

NEW LIFE OF JACOB

BY

C. BRADLAUGH

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IT ought to be pleasant work to present sketches of God's chosen people. More especially should it be an agreeable task to recapitulate the interesting events occurring during the life of a man whom God has loved. Jacob was the son of Isaac; the grandson of Abraham. These three men were so free from fault, their lives so unobjectionable, that the God of the Bible delighted to be called the "God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." It is true that Abraham owned slaves, was not always exact to the truth, and, on one occasion, turned his wife and child out to the mercies of a sandy desert; that Isaac in some sort followed his father's example and disingenuous practices; and that Jacob was without manly feeling, a sordid, selfish, unfraternal cozener, a cowardly trickster, a cunning knave; but they must nevertheless have been good men, for God was "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." The name Jacob עקב is not inappropriate. Kalisch says — "This appellation, if taken in its obvious etymological meaning, implies a deep ignominy: for the root from which it is derived עקב signifies *to deceive, to defraud*, and in such a despicable meaning the same form of the word is indeed used elsewhere. (Jeremiah ix, 3.) Jacob would, therefore, be nothing else but the crafty *impostor*; in this sense Esau, in the heat of his animosity, in fact clearly explains the word, "justly is his name called Jacob (cheat) because he has cheated me twice." (Genesis xxvii, 36.) Pious Jews in the formula for blessing the new moon are taught in the Kabbalah "to meditate on the initials of the four divine epithets which form Jacob." According to the ordinary orthodox Bible chronology, Jacob was born about 1836 or 1837 B.C., that is, about 2168 years from "in the beginning," his father Isaac being then sixty years of age. There is a difficulty connected with Holy Scripture chronology which would be insuperable were it not that we have the advantage of spiritual aids in elucidation of the text. This difficulty arises from the fact that the chronology of the Bible, in this respect, like the major portion of Bible history, is utterly unreliable. But we do not look to the Old or New Testament for mere common-place, every-day facts — if we do, severe will be the disappointment of the truth-seeker — we look there for mysteries, miracles, paradoxes, and perplexities, and have no difficulty in [finding] the objects of our search. Jacob was born, together with his twin brother, Esau, in consequence of special entreaty addressed by Isaac to the Lord on behalf of Rebekah, to whom he had been married about nineteen years, and who was yet childless. Infidel physiologists (and it is a not unaccountable fact, that all who are physiologists are also in so far

infidel) assert that prayer would do little to repair the consequence of such disease, or such abnormal organic structure, as had compelled sterility. But our able clergy are agreed that the Bible was not intended to teach us science; or, at any rate, we have learned that its attempts in that direction are most miserable failures. Its mission is to teach the unteachable: to enable us to comprehend the incomprehensible. Before Jacob was born God decreed that he and his descendants should obtain the mastery over Esau and his descendants: "the elder shall serve the younger." (Gen. xxv, 23) The God of the Bible is a just God, but it is hard for weak flesh to discover the justice of this proemial decree, which so sentenced to servitude the children of Esau before their father's birth. Jacob came into the world holding by his brother's heel, like some cowardly knave in the battle of life, who, not daring to break a gap in the hedge of conventional prejudice, which bars his path, is yet ready enough to follow some bolder warrior, and to gather the fruits of his courage. "And the boys grew: and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field: and Jacob was a plain man, dwelling in tents." One day, Esau returned from his hunting, faint and wearied to the very point of death. He was hungry, and came to Jacob, his twin and only brother, saying, "Feed me, I pray thee" (Ibid., xxv, 30) "for I am exceedingly faint." (Douay Version) In a like case would not any man so entreated immediately offer to the other the best at his command, the more especially when that other is his only brother, born at the same time, from the same womb, suckled at the same breast, fed under the same roof? But Jacob was not merely a man and a brother, he was one of God's chosen people, and one who had been honored by God's prenatal selection. "If a man come unto me and hate not his brother, he cannot be my disciple." So taught Jesus the Jew, in after time, and in this earlier age Jacob the Jew, in practice, anticipated the later doctrine. It is one of the misfortunes of theology, if not its crime, that profession of love to God is often accompanied with bitter and active hate of man. Jacob was one of the founders of the Jewish race, and even in this their prehistoric age, the instinct for driving a hard bargain seems strongly developed. "Jacob said" to Esau, "Sell me this day thy birthright." The famished man vainly expostulated, and the birthright was sold for a mess of pottage. If to-day one man should so meanly and cruelly take advantage of his brother's necessities to rob him of his birthright, all good and honest men would shun him as an unbrotherly scoundrel, and most contemptible knave; yet, less than 4,000 years ago, a very different standard of morality must have prevailed. Indeed, if God is unchangeable, divine notions of honor and honesty must to-day be widely different from those of our highest men. God approved and endorsed Jacob's conduct. His approval is shown by his love, afterwards expressed for Jacob; his

