

EDM 12 – How It All Started – The Stories of Jacob and Esau 1

We are taking a historical journey through the OT to learn all that we can about the Edomites. We are doing this so that we have the background information to Romans 9:10-13. When we have that background information, we will then be able to interpret Paul’s words correctly.

The final step of our historical journey takes us to Isaac and his wife Rebekah, the parents of Jacob and Esau. In their story, we discover that God was again testing the faith of a patriarch and his wife. God had tested Abraham and Sarah in one of the greatest stories of faith in the Bible – to give them a child in their old age. Now, a generation later, God would test their son Isaac and his wife Rebekah. They must also learn faith. They must also trust God for a miracle.

Isaac was sixty years old, twenty years into his marriage, and Rebekah had still not conceived. But when Isaac prayed, the Lord answered immediately. There would be no drawn-out drama of delay until his body was as “good as dead,” like with Abraham. Instead, the drama would play out in Rebekah’s pregnancy and the eventful lives of her twin sons that would influence the history of the nations coming from them.

The pregnancy was difficult as the children struggled in Rebekah’s womb. Most likely she did not know she had twins until God told her. But the difficult pregnancy provoked her to cry, “If it is so, why then am I this way?” We read that in Genesis 25:22, and we ask, “If what is so?” Well, the answer would be, “God if you have answered my husband’s prayer to enable me to conceive, why do I have this turmoil in my pregnancy? Why is it so hard?”

Here is what God said to her. We read the following in Genesis 25:23.

The Lord said to her,

- a – “Two nations are in your womb;
- b – And two peoples will be separated from your body;
- c – And one people shall be stronger than the other;
- d – And the older shall serve the younger.”

Three facts stand out in God’s oracle.

1. Her sons would give rise to distinct people groups that would become nations.
We know them to be Israel and Edom: Lines a-b.
2. One people will be stronger than the other: Line c.
3. The older will serve the younger: Line d.

Which people group will be stronger than the other (Line c)? Does this refer to Edom being stronger militarily in its initial stages of history? This perspective would line up with Esau’s profile of a hunter, a man of the field while Jacob was sedentary (Genesis 25:27). Edom also became an established nation hundreds of years sooner than Israel. Could it, however, refer to Israel becoming the dominant people in the reigns of Israelite and Judahite kings? Could it be an

eschatological statement about Israel becoming the dominant nation of the world as, for example, in the prophecy of Obadiah 1:17 where Israel possesses the nations?

The ambiguity in the third point of the oracle comes from the uncertainty of whether God was referring to the men, Esau and Jacob, or to the nations that would come from them. He had been speaking of peoples/nations. Either way, in what way would the older serve the younger?

The speculation surrounding the ambiguity may not seem crucial to modern readers, but it would become crucial for the people of God. The Jews believed they were the younger, weaker people. Thus, the oracle was for them a paradigm for how history would play out. The weaker, suffering people of Israel would eventually overcome the stronger, dominant pagan nations of the world, including Edom. This perspective coincides with the Genesis oracle's wording about the development and relationship of *nations* coming from these men. We should also note that we cannot find in the biblical narrative a time when the man, Esau, served the man, Jacob. Therefore, it must mean that “[the nation coming from] the older shall serve [the nation coming from] the younger.”

We can also see that the original story is not talking about the eternal destinies of individuals but the relationship of nations. The oracle is about what will happen as the two boys grow into adulthood and give rise to Israel and Edom.

Finally, the day came when the struggle in Rebekah’s womb ended. The boys were born, first Esau, all red and hairy. Noting these physical traits, Isaac and Rebekah named him Esau (עֵשָׂו) which derives from the word hairy (שָׁעָר). Esau also had a reddish skin tone and commentators have noted that the word describing his redness (אָדְמוּנִי) is related to the word for which his country would be named, Edom (אֶדְוֹם). However, the writer does not associate his reddish skin color at birth with the Edomites. That will come in the story of the birthright. Jacob, smooth and grasping Esau’s heel, then came forth from the womb. His action of holding his brother’s heel, *bayaacob* (בַּעֲקֵב) led his parents to name him Jacob, *Yaacob* (יַעֲקֹב).

In the naming of the sons, negative connotations would develop, but what may surprise some is that the negativity relates to Jacob’s name. Jacob comes from *El-Yaacob*, and its meaning was widely understood in the ancient Near East to be “may God protect.” Yet the Genesis writer

associated Jacob's name with his action of grasping and supplanting. We see this same negative connotation in Genesis 27:36,¹ Jeremiah 9:4,² and Hosea 12:2-3.³

In the patriarchal story of Genesis 25, the narrative moved to the emerging personalities and characteristics of Esau and Jacob and the fateful day when Esau sold his birthright to his brother for a meal.

