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The story of the birth of Jacob and Esau provides an interesting topic of study, especially in regard to family issues confronting us today. Although cultural norms are very different between then and now, patterns of behavior remain surprisingly similar. The story is found in the Old Testament document called 'Genesis' in the English Bible. The English title is taken from the ancient Greek translation of the original Hebrew text in 175 B.C.E where the book was simply labeled Γενέσις (=Genesis) with the meaning 'beginnings.'

## I Context

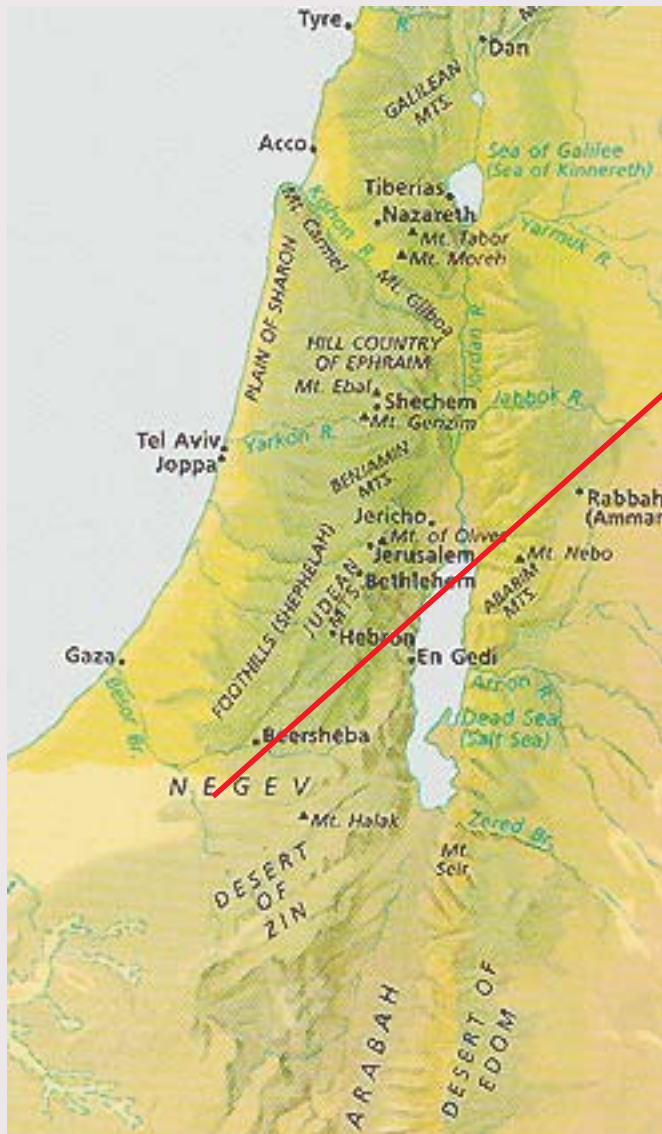
Again we consider two aspects of context: the historical and the literary. Once 25:19-34 has been positioned in history and in its context in Genesis, we will be in a much better position to make legitimate sense of these verses.

### a. Historical External History.

The compositional origin of the document called Genesis in the English Bible is like the other OT documents; its origin is clouded in mystery. This document is the first of five documents which together are called the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). Frequently down through interpretative history they have simply been called the 'books of Moses.' This because Moses has been closely associated with these documents by virtue of his leadership of the Israelite people in their move from slaves to nation. These documents have also been labeled the Law of Moses as well.

Although Moses certainly had a lot to do with the materials found in these documents, several indicators inside them suggest that at least in their present form they came into existence much later than the lifetime of Moses himself. References such as to the Canaanites being in the land 'at that time' (Gen. 12:6) suggesting that 'now' they were no longer in that land, as well as Moses' own death narrated in Deut. 34 which is obviously narrated from another person's perspective rather than Moses' -- all these and many more began suggesting to Bible students -- both Jewish and Christian -- as early as the middle ages that the compositional history is more complex than simply assigning it to Moses would allow.

Beginning in the late 1500s Christian scholars began probing the origins intensely in light of the emerging emphasis on study of history, especially ancient history, in western culture. This intense analysis led to the development of the viewpoint that the Pentateuch emerged in its present form in the period from the late exile to the post-exilic era during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. Numerous sources of material were utilized in the composing of these five OT documents, leading to the most commonly adopted view of the J, E, D, P sources as being dominant. This, of course, doesn't deny that much of the source material goes back to Moses himself, but does demonstrate that the book we know as Genesis owes its present form to editors who lived and worked many centuries after the stories themselves took place. Their intent was to carefully preserve the story of 'beginnings,' beginnings of both humanity in general and of the Israelite people in particular. For that we can give thanks to God who providentially guided this process through to its culmination in this first document of our Bible.



