

Esau and Jacob Reconciliation Episode (Genesis 33:4, 8-12): A Model for Interpersonal Conflict Resolution¹

Abstract

Forgiveness, reconciliation, and *Shalom* (peace) are important teachings and attitudes promoted in the Bible. Readers of the Bible are familiar with the Esau and Jacob saga. Although the narrative is undoubtedly an interesting one; many have often misconstrued and misinterpreted it. Esau has often been accused of been profane, sensual and thus, unworthy of the Abrahamic covenant-blessing. Hence, the purpose of the study was to critically re-read Esau-Jacob's reunion episode in order to discover some of the salient qualities of Esau and to draw some principles for interpersonal conflict resolution and reconciliation. Using the historical-critical and grammatical-historical analysis approach, the story comes alive though in a less conservative but illuminating and thrilling form. The findings showed that Esau was sincere, loving, forgiving, admirable and a worthy grand-son of Abraham. Though he had the capacity to harm and/or kill Jacob; however, he chose a non-violent approach. He rather swiftly **ran to meet** his brother, Jacob and **embraced** him; **fell** on his neck and then **kissed** him. The climax of the reconciliation process was loud **weeping**. The verbs in the narrative were used to propose and form a model for conflict resolution, peacemaking and reconciliation. Some implications of the need for forgiveness and peaceful resolution of conflicts were noted with the conclusion that since conflicts/offense is inevitable in human relationships; forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace building are important and should not be neglected.

Keywords: Esau, Jacob, Rebekah, Isaac, Reconciliation, Peace and Conflict Resolution

Introduction

The text of Old Testament is an interesting volume. It contains many fascinating stories that many, over the centuries past, have enjoyed reading and drawn inspirations from. Born into a Christian home and growing up, I fell in love with reading the stories in this part of the Bible. In fact, as a teen, I often enjoyed reading the Old Testament more than the New Testament. This was partly because I loved the many interesting stories/narratives in the texts. Then I loved and appreciated the Old Testament so much and I don't think that interest and love have diminished now.

Readers of the Bible are familiar with the story of Esau and Jacob. It is undoubtedly a very interesting and remarkable saga in the whole of the Old Testament. Many have read and

¹This article is dedicated to the Holy Spirit for the insight and grace.

interpreted the narratives in several ways. A good number of interpreters and commentators have often followed Jewish/rabbinic traditions; while others often have read and interpreted the story with the lens of the eyes of the New Testament ethics. As a result, such interpreters have tended to idolize Jacob and vilify Esau; accusing him of many crimes he never might have committed (Schindler, 2007, pg. 155). Such commentators seem not to be sensitive to Jacob's blemishes and Esau's merits. As a matter of fact, many of such interpreters, have refused to reread the episodes objectively in order to discover and acknowledge Esau's good qualities.² For example, among many commentators that have castigated Esau is Wenstrom (2011),

The life of Esau is a tragic story because even though he was born into a home of great privilege, which had a tremendous spiritual heritage, he remained an unbeliever. At no time in his life, did he ever place his faith in the God of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac, who is the Lord Jesus Christ...he never accepted Christ as his Savior and thus now resides in "Torments", which is the temporary fire for the souls of unbelievers from every dispensation...(pg. 1)

The above views/conclusions which are obviously hasty and faulty judgments represent the thoughts of many commentators down through the ages. However, it simply is "over-spiritualizing" historical narratives of the Old Testament and reading New Testament/Christian ethics, theology and ideology into them. A critical examination of the Jacob-Esau episodes however raises some salient questions: Are Jacob's actions praiseworthy and/or commendable? Should he have done what he did? Among the two of them (Esau and Jacob), who should to be castigated? Did Esau know Jacob's intentions of demanding for his primacy?

Above and beyond, a careful examination of the text under study (Genesis 33:4), provides evidence that Esau should not be hastily judged and dismissed as a "profane" and unworthy son. According to the passage, after many years of rivalry and separation, when Esau saw Jacob from a distance, he hastily **runs to meet** him and **embraces** him, and **falls** on his neck and **kisses** him, and they both **weep...**" (Emphasis and boldness mine). This shows that Esau had forgiven his brother and was no longer bitter with him.

The verbs used here are the major focus of this study. We intend to use them as reconciliation models for especially, interpersonal conflict resolution and transformation. Though, in doing this, I must quickly state that my intention in the study is not to provide any fresh, "unique", and/or venturesome alternative interpretation of the text under study. I have only tried to critically reexamine the narrative in order to discover some of the good qualities of Esau that the contemporary Christian can emulate especially in regards to forgiveness, reconciliation and peace building. The study thus seeks to discover some principles in the text to help Christians think through why they like Esau, should be willing to forgive and be involved in encouraging

²Many fail to acknowledge the fact that Esau, like any other human being, had his own assets as well as his own weaknesses. Thus, like many other Bible figures, he wrestled with God in many areas of his life.

reconciliation and peace building. The study however, starts by first establishing the fact that Esau should not be dismissed altogether as a profane and unworthy/unfaithful son who does not deserve the covenant-blessing as he has often been traditionally portrayed. He was in fact, a good, humble, forgiving, meek, faithful and worthy man of God and at the same time, a worthy and reliable grand-son of Abraham and Isaac's son.

