

The Hunter and the Trickster

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“This is the sum of the years of Abraham’s life which he lived: one hundred and seventy-five years. Then Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, the field which Abraham purchased from the sons of Heth. There Abraham was buried, and Sarah his wife. And it came to pass, after the death of Abraham, that God blessed his son Isaac. And Isaac dwelt at Beer Lahai Roi.”

-Genesis 25:7-11

As we move through the book of Genesis we have come to another key transition within the book. The beginning of Genesis is highly symbolic and uses universal images to describe the beginning of creation and God’s plan for man. After the tower of Babel the narrative of the Bible shifts to the life of Abraham. While his story becomes much more historic than symbolic, in many ways, Abraham is still a highly archetypal story. Once again, this doesn’t mean his life wasn’t historic, only that, as the first man to enter into a direct covenant with God after the fall, Abraham becomes symbolic for all those who will follow God. As such, the depictions of his life are also highly symbolic and are not very descriptive of his motives and character. There are stories, like his descent to Egypt and his manipulation of the Pharaoh, where we see Abraham as a real historical figure with flaws, but for the most part, he is shown primarily as the archetypal figure of faith in God.

The same is true of Isaac. Being the child of promise, Isaac embodies the ministry of Christ in his willful self-sacrifice in Genesis 22, and his emblematic marriage to Rebekah in Genesis 24. Beyond that, we aren’t given any real insights into Isaac’s personality or his motives in either of these stories. But, all of that changes with Genesis 25.

Genesis 25 signals the death of Abraham, the blessing of God has passed to his son Isaac and now we are moving into a more informal type of narrative account. Because of this, as we study the life of Jacob and Esau, the figures of the Bible become far more fleshed out and we do get to see their characters develop and shift. This is why Jacob becomes such an amazing figure in the scriptures. He is really the first person in the bible who receives a full character exploration. Really, the rest of the book of Genesis, which is more than half the book, centers around Jacob and his family. This allows us to

really understand his character, which is appropriate because Jacob will eventually be given the symbolic name of all God's people "Israel".

"And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God."

-Galatians 6:16

The Good Father

"A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, But the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous."

-Proverbs 13:22

Before we talk about Jacob though, I think it is fitting that we follow the conclusion of Abraham's life and evaluate his legacy. The first part of this chapter is all about Abraham's lineage, which is expressive of Abraham's good legacy and faithfulness to God. Even though Abraham stumbled and fell at various times of his life, what made him a man of faith is his willingness to get back up and learn from his mistakes.

The wisdom that we are given in the above Proverb is not primarily about wealth or financial success. We can know that for a certainty because the difference between the good man and the sinner is not their wealth or their possessions, but instead their legacy. The good man and the sinner can both accumulate vast wealth and have large families, the difference between them is that the good man has trained his children to actually *inherit* his wealth and not squander it. This means that the good man has been faithful to train the souls of his children and not merely to expand his wealth. To put it another way, the good father is the one who prepares his children for his death.

What this means is that the children of a good man will be necessarily grieved by the death of their father (as we see Isaac and Ishmael mourn over their father) but they are also not undone by his death. We see many families in the Bible who are completely ripped apart by the death of the father. Internal squabbles destroy the unity of longstanding homes, and even kingdoms are brought down due to bad planning for succession and training in goodness. The good father is the one who looks past their own life and seeks to build a legacy that will be honored by their children, and Abraham seems to have done this. But how did he accomplish this feat?

Godly Example

“Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock...”

-1 Peter 5:2-3

There are many angles that we could take that question, but the most important one is illustrated for us in the above passage. The good leader is not one who merely commands and orders goodness, nor is he one who uses force to coerce those beneath him into obedience. But, primarily, the good leader is one who takes their own advice. They don't just tell the people around them what to do, they embody it and act it out. Even when they fail to uphold their own ideal, they don't slip into a cycle of blame and self-justification, they repent of their wrong and move forward. This is what we see from Abraham. We even see this demonstrated in his wife “Keturah”.

While there is some debate about the identity of this woman, the vast majority of Jewish commentaries identify this woman as none other than Hagar. The reason for the new name is not to hide her identity, but instead to show this key practice within Abraham's life. It is no secret that one of Abraham's biggest mistakes was sleeping with Hagar and fathering a son with her. However, when this mistake became apparent, Abraham didn't run from the consequences, but sought to make things as right as he could.

