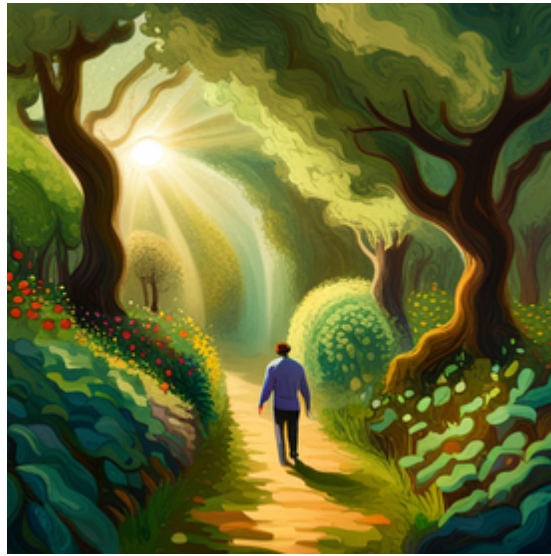


# The Despised Birthright: Ecology, AI, and a Human Future

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Preaching on:  
Genesis 25:19–34

While Rebekah is pregnant the two babies in her womb are so active, it feels like they're fighting in there—wrestling, struggling with one another. It's so bad, she loses hope and she wonders if she can keep going. She prays to God about it, and God has very little comfort for her: "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."

When Rebekah gives birth, it is indeed twins—two sons. The first son emerges all red and hairy, which is certainly unusual. He's named Esau. The second son is born just after Esau and holding onto his older brother's heel. This son is named Jacob, which comes from a verb meaning, "to follow at someone's heel," but it can also mean "to usurp": to seize something that isn't yours, to take over something that doesn't belong to you. So, right from the very start, we know that these two brothers are fated for an epic, maybe even mythic conflict.

As we read on, Esau seems a bit simple minded while Jacob reminds me of Alexander Hamilton: "I am not throwin' away my shot!" Esau sells his birthright to his brother for a bowl of lentil stew. Jacob is only too happy to oblige him. Later on, Jacob and Rebekah will trick Isaac into giving his final blessing

(intended for Esau) to Jacob instead by covering Jacob in goat skins so that when the blind old Isaac laid his hands on Jacob he would think it was actually his hairy older brother. What's going on here?

Rabbis and preachers and theologians have been fascinated by Jacob and Esau for thousands of years now. To give you one famous example, Saint Augustine believed that Jacob represented the saved and that Esau represented the damned. Well, from here in July 2023, when last month was the hottest June ever recorded in human history, and when last week was the hottest week ever recorded in human history, and here in the year when the hot topic on everybody's mind is artificial intelligence and the effects it's going to have on our future, I'd like to add my own interpretation to the story of Jacob and Esau.

Remember that Genesis is a book of origin mythologies. There's the creation story from Genesis 1, there's the creation story of Genesis 2, and then there's the recreation story of Noah's Ark. And then there's the stories of all these original great ancestors: like Abraham and Sarah, like Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and Esau. These stories of origin told the ancient Israelites (and tell us) where we come from, why things are the way they are, and (potentially) where we're headed.

I think the story of the conflict between Jacob and Esau is the ancient story of the conflict between humanity and nature, between civilization and wilderness. Esau is born hairy, like a caveman, like an animal. He's also red. Now, we think of the color of the Earth as being dirt brown, but to the ancient Mesopotamians the color of the Earth was clay red. One of Esau's other traditional names is Edom, which is basically just a variation of the name Adam, the original human.

Esau is a hunter, a man who lives in the fields, just like all of our ancestors did before the beginning of agriculture. Jacob lives in tents like a civilized person. And he's described in this translation as "quiet," which is an interesting choice. It's more commonly translated "perfect" or "upright." Today we might describe a person as "polite," or "civil," or "well-mannered." Jacob has evolved into the world of morality and appearances. He knows how to think, he knows how to present himself, his mama raised him right. He is civilized.

Esau lives and dies by what he can hunt. If the game disappears, he doesn't eat. He comes into Jacob's tent famished, and Jacob has bread and lentil stew—food that requires a civilization to plant, to grow, to harvest, to grind, to dry, to bake and to cook.

Esau was born first. Hunters and gathers come before farmers and herders and cities. But Jacob is surpassing his older brother. And he's determined to take his brother's birthright. He's determined that human civilization will inherit the Earth and its resources from the natural world. And it's easy to take that birthright away. Because of course the patriarchal system of primogeniture—where the firstborn son inherits everything—is itself an invention of civilization, and Esau can't possibly understand its implications.

Famously or infamously, Native Americans sold Manhattan to the Dutch for \$24 worth of civilized junk that the Dutch traders didn't really want anyway—beads and trinkets, as the story goes. This story may be just as mythological as Jacob and Esau's. And it's similar in another way as well. It's the story of "civilized" people trying to blame indigenous or prehistoric people for their own demise due to their inability to value what they have through a "civilized" understanding of things.

