

Younger Sons and Tricksters in Genesis: The Hebrew Hero

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Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis*

- Greek Epic, Homer
 - 1) Simple Characters
 - 2) Narrative Complexity; digressions
 - 3) "the Homeric poems conceal nothing, they contain no teaching and no secret second meaning."
- Hebrew Epic, Bible
 - 1) Complex Characters: Intention & motivation is often in the dark.
 - 2) Narrative simplicity: Only Essential details; No digressions
 - 3) The implied lesson is more important than the story

Philosophical Epic versus Religious Epic

- Both are “historical” in some sense
- There is a philosophical basis to Homer’s poems: questioning social customs and order and even challenging Gods
- Bible: Demands obedience from the reader; it is absolute Truth and questions are not permitted

Hebrew Hero

- Underdog, much like Israel itself
- Gains strength from God
- God helps the hero because of his humility, faith, and obedience
- Defined by his moral qualities
- Greek heroes, we will see, also are moral; the main difference is how the gods relate to heroes in Greek myth
- Finally, these are generalizations—Samson, stands outside this general view; The Bible represents literature from over a thousand years and so it is problematic to impose a universal interpretation

Examples of Hebrew Heroes

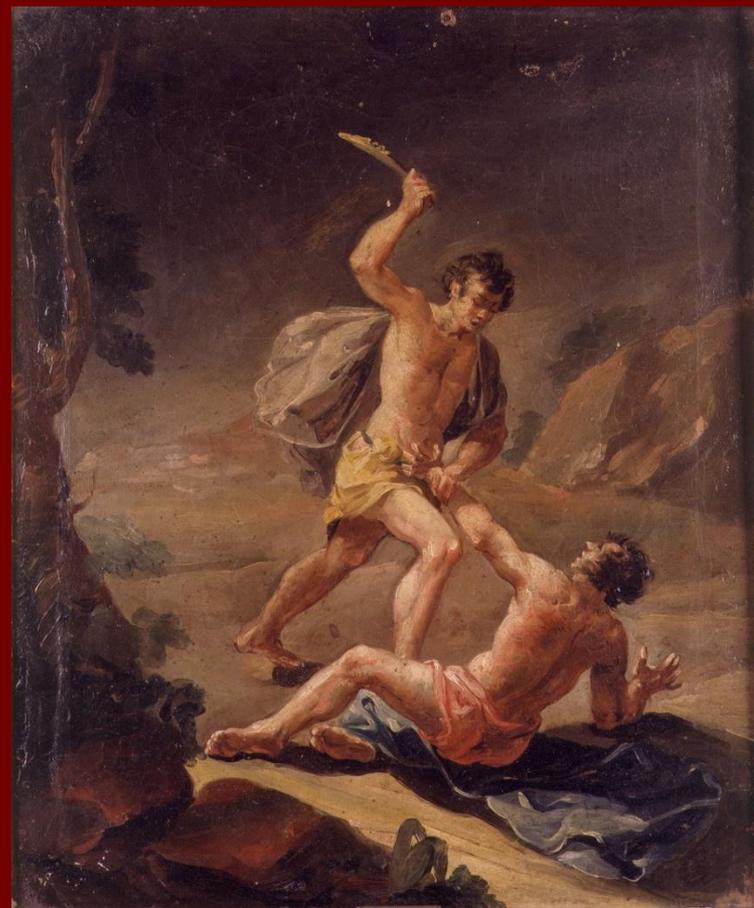
- Adam and Eve: The exception that proves the rule
- Noah
- Lot
- Abraham
- Joseph
- Moses
- All are obedient to God and God prospers them while destroying their enemies.
- They are Heroes because God favors them; they are obedient and faithful

Younger Sons as Heroes

- Cain and Abel
- Isaac and Ishmael
- Jacob and Essau
- Joseph and his 11 brothers
- Conflict over inheritance and favoritism
- The blessing of Joseph to 12 sons resolves this fraternal competition
- Historically, the 12 Tribes were in conflict with each other

Cain and Abel (ch. 4)

- Cain, the elder, is a farmer
- Abel, the younger, is a shepherd
- “In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.
- Why does God favor the offerings of Abel and not Cain?



Jewish law favored the Elder

- Deuteronomy 21: 15
- “If a man has two wives, one of them loved and the other disliked, and if both the loved and the disliked have borne him sons, the firstborn being the son of the one who is disliked, then on the day when he wills his possessions to his son, he is not permitted to treat the son of the loved as the firstborn in preference to the son of the disliked, who is the firstborn. He must acknowledge as firstborn the son of the one who is disliked, giving him a double portion of all that he has; since he is the first issue of virility, the right of the firstborn is his.”