### Internal History.

Internally, our passage narrates the birth of Jacob and Esau as twin sons born to Isaac and Rebekah, while they were living in the land of Canaan. Isaac had settled in Beer-lahai-roi (Gen. 25:11) after Abraham's death. This was between Kadesh and Bered according to Gen. 16:14, somewhat southwest of Beersheba. The exact time frame on our modern calendar is difficult to determine. It most likely was during a period from the late Middle Bronze Age (2200-1550 B.C.E.) to the Late Bronze Age (1500-1200 B.C.E.).

The setting in the text is the period after Abraham's death and after Isaac had married Rebekah, his uncle's daughter (Gen. 24:15).

### b. Literary

The general literary context for chapter 25 is that of the patriarchal history section found in chapters twelve through fifty in Genesis. Chapters one through eleven are the primeval history detailing beginnings of creation and humanity. The scope of these chapters is universal, that is, the history of humanity in general, beginning with Adam and concluding with Noah. The patriarchal history outlines the beginnings of the Jewish people with the stories of their founding ancestors, beginning with Abraham and ending with Joseph.

Within the patriarchal history section, the story of Abraham (precisely 11:27-25:18) looms largest since he is the founding father and the one who entered into covenant with God. This covenant would serve as foundation for all subsequent relationships of the Israelite people with Yahweh, and would be the basis of Paul's declaration of a new covenant through Christ in Romans 4 and Galatians 3.

Abraham's son, Isaac, receives scant attention in chapters 25 and 26, before the attention focuses on Jacob, who is renamed Israel, exclusively beginning in chapter 27. Most scholars will call chapters 25 through 36 the Jacob story, with a brief insertion about Isaac in chapter 26. The Joseph story comprises chapters 37 through 50. Thus although there were several patriarchs, the dominate ones in the Genesis narrative are Abraham, Jacob and Joseph.

Our passage falls at the beginning of the so-called Jacob story (chaps 25-36), and details the beginning of the Jacob story. It lays the foundation for the subsequent narratives that focus on conflict and confrontation -- something that Jacob's life seemed to revolve around. His name meaning 'trickster' certainly characterized the dominant pattern of his entire life. He frequently deceived others and eventually became the frequent object of deception himself. The Genesis narrator wants to help us understand where this behavioral pattern had its start. Thus the birth narrative sets the stage by characterizing Jacob from the very beginning. Add to that his mother's favoritism and the stage is set for a life of problems.

## II. Message

The literary structure of 25:19-34 is easy to detect. Two episodic narratives comprise this passage: (1) the birth of Jacob and Esau (vv. 19-28) and (2) the selling of the birthright (vv. 29-34). One happens at the beginning, the other when the twins were young men.



## a Birth of Esau and Jacob (vv. 19-28)

### NASB

19 Now these are *the records* of the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham became<sup>F433</sup> the father of Isaac; 20 and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter 8 of Bethuel the Aramean<sup>F434</sup> of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean,<sup>F434</sup> to be his wife. 21 Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD answered<sup>F435</sup> him and Rebekah his wife conceived. 22 But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is so, why then am I *this way*?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. 23 The LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples will be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger." 24 When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. 25 Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau. 26 Afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding on to Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob;<sup>F436</sup> and Isaac was sixty years old when she gave birth to them. 27 When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field, but Jacob was a peaceful<sup>F437</sup> man, living<sup>F438</sup> in tents. 28 Now Isaac loved Esau, because he<sup>F439</sup> had a taste for game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

#### Footnotes

F433: Lit {before}

F434: Lit {as you go}

F435: Lit {fell over against}

F436: Lit {brothers}

F437: Lit {begot}

F438: I.e. Syrian

F439: Lit {was entreated of him}

### NRSV

19 These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, 20 and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. 21 Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. 22 The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?"<sup>F77</sup> So she went to inquire of the Lord. 23 And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." 24 When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. 25 The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. 26 Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob.<sup>F78</sup> Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. 27 When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. 28 Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

#### Footnotes

F77: Syr: Meaning of Heb uncertain

F78: That is *He takes by the heel* or *He supplants*

### NLT

19 This is the history of the family of Isaac, the son of Abraham. 20 When Isaac was forty years old, he married Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan-aram and the sister of Laban. 21 Isaac pleaded with the LORD to give Rebekah a child because she was childless. So the LORD answered Isaac's prayer, and his wife became pregnant with twins. 22 But the two children struggled with each other in her womb. So she went to ask the LORD about it. "Why is this happening to me?" she asked. 23 And the LORD told her, "The sons in your womb will become two rival nations. One nation will be stronger than the other; the descendants of your older son will serve the descendants of your younger son." 24 And when the time came, the twins were born. 25 The first was very red at birth. He was covered with so much hair that one would think he was wearing a piece of clothing. So they called him Esau. <sup>F76</sup> 26 Then the other twin was born with his hand grasping Esau's heel. So they called him Jacob.<sup>F77</sup> Isaac was sixty years old when the twins were born. 27 As the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open fields, while Jacob was the kind of person who liked to stay at home. 28 Isaac loved Esau in particular because of the wild game he brought home, but Rebekah favored Jacob.

