5786 – Genesis 25-28 – Toldot (Generations)

THE BIRTH OF JACOB AND ESAU (vv. 25:19-26)1

19. This is the story of Isaac The introductory formula *'elleh toledot* (*these are the generations*) ... serves as the general title for the narrative cycle that concludes with 35:29. As such, it balances the earlier use of the formula before the listing of the line of Ishmael. In like manner, *'elleh toledot* in 37:2 prefaces a cycle of stories about Jacob, thus matching its appearance in 36:1,19 with the Esau genealogies.

Abraham begot Isaac This note is hardly needed after the foregoing "Isaac son of Abraham." Moreover, such a usage is never found in the other *'elleh toledot* examples. Yet the Chronicler later followed the pattern of this verse in recording, in 1Chronicles 1:28, that the sons of Abraham were Isaac and Ishmael, and then stating, in verse 34, that "Abraham begot Isaac." **The redundancy, therefore, is not a gloss but a literary device for emphasizing Isaac's role as the sole successor to the patriarch, in fulfillment of the promise of 21:12: "It is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued."**

20. ***forty years old*** Rebekah's age is omitted because, unlike Sarah, she was not beyond the age of childbearing.

sister of Laban The relationship is mentioned as an intimation of the fact that the Jacob–Esau episodes are intertwined with those of Jacob–Laban.

21. **Once again we encounter the motif of the barren wife of the patriarch.** In the present instance, Rebekah's inability to procreate is tinged with irony, for she had gone to her marriage with her family's blessing echoing in her cars: "O sister! May you grow into thousands of myriads" (24:60). **Now twenty years have passed**, and the divine pledges that Isaac would be the progenitor of a people remain unredeemed. Nevertheless, unlike Sarah and Abraham, **Isaac and Rebekah do not resort to concubinage**. Rather, **they maintain their faith in God's word and rely on the power of prayer**. The prolonged state of barrenness is profoundly meaningful in that it is ended by a deliberate act of divine Providence, a clear sign that the resulting offspring are predestined to be the instruments of God's purposes.

22. ***the children*** By indicating that there is to be more than one child (*i.e.*, twins), the Narrator takes the reader into his confidence.

struggled in her womb Rebekah experiences an unusually difficult pregnancy. Instead of the normally gentle quickening, the fetal movements are spasmodic and she has fears of miscarrying. Not only is the report of the difficult pregnancy unique in biblical literature, but the Hebrew also uses an unusual verb (*va-yitrotsetsu*), which literally means "they crushed, thrust, one another" **and which foretokens the future hostile relationship between the children who are about to be born**.

If so, why do I exist? The Hebrew is an incomplete sentence, which literally means "If so, why then am/do I ...?" The sense requires something like, "Why then did I yearn and pray to become pregnant? (Rashi) or "Why do I go on living" (Ramban)

She went to inquire of the LORD **The idiom employed means to seek divine guidance in a moment of great perplexity and anguish.**(35) Generally one would go to a specific sanctuary or to some charismatic personage of recognized authority. In this case **the narrative is tantalizingly short on details**. According to verse 11, the couple is living at *Beer-lahai-roi* at this time, the place where Hagar had received the divine announcement concerning the birth and destiny of a son, as told in 16:7-14. This may have influenced Rebekah to go to the same site. **It is to be noted that the divine name YHVH is carefully employed in both inquiry and response** ...

23. God's response is oracular (enigmatic) in style, poetic in form, the message being conveyed in four pithy phrases. Rebekah is informed that 1) she carries twins, 2) that each will be the progenitor of a people, 3) that the movements in her womb result from sibling rivalry for priority of birth, 4) and that physical strength would be decisive; ultimately however, hegemony (supremacy) would belong to the loser in the uterine struggle. **In historic terms, the seniority of Esau is reflected in his having achieved a settled kingdom earlier than Israel**, as noted in 36:31; **the supremacy of Jacob found expression in David's crushing victories over Edom**.

There is another aspect to the oracle. Its presence here actually suggests a moral judgment on Jacob's behavior, for **it tacitly asserts that his claim to be heir to the divine promises rests solely upon God's predetermination**. Thus, his election is thereby disengaged from the improper means he later employed to obtain his rights.

