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The story of Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25:19–36:43)

The birth of Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25:19–26)

Abraham has died just prior to this story, and now the history of God's chosen seed is to be carried on through Isaac. Here we have a familiar beginning: Rebekah is barren, and the continuation of the promised seed is in jeopardy once again. How will God intervene in the situation and keep his promises?

25:19. And these are the generations of Isaac the son of Abraham: Abraham fathered Isaac.

The statement, 'And these are the generations of ...' is an oft-repeated formula in Genesis (see 6:9; 10:1; 11:10,27; etc.). It serves

two functions. First, it introduces genealogical data. And, second, it normally precedes a new block of narrative material—a new story is being introduced. (For the latter interpretation, see commentary on the passages listed above.) In addition, the verse serves as a contrast to Genesis 25:12—there is striking similarity of language and contrast of purpose. The previous verse underscores Ishmael's descent, not from Sarah, but from Hagar, the Egyptian maid.¹ Isaac's direct descent from Abraham and Sarah is now accentuated and legitimized—that is, he is the true heir.

25:20–21. And it came to pass when Isaac was forty years old that he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel, the Aramaean from Paddan-Aram, the sister of Laban the Aramaean, to be his wife. And Isaac prayed to Yahweh in front of his wife because she was barren. And Yahweh was entreated. So Rebekah his wife conceived.

In a general sense, this story parallels that of Abraham and Sarah. The latter were also subject to a long period of barrenness (see 11:30).² The length of barrenness for Isaac and Rebekah is twenty years (see 25:26); for Abraham and Sarah it appears to have been much longer. There is a major distinction between the two events, however: Isaac and Rebekah do not resort to concubinage to produce children. Rather, they seem to trust in the word and providence of God.

What Isaac does is to 'pray'. That verb is in the Qal stem, and when it appears that way in the Hebrew Bible, God is always the one being addressed. God responds by being 'entreated'—that is the same verb as 'prayed' in Hebrew, but it is in the Niphal pattern/stem. It is what is called a 'tolerative Niphal', signifying that the subject grants the request or prayer.³ In the Bible this verb in this pattern is reserved for God's work.

It should also be observed that Isaac prays ‘in front of’ Rebekah. That phrase is a substantive that is used almost exclusively to denote physical positioning.⁴ Perhaps it signifies that Isaac is literally standing before his wife and interceding with God for her.

25:22–23. *And the sons were crushing each other inside her. And she said, ‘If it is so, why am I like this?’ So she went to enquire of Yahweh. And Yahweh said to her:*

*Two nations are in your womb
And two peoples from your inward parts will be divided.
And one people will be stronger than the other people
And the older will serve the younger.*

Here is the first indication of conflict between the two brothers who are soon to be born. They are ‘crushing each other’ (Hithpael reflexive pattern) inside Rebekah. Such action reflects great animosity and enmity between the two children. Some of the rabbis explain that this verb really has the meaning of running or moving quickly, and so ‘... whenever she passed by the doors of the Torah (i.e. the Schools of Shem and Eber) Jacob moved convulsively in his efforts to come to birth, but whenever she passed by the gate of a pagan temple Esau moved convulsively in his efforts to come to birth’.⁵ Although that story is apocryphal it reflects the bent of each child. In addition, the activity of crushing each other serves as a symbol representing the future history of the brothers’ relationship.

Rebekah’s verbal response demonstrates that something extraordinary is happening. Her question is brief and incomplete— it literally reads: ‘If so, why am I?’ It may be that she is even going so far as to question her own existence in the light of the problem she is experiencing. But in the end she responds properly by going

to Yahweh and enquiring of him. In that sense she imitates her husband, who had prayed earlier because of her barrenness.

Yahweh's answer to Rebekah is typical Hebrew poetry, and it consists of two pairs of lines, or, more technically, cola, in parallel.⁶

The first is:

a	b	
Two nations	in your womb	
a ^I	b ^I	c ^I
And two peoples	from your inward parts	will be divided

The construction is an incomplete synonymous parallelism in which the verb of the second line also applies to the first line—a feature that is typical of Hebrew poetical practice. The second couplet says:

a	b	c
And one people	than the other people	will be stronger
b ^I	c ^I	a ^I
And the older	will serve	the younger

There is a clear reversal in the order of the elements: in the first line the one people—that is, the younger—is the subject; in the second line it is the other people, the older, that is the subject. This reversal serves to emphasize the point of the subservience.