²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field, but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents. ²⁸ Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. ²⁹ When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; ³⁰ and 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. ³¹ But Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." ³² Esau said, "Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?"

³³ And Jacob said, "First swear to me"; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. (Genesis 25:27-34)⁴

The narrative showed the contrasting personalities of Jacob and Esau, but the assumption of many is that the description of Esau meant to convey cultural and moral inferiority compared to

¹ Then he said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob, for he has supplanted me these two times? He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing."

² "Let everyone be on guard against his neighbor, and do not trust any brother; Because every brother deals craftily, and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer." Krause believes that Jeremiah is "...playing on the popular etymology of Jacob's personal name as meaning 'supplanter': Trust not a brother, for every brother tries to supplant." כִּי כָל־אָחִי עֵקֹב יַעֲקֹב – Joachim Krause, "Tradition, History, and Our Story: Some Observations on Jacob and Esau in the books of Obadiah and Malachi," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Vol 32.4 (2008): 476. Keil & Delitzsch say, "In the words עֵקֹב יַעֲקֹב there seems to be an allusion to Jacob's underhand dealing with his brother Esau..." *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1984, Vol 8: Jeremiah, 184.

³ "The LORD also has a dispute with Judah, and will punish Jacob according to his ways; He will repay him according to his deeds. In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his maturity he contended with God." Westermann believes that Hosea is linking the name Jacob with the act of deception, Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, Augsburg, Minneapolis, MN, 1981, 414.

⁴ Westermann sees the contrast between Jacob and Esau as parabolic of two types of civilization that clashed in ancient times – the crude, clumsy, and stupid hunter/gatherer vs. the aspiring, self-conscious semi-nomadic that eventually gave rise to a waxing civilization. Throughout the whole world of literature narratives are often introduced with two brothers embracing different occupations. This motif is a sign that very early in the history of mankind there was serious reflection on the different forms of civilization, and mirrors in its turn historical developments; new forms of civilization arose, older forms disappeared...." Westermann, 414-417. Von Rad speaks of the "roving and uncultured hunter" being "a sinister person," Gerhard Von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1966, 261. Gibson speaks of "...the seeds ... of the classic clash ... between the man of action and the man of thought, the practical man and the brooder, the bold and the careful, the doer and the schemer," Gibson, 137-138.

Jacob, the peaceful tent-dweller,⁵ although this cannot be sustained in the text.⁶ Yet, commentators heap scorn upon Esau not just for selling the birthright, but for everything leading up to its sale and all his behavior that day.⁷ The gulping down of the stew is an indication that Esau is an “uncouth glutton,” and the five verbs presented in rapid, staccato fashion – he *ate* and *drank*, and *rose* and *went* his way and *despised* his birthright – indicate a lack of manners and judgment.⁸

No doubt, Esau sinned gravely. Hebrews 12:16 leaves no room for justifying his sale of the birthright. The writer exhorts his readers, “that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal.” It was, indeed, a godless act. But is it fair to paint a complete portrait of the man based on that act? Is it fair to write him off and his descendants as well and to read crudeness into every action?

The verb, “I am famished” is a *hapax legomenon*,⁹ and has had a tendency for commentators to read bestial preconceptions into it despite the *Targum Onqelos* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* translating it, “I want to taste.”¹⁰ The Hebrew for “tasting” is *la’at* (לָאֵת), and it is usually interpreted negatively despite the evidence for such a negative translation being slim. In post-biblical Hebrew, this word was used for the feeding of animals, but that would not necessarily shed light on what it meant hundreds of years earlier.¹¹ We should also note that Esau says “Please” and that he wants to eat *from* (*min* - מִן) Jacob’s stew, not gulp down the whole thing. These are hardly the words of a ravenous, animal-like man. When the Hebrew text in Genesis 25:30 has Esau repeating the word for what Jacob is cooking, “the red, that red” (מִן־הָאֵדָם הָאֵדָם), this does not mean that Esau was fumbling for words because he was stupid. If he had been in the field all that day and was unsuccessful in his hunt, he may have been exhausted.¹² The word for “famished” is *ayep* (אֵיֵפ). Although it does not denote a person at death’s door, it does

⁵ Peaceful man is *tam* (טָמֵם) which connotes “moral integrity and innocence,” Frank Anthony Spina, “The Face of God: Esau in Canonical Context,” *The Quest for Context and Meaning: Studies in Biblical Intertextuality in Honor of James A. Sanders*, editors, Craig A. Evans and Shemaryahu Talmon, Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1997, 7-8. *Tam* is used two other places in Genesis; in 6:9 referring to Noah as *blameless* in his time and 20:5-6 where Abimelech, king of Gerar, is said to be a man of *integrity*.

