

# Birthright

Jonathan Omer-Man

**M**y name is Esau. This is my home, this is where I live, on Mount Se'ir, the hairy mountain. My line has prospered and grown strong here; powerful kings and princes have sprung from my loins. We are a warrior nation, and we seek the high road to God. We have had our defeats, but we do not complain. In our calling we take risks.

No one visits me now; I no longer await my brother's arrival. Once he said that he would visit me up here on Mount Se'ir, but he found another way to complete what he had to complete. At any rate, when last we met, at our father's funeral, he made no mention of the matter. Our paths are separate now. For years they were intertwined, and the one could do nothing that didn't affect the other. Now we no longer need each other. My brother no longer needs me. Do I feel used? Well, I was used. We are all used by our brothers, but I am no longer angry, I am not bitter. Even when he tricked me and stole from me, I did not remain angry for long. True, the second time he outwitted me, I bellowed and bawled that he was a cheap thief, and that I wanted to kill him, but that passed. Some of his descendants tell strange stories about me, about the diabolic Esau, but they do not understand. They follow after my brother, but they do not comprehend the significance of the story of Esau and his brother.

Even in our mother's womb, we struggled. Even there, twins in the belly of the matriarch, our limbs entangled, we were two individuals, two nations bound together and yet destined to tread different, divergent paths. Our mother had waited a long time for the pregnancy, but when she did conceive, she felt that she could not live with all the jostling and pushing and wrestling within her. Most women forget the pangs of pregnancy, but she remembered. When we were small children and were making too much noise fighting over some petty toy, she liked to tell us how she had gone to

complain to the Lord about the inner commotion, what we were doing inside her, and what God had told her:

*Two nations are in thy womb, And two nations shall be separated from thy bowels; And the one people shall be stronger than the other people; And the elder shall serve the younger.*

You know, for years I was tormented by that prophecy. I would brood over it, turning it over and over in my mind. Its meaning seemed to change, to shimmer before me. Would the separation be just one brother from the other, or also one son from the parents? Who would serve whom? Would it be the stronger? I seemed to be stronger. And after my brother tricked me out of the birthright of the first-born, did I then become the younger? It was so unclear! For a long time that prophecy was the touchstone of my life. My brother's too, but for him it was different. You see, I thought that it was a challenge, that it meant that everything was open, that both of us had a chance; but he thought that it meant that everything was foreordained, that he was the chosen son. I was willing to fight for it, to strive for it, to risk my world on a single cast of the die, to win in glory or to lose in ignominy. But my brother was different: he didn't want to fight for the birthright, he wanted to be the first-born. When he stole something, and he stole a lot, he truly believed that it belonged to him. When he took my father's blessing from me, he thought that he was just correcting an accident of nature, a minor accident of chronology, the fact that he arrived in this dark world a few minutes after me.

When I was a child, I would accompany my father when each evening he went into the fields to pray. He used to stand motionless, mouthing words that I could not hear, gazing intently at a bush or a boulder or a lizard. It was then that I began to look at things, at the details. Later, as a lad, I would go out into the fields and the forests alone, and bring back game for the family. Whenever I caught a deer, I would prepare venison, which my father loved; we would all sit together and study, and he would favor and praise me. We were an odd family. My mother loved my brother, my father loved me.

My brother stayed at home a great deal, and he learned the occult arts of the tent dwellers. I became a hunter, and I learned a different wisdom. I had to discover the limits of my powers: how fast I could run, how far I could throw, how long I could stand motionless. I learned to watch, to read the signs and to know the lore of the field. I learned patience and precision. I became a cunning person. But still my brother outwitted me!

I shall tell you what happened that first time. We must have been eighteen years old. I had been out hunting for more than a week, and I was tracking a small flock of mountain goats. There were seven or eight of them. Each time I approached, they would climb higher into the crags. At last I surprised them, and killed a young male with a long sling shot across a crevasse; but when I lowered the carcass down a cliff face, I tore a muscle in my right thigh. The way back was difficult and took me longer than usual, as I was limping badly. A few hours trek from home; I saw a hyena in my path. It had been tracking me, and now it was blocking the trail. It didn't attack me, but it was waiting for me to falter. It stayed out of stone's throw. But I was too tired to fight, and had to surrender my winnings to the meanest of scavengers. As soon as it started devouring the carcass, I hobbled off to our encampment. So I came home with nothing, exhausted, injured, and hungry. When I saw my brother squatting outside our tent, making some red lentil pottage, I wanted to cry. I told him that I had lost everything, but he continued with his cooking without looking up at me. I told him about the hunt and the climb, and still he was silent. I told him about my hurts, and about the hyena, and he continued to cook, stirring and adding herbs. Then I told him that I was faint, and I asked him for some of his bloody red lentil stew, and he said, "Sell me first your birthright." Then I wept, for I realized that he was a better hunter than I. "Take it," I told him, "I have no use for it."

