

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 25 – Descendants Leading to Jacob and Esau – Birthright

Chiasm in the Jacob Story

As in the Abraham story, there may be a chiastic pattern in the Jacob story, where themes introduced in its first half are resumed in reverse order in the second. This kind of pattern places emphasis on its center (in boldface), in this case the fertility of Jacob himself and of his flocks:

- A. Encounter between Jacob/Esau (25.21–34; 27)
 - B. Encounter with God and departure from home (28)
 - C. Acquisition of wives, Leah and Rachel (29.1–30)
 - D. Fertility: the birth of Jacob’s children (29.31–30.24)
 - D’. Fertility: the growth of Jacob’s flocks (30.25–43)
 - C’. Jacob’s removal of his wives from their father’s household (31.1–32.1)
 - B’. Encounter with God on return home (32.22–32)
- A’. Reunion encounter between Jacob and Esau (33.1–33.17)

This part of the story of Genesis begins with the birth of not one son but two: Isaac begets Esau and Jacob. As a useful side note, “beget” is just the male version of “birthed.” Women “birth” babies, men “beget” them. From their birth we are told that both of these sons are destined to be nations: Jacob’s descendants will become Israel and Esau’s will be Edom, one of Israel’s most notorious enemies. It doesn’t take a lot of insight to see that Jacob will be the focus of the story. But, as it turns out, Jacob is also a liar, and so is his mom Rebekah. There is nothing to be gained from trying to make excuses for either of them. And it’s not like Isaac’s father and grandfather are models of virtue as they pass off their wives as sisters in order to save their own necks.

Sibling Rivalry As their descendants will be after them, brothers Jacob and Esau are in conflict with each other. This is not the first time in Genesis brothers had trouble getting along, and it will not be the last. The Cain and Abel story already mirrors the conflict we are about to read about here. A related theme in Genesis and the Old Testament is how the younger brother leapfrogs over the older brother and receives his honor—Moses was the younger brother of Aaron and David was the youngest of a litter of brothers. The younger usurping the older brother is true of Cain. With Abel dead, Cain’s other younger brother Seth takes over the place of first importance.

We see a similar theme in the story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob and Esau are fraternal twins that seem destined for conflict from birth: Jacob, the second born, is grasping Esau’s heel as he comes out. They grow up and Jacob is presented as a peaceful homebody while Esau is a not-too-bright hairy hunter (“Esau” is Hebrew for hairy). After hunting one day, Esau comes home famished and asks Jacob for some of the red stew he was making. Instead of being a gracious brother or even a normal “bug off, make your own” brother, Jacob uses it as an opportunity to take advantage of his brother’s hunger. He reveals his desire to be top dog in the family by striking a deal with Esau: “some stew in exchange for your birthright.” Esau agrees, perhaps thinking the agreement means nothing, or that he can get out of it—or perhaps he is just incredibly stupid. And it seems no one bothers to tell Isaac of the little switcheroo at the stew. I mean, why bother the old man, right?

This sets up another confrontation at the end of Isaac’s life, when Jacob and Esau are a little older. At this point Isaac is pretty much blind, and apparently a bit senile. He calls for Esau so he can bless him as the firstborn before he dies. Isaac tells Esau to go out, hunt some game, and prepare a tasty meal for him and then he will bless Esau. Instead of replying, “Yeah, um, dad, about that. I sort of sold my birthright to Jacob a while back for some lunch,” he goes out, perhaps hoping he can sneak in the blessing without Jacob knowing about it. That is, when he goes out to hunt, he has every intention of breaking the oath he swore to Jacob. Rebekah overhears this and thinks fast. Rather than putting on the brakes and having a family meeting, she tells Jacob what his rat brother is doing. They devise a plan, which does not involve coming clean and telling the truth. Of

course not, that would be too easy. Instead, Jacob dresses up like Esau, even down to covering his arms and neck with goatskin (My, Esau, what hairy and goat-like arms you have!). Then Rebekah prepares a meal just as Isaac likes it. And the ruse works. They come into Isaac's presence and he asks, "Who is it?" Jacob answers (in his best Esau voice), "I am Esau, your firstborn." Hmm. Isaac is a little skeptical at first. Why does Esau sound like Jacob? But as soon as he gets a whiff of the clothes, all doubts vanish.

Genesis 25:1–6 (NRSV)

¹ Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. ² She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. ³ Jokshan was the father of Sheba and Dedan. The sons of Dedan were Asshurim, Letushim, and Leummim. ⁴ The sons of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Hanoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah. ⁵ Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. ⁶ But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country.

Source Theory: J Source = normal; E Source = **Bold**; P source = *italicized*; JE Redactor = ***bold italicized***.

Nothing more is known about the mysterious Keturah. Keturah's name means "incense," which seems to refer to the incense trade from southern Arabia (the word for incense is "ketoret"), and whose children reflect names related to the Arabian peninsula, a main source of aromatics in antiquity. A midrash identifies her with Hagar and explains the name on the grounds that Hagar was "*perfumed ('mekuteret') with commandments and good deeds*".

In the story, the interest of Abraham's third marriage lies in its enabling Israelites to know how they relate to people such as Midian, Sheba, and Dedan, who appear on the fringe of the Old Testament story, and other peoples that are just names to us but might also have been familiar to people listening to the story, as tribes on the fringe of their lives. Midian, the region in northwest Arabia where Moses flees and settles (Ex 2.15–22). Sheba, the wealthy southern Arabian kingdom whose queen visits Solomon (1 Kings 10.1–13). The genealogical split between the children of Hagar and the children of Keturah distinguishes the Arabs of the Syrian and Sinai deserts (the Ishmaelites), who were primarily pastoralists, from the peoples of the Arabian peninsula, in whose southern regions were settled nations wealthy from trade in incense, spices, and gold. This J text has an interesting genealogical variation: here Sheba is the son of Jokshan (v. 3), who is Abraham's son, whereas in a J portion of the Table of Nations, Sheba is the son of Joktan (10.27–28), son of Eber.