endorsement by his subsequent attention to Jacob's welfare. We may learn from this tale, so pregnant with instruction, that any deed which to the worldly and sensible man appears like knavery while understood literally becomes to the devout and prayerful man an act of piety when understood spiritually. Pious preachers and clever commentators declare that Esau despised his birthright. I do not deny that they might back their declaration by scripture quotations, but I do deny that the narrative ought to convey any such impression. Esau's words were, "Behold I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright be to me?"

Bereshith Rabba, cap. 95, says that "wherever Jacob resided, he studied the law as his fathers did," and it adds, "How is this, seeing that the law had not yet been given?" There is no record that Esau also studied the law, and there is no mention of any legal proceedings to set aside this very questionable birthright transfer.

Isaac growing old, and fearing from his physical infirmities the near approach of death, was anxious to bless Esau before he died, and directed him to take quiver and bow and go out in the field to hunt some venison for a savory meat, such as old Isaac loved. Esau departed, but when he had left his father's presence in order to fulfil his request, Jacob appeared on the scene. Instigated by his mother, he, by an abject stratagem, passed himself off as Esau. With a savory meat prepared by Rebekah, he came into his father's presence, and Isaac said, "Who art thou, my son?" Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord. The Lord loved Jacob, yet Jacob lied to his old blind father, saying, "I am Esau thy first-born." Isaac had some doubts: these are manifested by his inquiring how it was that the game was killed so quickly. Jacob, whom God loved, in a spirit of shameless blasphemy replied, "Because the Lord thy God brought it to me." Isaac still hesitated, fancying that he recognised the voice to be the voice of Jacob, and again questioned him, saying, "Art thou my very son Esau?" God is the God of truth and loved Jacob, yet Jacob said, "I am." Then Isaac blessed Jacob, believing that he was blessing Esau and God permitted the fraud to be successful, and himself also blessed Jacob. In that extraordinary composition known as the Epistle to the Hebrews, we are told that by faith Isaac blessed Jacob. But what faith had Isaac? Faith that Jacob was Esau? His belief was produced by deceptive appearances. His faith resulted from false representations. And there are very many men in the world who have no better foundation for their religious faith than had Isaac when he blessed Jacob, believing him to be Esau. In the Douay Bible I find the following note on this remarkable narrative: "St. Augustine (*L. contra mendacium*, c. 10), treating at large upon this place, excuseth Jacob from a lie, because this whole passage was mysterious, as relating to the preference which was afterwards to be given to the Gentiles before the carnal Jews, which Jacob, by

