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No 660.

The Life of Jacob.

Gen 27: 41.—

The name of Jacob is associated with some of the most marked events of Old Testament history. He was the second son of Isaac and Rebekah, a twin with Esau, and born after twenty years of wedlock which had been unblest with offspring. As often happens in the same family these two brothers proved to be totally at variance in temperament and character, from birth. Indeed, before their birth, God gave a prophetic interpretation to the mother's strange consciousness of inward conflict, saying "Two nations are in thy womb and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels: And the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger." And so it proved. The first born of the twin children was red and rough skinned, covered over with a thick down or fur like a hairy garment, and hence received the name Esau: hairy Jacob, different in complexion and appearance was as different in all the features of character. But according to the divine

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prophecy, he was destined to supplant his brother, notwithstanding his more delicate and tender nature, and hence his name which was also prophetic "supplanter". His first act was to lay hold upon his infant brother's heel. which, symbolizing the tripping up an adversary in wrestling or running, became the type of the lifelong antagonism of the brothers and the ultimate superiority of the younger over the Elder twin.

Diversity of temperament naturally meant diversity of employment. And so Esau became a cunning hunter, finding in such a wild restless life, an outlet to the wild restlessness of his character, and subjecting himself probably to the corrupting society of the heathen Canaanites round about; while Jacob followed the quieter safer purer pastoral life of his forefathers growing up under more civilizing and refining influences, an upright man, of domestic tastes and habits

There are few lives whose incidents are treated so much in detail, in the Bible, as that of Jacob. We are compelled therefore in order to bring this discourse within reasonable range to consider only those marked and conspicuous events of his history which like mountains in a landscape rise above the dead level of common place, into individual prominence.

The first of these events is the purchase of Esau's birthright. This has already been considered in reviewing the history of the Elder brother. Yet as there were two parties to the transaction, so it is in more senses than one, "two faced". Having viewed it from the side of Esau, let us now view it from that of Jacob, with regard to whom it was the first of those events fulfilling the prophecy that he should supplant to

Let us bear in mind that the birthright bore enfolded in it peculiar privileges: a double patrimony, patriarchal headship in the family or tribe, priestly and perhaps prophetic honors, the blessing of the firstborn & other less definite and distinct marks of spiritual priority and precedence.

From the first Jacob coveted this birthright heritage which belonged to Esau. And it was certainly very pardonable in Jacob to covet this which included the "best gifts" of patriarchal times, since such earnest desire only proved how much he appreciated all that the birthright represented. But as to the means by which he obtained it, we cannot hesitate to pronounce them mean, selfish, unfraternal, untruthful, unjust and outrageous.

There is no attempt in the Bible annals of this sad transaction to cloak or even soften as by a veil of apology the hideous features of this whole performance! The impartial scriptures chronicles tell the whole tale and leave us to draw our own inferences. And to attempt any specious excuse for such vicious overreaching of a brother would imply too much sympathy with its crafty & wily perpetrator. No one can hesitate to pronounce it a breach of every law of natural affection, humanity good morals and domestic faith, who considers these facts.

1. That Jacob took advantage of his brother's need and distress to wrest it from him. Esau's Exigency, Emergency, necessity he made his opportunity

The odor of the savory pottage appeals to the appetite of a half-famished brother, who in the agony of extreme hunger is faint for food. Natural affection, fraternal regard, - even common humanity imperatively demanded that he should at once and freely supply Esau's need. But when we hear him, ⁱⁿ under such circumstances, demand the transfer of his birthright, as the price of the relief of hunger, we cannot but feel a righteous indignation and wonder that Esau did not forcibly seize and appropriate so much of the savory dish as his hunger required. That certainly would have been far less a breach of propriety or even good morals - and in these days I do not think the courts would deal very harshly with a man for appropriating food from his brother's mess.

