

Genesis 25:19-34
The Birth of Esau and Jacob

Any parent who has more than one child can attest to the wonderful, and yet sometimes frustrating, fact that two children from the same two adults can be very different. Personality, ambitions, interests, all can vary even though the two siblings are produced by the same mother and father. Biology can explain part of this, and so can psychology. But ultimately, as believers we know that it is God Who sovereignly ordains His perfect will for our children.

The great patriarch Abraham had died. For one hundred years he had journey with, and sometimes from, God as he sojourned through the lands of Canaan and Egypt. His life had been an example of both faith lived out and the failure to stay true to that faith. Yet, through it all, God had proved faithful, and had fulfilled His promises to Abraham. God had called him, led him, and prospered him. At the end of his life, Abraham was “gathered to his people” fully “satisfied with life” (Genesis 26:8) and was buried by his sons Ishmael and Isaac. In our passage today we see how, for Abraham as for each of us, life goes on after his death.

Context

Scripture has already offered us a picture of Abraham's two sons, and then his extended family through his wife/concubine Keturah. We have also read about the generations that followed Ishmael. Now in this passage the attention is drawn to the children born into the chosen line of Isaac. This narrative is part of a larger study of the life of Jacob, who will be the inheritor of God's sovereign promises. As we will see, the narrative of Jacob will be one of fraternal struggle, and that struggle is anticipated here in the narrative regarding his, and his brother's birth.

We should also note that this narrative covers decades. Isaac is a relatively young man of forty at its beginning. Twenty years passed before the birth of his twin sons, and they are likely young adults at the end of the passage. In terms of literary style, the passage is bounded by the heritage of the father, Abraham at the beginning, and the despising of that inheritance by Esau at the end.

The narrative begins with the standard *tōlēdōt* formula we have seen before in the genealogies of Genesis, “now these are the records of the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham became the father of Isaac” (v. 19). Unlike the other genealogies, however, which are primarily a listing of names and generations of descendants, this *tōlēdōt* introduces a lengthy narrative.

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Scripture sets the stage by reminding us that “Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife” (v. 20). Recall that Isaac had played no part in the selection of his bride. That important work had been delegated to, and performed faithfully by, the faithful servant of Abraham, who had journeyed to the family's ancestral lands to find the woman God had chosen for Isaac. This was, of course, the family of Nahor, Abraham's brother, and the Paddan-aram referred to here is simply another name for the Aram Naharaim of Genesis 24:10.

“Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent, and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her” (Genesis 24:67). Despite their love, however, the marriage did not prove immediately fruitful. In fact, Scripture points out that it would take twenty years for the couple to produce children (v. 26). Perhaps at first not much attention was paid to the fact that the marriage produced no children. No doubt these things took time in the ancient world as they often do today. But certainly, as the months turned into years without any progeny, Isaac and Rebekah must have become concerned.

Eventually the burden became more than they could bear. The inability to conceive became more and more apparent. Therefore, “Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife” (v. 21). We can only imagine the conversations Isaac must have had with his father as time passed. The family pattern was evident. Abraham had struggled to father children. So, too, did his son Isaac. Though Abraham and Isaac knew nothing of genetics, certainly they must have wondered why their particular family had such difficulty fathering children. No doubt father and son talked often about the emotional, physical, and spiritual challenges of waiting on the Lord. Ironically, whereas the the struggle Abraham endured led to his, and Sarah's, decision to involve Hagar which led to fraternal strife, Isaac made no such misjudgement. Yet, Isaac also had challenges with his two sons nonetheless.

One might even wonder if Abraham doubted as to whether or not the servant had found the correct woman to be Isaac’s bride. To be sure, God had been faithful and revealed His will step-by-step through the process of searching for the potential wife of Isaac, but we cannot fault Abraham for perhaps doubting whether the servant had missed something. Or perhaps to give Abraham the benefit of the doubt, by now, content and “satisfied with life” Abraham had become more comfortable waiting on the Lord and simply encouraged Isaac to be patient with God’s timing.

What we can clearly see is that Isaac dealt with the infertility of his wife much more effectively than did his father. Did Abraham caution his son against trying to force the will of God? He certainly would have had many stories to tell of the family strife caused by the consequences of his relationship with Hagar. Perhaps Isaac’s own strained relationship with Ishmael played a role in his decision making. In any case, Isaac chose not take to himself a surrogate woman to father a child. Instead, with far more wisdom than his father showed, he “prayed to the Lord” (v. 21). Curiously, Scripture makes no reference to Abraham praying for Sarah during the twenty-five years of waiting for Isaac, though it is not impossible to think that he must have done.

