

Christian Faith, and philosophers lower the tone of public morality by avowing that they recognise no sanctity in the law of marriage, and some of our journalists and novelists, who make a noise in the world wholly disproportioned to their number and importance, expend themselves in paltry sneers, or vulgar jests, or crafty insinuations against all that was once held to be true and pure,—can hardly escape the charge of ungodliness. And we shall best serve such an age as this, we can only keep ourselves unspotted in such a world as this, by being true to the convictions by which Enoch was sustained:—the conviction that evil cannot prosper in the end, however strong and prosperous it may look for a time, but must be punished and destroyed; the conviction that God *is*, even though we can no more prove his existence than we can prove our own; the conviction that He is the true Ruler of men, that the world is his world, and that his will must and will be done in it; the conviction that He will come to judge the world, and to reward every man according to his deeds, whether they be good or whether they be bad.

S. Cox.

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ESAU AND JACOB.

(GENESIS xxv. 27–34).

THE names of these brothers are familiar as household words; but their history, copious as it is in parts, leaves not a little for the student of character to supply by inference and comparison. The broad facts are there: the outline, as it were, is clearly traced, but it has been filled in hastily and inconsiderately by interpreters; and the current estimate formed of the pair is far from accurate, while much of the moral has been missed.

I offer the following sketch as a contribution partly to a fair judgment of character, partly to a careful and comprehensive study of Holy Scripture.

Two lines of human life are typified in these brothers. And the type is maintained in their posterity. The names widen out into a world connection and national growth, as they pass into the titular Edom, and the new significant form Israel; Esau, Edom—Jacob, Israel; Esau signifies made, perfected; Edom, red; cognate it is thought in meaning with Adam, and having reference likewise to the material out of which man was made. Jacob is one who takes place of another, a *supplanter*, as Esau in his burst of anger and jealousy interprets the word; Israel is a *prince who has power with God*. The first pair of names taken together may denote one made according to a perfect standard, holding to it, choosing the *red* (whether the pottage which was his first paramount temptation, or the lower nature above which he should have risen); one of *the earth, earthy*. The second pair of names indicates one seeking higher place; one who grasped at his brother's right or a share in it; eventually, one who by Divine power achieved his hope.

Compare the two nations: Edom, a wise and strong people from the beginning; *putting their nest in a rock* (like the Kenites), hardy, untameable, and extinct. Israel, cradled in weakness, suffering and slavery; rescued by no power of their own; trained, protected, delivered again and again; cast out but *not forsaken, cast down but not destroyed*,

Tost wildly o'er a thousand lands  
For twice a thousand years;

existing still, hoping still. In these opposite histories we have the symbolism of a nature standing in its own strength; and, on the other hand, of a nature weak in itself, but strong in imparted strength. We have a life which

clings to earth contrasted with another rising above earth ; a natural organic life, and a grafted heaven-breathed life. The one dies and passes away, the other is undying because Divinely sustained. Nothing is everlasting but by the gift of God, or as belonging to God. Immortal life is the heritage of the being made in the image of God, cared for as the child of God. What, then, if men disinherit themselves? That is an issue we cannot yet follow, it is a portion of the unknown future ; the *utter darkness* closes over it. What we can see is that men may endanger, may cast away, their heritage ; again, that they may be renewed and fitted for it. Both find their likeness *here*. The steps that lead up to or away from our destined blessing may be traced here. The deep principles at work in the formation of habits, or wrapped up in the relations of common life, are indicated here. But they are perhaps unmarked by general readers.

The one direct notice of Jacob's character is that he was a *plain* (*i.e.* upright) *man*. It is but incidentally that we catch glimpses of his self-communing piety, high-wrought feeling, deeply grounded faith. Nor is there a word of what he must have suffered in leaving home : we have to piece together many fragmentary hints before we comprehend his position fully. Still waters run deep.

But the frank manly qualities of Esau are brought forward and prominently seen. We forget his faults, and weep with him that wept. Why is that great disappointment insisted on with unusual pathos? Why is it so touchingly told? I believe that it conveys, and was meant to convey, a permanent moral lesson, a lesson as to the reality of what men lose by reckless habits and selfish thoughtlessness ; a lesson that what is attractive on the surface of human character is no equivalent for what is essential to its vital excellence and ultimate perfection.

