

Genesis | Daddy's angel, mummy's devil

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Alison Sampson ~ Genesis 29:15-30

A perceptive young girl said to me once, 'I'm daddy's angel, and mummy's devil. But my sister's mummy's angel, and daddy's devil. It's a bit difficult, really.' Then she shrugged dismissively, but I thought 'difficult' was the understatement of the year. Those sisters fought every day in every possible way as they lived out their assigned roles and competed for their parents' affections. Things were more than a bit difficult.

Playing favourites is very common, but it's a dangerous game. It invariably leads to rivalry, and all too often to violence. We come across it in today's story. Jacob has travelled to his mother's homeland to find a wife, yet through his uncle's deviousness Jacob the trickster is tricked. Jacob had bargained to marry his younger cousin, Rachel. But just as Jacob had fooled his father through the darkness of Isaac's blindness, Uncle Laban fools Jacob via the darkness of the night; he sends Rachel's veiled older sister to the wedding tent, instead. And just as Jacob had pretended to be his older brother Esau, Leah pretended to be her younger sister, Rachel, as she lay with Jacob.

Jacob got a taste of his own medicine and found it bitter, indeed. But when he complained to Laban, Laban rebuked him. 'Here, it's not done to put the youngest before the firstborn,' he said. Of course, in his place Jacob had done exactly that, stealing the blessing that had been intended for his older brother, Esau.

By the end of this sorry saga, Jacob winds up with not one but two wives, the sisters Leah and Rachel, plus two concubines, the slaves Zilpah and Bilhah. And yes, this story is outrageous and offensive. It's from a time and place where daughters are used as payment for wages and slaves have no power at all, and where a couple of absolute scoundrels behave atrociously. But in its shock value it's also memorable, making it a powerful moment in a theological theme which is developed through the book of Genesis.

The narrator tells us, 'Jacob slept with Rachel also and Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah.' This is one of the most shattering sentences in scripture. For Jacob loves Leah but he loves Rachel more and, if we peek ahead in the story, we discover that Leah feels it in her very bones. If Rachel is the angel,

Leah must be the devil: the despised and rejected one. This feeling leads the sisters into a lifelong struggle as each seeks to be the most beloved, to bear more sons, and to triumph over her sibling. Their struggle only comes to an end when Rachel dies in childbirth.

Most of us can tell a story or three about sibling rivalry, for siblings have envied each other since the beginning of time. They envy birth order and bicycles, blessings and inheritances, intimacy and access to one parent or another. Again and again, they try to prove themselves the most beloved. At heart, they are asking a single question: Who's the favourite? It seems that being loved is never enough. We always want to be loved more than another.

This drive is why Genesis is packed with stories of sibling rivalry. Cain and Abel. Isaac and Ishmael. Jacob and Esau. Rachel and Leah. Joseph and his brothers. Genesis shows us that sibling rivalry is normal, but it doesn't suggest that it's okay. Instead, it shows how destructive it is, then points to a God who doesn't ration love and blessings to a favoured few but showers them abundantly upon everyone.

Let's recall the destructive effects. The first episode, in chapter 4, ends in murder. Abel's sacred offerings have been accepted, but God asks Cain to do better. Cain is so envious that he kills his brother, and this spilling of blood triggers a curse from the land, making it less cooperative and less fertile.

The next episodes involve Abraham's family. Sarah is so concerned that Ishmael, the son of the slave Hagar, will take precedence over his brother Isaac that she sends him to the desert to die. In the next generation, Isaac prefers Esau, while Jacob is Rebekah's favourite. This rivalry leads Jacob to rob his brother of birthright and blessing, then flee his family.

Far from home, Jacob meets and marries Leah and Rachel. The sister-wives become obsessed by their rivalry, and Rachel's desperate desire to prove herself by having another son quite literally kills her. A few years later, Jacob cherishes Joseph, showing him preferential treatment over his many brothers. This so enrages his brothers that they consider murder. But they end up selling Joseph into slavery instead, and telling Jacob that he's dead. Jacob nearly dies from grief. These stories show that engaging in rivalry has devastating effects. It destroys individuals and tears families apart.

Perhaps this is why God refuses to participate. For, in each of these stories, there is a chosen one: but God does not reject the other. Genesis is not just a story about Abel's offerings being accepted, but about God's invitation to

Cain to do well, and God's protection of Cain even after he rejected God's invitation and killed Abel.

It's not just a story about the chosen son, Isaac, but also his brother Ishmael: rejected by Sarah, sent to die in the desert, yet met there and blessed by God and made the ancestor of a great nation: the Ishmaelites.

It's not just a story about the chosen son, Jacob, but also his brother Esau. Tricked out of birthright and blessing, despised by his mother, yet he is blessed by God and inherits the very wealth and power promised in the blessing stolen from him. In fact he becomes the father of the Edomites.

And it's not just a story about Jacob's favourite wife, Rachel, but also about her sister Leah: rejected and despised by her husband, yet seen and blessed by God, becoming the matriarchal ancestor of all Israel's priests and kings.

Genesis provides solace, then, to those who feel unloved, forsaken and alone, and it also asks the chosen ones to see through the eyes of the other. The stories are constructed so that we identify with Cain, Ishmael, Esau, Leah and Joseph's eleven brothers. We see their bitterness and pain, and we are invited into the healing sweep of the book. For Cain murdered Abel, yes, but Ishmael and Isaac stood at their father's grave together, Jacob and Esau one day embraced, and Joseph and his brothers eventually worked towards repentance, reconciliation, and a lasting peace. In the long arc of Genesis, sibling rivalry is not the end of the story but something to be noticed, named and wrestled with again and again, as we try to discern the nature of God and how we are to live.

Through these stories, we recognise that human love is imperfect and partial. We have favourites; we compete for blessings; in our rivalry, we cause conflict, division and pain. But we see that God's love is different. For God sees those who are despised and rejected; God seeks them out and blesses them; and God works through them. In God's economy, choosing one does not mean rejecting the other; there is enough love and blessing to go around.

Turning to ourselves, it's normal to notice and envy the ways other people are loved and blessed; it's especially normal to do this within a family setting. The sibling stories in Genesis suggest that this rivalry is natural but not inevitable. Through stories of favouritism, envy and their consequences, we

are warned against rivalry. And in the ultimate reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers, we see rivalry finally healed and each brother uniquely blessed.

As God's people, then, we don't need another person's blessing and we certainly don't need to envy it, for we each have our own. So the next time you find yourself wondering, 'Who's the favourite?' or comparing yourself to someone else, whether sibling, co-worker, or friend, or the next time you hear yourself talking in ways which set up rivalries between others, I suggest that you pause. Pause, and remember where rivalry leads: to conflict, breakdown of relationship, endless dissatisfaction, even despair. Wonder if you are contributing to devastation or reconciliation in the world. Look then to your own life and count your many blessings: for, as great as the blessings showered upon other people may be, I guarantee: you, too, have been richly blessed.

Indeed, with the Apostle Paul, I am convinced that neither rivalry nor favouritism, neither birth order nor blessings nor inheritances nor curses, neither a history of conflict nor grievous wounds, neither being despised and rejected nor being cherished and loved, indeed, 'neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor any powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.' And that is more than enough blessing for anyone. Ω