Isaac's Family: The Setting of the Drama

The story of Isaac's family is one of the most dramatic, powerful and significant stories in the whole of the Bible. In the episodes, Rebekah, Isaac's wife is seen very influential, active and powerful. In fact, Reiss (2014) has rightly observed and opined that she, Rebekah, is the most powerful matriarch in the whole of the Old Testament. This is partly because, she is one of the women that God spoke to in the Scriptures. The God of her father-in-law, Abraham, talked to her about her role in the perpetuation of the Abrahamic covenant-blessing, and she played that role very well. We must thus recognize, understand and appreciate the fact that all the roles she played in making sure Jacob received the covenant-blessing by all possible means, was a covenant/divine role and/or mission which emanated from her faith in the Deity that spoke to her- the Deity that her father-in-law, Abraham and her husband, Isaac, worshipped. Thus, everything she did was an act of faith; not deception or fraud per say.³ Rebekah only wanted God's will to come to pass and she was ready to pay the price. She was not sentimental; all she wanted was the fulfillment of the vision/oracles she received.

I often have heard many people condemn Rebekah and many Old Testament characters for some of their actions. However, just as earlier stated, I think we should not hastily interpret these narratives or judge these people with the lens of the eyes of the New Testament ethics. Many preachers and Christians often make this mistake. Old Testament historical narratives should often be first and foremost interpreted in their context; not our own. More so, it is not too good to blatantly accuse and/or criticize our patriarchs and matriarchs of faith of unfaithfulness and dishonesty. This is because, they are the foundations upon which our religion and faith is built. So, then, we must be careful of how we talk about them. Besides, we don't have all the details. The Bible has not supplied us with all the details/information about them and the situations that influenced some of their actions.

Nonetheless, as stated above, in Genesis 25: 22, we see that it was Rebekah that went herself to enquire of the Deity concerning her experiences with the babies in her womb and the Deity gave her oracles concerning the unborn children. Hence, it is evident that Rebekah had faith in this Deity and that's why she went to Him for enquiries. Again, it is understandable that Rebekah accepted the oracles/prophecies and believed this Deity. She never doubted the message. I

³I believe, the vision and/or oracles Rebekah received concerning the twin sons continuously affected/influenced the way she related with both of them. She believed that the younger was the one divinely chosen and entitled to receive the covenant-blessing.

believe the prophecies that she received made her play all the roles she played in the narrative (or drama).

Now whether Rebekah shared the oracles she received about the unborn children with her husband, Isaac, or not, we do not know and the Bible is silent about that. Probably she did not; and probably, she did. She might have related the message to Isaac due to the fact that it was Isaac that interceded on her behalf before she became pregnant of the twins. Remember, it was as a result of his prayers and/or sacrifice that God opened the womb of his wife, and she became pregnant of the twins (cf. Genesis 25:21, 22).⁴ Because of the above incidence, I believe Rebekah may have told her husband about the oracles concerning the destinies of the unborn twins. Moreover, looking at Isaac's actions after many years, by calling Esau secretly and asking him to prepare him "venison" without involving the wife; presupposes that he knew about the prophecy but wanted to bless the right person, the elder, instead of the younger. From the look of things, Isaac did not want his wife, Rebekah, to know about his plans to bless Esau talk of being a witness to the occasion. It also seems that there were some sorts of tensions, scheming and eavesdropping in the family. Isaac was probably been monitored to know when he intends passing on the Abrahamic blessing to the rightful heir. Else, why would he (Isaac) rush or hurry (as if he was going to die soon), to bless Esau in the secret? From the look of things, it is obvious that he lived for more than twenty years after the saga. This is because, Jacob still came back to meet him alive. So, why the rush to pass on the covenant-blessing. Was Isaac afraid of something? Moreover, how did Rebekah get to know that Esau was been sent to hunt for some game and prepare the meat for the father to bless him? Was she monitoring her husband?

Rebekah was not the one that wrote the script she acted. The script was written by the Deity that spoke to her and who gave her a glimpse of it. She only directed it; while Jacob acted it. Jacob was the major actor and Esau was a victim of circumstance. Obviously, Isaac was not part of the scheme. Because he tried his possible best to bless his worthy firstborn child, Esau; but all his efforts did not work out because, the script had already been written and endorsed by the Deity-the [G]od of his father, Abraham. Moreover, we observe that this God was silent as Rebekah and Jacob acted out the script He wrote. He never rebuked or criticized them for deceit or betrayal-instead, after the whole drama has been acted out, He goes ahead to confirm the blessing and lionize Jacob and his descendents as the chosen/favored race.

