

## Timeline of Truth – Esau & Jacob: Birth & Birthright (Gen 25:20-34)

<p><sup>20</sup> Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah as wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padan Aram, the sister of Laban the Syrian.</p>	<p><b>1. Review &amp; Timing of Isaac &amp; Rebekah's <u>Marriage</u></b></p>
<p><sup>21</sup> Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived.</p>	<p><b>2. God Gives Isaac and Rebekah <u>Children</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Rebekah was barren</i></li> <li>• <i>Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife</i></li> <li>• <i>Rebekah conceived</i></li> </ul>
<p><sup>22</sup> But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If <i>all is well</i>, why <i>am I like this</i>?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.  <sup>23</sup> And the LORD said to her: "Two nations <i>are</i> in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body; <i>One</i> people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger."</p>	<p><b>3. God Reveals the <u>Future</u> of Rebekah's Sons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The children struggle inside her</i></li> <li>• <i>Rebekah inquires of the LORD</i></li> <li>• <i>The LORD explains:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>2 nations / 2 peoples</i></li> <li>- <i>The older will serve the younger</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><sup>24</sup> So when her days were fulfilled <i>for her</i> to give birth, indeed <i>there were</i> twins in her womb.  <sup>25</sup> And the first came out red. <i>He was</i> like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau.  <sup>26</sup> Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.</p>	<p><b>4. <u>Esau</u> and <u>Jacob</u> Are Born</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>As God said: TWINS</i></li> <li>• <i>1<sup>st</sup> – Red &amp; Hairy: Esau = HAIRY</i></li> <li>• <i>2<sup>nd</sup> – Hand Took Esau's Heel: Jacob = SNEAKY</i></li> <li>• <i>Isaac = 60 years old</i></li> </ul>
<p><sup>27</sup> So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents.</p>	<p><b>5. Esau and Jacob <u>Grow</u> &amp; Develop</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Same parents, different personalities</i></li> <li>• <i>Esau – outside, hunter</i></li> <li>• <i>Jacob – inside, mild (cook?)</i></li> </ul>
<p><sup>28</sup> And Isaac loved Esau because he ate <i>of his</i> game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.</p>	<p><b>6. Isaac and Rebekah Choose <u>Favorites</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Isaac loved Esau</i></li> <li>• <i>Rebekah loved Jacob</i></li> </ul>
<p><sup>29</sup> Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary.  <sup>30</sup> And Esau said to Jacob, "Please feed me with that same red <i>stew</i>, for I <i>am</i> weary." Therefore his name was called Edom.  <sup>31</sup> But Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright as of this day."  <sup>32</sup> And Esau said, "Look, I <i>am</i> about to die; so what is this birthright to me?"  <sup>33</sup> Then Jacob said, "Swear to me as of this day." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.  <sup>34</sup> And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised <i>his</i> birthright.</p>	<p><b>7. Jacob Deals for Esau's <u>Birthright</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Jacob cooked a stew (was he scheming?)</i></li> <li>• <i>Esau came in weary</i></li> <li>• <i>Esau asked for some stew (Edom = "red")</i></li> <li>• <i>Jacob offers a deal – my stew for your birthright</i></li> <li>• <i>Esau reasons for immediate gratification</i></li> <li>• <i>Jacob seals the deal with Esau</i></li> <li>• <i>Jacob fees Esau</i></li> <li>• <i>Esau's ultimate choice rejected what was best</i></li> </ul>

**29–34** The story of Esau's rejection of his birthright is purposefully attached to the end of the narrative that introduces the motif of the older serving the younger. It is a narrative example that God's choice of Jacob over Esau did not run contrary to the wishes of either of the two brothers. It is clear from the narrative that Esau was one who "despised" his birthright, while Jacob is portrayed as one who would go to great lengths to gain it. The importance of the contrast between the two brothers can best be seen in the fact that the writer himself explicitly states the point of the narrative in the conclusion of the story: "So Esau despised his birthright" (v.34). In few cases in Genesis do we find such a clear and forthright statement of the writer's own understanding of the sense of the individual stories. We are left with no doubt that the writer saw in this story of Jacob's trickery a larger lesson, that Esau, though he had the right of the firstborn, did not value it over a small bowl of soup. Thus, when in God's plan Esau lost his birthright and consequently his blessing, there was no injustice dealt him. The narrative has shown that he did not want the birthright. He despised it.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sailhamer, J. H. (1990). Genesis. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 2: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers* (F. E. Gaebelin, Ed.) (183–184). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