Abraham's descendants are mentioned in the reverse order of their ancestors' births: first the many descendants of Keturah, then Isaac, and, lastly, the line of Ishmael, Abraham's first-born son. This puts Isaac in the central position, and it is he alone who inherits his father's estate, Abraham having honorably discharged his obligations to his other sons through gifts (vv. 5–6). While the definition of a "secondary wife" may have meant that Keturah's children had no inheritance rights, Abraham nevertheless gives them a share in the family inheritance before he dies but gives the expected primary recognition to Isaac, "his only son."

Concubines, in the plural, is puzzling. Perhaps it refers to both Keturah and Hagar, who are each also referred to as Abraham's wife (v. 1; 16.3). Note that Abraham gives gifts to all his children, even those who are not of the chosen line. This expresses a positive view of the Arab peoples, who are fully children of Abraham.

Genesis 25:7–11 (NRSV)

⁷ This is the length of Abraham's life, one hundred seventy-five years. ⁸ Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. ⁹ His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, ¹⁰ the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with his wife Sarah. ¹¹ After the death of Abraham God blessed his son Isaac. And Isaac settled at Beer-lahai-roi.

Source Theory: J Source = normal; E Source = **Bold**; P source = *italicized*; JE Redactor = ***bold italicized***.

A brief and dignified notice, from the P source, of the death of Abraham and his burial in the cave of Machpelah. Isaac and Ishmael are briefly rejoined at their father's burial, sometime after the death of Sarah. At Abraham's death, the patriarchal blessing passes to Isaac (v. 11).

Abraham knows that his job is done. He and Sarah have had a son, who has grown up, and Abraham has made sure he has the right wife. Although she has not had a baby yet, Abraham knows that God can sort that out and that he can entrust the future of God's promise to God and to Isaac now. It is through him that God's purpose is going to be fulfilled.

At the same time, it is neat to picture Ishmael and Isaac together burying their father. Death in the family is one of those occasions when the tensions all come out, and one could not blame Ishmael if he felt put out at the way God has given Isaac priority over him and the way Abraham has done the same in not treating him as his real son when it matters—in his will (see the opening verses of Genesis 25). But Ishmael is a big man. There he is, joining Isaac in burying their father.

His secondary significance comes out again in the way Genesis goes on to provide an account of his descendants. As happens in Genesis 1–11, the line mentioned first comes there in order to be cleared out of the way before the story comes to the line that really matters. Once again, the account provides the audience with a framework for understanding the position of people who live around them, desert peoples we know of from elsewhere in the Old Testament, such as Kedar and Dumah, and other peoples we know nothing about. The paragraph makes more explicit than some earlier lists that they are talking about individuals who also stand for the groups that trace their ancestry back to them, as “**Israel**” traces itself back to “Israel.” The last comment on Ishmael that he “settled” over against his wider family suggests a fulfillment of the prophecy or promise God's **aide** gave his mother (Genesis 16:12). More literally he “fell” in the sense of “leapt,” like Rebekah jumping off her camel (Genesis 24:64). Like Genesis 16, Genesis 25 indicates that Ishmael is a survivor. No one knocks him over. If he falls, he falls on his feet.

It is both paradoxical and logical that Genesis doesn't have so much to tell us about Abraham once he has had his son (there's just Sarah's death and the arranging of Isaac's marriage) and that the first thing it tells us about Isaac concerns how he and Rebekah come to have children. That's what the fulfilling of God's purpose depends on.

Like Isaac's parents and many others in Genesis and elsewhere, Isaac and Rebekah have trouble starting a family, and like other such would-be parents, getting pregnant is then only the beginning of their problems. What's distinctive about Isaac and Rebekah is the way they react to all that. First, it makes Isaac pray. The word Genesis uses is not one that appears often. It is used mostly in connection with Moses praying for God to take away the afflictions God brings on the Egyptians, but it also comes in the context of some other illnesses and afflictions. So it suggests laying hold of God to remove some disaster. It will indeed be a disaster if Isaac and Rebekah cannot have children. Typically, the story assumes that the problem lies in Rebekah. Often this assumption may be justified by the fact that when the man tries with another wife, as Abraham did, she gets pregnant. In other cases, such as this one, it might be that the problem lies in Isaac. But God deals with it anyway.

More distinctive is the next round of prayer, which follows. Like other women in these stories, such as Sarah and Rachel, Rebekah is not the kind of person who just sits at home demurely submitting to her husband and accepting her lot. She takes action. At this point she does so by assuming that she too can talk to God about what the heck is going on. She does not have to leave prayer to her husband or go to God via him as if she had no relationship with God of her own. She has the freedom the Psalms illustrate to go straight to God with the issues in her life.

If Abraham was 100 when Isaac was born (21.5), Isaac 60 when Esau and Jacob were born (25.26), and Abraham died at 175 (25.7), then Abraham passed away only when his twin grandsons were 15. This suggests

that the notice of Abraham's death is premature here. Source critics resolve the problem by attributing the chronology to P, but the bulk of the ancestral narrative to J.

Genesis 25:12-22 (NRSV)

¹² These are the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's slave-girl, bore to Abraham. *¹³ These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, named in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael; and Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, ¹⁴ Mishma, Dumah, Massa, ¹⁵ Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah.*

¹⁶ These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages and by their encampments, twelve princes according to their tribes. ¹⁷ (This is the length of the life of Ishmael, one hundred thirty-seven years; he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people.) ¹⁸ They settled from Havilah to Shur, which is opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria; he settled down alongside of all his people.

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?" So she went to inquire of the Lord.

Source Theory: J Source = normal; E Source = **Bold**; P source = *italicized*; Redactor = ***bold italicized***.

Like Nahor (22.20–24) and Jacob, Ishmael has twelve sons. Havilah to...Assyria (v. 18), the Sinai and Syrian deserts. Princes according to their tribes, living in villages and...encampments, a nice description of the lives and political structures of the Arab peoples on the fringes of the desert living a life similar to the later bedouin.