While Sarah was alive, Abraham honored the will of Sarah, and God, by sending Hagar and Ishmael away while he attended to Isaac and Sarah. After Sarah's death though, it would make sense that he would bring Hagar back to himself, becoming more of a father to Ishmael and having more children with her. Remember, Hagar is presented by the author of Genesis to be innocent in her behavior, this is why God meets her twice in the wilderness and enters into a covenant with her and Ishmael.

The evidence for this reconciliation can be found in Ishmael and Isaac attending the funeral for Abraham. If Abraham would never have reconciled with Ishmael and Hagar, the odds that he would attend his father's funeral are fairly low. The other hint is in the name itself. “Keturah” means incense and incense refers to something that gives off a pleasing aroma after being burned. This makes a lot of sense, since Hagar was a woman who was cruelly treated by both Sarah and Abraham, but after being “burned” by her master, she is received by God and is returned to Abraham as a beautiful “incense” within his home.

Regardless of how we take this incident though, the clear and obvious fact is that Abraham did succeed in amending his mistakes. As such, he did not leave his family in

disarray and chaos, but he left his family in a mended state, where Isaac and Ishmael had made peace with one another and did not fight over his inheritance. This is, by the way, no small feat. Even families with modest inheritances will erupt into bitterness and backbiting to pilfer the assets of their deceased relative. The fact that Isaac, Ishmael, and the other sons of Abraham don't do this is representative of the good example and legacy that Abraham left to his children.

Faithfulness to God

“Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived.”

-Genesis 25:21

The other legacy that Abraham left his children was supreme dependence upon God. When Isaac and Rebekah experience barrenness, Isaac immediately recognizes his own helplessness to resolve the situation. Anyone who has experienced the misery of being unable to conceive can tell you how much anxiety and marital strife this problem can cause. While we do know that Isaac married Rebekah at 40, and she bore Jacob and Esau at 60, we are not told how these two decades of barrenness affected Isaac or Rebekah. But what this passage does teach us is that Isaac ultimately accepted God's sovereignty in his life.

“Shall I bring to the time of birth, and not cause delivery?” says the LORD.

“Shall I who cause delivery shut up the womb?” says your God.”

-Isaiah 66:9

God is the one who causes delivery and shuts up the womb. In the modern age with all of our technological advancements that allow us to prevent pregnancy and overcome infertility issues, it is easy to think that the creation of life is something that we can control; but that just isn't true. A husband and a wife can implement all sorts of methods of “birth control” but ultimately God is in control of pregnancy. Every time a man and woman come together in intimacy they have the potential of creating life, while this potential can be mitigated, it can't be taken away. Even within our control, if the womb is closed, no amount of intervention can change that. Certain techniques can increase the probability of conception, but nothing can give total certainty to the couple who is trying to conceive.

Abraham and Sarah, who suffered from decades of infertility, recognized this all important lesson. Throughout the years of struggling and searching for a solution for their problem, God waited until Sarah was physically unable to bear children before God allowed her to become pregnant. And even after Isaac was born, God commanded

Abraham to sacrifice Isaac to Himself. While God spared Isaac, the lesson sunk in deep for Abraham. We are not in control of this life, we are underneath the sovereign care of our God. This is why, when Isaac and Rebekah suffered from infertility, his ultimate response to this problem was to fall at the feet of God and receive from Him whatever God willed. While it is a small incident, it is exemplary of Abraham's ultimate legacy, and reminds us why, after thousands of years, we still look up to Abraham and proudly declare that we are his children.

A Continuation of the Fall

That being said, let's move into the life of Jacob.

"But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If all is well, why am I like this?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.

And the LORD said to her:

"Two nations are in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger." So when her days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents. And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob."

-Genesis 25:22-28

As we can see, even Isaac, who was the child of promise, was not immune to the consequences of the fall. Within the womb, the children of Isaac and Rebekah are already fighting with one. Once again, in the modern era we tend to think that we have total control over nature. This is why modern parents have a tendency to believe that every success or failure of their children is totally within their power. The metaphor that I have found really useful to explain this phenomenon versus the true way that God has intended for us to view parenting is carpentry versus gardening.