And Isaac prayed passionately. The language used in Scripture describes intercessory prayer on behalf of another and is the same as that used to describe Moses praying for the Egyptians to be relieved of the plagues they suffered (Exodus 8:26, 10:18). We can see from his response to Rebekah’s apparent barrenness that clearly Isaac recognized God as the giver of life. He acknowledged both his own need and God’s ability to provide. And God was faithful, “the Lord answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived” (v. 21). Rebekah became pregnant.

Isaac had had to contend with Rebekah becoming pregnant. Now Rebekah had to contend with being pregnant. That was because this was not an easy pregnancy. As the unborn infants developed within her womb, “the children struggled together within her (v. 22). Whether Rebekah knew that she was having

twins at this point is uncertain. What is clear is that this was uncomfortable in the extreme. The word for ‘struggle’ describes an act of violence and force. This was not merely the usual movement of a fetus within the womb. As an example, a similar instance of this descriptive term includes the act of aggression against Abimelech when “a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head, crushing his skull” (Judges 9:53).

So challenging did her pregnancy become that Rebekah wondered “why then am I this way?” (v. 22) and “she went to inquire of the Lord” (v. 22). Isaac had prayed to God when Rebekah was barren. Now Rebekah inquired of the Lord. But the language used here does not mean that Rebekah prayed herself for wisdom. That she asked of the Lord (and then received an answer) could also be interpreted to mean that Rebekah sought out a prophet to help her understand what was happening within her.

This was not extraordinary. Seeking truth from God by asking a prophet eventually became quite common in Israel (2 Kings 8:7-15). Such a procedure included the supplicant approaching the prophet to ask him to inquire of the Lord, the prophet then doing so and receiving from God an answer, the relaying of that answer to the supplicant, and then the fulfilling of the oracle as given by the Lord. It may be that Rebekah did this rather than pray.

Whatever the process, that is whether Rebekah prayed to the Lord herself or sought out a local prophet to seek God’s wisdom on her behalf, God answered.

“Two nations are in your womb;
And two peoples will be separated from your body;
And one people shall be stronger than the other;
And the older shall serve the younger” (v. 23).

The answer from God contained much that was news for Rebekah. First, she now understood, if she had not done so before, that she was carrying twins. Second, she was told that these boys would each be the ancestor of a people group. Finally, she was told that the younger of the two would take priority over the older. How much of all this made sense to her we are left to wonder. Indeed, it may have left her with more questions than when she began.

God’s answer substituted two nations for the two boys. Israel and Edom would be the two rival kingdoms. The two would be separated, a reminder of Abraham and Lot as well as Isaac and Ishmael, and this separation would not be without its challenges. The younger would usurp authority from the older. That the younger brother would take precedence is far from unknown in Scripture, though it runs counter to the usual ancient practice of primogeniture. We know that Isaac supplanted Ishmael. Joseph and Benjamin were far more important than their older brothers. Ephraim was blessed instead of Manasseh. David became king, not his older brothers. Solomon succeeded David not Adonijah. Each of these instances is but another illustration of God’s sovereign choice in electing those whom He would.

We should also note that while the ultimate fulfillment of this oracle was a long time in coming, it was not until the time of David that the Israelites would thoroughly subjugate the Edomites, Edom regularly was placed in submission to the Hebrew people (Exodus 15; Numbers 24; 2 Samuel 8).

Finally the time came for the sons to be born and Rebekah to be relieved of the burden of her pregnancy. “²⁴When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau. ²⁶Afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding on to Esau’s heel, so his name was called Jacob; and Isaac was sixty years old when she gave birth to them” (v. 24-26).

In this description, Scripture takes advantage of the Hebrew language to make a series of wordplays. The firstborn child was red or *'admōnī*. Whether this refers to the skin tone or to the fact that he was very hairy is unclear. We do know that this particular description is used only again of David in Scripture. Esau was also described as hairy or *šē'ār*. So we can see that the first of these Hebrew terms provides the etymology for the child's name, Edom, and the latter for the place where he came to live, Seir (Genesis 36:8-9).

The second child also has the same literary element involved in his birth. He is named Jacob, *ya'āqōb*. That he was born grasping the heel of his older brother is the word *'āqēb*. Another Hebrew word, *'āqāb*, means to follow closely or to overtake, and carries with it the nuance of taking advantage through deception, a concept that would fit the life of Jacob quite well.