The lax and lenient standard of ordinary society favours

many traits in Esau as popular, and represents his errors as venial, a Latin moralist would say *human*, and the word just expresses the defect of his character. On the other hand, Jacob's course is humiliating to pride, and a rebuke to hero-worshippers. Yet it has a clear encouragement for all who are conscious of liability to temptation, of difficulty in resisting it, and who trust to find support and reward in resisting. It exemplifies the Christian assurance, *greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world.*

Look now at the brief opening notice of the two brothers in their youth (Gen. xxv. 27, 28). *The boys grew, and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a plain man, dwelling in tents. And Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison; but Rebekah loved Jacob.*

Nothing is recorded of their childhood, nothing of home-discipline and training and associations. It is mere matter of conjecture on what terms they were of affection and intimacy; whether the gentle meditative temper was despised, possibly domineered over, by the more enterprising brother. They may have been rarely together; we need not suppose them dependent on one another for society as in a lonely home. What we are told of Isaac implies that his life was passed in a generally undisturbed tranquillity; his wealth and position would not probably be inferior to those of Abraham, his dependants not fewer. If so, the tribe or encampment was considerable. Abraham mustered over three hundred fighting men, Esau brought four hundred to meet Jacob. And not far off were the populous cities of Canaan, with their opportunities for free social intercourse, for friendship, for marriage. Jacob drew back from them in dislike, which he shared with his mother, of prevalent corruptions and an idolatrous tone. Esau had no such scruples; he courted their acquaintance, perhaps gaining name and fame by daring deeds and adventurous spirit, while he contributed to the protection and provision of his

home. We cannot, therefore, think of the two as living in retirement and isolation; the household was extensive, its relations voluntary and free. On the other hand, the inner life, the pervading spirit of the home, what is the idea we form of that?

If ever there was a household imbued with thorough devotional feeling, and in which the children were objects of peculiar care and trained in all the rudiments of holy living, one might expect it to have been the household of Isaac and Rebekah. What a foundation of religious life was laid in the example of Abraham, and the tradition of his call and his answer of faith! And when that vivid faith was further proved at Mount Moriah, Isaac had shared in it, had equally been found capable of the self-surrender claimed, had returned home with life won from death, and with a renewed apprehension of the *sure mercies* of the living God. And Rebekah, she had come from a distant land for avoidance of any connection with idolatry; she had been chosen, and she came, in faith.

With such parents, "so fathered and so husbanded," we may conceive what an atmosphere of simple piety their children must have breathed; what recollections, what hopes, must have been the food of their infant minds; what a pattern of goodness and earnest of its reward must have been set before their childlike imagination. In that Eastern clime, nurse of contemplative habit, one can fancy the now venerable parents, with the twin boys beside them, pointing to the star-paved evening sky, and recounting with solemn reverent awe the vision shewn, the promise made, to Abram: *Look now toward heaven and tell the stars if thou be able to number them, so shall thy seed be.* Nor would they fail to dwell on the full expansion of the promise, transcending in its moral and sacred significance all mere mention of numbers and time; a promise shadowing out, though dimly till fulfilment came, hope of redemption and

effect of righteousness.<sup>1</sup> *In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.*

Years passed: *the boys grew*, childhood developing into youth, youth into manhood, with constitution and temperament drawing them gradually apart toward separate lines of active and contemplative life. Esau became the skilful roving hunter, to the admiration of Isaac, who delighted in his tales of hardihood, while he feasted with him on his game. Jacob, more staid and thoughtful, clung to the scenes and occupations of home, leaning on his mother's love, pouring his cherished aspirations into her partial ear, and submitting in return to an ascendancy which was eventually to cost him all the comforts he so prized.

From a consideration of natural and constitutional traits, the incident related in the following verses (Gen. xxv. 29-34) brings us to distinctions of moral tendency. Some perhaps may think that it exhibits in the worldly indifference of the one, and the religious anxiety of the other, the natural outcome of their habitual pursuits. Yet the active life is not in itself less highly toned than the contemplative; not less capable of robust thought or religious feeling. It may not be so readily impressed, it may be more difficult to direct; but, given a right influence and direction, it is perhaps the root of a manlier character, it sends forth stronger shoots of virtue and practical holiness. Muscular Christianity has become a proverb; in some degree it bears the characteristic mark of the western hemisphere. Energetic idleness<sup>2</sup> is like a brier which, duly grafted, bears a more vigorous plant than the delicate product of the garden nurtured on its own stem.