A carpenter is dealing with death, inanimate objects. As such, he has almost complete control over what he is making. However, a gardener is working with a living thing. Plants have their own make-up, character, and individual way that they will grow. While the carpenter's job is to create a specific result, the work of the gardener is to nurture and shape the organic growth of something else. Because of this, a gardener understands that they have massive limitations towards what they are able to

accomplish, and yet, they still do have some power and control over the growth of their plant.

This is the reality that Rebekah is faced with early on. Her job as mother has not even begun, and yet, her children are already fighting with one another. I think that the greatest fear of most parents, especially most mothers, is for division within the family. That is why sibling rivalry can be particularly painful for a parent to go through. In modern day, we have a slew of parenting books and techniques that teach us how to avoid sibling rivalry and how to raise our kids as individuals without jealousy. While much of this advice is good, if we take this advice too far, we can start to believe that we can actually stop sibling rivalry through correct parenting, or create sibling rivalry through bad parenting. This isn't true though. Jacob and Esau are already at odds within the womb because the spirit of man is already fallen and incomplete at the moment of conception.

“Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?”

-James 4:1

We will certainly delve deeper into this rivalry as the book of Genesis goes on, but for now I just wanted to point out that the ultimate cause of rivalries in general have to do with conflicting desires. The soul of man was designed to be filled with an infinite resource, God Himself. But since we are born outside of a relationship with God, man naturally seeks satisfaction in the finite resources of this world. But, since these resources are truly finite, we will necessarily come into conflict with one another because of our desires.

The wrestling that happens within the womb is probably as simple as the desire for space, but over time siblings will fight over the most important resource in any home, the love and attention of the parents. So, even though Isaac and Rebekah didn't create the rivalry between their sons, they certainly made it worse by choosing to favor one over the other. Isaac chose to favor Esau's power and strength, exemplified in his skills as a hunter, while Rebekah favored the more gentle and clever disposition of Jacob.

But, as I mentioned before, even though Isaac and Rebekah made the situation worse, the personalities of Jacob and Esau were always destined to clash. In ideal circumstances, the differences between two people are resolved in the act of love. Love, in a macro sense, is the characteristic of God that allows for two persons to become “one” in a sense, while maintaining their identity. Think about marriage as the ultimate example of this. In a loving marriage, a couple maintains their identity while

also incorporating a lot of the characteristics of their spouse. This allows for someone to refine aspects of their own personality in opposition to the strengths of their spouse. While this process is, in many ways, painful and requires self-denial, if it is done properly, it will allow for true union to take place without one party losing their identity.

The great irony of Jacob and Esau is that they actually have complimentary personality traits. Meaning that, if they learned to co-exist in the same tribe, they would have much more easily refined the rough parts of their personalities and become better. However, it was their sin that disabled them from achieving unity that would have assimilated their personalities in a useful way. So let's take the rest of this paper to delve deep into the personalities of these two men. By doing this we will understand why Jacob will become the symbol of all those who follow God, and why Esau is the symbol of all those who will ultimately reject God.

The Hunter and the Trickster

“Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, “Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary.” Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, “Sell me your birthright as of this day.” And Esau said, “Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?” Then Jacob said, “Swear to me as of this day.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.”

-Genesis 25:29-34

Within this short account, the author of Genesis has given us a brilliant depiction of the key differences between Esau and Jacob that will persist throughout their lives. And this difference really boils down to the roles that Esau and Jacob play within the family as the hunter and the trickster.

Esau

“And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau.”

-Genesis 25:25

The first keys we are given to the personalities of these two men is in the form of symbols, but these symbols are later vindicated in the actual behavior of Esau and Jacob. Esau's name can literally be translated as “hairy” because of how he came out of the womb. While his parents probably thought of this name as funny, it ended up being

quite significant to Esau's personality. In the Bible, hair can be used as a symbol for a type of covering and an extension of someone's glory or power. This is why one of the requirements of the Nazarite vow, (described in Numbers 6), was to not cut their hair while they were fulfilling their vow. And then they completed the vow by shaving their head and burning their hair. The man who made this vow most famous was Samson who was bound to this vow for his entire life. This is why when Delilah cut his hair he lost his power. Hair is symbolized in more places than this though, like in Proverbs 16:31 which describes gray hair as a "crown of glory" or in 1 Corinthians 11 when Paul tells the Corinthian women not to shave their head because their hair is a glory for them. This might seem very strange, and even misogynistic to our modern ears until we understand how ancient man saw hair.