Esau

Esau is remarkably an interesting character or figure in the Old Testament even though many have refused to admit this fact. He and his twin-brother Jacob was born into the chosen family

⁴The Hebrew verb used here, *atar*, is significant. It is the same word used in the story of God's dealings with the Egyptians in which Moses prayed (asked) him to remove the plagues. The NET Bible commenting on this verb, notes that the cognate word in Arabic means "to slaughter for sacrifice," and that the word is used in Zeph. 3:10 to describe worshippers who bring offerings. Consequently, Isaac probably did not just say some prayers alone; some sacrifices/rituals might have accompanied the prayers (pg. 80).

that God had ordained to receive His covenant-blessing/promise. Their grand-father, Abraham, was chosen, called and separated by God almighty to receive the Promise with privileges, responsibilities and blessings attached (Genesis 12).

Genesis 25:19-20 records the family history of Isaac the father of Esau and Jacob and as a part of this history, Genesis 25:21 records Rebekah's challenge with getting pregnant and/or having children. According to this passage, and as stated earlier, Isaac had to pray to the God of his father, and intercede for the wife before she was able to conceive after about twenty years. Genesis 25:21 and 25:26 mentions that Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah and sixty years when Rebekah conceived and gave birth to the twins.

At the vanguard of the Esau-Jacob episode is his struggle with his twin brother, Jacob. This struggle⁵ started from the womb and foreshadowed the struggle that would consume much of their lives and even their offspring (Israel and Edom). The God of their father and grand-father even predicted this struggle (Genesis 25:22-23). The Hebrew Bible tells us that this God knows each individual and their destiny even before they are conceived.

The name of each of the twins was indicative of his features and characteristics. Esau means "red", "hairy". He was thus a hairy man and his hair was red. Esau was a skillful hunter (like Nimrod) and thus, a man of the field. He was independent, wild and strong but also a passionate/emotional type. He could be passionate and obsessive for anything: sex, food, hunting etc. This was probably one of his weaknesses that Jacob discovered and used against him. For example, one day, Esau comes in from a hunt and met Jacob cooking red stew. He points to the red stew and pleads with Jacob to feed (*la 'at*) him else he die because he is famished. Because of this singular incident, many have accused Esau and his descendents as lusty, profane and passionate people who lived for the moment (NET, 2000, pg. 80).

Everything about Esau was opposite of Jacob. Whereas Esau was a skillful hunter, Jacob was the calm type, even-tempered and one "living in tents". The mother loved him probably because of the oracles and not because he was the quiet type or that he lived in tent with her.

Selling of the Birthright: A Critical Re-examination

Many who have castigated Esau for trading his primacy have little or no understanding of the socio-cultural context/milieu of their time. Actually, what transpired between Esau and Jacob was not really a strange transaction so to say. Trading of one's primacy was customary and/or common in their time and culture. In line with Nuzu customs, one could negotiate and acquire primacy (birthright) at a price in order to secure inheritance for himself. And that's exactly what Jacob did. He negotiated with his brother, Esau, and acquired his primacy. Schultz (1990) corroborates, "In line with Nuzu customs he (Jacob) negotiated with Esau to secure inheritance

⁵This verb, *ratsats* is a rare hithpoel stem. It connotes the idea of "crushing each other". It thus implies an extraordinary/uncommon violent struggle. For Rebekah, the experience was not normal.

rights. [However], his bargaining ability is readily apparent in his acquisition of first-born rights for a meager price of a dish of lentils” (pg. 36).

In the ancient Near East, primacy/birthright and right for inheritance could be acquired in many ways: it could be traded (bought with either money or gifts), or by possessing family idols; pronouncement of blessings on the heir etc. For example, in Genesis 31: 19, we see Rachel, Jacob’s wife, trying to acquire primacy for herself and/or the husband by laying hold of their family idols. On their way back home, she stole her father’s (family) idols and hid them. She knew and understood the implications of her actions. In their time/culture, anyone having the family idol(s) could claim the father’s inheritance. Possessing those idols automatically gave her and the husband the legal rights to become the rightful heirs and inheritors of her father’s wealth/property. Probably, Rachael, having been told by her husband of how he cheated his elder brother and stole his birthright/covenant-blessing and ran away, also stole the idols and ran away. She did that in order to help the husband, Jacob, who has been cheated severally by her father, Laban, become the heir and rightful inheritor of his (Laban’s) inheritance.

Be that as it may, from the above comments of Schultz, first, we see that the ancient Near Eastern custom then permitted the sale of one’s primacy, birthright or inheritance. The NET Bible corroborates, “There is evidence from Hurrian culture that rights of inheritance were occasionally sold or transferred” (pg. 81). If that was the case, why do many today, in the light of the “New Testament” ethics or perspectives, criticize Esau without hearing from his own side of the story? Besides, we must admit and acknowledge the fact that all we read about these twin brothers are from the Israelites’ (Jacob’s descendants) side and/or perspectives of the story. We do not have at hand, any parallel story/text from the descendents of Esau (the Edomites) today.