#### Footnotes

F77: Jacob means "he grasps the heel"; this can also figuratively mean "he deceives."

## Comments:

This episode narrates first the birth of the twin boys to Rebekah as an answer to prayer (vv. 19-25) and then the life-styles of the young boys as they were growing up (vv. 26-28).

In formal style (vv. 19-20), Isaac is listed as a descendant of Abraham who married Rebekah when he was forty years old, although Rebekah was but a young teenager. Chapter 24 details this situation with much more information. It is one of the great love stories found in the Old Testament.

Sometime after their return across the fertile crescent to the land of Canaan this episode took place. Jacob became concerned that Rebekah hadn't produced children (v.21). Instead of setting her aside in favor of another wife as would have been customary, he asked God to bless Rebekah with children. God answered the prayer with twin boys.

During her pregnancy she sensed difficulty and impending trouble with the birth of these babies (vv. 22-23). After inquiring of the Lord -- at what worship center the text doesn't specify -- she was given a divine word that these two boys would become the beginnings of two separate nations. Also, that the younger of the two would be the stronger and the older one would wind up serving the younger. Two later oracles (27:29, 40) reinforced this earlier word from God.

The unusual birth of the twins is described in vv. 24-26. The New Interpreter's Bible (iPreach online) volume on Genesis provides helpful summation:

When the twin boys are born, the narrator portrays them with features of their subsequent relationship: Esau, physical features; Jacob, action (this is reversed to some degree in v. 29). The Hebrew word for "red" (אדמוני) *admônî*, [or "ruddy"]; see 1 Sam 16:12) is a play on Edom, linked to the "red stuff" at v. 30 (see 36:1). The word for "hairy" (זעיר) *Ze'ir* is a play on Seir, the region where the Edomites lived, and is linked to the deception in 27:23. Why he is named Esau is uncertain. The meaning of Jacob (יעקב) *ya'qob*, also uncertain, plays on the word for "heel," עקב (*ʿaqeb*), "grasp the heel," or, less likely, the verb *ʿaqab* ("he supplants, deceives"; see Esau's interpretation in 27:36; Hos. 12:4). The name Jacob is associated with a feature of his birth and implies a uterine struggle to be born first, a struggle that Esau wins.

From the very outset one could smell trouble brewing. The lifestory of these two boys would be caught in struggle to control one another. Deception and even violence would dominate their histories.

The life-styles of the two boys while growing up is described in verses 27 and 28. The NIB, Genesis, again provides helpful description.

The author describes the young men by referring to ways of life that often stood in tension: Esau with those who are at home in the wild, on the move with animals, and Jacob with those who live a more settled, pastoral way of life. The writer characterizes Jacob with the word תָּמ (tAm), which both the NRSV and the NIV translate as "quiet" or mild-mannered; it normally means "innocent, upright" (see Job 1-2), which seems appropriate, at least at this point in his life. The writer juxtaposes the twins' different interests and temperaments with the love of the parents (cf. 37:4), a realistic note, common among parents. Isaac's love of Esau involves his ability to provide food (see Rebekah's use of this knowledge in 27:7, 14), but also remains independent of the oracle, of which Isaac was unaware. The author offers no specific reason to explain Rebekah's love for Jacob, but we may suppose it relates to what she knows about Jacob from the oracle.

Perhaps the most telling statement in the entire passage is verse 28 where it states that Isaac favored Esau but Rebekah favored Jacob. Not only was there the intimation of problems ahead in the birth of these two boys, but parental failure in showing favoritism nourished and encouraged the problem.

What can we learn from these verses? Perhaps we can learn from the mixed example of these two parents. Although they loved one another -- something not considered particularly important in a marriage during this time -- they still wound up being pitted against one another by their children later on. Jacob set a positive role model by asking God to bless his wife with children, and Rebekah did likewise when she consulted God about the meaning of what happened during her pregnancy. Certainly we should seek God in the matter of children, but we must also follow God's guidance in raising these children as well.