Because hair is symbolic of someone's glory, it makes sense that Esau would be born covered in hair. Meaning that Esau, from his earliest moments, is seen as a man covered in glory, or power, that is from himself. Even in our modern day we can understand this concept as men who have a lot of body hair have, historically, been seen as more masculine and powerful. This symbol becomes even more clear though in a following verse.

The Hunter and the Shepherd

"So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents."

-Genesis 25:27

Esau is now depicted as a hunter. While being a hunter is not necessarily a bad thing, this profession is used in a symbolic way by the author of Genesis throughout.

"Cush begot Nimrod; he began to be a mighty one on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; therefore it is said, 'Like Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD.'"

-Genesis 10:8-9

The people of God are usually shown as being shepherds who raise and cultivate livestock, as opposed to being hunters who kill wild game. Which is a similar contrast between Christ, who is called the "Good Shepherd" and Satan who is always depicted as a hunter or a predator, like a snake or a roaring lion. Once again, this is not a commentary on the profession itself, but instead it is a symbolic depiction of character. To put it another way, the shepherd symbolizes someone who lives within nature and cultivates life while the hunter is one who exercises power over nature in order to pursue and take life. This is how the Christian author Matthieu Pageau describes this difference in his very interesting book "The Language of Creation":

“Like Cain, the descendants of Ham are kingly prototypes credited with building the first cities and ruling over powerful empires. Nimrod is called a “hunter” which points to his ability to kill wild animals as opposed to pasturing domesticated animals. This is the expression of power in contrast with authority, an important pattern that is repeated in the relationship between Jacob and Esau...

Esau (also called Edom) is identified in the Bible as a nation of kings while Israel is called a nation of priests (compare Genesis 36:31 with Exodus 19:6).”

-Matthieu Pageau - “The Language of Creation: Cosmic Symbolism in Genesis”

This is why the juxtaposition given to us in Genesis is that Esau was a hunter, but Jacob was a “mild man”. This is a bit of a mistranslation that results from the Biblical translators trying to make sense of the juxtaposition without taking into account the symbolic content. The word translated “mild” here is actually the Hebrew word “tām”, which actually means “perfection or wholeness”. In other words, the writer of Genesis is using Esau’s vocation as a hunter as a commentary on his actual character in contrast to Jacob’s character.

Once again, this doesn’t mean that the personality of the hunter is a bad thing, it is actually good to have strong men in a society who will contend with nature. These kinds of men make great generals and even political figures, but they should only run things in times of great crisis. The reason for this is because a hunter does not create new possibilities or potential, they only conquer and subordinate the resources that are around them. The shepherd or the farmer, takes a resource and multiplies it. By doing this, they create greater opportunity and benefit for everyone. Because of this, the shepherd, or the farmer is better to lead a nation because they are about multiplying resources within a nation as opposed to capturing resources by the use of force.

Unfortunately, as we can see from Isaac’s acceptance of Esau, the majority of people see the “hunter” as more valuable than the “shepherd” because they appear more masculine and powerful. It is not a mistake that the original Sanskrit word for “war” literally means “the desire for more cows”. The majority of leaders that mankind appoints tend to be the “hunter” archetype that expands the resources and land of the nation by conquering others.

While this personality type becomes necessary during times of crisis and unprovoked war, the better leader is the one who is a farmer or a shepherd, one who multiplies resources through innovation and good management. The greatest expansion of wealth in human history has not been from nations expanding outwards in conquest, but through things like the agricultural revolution, the industrial revolution, and the

information revolution that we are in now. It isn't a mistake the gift that Jacob gives his father to get the blessing comes from the flock that he shepherded and the animal that Esau gets comes from hunting.

Despising Responsibility

To put this more simply, Esau is seen as the kind of man who uses power to pursue his insatiable desires while Jacob is someone who has an inner contentment that allows him to simply "dwell in tents". This doesn't make Jacob harmless, we will examine his character in a second, but this inner quality that Jacob has makes his bad points come out as more of a harmless trickster than a true malevolent villain. This all might seem like mere speculation, but the above story lays out this point clearly. In the story, Esau has come back from a hunt exhausted while Jacob is making a stew. In his impatient lust, Esau casually trades his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew.