⁶ Spina speaks of commentators who see that these descriptions are “... subtly unflattering, hinting that Esau is crude, uncultured, and instinctual,” *Ibid.*, 6. Westermann speaks in a macrocosmic way about civilizations and says that “the aspiring shepherd speaks, triumphant and mocking, as he makes fun of the crude, clumsy, and stupid hunter.” But he also says, “This is in no wise to be understood as a characterization of the individual Esau,” Westermann, 417.

⁷ The *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* vilified Esau for his behavior on this day. He was not just out hunting game for his father, but he sinned in five ways that day including worshiping idols, shedding innocent blood, and defiling a virgin. Other rabbis viewed Esau’s request for food as animal-like. He poured food down his throat like a camel while still others saw his actions as rejecting priestly duties and denying the resurrection, *Ibid.*, 43-44.

⁸ Speiser, 195.

⁹ A *hapax legomenon* is a word or phrase used only once in the Bible.

¹⁰ Anderson, 45. The *Targum Onqelos* is the primary Aramaic translation of the Torah attributed to Onqelos who lived in the second century AD. The *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* is another Aramaic translation of the Torah although the date of its composition is disputed.

¹¹ R. Christopher Heard, *Dynamics of Dissection: Ambiguity in Genesis 12-36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah*, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, 2001, 103-104.

¹² *Ibid.*, 104.

indicate “a state of weariness or hunger resulting from a day’s abstinence of food or several days’ exertion with less food than normal...”¹³ Esau may have exaggerated his condition, yet he was in a physically challenging situation (25:32). One rarely attributes stupidity and lack of manners to people in such conditions.

What did Jacob think of the situation? He saw his brother in distress, and rather than help, he bargained with him; “First sell me your birthright.” Is this brotherly? The text reveals that Jacob saw his brother in need and made the opening move in a negotiation!¹⁴ Esau was weary, exhausted, and “dying from hunger.” Jacob saw that he had the upper hand in a vulnerable situation.

But would something as sacred as a birthright be negotiable and a “game of matching wits”? The Nuzi tablets show that Hurrian-Canaanite custom and law allowed birthrights to be sold¹⁵ and that the firstborn did not always receive the birthright.¹⁶ To a reader living in such a world, it would appear that Jacob and Esau had entered a negotiation, a practice acceptable in their time.

This brought Esau to a crossroads. Would he trust the God of his father, Isaac? Would he exercise faith like his grandfather Abraham who believed that God could bring into being that which does not exist (Romans 4:17) and raise the dead (Hebrews 11:19)? Sadly, he did not walk in such faith. He was a skillful hunter. He was a man of the field. He would later be told that he would live by the sword (Genesis 27:40). Esau only knew how to trust in skill and strength rather than God.

And the consequence is that Esau acted godlessly. He chose the way of pragmatism and expediency. “If I die, the birthright will be lost anyway. You can have the birthright. Just give me food.” Esau swore to Jacob, the exchange was in some way ratified, and Esau had his meal.¹⁷ He ate. He drank. He rose. He went his way. He despised his birthright.¹⁸

¹³ Ibid., 106.

¹⁴ Anderson notes that cooking stew is not a simple active verb. It is in the Hiphil form emphasizing causation and purpose, as though he were “cooking up something.” He notes that this verb in the Hiphil can mean “to act presumptuously” or “with willful forethought” and that “These associations could scarcely have been absent from the mind of the ancient writer or reader,” Anderson, 50.

¹⁵ Gibson, 141.

¹⁶ Sarna, 186-187.

¹⁷ The Rev. Dr. A. Cohen, *The Soncino Chumash: The Five Books of Moses with Haphtaroth*, The Soncino Press, London, 1977, 143. Cohen believes that the price was not the meal. He believes the meal was the symbolic action that ratified the transaction and that the price is unstated in the narrative.

¹⁸ “Scholars typically understand the birthright as a form of primogeniture, that is, the right to inherit a double share of the father’s estate,” Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 2007, 45.