

Genesis 27:1-4, 15-23; 28:10-17

The story of Jacob—and his brother Esau, and their mother Rebekah, and their father Isaac—calls into question our assumptions about blessings and fairness and the rule of law. It's a useful story for us to ponder in our own time, when public opinion about who suffers from the effects of racism has shifted dramatically. In the 1950s "most white Americans believed that black Americans faced substantial discrimination but that they themselves experienced little. Today, despite gaping disparities between black and white Americans in income, education, health care, homeownership, employment and college admissions, [a majority of white Americans](#) now believe they are just as likely, or more likely, to face discrimination as black Americans."ⁱ The charge of "reverse racism" is often deployed now, an appeal to people's sense of justice, making the claim that people of color get unfair advantages over white people. So let's see how Jacob's story can help us think about that.

Jacob has a reputation as a trickster, someone who's slick and deceptive, and I'm not saying he isn't . . . but I will say he didn't start it. When Rebekah was pregnant with Jacob and Esau, God told her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.' Esau was born first, the eldest who should serve the younger. But Rebekah doesn't appear to have shared this word from God with anybody; she just raised the kids and waited for God to fulfil the prophecy. This may be why Jacob was her favorite, because he was slated to be the winner; meanwhile the manly and hairy Esau was their father Isaac's favorite.

So we get all the way to Isaac on his death bed, and there's no sign of Jacob getting served by Esau. He had earlier persuaded Esau to sell him his birthright for a bowl of lentils,

which Esau rather carelessly agreed to, but now Isaac wants his manly son to go out and shoot him some meat and then receive the blessing of the first-born son. So Rebekah acts. At this last minute, she concocts a scheme for Jacob to impersonate his brother and receive the blessing that Isaac intends for Esau. Which he does, despite Isaac wondering why Esau's voice sounds so much like Jacob's.

The lectionary skips the next part, but I have to tell you for the dramatic effect that *the very next moment*, "as soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of his father Isaac, his brother Esau came in from his hunting," and the deception is discovered. Esau begs for some kind of secondary blessing, but there is nothing to be done about it. Esau weeps and makes a plan to kill Jacob. So Rebekah warns Jacob, Isaac gives him some parting instructions and another blessing, and off goes Jacob out into the big world, where he will shortly have this amazing dream of the ladder to heaven.

Now. One's heart kind of bleeds for Esau, doesn't it? Poor Esau never did anybody any harm. It's not his fault that he was born first, or even that he was his father's favorite. He seems to be kind of a simple, straightforward guy, pleased to be able to go off and shoot some savory meat for his dying father. How hurt he must have been to arrive home and discover that his mother and brother had plotted against him and that the blessing he deserved had been stolen. Primogeniture wasn't the law, in the sense of being written in Leviticus somewhere, but it was the custom and the expectation, and Esau had every reason to expect the greater inheritance.

But think about customs and laws. They're not put into place by some omniscient adult in charge because they're right or fair. Laws become law because someone with power decided

that they should be. If you are a person without power, there is no “fair” way to get out of your prescribed disadvantage. There are no “fair game” tactics available. Rebekah—a woman without power in the matter of inheritance rights—waited as long as she could for God to fulfil the promise that Jacob would break out of his subordinate role, and it was only at the last minute that she acted. It is painful to see Esau’s hurt and disappointment, and one is tempted to point out that rules are rules and it wasn’t Rebekah’s place to intervene. But the people without power in that society never agreed to the rules which bound them. You can’t expect people who are excluded from the benefits of the rules to be invested in upholding them. Rebekah’s deceit is a critique of an unfair system.

So now Jacob’s on the lam. He’s out of society, outside of the legal structures, and *now* God appears, which maybe raises the question of how our systems prevent us from encountering God sometimes. But one more note on Esau—once Jacob is gone, Esau goes and marries Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael. He marries the offspring of another first-born son who had been rejected. There’s something poetic in that. Anyway, at nighttime Jacob stops because the sun has set, lies down to sleep, and has this dream of a ladder between heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending. And God stands beside him and repeats the promise that God had given Abraham, about land and progeny, and adds this piece: “All the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.” Jacob is blessed *to be a blessing*. Yes, he and his will flourish, but the end goal is bigger than Jacob’s progeny. And indeed, years later when Jacob returns, he brings lavish gifts for Esau, hoping to soften his resentment, but Esau has already forgiven him, relinquished his resentment, and a level of family harmony is established that had never existed in their boyhood.

Jonathan Goldstein makes Esau and Jacob's reconciliation so human in his story about them.ⁱⁱ

Jacob had his people send forth to his brother a gift.