The Birthright Despised

Now the scene of Scripture shifted. Many years have passed. “When the boys grew up” (v. 27) is all the clue we are given as to how long it has been since the birth of the twins. The term for ‘boys’ can mean either an infant (Exodus 2:6), a youth of fourteen (Genesis 21:12) or even a young man of seventeen (Genesis 37:2). From the context of the narrative it is reasonable to assume that the twins have grown to the age where they are at the very least trusted to go hunting on their own and to be responsible for basic household activities. Likely, then, they are at least teenagers and perhaps somewhat older.

While not being specific as to their age, Scripture does provide a brief description of each. “Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field, but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents” (v. 27). Esau is described as a “skillful hunter” though we might take that attribution with caution since, as we will see, he returned from his hunt empty handed. The implication of being a “man of the field” is that Esau, as compared with Jacob, is unrefined. He is an outdoorsman, one who preferred the wilderness and solitude to the company of those around the family settlement.

Jacob was “a peaceful man,” which is actually a word which can be used to mean “perfect, or blameless” (Job 1:1). It cannot be used in this sense here, however, since Jacob’s actions can hardly be described as either perfect or blameless. He is also described as “living in tents” which may simply mean that his work kept him close to the family settlements. Thus, Jacob may have been charged with caring for the flocks, while Esau was sent abroad to hunt for food. There is no reason to take the assumptions of some commentators that Jacob was in any way effeminate. He likely worked as hard as his brother, just in a different area of family service. Rather than going off on his own to hunt and provide food, Jacob stayed around the family settlement attending to the chores required to be performed there.

Scripture offers us many examples of sibling rivalry. Cain and Abel and Ishmael and Isaac have already been witnessed in the biblical narrative. But here the trouble between the two young men is prefaced by a statement regarding their parents. “Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game, but Rebekah loved Jacob” (v. 28). The parental favoritism is transparent in Scripture, and we can only assume that it was equally transparent to the two boys. We are not told why each parent preferred one child over another, though it is mentioned that Isaac loved some well cooked meat and Esau was the hunter. Rebekah’s reason for preferring Jacob is not hinted at. Furthermore, there is no reason to assume that each parent did not love the other child as well. The term simply implies a preference for one child over another, such as that Jacob eventually felt for Joseph (Genesis 37:3). But as with the latter example, the preference Jacob had for Joseph led to resentment among his brothers, and painful discord within the family.

The narrative of this encounter between the two brothers, as related in Scripture, seems rather bizarre.

“²⁹When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; ³⁰and Esau said to Jacob, ‘please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished.’ Therefore his name was called Edom. ³¹But Jacob said, ‘first sell me your birthright.’ ³²Esau said, ‘behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?’ ³³And Jacob said, ‘first swear to me’; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright” (v. 29-34).

That Jacob was preparing stew makes sense from his previous description as a tent dweller. He was helping his mother, perhaps, with household chores. In this culture, a stew was a meal offered instead of a dish with meat as the main course. It may not have been for the family, but rather for the servants. Esau had returned from “the field” where he had likely been hunting and was hungry. Indeed he was ‘famished’ a word that means exhausted or starving. It is a term used to describe an embattled army, and gives a hint of the exaggeration to which Esau was prone. The irony here of a hunter not being able to feed himself points to the critical nature in which Scripture in this passage views Esau. And, we can certainly appreciate the fact that hunger and exhaustion makes one vulnerable to manipulation by others.

Esau saw the food Jacob was preparing. Scripture continues its word play from the boys’ names by identifying the stew as that “red stuff” thus having Esau use a version of his own name to describe what he wanted to eat. And since he is so starved, he wanted to ‘swallow’ it, or to simply gulp it down. Again, the exaggeration of his own condition and the coarse way in which Esau asked for food all reflect badly on his character. Esau is portrayed as both uncouth and as a glutton.

But Jacob comes off no better. Rather than simply giving his hungry brother some of the food, Jacob insisted on a trade. That he required no time to think about what he wanted indicates that Jacob may have been thinking of a way to usurp his brother’s place in the family for a long time. One might wonder if he knew of the prophecy regarding the birth of the two boys. Had Isaac and Rebekah talked of it? Had it become part of the family lore? In any case, Jacob immediately required that Esau sell him his birthright in order to satisfy his hunger.