### Review and Timing of Isaac and Rebekah's Marriage

<sup>20</sup> Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah as wife,  
the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padan Aram,  
the sister of Laban the Syrian.

### God Gives Isaac and Rebekah Children

<sup>21</sup> Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife,  
because she *was* barren;  
and the LORD granted his plea,  
and Rebekah his wife conceived.

### God Reveals Information About the Children in Rebekah's Womb

<sup>22</sup> But the children struggled together within her;  
and she said, "If *all is well*, why *am I like* this?"  
So she went to inquire of the LORD.  
<sup>23</sup> And the LORD said to her:  
"Two nations *are* in your womb;  
Two peoples shall be separated from your body;  
*One* people shall be stronger than the other,  
And the older shall serve the younger."

### Esau and Jacob Are Born

<sup>24</sup> So when her days were fulfilled *for her* to give birth,  
indeed *there were* twins in her womb.  
<sup>25</sup> And the first came out red.  
*He was* like a hairy garment all over;  
so they called his name Esau.  
<sup>26</sup> Afterward his brother came out,  
and his hand took hold of Esau's heel;  
so his name was called Jacob.

Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

### Esau and Jacob Grow

<sup>27</sup> So the boys grew.  
And Esau was a skillful hunter,  
a man of the field;  
but Jacob was a mild man,  
dwelling in tents.

### Isaac and Rebekah Choose Favorites

<sup>28</sup> And Isaac loved Esau  
because he ate *of his* game,  
but Rebekah loved Jacob.

### Jacob Trades for Esau's Birthright

<sup>29</sup> Now Jacob cooked a stew;  
and Esau came in from the field,  
and he *was* weary.  
<sup>30</sup> And Esau said to Jacob,  
"Please feed me with that same red *stew*,  
for I *am* weary."  
Therefore his name was called Edom.  
<sup>31</sup> But Jacob said,  
"Sell me your birthright  
as of this day."  
<sup>32</sup> And Esau said,  
"Look, I *am* about to die;  
so what *is* this birthright to me?"  
<sup>33</sup> Then Jacob said,  
"Swear to me  
as of this day."  
So he swore to him,  
and sold his birthright to Jacob.  
<sup>34</sup> And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils;  
then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way.  
Thus Esau despised *his* birthright.

## 1. Isaac's twin sons 25:19–26

Verses 19–34 introduce the whole Jacob and Esau saga.

In the first pericope (25:19–26) we have the record of God answering Isaac's prayers by making Rebekah fertile (blessing). He gave her two sons, Esau and Jacob, and foretold that from them two nations would come with the elder serving the younger.

The emphasis of this section is on the divine oracle (v. 23) as is clear from the chiasmic structure of the narrative.

**A** Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebekah (20).

**B** Rebekah was barren; prayer for children was answered (21a).

**C** His wife Rebekah conceived (21b). The children struggled together within her (22a).

**D** Rebekah asks for an oracle (22b)

**D'** Yahweh grants her an oracle (23)

**C'** Her days to be delivered were fulfilled (24a). And behold, there were twins in her womb (24b).

**B'** Jacob and Esau are contrasted in birth and appearance (25–26a).

**A'** Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah bore the twins (26b)."

The question of an heir continues primary in this section. Who will be Isaac's heir through whom God will fulfill His promises? Rebekah, like Sarah, was barren (v. 21). After 20 years of waiting and praying (vv. 21–22) God gave her children. Which of these two sons would be the blessed heir? God intervened to announce His foreordained choice (v. 23). Jacob's reactions to his election over Esau were quite different from Isaac's reactions to God's choice of him as Abraham's heir, as this section begins to illustrate.