Later I learned that on that very day grandfather had bequeathed his powers to our father, who had thereby become great high priest; either my brother or I was to be his sole heir. Let them not say that Esau despised the birthright! He did not; he honored and revered it and fought hard for it, but he lost it in a game he didn't understand.

My father had married when he was forty, and at that age I took two Hittite women, Judith and Basemath, as wives. My father and mother hated them, for the Hittites worshiped a different way. But a man cannot dally forever. When my whoring days were over, I knew it was time to marry, and promptly. Later my brother was to work for years to win his brides, which too I cannot understand.

My father and I grew closer again when his eyes began to fail. I would sit at his side and tell him stories of the hunt, and he loved every detail. He wanted to hear more, and I began to invent adventures to please him. Sometimes when I was sitting with him, relating some improbable tale of the chase, I would hear my mother clucking in disapproval from her side of their tent. She thought that I was dishonestly trying to win his heart. I began to understand my father more in those days, especially after he told me about that awful journey he made with his father to Mount Moriah. Perhaps he saw in me someone who would have refused to go, who would have said no. Perhaps he saw in me all the attributes that he had lost. He certainly saw in me the future of his line. But by then his vision was seriously impaired.

One day he called me.

"My son," he said.

"Here I am," I answered.

*"Behold now," he said. "I am old, and I know not the day of my death. Now therefore take, I pray thee, thy weapons, thy quiver and thy bow, and go out to the field, and take me venison; and make me savory food, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat; that my soul may bless thee before I die."*

O how my soul wept when I heard those words! What man can remain unmoved to hear the parting blessing of his poor old blind and dying father! I choked upon my tears and ran to do his will, happy like a child who knows that he is loved, and despondent

like a lad who knows that to gain his treasured prize he must lose so much. My heart was overfilled with emotions as I left his tent, and I was not attentive to what was happening around me. The truth is, I wanted that love of his too much.

The rest is documented history. I came back and prepared my father his food. I brought the meal into his tent in mock ceremony, and playfully announced like a herald:

"Let my father arise and eat of his son's venison, that his soul may bless me."

My father looked perplexed. "Who are you?" he asked.

I thought he too was jesting, and answered: "I am thy son, thy first-born, Esau." He became very agitated, and together we began to understand what had happened.

"Who was it then," he asked, "who prepared me venison, and brought it to me, and I ate it, all this before you came? Whom have I blessed? For whomsoever have I blessed, he alone shall be blessed. "

I was hurt and angry and bitter. I screamed and roared and sobbed. I asked my father for the impossible: "Bless me, please bless me," I implored. But the blessing he had given my smooth and slippery brother was unique: it was the transmission of a power that cannot be divided.

"Your brother came with cunning," he said. "He has taken your blessing."

"Have you not a blessing for me?" I begged.

His answer was more than I could bear. "Behold, I have made him thy master; I have given him his brothers for servants; I have sustained him with corn and wine; what then shall I do for thee, my son?"

"Do you not have even one blessing for me?" I asked, and I wept.

Well, he did give me a blessing. It was not that which I desired, but I learned to live with it:

*Behold, of the fat places of the earth shall be thy dwelling*

*And of the dew of heaven from above;  
And by thy sword shalt thou live, and thou shalt serve thy brother  
And it shall come to pass when thou shalt break loose,  
That thou shalt shake his yoke from off thy neck.*

My brother and I separated after that. I spent several days fuming and muttering that I was going to kill him, and he, with my mother's help, escaped to Uncle Laban in Haran. When last I saw him, at Yabbok, my blessing had come to fullness; I was free of him, but he still had work to do. I had learned that it is not the fruits of victory that make a true warrior, but steadfastness in battle. And my brother was learning not to fear my strength.

You ask me if I still think that my brother was a thief. Well, he took things that did not belong to him. But no, he was not a thief. You see, my brother was not a man like you or me. His mind was different. He appeared to be devious, but in fact he went straight to what he knew. He didn't think or speculate, he just knew. My brother never doubted. The fact that he broke the law was irrelevant to him. He saw how things were meant to be, and how they would be in the future. And he was right. The birthright and the blessing probably did belong to him. I wanted too much to win, and losing them was my teaching. But I warn any lesser man not to try to imitate Jacob! We punish thieves harshly here on Se'ir.

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