

# MORE SEED & BREAD, ISSUE NO. 335

## JACOB GETS A BAD RAP

by Candy Davis

Jacob gets a bad rap, that of a scheming deceiver. This dates to the time of his birth, when he grabbed the heel of his twin brother as they were born (Gen. 25:24-26). Jacob's very name means heel-holder, supplanter, deceiver. One famous pastor says, "This heel-grabbing tendency would plague Jacob for most of his life; he grew up to be a grasping and conniving person." But is this rap a fair one?

### CHARGE: JACOB STEALS ESAU'S BIRTHRIGHT

The birthright in ancient times was nothing to sneeze at. The firstborn son customarily received a double portion of the family inheritance (Deut. 21:15-17), along with the authority to govern the family (Gen. 27:29). The drama surrounding the birthright of Esau begins when he comes home from hunting, making a fuss that he is faint with hunger. He begs his brother for soup, to which Jacob says, **Sell me your birthright** (Gen 25:29-31).

Critics are quick to accuse Jacob of taking advantage of Esau in his moment of physical weakness. Overlooked, however, are words from Esau's own mouth which reveal just how little he values his birthright. **And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?** (Gen. 25:32). Mankind today may pity Esau, but Scripture does not. To Esau's selling his birthright in return for a pitiful bowl of soup, Scripture says, **Esau despised (Heb-*bazah*) his birthright** (Gen. 25:34; Heb. 12:16-17). He treated it as worthless.

Jacob is unfairly charged with stealing Esau's birthright. Esau sold his birthright outright in a transaction sworn with an oath by the brothers, making it binding. **And Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he swore unto him: and he sold his birthright unto Jacob** (Gen. 25:33).

The Hebrew word for "swear/sware" is *shaba*, the verb form of *sheba* (seven). Sevens were a custom in making formal oaths, confirming them with seven sacrifices or witnesses, or by repeating a declaration seven times (Gen. 21:28-30). It is possible that in swearing their oath, the brothers sealed the sale of the birthright in an official way beyond their verbal agreement, not written in the record. Regardless, if not binding, then Isaac could have nullified the deal and returned the birthright to his favored son, Esau (Gen. 25:28). As it stands, Isaac conceded that the sale was proper (Gen. 27:33; Heb. 11:20).

Lost among the voices condemning Jacob is the sound of the only voice that matters: the voice of God. Before the twins were even born, God told Rebekah that, of the twins she was carrying, the elder would serve the younger (Gen. 25:23). Critics try to wiggle out of God's intent by claiming the verse means only that the older shall serve the younger in some fashion, not that the younger will receive the birthright inheritance. Such critics forget that God provides a backup passage repeating His choice to give the birthright to Jacob, not Esau (Rom. 9:6-13).

Scripture offers further defense for Jacob. Whereas the Bible flat out calls Esau a fornicator (*Gk-pornos*) and a profane, wicked person (Heb. 12:16), it calls Jacob a plain (Heb.-*tam*) man (Gen. 25:27). Plain may seem unflattering until we know its meaning in Hebrew: perfect, complete, mature. This puts

Jacob in good company, for Job, too, is a plain (Heb.-*tam*) man in God's sight, **that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect (Heb.-*tam*) and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?** (Job 1:8).

All in all, it is fair to say that Jacob's purchasing the birthright was not for devious gain; otherwise we would read such in Scripture. No. We can search the Bible from front to back for condemnation of Jacob but will find none. Where Jacob went wrong was in failing to leave the matter of the birthright in the hands of the Lord. In his eagerness to see the purpose of God come to pass, he pitched in to give God a hand by securing the birthright himself. A lack of faith is what is in evidence here, not a devious, greedy heart. In the end, Jacob even overcomes this, as we see by his induction into the Hall of Faith (Heb. 11:21).

### **CHARGE: JACOB STEALS ESAU'S BLESSINGS**

The drama continues with Jacob masquerading as his brother when Isaac is about to bestow the blessings upon Esau. Now, on top of stealing Esau's birthright, Jacob is accused of stealing his covenant blessings (Gen. 27:36; Gen. 28:3-4).