The Jacob story extends from 25.19 to 37.1. As in the uncertainty over Abraham's heir, there is conflict and rivalry over who will be Isaac's heir. In the birth story of the twins, the theme of the barren wife is quickly resolved and the focus turns to the rivalry between Jacob and Esau, which begins already in the womb. An oracle from God announces that the outcome of the rivalry is foreseen, with the genealogy branching into two nations.

The Jacob story begins with the formula: "These are the descendants." Genealogical details follow in this brief summary from the P source. Paddan-aram (perhaps "plain, or road, of Aram"), either the region of Aram-naharaim (24.10) or the city of Haran.

Rebekah's barrenness puts her again in line of succession to her late mother-in-law, Sarah (cf. 24.67), though the narrative about Rebekah is much more compressed and much less complex than the corresponding story of Sarai/ Sarah (cf. ch 16). In the space of one verse the theme of the barren wife is raised and resolved, presenting an analogy to the situation of Abraham and Sarah (18.9–15; and later to Jacob and Rachel, 29.31; 30.22–24), but quickly moving on. The LORD granted his prayer shows that the conception is miraculous (as with Abraham and Sarah) and marks the offspring as special. A midrash sees in God's response to Isaac's plea an object lesson in the power of prayer to move God from anger to mercy (b. Yebam. 64a). The "barren mother" is a common motif in special birth stories. Compare also Rachel (Gen. ch 30) and Hannah (1 Sam. ch 1).

It is now Rebekah's turn to seek God's help, as the successful conception becomes a difficult pregnancy. The children struggled together within her announces the theme of the struggle between Jacob and Esau, which will be a major theme of the Jacob story. The goal of the struggle is not yet clear but is hinted at in God's oracle: the elder shall serve the younger. The brothers seem already to be struggling over who will have priority, i.e., who will be the firstborn. The method of Rebekah's inquiry is obscure, but God's response sketches the future of the children to be born—they will be two nations—much like the angelic oracle

forecasting the prenatal Ishmael's future (16.10–12). The ascent of the younger son is a repeated theme in Genesis (Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Ephraim, even Abel) and later (David).

Genesis 25:23–34 (NRSV)

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. 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. 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.) 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." 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.

Source Theory: J Source = normal; E Source = **Bold**; P source = *italicized*; Redactor = ***bold italicized***.

Isaac's prayer had been spectacularly effective in making God unlock Rebekah's womb. Esau was number one, but he couldn't care less and wasn't so ambitious. Jacob was number two, but he always wanted to be number one. They were twins, and Esau was the older, just by a few seconds, but it was as if Jacob was already reaching out to catch up with his big brother as they left Rebekah's womb. His name says it: it means "He grasps." (The name could also mean "[God] protects," and perhaps this meaning is also suggested.) It is odd that he is described as upright, since this is not one of the first six adjectives that one would attach to Jacob in light of his story.

The story's listeners know how to understand God's explanation of what was happening in Rebekah's womb a few weeks earlier, because they themselves are Jacob. Although Jacob eventually gets the new name Israel, which is his descendants' regular name, the Old Testament also continues to refer to the people as Jacob. Likewise Esau gets the new name Edom, which is the name of the people living just south and east of Israel who often contend with Israel for territory. For much of the time, Jacob-Israel will be the bigger of these two peoples. This is a little odd. The big brother is supposed to be the senior brother. Yet precisely because it is the regular social custom, God likes to make things work the opposite way so that big brothers eventually get pushed out of the way by little brothers (think of Joseph or David).

As there was a significance in Jacob's birth name and in his new name, so it is with Esau, and more so. First, Esau is quite close to the word for hair; hence the reference to Esau looking like a hairy garment. It implies that he is a rough-looking guy, a guy who will be at home in the wild. His personality and destiny, like Jacob's, seemed to be announced in the way he was when he was born. His hairiness was not the only aspect of his birth that Rebekah remembered. He also came out all red; and "red" is even closer to the name "Edom" than "hair" is to Esau. So this will be a story about Grabber and Red. But the story waits to make explicit that Esau gained this second name, until it tells us about the red lentil stew that Esau was so eager to eat.

Presumably Esau was exaggerating when he said he was starving, dying of hunger. And he wasn't bothered about being number one. If that was so important—well, let Jacob have the birthright. Who cares, when what you need is something to eat? Jacob cares. When you need to be number one and you are not number one, you care deeply. You will do anything to get there. But Jacob didn't have to do much—just cook a pot of stew at the right moment.

The uneasy relationship between Isaac's sons, harbingering an uneasy relationship between the peoples who trace their descent to them, is not the only parallel between Isaac's story and his father's story (it has the

effect of suggesting Isaac never did anything interesting or have anything interesting happen to him; he just fills the space between Abraham and Jacob).

As with Abraham, God appears to Isaac and promises that he will become a numerous people and will (at least through them) come to possess the country and be a standard for people's prayer for blessing. Like Abraham, Isaac has to cope with famine, and also like Abraham, he takes refuge in Gerar in the territory of a king called Abimelech (presumably a different one). The parallels will continue as that story unfolds.

Yet there are noteworthy distinctive features of God's words to Isaac. One is the prohibition on going to Egypt, recalling Abraham's command to his servant not to have Isaac leave the country in the other direction in order to find a wife. This is the promised land. Don't leave it even under pressure. There is the related promise, "I will be with you." God was certainly with Abraham, as Abimelech could see (Genesis 21:22), but God did not express an actual commitment to Abraham in these terms. So one could call this the Isaac promise (it will be repeated for other people, and for Israel itself, but it starts off as the Isaac promise). God's being with Isaac does not merely mean that Isaac has a sense of God's being there through tough times, or even that God actually is with Isaac through tough times whether or not Isaac has a sense of it. In the Bible, God's being with you is something that makes a practical difference to how things work out. So when external circumstances seem to be working against you, God's being with you will issue in blessing (fruitfulness and flourishing). Paradoxically that will be true because Isaac's father did what God said by being prepared to kill Isaac! Abraham's commitment to treating Isaac as dispensable is the basis for God's commitment to blessing Isaac. The attitude that parents have to their children, to God, and the way they see the relationship between these two attitudes can have profound implications for the way God deals with the children.