As regards formation of character, a quiet and retiring

<sup>1</sup> Isa. xxxii. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Strenua inertia* (Hor.), thus rendered in a memorable sermon preached at Eton by the Bishop of New Zealand, on Whitsunday, 1854.

habit has liabilities and defects of its own, no less than the fondness for hardy sports or the turmoil of public contests. The one bias needs stimulus; the other needs control. Esau and Jacob are examples of failure under opposite temptations. Had Jacob shared the courage of Esau, he would have escaped much obloquy. Had Esau been imbued with the faith of Jacob, he might, like Samuel, and One greater than Samuel, have grown up *in favour with both God and man*.

Jacob is commonly blamed for taking an unfair advantage. The compact, and the issues involved in it, are not always allowed due weight. Moreover, before unreservedly blaming him, we ought to be more in possession of the circumstances than we are. The inspired narrative does not so much as hint at a fault on his part: the one comment, the one only moral drawn, is in reprobation of Esau. Now it is far from impossible that Jacob's demand was in some measure a defensive one, and put forward to emancipate him from a felt tyranny. All that we see is that the bargain was unequal. Yet it may well be questioned whether it appeared so in the eyes of either at the moment. Jacob undoubtedly knew that Esau had little regard for that privilege which to him himself was all in all. Further, the very thing which constitutes the inequality of the proposal in the highest degree involved the principle which is its chief justification; viz. the principle of faith towards God. Esau was in extremity, faint, exhausted. The temptation presented to him is not to be thought a slight temptation, though it was one which required neither the self-command of a Stoic nor the faith of a Christian martyr, but simply a sound well-balanced mind, to refuse at such a cost. Certainly in the Epistle to the Hébreus it is spoken of slightly and contemptuously, because in very truth there is no measure of proportion between the poor satisfactions of self-indulgence and the happiness of a

reception into favour with God. But until in our daily experience of the world we see more instances than we do of men able to strike the balance between things temporal and things eternal, we need not underrate the trial, though we may take warning from its history against yielding to the like.

What was comprised in the birthright we gather in part from the distinct declarations of Scripture; but occasional hints go far to prove much more. The conclusion generally and with good reason accepted is, that this privilege of the firstborn conveyed three things: a double portion of the patrimonial inheritance; the right of precedence in the family; and finally the office of priestly ministrations at the family altar. There is no question as to the first of these three. The statements in Deuteronomy xxi. 17, and 1 Chronicles v. 1, 2, are decisive. But had the birthright contained this benefit only (as the verse in Chronicles taken literally would imply); or, again, had the second part of it bestowed a mere titular and conventional rank, there would have been no test of faith, or high principle, in either desiring or despising it. It is evident that some deeper promise, some spiritual good, underlay the material advantage. The writer to the Hebrews represents the conduct of Esau as *profane*, and also as involving a twofold loss. And it is simply characteristic of his profane unspiritual temper, that he negatives this view and asserts a claim to the blessing after he had parted with the birthright. What was this spiritual good? What in point of fact was included in the gift of precedency, or headship, which Isaac conferred on Jacob in the words *be lord over thy brethren*; words echoed at a later date with emphatic and explanatory addition in Jacob's own blessing upon Judah? The promise of the Messiah. For this was the peculiar blessing pronounced upon Abraham and the children of Abraham: *In thee, and in thy seed, shall all the*

*nations of the earth be blessed.* Originally, the reward of faith, this continued to be the object of faith; it could not but be contained in the prerogative formally and solemnly handed down by father to firstborn, or to him who had the right of the firstborn.

The third constituent of the birthright was the priesthood. This is affirmed by the most authoritative expositors, and is collected by reasonable inference from scattered notices of Scripture. And a pregnant fact it is. It signified not merely that the firstborn should rightly take the lead in serving God; it embodied practically the axiom that moral obligation accompanies spiritual privilege. It was in a manner a call to the firstborn, to represent in holiness of character and consecration, Him of whom he was pre-announced to be the ancestor. The fact and its meaning come out into view by degrees. When Moses was first commissioned to the court of Pharaoh, he was authorized to demand the release of Israel, collectively, as the *firstborn of the Lord*. When the release had been effected, the path of duty and of promise was opened before them and set out in these words, *ye shall be to Me a kingdom of priests*. The two terms are plainly identified and equivalent. Again, the frequent commands, *sanctify unto Me all the firstborn, the firstborn shalt thou give unto Me*, point in the same direction; eventually, they culminate in the application of the epithets *firstborn* and *firstbegotten* to Christ Himself, and in the description of the Christian body as the *church of the firstborn*.