Furthermore, the fact remains that many of the patriarchal narratives undoubtedly experienced a lot of adjustments and transformation as at the time they were redacted, edited and compiled after the Exile. And in the case of the Jacob-Esau episodes, the present literary form of the episodes was probably influenced by the Israel’s historico-social and religious perception of the Edomites as a rival tribe.⁶ As at when the narratives were redacted and compiled, Edom was one of the archenemies of the Israelites and probably, the portraying of Esau as profane and Jacob as

⁶If we believe that the Old Testament text was edited/compiled many centuries after the actual events happened, then it is possible that the harsh expressions of censure directed against Esau and Edom by Hebrew prophets and rabbis were a product of nationalistic prejudice/bias (Jer. 49:7-22; Ezek. 26:12-14; Obad. 1:1-14; Mal. 1:2-5). These expressions should thus be read and understood in that context rather than spiritualizing them and using them as text proofs to criticize Esau as a person. As at the time the texts were compiled, Edom (as a nation) was one of the archenemies of Israel. They continually plotted against Israel’s interests because there was this uninterrupted pattern of hatred/prejudice and hostility by Edom against Israel. Consequently, Israelite prophets/prophetic text were also antagonistic against Edom.

righteous (*tzadik*) by the redactors/editors, had both nationalistic and religious undertones. The Israelites retold their history to prove that they were the chosen race and to inform others that their national and religious heritages, history and laws were superior to others'. Hence, the narrators/editors were very deliberate- they painted the picture as if Esau despised and neglected his primacy.

Moreover, talking about the religious undertone of the episode, it is conspicuous that the narrator(s) tried to defend their [G]od in the role He supposedly played, especially His silence, passivity and endorsement of their father, Jacob whose actions were unethical. Hence, they assert Divine fairness and justness by branding the cheated, Esau, villain; and made him look irresponsible and unworthy of the "covenant-blessing". Therefore, they excused the negative behaviors of the cheater (Jacob); while projecting those of the cheated (Esau). This prejudice was sustained for generations up to the New Testament times. Schindler (2007) affirms that the Rabbis, in the Rabbinic literature, adorned "...Jacob in garments of righteousness and virtue; [while] Esau is portrayed as wicked (*rasha*)" (pg. 153). In the New Testament we see Christian authors like Saul (Paul) of Tarsus, a rabbi and later, a Christian scholar and many other Christians of Jewish origin, also promoting this nationalistic/religious pride and stretching it farther (cf. Hebrews 12:16, 17).

Finally, based on Shultz's observations, if the transaction was an accepted cultural practice in the ancient times, the questions are: Was Esau aware that in his own case, there was more to the issue of his primacy, namely, a covenant-blessing attached? Did he think of any religious/spiritual significance (as we now know) attached to his primacy other than physical inheritance? Was he actually serious with the bargaining like Jacob? I believe Jacob had privilege information that Esau probably did not have. Hence, while Esau might have been scatty and casual with the bargain; Jacob was deliberate and serious. In fact, the wordplays in the story are noteworthy. They help to clarify the essence of the story. According to the NET Bible (2000), the verb, "cook" (*zid*) sounds like the Hebrew word for "hunter" (*tsayid*). By this soundplay/wordplay, the understanding is "setting a trap by cooking". Thus, Jacob presumptuously set a food trap for his brother and the trap of course, caught him. The narrator(s) thus deliberately used this word to pass the message that the skilled hunter (Esau) became the hunted. For that reason, a critical examination of that narrative and the condition that made Esau trade off his birthright and Jacob's attitude towards him in such a difficult situation provoke some measure of sympathy for Esau and indict Jacob. Look at the choice of the vocabularies the narrator(s) used: Esau came in "faint," (translated '*ayif*), and said to his brother, Jacob, "feed (*la'at*) me," less I "die." Thus, it is obvious that Esau was physically exhausted and desperate for food; and instead of Jacob to feed his brother, he used that opportunity to defraud him of his birthright (Fawenu, 2015, p. 197). Jacob set the trap at the right time, when Esau was exhausted and hungry- at his "unguarded hour", and caught him.

Conceptualizing Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Sometime ago, I heard of the story of a man who vowed to kill his best friend for sleeping with his wife. According to this story, this best friend of the said man had sleeping with his wife for more than ten good years. And due to the fact that the man was not always around, the wife nicely covered the affair and pretended as if all was well. However, the husband later got to know about the affair but before this time, so many things have gone wrong in the family. As the man got know about this secret affair, he swore to kill the best friend. He struggled with this thought for months but later decided to drop the idea. Finally, he said to himself, "I will never forgive my friend. Never!" He vowed that the man in question would pay for every pain/damages he had brought upon him and his family. This is because, by this time, the love, tender feelings, togetherness and the trust he had for his wife, were all gone. The marriage relationship had become so soured and broken to the point that reconciliation was no longer visible. Now the question is, should the man forgive his wife and the best friend and continue with the marriage? And if he was going to forgive them, to what extent should he do that? Should he still continue with the wife in their marriage relationship? If he decides not to forgive, are there consequences?