Scripture does not give the reason God chose Jacob over Esau. What we do know is that His choice did not rest on the superior merit of Jacob but on the sovereign prerogative of Yahweh (Rom. 9:10–13). In ancient Near Eastern culture the first-born normally became his father's heir. So in designating Jacob as Isaac's heir God sovereignly overruled natural custom by supernatural revelation. The response of the members of Isaac's family to this revelation demonstrates their faith, or lack of it. However the main point of the narrative is to trace God's faithfulness and power in bringing to pass what He had promised.

"The revelation of the Divine will concerning the two brothers (ver. 23) was evidently no secret. It is clear that both Esau and Jacob knew of it. This fact is in some respects the key to the true interpretation of this incident [i.e., vv. 29–34]."

25:19–20 Paddan-aram means "the flat (land) of Aram." Aram was the area near Haran. People from this region became known as Arameans, and later the Greeks called them Syrians. Bethuel was a semi-nomadic herdsman, and he probably lived in the open fields at least part of the year.

25:21 Rebekah was barren for 20 years after she married Isaac (vv. 20, 26). God closed her womb so the chosen family would recognize her children as the fruit of His grace rather than simply the fruit of nature.

25:22–23 Rebekah's pregnancy was so painful that she wondered if there was any point going on living. She expressed the same thought when her sons had grown up (27:46). God's choice of the younger over the elder "was contrary to ancient Near Eastern custom, but the elective purposes of God transcend custom." The divine oracle summarizes the careers of Jacob and Esau and is similar to 12:1–3 in that both statements are programmatic.

25:24–26 Esau means "hairy one" and Jacob "El will protect." The Hebrew *ya'aqob* ("Jacob") is similar to *'aqeb* ("heel"). From Jacob's grasping Esau's heel at birth came the nickname "heel-holder" (i.e., one who outwits by trickery) "just as in wrestling an attempt may be made to throw the opponent by grasping the heel."

The lesson to be learned is that those who owe their existence to God's creation and election can acknowledge His hand at work in the affairs of their lives.

## 2. The sale of the birthright 25:27–34

25:27–28 Esau was a nomadic hunter, but Jacob remained in his tents.

"... they became the personification of the two different ways of life which would have been typical for Palestine at this period of history: that of hunter and nomad (Esau) and that of shepherd and semi-nomad (Jacob) . . . Esau is described as a 'skilled hunter,' 'a man of the outdoors;' Jacob, on the other hand, is portrayed as 'a simple man,' one 'remaining in his tents,' that is, a man of stable life in contrast to the rootless life of the nomad."

"The two characters are utter opposites, as the two nations will eventually be."

The Hebrew word *tam*, translated "plain," probably means domesticated, a homebody. It may imply a quiet, self-contained, detached personality, complete in himself.<sup>636</sup>

"Descriptions of Jacob's early life in the Scriptures paint an interpersonal portrait of a highly narcissistic individual who grew up in a family of origin ripe for producing such pathology."

25:29–30 The Hebrew word translated "stew" literally means "lentils." Esau wanted to "gulp it down" (Heb. *la'at*).

25:31–34 The way Jacob stated his demand suggests that he had long premeditated his act and ruthlessly exploited his brother's weakness. His insistence that Esau swear to him strengthens this impression. Because Esau despised his birthright Jacob obtained it and became what God had promised He would become, the stronger son who would lead (v. 23). Explicit moral commentary is rare in the Bible, so the writer's inclusion of it here marks something about Esau that he did not want the reader to miss.

"The cunning hunter fell into a better hunter's trap, becoming prey to his own appetite."

The writer showed that the natures of the two sons were very different; they were not identical twins. Esau cared only for physical and material things whereas Jacob valued the spiritual. Esau gave priority to the immediate satisfaction of his sensual desires, but Jacob was willing to wait for something better that God had promised in the future (cf. Heb. 12:16).

