* me?” is like asking why water is wet. I want to shout back, “Because that’s who he is! Wouldn’t you have been more surprised if he hadn’t deceived you?”

Although he is surprised by the departure Laban seems resigned to all of it except for one thing. His household gods were missing!

31:30 Now I understand that you have gone away because you longed desperately for your father’s house. Yet why did you steal my gods?”

We learn in the story that Jacob is unaware of this theft, but Rachel has stolen the small idols of her father and hidden them in the saddle bags. When asked about the situation she makes excuses in order not to reveal her own deception.

31:33 So Laban entered Jacob’s tent, and Leah’s tent, and the tent of the two female servants, but he did not find the idols. Then he left Leah’s tent and entered Rachel’s. 31:34 (Now Rachel had taken the idols and put them inside her camel’s saddle and sat on them.) Laban searched the whole tent, but did not find them. 31:35 Rachel said to her father, “Don’t be angry, my lord. I cannot stand up in your presence because I am having my period.” So he searched thoroughly, but did not find the idols.

This story makes it clear that Rachel is just as deceptive at heart as Jacob is. She has learned from the best. Additionally, it clarifies the source of their trust. Although they mention Yahweh’s name, their idolatry testifies against them.

Genesis 32: Jacob’s showdown with God

Jacob and his family surely breathed a sigh of relief when Laban left but that’s only because they had no idea what they were about to experience--a threat much more devastating than the one they had just escaped. Turning their backs on Laban the whole family began moving back to the land of Abraham and Jacob



knew that his brother would be looking for him. He wasn't sure if Esau still bore a grudge against him for that silly birthright and blessing thing in the past, but he couldn't be sure. After all, Jacob barely escaped with his life the last time he saw Esau. To hedge his bets, he sent a peace offering on ahead. This all took place at the ford of the Jabbok, a small stream on the eastern side of the Jordan (pictured above). Genesis 32:3–5 says,

³ Jacob sent messengers on ahead to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the region of Edom. ⁴ He commanded them, "This is what you must say to my lord Esau: 'This is what your servant Jacob says: I have been staying with Laban until now. ⁵ I have oxen, donkeys, sheep, and male and female servants. I have sent this message to inform my lord, so that I may find favor in your sight.'"

I'm sure that Jacob waited frantically for the response, which is why the brevity of the biblical text is so hysterical, really. The next verse simply relates:

⁶ The messengers returned to Jacob and said, "We went to your brother Esau. He is coming to meet you and has four hundred men with him."

That's it! Yikes! What would he need 400 men for unless his intentions were less than peaceful! There is no other explanation given and God seems content to let Jacob stew in his own juices! It is clearly a crisis moment for Jacob, and he takes drastic action (32:7–8):

⁷ Jacob was very afraid and upset. So he divided the people who were with him into two camps, as well as the flocks, herds, and camels. ⁸ "If Esau attacks one camp," he thought, "then the other camp will be able to escape."

As much as he fears Esau, Jacob begins to understand that there is One he should fear more and so we see Jacob do something he has never done before—pray to God (vv. 9–12)!

⁹ Then Jacob prayed, "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O LORD, you said to me, 'Return to your land and to your relatives and I will make you prosper.' ¹⁰ I am not worthy of all the faithful love you have shown your servant. With only my walking stick I crossed the Jordan, but now I have become two camps. ¹¹ Rescue me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, as well as the mothers with their children. ¹² But you said, 'I will certainly make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand on the seashore, too numerous to count.'"

At this point Jacob splits his family in two in an effort to preserve at least one party and sends generous gifts on ahead to Esau that are intended to appease his apparent wrath. Finally he is left alone, except of course for God. It is a strange but significant story (32:24–31).

²⁴ So Jacob was left alone. Then a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he could not defeat Jacob, he struck the socket of his hip so the socket of Jacob's hip was dislocated while he wrestled with him.

²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." "I will not let you go," Jacob replied, "unless you bless me." ²⁷ The man asked him, "What is your name?" He

answered, “Jacob.”²⁸ “No longer will your name be Jacob,” the man told him, “but Israel, because you have fought with God and with men and have prevailed.”

²⁹ Then Jacob asked, “Please tell me your name.” “Why do you ask my name?” the man replied. Then he blessed Jacob there.³⁰ So Jacob named the place Peniel, explaining, “Certainly I have seen God face to face and have survived.”

³¹ The sun rose over him as he crossed over Peniel, but he was limping because of his hip.

Let’s break this down by asking several questions. **First**, who is “the man?” As Jacob comes to understand in verse 30 the “man” is actually God himself.

So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.”

Now, this doesn’t mean that Jacob knew this from the beginning. He probably thought the “man” was an angel from God, which is why he attempts to secure a blessing from him and is brash enough to actually wrestle him. Only as he processes the events of the night after they’re over does he realize that he has actually been in contact with the God of his fathers.