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Again, look at the monstrous deception and trickery by which Jacob secured as it were the father's dying legacy of blessing in his own favor. The first suggestion of the fraud came from a too partial mother from whom he seems to have inherited a treacherous and untruthful character. But how readily he entered into both the acted & the spoken lie. The substitution of kid's flesh for wild game, of kid skin for Esau's hairy surface, and the assumption of his brother's vestments. All this is the acted lie.

Then as one sin leads to another, see how Jacob was compelled to cover the acted by the spoken lie. Having entered upon a course of deception, at least three deliberate falsehoods were necessary to complete his purpose.

As he approached Isaac's bed, and called the attention of the blind old father, he asked who art thou my son? "I am Esau thy firstborn! I have done as thou badest me: arise I pray thee, ^{and sit} and eat of my venison, that thy soul may bless me! One lie and a compound one, too. Surprised at the speed with which his behests had been fulfilled the father asks: How is it that thou hast formed it so quickly, my son? "Because the Lord thy God brought it to me! a second lie confirmed by an indirect appeal to God! anxious to test by touch where the Eye and Ear gave but indistinct reports, the old man drawing his son near felt the downy goat skin, and feeling his doubt give way, once more, with greater emphasis and solemnity inquired: art thou my very son Esau?

"I am": a third lie, which in response to such a question becomes virtual perjury! One can think of nothing more closely parallel than the threefold lie of Peter when cowardice betrayed him into the repeated asseveration "I know not the man," confirmed with oaths and blasphemy, even as Jacob ratified his falsehood by an indirect appeal to the most high, and perjured himself by a falsehood, when adjured to swear truly!

For one, I would no more think of apologizing for the dishonesty and stratagem by which Jacob obtained from his father that blessing which made good his previous purchase of Esau's birthright than I would of excusing these modern "confidence games," whereby villains are daily imposing upon the credulity of simpleminded unsuspecting men.

But it is Easy to deal in indignant denunciations of the selfishness and wickedness of the course of Jacob, and at the same time forget that what is incapable of any defence, may be qualified by many extenuating circumstances.

1 First of all, there is in us all a natural repugnance and resistance to all rights of Primogeniture. Who can contemplate the custom of arbitrarily conferring on the Eldest son the most enviable rights and privileges, irrespective entirely of character, tho' he be in every respect inferior to younger brothers, without feeling that such a system cannot belong to a high state of society; and that even when permitted by God it was only for a crude age, a preparatory period to a more perfect social state.

Especially in this case, did it doubtless seem akin to injustice that a brother who was twin with himself should inherit such a patrimony of property & privilege, merely because he was born first - a few moments of precedence in the accident of birth giving such immense precedence in the family!

2^d Again, what if Jacob felt in himself a conscious superiority to his brother in all that constituted fitness to bear birthright honors & dignities? Esau was by nature and habit an unspiritual man, all the purposes & pursuits, tastes and customs of his life shew a want of sympathy toward things of religion. And can there be any doubt that he had betrayed in some way his low estimate of the birthright? If by some previous expression of con-

tempt for his firstborn heritage of blessing, Jacob had discovered that Esau undervalued and could be easily induced to part with it we can at once see how Jacob was led to propose such a barter.

3^d Again, let us remember that Jacob's precedence in the family was a matter of prophecy. Even before the birth of these twin brothers, the mother was told by God that "the elder should serve the younger," an utter revolution of the patriarchal order. and no judgment pronounced upon her conduct or that of her person will be fair and impartial which overlooks this fact. Her expectation that Jacob should supplant his brother in the priority of the family was not merely a matter of partiality: it was based on prophecy. She had from the be-

gimming cherished this belief: and her manifest fault was in not leaving to god the fulfilment of his prophetic promise. Like many another, of feeble faith she must needs help prophecy to its fulfilment - when every thing seemed to be about to be lost, she was moved to secure all by treachery & trickery. It may be added in qualification of Rebekah's conduct that Jacob's domestic traits had endeared him to her and that the prospect of Isaac's death and Esau's succession to household headship with his hateful Canaanitish wives assuming authority over herself was dark and threatening. To all these considerations might be added another of great weight, viz. that these people lived in a day of far less light upon all matters of divine law & human duty.