prophetic light, might understand. So far it is certain that the first birthright, both by divine election and by Esau's free cession, belonged to Jacob; so that if there were any lie in the case, it would be no more than an officious and venial one." How glorious to be a patriarch, and to have a real saint laboring years after your death to twist your lies into truth by aid of prophetic light! Lying is at all times most disreputable, but at the deathbed the crime is rendered more heinous. The death hour would have awed many men into speaking the truth, but it had little effect on Jacob. Although Isaac was about to die, this greedy knave cared not, so that he got from the dying man the sought-for prize. God is said to love righteousness and hate iniquity, yet he loved the iniquitous Jacob, and hated the honest Esau. All knaves are tinged more or less with cowardice. Jacob was no exception to the rule. His brother, enraged at the deception practised upon Isaac, threatened to kill Jacob. Jacob was warned by his mother and fled. Induced by Rebekah, Isaac charged Jacob to marry one of Laban's daughters. On the way to Haran, where Laban dwelt, Jacob rested and slept. While sleeping he dreamed; ordinarily, dreams have little significance, but in the Bible they are more important. Some of the most weighty and vital facts of the Bible are communicated in dreams; and rightly so; if the men had been wideawake they would have probably rejected the revelation as absurd. So much does that prince of darkness, the devil, influence mankind against the Bible in the day time, that it is when all is dark, and our eyes are closed, and the senses dormant, that God's mysteries are most clearly seen and understood. Jacob "saw in his sleep a ladder standing upon the earth, and the top thereof touching heaven; the angels also, of God ascending and descending by it, and the Lord leaning upon the ladder (Gen. xxviii, 12 and 13, Douay Version). In the ancient temples of India, and in the mysteries of Mithra, the seven-stepped ladder by which the spirits ascended to heaven is a prominent feature, and one of probably far higher antiquity than the age of Jacob. Did paganism furnish the groundwork for the patriarch's dream? "No man hath seen God at anytime." God is "invisible." Yet Jacob saw the invisible God, whom no man hath seen or can see, either standing above a ladder or leaning upon it. True, it was all a dream. Yet God spoke to Jacob, but perhaps that was a delusion too. We find by scripture that God threatens to send to some "strong delusions that they might believe a lie and be damned." Poor Jacob was much frightened; as any one might be, to dream of God leaning on so long a ladder. What if it had broken, and the dreamer underneath it? Jacob's fears were not so powerful but that his shrewdness and avarice had full scope in a sort of half-vow, half-contract, made in the morning. Jacob said, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I shall come again to my fa-

ther's house in peace, then shall the Lord be my God." The inference deducible from this conditional statement is, that if God failed to complete the items enumerated by Jacob, then the latter would have nothing to do with him. Jacob was a shrewd Jew, who would have laughed to scorn the preaching "Take no thought, saying, what shall we eat? or, what shall we drink? or, wherewithal shall we be clothed?"

After this contract Jacob went on his journey, and reached the house of his mother's brother, Laban, into whose service he entered. "Diamond cut diamond" would be an appropriate heading to the tale which gives the transactions between Jacob the Jew and Laban the son of Nahor. Laban had two daughters. Rachel, the youngest, was "beautiful and well-favored;" Leah, the elder, was "blear-eyed." Jacob served for the pretty one; but on the wedding day Laban made a feast, and when evening came gave Jacob the ugly Leah instead of the pretty Rachel. Jacob being (according to Josephus) both in drink and in the dark, it was morning ere he discovered his error. After this Jacob served for Rachel also, and then the remainder of the chapter of Jacob's servitude to Laban is but the recital of a series of frauds and trickeries. Jacob embezzled Laban's property, and Laban misappropriated and changed Jacob's wages. In fact, if Jacob had not possessed the advantage of divine aid, he would probably have failed in the endeavor to cheat his master, but God, who says "thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, nor anything that is thy neighbor's," encouraged Jacob in his career of covetous criminality. At last Jacob, having amassed a large quantity of property, determined to abscond from his employment, and taking advantage of his uncle's absence at sheepshearing "he stole away unawares," taking with him his wives, his children, flocks, herds, and goods. To crown the whole, Rachel, worthy wife of a husband so fraudulent, stole her father's gods.

