

THE EPISTLE

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This Month's Cover

In honor of the feast of St. Matthew (Sept. 21), our cover this month is a detail from *The Calling of Saint Matthew* by Juan de Pareja (1606-1670, pronounced Pa-ray'-ha). The whole painting is very large, completed in 1661. It is oil on canvas, measuring 7'5"x10'8". It is displayed in the Museo de Prado in Madrid. Typical of Spanish painting of that era, the characters are dressed in 17th-century Spanish clothing. The only exception is Jesus and his companions on the right, who wear modified first-century Galilean clothing. One of the bookkeepers at the table is wearing eyeglasses, which did not exist in Jesus's time. The detail depicts Matthew and two bookkeepers seated at a table, with Jesus having called Matthew to follow him (Matt. 9:9). Matthew is looking at him and pointing to himself as if to say, "Who, me?" The others are looking on, asking themselves what is going on here. The marble column behind Matthew is significant. It divides the scene into the spiritual realm on the right and the materialistic and fallen world on the left. This painting celebrates two total transformations of life and identity: Matthew's transformation from the sinful tax collector Levi bar-Alphaeus to Matthew the Apostle of Christ, and Pareja's transformation from a pagan Afro-Hispanic slave to a free citizen of Roman Catholic Spain.

Juan de Pareja was an Afro-Hispanic slave in the workshop of the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez. Slaves and freed Africans were not legally allowed to become professional painters in Spain in those days. Notwithstanding, Velázquez recognized his talent and taught him. While he was not legally allowed to work on his own, he was allowed to produce works under the authority of Velázquez. He converted to Roman

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Catholicism and produced many beautiful religious paintings. Velázquez finally freed him in 1649. As an African, he was still not legally allowed to become a professional painter, but despite this he signed many of his works. Because of his talent and the reputation he had attained, the authorities chose to ignore that. One of the characters in this painting (not shown in our detail) is a self-portrait of Pareja, dressed in the clothing of a Spanish nobleman. He is the only one who looks directly out of the painting as if inviting the viewer to accept Jesus' call. This is the only known self-portrait of an Afro-Hispanic until the 18th century. In 1649, he accompanied Velázquez to Rome, where Velázquez painted his famous *Portrait of Juan de Pareja*. At the end of that year, he gave Pareja a document of manumission. Legally, it did not go into effect for four years, on the condition that Pareja commit no crime in the meantime. In effect, however, he was from that point on a free man. He moved to Madrid, where he continued to work for 20 years until his death in 1670.



Juan de Pareja

Richard R. Losch+

A Word from the Editor

These days a common, divisive, and yet usually misused suffix is “-phobia.” It is generally used to mean hatred, whereas what it really means is irrational fear.¹ There is no question that phobias exist. They usually make no sense, yet to the victims they are very real. If you have claustrophobia, fear of enclosed spaces, you can go into a state of total terror if someone locks you in a closet. If you have ailurophobia, fear of cats, you can have a cold-sweating panic attack in the presence of a kitten. If you have homophobia, it has nothing to do with sexual preference. It means that you panic at the presence of any two things that are the same. You may dislike or disapprove of someone's sexual preference, but that does not mean that you are irrationally terrified of it. What we often label as a phobia, which would be a psychological abnormality, is nothing more than ignorant

¹ Hatred is indicated by the prefix mis- or miso-, as in misogynist, woman hater. Someone who hates Muslims is a Misislamist, not an Islamophobe.

hatred. Hatred divides people, and it is becoming one of the most serious social illnesses in today's world. There is nothing new about racial, social, economic, or ethnic hatred. They are almost always based on ignorance or envy, but it seems that today these divisions are being nurtured for political and economic gain. They have destroyed societies in the past, and they can do so again. Racial hatred is being nourished and encouraged by unscrupulous people because it can become very profitable for a few. It can be a powerful political weapon, and sometimes a source of great material wealth. Religious division can be equally useful for demagogues as a tool for destroying a society or culture that they wish to replace with another. We see this today in the growing hatred of Jews, Muslims, and Christians that is being regularly nurtured through the rhetoric of ideological activists. Every human being is created in the image of God – i.e., we reflect the divine attributes of the Creator. If we allow our biases and ignorance to distort that image, we are sinning against God every bit as much as we are sinning against the victim whom we ignorantly hate. We all have biases and prejudices that are inculcated in us from our infancy, and most of them are based on false concepts. One of our prime duties as creatures of God is to do everything in our power to see people as his creatures and not as we would distort them. Pray for the wisdom and the strength to do this.

