



## Pressezentrum

---

Sperrfrist:	26. Mai 2017 09.30 Uhr
Projekt:	Bibelarbeiten am Freitag
Veranstaltung:	<b>Bibelarbeit mit GETI'17</b>
Zeit, Ort:	Fr. 09.30 – 10.30, Halle 18, Messe Berlin, Charlottenburg (594   E1)
Referent/in:	<b>Prof. Mika Vähäkangas, Missionsstudien und Ökumene, Lund/Schweden</b>

---

### Jacob is reconciled with Esau

Reading the text: Gen 33:1–17

Reading the Bible is sometimes like peeling an onion. So it is with the case of this biblical story, as well. The first level of this story is the reconciliation between the brothers.

The story goes: the mom's little weakling Jacob cheated the blessing of the first-born from the macho Esau. As a result, Jacob had to escape for his life.

In the exile, Jacob is successful and earns a lot of possessions: cattle, slaves, wives, children. (No, it is not by mistake I list wives and children as possessions – that is how they look like in Jacob's story.) His arrival is depicted in a bling-bling-manner, showing off Jacob's wealth like a rapper. The situation is precarious, and Jacob organizes the meeting so that in case violence erupts, slaves and Leah with children are slaughtered first and Rachel with Joseph have the best chances of escaping death.

However, Jacob's gifts to Esau, his submissive behaviour and probably also time do their task, and Esau is ready to forgive. This leads to an emotional reunion between the estranged brothers. Esau probably expects that from now on the brothers live together in peace, and the blessing is thus shared. At this level, the blessing looks probably to Esau like a free ticket to prosperity – Old Testament prosperity gospel.

However, Jacob cheats his brother to leave him: "You just go ahead, I remain here, cattle, children and women need rest. I will follow you". He goes his own way, leaving Esau out in the cold again. There was no reunification, and no actual reconciliation.

So, the second level of the onion is a story of cunning.

The morality of this story is doubtful: God's blessing is with the cheat, with Jacob.

Look at Jacob: Would you buy a used God from him? Yet, we Christians worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Considering the stories of Abraham and Isaac, as well, it seems that cheating goes in this family: Both Abraham and Isaac cheat their hosts, Egyptians and Philistines that their beautiful wives were their sisters. Thus, in face of threat, they are ready to cheat and render their wives to sexual exploitation – something that in the case of Dinah, Jacob's daughter, led to the slaughter of the sexual exploiter and his kinsfolk. And, Laban, Jacob's uncle, and Jacob competed in outwitting each other. These are our fathers in faith.

What is the result of having such role models? Western Christian colonial history abounds with cases in which the Christian colonialists considered it right to cheat the heathen out of their land. For example, in South Africa, Jacobs (literally, as Jacob is the most common surname of the whites in South Africa – one may wonder what made it so popular) considered it their divine right to take the land and make the indigenous people their slaves by whatever means. Just like Esau, the original population was there first, but they do not have the blessing. The cunning colonialist has a covenant with God, a covenant that seems to give him a carte blanche to do whatever he pleases. And note, in many interpretations, Esau was seen as the darker and we thus get a nice racist twist in the story. So, white Jacob, with the ownership of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, comes and takes the land of the dark Esau. The biblical story is li(v)ed again.

In the dismantling of Apartheid, the affluent whites approached the blacks with talk of forgiveness, reconciliation and democracy. Now the country would be united, reconciled and all would share the good life. What happened? The blacks, now mostly as good Christians, accept the return of the bling-bling-brother in the fold, embrace and reconcile.

However, once again, Jacob double-crosses Esau, and the social realities change only a little. Money and power are still in the white hands, good education remains the privilege of the rich (who are mostly white), and the democracy with black politicians functions largely as a fig leaf in front of the shame of racism. This leaves the country divided and wounded, with blacks, coloureds and whites wondering about their roles and identities. There are, however, those who attempt to reach true reconciliation.

What is almost humoristic, the leader of the new South African government of thieves and conmen is called Jacob, as well. This time, the Jacob is president Zuma who uses Christian rhetoric for his purposes of milking the nation out of its resources for private gain.

However, let us peel further in spite that this onion really makes you cry in tears. The third layer: When you look at the life story of Jacob, it becomes apparent that it is not, after all, a life of success. Wherever he goes, he ends up in conflicts. He is not able to live in peace with his neighbours, and is in constant fight. Even his family is filled with tensions to the extent that the older brothers want to kill the Daddy's favourite, Joseph. However, Joseph is not eventually killed but ends up in Egypt with Jacob believing that Joseph had been killed. What a bitter old man Jacob must have been! When famine hits the land, it is no wonder that he needs to send for help faraway in Egypt because one can hardly expect mutual help from the neighbours that one has constantly harassed. Eventually, Jacob is forced to exile in Egypt, and even if he rejoins there his favourite son, he dies long away from the Promised Land.

So, what seems to be on the surface a struggle about resources – land, cattle, slaves and wives as well as political power over the neighbouring peoples – turns out not to be so. Rather, if we consider what the author of this biblical narrative has wanted to convey, this is probably a matter of spiritual pedigree. The author of this story may have in his mind the question of how to argue that of all Abraham's descendants in various generations, it is just Jacob and his offspring that are chosen by God. It seems that the narrator is in pains to depict Esau as a person who actually did not deserve the blessing because of despising his birthright and selling it for a bowl of soup. Yet, even Jacob is a character who is difficult to justify as the rightful heir of the blessing. This third level is thus a matter of the line of spiritual, not political or economic power. Sorry, colonialists, but your biblical interpretation is shallow!