This prophecy of Yahweh overturns the common practices of the ancient Near East. The first-born normally would receive the greater share of the inheritance and leadership of the family. In Mesopotamia, for example, the *māru rabū* (a term related to the

Hebrew word for ‘older’ used in this passage) inherits much more than the *marū seḥru* (the latter term being related to the word translated ‘younger’ above).⁷ But in the case of Jacob and Esau it is God who predetermines that the situation will be different for the children of Rebekah.

The hostility between the two children is a symbol of enmity between two peoples. These two groups will be ‘divided’, which also carries the sense of ‘separated’ or ‘incompatible’, and strife will result. The fulfilment of the prophecy is clear: the people of promise, and ultimately the Messiah, will come through the lineage of Jacob, the younger son. Descendants of the elder son, Esau, become the Edomites, who stand outside the line of God’s covenant promises. Indeed, there is considerable evidence regarding the conflict between Edom and Israel throughout biblical history (see 2 Samuel 8:14; 1 Kings 11:16; 1 Chronicles 18:13).

25:24–26. And when her days were completed in order to give birth, behold, twins were in her womb. And the first came out ruddy, all of him, like a hairy cloak. And they called his name Esau. And afterwards his brother came out. And his hand was holding on to the heel of Esau, and so his name was called Jacob. And Isaac was sixty years old when she gave birth to them.

When Rebekah’s pregnancy ends, she gives birth to twins. The first is born with a very unusual characteristic: he is born with hypertrichosis—that is, covered with hair. Many translations also add that it was ‘red’ hair (e.g., NASB, NIV); it probably is better to render that term as ‘ruddy’ and to understand it as reflecting his complexion. The word is used of David in that way in 1 Samuel 16:12; 17:42.

The child is given the name ‘Esau’. This does not involve a word-play on any other term used in the story. It may be a derivative of

the verb *‘āsāh*, which means ‘to press’ ‘squeeze’ or ‘crush’.⁸ Thus its use may reflect the earlier incident of the children crushing one another in the womb (25:22).

The term translated ‘hairy’ is *sē‘ār* in Hebrew. Esau and his descendants later inhabit a land called Seir (32:3; 33:14,16; 36:8).⁹ The territory probably receives its name from Esau’s condition at birth. The reference to his hairiness also anticipates the story in Genesis 27 in which Isaac feels for the hairy arms of Esau in order to identify him (27:23).

The second child also appears in an unusual manner. His hand is grasping the heel of his brother. The symbol is obvious: the younger is holding on to the first, struggling, as if he is not going to allow his brother out before himself. This is a second indication of conflict between them, and it signifies the future relationship of the twins. Jacob’s name is the cognate verb of the noun ‘heel’; his name thus means ‘one who takes by the heel’.¹⁰ This translation is supported by the prophet Hosea, who said of Jacob, ‘In the womb he took his brother by the heel’ (Hosea 12:3).

Application

In the book of Romans, the apostle Paul makes mention of the story of the birth of Jacob and Esau. In Romans 9:10–13, he says the following: ‘And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to his choice might stand, not because of works but because of him who calls, it was said to her, “The older will serve the younger.”’ Paul uses the events recorded in Genesis 25 as an example to demonstrate God’s work of election. Before the boys were born God made a distinction: he chose Jacob and his descendants to

receive his revelation, to be the ones through whom the Messiah would come and to be his covenant people. Esau and his lineage would receive none of it. And this distinction was not made because of human merit or innate human goodness (was Jacob really a better person than Esau?). Rather, the distinction was made by the mercy of God.

The same still holds true today. People are of the covenant, not because of their own choosing, or because they somehow earned it, but simply because of the grace of God. Midlane tells the story of an unnamed minister in Scotland who was on his deathbed when a brother minister came to see him. The latter enquired, 'Well, my brother, what are you doing?' 'Doing?', answered the dying servant of God. 'Doing? I will tell you: I am gathering together all my prayers and sermons, all my good deeds and bad deeds, and am going to throw them all overboard together, and swim to glory on the plank of free grace!' Salvation is by God's grace alone. There is no other way.