

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

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JACOB AND ESAU (*GENESIS 25*)

The story of Jacob – and his sons – takes up half of the book of Genesis. And we will see, as we read through the rest of the Old Testament, Jacob looms large in the Family of Abraham. Over and over again, the Israelites were identified as the children of Jacob; in fact they bore his special name that the LORD gave him – Israel.

Jacob's entire life, however, was entangled with his relationship with his twin brother Esau. From the very beginning they were struggling with each other over the issue of who would be the heir of the Abrahamic Covenant. Although Esau was the firstborn and therefore the legal heir, Jacob's very destiny was to challenge that legal right and take it away from him. What's more to the point, the LORD himself wanted the younger son to be the heir. If this is true, why didn't God cause Jacob to be the firstborn? The answer lies in Jacob's desperation to have it.

The Arameans – We are reminded again that Abraham's descendants were not going to marry local Canaanite women. Rebekah was Laban's sister, and they came from the Aramean family stock that Abraham came from.

We aren't told about the religious history of the Arameans, but we are told that Abraham's immediate family knew about, and at least respected if not worshiped, Abraham's God. This has always been a requirement for God's people. Even if later in their history the Israelites took wives from non-Aramean stock (see Joseph in Egypt for a pointed example), it was not under circumstances that compromised the Israelites with the wife's unbelieving family. In fact, we will see Jacob's sons taking wives from the Shechemites *after* the men were put to death – despising Shechem's requirement for intermarrying and living together with the pagans. In other words, if the wife does not yet worship Yahweh, she will once she joins the Family. Usually we find husbands giving in to the wife's preferences, even when it comes to religion, and following her lead (that was in fact God's warning to the

Israelites before they entered Canaan 400 years later). That's not allowed in God's nation, however.

It was especially important at the beginning of the Covenant Family to have husbands and wives in one accord. For three generations, the Family only consisted of a few individuals. It would have been fatal to the Family's future with their God if at any point along the way they had made the mistake of introducing a false god into the situation, or relationships with pagans who would have influenced them in that direction. Their devotion to Abraham's God is what kept the little Family alive spiritually and sensitive to making the right moves toward their unique destiny.

Rebekah's barrenness – It seems that Rebekah was unable to have children. Apparently the family she came from had problems with this: Sarah was unable to have children until God did a miracle in her old age; and later Rachel would also be barren. They were all related in some way, and perhaps the problem was genetic in nature among the women of the family.

Isaac and Rebekah were married for twenty years before she became pregnant. And the only reason she did was that her husband interceded with the LORD on her behalf. We mustn't miss the obvious fact that these instances – Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel – show us the Covenant heirs praying according to the Promises that their God had already given them. If they were anybody else, prayers for children may or may not have been answered. But when the LORD's plan depends on them having children, they can therefore pray "with confidence, in full assurance of faith," because their prayers are based on the Word of God and therefore sure to happen. This is in fact what Abraham learned about true faith – it follows the Word of God, it doesn't presume on God's will. He himself had to wait 25 years for his own son.

This calls to mind Hannah's prayer later in Israelite history:

The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. (1 Samuel 2:5)

In other words the LORD makes things exist that were not, and he brings down the powerful and raises the weak. God deliberately arranges the circumstances so that his works are necessary; the right things won't get done unless *he* acts. When this happens, we learn not only that he can do it, but also the works that he does form the proper foundation for the future needs of his people. Natural means would not have sufficed.

Twins struggling – Women who have had children know that their babies will often kick and move in the womb; that's normal and a good sign of life. But in this case, something was happening in Rebekah's womb that *wasn't* natural.

From the very beginning the boys struggled for preeminence. The *struggle* becomes a necessary part of the life of the people of God. This struggle will characterize Jacob's life for the rest of his days. He struggled with Esau, with his father, with Laban, with his wives, with his sons, with the Canaanites. Thus he says at the end of his life – "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life." (Genesis 47:9) A strange thing to say for a man so richly blessed as Jacob was! And yet these blessings always came at a price – God gave them, but Jacob always had to fight for them, either because he had no legal right to them or else the circumstances were impossible. In fact it was a strange and mysterious combination of God's free grace and man's desire and determination to receive it. Herein is the essence of, and reason for, prayer.

Rebekah seeks the LORD – It's interesting that, while most modern women would go see a gynecologist if they thought something was going wrong with their pregnancy, Rebekah went to the LORD about it. There's something about Rebekah that sends her back to God: she senses something bigger than a physical problem. She already showed her sensitivity to the Covenant, and the will of Abraham's God, by agreeing to leave her home and family in Haran and marry Abraham's heir, following and believing the testimony of Abraham's chief servant.

Perhaps she sensed that the Covenant Promises were going to be endangered in some way, that this jostling of the babies pointed to trouble between them. Peace in the family raises no alarms; but war right from the very beginning raises red flags of warning and makes people apprehensive that there's going to be trouble in the family. When one's hope

is the Covenant Promises, war in the family sets brother against brother – family members are going to be both for and against God. And that’s extremely stressful to deal with.