25:24–28 The birth and youth of the twins show many of their defining traits. In addition to the pun on "Seir" and "se'ar" ("hair"), there is also a play on red ("admoni") and "Edom," another name for Esau and the kingdom descended from him. (See translators' note b and 36.9.) The Hebrew word for red ("admoni") is a play on the word "Edom" ("edom"; v. 30); hairy ("se'ar") is a play on Seir, the region of the Edomites (32.3). Red (Hebrew 'admoni) signals Esau's ancestry of Edom (a wordplay made explicit in v. 30). Hairy (se'ar) echoes the word Seir, a region in Edom, and loosely motivates the name Esau. The mention of Esau's hairiness also sets the stage for its prominence in the deception of Isaac in ch. 27. The red and hairy body of Esau also anticipate his character as a skillful hunter, a man of the field (v. 27). All of these traits describe Esau as a man of nature who operates in the wild as a skilled predator. His animal-like instincts and lack of intelligence are treated in the following story. A quiet man, living in tents. Jacob is a man of the domestic domain, a man of culture. Gripping Esau's heel. Jacob seems to be trying to pull Esau back so that he can be the firstborn, showing his ability to scheme and plan (cf. the birth of the twins Perez and Zerah, 38.27–30); this act foreshadows his more successful attempts to supplant his brother. Heel ('aqev) is the motivation for the name Jacob (ya'aqov). Jacob's smooth skin, in contrast to Esau's hairiness, is not mentioned until 27.11, when it becomes central to the plot.

Jacob's naming (as usual in the Tanakh) is based on a folk etymology. "Jacob" probably derives from "y-'k-b-'l," "may God protect." It is interpreted here by a play on the Hebrew word for "heel," i.e., "he takes by the heel" or "he supplants"; see Hos 12.3.

As in the Cain and Abel story (4.1–16), this narrative plays on the tension between the older and the younger brother and their different lifestyles. To the ancient Israelite, Esau's hunting, like his hairiness, suggested uncouthness and even a certain degree of danger. The uncouthness is also apparent in his blunt speech and impulsive behavior in the ensuing tale (vv. 30–34). Once again, the mother mediates God's preference (cf. 21.9–13; Mal. 1.2–5). The father seems blind to the higher purpose (cf. Gen. 27.1–45). God's favoring the younger son is already familiar from the story of Cain and Abel (4.4–5) and, in a different way, Ishmael and Isaac (21.12), and will be a prominent feature of the story of Joseph (37.3).

The opposition between the brothers is compounded by an opposition between the parents. Fond of game. Isaac's preference for wild food motivates his love for Esau and anticipates the role of this cuisine in ch. 27. In his filial preference, Isaac is ruled by his belly (like Esau in v. 30). Rebekah loved Jacob. No reason given for her preference—a mother's love needs no motive. And yet she knows that Jacob will prevail (see v. 23), and she operates and wields authority in the domestic domain that Jacob inhabits (living in tents, v. 27). Note that Jacob, in this respect, is allied with the feminine: he is his mother's boy (see 27.5–17). The alliances of the parents with the two sons provide background for the events of ch. 27.

25.29–34 The first story of Jacob's ascent over Esau shows their contrasting traits. In this story Jacob gains Esau's birthright (*bekorah*), his rights as the firstborn son. In ch. 27 Jacob gains Esau's blessing (*berakah*), which also belongs to the firstborn son. These two stories are complementary (and are both from the J source), hinging on the wordplay of *bekorah* and *berakah* (see 27.36) and binding both Esau and Isaac to Jacob's ascent. The dubious means of Jacob's victories are qualified by his (and his mother's) charms as a trickster. As the underdog, he resorts to trickery and wiles to defeat his big brother, who is stronger but not wiser.

The brothers are in their respective domains: domestic Jacob is preparing a stew, and Esau has returned from the wilds, having failed in his attempt to kill wild game (to the potential disappointment of his father). Esau is inarticulate, referring to the stew as that red stuff (lit. "this red red," *ha'adom ha'adom hazzeh*), which also signifies his name Edom. Let me eat, lit. "feed me," perhaps with the connotation of feeding animals.

Sell me your birthright. Jacob poses an outrageous price for a bowl of stew. Esau fails to respond to the invitation to barter, claiming that he is about to die, when in fact he is merely very hungry. As a man of nature, Esau thinks with his belly, not his brain. As a knowledgeable (and manipulative) man of culture, Jacob seals the trade with a legally binding oath.

The birthright refers to the extra rights that normally go to the eldest son: leadership of the family and a double share of the inheritance (Deut 21.15–17). This caricature of Esau as a dull person, outwitted on an empty stomach, is intended to explain Israel's domination of Edom (2 Sam 8.9–14; 1 Kings 11.14–22; 1 Kings 3.9–12; 8.20–22).

Ate, drank, rose, went. A quick series of verbs shows Esau as a man of action, unaware of the implications of his actions. Despised his birthright. Esau failed to value his birthright, treated it badly, and perhaps deserved to have lost it. Cf. Heb 12.16.

PEOPLE THROUGH KETURAH

Keturah קְטוּרָה – The third wife of Abraham, after Sarah and Hagar (Gen 25:1–4; 1 Chr 1:32–33). As far as they can be identified, her children and grandchildren were prominent Arabian or Aramean tribes or cities. Medan, Midian, Dedan, and Sheba/Saba were situated along the "incense route" through W Arabia, and Shuah was involved in Sabeian commerce as early as the second half of the 8th century B.C. "Keturah" is not attested as a personal name. It is reasonable to suggest that Keturah is a personification of the incense trade

Zimran זִמְרָן – Son of Abraham and Keturah. A clan name mentioned in the genealogy of Abraham and his wife Keturah in Gen 25:2 and in the parallel genealogical list in 1 Chr 1:32. Zimran is described as the first of Keturah's six sons. No clear regional identification has been made with this name, although the clan was most likely among those living on the fringes of the Negeb and in N Arabia.