A friend of mine had a similar experience. When he traveled outside the country and stayed for a year or so, the wife fell into adultery. However, she later confessed to the husband when he came back. Though she was thinking the husband would flare up and become furious; but my friend, instead, apologized to her for leaving her behind for so long and prayed for/with her and both of them wept and reconciled. That was how the matter ended.

I have heard cases whereby some people at a time, discovered that an uncle or a kinsman used fetish means (magical powers/witchcraft) to harm and/or kill their father, brother, sister, friend or a blood relative, they vowed to retaliate by all means. Often times, this would lead such people to also use fetish means to eliminate the perceived 'enemy'. A lot of these incidences often happen in many African traditional (even modern) societies. A young man near my ancestral home in south eastern part of Nigeria got to know that his neighbor placed a charm (juju) in front of his shop and that that was making his business to be going down slowly as people were no longer coming as usual, to patronize him. In fact, they would pass his barbing saloon and go to somewhere else to barb their hairs. When this young man went to a juju priest (witch doctor) and was told the cause of his problem; he retaliated and placed his own charm in the other man's shop. It did not take that his neighbor up to a month, his own business went down and folded.

Forgiveness is one of the most difficult virtues and/or qualities to cultivate by an average human being. It is often easier preached/said than done. In fact, for some people, the word is not in their dictionary. However, I believe that if people should consciously and intentionally cultivate this virtue, the world will be a better place for everyone. A lot of people have done foolish and unimaginable things because someone offended them and they found it difficult to forgive and let go. Many divorce, murder and suicide cases have happened and will continue to happen

because someone said or will say, “Over my dead body will I forgive him/her”. As a consequence, our society has experienced a lot of evils, wars, disintegration and estrangement, broken relationships everywhere, and hostilities all because someone or some people vowed never to forgive others.

Going through the pages of the Bible, one discovers that God Himself is the one that initiated the acts of forgiveness and reconciliation. When the first humans He created and blessed violated His commands, it was Him that came down looking for them. He did not wait for Adam and Eve to come begging for forgiveness rather, He initiated and began the process of reconciliation and by extension, redemption. Forgiveness is thus essential because, our own eternal salvation is also dependent on us forgiving those who offend us even as our Father in heaven forgives us. Hence, it is the basis and the requirement for receiving our own forgiveness from God (cf. Matthew 6: 12- 15).

It is very unfortunate that forgiveness and the ministry of reconciliation are being relegated to the background by many believers who are bent on retaliation. Jesus says, “Love and Pray for your enemies and those who persecute you” but many contemporary Christians now say otherwise. They hate and pray against their “enemies” and still come back to criticize and preach against Esau who unlike them would forgive and reconcile with his brother, Jacob- the one that denied him his inheritance/blessing.

Understanding Forgiveness

Before we talk about what forgiveness is, let us first start by saying what it is not.

First, forgiveness is not admitting and/or approving people’s wrongs and sins. Both God and our Lord Jesus never approved sin or sinful attitudes. Jesus forgave the adulterous woman brought to Him and yet told her to “go and sin no more” (John 8:11).

Second, forgiveness is neither excusing nor covering people’s evil/bad or inappropriate behaviors. We are to confront and boldly speak against evil without fear or favor. Forgiveness is not also trying to make what is evil right or look good- that is, justifying bad habits. Even though we are to forgive people who mistreat and offend us, but we are not to paint what is bad good. We are to always call a spade, a spade and be firm about it. We are to forgive but oftentimes, we are to allow justice to prevail if it has become necessary. I think, there is a thin difference between forgiveness and pardoning. There are cases that one would have to allow an offender to receive his/her due punishment. In such cases, s/he is not serving the punishment because s/he has not been forgiven but it would serve as a warning to the person and anyone who is thinking/planning of indulging in a similar practice. Hence, forgiveness is not aiding and abating crime and sweeping it under the carpet.

Forgiveness then is having a free, clean, pure mind and/or conscience towards someone who has injured, abused or offended you. It is not having malice or harboring grudges against someone that has done something wrong to you. Whenever one forgives another, s/he often would have and enjoy peace of mind and tranquility of the soul.

Understanding Reconciliation

Reconciliation entails re-stitution, re-storation and re-establishment of friendship or peace after a crisis, clash and/or quarrel. According to McCain (2006) “Reconciliation means a change in relationship from hostility to love, from animosity to friendship, from rejection to acceptance”. Reconciliation thus has to do with a change of attitude especially, “a change from a strained misunderstanding to loving acceptance” (pg. 90). The above definitions are significant. This is because, reconciliation should be the fruit of love and forgiveness. Any re-conciliation without genuine forgiveness is a time-bomb waiting to explode. It is a waste of time. It will amount to nothing. And any forgiveness without reconciliation is incomplete.