Ishmael and Isaac



- Abraham has a son with his wife's slave, Hagar
- In the wilderness, God says "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin."
- Ishmael means "God hears" because God heard Hagar's distress in the wilderness

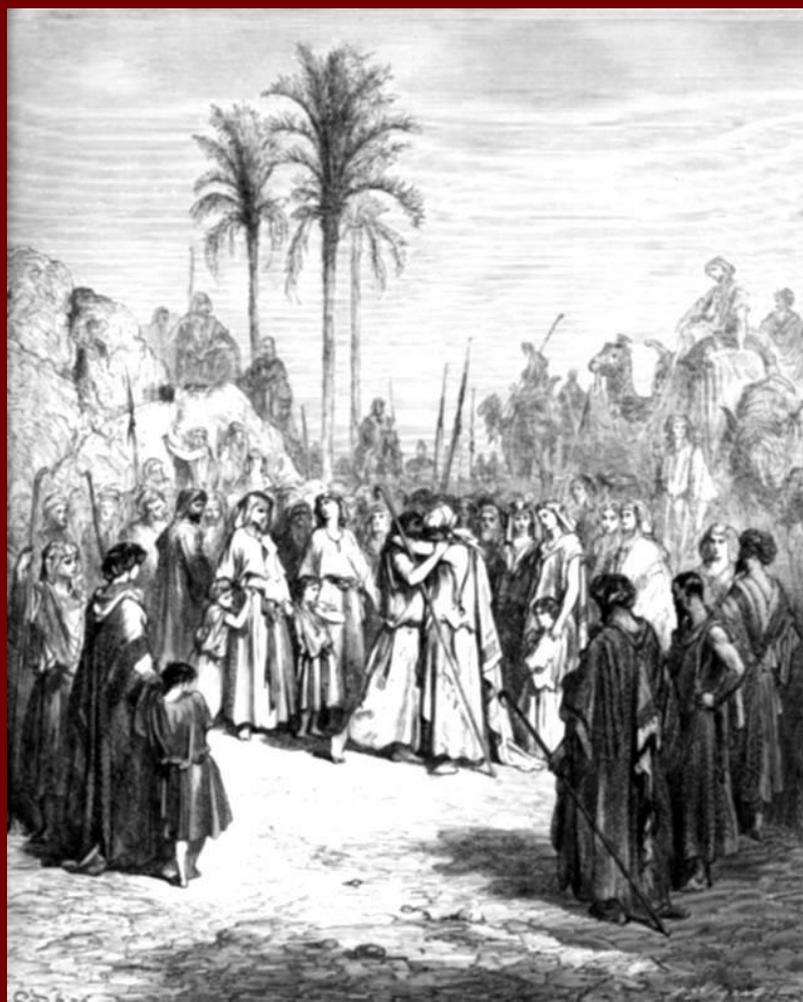
Jacob and Esau (Edomites)

- Jacob's name means "he takes by the heel"
- God tells Rebecca: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."
- Contrasting brothers: Esau is "red and hairy," and a hunter; Jacob is clever
- Birthright for a bowl of lentil stew
- Blessing: Deception of Rebecca and Jacob; preference of mother for younger son



Reunion of Jacob and Esau

- Jacob sends gifts ahead of him to Esau
- Esau forgives his brother and they embrace
- Jacob Supplicates: “if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor.”



Joseph and his brothers

- Joseph is favored by Jacob; “Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves.”
- Joseph’s Dreams: sheaves bow down to him; sun and moon even
- Sold into slavery
- God saves him and he saves his family from the drought

Jacobs Blesses the son's of Joseph



- Jacob intentionally gives preference to the younger against Joseph's wishes (48.12)
- "Not so my father! Since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head." But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations."

Dying Jacob blesses all his sons

- Reuben the eldest, is not truly blessed, for he slept with Jacob's concubine
- Judah is praised highly and is given kingship: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and the obedience of peoples is his.."
- Joseph: fruitful; "the blessings of your father are stronger than the blessings of the eternal mountains, the bounties of the everlasting hills; may they be on the head of Joseph, on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers."

Observations

- Favoring a younger son was not customary, but is the rule among the Patriarchs!
- The younger son is made great by faith and obedience in God (and sometimes the help of his mother)
- The Younger Son represents the “underdog” quality of the Hebrews
- The Hebrews favor cleverness over brute force; why?
- There are Political Implications to the Favored Son Syndrome: Could the theme be related to the political conflict between Tribes of Israel?
- The Story of Joseph and his brothers resolves the fraternal conflict at the core of so many of the Patriarch stories and represents a reunited Hebrew nation