"The frivolity with which he [Esau] sold his birthright . . . rendered him unfit to be the heir and possessor of the promised grace."

The birthright was the privilege of being chief of the tribe and head of the family (27:29). In Isaac's family it entitled the bearer to the blessing of Yahweh's promise (27:4, 27–29), which included the possession of Canaan and covenant fellowship with God (28:4). It included a double portion of the inheritance (Deut. 21:17) and the privilege of being the priest (spiritual leader) of the family.

"It is quite apparent from the Nuzi tablets that instances of the transference of birthright, such as occurred in the Patriarchal narratives, were not uncommon in Hurrian society. One example concerns a certain Zirteshup, whose father disowned him but later restored his status. . . . Another instance of the transference of birthright from the Nuzi tablets is the exchange by one Kurpazah of his birthright in consideration for three sheep given to him by Tupkitilla, his brother. In the light of this example, Esau's willingness to exchange his birthright for Jacob's mess of pottage (Gen. 25:29–34) is perhaps more understandable."

Even though Esau was a cunning hunter he placed little value on his privilege as the first-born son. He was willing to trade it to his crafty brother for a meal of "red stuff," a fitting description of his own nature.

The structure of the narrative again identifies the writer's emphasis, this time Esau's disdain for his birthright (v. 32).

**A** Jacob was boiling pottage (29a).

**B** Esau came in from the field; he was tired (29b).

**C** *wayyo'mer 'esav*: Let me eat some of that red pottage . . . , I am so tired!

**D** *wayyo'mer ya'aqob*: First sell me your *bkrh* (31).

**E** *wayyo'mer 'esav*: I depart; I die! Of what use is a *bkrh* to me? (32).

**D'** *wayyo'mer ya'aqob*: Swear to me first. So he swore to him and sold his *bkrh* to Jacob (33).

**C'** Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils; he ate and he drank (34aa).

**B'** He rose and went his way (34ab).  
**A'** Thus Esau despised his birthright (34b)."

There are two important instances of first-born sons relinquishing the rights of primogeniture in Genesis: Esau and Reuben. Esau considered his birthright of so little value that he sold all his rights as first-born to Jacob to realize an immediate physical gratification. Reuben forfeited his birthright through sexual promiscuity (Gen. 35:22; 49:3–4). In Esau's case, his entire birthright went to Jacob. In Reuben's, his went to three of his brothers. Judah obtained the regal right, Levi eventually received the priestly right, and the blessing of the double portion went to Joseph who realized it through his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

In reading this pericope many have concluded that God chose Jacob over Esau because He foresaw that Jacob would value the promises and the birthright, whereas Esau would not. This is not correct. Jacob valued the spiritual because God gave him the grace to do so. In the previous generation Isaac was the recipient of God's grace while Lot and Ishmael were not. Abraham was, too, whereas his brothers were not.

In this incident Jacob manifested spiritual perception. Some writers have suggested that he was impatient and took fleshly initiative like his grandfather (cf. 12:10–20; 16; 20). Note, however, that Moses blamed Esau, not Jacob, in this event (v. 34).

"How often do we put the question to ourselves, 'What is my mess of pottage?' It is important to verbalize the question. We are in constant danger of being tempted to give up something very precious in order to indulge a sudden strong desire. The desire may involve greedy eating and drinking, lusting after money or material things, letting loose our anger in abandonment of reason, succumbing to depression without check, cursing God in despair or disappointment without even thinking of the trap Satan set for Job and is setting for us, giving in to a sweeping sexual desire without waiting for the right framework. The mess of pottage that is dangerous to you and to me is any temptation to gratify the 'feelings' of the immediate moment in a way that shows we 'despise' the promises of the living God for our future."

This section is a warning that profane (secular) people who live to satisfy their fleshly appetites will lose more valuable things of lasting spiritual worth. Christians who live for the present will not lose their salvation, but they will lose some of their eternal reward (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10–15).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Constable, T. (2003). *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Ge 25:12–31). Galaxie Software.