We see that Jacob offered Esau no time to think about it. He wanted the birthright given first. Also, we can also see that Jacob insisted, rather than negotiated. There was no ‘please’ in the conversation. The very idea of a younger brother demanding, or even requesting, that the elder brother surrender his birthright is extraordinary in this, and in most ancient cultures.

Esau gave in, continuing to exaggerate his own need. He claimed he was “about to die” (v. 32) a very unlikely scenario. And even if so, would a bowl of stew have restored him from near death? Clearly Esau simply has so little regard for his birthright that he was willing to sell it for a very humble meal. In his own mind, he was justified in selling his inheritance to satisfy his hunger.

Jacob insisted. “Sell me your birthright” became “swear to me” (v. 31, 33) as the conversation continued. In an oral culture like that of the patriarchs, oath were vital elements of the moral code. But this could also reflect the animosity between the two brothers as well as the fact that Jacob knew Esau well enough to know he would renounce a simple verbal agreement or handshake if that is all the commitment he makes.

If Esau is too passionate, Jacob is too calculating. Esau may be uncivilized and easily taken advantage of, but Jacob is a cheat. The family birthright was worth infinitely more than a bowl of stew. Nonetheless, Esau surrendered. He “he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way” (v. 34). Apparently he wolfed down his food and then left as quickly as he had come in. He gave no sign of regretting his bargain. And Scripture passes harsh judgment. Esau “despised his birthright” (v. 34). The word is a severe condemnation, meaning to “despise or regard with contempt.” It can be used with reference to another person (1 Samuel 10:27) or also the name of God (Malachi 1:6). Curiously, Scripture does not condemn Jacob for his actions in the narrative.

What was this birthright? Scripture makes it clear that from the beginning, in Israel, the firstborn belonged to God (Genesis 4:4; Exodus 13:13, 15; Numbers 3:40-41). This was as true of products of the harvest as it was of livestock and children. God considered the nation of Israel to be His firstborn (Exodus 4:22). The firstborn receive special honor, perhaps as a sign of receiving his father’s potency for carrying on the family line (Genesis 49:3; Deuteronomy 21:17).

We do know that the ‘birthright’ was different from the ‘blessing’ given by the father. The blessing of the father was what formally acknowledged one child over another, and gave them priority as the first born. That the ‘birthright’ was different from the ‘blessing’ is signified by the fact that later Rebekah helped Jacob deceive Isaac to gain the latter. It must have been very important for her to have gone to such lengths to gain it for her favorite son, since Jacob already had the birthright. Also, we see in Scripture that the eldest son did not always receive these attributes. Isaac was not Abraham’s firstborn, and Jacob, was not Isaac’s. Though Reuben was Jacob’s firstborn, he did not receive the blessing (Genesis 49:3-4). And Ephraim was given the blessing over Manasseh. While the details of what was the ‘birthright’ and ‘blessing’ are not revealed in Scripture, it is clear that both were very important for family heritage and that no father casually gave either away.

Takeaways

Early Jewish writers claimed that Jacob earned God's favor through his own merit and Esau was condemned by God because he was sinful. Specifically these writers insisted that Esau had been an idolater and a murderer (*Genesis Rabbah*), whereas Jacob was described as a man "perfect in good work" (*Targum Neofiti*). Even the early Church saw the struggle in the womb as an illustration of the struggle between good and evil. Augustine wrote that the womb symbolized the Church, and the two sons the righteous and wicked within it (*Gospel of John*). Origen saw in the struggle between the two boys a representation of the spiritual battle within each believer.

For Paul, this narrative showed the grace of God.

“⁶But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; ⁷nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: ‘through Isaac your descendants will be named.’ ⁸That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. ⁹For this is the word of promise: ‘at this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son.’ ¹⁰And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; ¹¹for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, ¹²it was said to her, ‘the older will serve the younger.’ ¹³Just as it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated’” (Romans 9:6-13).

This is where Scripture leads us. Salvation was, and remains, dependent not upon ethnic boundaries or family relationships, but upon God's sovereign election. That both Jacob and Esau had the same mother, yet Jacob was chosen and Esau not, demonstrated that the salvation of the Jews was never an issue of ethnicity, but rather a sign of God's mercy.

Clearly the point of Scripture in this narrative is to emphasize the will of God in salvation, as in everything else. It is His divine purpose that is worked out in the interplay between the two young men. To be sure, each of the sons had a distinctive personality and character that God used to His advantage. But the divine direction of the narrative remains. Let us rejoice, therefore, in our salvation, and never forget to acknowledge the grace and mercy of God Who saved us.