Accusers fail to consider that Jacob is not a solitary player in this drama of deception. There is plenty of condemnation to go around. Isaac, for instance. Isaac—knowing full well that Jacob was God's choice for the blessings—had determined to pass them along to Esau anyway. Moreover, it appears that Isaac planned to perform the blessing ceremony on the sly, for Rebekah only learned of it when she happened to overhear the plan in the making (Gen. 27:5). Why, we ask, would Isaac give Esau the blessings in secret unless he knew he was dead wrong? And what was Isaac thinking, giving the covenant blessings to a son who caused his parents grief by marrying Canaanite women (Gen. 26:34-35)? As for Esau, besides proving himself unworthy by these marriages, he was not even eligible for the blessings and he knew it, having sold his birthright. So in whining about his supposedly stolen blessings, he was guilty of deceit himself (Gen. 27:36, 38).

And then there is Rebekah. The idea to disguise Jacob as Esau was Rebekah's in the first place. And it was she who ordered Jacob to comply with her scheme (Gen. 27:8).

As there is condemnation to go around, we must pause here to suggest that there might also be some mercy.

First, mercy for Rebekah. We can imagine Rebekah—a godly woman (Gen. 25:22)—in a state of panic. Her husband is about to defy the will of God (Gen. 25:23). The plan she contrived in reaction was dishonest, no argument there. But given the gravity of Isaac's imminent sin against God, she acted as she thought best to see the purpose of God fulfilled. As her son Jacob displays a lack of faith, so too does Rebekah. Rebekah should have left the matter of the blessings to God. She did the wrong thing, but for the right reason.

Next, mercy for Jacob. As noted, in pretending to be Esau, Jacob was in fact only being obedient to his mother (Gen. 27:8), and we can hardly fault him for that (Exod. 20:12). In this drama of the blessings, critics use Jacob's own words against him. "See!" they say. "Jacob himself admits that he is a deceiver!" (Gen. 27:12). And so it seems, unless we define the word "deceiver" (Heb.-*ta`a*) as used here: a mocker; one who makes fun of another. Getting caught pulling a fast one on his father is not Jacob's concern here at all, but rather being sensitive to Isaac's blindness (Gen. 27:1). Jacob does not want Isaac to think he is making fun of his father's disability.

Far from being condemned by God for stealing Esau's blessings, Jacob is assured by the Lord that he is the rightful recipient when God appears to Jacob in a dream at Bethel and repeats to him the same promises, the same covenant blessings, He had given to Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 28:12-14).

### **CHARGE: JACOB SWINDLES HIS FATHER-IN-LAW**

This next drama has critics accusing Jacob of resorting to black magic in order to swindle his Uncle Laban out of a vast portion of his flock. The two had agreed that Jacob could build a flock of his own from Laban's, with one unusual stipulation: Jacob's future sheep and goats would consist wholly of those with less desirable coloring—with speckled, striped or spotted markings (Gen. 30:32-33). But no sooner does Laban agree to Jacob's deal than he sets out to thwart it (Gen. 30:35), literally fleecing Jacob of the multi-color animals Jacob expected to use in breeding his own flock. It seems impossible now for Jacob to breed animals with multiple markings from Laban's herd of solid-color sheep and goats.

Jacob, however, knows a thing or two about animal breeding based on a lifetime of ranching. What he does next reflects this. **And he set the rods which he had piled before the flocks in the gutters in the watering troughs when the flocks came to drink, that they should conceive when they came to drink. And the flocks conceived before the rods, and brought forth cattle ringstraked, speckled, and spotted** (Gen. 30:37-38).

Twice we see the word "conceive" (Heb.-*yacham*) which here means to be hot; to be in heat, to mate (of animals). So it seems the mere sight of the striped branches, or perhaps a chemical leached from them into the water, may have served as an aphrodisiac of sorts. Critics belittle Jacob, but there was a method to his madness. Jacob knew through experience that a minority of any flock of solid-colored animals, like Laban's, possess a recessive gene for multi-colored markings. Two animals mating, when each carries a recessive gene, could produce an offspring with recessive traits—multi-color markings. Thus, increasing the breeding instinct increases the number of offspring born, which increases the probability of breeding multi-colored animals for Jacob's own flock. And this is just what Jacob had in mind when using the striped branch to promote mating. Nothing voodoo about it.

If this does not quiet the critics, then learning that the plan for Jacob's multi-colored flock came directly from God should (Gen. 31:9-12). Jacob did not swindle his uncle. It was God who took away Laban's flocks and gave them to Jacob (Gen. 31:9).

God ultimately sees that all charges against Jacob are dropped when He changes his name from Jacob, the deceiver, to Israel, the Prince of God (Gen. 32:28; 35:10). If the Lord does not give Jacob a bad rap, perhaps we should not either.