Jokshan יֶקְשָׁן – A clan name in the genealogy of Abraham by his wife Keturah in Gen 25:2. Jokshan is the second of seven sons born to Keturah. He is described in 25:3 as the father of Sheba and Dedan. This designation is problematic because of two statements in the genealogies in Genesis 10. In the Cushite genealogy of Gen 10:7 Sheba and Dedan are listed as the sons of Raamah. Then, in Gen 10:28, Sheba is described as one of the Arabian tribes descended from Joktan.

Medan מֵדָן – A son of Abraham and Keturah and brother of Midian (Gen 25:2; 1 Chr 1:32). The “sons of Keturah” are a group of Arabian tribes and cities of the 8th through 5th centuries B.C. Medan could have been a tribe or a settlement in Wādī Mudān (or Madān), which was situated in the basalt fields S of Midian. The wadi is mentioned by Islamic historians and geographers for the 7th century A.D.

Midian מִדְיָן – a son of Abraham and his concubine Keturah (Gen. 25:1–2), and his descendants. When Abraham expelled Isaac’s rivals “to the east country,” Midian was included (25:6). Thus, the Midianites were counted among the “people of the east” (Judg. 6:3, 33; 7:12), a general designation for the nomadic inhabitants of the Syrian and Arabian deserts. The first significant reference to the Midianites is a record of their involvement in the sale of Joseph into slavery, an account in which Midianites are closely associated or equated with Ishmaelites (Gen. 37:25–28, 36; 39:1; cf. Judg. 8:24). Later, Moses’s sojourn in Midian prior to the exodus is of some significance. Moses goes to Midian as a fugitive from Egyptian justice (Exod. 2:15). He is befriended by Jethro, the priest of Midian (2:16; 3:1), after defending his daughters from some shepherds who drove them away from a well. Moses marries Jethro’s daughter Zipporah (2:21), and while still in the general region of Midian, he is commissioned by God (through a burning bush) to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt (3:1–15; 4:19). Later, Moses’s Midianite brother-in-law, Hobab, guides the Israelites in the wilderness (Num. 10:29–32). When the Hebrews are encamped in the Plains of Moab, the “elders of Midian” and the Moabite king Balak hire Balaam to curse their new enemies (Num. 22:1–7; cf. Josh. 13:21). The Midianites also lead Israel into idolatry and immorality at Shittim (Num. 25:1–7, 16–18), and Moses is commanded to seek revenge by destroying the Midianite population in this region (31:1–12). Finally, after Israel’s settlement in the land, the Hebrew warrior Gideon soundly defeats the camel-riding Midianites, who are said to have oppressed the Israelites for seven years. Many years later, Gideon’s victory would be recounted in Ps. 83:9, 11; Isa. 9:4; 10:26.

Ishbak יִשְׁבָּק – The fifth son of Abraham and Keturah (Gen 25:2; 1 Chr 1:32). Abraham, in order to remove rivals to Isaac’s claim to his inheritance, provided gifts to Ishbak and his brothers and sent them to eastern areas (Gen 25:6). No descendants of Ishbak are mentioned in either list of Abraham and Keturah’s offspring, making it impossible to trace his genealogical relationship to other groups (in contrast to Jokshan and Midian whose lines are traced through further generations).

Shuah שׁוּאָה – A son of Abraham and Keturah (Gen 25:2; 1 Chr 1:32). Like all the sons of Abraham and Keturah, Shuah represents an Arabian or Syrian landscape associated with the incense trade around the middle of the 1st millennium B.C. The only person from Shuah mentioned in the OT is Job’s friend Bildad (Job 2:11). Job’s friends seem to come from the extremities of the Arabian peninsula: Eliphaz the Temanite from NW Arabia, Bildad the Shuhite from NE Arabia, and Zophar the Naamathite from S Arabia.

Sheba שֶׁבָּא – a descendant of Abraham and Keturah, the son of Jokshan, and the brother of Dedan. The similarity or identity of certain of the names in these genealogies has led some to conclude that the name Sheba refers to the same person or tribe, most probably related to the kingdom of Sheba in SW Arabia

Dedan דְּדָן – the city and kingdom of the Dedanites, an Arabian people of unclear origin (Gen. 10:6–7; 25:1–3). Al-‘Ula, an oasis about fifty miles southwest of Tema, was central to Dedan’s far-reaching commercial activities, which included trade with Tyre (Ezek. 27:20). The prophets denounced Dedan (Isa. 21:13; Jer. 25:23; 49:8; Ezek. 25:13).

Asshurim אֲשׁוּרִים – A clan name mentioned in the genealogy of ABRAHAM by his wife KETURAH in Gen 25:3. Asshurim is listed as one of the 3 sons of Abraham’s grandson DEDAN, the son of JOKSHAN. These 3 sons are not found in the matching, but abbreviated, genealogical clan list in 1 Chr 1:32–33, perhaps reflecting shifts in population or a changing political situation by the time of the Chronicler. Asshurim is not related to Assyria or the Assyrians, but may possibly be identified with Syrians. This group (note the plural form of the name) is one of many obscure ARABIAN tribal groups which inhabited the fringes of the Negev and N Arabian regions. Their

very obscurity was used by the biblical author(s) who wished to contrast starkly the importance of the descendants of Isaac, and even those of Ishmael, with the children of this secondary wife.

Letushim לְתוּשִׁים – A clan name mentioned in the genealogy of Abraham by his wife Keturah in Gen 25:3. Letushim (the plural form may be compared to similar plurals for groups in Gen 10:4—Kittim and Dodanim) is listed as one of the three sons of Abraham’s grandson Dedan, the son of Jokshan. These three sons are not found in the matching, but abbreviated, genealogical clan list in 1 Chr 1:32–33. This may reflect a shift in population or politics by the time of the Chronicler.

