

Sunday, October 20, 2013: Genesis 32:22-31; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

by [Sara Maitland](#) in the [Oct 16, 2013](#) issue

I have been thinking about Jacob a lot recently. I was commissioned to write a short story about genetic modification and chose to write about Jacob's spotted-sheep breeding program (Gen. 30:37-43)—perhaps the oldest example of deliberate gene manipulation for profit.

The main thing I learned about Jacob is that he was not at all virtuous. He was what in the U.K. we would call a "wide boy." In the U.S. you would say a "smooth operator," which is particularly pleasing because Jacob was a smooth man in contrast to his hairy twin brother Esau. I even did some research to see if the pejorative use of *smooth* to describe cunningly executed financial or sexual shenanigans might have its origins in Jacob, but my dictionary was not helpful. Jacob robbed his brother of his inheritance; he exploited his own father's disability by means of a dishonest and carefully planned trick to gain a blessing he was not entitled to; he spent 21 years stripping his father-in-law of his wealth and then abandoned him; he had 12 sons and an unspecified number of daughters by four different women, and he brought them all up together in a fractious, quarrelsome household. He smarmed his way back into the affections of his poor brother and came home rich, honored and powerful to begin the task of brutal conquest. Of course, all this was fairly mild compared to his grandfather Abraham, who would probably find himself in a locked ward nowadays.

And yet El Shaddai, the God of his fathers, loved Jacob. God constantly not only rewarded him and favored him over his gentler well-meaning brother but also appeared to him directly, sent him visions of angels, gave him a new name, made him lavish promises and kept them, and wrestled with him through a long desert night—an intimacy unique in the Hebrew scriptures. Jacob was one of the very few characters who "saw God and lived" as opposed to hearing God's voice or receiving God's messengers.

I love Genesis, especially the stories of the four patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph) and their infinitely sagacious, crafty wives—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel. But I do not—no one could—love them for their goodness. There is a very strong element of

soap opera in Genesis 12–50. Wikipedia defines the genre as featuring “multiple related story lines dealing with the lives of multiple characters. The stories in these series typically focus heavily on emotional relationships to the point of melodrama.”

Two of the major themes of this part of the Bible are making money and coping with infertility, but woven into those themes is every sort of personal drama—from murder and rape to romantic passion, sibling rivalry, sexual jealousy and the return of characters thought to be dead, like Ishmael and Joseph. There is a lot of fascinating academic work linking soap opera to oral folktales and fairy stories, and it’s fun to read Genesis in light of this.

In particular the patriarchs seem to share elements of their moral code with the heroes of these other ancient story traditions: if you are the hero, your highest moral duty is to win riches, love, a kingdom or all three. To this end you may lie, cheat, manipulate, abuse and kill anything that is in your way. As G. K. Chesterton put it, from fairy stories he learned the important moral lesson that “giants should be killed because they are gigantic.” This makes for great stories and gratifying reader identification, but it is a little hard to know what to do with it in terms of ethics and the Christian faith.

This might not matter. We might be able to read these stories as fascinating myths of origin; or as delightful and sometimes even funny stories; or as a hint that God can forgive anything and everything without thereby approving of it; or as folkloristic prehistory written mainly to explain how the descendants of Abraham ended up in Egypt—so that they could escape from slavery and become the chosen people with ancient roots in and rights to the land of the eastern Mediterranean.

But there is a big problem, and by a curious coincidence the epistle reading this week presents it in the bluntest possible terms: Paul tells Timothy that “all scripture is inspired by God [God-breathed] and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” Frankly, I cannot imagine any kind of “training in righteousness” that any reader could gain by studying the career of Jacob—almost every incident is either mystical or criminally immoral. It certainly does not represent marriage as a lifelong union between one man and one woman. It approves of genetic modification for profit and rewards chicanery, deceit, force majeure, ingratitude and avarice.

But what it does do that is positive and enriching is to emphasize just how complex the Bible is. We all know that we do not read all texts in the same way. We do not even try to read the instruction manual for our new washing machine in the same way that we read Shakespeare or *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Yet all of these writings offer us “teaching” and truth.

So when we go to the Bible we have to go alert and cunning about the fact that it is not a single text. It may very well all be inspired, but it is inspired to a variety of purposes and therefore comes in a variety of genres and calls for a variety of reading skills.