

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY
Genesis 27-28 – Jacob and Esau Compete

SYNOPSIS OF GENESIS 23-26

THE END OF CHAPTER 22

At the end of chapter 22, we learn that Abraham's brother, Nahor, also has eight children through his wife Milcah (daughter of Abraham's brother, Haran, who died at Ur, and sister of Lot), and four children through his concubine, Reumah. The last child of Milcah, Bethuel (Heb. "House of God"), is the father of Rebekah (and her brother is Laban).

CHAPTER 23 – SARAH'S DEATH AND BURIAL

In chapter 23, we learn that Sarah lived to the ripe old age of 127 years and that she died in Hebron. Abraham made an arrangement to buy a plot of land from Ephron the Hittite for four hundred shekels of silver. And he buried Sarah in the cave "facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan." Buying this land and the cave of Machpelah, Abraham lays claim to the land that the Lord had promised to give him.

CHAPTER 24 – THE MARRIAGE OF ISAAC AND THE AWKWARD OATH

Abraham makes his servant swear an oath by placing his hand under Abraham's thigh and promising that he will not get a wife for his son Isaac from among the women of Canaan, but instead from the house of Abraham's father. But the servant mustn't take Isaac to go to live there. Isaac must stay in the land God promised to Abraham. The servant goes with ten camels full of gifts. The servant asked God for a sign regarding whom he should choose; the one who gave he and his camels water to drink as he waits at a well. Rebekah appears and does it. Laban, her brother, and Bethuel, her father, then agree to let her go (if she agrees) with her maids back to the Negeb with the servant to marry Isaac. When they arrive, she sees Isaac, he sees her. Isaac brings her into his mother's tent and they became husband and wife. And it says "he loved her".

Awkward Oaths What is behind that strange way of making an oath? According to Midrash Rabbah, the hand isn't placed literally under the thigh, but rather the Milah (which means "circumcision"). The person is making an oath by swearing on circumcision, the mark of God's covenant. In the Western world, we place our hands over our hearts or on a sacred object like a bible, but in parts of the ancient world, their hand is placed subservient to the source of posterity (the source of Abraham's seed) which to the Hebrews was a sacred object. Abraham does it here with his servant. Jacob will have his son Joseph make an oath the same way in Genesis 47:29. Notice the relationship between the English words *testify* and the word *testicles*. Aren't we glad for the book of James in the New Testament with its injunction not to make oaths, but rather to let our "yes" mean "yes" and "no" mean "no" (James 5:12)!

CHAPTER 25 – ABRAHAM DIES AND JACOB AND ESAU ARE BORN

Abraham remarries and has six more children with Keturah, but he gives all he has to Isaac and sends his other children away from Isaac with gifts to the east country. Abraham dies and is buried with Sarah. Isaac is 40 years old and Rebekah is barren, but Isaac prays, and Rebekah conceives of twins. She is told there are two nations in her womb and the older will serve the younger. Esau (Heb. meaning "hairy") was born first and he was red and hairy. Jacob (Heb. meaning "he supplants") was born gripping Esau's heel. Esau was a hunter, a man of the field. Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau. Rebekah loved Jacob.

The chapter ends with the story of Esau, after hunting one day, coming home famished and asking Jacob for some stew. Rather than telling his brother make his own, Jacob takes advantage of his brother's hunger and reveals his desire to be the top dog of



the family. He offers to sell Esau some Lentil stew in exchange for his birthright and Esau agrees. He eats and then goes on his way. Ho Hum. No big deal. But, we are told that Esau “despised his birthright.” And what’s strange is that no one tells Isaac of the agreement. It just sits there in the background, which sets up another confrontation at the end of Isaac’s life.

CHAPTER 26 – FAMINE, ISAAC AND ABIMELECH – SHE’S MY SISTER, REALLY

Once again, a famine hits, and Isaac heads to Gerar, to King Abimelech. God appears to Isaac and says not to go to Egypt but to settle in the land that God will show him and reside there as an alien. God will give him those lands and will bless him. Once again, we are told that his descendants will be “as numerous as the stars of heaven,” and the nations will gain blessing through his offspring because “Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws” (vs 4-5).