Leummim לְאַמִּים – A clan name mentioned in the genealogy of Abraham by his wife Keturah in Gen 25:3. Leummim is listed as one of the three sons of Abraham’s grandson Dedan, the son of Jokshan. These three sons are not found in the matching, but abbreviated, genealogical clan list in 1 Chr 1:32–33. This may be due to shifts in population or a change in the political situation by the time of the Chronicler. The plural form of the name may reflect its use by a particular population group in the city of Dedan (compare similar plural names in Gen 10:4, Kittim and Dodanim).

Ephah עֵיפָה – A son of Midian (Gen 25:4; 1 Chr 1:33). Midian’s five “sons” as listed in Gen 25:4 comprise the clans, tribes, or people inhabiting the country of Midian sometime before 716 B.C. (Knauf 1988: 84–86). Ephah heads the sons of Midian and may have been the leading tribe in this country. By the time of Isa 60:6 (late 6th century B.C.?), the tribe was still famous for its camel breeding.

Epher עֵפֶר – A son of Midian (Gen 25:4; 1 Chr 1:33), i.e., a clan, tribe, or people inhabiting the country of Midian. The list of Midian’s five sons antedates 716 B.C. (Knauf 1988: 84–86). There are three areas or towns in NW Arabia which may have preserved the name of this ancient tribe: (1) Wâdî ‘Afâl (also recorded as ‘Afâr), the heartland of Midian with the site of Madyan/Maġâyir Šu‘ayb - al-Bad’; (2) Wâdî al-‘Ifrîyah, SE of Wâdî ‘Afâl; (3) Ṭayyib al-Isim on the Midianite coast of the Gulf of ‘Aqabah (ancient names from the root ‘PR have frequently been changed to “good [of] name,” which is the literal translation of Ṭayyib al-Isim, in order to avoid any resemblance with Ar ‘ifrît “demon”). The three places or areas were all settled in the Early Iron Age (Knauf 1988: xii Abb.1; 80).

Hanoch חֲנוֹךְ – Third son of Midian (Gen 25:4). For the meaning of the name, see ENOCH, which shares the same Heb spelling (ḥănôk). As with the other offspring of Keturah and Abraham, this “grandson’s” name may have been related to an Arabian town or oasis on the international trade routes (Eph’al 1982: 231–33, 240), perhaps even the city Cain named after his son Enoch (Gen 4:17).

Abida אַבִּידָע – The son of Midian and grandson of Abraham’s second wife, Keturah (Gen 25:4 = 1 Chr 1:33). The name “Abida” may be either a patronym or a toponym. Abida is used as a patronym both in the genealogy at the end of the Abraham narrative (Gen 25:1–4), and in the genealogy connecting Adam to Israel/Jacob (1 Chronicles 1). This patronym has traditionally been associated with the Arabian tribe of Ibadidi.

Eldaah אֶלְדָּעָה – A son of Midian (Gen 25:4; 1 Chr 1:33). Midian’s five “sons” as listed in Gen 25:4 comprise the clans, tribes, or people inhabiting the country of Midian. The list antedates 716 B.C. (Knauf 1988: 84–86). Eldaah means “God called.” The verb da‘â “to call” is specific to Arabic and ancient S Arabian. Eldaah belongs to the large group of clan or tribal names that are structured like personal names (Knauf 1988: 84).

PEOPLE THROUGH ISHMAEL

Nebaioth נְבַיּוֹת – A son of Ishmael (Gen 25:13; 28:9; 36:3; 1 Chr 1:29) and, as is the case with all the sons of Ishmael (with the possible exception of KEDEMAH), an Arab tribe (Isa 60:7).

Kedar קֶדָר – The second son of Ishmael (Gen 25:13; 1 Chr 1:29). The “sons of Ishmael” constituted a group of N Arabian tribes who flourished from the 8th through the 4th centuries B.C. Kedar, attested from 738 B.C. well into the Hellenistic period, was the most powerful among them

Adbeel אֲדֵבֵל – The third of Ishmael’s twelve sons (Gen 25:13 = 1 Chr 1:29). The LXX, however, transposing the letters beta and delta, spells the name nabdeēl (Gen 25:13) or nabdaiēl (1 Chr 1:29) in these parallel lists, and adds ragouēl kai nabdeēl “Ragouel (or Reuel) and Nabdeel” to the list of Dedan’s sons in Gen 25:3. But the Lucianic version of 1 Chr 1:29 reads Gk abdiēl, and Josephus spells the name abdeēlos in his list of Ishmael’s descendants (Ant 1.12.4). This rather consistent metathesis of the letters beta and delta in the Gk texts suggests that the difference in spelling is not simply a scribal error.

Mibsam מִבְּשָׁם – A son of Ishmael (Gen 25:13; 1 Chr 1:29). Since all the sons of Ishmael were ancient N Arabian tribes, and since Mibsam is followed by Mishma both in Gen 25:13 and in 1 Chr 1:29 and 1 Chr 4:25, the two “persons” may be interpreted as representations of the same Arabian tribe or clan. It is conceivable that this “tribe,” together with his “brother” Mishma, came to be included in the genealogy of the Israelite tribe of Simeon in 1 Chronicles 4. From Genesis 34, it can be inferred that the tribe of Simeon, living in the central hill country, had disappeared at an early stage of Israel’s prehistory. All references to Simeon in the Negeb are ancient constructs trying to tie the name of this tribe into the geography of the authors’ world centuries after the tribe had become extinct (Mittmann 1977: 217–19). The authors of 1 Chronicles 4 frequently took recourse to the names of tribes and clans inhabiting the Negeb in their own days, including Arabian and Edomite/Idumean population groups (Eph’al 1982: 199–200). The name is derived from Heb bōśem, Arabic bašām, “balm.” The tribe of Mibsam may well have been involved in the spice trade on the “incense road”; on the other hand, the name is attested as a personal name in Safaitic, and related names occur all over the Arabian peninsula

Mishma מִשְׁמָע – A son of Ishmael, and brother of Mibsam (Gen 25:13; 1 Chr 1:29). One may conclude from the fact that Mishma and Mibsam occur together both in Genesis 25 and 1 Chronicles 4 that 1 Chr 4:25 testifies to the settlement of these 2 Ishmaelite tribes or clans, wholly or in part, in the Negeb during the exilic and/or postexilic period. Heb mišmā’ means “hearing”; a verbal noun like this does not easily form a tribal name.