"Make it munificent," said Jacob, and his people sent out camels, cattle, and sheep. Esau, as it turned out, was very warmed by the gesture and when the brothers met, Esau bowed and Jacob bowed back. There followed a great deal of bowing. It started off sheepishly and slowly but became more and more heartfelt. In the end the two brothers were practically bellyflopping at each other's feet. All the while, Esau's army stood around them in a huge circle. Jacob could not help thinking of the money they just standing there and not painfully killing him was wasting.

Finally, Esau spoke.

"I received your gifts," he said. "They were really munificent."

Esau introduced his brother to each of the four hundred men in his army. Jacob gave up trying to remember their names after the fourth one.

"Everything I told you about this guy," said Esau, his hand on his brother's shoulder, "forget it."

Affirmative action was enacted into law in order to level the playing field for people of color, who had been systematically excluded from jobs and school admission and financial services and so much more. In 1978, a white man, Allan Bakke, challenged his rejection from medical school, saying that he was qualified for admission but had been shunted aside in favor of less qualified candidates of color. The Supreme Court ordered that the med school admit Bakke, and in later decisions limited the scope of affirmative action programs.ⁱⁱⁱ

More recently, in 2016 Abigail Fisher sued the University of Texas for not admitting her, claiming that she was excluded because of the color of her skin. The case is disingenuous, designed to rally public opinion against efforts to diversify universities and other public spaces. In fact, race probably had nothing to do with the University of Texas's decision to deny admission to Abigail Fisher.^{iv} She had failed to graduate in the top 10 percent of her class, meaning she had to compete for the limited number of spaces up for grabs.

She and other applicants who didn't make the cut were evaluated based on two scores, which were calculated on the basis of grades, test scores, two essays, leadership, a bunch of other things, *and* race. Even if she had received points for her race, she would still have been rejected. Legally the case was pretty straightforward. But politically, it was a referendum by the suit's backers (Abigail Fisher was simply the face for this suit) on the 14th Amendment, the Equal Protection Clause. Politically, it was very effective in making white people feel persecuted and resentful of people of color, contributing to our poisonous polarization.

Allan Bakke and Abigail Fisher are probably estimable and hard-working people whose ambitions are/were very justified, just as Esau's expectations were justified, at least in terms of social norms. But the system that let them feel *entitled* is rigged, and rigged in their favor. (Abigail Fisher went to her second-choice school, graduated, and did just fine.) Adjustments intended to widen the possibilities for people of color are disrupting those social norms, and in the long run, it will be a blessing for all of us. We all do better when we all do better.

In the Genesis story, God ended up blessing Esau *by* blessing Jacob. Esau sets a powerful example of stepping back and waiting to be blessed by the one who had not been slated to be blessed. He totally gets credit for letting go of his resentments and forgiving Jacob, but I'd say that we should all be so restrained. We should all question our own entitlement. His grief and sense of betrayal were real—his suffering was real—but it turns out that nothing bad was happening when Jacob usurped Esau's right to the blessing. It was his expectations from an unjust system that set Esau up; it was good-heartedness, a generous spirit, and reliance on the grace of God that enabled him to come to the point of being able to celebrate when Jacob came home.

And here's the thing: this is not super-human nobility, this is just brotherliness or siblingness. We all know how to do this. Jonathan Goldstein again:

"There's one more thing I have for you."

Jacob handed Esau the flattened-out piece of parchment.

"It's really yours," he said.

Esau protested but Jacob, who was still all wrestly from his match with the angel, started to get physical about it—awkwardly shoving it down his brother's toga.

Later in the evening, once they had begun to loosen up, a spread of food was prepared. As they ate, and Esau got into the warmth and spirit, without thinking, . . . he pulled out the rumped parchment and used it to wipe a spot of gravy from off his chin.

God of infinite grace and possibility, when we feel that we have been forgotten, remind us that we are your beloved children. When we feel unworthy, remind us that we are your beloved children. When customs and structures are unjust, help us to recognize our siblings and correct those injustices for the benefit of all. As Jacob's progeny became a blessing for all the earth, may we too be blessed to be a blessing for others. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.propublica.org/article/a-colorblind-constitution-what-abigail-fishers-affirmative-action-case-is-r>

ⁱⁱ Goldstein, Jonathan, *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Bible!* New York: Riverhead Books, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Bakke-decision>

^{iv} <https://www.propublica.org/article/a-colorblind-constitution-what-abigail-fishers-affirmative-action-case-is-r>