

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

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THE DESCENDANTS OF ESAU (*GENESIS 36*)

It seems strange that right in the middle of the account of Abraham and his Covenant descendants, we have this chapter describing the descendants of Esau – who had no rights to the Covenant blessings. Esau, if you remember, rejected his birthright. Why is it, then, that we have such a full description of his family and (seemingly) a rich and successful genealogical history – a record of a man whom God rejected?

We are at a point in Jacob's life where he and his Family are about to leave the area. In contrast, Esau and his family are going to settle in and take possession of their land. So the two brothers separate (verses 6-8 tell us that the land of Canaan wasn't big enough to support them both).

Each man had made critical choices: Esau *rejected* God's promises, and Jacob *struggled* to get them. Now the time had come for the kind of life that results from those decisions. The short version is that Esau got his inheritance now and Jacob had to wait for his; Esau received this world, and Jacob the next.

Let's trace the history of Esau and his descendants.

Esau's prosperity

First, Esau identified with Ishmael and his side of the family. Ishmael had already separated from Abraham's clan years before and was living among the Canaanites and, no doubt, adopting their culture. The fact that Esau married Ishmael's daughter Basemath also reflects his separation from the Abrahamic clan and identification with those who had been cast out of the Covenant group.

Second, we are told that Esau also married other Canaanite women which, as the rest of the Old Testament tells us over and over, means inevitable idolatry and taking on the pagans' cultural ways that were so hateful to God (and would prove to be their downfall later when Israel returned from Egypt).

Third, it appears that Esau and his family *were* richly blessed. He had many children, many of whom grew up to be chiefs of their tribal areas in the

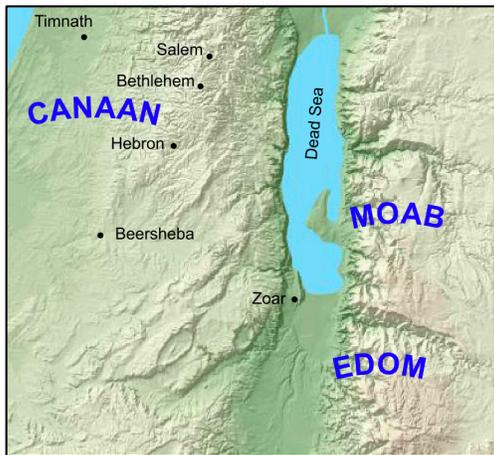
land of Seir. They spread out through the land later known as Edom and conquered the Horites living there. They were prosperous and powerful.

Fourth, the descendants of Esau grew and took over their land *through natural means*. In other words, they did what any other people group or nation has done through history: they moved in, they conquered, they ruled, they prospered. History is filled with this kind of takeover and growth of one nation over their neighbors. There's nothing here that can't be accomplished by common sense, ambition, ruthlessness, courage and strength – along with (no doubt) many vices as well.

Fifth, all this came about as a result of rejecting God and his Promises. Keep in mind that Esau wasn't your ordinary pagan; he was in line to inherit the Covenant Promises from his father Isaac. The man turned away from that, rejected

God, and went his own way in the world. One would think that he would have had a hard time of things as punishment for his bad decision; but it seems as if God gave Esau exactly what he wanted – *this* world. Could this be a dead-end that God has just led Esau into, unknown to him at the time? Does gold and silver, the very things we crave, actually become a curse in our hands and weigh us down to Hell? A curse sent from God in the appearance of a blessing? If so, through Esau’s sin God passed down an inheritance of failure, rejection and death to his descendants.

Sixth, Esau and his descendants were now settled down in the area. Their land was called Edom, and it was (by God’s design) outside of the Promised Land, south of the Dead Sea and bordering the Arabian Desert. For generations there were kings and cities and prosperous life in Edom long before Israel ever came back from Egypt. “These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites.” (verse 31)



So by all appearances, Esau went his way and prospered. But the reason we can take this as his first step toward a dead end is what other passages in the

Bible say about him (which we will look at shortly).

Jacob’s struggles

In contrast to Esau’s apparent immediate success, Jacob and his Family suffered from one problem and defeat after another. He had chosen life, the Blessings of the Covenant, but they certainly wouldn’t be obvious in the life that he chose. As he told Pharaoh later in Egypt –

The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years. Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning. (Genesis 47:9)

There are characteristics of Jacob’s life that set him apart from Esau.