Second, why does the angel strike his hip? The text says, “when the man saw that he could not defeat Jacob, he struck him.” Obviously he **could** defeat because he did so by striking the hip, so why does it say he **couldn’t**? I think the point is that Jacob is so stubborn that the angel understands that using normal “human” means (if you can call it that when a powerful angel is involved) Jacob will not back down. That is, this is a demonstration for our benefit, to explain that given the normal means of “fighting” poor Jacob would not be overcome. This is really a reflection and indication of his stubbornness. You might ask how someone could be so foolish to continue fighting and the only answer is that the foolishness and “Jacobness” goes all the way to the bone. The text states that the angel knew he had to break out the big guns and so he uses a little supernatural power dislocating Jacob’s hip. Again, why? Because it’s the only practical way to *force* Jacob to stop fighting! I hope you’ll understand by now that this scenario of a wrestling match is really a metaphor for how Jacob has been living his life. He has been fighting others all his life, trying to get things from them by his own strength. In his case this “strength” is deception, but what he doesn’t realize is that all the people in his life he has been warring against going back to his father, and brother and father-in-law were really just stand-ins or proxies for God. Jacob hasn’t been striving with just people, but actually God himself and now he has to face the fact that his powers are no longer enough to save him from doom.

Third, why does the angel ask Jacob his name? Just imagine the scene of two men actually wrestling hard for a long time until one is injured, and they have to quit. They’re both breathing heavily (well, at least one is) and the angel looks at Jacob and says, “hey, by the way, I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced, what’s your name?” I don’t think so. The angel isn’t just getting acquainted. He knows exactly who Jacob is. You see, after Jacob quits fighting, he still persistently wants the blessing from the angel and this is when, in effect, the angel says, “Alright,

if you want the blessing from me, you'll have to tell me your name." We know in the context of the story, which has been a long one, that the name of Jacob has *very* significant meaning. The angel isn't asking a fact; he's asking for a confession. The angel says "you've got to tell me what you are down deep inside" to see if Jacob can come to grips with the fact of who and what he is. I believe that he doesn't answer flippantly or lightly and that the admission is likely a very difficult thing for him, but he answers rightly, "Down deep inside what I really am is a bold-faced deceiver." Does this disqualify him from the blessing? Should he have perhaps lied a bit and presented a better "resume" than he did? Evidently not, because he got what he wanted when the angel gave him a new name.

Fourth, and finally, how does Jacob overcome? This is where we have to be the most careful in our interpretation. I don't think, given the context of the whole story, that God is rewarding Jacob's stubbornness and saying "You've overcome by being a stubborn, selfish deceiver. In fact, you're so persistent even I can't beat you. Congratulations, I guess I'll have to bless you." Remember that in the story Jacob got what he wanted *only after he stopped fighting*. Furthermore, after he stopped fighting, he then confessed his character and asked for the blessing. Only then did God freely give him the blessing (in this case probably protection from his brother) that he needed. Jacob didn't overcome by being stubborn; he overcame when he quit fighting, confessed his sin and asked in faith.

It's hard to be dogmatic about anyone's salvation experience, even the people in the Bible, but I think this is the moment of Jacob's actual salvation. Notice that we begin to see a change in his life where there was none before. He listens to God, he obeys God, he worships God and the fear of God falls in a protective way upon him. Consider this story of a whole family unit that is very different from what we have seen before (Gen 35:1-5)!

1 Then God said to Jacob, "Go up at once to Bethel and live there. Make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau." 2 So Jacob told his household and all who were with him, "Get rid of the foreign gods you have among you. Purify yourselves and change your clothes. 3 Let us go up at once to Bethel. Then I will make an altar there to God, who responded to me in my time of distress and has been with me wherever I went."

4 So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods that were in their possession and the rings that were in their ears. Jacob buried them under the oak near Shechem 5 and they started on their journey. The surrounding cities were afraid of God, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.

Conclusion

And now you know why the nation is often referred to as the “sons of Israel” (his new name) or just as often “sons of Jacob” (his old name). Most of the time, the nation of Israel does a fine job of reflecting the character of Jacob which isn’t really much of a compliment. If you were to chart out Jacob’s life, using our significant colors of blue and orange I think that most of the time we would have to color him blue!

Jacob	Jacob	Jacob	Jacob
Gen 25	27	29	32

He clearly turns to God and follows him towards the end of his life, but even then, he still sometimes deceives those around him (see his dealings with Esau in chapter 32). As always, we’re more interested in what this tells us about God, and it might surprise you. I can understand why God would choose Abraham. Even though he had several failings at least he was pretty responsive to God’s work in his life. But why would God choose Jacob? Why would God suffer the grief, so to speak, to work with Jacobs, or me for that matter? When you contemplate on the depth of this message for a while it gives new and significant meaning to the phrase “The God of Abraham, Isaac **and Jacob**” (Acts 3:13) . . . doesn’t it?