

White Jacob: An Imaginative, Biblical Approach

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Some of you know the incredibly compelling story in *Genesis* 32-33 of the “reconciliation” of brothers Jacob and Esau. I wonder if it might be helpful to “think with” this story as we seek a faithful approach to the evil of racism today. It’s an imperfect analogy for sure, but *Genesis* is raising some pertinent topics. Bear with me as I use Jacob to depict “whiteness.”

Jacob’s Appeasement.

After stealing the birthright and the blessing from his sibling, Jacob leaves for 20 years. What is he doing during this time? He is prospering by accumulating wealth. Then, God tells Jacob that it is time to return home, and this command immediately brings up the question of Esau. To go back is to deal with Esau, whom he has wronged. So Jacob sends messengers to Esau to test the waters about a possible return. Jacob’s motives here are not clear, but he certainly does not mention reconciliation or an apology or a giving back of the stolen birthright. Jacob wants to be sure that Esau knows about his wealth foremost (32:3-5). Does Jacob want healing and a relationship with his sibling, or does Jacob want to go home safely and live the status quo?

The messengers come back to Jacob and say, “We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and 400 men are with him.” Yikes! Jacob freaks out; he assumes the worst about Esau. Esau wants a war! He seeks to kill me! Jacob divides his camp into two groups because surely Esau can’t defeat two dispersed camps. Jacob seems concerned about keeping as much wealth as possible. Listen to Jacob’s thoughts: “If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape” (Gen 32:8). Jacob prays although it is questionable how sincere his prayer is. One interpreter calls it a “foxhole” prayer. His actions relate solely to his wealth, to his property. He prepares an appeasement gift for Esau. There is no talk of apology or reparations, no discussion of previous bad behaviors, no talk of stolen birthright and blessing.

Jacob’s Wrestling.

The previous story is the context for Jacob’s wrestling with the “man” at the Jabbok. Many interpreters see Jacob wrestling with God here, but it is also possible that Jacob is wrestling with his past, with Esau, with his actions. Maybe it’s not a spiritual wrestling but an ethical one? What will happen when he meets his brother again? It’s painful wrestling that leaves him disjointed. It’s a conversion. It’s face-to-face with the Divine. This type of transformation requires a name change! And what is this blessing? Jacob wants a blessing, perhaps some riches and possessions. But perhaps the blessing is a new perspective and new identity.

Esau’s Demonstration of Grace and the Brothers’ Reunion.

What happens when the brothers finally meet? Jacob divides his four wives and children into groups and places them in line in order of importance. He goes to meet Esau and bows before him. What does this action mean? Is he only scared? Or does he have guilt from stealing the blessing? Or has he become humble?

“But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” (Genesis 33:4 NRSV)

The Masoretic (Hebrew) text places a dot over each Hebrew letter in the word for “kiss,” so that we pause there in wonder. The one who has every reason to seek revenge does not. Esau offers grace. Esau acts like a brother. Jacob does not deserve this type of blessing. The supposedly “unchosen” brother becomes the bearer of grace to the “chosen” one.

The problem, of course, with the reconciliation paradigm is that Jacob is never held accountable for his previous actions. To see the two brothers embrace -- it’s a beautiful moment at the end of the story. But one of the reasons the story can conclude in this manner lies in the fact that Esau has also accumulated wealth and raised a family. He has not been a victim of Jacob’s behaviors for over two decades now. He is Jacob’s equal. We might even say that Esau holds power.

Yet, the brothers are not able to talk much after their reunion. They are not able to discuss their past, their hurts, their behaviors. So, despite a passionate meeting, despite Esau’s expressed wish to journey alongside Jacob, and despite Jacob’s promise to come to Esau in Seir, Jacob ends up going elsewhere. They separate to live in different lands. Reconciliation is only reunion.

(Image: W4B19-4b Capital - Reconciliation of Jacob and Esau
Aosta (Piemonte) chiostrò Sant'Orso, cloister
W3EB18-9b Kapitell Jakob bei Laban - Rahel & Lea mit Tierherde 25a
Detailed information on the capitals of this cloister Sant'Orso in a common project by
Kunsthistorisches Institut Florenz and other Institutions on cenobium.isti.cnr.it/aosta)



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