We must however note that re-conciliation does not mean re-opening the door of one’s life to someone who’s not worthy to enter- to someone who has betrayed you and has gone far to hurt you in the past. Though we are to forgive (not bearing grudges/keeping malice) and re-concile (that is, to re-establish the harmony and love as before), but we are to be careful. Among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, there is a saying that “*onuma juoor/biee, onye nzuzu anwuo* – when wrath subsides, that is, after re-conciliation, the foolish person dies.” The fool here implies one who is not careful and cautious. It is dangerous to hastily reconcile and/or re-establish a relationship/friendship with someone who has not genuinely repented and admitted his faults. It is not advisable to re-establish friendship with someone living in denial; that is, an old friend or partner who has hurt you but has refused to admit or come to terms with the reality of the bad situation caused by his actions or inactions. The best thing to do is to make peace with the person(s), love them genuinely, have clear conscience towards them and then move on with your life. Even God Himself never allowed everybody in the Old Testament era to approach Him. The tabernacle and later, the temple, were divided into courts and segments. Only the High Priest was permitted to enter the most holy place where God dwelt and it was just once in a year. The priests were restricted from entering the Holy of holies; so also were the Levites. There were different courts: for men, women and children. And many a times, I think we should habitually apply the same principles in human relationships. There are people that shouldn’t enter or be at the inner court of your life. When the wrong people enter one’s inner court, they will always come out leaving some indelible marks on the person’s soul/life.

Having briefly looked at what forgiveness and reconciliation entail, let us critically re-examine and analyze the story of Esau’s meeting with Jacob in the Book of Genesis. For the purpose of this study, we are going to analyze/exegete a verse (Genesis 33:4), which captures the whole essence of the study. The grammatical-historical analysis approach is specifically employed here because it allows one to determine the semantic range of the terms/words.

The Text (Genesis 33:4)

| ESV | BHS |
|--|---|
| But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept . | וַיֵּרָץ עֵשָׂו לִקְרָאתוֹ וַיִּחַבְקֵהוּ וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צַוְּן אָרְוֹ וַיִּשָּׂקֵהוּ וַיִּבְכּוּ׃ |

Lexical Analysis and Comments

וַיֵּרָץ/wayyarats: This is one of the most important verbs in this episode that needs to be given attention. The verbal form is Qal waw-consecutive, third masculine singular (3ms) with the particle *וַ*/*wa* or *va*, serving as a conjunction from the root *ruwts*, meaning “to run or rush upon in a hostile manner”. In the Polel, the verb could be translated “to run swiftly”. According to Vine, the word in Akkadian means, “to hasten to one’s aid”. It appears about eighty (80) times in the Bible. It could mean moving very quickly or running (Gen. 18:2, 7) (BDB, OT: 7323). Hence, Esau on sighting Jacob his brother, rushes, runs, and/or hastens to meet him. He did not delay or wait for Jacob to come close before he could reconcile with him. He rather runs, showing eagerness, enthusiasm and willingness to meet and reconcile with his brother, having forgiven him. Jacob also was willing to meet with Esau and reconcile with him. He was ready to make up for his sins against Esau. Hence, he sent delegates and gifts ahead in order to pacify him. Both parties were thus committed in/to the whole process.

Thus, in reconciliation, forgiveness on the part of the injured party and repentance on the part of the wrongdoer or offender, are necessary and basic. Anna (2012) admits that there cannot be any restoration of a good relationship between hostile parties if such move is not rooted in true forgiveness. Before the meeting, Esau, from all indications, had already forgiven Jacob and Jacob also had recognized his faults and was willing to amend his ways. Jacob was not the one that asked Esau for forgiveness; Esau, over the years, had moved on with his life and no longer bitter with Jacob.

The second verb that is worth examining in the text is *וַיִּקְרָא/liqua'tow*. It is Qal infinitive construct with a third masculine singular (3ms) suffix and *וַ*/*wa* (particle) serving as a preposition. The root of the word is *qir'ah* or *qara'* (BDB OT: 7125; 7122). It means an encountering, (accidental, friendly or hostile). It could also be translated, “to befall”, “to meet”. But in Niphal, it is best translated “to **meet** unexpectedly”; while in Hiphal, it is translated, “to cause to **meet**”.

The root/verbal form of this word denotes a planned encounter and/or meeting wherein the subject intentionally confronts the object. According to Harris (1980), this word can represent

the following: a friendly encounter like that of a host rushing out to **meet** a prospective guest (cf. Gen. 18:2; Judg. 4:18) or one going out to **meet** someone in order to recognize or gain him as an ally (2Sam. 19:16; Josh. 9:11; 2Kgs. 10:15; Ps. 59:5). Whatever be the case, such **meetings**, like in the case of Esau and Jacob, were intentional and purposeful.

“**Meeting**” (for dialogue) is important in reconciliation and conflict resolution. There cannot be dialogue without **a meeting**. Thus, ‘meeting’ gives two parties the opportunity and platform for dialogue. And reconciliation is almost impossible without dialogue. Dialogue is an organized encounter(s) between two disagreeing/conflicting parties. In reconciliation, there is often the need for both parties to “meet” and/or come face to face to talk about how they feel. That is what Esau and Jacob did. Even though Esau had forgiven Jacob and Jacob had also repented, they both arranged for a meeting in order to dialogue, express their feelings and consummate the process. Dialogue is thus an important element in reconciliation and conflict resolution.