Richard R. Losch+

Why Abraham Left Everything to Isaac

Anyone who is familiar with the story of Abraham knows that he had two sons: Ishmael by Sarah's slave Hagar, and Isaac by his wife Sarah. More diligent readers of the Bible are aware that he had six other sons. After the death of Sarah he married his concubine, Keturah, who bore him six more sons: Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah (Gen 25:1-4). Although the Torah had detailed inheritance laws, the Law would not be given to the Israelites until the time of Moses centuries later. Even in Abraham's time, however, it was customary that the oldest son would receive a double portion, and the rest of the estate would be divided evenly among the other sons.¹ Despite that, Gen. 25:5 says that Abraham left

¹ For example, if a man had four sons, his estate would be divided into five equal parts, and the oldest son would receive a double portion.

everything to his second son Isaac. When it says “everything” (*kol-asher lo*, כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ) it is all-inclusive. It means not just his material wealth, which would have been livestock, slaves, gold, silver, and tents. It also included his legal and covenantal rights as well, including the land of Canaan and the promise of becoming a great nation.

The thought that immediately comes to mind is that Isaac was the son of his legal wife, while the other seven sons were the sons of a slave and a concubine. The Bible is not even clear whether, after Sarah's death, Abraham took Keturah as his legal wife or simply kept her as a concubine. Either way, his last six sons were not the sons that were promised to Sarah by God. In fact, however, there is considerably more to the matter than just the question of Isaac's mother. If God's promise to Abraham that the descendants of Isaac would possess Canaan and become a great nation, there could be no possibility allowed that in the future other descendants of Abraham could lay claim to the land of Canaan or even to the promise.¹ Apportioning the inheritance according to the normal custom would give the other seven sons a right to claim a portion of Canaan.

The expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham's tribe (Gen. 21:8ff) seems to be a tragic aspect of the story, and on the surface seems cruel and unfair. It must have been as painful for Abraham as it was for Hagar and Ishmael, and yet it was at God's command. Hagar became arrogant and insolent to Sarah after she bore Abraham a son when Sarah could not. This led to a strong antipathy between the two women. It was at Sarah's behest that God gave Abraham permission to expel Hagar and Ishmael. This was nonetheless part of God's plan because Ishmael could not be allowed to have any reason to lay claim to any portion of Canaan. One would expect that there would be antipathy between Ishmael and Isaac, but there is no biblical evidence of this. To the contrary, if we read between the lines, Abraham apparently maintained a relationship with Ishmael, and it may well have been a loving and caring one. When Abraham died and was buried, Isaac and Ishmael were both there, both mourned, and apparently there was no hostility between them (Gen. 25:8). Whether this was a reconciliation or they had always

¹ In fact, this has happened. Islam claims that the promise was to Ishmael's descendants and not Isaac's, and that it was Ishmael whom Abraham prepared to offer in sacrifice. Ishmael's descendants are the Arabs. This is why the Arabs claim the right to possess the State of Israel.

gotten along reasonably well is unclear. Ishmael had prospered greatly, and there seems to have been no conflict between the two men. As for Abraham's six sons by Keturah, he gave them all very generous gifts, even though they did not receive a legal portion of his inheritance or any right to the land of Canaan (Gen. 25:5f).¹

Abraham's choice to leave everything to Isaac was not favoritism. It was an act of faith and obedience to God's covenant. He understood that the promise was to Isaac's descendants alone, and he did not want to leave any possibility of his other descendants making any claim to Canaan. He was a very wealthy man and took care of his other seven sons generously. It was also a prophetic decision in that it secured a single direct line of descent from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob and then through David to the birth of Jesus Christ. This was all a part of God's plan.