Notwithstanding all these extenuations, the whole transaction was faithless both towards God & man. The same impartial narrative which exposes Esau's idolatry of appetite and profane undervaluation of spiritual things, unveils the selfish craftiness of Jacob and his culpable ambition for preeminence. Though of a thoughtful and religious temperament - Jacob is held up before us as a man of many faults, and especially as lacking in the simple uprightness and truthfulness which so many in our day lack who make choice of heaven but grovel still upon Earth! and as we study Jacob's further history we shall see how the discipline of God's Providence was directed toward the purifying of Jacob's character from these vicious elements.

It is noticeable that though God allows this deceitful
stratagem to become means by which the prophe-
cy of Jacob's preeminence is confirmed - the language
of Isaac's benediction rises to no sublime heights
of inspiration and prophecy. "God give thee of
the dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth
and plenty of corn and wine: let people serve
thee and nations bow down to thee: be lord over
thy brethren and let thy mothers sons bow down
to thee. Cursed be every one that curseth thee and
blessed be every one ^{he that} blesseth thee" all this is the
language of merely temporal blessing - no hint
is here of those higher spiritual privileges twice
assured to Abraham, and once to Isaac. And
we cannot marvel if the windows of a hidden

future were not more gloriously opened in inspiring visions, since there was so much that was carnal and sinful in the whole conduct of the parties concerned. Isaac, controlled by parental partiality and the sway of appetite; Rebekah plotting with one son to outwit and defraud another; Esau sensual and carnal undervaluing his birthright privileges; Jacob wresting the same from his brother first by the meanest selfishness and then by deliberate falsehood & treachery - is it a marvel if smothered by such an atmosphere, the prophetic fires did not kindle brightly in the utterances of the aged sire, or illumine Jacob's future with the glory of any spiritual blessing or messianic revelation!

Punishment does not always, in this world follow close upon the heels of transgression: but, in this case, retribution proved swift footed. Scarce was the fraud by which Jacob deceived his father and betrayed his brother accomplished when the resentment of Esau filled Jacob and his mother with fear lest he should fall a victim to his brother's anger. And so she advised Jacob to go at once to Mesopotamia, where the family of his mother dwelt, and whence she came. In order to secure the father's emphatic approval of his departure into this distant land, Rebekah suggested the danger of Jacob's doing as Esau had done, marrying a Canaanitish woman and bringing into the home of his parents another element of disunion and dissension. Isaac therefore called Jacob and emphatically charged him to go Padan Aram & find a wife among his cousins.

ins, and added a parting blessing which in tone and scope was really grander than that which he had obtained by guile. It prophesied a numerous seed, and a sure inheritance in Canaan, and the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant, as his portion.

And so Jacob departed, from Beersheba toward Haran, which in a direct line was not less than 500 miles off. He had gone scarce one fifth of the way when at Luz or Bethel occurred that night-vision which is the next great event in his life. The sun had set. The night had come, he was footsore & weary, and making a pillow for his head out of the stones of the place he lay down to sleep. What must have been his feelings as he thus prepared for his sleep. An exile, in a wilderness, alone, pillowed on stones, going from home into a far off land

and already in his seventy eighth year, what had been the cause of all this estrangement from his own brother, this exile from father & mother and home? Simply his own sin. In the midst of danger, with a future dark & doubtful before him, fleeing from his brother's hate and violence, he must have seen his birthright blessing only as a great way off, with no Enchantment lent to the view by the dimness and indistinctness of distance! The fragmentary character of Bible biography leaves many an ellipsis to be supplied. And here is one. Jacob had grievously offended against the right. After making all due allowance for the imperfect revelation of gods will in those days when as yet even the mosaic and levitical code, not to say the Christian, had not been given, we cannot acquit Jacob of a very plain offence against truth.