At face value, this can seem like more than a cruel trick, but the author of Genesis is quick to tell us that Esau made this trade willingly because he "despised his birthright." In other words, Esau wasn't taken advantage of here, he genuinely did not care about his birthright. In fact, we have no indication that this event even bothered him, until Genesis 27 when Jacob tricks Isaac into giving him the family blessing. In other words, he doesn't mourn the loss of the birthright until he loses the accompanying blessings. But why didn't Esau care about his birthright?

The birthright that we are talking about was the rights of the firstborn in ancient culture. These rights were essentially a passing down of the patriarchal mantle to the next generation. Meaning, that ancient people living in this area were more tribal and familial than we are today. The "head", or patriarch, of the family was given much respect and acted more like a ruler than a mere parent. As such, they had the majority of the family land, and were responsible for being the financial and spiritual leaders of the family. What we see from Esau in his role as a hunter is that he wants the spoils without the responsibility. A shepherd must take care of their flock. They raise them, they feed them, and through their care they produce more and more of them that they can use for food and clothing. A hunter is one who takes no responsibility for animals, but instead kills a wild animal for food and clothing.

This opportunistic attitude is one that Esau also passed down to his children. In a really obscure book of the Bible, Obadiah, God pronounces judgment upon the children of Esau for their actions towards the children of Jacob. In it He says this:

"For violence against your brother Jacob, Shame shall cover you, And you shall be cut off forever. In the day that you stood on the other side— In the day that strangers

carried captive his forces, When foreigners entered his gates And cast lots for Jerusalem—Even you were as one of them.”

-Obadiah 1:10-11

This is the spirit of opportunism that Esau embodied. He didn't want any responsibility, but he did crave blessing. This is why Esau is depicted as short-tempered, cruel, proud, and selfish. He never learned how to cultivate responsibility and true discipline, he only understood power. This is why the Bible has such harsh pronouncements against Esau like:

“I have loved you,” says the LORD. “Yet you say, ‘In what way have You loved us?’ Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” Says the LORD. “Yet Jacob I have loved; But Esau I have hated, And laid waste his mountains and his heritage For the jackals of the wilderness.”

-Malachi 1:2-3

God here is not saying that He unconditionally loved Jacob and unconditionally hated Esau, only that the character of Jacob and Esau developed over time. Jacob's became acceptable, while Esau's seemed to deteriorate and become worse. In other words, God is saying that because He rejected the behavior of Esau He “hated” or rejected the descendants of Esau, or the culture of the Edomites. While Jacob ended up changing over time and became one who was approved by God, becoming the patriarch of the Israelites. The writer of Hebrews puts this point even more clearly in Hebrews 12:

“Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.”

-Hebrews 12:14-17

Edom

Once again, this isn't saying that Esau could never have been accepted, only that he wouldn't be accepted. To put it another way, his behavior revealed a character quality that is fundamentally irredeemable, and the writer of Hebrews is warning against it. What is this spirit? The spirit that despises responsibility and only pursues its own desires.

“And Esau said to Jacob, “Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary.” Therefore his name was called Edom.”

-Genesis 25:30

While Jacob starts out with a more negative name, he eventually receives a new, more positive, identity from God. Esau on the other hand starts out with a “powerful” name, but ends up with a worse identity in the end. “Edom” literally means “red” and is symbolically associated with passion and anger. While a little passion is good, Esau receives this particular moniker not because he was a “passionate” guy, but because his emotions controlled him.

“Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls.”

-Proverbs 25:28

Esau was a man who lacked all self-control. His passions and emotions controlled him to such a point that he became an irredeemable man. Because of this, Esau becomes the basis for classic movie villains like Gaston from “Beauty and the Beast”. The imagery is not subtle if you know what to look for. Gaston brags that he is covered in hair, he is a hunter, and he always wears red. This is why Gaston feels entitled to Belle’s affection and why he grows murderous towards the beast, who is a true rival to Gaston in strength and in genuinely winning Belle’s love.

This is also why the writer of Hebrews associates Esau with the root of bitterness. Forgiveness is itself an act of responsibility and self-denial. In order to forgive another person, one has to surrender themselves to the justice of God and give God the authority to judge another person. The decision to hold a grudge or remain bitter, is a decision to deny God His role as judge of the earth.

“Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.”

-Romans 12:29

God doesn’t command us to forgive because we have no right to be angry, He commands us to forgive because we have no ultimate right or authority to judge another person. God Himself is the judge of the earth and He will execute judgment for the sins done on the earth. While there are mechanisms available to us for partial judgment to be done now, like through courts or even the church, ultimate judgment belongs to God. Forgiveness is a responsibility that someone shoulders in service of God and in recognition of His divine prerogative. Esau was unwilling to do this, which is why he harbors a murderous rage towards Jacob for taking something from him that he despised. It is this proud and out of control attitude that condemned Esau, not some arbitrary choice that God made before Esau was formed.

“Behold the proud, His soul is not upright in him; But the just shall live by his faith. Indeed, because he transgresses by wine, He is a proud man, And he does not stay at home. Because he enlarges his desire as hell, And he is like death, and cannot be satisfied, He gathers to himself all nations And heaps up for himself all peoples.”

-Habakkuk 2:4-5

To live by faith, or to live in contentment towards God and His will and purpose for our life, is something that the proud man cannot do. Esau was too consumed by his own ego, his own desires, and his power to ever bow to God. It is also incredibly hard for the proud to recognize their own limitations. To live by faith, is to acknowledge our innate lack and need for grace and mercy to lift us up. The one who is proud and strong will always find it difficult to admit their own lack, they tend to blame others for their own faults and never find legitimate repentance, and this is why Esau was ultimately rejected.

Jacob/ the Trickster

“Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau’s heel; so his name was called Jacob.”

-Genesis 25:26

This in no way means that Jacob came out a perfect man, just that he is ultimately redeemed in Genesis. Jacob’s name literally means “heel catcher” or, one who tries to supplant what is above him. This title, (although it was given as a bit of a joke), becomes prophetic towards Jacob’s role as the “trickster” within the family. The archetype of the trickster is found throughout stories around the world. This is Loki in Asgard mythology, Prometheus in Greek mythology, Jack in “Jack and the Beanstalk”, and Bugs Bunny in Looney Toons.

The “trickster” is the one who mocks those in power and seeks to steal treasure that is above them. So, Prometheus steals fire from the heavens and Jack steals gold from the giant at the top of the beanstalk. The trickster points out the unfairness of the world they are born into and seeks to correct the injustice through trickery or deception.

This is exactly Jacob’s story. Even though God has already pronounced that Jacob should rule over Esau, Isaac prefers Esau because of his power and his skill at hunting. Beyond God’s pronouncement, Esau also shows disdain for his birthright and demonstrates a character that would make a brutish and selfish leader. Even so, Isaac won’t budge and maintains his favor over Esau. This created an unjust home that couldn’t be overturned through normal means.

But, since Jacob has the personality of the trickster, instead of fighting his brother, or his father, he seeks justice through tricks. We do see this throughout history, every positive revolution tends to start with men who are more or less tricksters. Think about Elijah in the book of 1st Kings who prays against the rain in order to impoverish the nation, and when he confronts the priests of Baal in 1st Kings 19 he begins to mock them. Think of the “Boston Tea Party” which was the first major act of defiance enacted by the American colonies against British tyranny. But it was performed by many drunk men who disguised themselves as Native Americans and tossed a bunch of tea in the harbor.

Like in the story “The Emperor's New Clothes”, when power structures become corrupt, it is often the “trickster” to mock the absurdity of the culture they are in. When this role is enacted correctly, it can point out corruption and mismanagement, but this role has to be itself supplanted with a more serious spirit that can actually build something better as opposed to only mocking what is. Negative revolutions, like the French Revolution or the Russian Revolution, start in much the same way, with “tricksters” mocking the center of their society. But they turn out bad because the mockery never turns serious. As a result, you have an endless cycle of cannibalism until someone truly malicious takes over and re-establishes order through terror.

The Need For Maturity

This is what makes the “trickster” so interesting. Unlike the “hunter” who has a more fixed identity, the “trickster” necessarily has a more flexible identity that needs to mature over time. The poet and artist Tim Callahan describes the character of the trickster this way:

“The central characteristic of the Trickster is that he (usually, although sometimes she) has no fixed nature. Just when we’ve decided he’s a villain, he does something heroic. Just when we’re sure he’s a fool, he does something intelligent. . . . Yes, the Trickster does charm us, even when we know he’s lying.”

