

Genesis 37 An unlikely family

Introduction

A large section of the newspaper I bought last Saturday, 22 July 2013, was understandably taken up with every possible item of news and a series of pictures of William and Kate and their baby boy George. This little boy, though he has no comprehension of it is that he is by virtue of his birth a potential heir to the throne of the United Kingdom and indeed of the fifty-four independent Commonwealth nations around the world. Although given the length of the reign of his great-grandma and the potential reigns of his granddad and father he might have to wait a very long time before this opportunity would come his way! None of us chooses our parents or other relatives. Although this is a statement of the blindingly obvious it is a fact that has the most powerful shaping influence on the life of each child that comes into the world. Two babies may be born in the same maternity ward yet if their respective parents come from, for example, Shettleston and Newton Mearns, Glasgow, their opportunities in life and indeed their quality and length of life are indeed likely to be very different. In the early years of the twenty-first century it is disturbing to note the levels of social inequality in our country. Although there are always some people that can rise above their lowly circumstances to accomplish great things, it cannot be denied that they are usually the exception rather than the rule. Our story focuses on the life of one young man whose early privileges were a bitter-sweet experience. Yet so much good has come from it, for him, his family and nation and for future generations of believers.

1. Contrasting family fortunes

In the book of Genesis a careful reader will note that the book is divided up into a number of sections. A significant phrase ‘this is the account of...’ signals a transition to a new section of the book. At the start of Genesis 36 and then here in Genesis 37:2a there are the last two uses of this form of words which draw attention to the respective descendants of Esau and Jacob. Genesis 36 covers Esau’s family and a big chunk of ancient history whereas Genesis 37-50 goes into quite a bit of detail concerning aspects of the life of Jacob’s children, in particular in relation to the life of Joseph. If we were able to be transported in a time machine back to this period of ancient history, say around the time of Joseph’s birth, the perception of many people whom we might potentially interview would be that Esau and his family were more prominent more wealthy, and settled in the land, and had significantly better prospects for the future. The idea that this branch of Isaac’s family would fade into obscurity would be a big surprise to them. For the most obvious of reasons Christians do not spend a great deal of time reading and reflecting on Genesis 36. Esau’s family grew rapidly, by the middle of the chapter there are references to a number of them becoming chiefs. In Genesis 36:31 there are these significant words: *These are the kings who reigned in Edom before any Israelite king reigned.* In worldly terms Esau’s family had wealth, property and security. Biographers had they existed then would have written about Esau and his family. It is rare for the average citizen, let alone the working poor to have their lives recorded for posterity! Our familiarity with the story of Joseph and our lack of knowledge of the family of Esau can naturally lead us to suspect that Esau’s family had led an obscure and insignificant life and thus were of little interest to the chroniclers and recorders of history. This could not be further from the case. God had promised Abraham and his descendants through the line of Isaac and Jacob an inheritance in the land of Canaan. Yet there was nearly 450 years to pass before this promise was fulfilled in the time of Joshua. Even Joseph himself, despite his life of privilege in Egypt

was very conscious that the blessings of the land were still to be fulfilled by the time of his death. In Genesis 50:24-25 it states: *Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.'*²⁵ *And Joseph made the Israelites swear an oath and said, 'God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place.'* The good news recorded in Exodus 12:40-41: *Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years.*⁴¹ *At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the Lord's divisions left Egypt.* (and Exodus 13:19: *Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the Israelites swear an oath. He had said, 'God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place.'*) was a distant prospect still to be fulfilled. They lived and died not knowing how it would come about. All this time Esau's family had from a secular perspective received their inheritance and were doing well in material, but not spiritual terms. How is God going to work for the good of Jacob's family? It will come about through a spoilt teenager, a seventeen-year old who has no ambitions or expectations beyond helping out in the family business and living in tents in Canaan. Yet God had other plans. The Bible only records two more uses of the words *this is the account of...* (in Numbers 3:1 with reference to Moses and Aaron and in Matthew 1:1 concerning the genealogy of Jesus). Who knows what God has in store for you and me –our children, grandchildren and possibly future posterity! We see our limitations but God can see our potential when offered in His service. The story of Joseph is a source of much potential encouragement to us.