For thousands of years now civilization has been at war with the natural world. It's not hard to understand the animosity civilization felt for the natural world in the beginning. The natural world was harsh and unforgiving. Yes, it provides everything we need to survive, but it can also kill you without any warning. You are not in control of nature. Nature is in control of you. Farming, herding, cities, culture, technology—all of these developments of civilization are an attempt to take over the natural world, to control it, to subdue it and have dominion over it, as Genesis 1 famously puts it.

Before civilization, nature could have destroyed humanity. One scientific study suggests that 70,000 years ago volcanic activity led to a change in climate that reduced the human population to about 40 breeding pairs—an endangered species. But here in 2023, we are now well past—centuries past—the tipping point where nature threatens to destroy us. Instead, it is we who threaten to destroy nature, and if we do, we're likely to destroy ourselves as well. Climate change is a big one, of course, but it's not just climate change. It's over population, wilderness and habitat loss, overfishing, overhunting, overfarming, pollution, forever chemicals and plastics in the water, in the soil, in the air, in our bodies, and yes, still nuclear war.

So, perhaps for the sake of nature, which has been more than subdued by us and has become threatened by us, and for the sake of ourselves, it's time for us to go back to the story of Jacob and Esau and question the circumstances by which we have stolen the natural world's birthright. A few thousand years ago this story must have seemed like a scrappy and civilized thing to do. It may have been funny to laugh at dumb ol' Esau for not having the wits to bake himself a loaf of bread. But from the perspective of 2023, it seems like just another example of human hubris—excessive pride and overconfidence combined with shortsightedness that ultimately leads to a predictable downfall.

As Christians, isn't stewardship of the earth one of our core values? Isn't the natural world and even the wilderness one of the places where we can most intimately connect to God and hear God speaking? And isn't excessive, short-sighted pride that harms ourselves and our neighbors precisely the kind of sin we want most to examine, confess, and cut out of our lives? Isn't it possible that we would just all be happier and less anxious, if we lived in a civilization that was not at war with nature? Isn't it possible that we'd all be happier and less anxious, if we lived closer to nature and further from the somewhat bizarre goals of modern civilization—money, and stuff, and constant progress?

And I'll go one step further. We stole the birthright from the natural world. And for thousands of years,

the second son of civilization, had a new and empowering vision of a human future—a human future. We didn't always know exactly where we were going. We weren't always progressing by leaps and bounds. But we believed in civilization as the future of humanity. As recently as the mid-twentieth century that vision for humanity's future was bold, hopeful, and (although always involving change), it was human—not alien to us, not artificial, not empty to us.

But I have a sense that in our culture today we no longer have any real human vision of our own human future. What will it be like to be human 100 years from now? Most of us today really have no idea, no vision of it, no hope for it, no sense that it will even happen at all, or even any sense that we have any control whatsoever over what the world will be like in a century. Right? That's something relatively new for our civilization. Without a vision for a human future, we have lost the birthright we stole from nature. We stole the birthright in order to ensure a human future. But now we don't know what a human future even looks like. We don't know if there even is a human future.

And now with the advent of AI, there's this new threat to human civilization, again of our own making. At the end of May, a group of industry leaders from OpenAI, Google, Anthropic (all the people making AI) that AI poses a risk of extinction to humanity on the order of pandemics and nuclear weapons. There's a sense with AI, sort of like the creation of the atom bomb, that civilization itself, apart from humanity, is making its own progress. We're not in control of it. There's a sense from those in both projects that if we didn't do it, someone else would have. It's like we see the invention of these new technologies as inevitable, as if humans can't control them. We don't think we have control over our own futures. And it's literally coming true. Soon our technologies may actually be making decisions for us and about us that we're no longer capable of making for ourselves.

It's not Esau who despised the birthright we stole from the natural world. It is we who despise the birthright we invented for ourselves—that we would create a civilization that would ensure a human future. We've lost it.

So, maybe it's time for us to give it back—back to the Earth. If we don't know where our civilization is leading us, let's stop following it. And let's reimagine a human future, not where we turn into a bunch of luddites and go back to hunting and gathering—that's impossible, but in which we dedicate ourselves to bringing our civilization within the boundaries of the natural world, in which we imagine a future for humanity that is more in touch with the environment than it is with markets and commodities and technologies, in which we're more connected to nature than we are to the internet or to social media, where we're more interested in the profound intelligence of the Earth and its ecosystems than we are in the intelligence of our machines. That is a vision of a human future. And we know we need it. And we know where we need to start. But the question is, will we do it? Will you do it?

Will you take up the great work of building an ecological civilization that draws us back to nature, back to ourselves, back to God's creation, and back to a vision of a human future?