

September 1, 2002  
The Crown of the Year

#### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Greeks were not agreed what to make of Odysseus. A "very versatile man" (aner polytropos), as Homer called him, expert in ruse and master of disguise, this son and heir of Laertes was certainly among the most interesting and entertaining characters in classical memory. Both sagacious in counsel and brave in combat, moreover, his role in the routing of Troy placed Odysseus with the heroes honored in the annals of valor.

Some Greeks, nonetheless, did not feel entirely comfortable with this cunning warrior, "ever resourceful" (polymetis), never at a loss for the ingenious plan or the artful word. Even while admiring his various stratagems - his clever escape from the Cyclops's cave, for instance - they wondered if all that talented guile was entirely a good thing. Was there not something rather sneaky, duplicitous, and a tad too fast about it all? Indeed, might there not be some deeper significance in the fact (proved in the footrace at the funeral games of Patroclus) that Odysseus was simply much faster than everyone else?

Even conceding that Odysseus would never have arrived safely back home in Ithaca except for that wild, wily aspect of his character, was a man of so much deception to be held up for the emulation of the young? Were the ways of guile to be regarded as models in education? Would the imitation of shrewd Odysseus lead to a more virtuous citizenry and the enhancement of public trust? Doubting it, Pindar and Sophocles expressed their reservations about Odysseus. Plato, in fact, raised those same questions in the shorter dialogue between Socrates and Hippias, which contrasted the cunning of Odysseus with the candor of honest Achilles. In short, the example of Odysseus was a bit of a problem.

Now, with no possible rival, I think, the Odysseus in the Bible is Jacob. Truth to tell, the several parallels between the two are striking, if not always edifying. For starts, both were utter con-men, unscrupulous deceivers, fluent, even eloquent, in falsehood. The one tricked blinded Polyphemus by hiding under a sheep, while the other deceived his blind father by hiding under a goatskin. Both, moreover were blessed by blind men, the one by Teiresias the other by Isaac. Each

man struck a deal to win his wife, the one with Tendareus, the other with Laban. The one took from the herds of Helios, the other from the flocks of his father-in-law.

Both Odysseus and Jacob, furthermore, were accomplished, wide-ranging travelers. Whereas Odysseus returned home in disguise, Jacob left home because of a disguise. In the course of those journeys, the reader is struck by the attention given to events that happened while the two travelers slept, whether near Aeolia and at the Bay of Porcys, or Bethel and the ford at Peniel. Both travelers, likewise, left aging fathers, but even after many years each returned to find his father still alive. Indeed, the paternal home was the goal of each man's journey.

Jacob's flamboyant career began even in his mother's womb, where he and his twin brother wrestled to see who would be born first. Esau won the match, but Jacob emerged still clinging to his sibling's heel, determined never to lose again. He seldom did. Many years later he would walk with a limp from an injury sustained in another wrestling match, that time with an angel. Jacob won that contest too.

The great Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, was once approached by a woman distressed from her recent reading of Romans 9:13. "I cannot understand," she said, "why God should say that He hated Esau." "That is not my problem, madam," Spurgeon replied, "My difficulty is to understand how God could love Jacob."

But God sees all things, including the future, and He knew how Jacob would turn out in the end. God foresaw the finishing days of an old man finally purified by much pain. God foreknew the aging heart chastened by grief for a lost son and disappointment in the other sons. God saw, already, the later exile of Jacob in the land of Egypt, much humbled now, long bereft of the woman he really loved, and waiting to die on alien soil. God could hear already the much wiser ancient who told Pharaoh, "The days of the years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the ways of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage."

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