2. The formative influences on Joseph's childhood

(a)**An unnecessarily complex family** This was not a typical nuclear family. It was a polygamous household with a patriarch who had two wives and two concubines who appear over time to have become in effect additional wives. Jacob had never planned to marry more than one woman. He had left home in a hurry after deceiving his father and conning his brother and living at a safe distance in the community where his mother's family were living in Syria (Genesis 27-29). Uncle Laban's home was not as welcoming a place as the public shows of affection appeared to display. Very early on in his stay Jacob fell for the very attractive younger daughter Rachel and made a dramatic offer to his uncle to work seven years for her hand in marriage. There was no other way he could have provided the means for them to have a future together. Yet when the time came for the wedding it was worthy of a Hollywood comedy blockbuster. Laban arranged for the most significant festivities to take place in the dark at night and pressured the two sisters to swap places so that somehow Jacob was tricked into thinking he had married Rachel and instead woke up married to her older sister Leah. Conversation at the extended family breakfast table the following day was exceedingly strained leading to wonderful tales about cultural customs in the area from Laban and an agreement from Jacob to work another seven years for Rachel. As a result, after the ancient equivalent of a week's honeymoon with the unfortunate Leah, all assemble again for a second marriage ceremony when Jacob finally gets to marry Rachel. Home life was strained at best and at times resulted in seriously fractured relationships. What we may forget to note was that the older sons of Jacob grew up experiencing the bitter rivalry between their respective mothers and as a result this negative experience must have had an unhelpfully formative impact on the development of their characters and conduct. The Bible nowhere insists on monogamy for all people. Although it clearly states right from the beginning God's clear commendation of monogamy as the basis of the human family, and this message is repeated at intervals, supremely in the teaching of Jesus. However, the examples of alternative family arrangements suggest as here that God was not a kill-joy in steering

humanity down one particular moral pathway for marriage arrangements. This is most salutary when it appears that Western Governments are turning their backs on it as the standards for their nations. God does not advise us to follow a particular moral pathway without a good reason. If we ever wanted a good illustration of why monogamy is a better practice than the family life of Jacob is a sober illustration of the risks of an alternative lifestyle. Already in Canada that accepted same-sex marriage legislation ahead of the UK there have been calls for the legalisation of polygamy and some other alternative relationship arrangements. If the Judeo-Christian moral principles behind the historic standards held in this country are rejected then it is difficult to see on what basis a secular government without this moral framework could avoid being even more morally promiscuous in the range of adult relationships it might sanction in law. This story of life a few thousand years ago begins to offer more contemporary comments on relationships today than might have been apparent a generation ago.

(b) **An unfortunately troubled family** When Joseph was a child, the youngest of eleven born to four different mothers in the household, all competing for their husband's attention, a hasty exit from Syria was required. Great-Uncle Laban's hospitality was visibly diminishing and this resulted in a distressing departure from the only home and country he had known as they headed off to a country he had heard of but never experienced. God intervened and prevented a tragedy when the inevitable confrontation came with Laban's men (Genesis 31). This was good news but scarcely the end of their troubles. Possibly as soon as some weeks later, maybe a few months but scarcely any longer passed before a new dark cloud appeared on the horizon –his father's brother Esau. Daddy why is uncle Esau cross with you after all these years? Do you think Jacob could have told the truth to his young son –that he had conned his brother and deceived his blind dad? In the midst of this traumatic episode God met with Jacob at Mahanaim (Genesis 32). Young Joseph might have been puzzled once more as his dad appeared to have sustained a significant injury meeting with God. Was prayer that danger an activity? What had my dad done to deserve this treatment – might have been an unspoken question in his mind. Yet the time for questions became a time of serious apprehension as Jacob divided up his family into groups making plain whose lives were potential most expendable! Young Joseph and favourite wife Rachel were put in the safest place in the convoy, but he could have been forgiven for wondering why his father lived in constant fear of people catching up with him. Was this how other families lived? Was this how God intended us to live? Thankfully Uncle Esau was incredibly gracious in forgiving the past sin of Jacob, but I'm not certain about the sincerity of Jacob's apology. The lack of apparent contact between the brothers in the future to my mind implies that the underlying issues were still a barrier to friendship. This was a troubled family.

At last the family settled in Canaan, but it was not long before tragedy befell their family with the rape of step-sister Dinah, by the heir of the local chief in Shechem. In an era where moral codes were limited and their enforcement non-existent it does appear that the local chief recognised his son had behaved badly and made the best effort he could to heal the wounds that had been created. Yet instead of reconciliation and resolution Joseph's hot-tempered step -brothers Levi and Simeon committed mass murder in a revenge attack on the local community (Genesis 34). This was not the only time their appalling temper tantrums had caused suffering. At the end of his life in Jacob's blessing of his children he had only these words to say of these particular sons in Genesis 49:5-7: *'Simeon and Levi are brothers – their swords are weapons of violence. ⁶ Let me not enter their council, let me not join their assembly, for they have killed men in their anger and hamstringed oxen as they pleased. ⁷ Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel! I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel.* If this was the best gloss Jacob could put on their lives then we have a grim picture of two

brutal men. The wider community reacted in horror at the actions of the new family in their midst who again had to leave town- do you see a pattern here of rapid removals? Yet at last Jacob and his family arrive in Bethel. It is a time for soul-searching; a time to end religious syncretism with the destruction of the images of Syrian gods that some in the camp has been worshipping alongside their acknowledgement of Yahweh. It is a relief for all concerned when God met with them and granted his protecting grace. *Then God said to Jacob, 'Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau.'*² So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, *'Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes.'*³ Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone.'⁴ So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods they had and the rings in their ears, and Jacob buried them under the oak at Shechem.⁵ Then they set out, and the terror of God fell on the towns all around them so that no one pursued them. (Genesis 35:1-5). Joseph by then an older child or possibly entering his teenage years may have been confronted with the claims of the God of Israel more seriously than on any previous occasion. Were the family troubles now behind them?

