

Jacob and Esau

”Have you but one blessing, father? “ is Esau’s anguished outcry after Isaac blessed Jacob. This is the story of two siblings striving and fighting for the love of their parents. It keeps repeating itself over and over again, since biblical times. However, it is not only the story of sibling rivalry. The exegesis of this text mirrors the self-understanding of Jews and Christians as well as their perception of the other.

While still in the womb, the twins move and kick causing their mother Rebecca to ask God about this. The Divine answer: “Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples issue from your body; one people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.” (Genesis 25:23) Rebecca gives birth to twins: the first one to come is Esau, the second Jacob. The Bible reports that Esau, the skillful hunter and outdoorsman, was the darling of his father, whereas Jacob, who often stayed in his mother’s tent, was her preferred child.

Christians saw themselves as Jacob and the Jewish people in the role of Esau. The inception of this interpretation can be found in Paul’s letter to the Romans. Paul wants to ascribe an honorary status to the non-Jewish believers of Jesus Christ. Thus, he writes: “... it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants.” (Romans 9: 8) Paul points to Isaac who was Abraham’s second-born son, yet he – and not the firstborn – was chosen to receive the special family blessing. Likewise Jacob - second born - received the blessing of the first-born. That Divine Election has nothing to do with natural birth is the message that Paul implies. He quotes from Genesis: “The elder will serve the younger.” (Genesis 25:23) And he further adds from Malachi: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” (Mal. 1.2)

Paul’s attempt to ascribe the status of chosen and beloved child to the formerly pagan followers of Jesus Christ was successful. Yet, it entailed the defamation of Jews who did not believe in Jesus Christ. Paul planted the seed of the paradigm of replacement theology which the fathers of the church unfolded. Many Christians in later centuries read it not only as a theological but also a political program. The statement “The elder will serve the younger” was used in antiquity and the Middle Ages to politically suppress Jews and literally force them into servitude.

Ireneus (135-202) was the first to explicitly identify Christians with Jacob and Jews with Esau (*Adversus haereseas* IV 21). Just as Jacob gained the right of the firstborn son by selling Esau a meal, likewise Jews forfeited the right of the firstborn by rejecting Jesus Christ, according to Ireneus. The story of Jacob and Esau each striving for their father’s blessing was turned into a typology to define the Christian-Jewish relationship. Origen (185-254) alludes to it as common knowledge, claiming: “even the unbelieving Jews know that one people has taken the place of another, i.e. that the Church has taken the place of the Synagogue, and that the elder is now the servant of the younger.” (*Hom. in Gen. 12:3*). Here we see an example of replacement-theology, the Christian paradigm that would dominate the Christian perspective on Christian-Jewish relations until well into the late 20th century.

Another very concrete example of replacement theology can be found in a homily of Bishop Ambrose of Milano (339-397). He sets out with the observation that it was Rebecca who gave Jacob the clothes of Esau, and Ambrose concludes: “Rebecca saw in this cloth a symbol of the church, she gave the younger brother the cloth of the old covenant, the prophets, the clothes of the priesthood and kingdom of David and Solomon, of Ezekiel and Hosea ... The Christians knew well how to make use of these clothes, in contrast to the Jewish people who had received the clothes, but did not use them. While in Jewish possession, the clothes had lain in the shade, neglected and forgotten. But the Christians put them on and they shone brightly.”

The following midrash from the Jewish tradition can be read as a response to the Christian claim of being Jacob: “R. Achia in the name of R. Huna: The evil Esau will one day put his clothes and sit down with the just ones in paradise, but the Holy One, blessed be He, will throw him out.” (j Nedarim III. 8 38a) Esau claims to be Jacob. He claims a place in the world to come, but his fraud is recognized and God will throw him out. For many centuries, the Christians claimed to be the only legitimate heir to the biblical promises. Thus, the Christian claim to be Jacob left only the role of Esau for the Jews. It is therefore not amazing that Jews saw in this Christian claim an imposture.

The American Catholic theologian, Sister Mary Boys, has written a book with the title: *Has God only one Blessing? – Judaism as a source of Christian self-understanding*. In the introduction to her book, she points out: “One dimension of the problematic relationship of Jews and Christians has been our implicit premise that God has only one blessing to give – as if we were rivals of God’s love. Hence, the impulse to present Christianity as making Judaism obsolete.” (p. 5) Her answer to this challenge: “The problem is not in God but in our own failure to understand that God loves different peoples equally. Learning how to be mature and healthy siblings celebrates the unique ways in which love is bestowed from above.”

Christian exegetes focused on the early stages of Jacob’s and Esau’s relationship as a paradigm for Christian-Jewish relations. I suggest reading further in the biblical account of the relationship of Jacob and Esau. After Isaac had – unwillingly - given the blessing of the first-born to his second born, Esau “lifted up his voice and wept.” (Gen. 27:38) Esau’s pain and anger are immense. He plans to kill his brother. Jacob flees to Haran. He has to leave his family behind; he has to set out on a dangerous journey, not knowing how it will turn out. Jacob is lucky, for God is with him. He stays in Haran, marries, gets rich and hears the voice of God one day, telling him to return to Canaan. With a huge caravan, he sets out to return to the land of his birth. The closer he draws, the more anxious he becomes: “Jacob was greatly frightened.” (Gen. 32:8) Will Esau still attempt to kill him? Jacob sends many presents to Esau who approaches him with an army of 400 men.

During the following night, Jacob fights with a man, who is unknown to him. In this wrestling match, Jacob proves to be stronger than his opponent and wrestles a blessing from him. The identity of the other remains unclear. Was it an angel? Was it God? Modern exegetes also ask: Did Jacob fight with himself?

However, the encounter between Jacob and Esau the next day is different from what was expected. Jacob “went on ahead and bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his brother. Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him, and falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept.” (Gen. 32:3-4) Jacob offers

presents to Esau, who kindly rejects this offer: "I have enough my brother." (Gen. 32:9) Jacob responds: "... accept from me this gift; for to see your face is like seeing the face of God..." (Gen. 33:10).

What a transformation! Instead of hate and physical conflict, we are witnesses to the reconciliation of two brothers. Esau is content with what he has and Jacob is able to perceive God in the face of his brother, in whom he saw his mortal enemy just the night before.

The biblical story of Jacob and Esau can serve as a paradigm of the Christian perception of Jews and Judaism. Yet, the paradigmatic story should not be the twins struggling in the womb. The paradigmatic vision should be Jacob's revelation, as he sees the face of God in his brother. This challenge applies to Jewish-Christian as well as other interreligious relations. And it also applies to each of us in our daily lives in the midst of our families.

Dalia's response:

From what you wrote, Ursula, I learn how texts which both religions used as a weapon against each other, and utilized to praise their faith on the account of dismissing and excluding the sister faith, can be used as healing bridges. You teach that theologians and commentators chose to focus on the disturbing aspects of the stories and not on their empowering facets. I like the fact that you do not call for the annulment of the differences between the two cultures or their blurring, but for making use of a healthy family image, a family that is bound together and yet, each one of its members is individual and unique.

It is only natural that we define ourselves negatively: "I am everything that he is not" or "by no means am I what she is". It is much more demanding and challenging to define ourselves positively ("I am..."). We can see that in the Jewish liturgy, the three distinguishing blessings: "Praised are You *Adonai*, ruler of the universe who has made me a gentile / a woman / a slave" cause much discomfort; they do not represent our religious feelings anymore. Many Jews replace them with positively phrased blessings: "Praised are You *Adonai*, ruler of the universe who has made me a Jew / in His image / a free person".