In Gerar, Isaac is asked about his wife, but he says “She is my sister”; a familiar family story. But king Abimelech sees Isaac fondling his wife and confronts him. And then tells his people, “touch her and you will be put to death.” Isaac became rich and prospered. And Abimelech eventually sends him away saying “You have become too powerful for us.”

So he moved to the valley and dug back up the wells his father had dug and this caused a dispute with herders of Gerar who claimed the wells were theirs. This happened with the first two, but the third they didn’t quarrel over, so he called it Rehoboth (Heb. meaning “room”) saying “Now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.”

Then he went to Beer-sheba and God appeared and reaffirmed the covenant promise and so he built an altar there. Abimelech approached him, Isaac questioned why (“But you hate me!”), but they established a covenant together (exchanged oaths) and they departed in Peace.

At the end of the chapter, we learn that Esau married two Hittite women at age 40 and “they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah.”

FOCUS: GENESIS 27-28 – THE BLESSING OF JACOB; FATHER OF THE NATION

Source Theory: All but the last verse of chapter 27 is from the Yahwist source (J Source). The final verse is from the Priestly source (P Source) along with the first nine verses of chapter 28. From there, we alternate between the Yahwistic source (J Source; vs. 10-11a, 13-16, 19) and the Elohist source (E Source; 11b-12, 17-18, 20-22).

Key: J source – normal | **P source – Bold** | *E source – italics*

Genesis 27 (NRSV)

27 ¹When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called his elder son Esau and said to him, “My son”; and he answered, “Here I am.” ²He said, “See, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. ³Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me. ⁴Then prepare for me savory food, such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may bless you before I die.”

⁵Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, ⁶Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “I heard your father say to your brother Esau, ⁷‘Bring me game, and prepare for me savory food to eat, that I may bless you before the Lord before I die.’ ⁸Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you. ⁹Go to the flock, and get me two choice kids, so that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, such as he likes; ¹⁰and you shall take it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies.” ¹¹But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, “Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of smooth skin. ¹²Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing.” ¹³His mother said to him, “Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my word, and go, get them for me.” ¹⁴So he went and got them and brought them to

his mother; and his mother prepared savory food, such as his father loved. ¹⁵ Then Rebekah took the best garments of her elder son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob; ¹⁶ and she put the skins of the kids on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. ¹⁷ Then she handed the savory food, and the bread that she had prepared, to her son Jacob.

¹⁸ So he went in to his father, and said, "My father"; and he said, "Here I am; who are you, my son?" ¹⁹ Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me." ²⁰ But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" He answered, "Because the LORD your God granted me success." ²¹ Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not." ²² So Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." ²³ He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him. ²⁴ He said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am." ²⁵ Then he said, "Bring it to me, that I may eat of my son's game and bless you." So he brought it to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank. ²⁶ Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come near and kiss me, my son." ²⁷ So he came near and kissed him; and he smelled the smell of his garments, and blessed him, and said,

"Ah, the smell of my son
is like the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed.

²⁸ May God give you of the dew of heaven,
and of the fatness of the earth,
and plenty of grain and wine.

²⁹ Let peoples serve you,
and nations bow down to you.
Be lord over your brothers,
and may your mother's sons bow down to you.
Cursed be everyone who curses you,
and blessed be everyone who blesses you!"

³⁰ As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of his father Isaac, his brother Esau came in from his hunting. ³¹ He also prepared savory food, and brought it to his father. And he said to his father, "Let my father sit up and eat of his son's game, so that you may bless me."

³² His father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" He answered, "I am your firstborn son, Esau." ³³ Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, "Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all^a before you came, and I have blessed him?—yes, and blessed he shall be!" ³⁴ When Esau heard his father's words, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, "Bless me, me also, father!" ³⁵ But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing." ³⁶ Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob?^b For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright; and look, now he has taken away my blessing." Then he said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" ³⁷ Isaac answered Esau, "I have already made him your lord, and I have given him all his brothers as servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son?" ³⁸ Esau said to his father, "Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!" And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.

³⁹ Then his father Isaac answered him:

"See, away from^c the fatness of the earth shall your home be,
and away from^d the dew of heaven on high.

⁴⁰ By your sword you shall live,

^a Cn: Heb of all

^b That is *He supplants* or *He takes by the heel*

^c Or *See, of*

^d Or *and of*

and you shall serve your brother;
but when you break loose,^e
you shall break his yoke from your neck.”