וַיִּשָׁקוּ/wayechabqahu: This verb is also significant in this narrative. It is from the root *chabaq* meaning “to clap the hands” or “to embrace”. When Esau met Jacob, he embraced him (extending his hands for peace/fellowship). Other places this verb is used in the Old Testament are in Genesis 29:13; 48:10 and 2Kings 4:16. Interestingly, in that Genesis 29:13, we see a similar occurrence- Laban did to Jacob exactly what Esau later did to him. He (Laban) on hearing about the arrival of Jacob his sister’s son, “...**runs to meet** him, and **embraces** him, and **kisses** him...” The order of the actions here are very remarkable. It is the same order that the Esau-Jacob’s episode follows. However, Esau, after embracing Jacob, did not stop there, he goes ahead to fall on his neck demonstrating forgiveness.

וַיִּשָׁקוּ/wayyishaqehu: is another important word used in the episode. In the Masoretic Text (MT), each letter of this word is noted with a point over it to make it emphatic. And as Clark (2005) notes, the rabbis used those notations to draw the attention of the reader to the change that had taken place in Esau, and the sincerity with which he received his brother.

The verbal form of this word is Qal waw-consecutive 3ms verb with a 3ms suffix. According to BDB (OT: 5400), the verb is from *nashaq*, identical with *nasaq*, meaning “to catch fire, burn, kindle, to kiss”. The verb has the idea of “fastening up”, and figuratively, “to touch” as a mode of attachment. Again, it is important to note that the verb *nashaq* is also related with *chasaq* (OT: 2836), meaning “to cling”, that is, “to join, to love, delight in” etc. In the *hiphil*, *nashaq* means “to touch gently”. Hence, Esau, runs to meet Jacob, embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him passionately. The kissing here talks of acceptance. The usage of this verb, *nashaq* implies that there was no deceit in Esau. Everything he did was done with passion, love and honesty. For there to be true reconciliation and peacemaking, both parties, must be willing to accept the conditions initiated and/or agreed upon during the dialogue stage and be ready to wholeheartedly obey them. Also, the items, passion, love and honesty are necessary for true reconciliation.

Finally, the verb $\text{וַיִּבְכּוּ}/wayyibeku$ meaning “and they wept” is also important in the narrative. The verbal form is Qal waw-consecutive third masculine plural (3mp) from the root, *bakah* meaning “to weep or bemoan”. It could as well be translated as: “to bewail, complain, make lamentation, shed tears, to cry etc. In the Qal, the verb is translated: to weep (especially in grief, humiliation, or joy), to weep bitterly, to embrace and weep, as the case may be (OT: 1058). The root occurs in many Semitic languages; and in Hebrew, it is commonly paralleled with *dama'* meaning “to shed tears” and *sapad*, “to mourn”. The ancient Semitic peoples often wept loudly than quietly. Hence, when Esau met, embraced and kissed Jacob, they wept loudly. The weeping is the climax of the reconciliation process. It indicates accepting and sharing of blames and pains and joy. Thus, in reconciliation, both parties should be humble enough to accept/share blames- that is, the consequences of their actions and inactions. Any reconciliation process that ends with one party rejoicing while the other is unhappy is not true reconciliation. At the end of every conflict resolution and peacemaking, both parties should share the blames, pains of their actions/inactions and also the joy of the reunion. It should be a win-win not win-lose affair.

In the case of Esau and Jacob, both parties were eager and active in the reconciliation process. Jacob bowing seven times to Esau shows deep manifestation of reverence and humility. He made every effort to win the heart of his brother. He came to Esau with the attitude and feeling that he had offended him and needed his forgiveness. Probably Esau had thought that the strife between him and his brother may continue knowing the character of Jacob. But on meeting Jacob, he saw a new, mild, humble and broken man. When Esau saw this disposition, he was overwhelmed with brotherly affection and his heart melt.

Vv. 8-11: After the weeping, Esau then asks Jacob the meaning of all the presents he sent to him. Jacob’s reply was straightforward, “ $\text{לְמַצְאֵתִי לְבָרְכָנִי}/limso' hen be'ene 'adoni$ /to find grace in the sight of my lord”. Jacob had live in guilt all these years and probably wanted to make it up to and repay his brother what he stole from him. However, Esau’s attitude towards the gifts and his reply is noteworthy- it showed maturity. He was no longer the Esau to be deceived with material things. He had learnt his lesson and moved on with his life and moreover, he was also rich and blessed. However, after been urged by Jacob to accept the gifts, he collected them because he had sincerely forgiven him.

V 12: Esau wanted to travel along with Jacob; therefore he said, “ $\text{וְאֵלְכָה וְנִלְכֶה וְאֵלְכָה}/nis 'ah wenelekah we'elekah lenegdeka/$ let us take our journey and let us go and I will go before (ahead, in front) of you”.