The mischievous child is a great example of this character trope. Think about Kevin MacCallister in the Christmas classic “Home Alone”. Kevin is the youngest in his family making him the weakest and most helpless child. Because of this, he experiences a lot of bullying from his older siblings and lacks the strength to stand up for himself directly. He is also “rejected” in most ways by his parents who prefer the more strong and articulate figure of Buzz to Kevin’s whiny and immature personality. This in turn makes Kevin the “trickster” of his family who tries to get his way through mockery and

deception. This eventually leads to him “saving the day” through a series of dangerous pranks that defeat the villains of the movie.

However, as affable and funny as the character of the trickster might be, it is an incomplete identity that doesn’t age well. I like how Solomon points out this problem in Ecclesiastes 10:

“The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself. The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness: and the end of his talk is mischievous madness. A fool also is full of words: a man cannot tell what shall be; and what shall be after him, who can tell him?”

-Ecclesiastes 10:12-14

While the “fool” or the “trickster” can point out injustices, they can’t actually build something better. Like the “hunter”, they lack responsibility and the ability to create, they only have the ability to mock and undermine. While this can be effective at confounding the plans of the oppressive, it isn’t going to fix what is broken. While Kevin can effectively combat the thieves in the movie, he is ultimately unable to defeat them. It takes a strong and responsible figure in the end to actually stop the villains of the story. This is one of the ways to understand Solomon’s depiction of the “fool”. The trickster relies upon their wit to get their way, but they ultimately are caught in their own mechanisms. Think of the figure of the clown who sprays themselves in the face with water and slips on their own banana peel.

This also goes along with the great irony of the trickster, their great desire is to be loved. The majority of comedians will say that their comedy was a way to be liked and gain approval, and basically all the tricksters in popular stories have as an ultimate goal the attainment of love and approval. Jacob craves the approval of his father, same with Loki, Kevin Macalister craves his mother’s love, and Prometheus craves the love of humans.

This irony both makes the trickster easier to redeem, as well as an ultimately tragic figure if they aren’t. Since the hunter craves power and an end to their own desires, they tend towards selfishness. While the trickster craves approval making them more empathetic and compassionate towards others, especially those less fortunate than them. However, since the trickster seeks approval through tricks, they end up losing the trust and approval of those they are trying to please. Because of this, the lips of the fool will “swallow up themselves.”

The trickster tries to catch others in their machinations, but is ultimately defeated by their own designs. Jacob successfully tricks his brother, twice, but this doesn't actually get him the birth right, instead he has to flee his own home to avoid being killed by his brother. But, it is in running from his brother that Jacob begins to experience redemption. Like Jack from "Jack and the Beanstalk", Jacob is shown a ladder that stretches into the heavens. To put it another way, God reveals to him a hierarchy of value that points to God Himself. The trickster is very shortsighted, only thinking about confounding the powerful, they tend to not have any long-term goals. God is pointing Jacob's vision to the very highest. Instead of living for himself, God is asking Jacob to live for Him and His glory.

This vision begins Jacob's journey to redemption. He meets his future wife and consigns himself to work for her father to earn her hand. This transitions his life to being a shepherd.

The Shepherd/ Israel

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

-Psalm 23:1-3

While both the hunter and the trickster have a role within their given societies, they are also incomplete identities that can turn evil if they never mature. While Satan is associated with "the hunter" at various times, he is also associated with "the trickster" at various other times. Satan is the one who opposes God, not through force, but through deception and manipulation. The snake in the garden of Eden is the ultimate manifestation of both archetypes. The snake is both a predator, as well as a trickster. Snake's do devour prey, but they do so through venom and cunning more than brute strength. And when the "trickster" does not mature, he can also become a more "demonic" figure, think of the Joker from Batman for a good example of this.

But these archetypes are also not innately bad. For Jesus is also depicted as a lion, and in some ways as the trickster. Remember that He defeats sin and death not through a giant battle in which He overpowers Satan. But instead He seemingly falls into Satan's trap on the cross and is brutalized and killed. However, instead of being undone by sin and death, Jesus, through His death, overcomes sin and death. This means that far from being bad, the archetypes can reflect the very nature of God.