First, everything that happened to Jacob was by the hand of God, who richly blessed him during his stay with his uncle Laban. Not *because* of his efforts, but *in spite of* them, did Jacob become rich and prosperous. God filled his hands with undeserved treasures from Heaven as a reward for his faith.

Second, Jacob didn’t marry a pagan girl – he married Leah and Rachel, who followed him as he followed Abraham’s God. It was critical to make sure everyone believed in the same God instead of introducing idols and false gods that would split the Family and threaten the Inheritance.

Third, Jacob had to leave the area. There was Esau settling down for the next four hundred years, he and his sons and grandsons building a nation in comfort and prosperity – and the great Heir of the Promised Land was forced to

leave his Inheritance, flee to Egypt and take refuge during the famine.

Fourth, Jacob and his Family hit insuperable problems everywhere they went. The stories in Genesis show us the Family members struggling with trials and troubles not only against nature but also the surrounding pagans and nations. From Dinah's rape, to Judah's troubles, and Joseph being sold into slavery, and the slavery of the entire nation of Israel under Pharaoh, to being trapped at the Red Sea during their escape from slavery, and the lack of food and water in the desert for 40 years on their way to the Promised Land – these and many more obstacles were mountains that the people of God *couldn't* solve on their own. Esau decided on this world and walked into the easy life; Jacob decided on the next world and faced nothing but trials and hardships as a result.

Fifth, it literally took the hand of God to rescue them from one problem to the next. Miracles marked their journey from beginning to end. God's people are called to hardship: "In this world you will have troubles." (John 16:33) But God has committed himself to removing the mountains, raising up valleys, making the way plain, destroying the nations who get in the way, giving strength to the lame and weak, and whatever else it takes to get his weak and helpless children to their otherwise unattainable goal. At the end of this journey it will be supremely obvious that God carried them every step of the way and enabled them to do the impossible. This is how he gets glory.

Sixth, Jacob proved his spiritual descent from Abraham by his life of *faith*: seeing the spiritual God, opting for the eternal inheritance, walking behind

his God who does what Jacob can't do for himself. And the life of faith necessarily means that the inheritance is *delayed* (in his case, for more than 400 years!). Esau gets his now; Jacob's Family "died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth." (Hebrews 11:13)

One characteristic of unbelievers is that they think only in the short term; believers think far down the road. Esau's descendants thought they had a secure hold on their land and lifestyle as the centuries passed – riches bought cheaply with no commitment made to God. But by the time of Jesus, most of their prosperity and greatness had died out and only a few Idumeans were left – and they disappeared soon after Jerusalem was destroyed.

On the other hand, Jacob's descendants came back from Egypt (against all odds!), took over Canaan, and established a nation that lasted until 70 AD. But even that was not the end. The foundation stone of the Jewish nation – including all their history between Jacob and Jesus – became the Rock that defines and supports the Christian Church. Jacob's blessings grew from glory to glory, while Esau's "blessings" died out and vanished like a cloud of smoke.

The Point: God *really* does not like people rejecting him. This story is not about the ordinary pagans, who of course will only be fodder for destruction. This is about those who are within reach of the Treasures of Heaven and callously turn away from them, as if they are of no worth. God's hatred for

Esau became a byword in the rest of the Bible.

“Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the LORD. “Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.” (Malachi 1:2-3)

As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” (Romans 9:13)

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God ... that no one is ... 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 rejection of God can come in many forms. Hypocrites, whom Jesus and the Apostles especially condemned, are scattered all through the Church – people who on the outside appear to be of the Family of Faith, but in their hearts have turned away from the true spiritual treasures of Heaven to take hold of this world instead. That rejection by an apparent heir is what especially irritates the LORD.

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)

It is terrifying to think about God’s revenge. Slowly, with the sinner unaware, over a period of time till the situation is beyond fixing, God arranges his eventual destruction. “The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.” (2 Peter 2:9) Seemingly blessed in this world, the sinner’s heart has been “hardened” by God himself against spiritual things. The “life of faith” is not in him; light doesn’t shine on his path; the way to death is sure and certain. He gets what he really wanted; but in the end God brings him to nothing but misery.¹ There is no true life apart from God.

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 [*like Esau!*] will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 8:11-12)

¹ This also shows us the long shadow of doom that is cast on one’s descendants if we turn away from God.

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Genesis : A Theological Commentary

ISBN 978-1722102463



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A subsidiary of
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