25. ***red*** Hebrew *'admoni* is also used-admiringly—of David in I Samuel 16:12 and 17:14. The term, therefore, is not likely to mean red headedness, which was popularly associated with the sinister and the dangerous. More likely, a ruddy complexion is intended. This may well be connected with the convention found in Egyptian and Cretan art, as well as in the Ugaritic texts, that equates red skin with heroic stature. At any rate, **there is here**

1 Nahum M. Sarna, Ed., *The JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis*, (The Jewish Publication Society), pp.178-182.

an undoubted implicit word play between *'admoni* and Edom, which is another name for Esau, as noted in verse 30 and other texts. It is likely that the origin of the name Edom may lie in the characteristically reddish hue of the Nubian sandstone and crystalline rocks of that country.

like a hairy mantle This detail anticipates the crucial role of Esau's hairiness later on in the narrative. **Hebrew *se'ar*, "hair" (*sa'ir*, "hairy"), is also an allusion to the land of Seir, the habitat of Esau/Edom, as mentioned in 32:4 and in other texts**. This region probably derived its name from the shaggy nature of the terrain. The Jebel section of Edom has a relatively high annual precipitation and also benefits from snowfall on the hilltops. As a result, it was always distinguished for its woods, forests, and brush. **It was not until World War I that the region became** finally **denuded of vegetation**. **The Turks cut down the forests in order to service the Hejaz Railroad**. Esau's unusual hairiness brings to mind the account of Enkidu in the Gilgamesh Epic. His entire body is also said to have been covered with hair, a condition that was popularly taken to be a sign of boorish uncouthness.

26. ***holding on to the heel*** That is, attempting to forestall the prior birth of his twin. This seems to be the idea behind Hosea 12:4: "In the womb he tried to supplant his brother."

Jacob By folk etymology, the name is here derived from Hebrew *'akev*, "heel." **In reality, Hebrew *ya'akov* stems from a Semitic root *'a-k-v*, "to protect."** It is abbreviated from a fuller form with a divine name or epithet as its subject. *Ya'akov-'el*, "May El protect," is a name that has turned up several times in cuneiform texts over a wide area. The name Jacob is thus, in origin, a plea for divine protection of the newly born—most appropriate for the one who was to live his entire life in the shadow of danger.

THE SALE OF THE BIRTHRIGHT (vv. 27-34)

The struggle for seniority between the twins, which commenced inside the womb, continues into adulthood. Jacob now seizes an opportunity to inveigle (convince, trick) Esau into transferring the birthright to him. His desperate endeavors to obtain this end by means fair or foul can only be understood in terms of a specific psychological situation, the elements of which were certain complex sacred realities. The first-born son along with the first fruits of the soil and the male firstlings of the herd and the flock were considered to be possessed of a unique sanctity. They all belonged to God. The first male issue of the human womb had to be redeemed from his sacral state. Originally he was accorded a privileged position in the ~~cult~~ (religious group). At a later time the tribe of Levi displaced the first-born in Israel and appropriated his religious prerogatives. Being the primary guarantor of the future of the family line and, hence, of the preservation of the ancestral heritage, the first-born naturally ranked second only to the head of the family, the paterfamilias, whose successor he would automatically become. Isaac's blessing in 27:29 makes this quite clear. The status of first-born was bound up with responsibilities and obligations on the one hand and with rights, privileges, and prerogatives on the other.

Two other aspects of the story of Jacob and Esau have been illuminated by ancient Near Eastern documents. **We now know that a father had the right to disregard chronological considerations in determining his heirs and that an heir was able to barter away his future inheritance**.

The hegemony (supremacy) of the older brother in the ancient world is widely attested. It is taken for granted, for example, in a Sumerian hymn to Enlil extolling the fact that in the city of Nippur "the older brother honors the younger brother, acts humanely toward him." The right of the first-born to a double share of the inheritance is documented at Mari and Nuzi, in the Middle Assyrian laws, and in biblical law (Deut. 21:17).

The provisions of Deuteronomy 21:15-17 establish that at some period it had been legally and socially acceptable in Israel for the father to ignore seniority of birth. We know also that Jacob deprived Reuben of his birthright, an event that is commemorated in the poem of Genesis 49:3-4 and explained in I Chronicles 5:1. Further, Genesis 48:13 tells us that Jacob passed over Manasseh in favor of the younger Ephraim. Added to these examples is the documentation from Nuzi, Alalakh, and Ugarit, all confirming the same sociolegal situation. Finally, the possibility of the transfer of inheritance rights is illustrated by a Nuzi tablet that records how a man parted with his future inheritance share in return for three sheep received immediately from his brother.