So Rebekah decided to get inside information about what was going to happen. She went looking for a spiritual reason, and therefore she got a spiritual answer – what God sees happening. There *will* be trouble between the boys, on a scale that none of them could imagine yet: two nations, two histories of millions of people struggling against each other and causing trouble for each other. There will *not* be unity between the brothers or their descendants, unfortunately (bad news for parents!).

This was a strange thing to tell a mother – it was a matter of international politics, and God’s favoritism. One will be favored of God, the other rejected by God. Both will become nations and the struggle will extend across national borders, affecting millions of lives – and it will start right away, because immediately both sons’ families started growing exponentially.

And yet there will be victory of one over the other. God will himself favor and bless the younger son so that he gains dominance over the other. On one side is Light, and on the other darkness.

And not just Jacob himself, but his descendants as a nation will struggle with, and overcome, the descendants of Esau in the centuries ahead. This is particularly important in light of the fact that Esau got a head start on his brother; his descendants grew rapidly and took over a good part of the land *ahead of* the Israelites – see Genesis 36:31. So in order to fulfill this prophecy from the LORD, there will be more miracles in store for Jacob’s descendants as the

LORD changes circumstances to favor them. Esau and his descendants will never gain the upper hand.

The birth of the twins – Isaac was 60 years old when the boys were born. In fact, Abraham himself got to see his grandchildren – at the time of their birth, he was 160 years old; they were 15 when he finally died. Abraham had to wait 25 years for his promised son; Isaac had to wait 20 years for his.

The circumstances of the birth of the twins will figure into the story later on, as the completely different physical traits are going to be a major hurdle to cross when Jacob tries to deceive his father by pretending to be Esau.

But the detail about Jacob *grasping Esau’s heel* when he was born connects the struggle between the brothers in the womb, and the struggle that Jacob will have with the man from Heaven in Genesis 32. He struggled with man, and he will struggle with God. He wants something, and he will not let go until he gets it.

The name *Jacob* means “he grasps the heel.” It was also a figure of speech that the Hebrews used when they referred to someone deceiving another person. In this case, both meanings describe Jacob’s life in his struggle with Esau for the birthright, and his deceiving people in order to get it. He used both methods to achieve his goal.

Two personalities – Not only were the two boys different physically, they were poles apart as far as their personalities went. Esau was a hunter and always on the roam; Jacob was a “quiet” man who stayed home. Isaac favored Esau because he “had a taste for wild game.” So on the surface, Esau would have more hope for his future than Jacob had;

their father's tastes for the good things of this world clouded his judgment and threatened the fulfillment of the Word of the LORD.

But let's lay this out clearly so that we can see the differences between the two men, at least in the LORD's eyes and the way the histories of the two families intertwined in the following centuries.

The Scripture says that the LORD loved Jacob and hated Esau. One son wants the birthright, the other son despises it. One is destined for life, the other for death. One is the father of the children of light, the other the father of the children of darkness. On the one hand, a son wants the treasures of Heaven; on the other hand, the son rejects those and instead wants this world's treasures.

Let's make it even more pointed and tragic: two sons from the same mother – one wants Heaven and the other one doesn't. One wants the spiritual inheritance of the Father, the other despises that spiritual inheritance and only focuses on this world. It's the classic battle between Christianity and Judaism, between Christian and Jew – both sons born of the same mother, yet the elder son rejects his birthright, what was rightfully his to claim, and chooses this world's riches and pleasures as a poor substitute of Heaven. The younger son – the Church, the body of Christians all around the world that was first born at Pentecost – has laid claim to the elder son's birthright, and now the Father is giving to them what was rightfully the Jews' inheritance.

I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In

that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 8:11-12)

Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen. (Acts 28:28-29)

[*You were*] cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree. (Romans 11:24)

The tragic thing here is that the older son wants something from his father (Isaac), but not what the Father (God) wants for him. Esau wanted property, but not the Covenant Promises that God intended for Abraham and his heirs. Jacob (however much he may have understood all of that at the beginning, he grew to understand it as time went on) struggled to get that Covenant inheritance. The younger son wants what the Father in Heaven wants to give him. And it's the same situation now with the Church and the Jews: the Father has all along wanted to give his children the spiritual inheritance that the Covenant is founded on, and it's *that* that the Jews have rejected when they reject Christ, who has come to give us exactly that and nothing else. That's why Jesus told the Jews, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did." (John 8:39)

If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. (John 8:42-44)

It was a harsh thing to say to the Jews, but they were doing the very thing that Esau did when they rejected their spiritual birthright.

Esau sells his birthright – Let me point out that there was absolutely no deceit on Jacob's part in this transaction. When Esau agreed to give up his birthright for a bowl of stew, he knew exactly what he was doing. He even said plainly, "Of what use is a birthright to me?" He took the additional step, as if to confirm his presence of mind and the responsibility for his action, of swearing to give Jacob his birthright for the food. So when he claims later on that – "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing." (Genesis 27:36) – that was a lie. The Scripture tells us plainly what the problem really was: "So Esau despised his birthright."

Was Jacob being shrewd? Yes. Did Jacob understand that this would no doubt cause major problems in the family later on? Yes. But he didn't force Esau to do this.