Dumah דּוּמָה – A son of Ishmael (Gen 25:14; 1 Chr 1:30). In all probability, this “Dumah” refers to the district and oasis town in N central Saudi Arabia near the S end of the Wadi Sirhan. An oracle against this town and its relation to the Kedarite tribal confederacy is perhaps contained in Isa 21:11; but the reference in Joshua 15:52 apparently belongs to another location. Dumah (29°48.5’ N, 39°52.1’ E) is the largest oasis in the long, extremely arid, Wadi Sirhan and often has been referred to as “the gateway to Arabia.”

Massa מַשָּׂהָא – A son of Ishmael (Gen 25:14; 1 Chr 1:30). The “sons of Ishmael” were prominent Arab tribes of the 8th and 7th centuries B.C. See ISHMAELITES. As a tribe, Massa is attested both in the OT and in ANE texts.

Hadad הָדָד – The eighth son of Ishmael (Gen 25:15). The MT here and in the parallel 1 Chr 1:30 reads ḥādad, while other mss read hdd and ḥdr.

Tema תֵּימָא – One of the sons of Ishmael (Gen 25:15). As with many of the names in this chapter, the name “Tema” has Arabian elements, and is certainly to be connected with the prominent oasis city of Teima.

Jetur יֶטוּר – The tenth son of Ishmael (Gen 25:15; 1 Chr 1:31). With the exception of Kedemah, all sons of Ishmael were Arab tribes of the 7th through 5th centuries B.C.

Naphish נַפִּישׁ – A son of Ishmael (Gen 25:15; 1 Chr 1:31) and, like all the sons of Ishmael, an Arab tribe (1 Chr 5:19).

Kedemah קֶדְמָה – A son of Ishmael (Gen 25:15; 1 Chr 1:31). All the sons of Ishmael are prominent N Arabian tribes or cities of the 1st millennium B.C.

LITERARY CONSIDERATIONS

Basically, there are three different types of Jacob stories that were collected, probably separately from one another: stories about conflict, sagas around Jacob’s marriages, and theophanies.

First, there are a number of stories about the **conflict** between Esau and Jacob, who are said to represent Edom and Israel in the prophecy of Genesis 25: 23: Two nations are in your womb and two peoples born of you shall be divided. One shall be stronger than the other; the elder shall serve the younger. No doubt these stories were first cherished by Israel as heroic tales of their own superiority and greater cleverness above their neighbor and rival across the Dead Sea in Jordan, Edom.

Second, a group of **sagas** grew up around Jacob's marriages and his adventures with Laban, his Aramaean relative. The tricks and deceits of Jacob and Laban against one another gave delight to Israelite audiences who saw in this single combat between heroes a mirror of the battle between the nation Israel and the Aramaeans in later days (1 Kgs 20 and 22), in which Israel outfought Aram. Both the first and second group of stories, which pit Esau or Laban against Jacob, are really "eponymous," where the individuals stand for the whole nations.

A third group of stories preserved a number of **theophanies** of God to Jacob at various important shrines: Bethel in chapter 28, Mahanaim in chapter 32, Peniel in chapter 32, and again at Bethel in chapter 35, this time twice. Israel treasured these traditions because they not only detailed God's blessing on special sites within their land, but they also provided a framework of divine guidance for Jacob, and special moments in which God reaffirmed his promise, made first to Abraham, renewed to Isaac in Genesis 26, and repeated now to Jacob.

In this collection of Jacob materials, the process of gathering the traditions together becomes easier to understand. We can trace the likely sequence of development from the oral state to the final written form. The three different types of stories were originally kept and transmitted for different reasons, sometimes by the same people, sometimes by others. The sagas of Jacob's conflict with Esau were tribal stories told about the times when the Jacob tribe(s) first settled the land and had to fight for control. This "history" was remembered in the form of the personal struggle between Jacob (Israel) and Esau (Edom), their chief rival for the land around the Dead Sea and the Jordan River. Single incidents may have been remembered by individual clans or villages, but gradually they were collected into a larger body of stories for the whole nation, probably in the period of the judges, between 1200 and 1000 BC. The second group of stories about Laban and the Mesopotamian roots of the Jacob tribes began as family histories. But as relations between Israelites and Aramaeans turned into battles, these tales developed into hero sagas about how Israel bested the Aramaeans in their contests.

The divine appearances to Jacob may have originated in local shrines, where some divine appearance was remembered and drew worshipers to the holy place. At the time of the Hebrew conquest, the Israelites associated the shrines near the areas that Jacob had lived as places where God had shown blessing and guidance to Jacob their ancestor.

THE JACOB SAGA IN THE PATRIARCHAL NARRATIVES

Earlier Sources

Scholars generally agree that the Jacob stories were first gathered together in cycles around three major themes, and can be traced back to oral traditions preserved at tribal and cultic centers:

The Conflict between Jacob and Esau

- Act 1. The twins struggle for first place in the womb (25: 19– 28).
- Act 2. They struggle for the birthright (25: 29– 34).
- Act 3. They struggle for Isaac's blessing (27: 1– 45).
- Act 4. They find reconciliation (32: 3– 21; 33: 1– 1).

The Conflict between Jacob and Laban

- Act 1. Jacob must marry into Laban's family (27: 46– 28: 9).
- Act 2. Jacob is tricked by Laban but gains a double family (29: 1– 30: 24).

