

The *Biblical Saga* of Jacob and Esau: Religious Education and the UNESCO Standards for Peace and Tolerance

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Executive Summary

This article is a reworked version of a presentation prepared for the *International Symposium on Religious Studies and Global Peace (16 – 18 May 2013)* organized by the Faculty of Theology of Necmettin Erbakan University in Turkey. The challenge posed by the conference organizers was to answer, for one's own culture, the following questions: "What is the most appropriate method for understanding and interpreting the Scriptures today? What is the soundest and most effective method in deriving principles from those Scriptures and relating them to the life of an individual and to society? In what way and how can these religious principles and moral values be taught in educational institutions?"¹

Focusing on global peace, the organizers stressed that "there is an urgent need for underscoring the positive aspects of religion and bringing out its guiding principles and values for the wellbeing of society."² In light of the fact that the Turkish educational system is going through a process of reform and in all likelihood, could serve as a model for Islamic education in other Muslim and non-Muslim countries, I took the organizers' challenge to make a contribution from my own culture very seriously.

On the assumption that for religious peace education, personal stories may well be more effective than abstract religious philosophy, I chose the *Biblical family saga* of Jacob and Esau as a case study.³

My main findings are that this *Biblical family saga* teaches that humans cannot justify wrongdoing by claiming to be acting in the name of God's revealed wish and that human actions must be judged according to universal standards. These standards – as one can deduce from the *IMPACT-SE UNESCO-derived standards for peace and tolerance in school education* – are the result of a millennia-old process of human observation that is largely based on revealed wisdom in the various civilizations. Therefore, if religious education is to remain faithful to the message of the Holy Bible, it must abide by international standards for peace and tolerance in school education.

¹ "Aims and Scope," *International Symposium on Religious Studies and Global Peace*, Konya: Faculty of Theology, Necmettin Erbakan University, Dedeman Convention Center, May 16 – 18, 2013.

² *Ibid.*

³ I wish to thank Alexander Rofé for kindly directing me to some of the sources consulted.

The Patriarchs lived sometime during the second millennium BCE, and perhaps even earlier. The *family saga* of Jacob and Esau came later, in the first half of the first millennium suggesting that the story served for centuries as an educational tool in ancient Israel to explain the complicated relations between the two neighboring peoples, Edom and Israel. It has served for millennia as paradigm for peace and reconciliation. In monitoring the *family saga* according to the *IMPACT-SE Methodology*, I found that, indeed, the *saga* fully conforms to the UNESCO-derived standards for peace and tolerance in school education.

In other words, the Jacob and Esau *family saga* teaches RESPECT for the other, treats the "Other" as an INDIVIDUAL, espouses NO HATE, teaches PEACEMAKING, provides UNBIASED INFORMATION about the conflict that includes criticism of one's "national self," is GENDER sensitive and is aware of women's critical role in peacemaking. Finally, the Biblical *saga* educates for sound economic development through ingenuity, hard work and deep understanding of nature and the environment.

The *IMPACT-SE Methodology* also confirms the conclusions of Biblical and literary scholars as regards the dominant role of female figures in Biblical *family sagas*. I compared the role of Rebecca and other figures in the *saga* with that of women in two other genres, the Iranian *Ta^cziyeh* passion plays and ancient Greek tragedy and found Rebecca's role to be unique, being both an enabler of God's will and a *universal guardian of peace*. Combining the interests of the common people with the will of God against the Patriarchal order, she enables the *saga* to move ahead smoothly; no tragedy or bloodshed occurs.

Instead, with Rebecca's initial guidance, the Jacob and Esau *family saga* culminates in an emotional reconciliation between the two main protagonists and the two peoples.