27. The two lads pursued incompatible vocations and lifestyles. The description of Esau as a hunter and as "one who lives by the sword" (27:40) reflects a very early stage in the history of Edom, the time when the tribe was still engaged in hunting as an economic necessity and had not yet become a settled monarchy. This ancient period is reflected in the nature of the national Edomite god Qaus, whose name is Arabic for "bow." He was originally the god of hunting and warfare.

Hunting as a way of life was held in low esteem in Israel. The only hunter, other than Esau, mentioned by name in the Bible is Nimrod, in 10:9. **Near Eastern art often portrays kings and nobles in pursuit of game, but no Israelite or Judean king or hero is ever mentioned as indulging in the sport**. However, the fact that Leviticus I7:13 legislates concerning the preparation for food of an animal caught in the hunt and that Deuteronomy 14:5 includes wild animals among those permitted to be eaten proves that hunting was sometimes an economic necessity even in Israel. Nevertheless, it is highly significant that sacrifice in Israel was restricted to domesticated animals.

a mild man Jacob is a quiet man and does not carry weapons.

who stayed in camp Literally, “who dwelt in tents," the hallmark of a pastoralist, according to 4:20,42

28. **Although this verse is not pertinent to the immediate context, it is essential to the understanding of the events described in chapter 27**.

but Rebekah favored Jacob No reason is given for her preference, but it may well have been based on the oracle she had received.

29. ***cooking a stew*** The nature of the dish is at first left vague and is disclosed only in stages—first as "red stuff," then as "lentil stew."

famished Hebrew *‘ayef*, traditionally rendered “faint," actually means to be in dire need of food and drink,

30. ***Give me*** *... to gulp down* In rabbinic Hebrew the stem *l-‘-t* is employed for the feeding of animals. Its use here, unique in the Bible, is suggestive of Esau's boorish manners.

red stuff **Hebrew *ha-'adom ha-'adom*. The repetition may indicate “deep red."** The description provides another (reason), this time explicit, for Esau being called Edom. At the same time, *'adom* is close in sound to *dam*, “blood." Word play involving “Edom" and *dam* occurs in several texts.[47] Blood was considered to constitute the life-essence and was widely believed to contain magical properties. It was a symbol of strength and vitality. A suggestion that Esau thought the "red stuff" to be a blood broth is most plausible. His primitive instincts were aroused by the sight. He expected his vitality to be renewed by drinking it.

31. Jacob exploits his brother's misery in order to gain what he thought an accident of birth had denied him.

sell Biblical law and terminology do not differentiate between sale and barter, using *m-kh-r* for both.

32. I am at the point of death Literally, "I am going to die." This statement either refers to the generally perilous life he led as a hunter or is an exaggerated description of his present condition.[48]

33. ***Swear to me first*** Esau's reply indicates that he agrees to the transaction. But Jacob does not trust his brother. He wants an oath. In the ancient world an oath was an unqualifiedly sacred act. The self-imprecations against the violator that all such oaths usually contained were a potent means of reinforcing a verbal commitment. It made the transaction irrevocable, even if one party was later disappointed.

34. ***bread and lentil stew*** Only now is the identity of the stew revealed. It is not blood broth, after all, but lentils!

lentil This plant was cultivated very early in the Near East. Because of its highly nutritious properties, it was an important staple in the daily diet. The color of the lentil is yellowish red or light brown. On this occasion Jacob either added something that gave the stew an exceptionally red hue, **or he made use of the Egyptian variety, which is red**.

he ate ... The abrupt succession of five short Hebrew verbs effectively reproduces the chilling, sullen atmosphere in which Esau silently devours the meal.