We have no account of his repentance, and yet here at Luz, he is blessed with a glorious vision of God, which according to all spiritual Experience is inconsistent with a condition of heart such as that which prompted Jacobs selfishness and untruthfulness in his dealing with his father & brother in the matter of the birthright.

Now if we examine carefully into his life we find that as with Abraham revelation followed obedience so with Jacob, revelation followed humiliation, and for ourselves we have no doubt that this first revelation was preceded by such humiliation as prepared the way for the exile to receive a visit and vision of the God of Abraham and of Isaac. Doubtless from the time he left home, conscience and memory, those companions which attend the most solitary into the

mildest solitude and converse with us amid the most unbroken silence, had been unceasingly bringing up before him all the wrong of his past life. And especially as he lay down to sleep, must these reflections have forced themselves upon his mind and heart. Again we say we cannot imagine such a vision as that of Jacob's ladder to have been granted to any man in a path of unrepented wrong. But if we suppose that a true humiliation for his sins against god and his own household had softened his heart and humbled his soul, we can readily understand how even such a revelation could follow humiliation. how even such visions of glory could break upon Eyes whose sight was made clear by tears of contrition, and a new or revived faith in god.

The vision of Jacob's ladder is too important to be briefly passed by and demands separate treatment, by itself. But considered in its relations to this history, we must mark carefully its prominent features. It presented to Jacob the God of Abraham and of Isaac as his God. personally confirming the promises prophetically announced by Isaac. The significance of the vision may be indicated in the following particulars

1. The Promises: of an earthly estate, a numerous seed, and dimly of the messiah as about to spring from his immediately family.

2. The Providence of God. it assured him of divine presence in solitude and protection in danger. and by the ascending & descending angels beautifully symbolized communication between God and man.

3. Prayer. Without doubt, in the dreariness & desolation that oppressed the wanderer, he had cried out of these depths of despondency and despair unto God: and this midnight vision was God's answer - his petitions and confessions had ascended to God: and as surely would God's forgiveness and blessing come down.

4. Progress. I cannot but think that the ladder or staircase with its gradual ascent must have indicated to the patriarch the idea of success by struggle which his life exemplifies. God in those early days taught men by symbols - and Jacob saw that while heaven and earth were joined in covenant approach to God must be step by step only and the reward of patient climbing: endurance & endeavor are the means of growth in godliness &c.

The emotions of Jacob on awaking are worthy of notice.

1. He was impressed with the spirituality and omnipresence of God. Surely the Lord ^{Jehovah} in this place and I knew it not. Some have thought indeed that previously his ideas of the Deity was little more than that of a local God. But this seems unnecessarily literal as a construction of his language. Doubtless his notions of Jehovah were not peculiarly exalted or spiritual; those were primitive days, days of imperfect revelation - shadows rather than sunshine. But without ever having thought of Jehovah as confined to any locality, we can easily understand how such a vision might so increase and intensify his conceptions of God as a spiritual, omnipresent and everywhere present deity as to draw from him these expressions of awe and wonder.

This pouring oil upon the stones has an historic meaning or relation which demands a moment's notice. Many think that to this act of Jacob, in setting up a stone to mark a sacred spot, may be traced the origin of Cromlechs and all sacred stones. Certainly in after ages, we find the custom of having stones and those too anointed with oil as objects of idolatrous worship. Clement Alex. speaks "of worshipping Every oiled stone" and in like manner Arnobius refers to the worshipping of a stone smeared with oil as though there were in it a present power. It has been conjectured that the name Baetulia given to stones, called animated stones, by the Phoenicians was derived from this name Bethel. The erection of all such stones for worship was afterward forbidden as idolatrous - having grown into an abuse. Lev. 26: 1.

Abraham had in this neighborhood built an altar - and possibly the Providence of God guided Jacob to the very spot, thus doubly sanctified and henceforth to be known as Bethel: house of God.