But in those days God's ways were not as our ways. God came to Laban in a dream and compounded the felony, saying, "Take heed thou speak not anything harshly against Jacob." This would probably prevent Laban giving evidence in a police court against Jacob, and thus save him from transportation or penal servitude. After a reconciliation and treaty had been effected between Jacob and Laban, the former went on his way "and the angels of God met him." Balaam's ass, at a later period, shared the good fortune which was the lot of Jacob, for that animal also had a meeting with an angel. Jacob was the grandson of the faithful Abraham to whom angels also appeared. It is somewhat extraordinary that Jacob should have manifested no surprise at meeting a host of angels. Still more worthy of note is it that our good translators elevate the same words into "angels" in verse 1, which they degrade into "messengers" in verse 3. John Bellamy, in his translation, says the

“angels” were not immortal angels, and it is very probable John Bellamy was right. Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau, and heard that the latter was coming to meet him followed by 400 men. Jacob, a timorous knave at best, became terribly afraid. He, doubtless, remembered the wrongs inflicted upon Esau, the cruel extortion of the birthright, and the fraudulent obtainment of the dying Isaac’s blessing. He, therefore, sent forward to his brother Esau a large present as a peace offering. He also divided the remainder of his flocks, herds, and goods, into two divisions, that if one were smitten, the other might escape; sending these on, he was left alone. While alone he wrestled with either a man, or an angel, or God. The text says “a man,” the heading to the chapter says “an angel” and Jacob himself says that he has “seen God face to face.” Whether God, angel, or man, it was not a fair wrestle, and were the present editor of *Bell’s Life* referee, he would, unquestionably, declare it to be most unfair to touch “the hollow of Jacob’s thigh” so as to put it “out of joint,” and consequently, award the result of the match to Jacob. Jacob, notwithstanding the injury, still kept his grip, and the apocryphal wrestler, finding himself no match at fair struggling, and that foul play was unavailing, now tried entreaty, and said, “Let me go, for the day breaketh.” Spirits never appear in the day time, when if they did appear, they could be seen and examined; they are often more visible in the twilight, in the darkness, and in dreams. Jacob would not let go: his life’s instinct for bargaining prevailed, and probably, because he could get nothing else, he insisted on his opponent’s blessing, before he let him go. In the Roman Catholic version of the Bible there is the following note: — “Chap. xxxii, v. 24. *A man, etc.* This was an angel in human shape, as we learn from *Osee* (c. xii, v. 4). He is called God (xv, 28 and 30), because he represented the son of God. This wrestling, in which Jacob, assisted by God, was a match for an angel, was so ordered (v. 28) that he might learn by this experiment of the divine assistance, that neither Esau, nor any other man, should have power to hurt him.” How elevating it must be to the true believer to conceive God helping Jacob to wrestle with his own representative. On the morrow Jacob met Esau.

“And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed² him; and they wept.”

“And he said, What meanest thou by all this drove which I met? And he said, These are to find grace in the sight of my lord.”

“And Esau said, I have enough, my brother; keep that thou hast unto thyself.”

“The last portion of the history of Jacob and Esau “, writes G. J. Holyoake, “is very instructive. The coward fear of Jacob to meet his brother is well delineated. He is subdued by a sense of his treacherous guilt. The noble forgiveness of Esau invests his mem-