This leads to the archetype of "the shepherd". The shepherd is not really an innate archetype for anyone, but is instead a more ideal character that we are all striving to

become. The shepherd both uses strength to protect and discipline the sheep, as well as using their wits to overcome the far more powerful predators that want to devour the innocent. In other words, becoming “the shepherd” means exercising the wit of the trickster, and the strength of the hunter towards the responsibility of caring for the helpless, (symbolically the sheep).

By doing this, the shepherd has an ability that the hunter and the trickster lack, to create new potential and possibility. The hunter and the trickster can only grow their resources by taking what belongs to someone else, the shepherd is actually able to multiply opportunity by exercising their strength towards cultivating new life. This is ironically why the hunter and the trickster need each other. Only by experiencing the limits of our own ability are we shown our need to look outside ourselves and experience grace.

When Jacob deceives Esau, Esau was supposed to look inside and see the flaws within his own character. Instead he merely blames Jacob for the frustrations in his own life and seeks to murder his brother. There is some indication that Esau experiences a small amount of redemption when he meets his brother again, but this redemption is limited and as a result, Jacob never fully reconciles with his brother, and the nation that Esau founded continued in the same destructive patterns that Esau exhibited.

Jacob, on the other hand, by being driven from his home, goes to his uncle Laban’s house and literally becomes a shepherd. In this vocation, and through many of Laban’s deceptions towards Jacob, Jacob does begin to learn the importance of humility and honesty, but he still lacks the character that he needs. So, God commands Jacob to return to his own home and meet his brother. Jacob, still in the heart of the trickster, tries many different methods to appease his brother through gifts. When that doesn’t work, he finally begins to take responsibility on his own shoulders, separates himself from his family and prepares himself to receive the consequences of his own actions.

It is here that God finally meets Jacob face to face, but, even still, he can’t give up his old habits and seeks to literally wrestle a blessing out of God. After wrestling with God all night, God dislocated Jacob’s hip. By doing this, Jacob is now in a position where he has no choice but to trust in the deliverance of God, and he grabs the waist of God begging for a blessing. It is only here, at the end of his strength, that Jacob is finally free to receive his new identity “Israel”.

Israel means “one who contends with God” and is the perfect new identity for all who call on the name of God. The person who truly submits to God is the one who recognizes that they can’t find their ultimate good in any place except for God Himself. As such, by recognizing that God is our highest good and our ultimate purpose is found

in Him, the Christian must “contend with God” for any and all blessings of our life. The reason why this is seen as “wrestling” is because our flesh doesn’t want to surrender to God, it always puts up some sort of resistance towards God and His purposes. But the soul finds its ultimate rest when it finds its ultimate peace and contentment in the love and grace of God.

“Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.”

-James 4:1-3

Both the hunter and the trickster are broken by their desires to find pleasure and contentment where it can’t be found. The hunter searches incessantly to satisfy their desires in the world, and the trickster is trying to usurp the position of another to gain peace, but both are confounded in the end. Only when someone recognizes their ultimate end in God can they find the true joy that comes, not through conquest, but through surrender. James tells us *“you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.”* Meaning that if we stopped struggling to find our ultimate fulfillment and merely asked God for Himself, we would be given what our souls long for. And in this contentment, we could finally find rest and mature out of the negative qualities of our nature.

Even though this is true, we are still ultimately “Israel”. In our best moments we will realize this and find our ultimate contentment in God, but we still have a tendency to rise up and “wrestle” against the will and purposes of our God. This is the struggle that the Christian finds themselves in, but one that should move us more and more into a state of surrender that brings rest in the presence of our Lord.

“Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Thy power, and Thy wisdom infinite. And Thee would man praise; man, but a particle of Thy creation; man, that bears about him his mortality, the witness of his sin, the witness that Thou resistest the proud: yet would man praise Thee; he, but a particle of Thy creation. Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee...and they that seek the Lord shall praise Him: for they that seek shall find Him, and they that find shall praise Him. I will seek Thee, Lord, by calling on Thee; and will call on Thee, believing in Thee; for to us hast Thou been preached. My faith, Lord, shall call on Thee, which Thou hast given me, wherewith Thou hast inspired me, through the Incarnation of Thy Son, through the ministry of the Preacher.”

-Augustine of Hippo - "The Confessions of St. Augustine"