Richard R. Losch+

A Touch of Trivia

In the 15th and 16th centuries, sugar was so expensive in Europe that only the super-rich could afford it. Most of it was imported from the East Indies and Africa, and the processing and shipping were extremely costly. In India, large sugar crystals were known as Kanda, from which we get the English word candy. The poor could not afford meat or sugar, so their primary diet was vegetarian. The rich, on the other hand, considered vegetables to be peasant food and ate huge amounts of meat, fish and exotic birds, using vegetables almost exclusively as garnishes and flavor additives. Because of this, many of them were very unhealthy and suffered from painful diseases like gout and arthritis, as well as serious cardiovascular and intestinal disorders. Sugar was a symbol of wealth and social status, and the upper classes ate vast amounts of it. The result was that many were grossly obese and most had rotten teeth. Black rotten teeth became a status symbol. The peasants, with their restricted diet, had reasonably healthy teeth despite being otherwise mal-

¹ The only one we know much about is Midian. The tribe that he founded lived in the desert, probably as nomads. When Moses fled from Egypt, he went to the land of Midian, where he met his future father-in-law Jethro, who was a priest. Jethro worshiped a monotheistic god whose religion seems to have developed from the faith of Abraham, his ancestor.

nourished, so good teeth were considered a sign of low breeding. Sugar was not only lavishly consumed, but it was also used as a public display of wealth. Amazingly intricate sculptures of palaces and castles, armored knights on horseback, flowers, and almost anything elaborate that you could imagine were sculpted of marzipan or pure sugar and presented as decorations at the dinner tables. They were called “subtleties.” They were then eaten along with a variety of other sweet desserts. Evidence of these sculptures is not only in descriptions and drawings from the time, but also in the financial records of payments to sugar-sculptors in the kitchens. At one of his banquets, Henry VIII presented the French ambassador with a chess set made entirely of brown and white sugar. It was so beautiful that the ambassador took it back to France to present to his king. Being at the top of the socio-economic ladder may have been sweet in some respects, but it certainly was not so when it came to health.

Richard R. Losch+

The First Shall Be Last

A social standard that goes back to prehistory is the Principle of Primogeniture. This means that the firstborn son inherits most or all his father's titles and estate, while the rest of his siblings share what is left or, in some cases, get nothing at all. It is still used today in many cultures and in almost all monarchies. The oldest child becomes the successor to the throne. In the Middle Ages, this was observed to the extreme: Among royalty and the nobility, the oldest son inherited all his father's titles, authority, property, and other wealth. The second son would usually be granted a bishopric or other important and lucrative post in the Church, the third might get a military position. The rest were on their own, sometimes with a very small income to help get them started. Daughters were totally dependent on either being married off or being supported by their brothers. One advantage to this was that it kept estates intact, but at the cost of the livelihoods of many younger members of the family.

One significant exception to this in ancient times was the Jews. Primogeniture was still the rule, but the Torah had specific laws guaranteeing reasonable financial protection and a fair sharing of the estate among all the siblings. The firstborn son received preference, but he did not automatically inherit the entire estate, leaving his siblings with little or nothing. To protect the integrity of the tribes,

estates could not be inherited across tribal lines, even through marriage. This prevented their being absorbed and simply dissolving into other holdings. Long before there was any such thing as an Israelite or a Jew, the Hebrews understood that while there were human rules that were laid down by God, God made the final decision. The books of Genesis and Exodus are full of such situations.

The first of these is Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:1ff). God preferred Abel's sacrifice over that of his older brother, Cain. Because of that Cain murdered Abel and was cast out. His birthright was passed on to Adam and Eve's third son, Seth. In the case of Ishmael and Isaac (Gen.16:1ff), Ishmael, even though he was born of Sarah's slave Hagar, was legally Abram's firstborn son and legally had the birthright.¹ Notwithstanding, God chose Isaac, the second-born son, to be his father's sole heir. Isaac's first children were the twins Esau and Jacob (Gen. 25:24ff). Esau emerged from the womb first and therefore was legally the firstborn and Isaac's heir. Jacob emerged second, but firmly gripping Esau's heel as he too was born. When they were grown, Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a pot of stew when he was hungry. What sealed that, however, was when the old blind Isaac was dying and gave his paternal blessing to his sons. Because of some rather shady manipulation between Jacob and his mother Rebecca, Isaac unknowingly gave the blessing of primogeniture to Jacob rather than to Esau. By the law of the time, even though the deceit was discovered, it could not be undone. Jacob became the heir. Later, God changed his name to Israel (in Hebrew, "Man Who Struggles with God"), and he became the ancestor of the Israelites, who would in turn become the ancestors of the Jews.