The above suggestion of Esau to Jacob shows the kind of heart Esau had- a sincere, broken, and simple and forgiven heart. Esau was the type that easily forgives and forgets. In the episode, we see that he is more proactive than Jacob. He was the one that came out to meet his runaway brother; he was the one that ran to meet him, embracing, kissing and weeping on Jacob’s shoulders. He never exhibited any form of anger- he was very excited to meet his brother and

was happy with his success. This shows that Esau is not the type of person many have painted him to be. He had so many good qualities that many have refused to acknowledge.

The expression of kindness at this meeting is noteworthy- and as earlier stated, it is the best reconciliation narrative in the Bible. Commenting on the passage Henry (2006) notes:

Though he (Jacob) feared Esau as an enemy, yet he did obeisance to him as an elder brother...The way to recover peace where it has been broken is to do our duty and pay our respects, upon all occasions as if it had never been broken. It is the remembering and repeating of matters that separates friends and perpetuates the separation. A humble submissive carriage goes a great way towards the turning away of wrath. Many preserve themselves by humbling themselves: the bullet flies over him that stoops.

Also, Clarke (2005) draws our attention to the role that Esau played in the reconciliation process. According to him, Esau was very sincere and genuine in his conduct and at the same time, he was magnanimous. He buried all his resentment, and forgot all his injuries and wholeheartedly received his brother. And by this singular attitude, a potential full scale violence was aborted prematurely and peace ensued between the two parties.

Implications for Interpersonal Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation

First, interpersonal conflict, misunderstanding, offences and cheating are inevitable in human relationships and based on the study, the use of non-violence/peaceful methods in settling such disputes is preferable. Moreover, this method has always been around for a long time as demonstrated in the Esau-Jacob narrative. Had the strife/conflict between Esau and Jacob ensued, maybe Esau would have succeeded in carrying out his earlier plan of killing Jacob. And if that had materialized, then, probably the whole program and historical plan of God for humankind may not have been actualized via Jacob's descendents. The essence of the covenant-blessing may thus have terminated half-way had Jacob died. Fawenu (2015) agrees that if Esau had killed Jacob, the perpetuation of the Abrahamic covenant through him may have been impossible. Hence, "By implication, abortion of the violence makes the perpetuation of the patriarchal covenant possible" (pg. 200). Who knows how many geniuses and destinies that have been wasted because of interpersonal conflicts that were not properly managed and/or resolved. Many people have done harms/atrocities against others because of rage and anger emanating from interpersonal conflicts. Esau had the capacity to harm and/or kill Jacob; however, he chose a non-violent approach and **runs to meet him, embraces him, falls on** (threw his hands around) his neck and **kisses** him and both of them **weep**. As earlier stated, the verbs used in narrate this peaceful and smooth reunion is still significant and relevant in conflict resolution and transformation.

Second, we should not always allow temporary emotions (like anger, sadness, and hate) emanating from offences from people, to cause us take permanent insalubrious and/or

unwholesome decisions that we may end up regretting for the rest of our lives. We should emulate Esau's attitude in the episode. He did not allow his anger to cause him to harm his brother and to sin against God. Third, anger, animosity, hatred and bitterness are potential catalysts of violence. Hence, they should not be allowed to degenerate to violent behavior because, they have the capacity of doing so. Keeping malice and animosity is a choice. And if one chooses them over love, forgiveness and reconciliation, then, such individual has probably chosen to die young. God Himself intentionally does not keep malice. Psalms 30:5 says, "For His anger lasts only a brief moment, and his good favor restores one's life..." That means, if God begins to keep malice against us each time we offend Him, none of us will still be alive today. It is His favor that is still keeping us despite our shortcomings. We are to do the same to others (cf. Matt. 6:14; 5:43-48).

Fourth, peacemaking is something that has to be made. Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9). Reconciliation, peace and conflict resolution and transformation do not just happen. Broken relationships cannot be restored by apathy. Christians should actively be involved in providing opportunities for reconciliation. Peacemaking is what every Christian should be committed in doing. In the New Testament, both Jesus and Paul advocated for peacemaking and reconciliation. Jesus admonishes us to forgive others so that our heavenly Father will also forgive us. And in 1Corinthians 5:18-20, Paul informs us that God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. Though, this he spoke in the context of preaching the gospel and bringing sinners to God; however, it can also be practically interpreted to mean peacemaking among people in a social context. So, we are to share this message with others especially via our actions.

Conclusion

This study so far has established and maintained the fact that Esau is not a negative or wicked (*rasha*) personality; and that his life is/was not a tragic story. There are so many things we can learn from this noble and gracious grand-son of Abraham. Though Jacob cheated him of his primacy and the covenant-blessing, he embraced his brother, setting aside all past grudges and misdeeds. As a matter of fact, this attitude, though often being neglected and downplayed by interpreters, is commendable and should be emulated by every Christian. Since conflicts/offence is inevitable in human relationships; forgiveness, reconciliation, *Shalom* (peace) are important teachings, themes and/or principles promoted in the Bible that should not be neglected.

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