Thus did Esau spurn the birthright Our sympathy with Esau is somewhat dissipated when the Narrator describes his inner feelings. **Having finished the broth, Esau does not quarrel with Jacob but goes indifferently about his business, with no apparent regard for the sacred institution of the first-born**. On the other hand, **it is highly significant that the text only mentions Esau's sale of the birthright but does not state that Jacob bought it**. This is contrary to the usual biblical legal style as, for instance, in the case of Abraham's purchase of the Cave of Machpelah, Jacob's acquisition of a field, and David's buying the threshing floor from Araunah.[49] The omission in the present story is another way of dissociating Jacob's eventual ascendancy from the means he adopted.

(35) Cf., 1Sam 9:9-10; 1Ki 14:1-3; 2Ki 8:8; 2Ki 22:18.

(47) For the *Edom-dam* wordplay, cf. 2 Kings 3:8, 20, 22f; Isa. 34:3, 5-7; Ezek. 35:1-7 (Seir); Joel 4:19, 21. For blood as the life-essence, cf. Lev. 17:11; Deut. 12:23.

(48) The first interpretation is favored by Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Radak and the second by Sforno.

(49) The pertinent texts are Gen.23:18; 33:19; Josh 24:32; 2Sam 24:24.

1. ***The redundancy, therefore, is not a gloss but a literary device for emphasizing Isaac's role as the sole successor to the patriarch, in fulfillment of the promise of 21:12: "It is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued."***

   a. Doubling in Biblical Hebrew speaks with intensity. When the text repeats גָּדוֹל גָּדוֹל or קָדוֹשׁ קָדוֹשׁ, it’s not filler—**it’s force**. These phrases surge past basic description to declare absoluteness, **as if one word alone couldn’t hold the weight**. Whether in poetry, prayer, or prophetic urgency, reduplication fills the gap where Hebrew lacks morphological superlatives, making holiness holier and greatness resound beyond measure.[2]

   b. Genesis 22:11

   [11]But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, **"Abraham! Abraham!"** "Here I am," he replied.

   c. Numbers 15:41

   [41]**I am the LORD your God**, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. **I am the LORD your God**. '"

2 https://biblicalhebrew.org/doubling-of-words-used-for-emphasis.aspx

d. Isaiah 6:3

[3]And the (Seraphim) were calling to one another: "**Holy, holy, holy** is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

e. Isaiah 40:1-2

[1]**Comfort, comfort** my people, says your God. [2]Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed ...

f. Ezekiel 17:7

[7]"'But there was another **great eagle with powerful wings** and full plumage.

וַיְהִי נֶשֶׁר־אֶחָד גָּדוֹל גְּדוֹל כְּנָפַיִם וְרַב־נוֹצָה

(*va-y'hi nesher echad gadol gadol k'nafayim v'rav no-tza*)

Lit: And there is another great eagle, Great-winged, and abounding with feathers

1) The "great eagle" used in the "parable" about Judah is Babylon.

f. This kind of repetition is easy to see and to understand, but there are other times when the reduplication is not so obvious. Hebrew storytellers often used the technique in stressing important elements of their accounts. If we look at the story of Joseph, for example, we may notice repetition but not think about its significance: **Joseph receives two robes (one from his father, one from Pharaoh); his robe is used twice by those trying to destroy him; Joseph has two dreams in which his family bows to him; Pharaoh has two dreams foreshadowing the coming famine in Egypt; Joseph's brothers make two visits to Egypt to seek his help**; and so on.[3]

g. (Yeshua) himself employ(s) this more subtle form of repetition in order to stress important points in his teaching. For example, in his Sermon on the Mount we find that he gives numerous pairs of examples with only slight variation. He uses **salt and light** to teach about the responsibilities of the disciple (Mathew 5:13-14); he speaks of **food and clothing** as things that we should not be worried about (Matthew 6:25-31); he mentions both **birds and lilies** to show God's care (Matthew 6:26-30); and he also uses **dogs and pigs** as examples of animals to which we would not give things of great value (Matthew 7:6).[4]

h. Hebrews 10:11-14 (NJB)

[12](Yeshua), on the other hand, has offered **one single sacrifice** for sins, and then taken his seat forever, at the right hand of God ...

[14]By virtue of that **one single offering**, he has achieved the eternal perfection of all who are sanctified.

2. ***Rather, (Isaac and Rebecca) maintain their faith in God's word and rely on the power of prayer.***

a. Genesis 26:1-3

[1]Now there was a famine in the land—besides the previous famine in Abraham's time ... [2]The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, "DO NOT GO DOWN TO EGYPT; *live in the land where I tell you to live.* [3]STAY IN THIS LAND FOR A WHILE, and *I will be with you and will bless you.* For **to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham**.