Sadly this was not the case as a series of bereavements – most notably the tragic loss of Joseph's mother Rachel while giving birth to her second child Benjamin – would have brought serious sorrow into this young man's life. Joseph's entry into adulthood was hardly an ideal one. His formative years had been shaped in a dysfunctional family that hardly served as an adequate role model for his future service. And to cap it all his elder brother Reuben showed serious disrespect for his father by an inappropriate relationship with his father's concubine Bilhah (Genesis 35). We know what Joseph would accomplish in his future career and in an exemplary family life. It is a reminder that no matter how troubled our past has been it must not be allowed to define our future. Are there any issues in your past that are currently overshadowing your life? Bring them to the Lord and allow Him to minister His healing and restoring grace to allow you to move on and forward in your life with Him.

3. The roots of his brothers' hostility (Genesis 37:1-4)

*Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.*² This is the account of Jacob's family line. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him.⁴ **When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.** (Genesis 37:1-4). The three eldest sons Reuben, Levi and Simeon had all engaged in conduct that culturally had rendered them unsuitable for the honour of serving as the heir apparent amongst the brothers. Yet Jacob had not installed one of the other older brothers in that position, instead favouring young Joseph once again. Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher were the sons of Jacob's concubines and therefore ineligible for such an honour. By rights Judah was next in line, but his leading role later in disposing of Joseph and despatching him as a slave to Egypt showed how his mind was working at the time. For reasons unknown to us Judah detached himself from the family circle and defying family expectations married a Canaanite woman (See Genesis 24:3 for Abraham's clear convictions on this matter). Father Jacob appeared to have little authority or control over the conduct of his sons. Had his past failings undermined his moral authority in the present? For those of us who are parents or grandparents the importance of living the values we commend to younger members cannot be overstated. If we don't practice what we proclaim then there is little chance of our advice being taken seriously. Sadly the inconsistent behaviour of Jacob led to a much more difficult

childhood for Joseph than might otherwise have been the case. It is possible that Joseph was a good and obedient child who lived a God-honouring life but he still could not have avoided the pent up feelings of injustice towards his father by his brothers being visited upon him. The actions of the scheming and deceitful Jacob had been imbibed by his older sons. Joseph the younger son had known a more spiritual and sensible father as he entered his teenage years, in stark contrast with his older siblings. None of us can change our past or the family history into which we were born. However, a spiritually privileged home does not guaranteed that children adopt and follow the faith of their parents; however, equally, the absence of such blessings does not necessarily prevent someone coming to faith through other means and living a life honouring to God. Each person is inevitably influenced and shaped by the context in which we grew up, but it does not define us for ever –unless we actively choose it to be the case. If Joseph could overcome the adverse circumstances he experienced in his youth then we also through the power of the Holy Spirit can do the same.

4. The recognition of the cost of our calling

To follow in the way of Jesus will at times be costly. Some times our own shortcomings contribute to the difficulties we experience, but on other occasions, the very fact that we are living the right way causes people with different values to act in ways that we can find painful and difficult. Yet we follow in the footsteps of One who calls us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Him (Mark 8:34-35). In Isaiah 53 there is a graphic description of the suffering of Jesus to obtain our eternal salvation. Listen to these verses: *He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces He was despised, and we held Him in low esteem.⁴ Surely He took up our pain and bore our suffering yet we considered Him punished by God, stricken by Him, and afflicted.⁵ But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by His wounds we are healed.⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all... He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in His death, though He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth.¹⁰ Yet it was the Lord's will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer, and though the Lord makes His life an offering for sin, He will see his offspring and prolong His days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in His hand.¹¹ After He has suffered, He will see the light of life and be satisfied; by His knowledge My righteous servant will justify many, and He will bear their iniquities* (Isaiah 53:3-6, 9-11). It is the final outcome here that provides the context in which His suffering gains its full meaning. We grasp but a little of it with our finite minds.

How are we to live in the light of the pressures and experiences through which we have come, through which we may currently be passing in a time of trial, or which may be our lot on some future occasion? David wrote these words for such times in Psalm 37:3-9: *Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.⁴ Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.⁵ Commit your way to the Lord; trust in Him and He will do this:⁶ He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun.⁷ Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for Him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.⁸ Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret – it leads only to evil.⁹ For those who are evil will be destroyed, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.* May God help us to do that, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