Act 3. Jacob tricks Laban out of his flocks (30: 25– 43).

Act 4. Jacob escapes with Laban's gods (31: 1– 24).

Act 5. Jacob and Laban are reconciled (31: 25– 32: 3).

Theophanies

Act 1. God appears to Jacob at Bethel to renew the promise (28: 10– 22).

Act 2. God appears at Peniel and names Jacob "Israel" (32: 22– 32).

Act 3. God renews the promise at Bethel (35: 1– 15).

SAGA MOTIFS

At the oral-tradition level, many of the Jacob narratives are built around traditional folk motifs.

Some of these are:

a. the shepherd bests the hunter (Jacob over Esau)

b. origins of famous place-names (Bethel = "house of God")

c. a night encounter with a mysterious god (Jacob versus the angel)

d. puns on the name of an enemy (Esau is hairy and red, named for Israel's enemy Edom)

The growth of so many traditions probably took centuries to become organized into a heroic epic that followed Jacob from birth to death. The crucial element that united them was the religious theme of God's choice and guidance, so that each incident and story could be fitted to the others as part of God's blessing. This stage, perhaps still completely oral, would have been achieved only after the exodus and conquest when the tribes would have developed a sense that they all belonged together as one people, and combined their individual traditions into one.

Finally, the stories were carefully organized as a written history by J and then by E, and, still later, other versions were included or reworked by P. These sources can still be detected by the appearance of the same story in two different forms. In chapter 35, we note that Jacob arrives at Bethel twice— in verse 6 and again in verses 10 to 15; and twice his name is changed from Jacob to Israel, once in chapter 32 and again in chapter 35.

By the last editing under the Priestly school at the time of the exile in the sixth century BC, Genesis 12– 36 had developed into a great epic of faith, including all the traditions from Abraham until the slavery in Egypt. But it still betrayed its origins from the days when many of the stories were oral tales about the mighty exploits of a local leader over enemy tribes. Israel kept the whole tradition, warts and all, the way it had been passed down, because the people did not want to lose touch with their historical roots or with the way their ancestors remembered Yahweh, the God of history.

THE PATRIARCHAL STORIES AS SAGAS

The patriarchal traditions of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have often been called "legends," half-historical, half-entertaining stories of the past. Because the word legend in English often comes to mean simply fictitious, many scholars today have come to use the term saga, borrowed from Icelandic family stories of the Middle Ages. Sagas are heroic tales about the ancestors of a well-known family. They give luster to the family or clan today by telling of the adventures of one or more of its great-great-grandfathers or grandmothers long ago. They often have colorful features, building up the fearless hero almost bigger than real life, and they share some of the characteristics of the epic style: long and very elaborate poems about great heroes who affected the whole course of the nation. Homer's Iliad and Odyssey and Virgil's Aeneid fall into this type of literature.

Sagas show signs of being repeated orally at first, sometimes with more than one version of each story in circulation. Each storyteller can adapt or add themes and local color to his retelling. By the time it is written down, the oral saga may have developed much beyond its earliest form, and two different versions may show quite striking changes from each other. The patriarchs' stories in Genesis show signs of this.

Compare the three cases of the patriarch's claiming that his wife was really his sister in order to save his life.

Gen 12: 10– 20	Gen 20: 1– 18	Gen 26: 1– 11
Hero: Abraham	Hero: Abraham	Hero: Isaac
King: Pharaoh	King: Abimelech of Gerar	King: Abimelech of Gerar
Pharaoh desires Sarah	Abimelech desires Sarah	Citizens desire Rebecca
God sends plagues on Pharaoh	God warns Abimelech in dream	No corresponding act
Pharaoh understands cause	God explains the cause	Abimelech finds out for himself
Pharaoh berates Abraham	Abimelech berates Abraham	Abimelech berates Isaac
Abraham is silent	Abraham explains reasons	Isaac explains
Pharaoh sends him packing	Abimelech gives Abraham gifts	Abimelech warns people to avoid Rebecca
	Abraham intercedes to heal Gerar women of barrenness	

When we look at these three stories, there would seem to be only one chance in a million that such a coincidence of events could happen three times in two generations, and that both Abraham and King Abimelech could have been so foolish as to fall into the same trap twice in their lives.

Originally these three different stories were only one story.

The same heroic tale about how a patriarch had almost lost his wife to a powerful king was possibly told in three separate cities or towns. One would be Beer-sheba, a city near Gerar associated with Isaac's life, and another would be Hebron, where the story was transferred to Abraham, who was the local hero there.

Or, storytellers in three different tribes each adapted the story to their local audience so that some tribe who lived near Gerar quickly identified the powerful king with Abimelech, while those farther south near the Egyptian border made the king the pharaoh of Egypt. In any case, three different versions arose.

We cannot know just when and how this happened, but we do know that sagas are preserved and retold only within the group or groups for which they have meaning. Perhaps there was a special storyteller for each tribe who passed on its traditions to his successor. Or perhaps the stories were told at shrines where the priests would learn all the stories and preserve them.

TIME IN GENESIS – IS A YEAR A YEAR AS WE KNOW IT?

In ancient times, twelve thirty-day months were used making a total of 360 days for the year. Abraham, used the 360-day year, which was known in Ur. The Genesis account of the flood in the days of Noah illustrated this 360-day year by recording the 150-day interval till the waters abated from the earth. In other words, it indicates a 5-month period as being exactly 150 days in length, or five 30-day months.

We see it here in the account of the Flood:

- In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened. Genesis 7:11
- And the waters prevailed upon the earth an hundred and fifty days. Genesis 7:24
- And the ark rested in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, upon the mountains of Ararat. Genesis 8:4
- The 150 days began on the seventeenth day of the second month, and ended on the seventeenth day of the seventh month. This of course had issues in keeping the seasons correctly in context. The Hebrews added an extra month to compensate.