3. *Thus,* ***his election is thereby disengaged from the improper means he later employed to obtain his rights.***

a. Genesis 25:29-34

[29]Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. [30]He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (That is why he was also called Edom.) [31]Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright." [32]"Look, I am about to die," **Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?"** [33]But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. [34]Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So **Esau despised his birthright**.

1) Genesis 27:34-36

[34] When Esau heard his father's words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, "Bless me—me too, my father!" [35]But (Isaac) said, "**Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing**." [36]Esau said, "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? This is the second time he has taken advantage of me: **He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!**" Then he asked, "Haven't you reserved any blessing for me?"

2) Jacob did use deceit to acquire the blessing (at Rebecca's instigation) but it was the blessing that he (and NOT Esau) was supposed to get.

3) Jacob did NOT "take" or "steal" Esau's birthright—he bought it. The transaction was completely legitimate. "Esau despised" it.

b. Romans 11:25-29

[25]I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in,

3 https://tacticalchristianity.org/seeing-double/

4 Ibid.

[26]and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. [27]And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." (Isa 59:20) [28]As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake; but **as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, [29]for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable**.

4. *The provisions of Deuteronomy 21:15-17 establish that at some period it had been legally and socially acceptable in Israel for the father to ignore seniority of birth. We know also that Jacob deprived Reuben of his birthright, an event that is commemorated in the poem of Genesis 49:3-4 and explained in I Chronicles 5:1. Further, Genesis 48:13 tells us that Jacob passed over Manasseh in favor of the younger Ephraim.*

a. Genesis 49:3-4

[3]"Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honor, excelling in power. [4]Turbulent as the waters, **you will no longer excel**, for **you went up onto your father's bed, onto my couch and defiled it**.

1) 1Chronicles 5:1

[1]The sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel (he was the firstborn, **but when he defiled his father's marriage bed, his rights as firstborn were given to the sons of Joseph** son of Israel; so he could not be listed in the genealogical record in accordance with his **birthright** ...

b. Genesis 48:8-16

[8]When Israel saw the sons of Joseph, he asked, "Who are these?" [9]"They are the sons God has given me here," Joseph said to his father. Then Israel said, "Bring them to me **so I may BLESS them**" ... [13]And Joseph took both of them, **Ephraim on his right toward Israel's left hand and Manasseh on his left toward Israel's right hand** ... [14]But Israel reached out **his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Manasseh's head, even though Manasseh was the firstborn**. [15]Then he blessed Joseph and said, "May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked faithfully, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, [16]the Angel (of the LORD) who has delivered me from all harm—may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac ... "

c. Deuteronomy 21:15-17

[15]If a man has two wives, and he loves one but ~~not the other~~ (the other less), and both bear him sons but the firstborn is the son of the wife he ~~does not love~~ (loves less), [16]when he wills his property to his sons, he must not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the wife he loves in preference to his actual firstborn, the son of the wife he does not love. [17]**He must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double share of all he has**. That son is the first sign of his father's strength. The right of the firstborn belongs to him.

5. ***Thus did Esau spurn the birthright*** *Our sympathy with Esau is somewhat dissipated when the Narrator describes his inner feelings.* ***Having finished the broth, Esau does not quarrel with Jacob but goes indifferently about his business, with no apparent regard for the sacred institution of the first-born.***

a. The first-born son was not only given a double portion of his father's estate, but he was also given other obligations and responsibilities. He became the "patriarch" (i.e., the "head" or "leader") of the family when his father passed and had the obligation to mediate conflict among members of the family and arrange for its defense in times of trouble. He was also the one with whom other family heads would arrange a bride or groom for his younger brothers or sisters.

This is one of the issues that comes up in the Parable of the Man with Two Sons—when the "prodigal" (i.e., the "reckless" one) returns, the "party" thrown for him comes out of the inheritance of the older bother.

And, the older brother should have done his best to prevent his younger brother from taking his inheritance early (i.e., before his father's death) and striking out on his own.

b. Hebrews 12:14-16

[14]Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. [15]See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. [16]See that no one is sexually immoral, **or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son**.