And, this leads us to the following, fourth, level of the onion: being chosen by God is not a matter of the person, like Jacob, being stronger (because Esau was stronger) or firstborn (Esau was) or morally upright (for Jacob was not that). It seems that the selection is God's sovereign decision with which humans have nothing to do. In Reformation traditions, this is called grace. Isn't this a wonderful twist: by the wave of a magic hermeneutical wand, an ethically highly problematic biblical story is transformed into a showcase of pure Lutheran doctrine! Luther will be happily clapping his hands!

As you can guess, this is, however, not all but we need to peel further. The fifth level. Even if the narrator of the story wants to present Jacob's life as bling-bling, it is not. Actually, comparing Jacob with the calling of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, we get even a clearer picture about how it is to be chosen. It is a terrifying situation to be chosen by God. The shallow life of enjoyment and avoidance of conflicts needs to be left behind, and the chosen carry out the will of God. Jonah probably did the rational thing when attempting to escape to the metropolis and disappear there from God, or Moses to turn down the calling with the excuse of his being slow of speech. Likewise, even if the narrator of the story of Jacob presents the chosen people, the Israelites, as the strong nation that is supposed to rule over the neighbouring nations, the history of the chosen people is not bling-bling at all, either, but rather a long string of tribulations and survival amongst most horrible persecutions. God does not call his followers on a Sunday picnic. This reality is often clearly depicted in the stories of calling of many African prophets of last century and even today. In many cases, the calling is terrifying and one attempts to avoid it, with good reason. Jesus portrays us the summit of God's calling. It is called the cross.

Thus, God's calling is grace but it involves the cross. Luther, as a biblical scholar, came to this conclusion, too. And this conclusion does not make you or Luther clap your hands, the cross is not a joke, it is serious business.

Still, considering the calling, it is not by chance that the narrator of this biblical story tells us how Jacob wrestles with the mystery man the night before reunion with Esau. This mystery man is interpreted either as God or as an angel. Jacob cannot win. This might be like I was wrestling Sumo with my 2-year daughter, and sometimes the matches could last long! These two wrestle until the dawn. In the end, the mystery man injures Jacob so that he is limping for the rest of his life. So, Jacob limps to his brother on the following day. We may wonder whether the terrifying call of God actually leads to permanent injuries in each case. Definitely, it changes the called. Here Jacob turns into Israel which possibly means "he struggles with God". Therefore, the life of the called is constant wrestling with God.

Considering the choice of Jacob: God chooses this cunning weakling, and even causes him to limp for the rest of his life. Why? What is interesting in the story of Jacob is that he is fleeing from many people and situations but he does not run away from God. Sure, when seeing the ladders to heaven, he is in awe but does not run away. When meeting with the mystery man, he does not run away but faces the challenge of wrestling. So, Jacob faces the call

frontally. One may think that if there is something one should take as exemplary from this man's life and nature, it is this fearless encounter with the calling.

Moving on, at the sixth level we are in front of the deepest question: Who and how is this God who is choosing whomever He wants?

After wrestling with the mystery man, Jacob asks his name but he does not answer. He knows Jacob's name, and he gives Jacob a new identity as Israel, but he is not prepared to reveal his name. He remains a mystery for Israel forever. Interestingly, elsewhere, God answers the question about her name in quite a humorous manner: "I am who I am" – one could hardly be anything else. Yet, as many a good joke, this contains deeper existential and philosophical levels. For example, that God is not the way we are. She is not contingent, having a beginning and an end, she does not exist the way we do.

Luther sketches theology of the cross (theologia crucis) in the Heidelberg disputation in 1518. There, one of the main points is that God is not the way humans expect Him to be – She is different. Humans seek God in glory and bling bling but she is not found there. Luther probably resorts to humour here by playing with words. He makes an indirect reference to the story of Elijah's meeting with God: Elijah waits to see God. First comes a storm, then an earthquake and fire, but God was not in them. However, when there comes a gentle whisper of a wind. God was there, and one has often interpreted this so that Elijah did not see God's face but saw God from behind. So, for Luther, when theologians of glory want to see God in great manifestations, it is like wanting to see God's face. However, God is seen only through sufferings and the cross, something that Luther describes as "posteriora", that means backside things. Thus, humans want to see God's face but just see the bottom!

When wandering through the puzzling and troublesome biblical story of Jacob and Esau, we are led to many ethical, political and theological questions. When peeling the onion deeper, the questions become increasingly deep and even complex. In the end, what do you have in hand: just the mystery, a deep sense of something beyond one's comprehension. It also leaves you puzzled with the Bible: there are so many ways of interpreting it, often contrary to each other. This biblical story can be enslaving or liberating. In the bottom it is a question of which lenses you use to read the Bible. For Luther, changing the lenses from reading the Scriptures through the image of God as a bloodthirsty harsh tyrant to a forgiving Father made the texts open in a completely new light.

Whichever lenses we may use in reading the Bible, it is certain that it is such a varied and multifaceted collection of texts that it will always challenge you and your certainties. And perhaps that is how God wants it to be. A mystery solved is no longer a mystery.

Dieses Werk ist lizenziert unter einer Creative Commons Namensnennung – Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen 4.0 International Lizenz, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>