One particularly bad parental failure is showing favoritism. It's easy to do. Just like these ancient parents we find certain traits in one of our children more likeable than those in the other children. Without thinking we can favor that kid over the others. But to do so sets in motion a litany of problems.

### b. Selling the Birthright (vv. 29-34)

#### NASB

29 When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished;<sup>F440</sup> 30 and Esau said to Jacob, "Please let me have a swallow of that<sup>F441</sup> red stuff there, for I am famished."<sup>F442</sup> Therefore his name was called Edom.<sup>F443</sup> 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.

#### Footnotes

F440: I.e. one who takes by the heel or supplants  
 F441: Lit {complete}  
 F442: Lit {dwelling}  
 F443: Lit {game was in his mouth}

#### NRSV

29 Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. 30 Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.<sup>F79</sup>) 31 Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." 32 Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" 33 Jacob said, "Swear to me first."<sup>F80</sup> 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 his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

#### Footnotes

F79: That is *Red*  
 F80: Heb *today*

#### NLT

29 One day when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau arrived home exhausted and hungry from a hunt. 30 Esau said to Jacob, "I'm starved! Give me some of that red stew you've made." (This was how Esau got his other name, Edom – "Red.") 31 Jacob replied, "All right, but trade me your birthright for it." 32 "Look, I'm dying of starvation!" said Esau. "What good is my birthright to me now?" 33 So Jacob insisted, "Well then, swear to me right now that it is mine." So Esau swore an oath, thereby selling all his rights as the firstborn to his younger brother. 34 Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and lentil stew. Esau ate and drank and went on about his business, indifferent to the fact that he had given up his birthright.

#### Comments:

One turning point in the story of these two boys happened as young men, and is effectively summarized in the Old Testament Library volume on Genesis:

The action which now begins is again robustly realistic. The hunter, in contrast to the shepherd with his much more economic and careful way of life, often does not have enough to eat. If he takes no prey, he goes hungry. This is the way we must imagine Esau's situation when he wearily bursts into Jacob's presence. He does not even know what Jacob is preparing; it is possible he never had seen its like before, or there may be another reason. He refers to it in a few clumsy words and unconsciously caricatures his own name ('*Adom*, "red"—'*edom*'); he wants to "gulp it down". But the situation can be understood differently. Perhaps Esau did know the red pottage, i.e., he considered it a "blood soup" and is greatly deceived when he finds it to be only a dish of lentils (D. Daube, *Studies in Biblical Law*, 191 ff.). Esau's subsequent assertion that he was deceived by Jacob twice (ch. 27:36) supports this interpretation. Otherwise Esau's claim would not be understandable, for according to the usual interpretation one cannot really speak of deception in the sale of the birthright. Finally, one understands why Jacob demands confirmation with an oath, for without it the agreement could have been later rescinded. An oath, however, is absolutely binding on the partner in any case (cf. Josh. 9:19). The statement in which Esau makes light of the matter (v. 32) must not be understood in such a way that he considers the birthright nothing, since he must die anyway. That would be no argument at all, and would also depreciate Jacob's birthright. He says it, however, with respect to his present situation in which the birthright is not an equivalent worth discussing: "I am dying of hunger, after all". The conclusion contains the exposure, "It was lentils!" Possibly, however, Esau did not notice it at once. In any case he does not pay particular



attention to it. The statement, “He ate and drank, and rose and went his way,” caricatures once again his unpolished callousness.

The birthright was critical to a young boy’s future in this ancient world, for it meant that he inherited all of his father’s possessions at his father’s death. Unlike our modern practice where an estate is normally divided out equally among surviving children, the oldest son received everything in that world. Whatever life Esau was going to have from this point, he would have to develop it completely on his own without any anticipation of future help from his father’s estate. Later on Esau would despise this day and this decision.

What can we learn from this? Perhaps one important lesson is that hasty decisions to satisfy urges of the moment will often be critically bad decisions for our future. In our feel good American life-style, we probably need to learn the discipline of waiting and thinking through the effects of our decisions more than any other generation in our country’s history. Just as Esau lived to regret this hasty decision we will also.

Another possible lesson pertains to Jacob. Instead of treating his brother like a brother when he caught him at a vulnerable moment, Jacob used the situation to take advantage of his brother for his own advancement. Although Jacob was ‘true to his character’ as a deceiver, he was not true to divine principles of family relationships and respect. Later on he would have to flee this region for his life and would live a good portion of his adult life in exile from the land of Canaan. All because of this deception of his brother. How many times have we sought to take advantage of someone in a vulnerable moment? Instead of being Christian to our brother, we deceive and take advantage. In the process we rob him of his dignity and self-worth. These decisions and actions we will also live to regret down the road. Just as Jacob did.