ory with more respect than all the wealth Jacob won, and all the blessings of the Lord he received. Could I change my name from Jacob to Esau, I would do it in honor of him. The whole incident has a dramatic interest. There is nothing in the Old or New Testament equal to it. The simple magnanimity of Esau is scarcely surpassed by anything in Plutarch. In the conduct of Esau, we see the triumph of time, of filial affection, and generosity over a deep sense of execrable treachery, unprovoked and irrevocable injury." Was not Esau a merciful, noble, generous man? Yet God hated him, and shut him out of all share in the promised land. Was not Jacob a mean, prevaricating knave: a crafty, abject cheat? Yet God loved and rewarded him. How great are the mysteries in this Bible representation of an all-good and all-loving God, thus hating good, and loving evil! At the time of the wrestling a promise was made, which is afterwards repeated by God to Jacob, that the latter should not be any more called Jacob, but Israel. This promise was not strictly kept; the name "Jacob" being used repeatedly, mingled with that of Israel in the after part of Jacob's history. Jacob had a large family; his sons are reputedly the heads of the twelve Jewish tribes. Joseph, who was much loved by his father, was sold by his brethren into slavery. This transaction does not seem to have called for any special reproof from God. Joseph, who from early life was skilled in dreams, succeeded by interpreting the visions of Pharaoh in obtaining a sort of premiership in Egypt; while filling which office he, like more modern Prime Ministers, "*placed* his father and his brethren, and gave them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land." Joseph not only gave his own family the best place in the land, but he also, by a trick of statecraft, obtained the land for the king, made slaves of the people, and made it a law over the land of Egypt that the king should be entitled to one-fifth of the produce, always, of course, excepting and saving the rights of the priest. Judah, another brother, sought to have burned a woman by whom he had a child. A third, named Reuben, was guilty of the grossest vice, equalled only by that of Absalom the son of David; of Simeon and Levi, two more of Jacob's sons, it is said that "instruments of cruelty were in their habitations;" their conduct, as detailed in the 34th chapter of Genesis, alike shocks by its treachery and its mercilessness. After Jacob had heard that his son Joseph was governor in Egypt, but before he had journeyed farther than Beersheba, God spake unto him in the visions of the night, and probably forgetting that he had given him a new name, or being more accustomed to the old one, said, "Jacob, Jacob," and then told him to go down into Egypt; where Jacob died after a residence of about seventeen years, when 147 years of age.³ Before Jacob died he blessed first the sons of Joseph, and then his own children, and at the termination of his blessing to Ephraim and

Manasseh, we find the following speech addressed to Joseph, "Moreover I have given to thee one portion above thy brethren, which I took out of the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow." This speech implies warlike pursuits on the part of Jacob, of which the Bible gives no record, and which seem incompatible with his recorded life. The sword of craft and the bow of cunning are the only weapons in the use of which he was skilled. When his sons murdered and robbed the Hivites, fear seems to have been Jacob's most prominent characteristic.

The Talmud says: "The sons of Esau, of Ishmael, and of Keturah, went on purpose to dispute the burial (of Jacob); but when they saw that Joseph had placed his crown upon the coffin, they did the same with theirs." There were *thirty-six* crowns in all, tradition says. "And they mourned with a great and very sore lamentation." Even the very horses and asses joined in it, we are told. On arriving at the cave of Machpelah, Esau once more protested, and said, "Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, are all buried here. Jacob disposed of his share when he buried Leah in it, and the remaining one belongs to me." "But thou didst sell thy share with thy birthright," remonstrated the sons of Jacob. "Nay," rejoined Esau, "that did not include my share in the burial place." "Indeed it did," they argued, "for our father, just before he died, said (Gen. i, 5), 'In my grave which I have bought for myself.'" "Where are the title-deeds?" demanded Esau. "In Egypt," was the answer. And immediately the swift-footed Naphthali started for the records. ("So light of foot was he," says the Book of Jasher, "that he could go upon the ears of corn without crushing them.") Hushim, the son of Dan, being deaf, asked what was the cause of the commotion. On being told what it was, he snatched up a club and smote Esau so hard that his eyes dropped out and fell upon the feet of Jacob, at which Jacob opened his eyes and grimly smiled." (Sotah, fol. 13, col. 1).

ENDNOTES

¹ Genesis, xxxi, v. 24, Douay version.

² The Talmud says: "Read not 'and he kissed him,' but read 'and he bit him'" (Pirke d'Rab Eliezer, chap. 36); and Rabbi Yanai says: "Esau did not come to kiss him, but to bite him; only the neck of Jacob our father became as hard as marble, and this blunted the teeth of the wicked one. And what is taught by the expression 'And they wept?' 'The one wept for his neck, and the other for his teeth'" ("Midrash Rabbah," c. 68). Aben Ezra says that this exposition is only fit for children.

³ *Bava Bathra*, fol. 17, col. 1, says: "Over six the angel of death had no dominion and these were: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam," and it also says that these and Benjamin, the son of Jacob, "are seven who are not consumed by the worm in the grave."

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