What Esau did, which is so typical of those who only want the things of this world, was trade life for death, success for failure, family for enemies – essentially a life with God for a life without God. For momentary pleasures, in order to live in the here and now, they will willingly turn their backs on what they don't think is real anyway. Hebrews states the case succinctly:

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like

Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. (Hebrews 12:15-17)

This is not wisdom, it's playing the fool. There is always a trap holding the bait of cheese. He was walking away from his father's God, and he will have neither his father's good will nor God's from now on. It's the finality of the thing that he wasn't facing right now; but his decision will cause great distress in the near future. Which points out something else about the fatal decisions we make about sin and God: for now, the pleasures of this world are our justification for rebelling against God. And since lightning doesn't strike us right away, we believe the lie that nothing bad will happen when we ignore God and his world. But God works over time; he lets the wicked have enough rope to hang themselves in the end. Usually long after the sin, when the effects of it are starting to take our lives apart, when there is no way to reverse one's decision and no way to fix the damage, do we suddenly realize that we did the wrong thing – and there is no longer any remedy.

He also sealed the doom of all of his descendants. For the rest of the history of the Old Testament, the Edomites would be on the wrong side of the line – tolerated at times, at other times punished and destroyed for their opposition to God's chosen Nation. They had their forefather Esau's ignorance and insensitivity to spiritual issues to thank for that.

Jacob, on the other hand, got hold of a spiritual goldmine, which the ensuing chapters will unfold in detail.

This legal transfer of the birthright has an eternal aspect to it. It cannot belong to both sons; only one can legally claim it. One has to deliberately give it up before the other can rightfully lay claim to it. This is why the Son of God deliberately gave up *his* birthright so that Christians could lay claim to it.

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

Christ of course didn't do this because he despised his birthright, but because he wanted us to have it. But the act of giving it up was legally necessary before any of us could lay claim to it. This is in fact going to be the crucial aspect of Jacob's struggle with the Firstborn in chapter 32: the only reason God let him have his chance at it was because the Son had given it up, and had put it within Jacob's reach. Jacob took what Esau gave up, and Jacob took what the Son of God gave up. In the same way we must be just as passionate about our Inheritance from the Father.

The Point – The lesson about Esau is plain enough to see. Obviously Esau cared only for his sensual needs; he showed an appalling lack of sensitivity to more important issues. “Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.” (Philippians 3:19)

The Scriptures are full of injunctions to avoid that mentality: Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:19-21); Jesus' answer to Satan's temptation (Matthew 4:4); Solomon's observation that men spend all their efforts for food (Ecclesiastes 6:7).

But the positive side of that injunction is to “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” (Colossians 3:2) Our focus should be on the Kingdom of God, not on filling our bellies. (Matthew 6:25-33) We are children of God, and our hearts and minds should be on greater things than satisfying our senses: not this world, but the next world. It's a choice between the flesh or the Spirit, this world or the next world, the old man or the new man. “You cannot serve both God and money.” (Matthew 6:24)

The important thing to realize is that this principle is not *added to* the lesson of Esau by later New Testament passages, but *drawn from* it. Esau really did turn away from a spiritual asset, and doomed his descendants to a life without God.

The painful part is what we give up when we want only this world. Esau pleaded for *something* good from his father; he got nothing. *No hope and no God*. We get none of the Covenant – we are not treated as sons, God gives us no grace or forgiveness, there is no sacrifice for our sins, there is no fellowship with God, not even a dependable revelation of him. We will be at war with God and man, with no peace in the world or in our hearts. All the blessings that come from knowing God and living with him in his House as his children will be alien to us – not only will we not have them, we won't understand their value. In our spiritual stupor we won't even realize

what we've turned our backs on. As a tragic example of the Jews committing the same rejection that Esau did, Paul tells us about them –

Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.” (Romans 11:7-8)

They will actually argue with you about this: they don't see the point in going to the Son of God for *anything*, even when that act of rebellion separates them from the life of God and eliminates them from the Family of Abraham.

The lesson on Esau is plain enough, but Jacob is the real lesson of this passage. Whatever he might have understood about Abraham's God and the Covenant at this stage, the important point is that he didn't sit around and wait for things to happen on their own. He went after it with all of his heart. This is, in fact, the lesson that Abraham also learned about true faith – we have to *want* what God has for us. The Promises are from another world; it's a different treasure than food and drink, clothes and houses, money and power. It's a spiritual inheritance that only the true children are going to want – but they really do want what they see. They see the depth of the treasures of Heaven, the inestimable value of them, the power and glory of them, the life of God in them. Compared to this world, the treasures of Heaven are like light versus darkness, life versus death. Remember Lazarus' reward versus the rich man's doom. Faith sees that, and faith reaches out for it. It's that reaching out that proves one's heart; it shows for certain

the true hope that we have and what we value. And that is what God rewards when he sees it in his people: their passion for him. It's true that God gives us his life as a free gift; but we have to *want* it.

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the Heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. (Hebrews 6:4-6)

Jacob is the Patriarch that is most identified with the Jewish nation throughout the Old Testament – far more than the others. And the reason is that they went after the true inheritance that God has for the children of Abraham, which the rest of the world despises.

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