It is further observable that the birthright, as the heritage of a single person, terminates with Jacob. The position of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in relation to God was unique. No other individual names are so associated with the Divine name. But that honour is shared by the collective family; and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is known also as the God of Israel. Consistently

with this, when the patriarchal privilege passes over to the twelve heads of the future tribes, the threefold elements of the one birthright are distributively assigned; the double portion to Joseph; the precedency, including the lineage of the Messiah, to Judah; the priestly ministry to Levi.

These considerations assuredly prove that the acquisition of the birthright was no mean or common object of ambition, but one adequate to engage the whole soul as with a master passion and the longing of a life. We are likely to judge both motives and character incorrectly, unless true measure is taken of the prize contended for, and the passions called into play. Jacob had coveted, no doubt *coveted earnestly*<sup>1</sup> and long, what Esau relinquished with indifference. Is there no mark here of mental, of moral, superiority and inferiority? The one rose to a just estimate of his object; the other *comprehended it not*. It is no strained conjecture to assume that the elder brother had a certain value for it, as belonging to his accredited position; that he regarded it as men regard an honorary title or a step in rank: whereas the other had gauged its true spiritual meaning and glorious promise. Was this a trivial difference? It is the difference between what ennobles and what degrades the human soul: it is the superiority of depth of feeling, coupled with persistency of aim, over reckless unreasoning levity. The simplicity of the Bible leaves much to be filled up in its histories, and is easily misread. We do surely misread it here if we see in all this only an encounter of cupidity with carelessness, if we fail to discern in this diptych of moral portraiture the evil of self-gratification, incapable of pursuing its highest good, and the worth of settled lofty purpose, working out its thoughtful way to eventual fitness for the *goodly heritage* in view.

It might be important, could we but find the answer, to ask when this compact took place; in youth, or manhood,

or middle age? Was the transaction secret or avowed? If known at home, was it known abroad? What was the effect on the position of Esau, and what on his mind? If we had positive information on these heads, it is not impossible that a very different colouring might be thrown upon the subject. And if we cannot have the whole case before us, it should be a matter of conscience to be forbearing in our judgment, and rather to be reverent than rash. As I have intimated above, we do not look in the Bible for exhaustive details; its statements are designed, not for the gratification of curiosity, but the glorification of Truth. There is a principle both in what they omit, and in what they set forth. The grand realities of life, the broad outlines of the laws which govern it, are *written for our learning*; the apportionment of praise and blame, which is dear to the complacent and the censorious temper, finds but rare or incidental expression, as though it were proper only and reserved for the determination of the One Judge who reads all the heart.

It is easy to believe that Jacob revealed what had taken place in confidence to his mother. It has been thought that Esau's Canaanite marriages were due to the change in his prospects, and his consciousness of it. It may be that, angry with himself, wounded in feeling, made reckless by remorse, he fled, as men do, any whither to escape self-reproach, and sought in connecting himself with those who knew nothing of the Abrahamic hope, to find arguments to second and support him in abandoning it. If so, as there is a note of time for his marriage, so there is, approximately, for his compact with his brother. And if so late a date is assumed for the transaction, it alters, or at least affects, the complexion of it. For in that case it cannot be regarded as an accident of thoughtless impulse; rather it evinces the decision of the matured character, when men have taken their line and are fixed in habit, and, if a crisis comes, prove

the nature of their choice. Esau, according to this theory, yielded with his eyes open to the condition imposed upon him; his consent was deliberate, and left him no right of recalling it. Jacob may have felt that, in imposing and exacting it, he was justified by the actual terms of the promise at his birth, and more than justified by the glorious expectation which that promise was understood to include.

There are those who instinctively think more of others than themselves; with whom humility is a habit, and acquiescence a second nature; sensitive to giving offence, still more to giving pain, they are almost incapable of contending against the express wish and interest of another, or of advancing and insisting on their own. But there come moments which absolutely choke up and change the current of their lives. And there is a point with the most pliable beyond which they cannot go in giving way; a time when independence becomes a vital necessity.

I say not that it was so with Jacob; but it may have been so. In the absence of direct proof, it is as fair to put the best as the worst construction on his motives. And the tenor of the Sacred Record is in favour of doing so. We see the Divine hand leading, the heavenly vision encouraging him, and that these mercies were not unthankfully lost on him. In his latest days he recurs devoutly to the remembrance of them, to *the God which fed me all my life long, which redeemed me from all evil*. Is it not credible that he had this recognition from the beginning? that he thought in earnest and acted in faith; that his whole moral being was drawn out and raised above itself by the hope set before him? And if he knew it to be unregarded by his brother, could he do otherwise than desire to secure it for himself?

J. E. YONGE.

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