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The Dormition of the Mother of God

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Whether by temperament or training, Laban of Haran was a shrewd man of business. Able to sniff out profits, even downwind, and ever swift in their pursuit, he was constantly vigilant for new opportunities and additional sources of gain. "Interest" was his favorite noun, "compound" his predicate of choice.

Thus, when Laban's sister Rebekah returned home from the well one day, accompanied by an elderly sojourner from afar, her brother made careful note of the man's apparel, the quality of his retinue, the number of his camels, and the enigmatic baggage by which the latter were burdened. Laban observed, moreover, that Rebekah came back adorned with costly jewels she had not been wearing when she left home that day. Her brother then listened carefully while the visitor described himself as a servant on a mission to find a wife for the son of his wealthy master, who lived in the land of Canaan. Would Rebekah, the servant inquired, consent to become the wife of that wealthy man's son?

At least from Laban's viewpoint, the question was settled when "the servant brought out jewelry of silver, jewelry of gold, and clothing, and gave them to Rebekah. He also gave precious things to her brother and to her mother" (Genesis 24:53). Man of business that he was, Laban sensed the advantage of becoming the brother-in-law of a wealthy man, and he was relieved when his sister consented to the servant's proposal. Off she went to Canaan with the blessing of her brother.

A whole generation had passed when Laban received yet another visitor, this one the younger son of that sister who had departed. His name was Jacob, and Laban proceeded, by habit, to size him up. It was necessary, after all, that men of business should take the measure of other men and make estimates of their mettle. This activity was good for business.

Quickly sensing that Jacob was no match for him, Laban engaged the young man as an underpaid employee and then tricked him into marrying Leah, an inconvenient daughter who had proved too plain for other potential suitors in the neighborhood. From this experience Jacob learned the ways of Laban and began to form some estimates of his own. From that point on, the two men became competitors.

Laban, had he considered that this son of his sister shared his own blood and lineage, should have known better than to strain his association with Jacob. The latter, albeit still young, was to prove, in due course, more than a match for his uncle and father-in-law.

In fact, Jacob had already learned a thing or two about sizing men up and judging what they were made of. Shortly before arriving at Laban's house, he had correctly measured and tested his own twin brother, Esau, and thereby succeeded in taking

possession of both the latter's birthright and his blessing.

In fact, wily Jacob had been very carefully observing that brother for quite some time, for a rivalry between the two had begun even before their birth. Heaven knows how it started. Apparently they were not identical twins (cf. 25:25; 27:11), and it is possible that Jacob was conceived first. Perhaps he felt a prior claim, as it were, on the womb of his mother (to whom he would always remain the preferred son) and regarded his brother as an intruder. However that may be, the two boys wrestled together to determine which of them would be the firstborn (25:22). Esau won that contest, but even as he issued forth into the air he felt the strong hand of Jacob still gripping his heel in a trip hold (25:26).

It is significant that Jacob's very first encounter with another human being was a struggle for supremacy. The experience marked him for life. Even the Almighty, when He determined to gain Jacob's attention, was obliged to turn the encounter into a wrestling match (32:22-32).

This trait in Jacob's character also prepared him for dealing with his father-in-law. Laban's repeated attempts to trick, defraud, and deceive him were met in every instance by crafty countermeasures that left the older man in a state of growing frustration. Gradually, and with recourse to every ruse and ploy, Jacob managed over the years to acquire much of Laban's property. Finally he gathered up all his goods and simply went back to Canaan. Having left home years before with only a staff in his hand, Jacob returned a man of wealth.

Both Laban and Esau are regarded without favor in the later parts of the Bible. The Book of Wisdom, describing the career of Jacob, dismisses both of those men simply as "his enemies," who "oppressed him" and "lay in wait for him" (10:10-12). In the New Testament Esau is called "a profane person" (Hebrews 12:16), while Laban, that erstwhile man of business, is not named at all.

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