

Heritage Lost and Found

An archaeologist was digging in the Negev Desert in Israel and came upon a casket containing a mummy. After examining it, he called the curator of a prestigious natural history museum. "I've just discovered a 3,000 year old mummy of a man who died of heart failure!"

To which the curator replied, "Bring him in. We'll check it out." A week later, the amazed curator called the archaeologist. "You were right about the mummy's age and cause of death. How in the world did you know?" "Simple...there was a piece of paper in his hand that said - put me down for 10,000 Shekels on Goliath'."

I thought it was appropriate to begin with a joke about a mummified skeleton . . . because the story of Jacob and Esau is one big skeleton that didn't keep in the family closet. If you've done any reading in the Bible you will know it is big on family histories. Chronicles and Judges and Matthew's gospel and the saga of Abraham and his offspring Genesis - these are the ancient version of today's records in a town clerk's office. Marriages, births and deaths are all there.

Anyone checking into your own family history knows that sometimes surprises pop up. Hopefully it's nothing as underhanded as Rebekah and Jacob's plot to steal Esau's birthright. It's a good surprise like discovering I had a five or six times great grandmother who came from Ireland. But there are other hints that can be eye-opening, even troubling. Let me tell you what I mean.

A few years ago I decided I would finally join the Clan Campbell Society. My mother's mom was named Dorothy Mae Campbell, but I didn't know much about anyone else on that side of the family. This was unfortunate because in order to become a member of the clan I had to prove ancestry back 3 generations. Problem was, I only knew my grandmother's father name which was George. That's it. I got my grandmother's birth certificate and there was George's full name and town of residence. Imagine my surprise was I when I found out he was from Stonington! So I wrote to the town clerk's office and got George and his wife's death certificates. The revealing thing about death certificates - they tell you how people died. I found out my great-grandfather died of scirossis of the liver. Hmm. Not hard to figure out what that meant. He died when my mother was two year old and his wife Annie died even before that. Reading into her death and his, I saw a troubled relationship with alcohol involved. I began to understand my grandmother and my mother better. They both behaved like adult children of an alcoholic. We don't realize that display of emotions or lack thereof tells a story in itself within a family. We can inherit family behaviors initiated by someone long dead. For me, it was an incredible "aha" moment that helped me be more patient and understanding with my mother those last few years.

I tell you this because we all have our family stories – legends, even. And even a few skeletons in the closet. But the family stories or myths are important for us today. Can you think of a relative your parents always talked about? Maybe it was a crazy old uncle or a world-traveling aunt. Or perhaps it was somebody nobody dared mention. In those situations it is the silence that speaks volumes. That's what I mean when I say we all have family stories. The story we tell is a way to clarify or cover up or even put someone on a pedestal who wasn't so revered in life. Digging up these stories, even secrets, can be dangerous – as I found out!

The first book of the Bible is a bit of history and it is a lot about human nature and the nature of the Divine at work in creation. God creates and makes an agreement with humankind and we mess it up. Over and over again God promises to be our God if we will be God's people. Genesis reveals a lot about a God who never gives up on us. Even to the point of the absurd – promising Abraham and Sarah they would be parents of a

great nation when clearly they were way beyond childbearing years! The storytellers in Genesis did a good job by keeping a lot of juicy bits in. It is important, though, to also listen for the silences.

The tale goes on to show that even those with the greatest of faith don't always act rashly or patiently even with God's assurances. That's why Sarah took matters into her own hands and her maid, Tamar had Abraham's son Ishmael. They later get banished from the land. (As a side note - Ishmael became the father of the tribe that eventually followed the way of Islam.)

Sarah eventually gave birth to Isaac who was about 40 years-old before his father Abraham realized he'd better find him a wife – last week's story. Maybe the trauma of almost being sacrificed as a child affected Isaac. But Abraham's servant brings back Rebekah from homeland and household of Sarah's uncle. Together, Isaac and Rebekah had twin sons – Esau was born first and emerged with Jacob grasping his heel. Firstborn status meant everything in those days, no matter what you looked like. Esau was ruddy in complexion and is purported to have red hair. Jacob was darker skinned – obviously not identical twins.

Although parents aren't supposed to have favorites, Rebekah favored Jacob and did all in her power to help him succeed in life. But one hurdle kept Jacob from being first in Isaac's eyes. Remember, he was born second. This was always hanging over his head. So all Jacob had to do was to get his brother to give up his birthright – his claim to inheritance in the system of the day. And all it took was a very hungry Esau and a wily Jacob at the cooking fire. For a bowl of stew Esau gave his birthright to Jacob. Now all Jacob had to do was to get the aging Isaac's blessing – and that is a tale for another day.

Remember what I said about family stories – they have a goal in mind, depending on who tells the tale? We have to also listen to the silences. This chapter in the Abrahamic saga portrays Jacob as cunning, skilled and handsome. In the silence Esau is not shown in a very good light. Next to Jacob he is simple-minded, focusing only on his hunger. We might figure out Esau is a good hunter and provider, meaning he has better survival skills in the wilderness than his brother. But at home brains win over brawn.

We also have to note the absence of the mention of God. Did God sit back and let things play out, because Rebekah and Jacob always showed their true colors? God didn't need to act because the humans acted out as agents on their own behalf. In some ways this tale gives us more questions than answers. The one important question to always ask is: Do we act and live with the intention of being on the side of God? Or are we hoping that how we want to live will be blessed by God?

There is some good news. There is more to the story yet to come. The other good news is that history tells us that God does not give up on us. Whatever mistakes we make, God is always waiting for us to turn to the Godly way so we can be offered forgiveness. But remember, sometimes it takes generations to straighten out the results of a hungry stomach and a bowl of stew.