We have another example of the reversal of the primogeniture of twins in the story of Zerah and Perez (Gen. 38:27ff). As Tamar went into labor, the first to emerge was the hand of Zerah. They tied a scarlet string to his finger to indicate that he was the firstborn. The hand drew back into the womb, and Perez emerged first, and therefore had the birthright. The rabbinical interpretation of this story was that even though worldly powers can work to try to claim a birthright, the final choice is still God's. This was important because Perez, an ancestor of Ruth's husband Boaz, would become an ancestor of David and thus eventually of Jesus (Ruth 4:18ff).

¹ Since Sarah was barren, even though Hagar was a slave, she could legally bear Abraham's child, who would by law be considered Sarah's.

In the story of the twelve sons of Jacob (Israel), we again see the loss of the birthright by the oldest son. Ruben, the oldest, was denied his birthright because he violated his father's concubine. The next two, Simeon and Levi, were denied the birthright because they disgraced their family by unjustly slaughtering all the males of Haran because the prince of Haran had raped their sister Dinah. The fourth son, Judah, thus became the primary heir.¹ In this story, we also have the primacy of Joseph, Jacob's youngest son until Benjamin was born later. He became the Vizier of Egypt and gaining power and authority over all his brothers, including Judah. He had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, by his Egyptian wife Aseneth. When his father Jacob blessed the boys, he crossed his hands and laid his right hand on Ephraim, the younger. This signified giving him the birthright over his older brother Manasseh. When Joseph reminded him that Manasseh was the older, Jacob indicated that he knew what he was doing and continued conferring the birthright on Ephraim. The prophets often called the Northern Kingdom of Israel Ephraim.²

After the Israelites had been enslaved in Egypt and finally freed, we once again see God choosing a younger brother over an older. Aaron was Moses' older brother. Yet it was Moses whom God chose to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, appointing Aaron as his spokesman. Aaron was eventually appointed High Priest, which is the second most important leader, and yet once again we have the situation of a younger brother obtaining the birthright.

After Saul's failure as king, God instructed Samuel to anoint a new king over the Israelites. We once again see reversal of primogeniture. By worldly standards, Eliah, Jesse's oldest son was unquestionably the perfect choice. He was tall and regal, handsome,

¹ When David's United Monarchy broke in two in the late 10th century B.C., the northern kingdom (the ten northern tribes) retained the old name of Israel, and the southern kingdom was named Judah because almost all of its population were of the tribe of Judah, with a small part of it being the tribe of Benjamin. The northern ten tribes completely disappeared after the exile into Assyria in the 8th century BC.

² This is appropriate because the Ephraimites were a rebellious and bellicose tribe who often raided the other tribes. They were finally subdued by Jephthah, who slaughtered most of them after they had crossed over the Jordan into Gilead to pillage their neighbors (Jdg. 12:1-7). The northern kingdom, like the tribe of Ephraim, was also rebellious and bellicose.

intelligent, and apparently a good leader. Notwithstanding, God held back Samuel until he saw the boy David, the youngest of Jesse's sons. He immediately knew that this was the one that God had selected. He anointed him King of Israel. Despite his many flaws, for the next three thousand years Jews and Christians alike have looked upon David as the ideal monarch. As the Bible points out, humans see only the outward signs, but God sees what is in the heart. This overrides any human sense of priority or primacy.

The New Testament, of course, presents the most profound reversal of human authority. Every religion in the world that foresees some kind of messiah foresees a strong leader who will drive out oppressors and bring peace and true justice to the land, reigning as a wise, powerful and just monarch. When God sent his Son to redeem the world, he came not as a great prince or warrior, but as a humble laborer. Born in lowly circumstances of an insignificant laboring family, living as an itinerant preacher who was followed by the common people but rejected by the powerful, and dying the death of a criminal slave. Nothing could have been more contrary to the world's image of a Savior. Notwithstanding, we now revere him as the divine King of the Universe.

The ancient Old Testament sibling rivalries serve as a constant reminder that we humans see the world from a human perspective, but God sees it from a divine one. When Jesus rebuked Peter outside Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:33) he chastised him for thinking in human terms instead of learning to think in God's terms. What seems reasonable and fair to us as humans is often overturned by God in favor of something that is unexpected.