3. Jacob was further impressed with the duty and privilege of entering into personal covenant with this God who had heard his prayer, guarded & guided him by his providence, and ratified to him the promises. And so he vowed: if God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go and will give me bread to eat and raiment to put on so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then shall Jehovah be my God, and this stone which I have set for a pillar shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me, I will surely give the tenth unto thee!

It may to appear to us in a more advanced age that the language of this covenant fails to shew that Jacob's ideas of the relations between God and man were of an exalted and refined nature; but again we say this was a rude age and an age of crude religious ideas, and for that day, Jacob's covenant may have implied as high a conception of obligation and as high ideal of consecration as the most spiritual devotedness in this radiant day of Christian knowledge. And I will only add that here as in the instance of Abraham giving tithes to Melchizedek, we have proof that the duty of consecrating a definite portion of property to the purposes of religion was recognized before the giving of any recorded law, as at Sinai.

The vice of parental partiality found a place even in the hearts and homes of the patriarchs. Esau became the pet of his father, perhaps because his bold reckless spirit was so much in contrast with Isaac's nerveless forceless quietness. But there was a gross selfishness and even sensuality that prompted or fed this partiality for Isaac was fond of the savory dishes which his wild unruly boy prepared from prey taken in hunting. Jacob on the other hand was equally petted + indulged by his mother, who was probably drawn to him by his more domestic traits, his tact and thrift and industry, but who allowed her partiality to warp her judgment and even her consciousness of right - her conscience, and prompt her and her son to grievous sins against truth and justice. Like other parental vices, this favoritism brought its own punishment, a life long train of estrangements and trials.

In Jacob's history we see parental partiality and treachery working its legitimate and natural results. Esau, excited to revenge, threatens Jacob's life and this moves Rebekah to send Jacob into exile. And so where unity should have dwelt was a divided house. domestic discord displaced harmony and hatred, brotherly love. And so the sins & errors of indulgent and partial parents brought a long train of miseries. In old age, left by both sons, their idols turned to scourges, the father finds his pet son disappointed and disinherited, the mother finds her pet son driven into exile and trial, and so even gods people find that whatever a man sows that shall he also reap. at least in this world our vices and follies bring a sure harvest.

Here we must pause in reviewing this patriarchal biography. So much of interest and importance remains to allow a mere rapid and cursory glance at the latter part of a most eventful and instructive life. and all I would add in looking back over the part of Jacob's history already reviewed is the Encouraging reflection, that almost any natural defects or even vicious propensities may be subdued and overcome, where a man's ruling aim and purpose are right, honorable, noble, holy. Looking at Jacob and Esau as we see them in their father's home we confess that we incline quite as much to like Esau the wild daring wayward but generous hunter, as Jacob the quiet domestic but artful and subtle and selfish heir to brotherly blessings. But God chose Jacob. and

the future proved that back of Jacob's faults follies and
vices there lay a soul capable of mighty exertion and
manly self conquest. And while Esau with all his
generous and noble traits disappears out of history,
comparatively forgotten, the character of Jacob
stands conspicuous among the noblest monuments
of the power of prayer and effort under the guidance
of God's spirit. Let us take courage. The world is full
of mixed characters. Heroes and heroines abound in
fiction but not in history, in partial biographies but
not in real life. In all of us the good and evil dwell
together and struggle for mastery. The grand ques-
tion of character influences and destiny is which
shall prevail? Wickedness and worldliness will

swallow up many noble natural qualities and transform men into mere monsters of selfishness and sensuality. The grace of god inspiring noble aims and making holy exertion may change supplanting wily plotting Jacob into Israel, a very prince of god. It is the deadly grapple that throttles and strangles and finally destroys the coiling serpent of evil. And while in Jacob's earlier history we find so much to condemn, we admire all the more the moral and spiritual heroism which in face of the most unnumerable obstacles of natural disposition and character, climbed round by round, step by step up the ladder of prayer & progress whereby heaven is brought near to Earth!

Detroit Mich. Sabbath P.M. January 19. 1843.
Course of scripture characters.