Richard R. Losch+

A Touch of Trivia

Only one United States President in history has been arrested during his term in office. In 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant was stopped in Washington, DC for speeding. He had a habit of unsafely racing his horse and buggy through the streets of the city, and he regularly ignored warnings from the police. He made a public apology and posted a \$20 bond (about \$500 today). He was released on his own recognizance. His speeding ticket is on display in the National Archives in Washington.

Richard R. Losch+

Why Joseph's Brothers Hated Him

One of the longest and best-known stories in Genesis is that of Joseph's betrayal by his brothers and his rise from slavery in Egypt to becoming the second most powerful man in the Egyptian Empire (Gen.37ff). Joseph unquestionably ranks among the greatest and wisest men in the Torah, yet when he was a boy his older brothers hated him, even to the point that they plotted his murder. The great Alabama preacher John Claypool wrote *God the Ingenious Alchemist*, in which he observed that as the alchemists of the Middle Ages tried to turn lead into gold, God successfully turned human lead into gold time and time again. We see the cheating con-man Jacob becoming Israel, the venerated ancestor and leader of the Israelite people. David, a warlord, murderer, terrible husband and worse father, became one of the greatest kings in history and the ancestor of Jesus Christ. So it was with Joseph. As a boy, the great and wise leader was clearly a spoiled brat. It was not entirely his fault, because his father made no attempt to hide the fact that he loved Joseph far more than he loved any of his ten older sons (37:3. Benjamin, his twelfth, was an infant or not yet born). Jacob gave Joseph a "coat of many colors,"¹ a clear sign that he considered the boy to be more valued than his brothers. Joseph would go out into the fields and observe his brothers tending the flocks and then come back and tattle to his father on everything he saw that they had done wrong (37:2). He was arrogant and condescending to all of them. When he had a dream foretelling his leadership, he told them that one day they would bow down to him (37:5ff). Interpreting another dream, he told his father and mother that they too would kneel before him. Even though it does not excuse their plot to murder him or their sale of him to Midianite slavers, it is no wonder that his brothers hated him.

The reason that Jacob loved Joseph more than any of the others was that he was the long-awaited first-born son of Rachel, the only one of Jacob's four women whom he truly loved. Even though he married Leah first, he had been tricked into it by his father-in-law

¹ Even though it is firmly rooted in tradition, this early translation has been challenged by most scholars. The Hebrew is unclear as to what kind of garment it was, but all indications are that it was an ankle-length cloak with long sleeves. In ancient times that was a token of high status and authority – hardly what you would expect your "kid brother" to wear.

Laban. There is no indication that he ever mistreated Leah, but from the very beginning it was clear that the woman he really loved was her younger sister Rachel. It must have been very difficult for Leah, knowing that even though she was his first wife, she was never truly loved. Whether or not she ever discussed this with her sons, there can be no question that they were fully aware of it. The love that they sought from their father simply was not there. Jacob also had two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah, who bore him sons as well. Years of the ten men and their three mothers struggling to receive some of the love that Jacob so openly showed for Rachel and Joseph certainly strained their relationship with Joseph to the breaking point. Finally, when Joseph was in his teens, the brothers conspired to murder him and make it look to their father as if he had been killed by a wild animal when he was tending the flocks. The oldest, Reuben, talked them out of it, and as they were trying to decide what to do, they saw the Midianite slavers and sold Joseph to them. They then took the special garment that Jacob had given to Joseph, and tore it and doused it with blood. They took it back to their father, claiming that a wild animal had killed Joseph.

Joseph's experiences in Egypt as a slave and prisoner were a refining fire that developed him into the extraordinary man that he would eventually become. It was through this that God the Ingenious Alchemist turned the lead into gold. Over the course of the centuries, all of Jacob's sons would become the founders of Israelite tribes. Joseph did not become the patriarch of a tribe, but his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, did. Ultimately, however, only two of the Israelite tribes, Judah and Benjamin, would survive the centuries of turmoil, paganism and backsliding and become the basis of the Kingdom of Judah. It was into that kingdom, later known to the Romans as Judea, that the Savior was born.

Richard R. Losch+

A Touch of Trivia

The White House isn't just white. Its white paint, called "Whisper White," is made in Germany by Duron, Inc. It's a special formula that protects the building from the elements yet allows condensed moisture from underneath to escape. The building was last painted in 2019. At \$150 per gallon, the project cost \$85,000.

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