⁴¹ Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.” ⁴² But the words of her elder son Esau were told to Rebekah; so she sent and called her younger son Jacob and said to him, “Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. ⁴³ Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran, ⁴⁴ and stay with him a while, until your brother’s fury turns away—⁴⁵ until your brother’s anger against you turns away, and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send, and bring you back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?”

⁴⁶ Then Rebekah said to Isaac, “I am weary of my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women such as these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?”

Genesis 28 (NRSV)

28 ¹ Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and charged him, “You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women. ² Go at once to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel, your mother’s father; and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother. ³ May God Almighty^a bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, that you may become a company of peoples. ⁴ May he give to you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your offspring with you, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien—land that God gave to Abraham.” ⁵ Thus Isaac sent Jacob away; and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob’s and Esau’s mother.

⁶ Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, and that as he blessed him he charged him, “You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women,” ⁷ and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and gone to Paddan-aram. ⁸ So when Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please his father Isaac, ⁹ Esau went to Ishmael and took Mahalath daughter of Abraham’s son Ishmael, and sister of Nebaioth, to be his wife in addition to the wives he had.

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. *Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place.* ¹² And he dreamed that there was a ladder^b set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And the LORD stood beside him^c and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴ and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed^d in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵ Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” ¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” ¹⁷ *And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”* ¹⁸ *So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.* ¹⁹ He called that place Bethel;^e but the name of the city was Luz at the first. ²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me

^e Meaning of Heb uncertain

^a Traditional rendering of Heb *El Shaddai*

^b Or *stairway* or *ramp*

^c Or *stood above it*

^d Or *shall bless themselves*

^e That is *House of God*

bread to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹ so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, ²² and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you."

CHAPTER 27 – ISAAC BLESSES JACOB

Isaac is now practically blind, and he is old and close to death. And he asks Esau to go and hunt some game and prepare a tasty meal for him and then he will bless Esau. But instead of mentioned the fact that he had sold his birthright to his brother years earlier, he goes out and does what was asked. But Rebekah hears about it and she devises a plan whereby her favorite son Jacob will trick Isaac into giving him the blessing.

So, Rebekah prepares the meal just like Esau and Jacob dresses up and covers himself with goatskins so that he is hairy like Esau, and the plan works. Isaac, doesn't know who it is, but after asking, Jacob says that he is Esau, and so Isaac blesses him. Esau then comes back, finds out about the treachery that outwitted his own treachery, and he is angry. And for some reason the blessing can't be undone. Apparently, there are no take-backs when it comes to blessings. The only blessing that Isaac has for Esau is more like a curse than a blessing: he will live by the sword and serve his brother.

Feeling cheated, Esau threaten to kill his brother after his father dies. He hates Jacob. So, to protect Jacob, Rebekah lies to Isaac again by saying that she wants Jacob to go to Haran, where her brother Laban lives, to find a wife—rather than having to choose one from among the Hittites. And that's where the chapter ends.

CHAPTER 28 – ISAAC SENT TO LABAN, ESAU MARRIES ISHMAEL'S DAUGHTER, AND JACOB HAS A DREAM

Isaac calls Jacob and tells him to head to the homeland to find a wife and Jacob is only too happy to escape his brother's vengeance. Seeing that his father had sent his brother away and had told him not to marry any of the Canaanite women, Esau purposely marries not one, but two of Ishmael's daughters just to get back at his father.



On a mission to find a wife, Jacob is heading towards Haran. Jacob stops for the night at a place that he will soon name Bethel (which is made up of two Hebrew words meaning "house of God"). How does it get this name? That's what this story is meant to tell us.

Jacob uses a stone for a pillow and has a dream about a ladder with angels of God ascending and descending on it; "Jacob's ladder"—a portal between heaven and earth. Remember the cosmology of the ancient Israelites. Earth, sky, dome, water, heavens; essentially a snow globe within a snow globe.

God stands beside him and reaffirms the covenantal promise that was made and says that it will be fulfilled through him. Jacob's offspring will be uncountable and a blessing to all peoples of the earth.

Jacob is scared but says "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (vs. 17). He makes a pillar and pours oil on it calls the place Bethel (Heb. meaning "House of God"). And Jacob pledges that that stone will be God's house and he promises to give God a tenth of everything he receives (hence the beginning of the tithe; vs. 22).

We might ask: What is the purpose of this story of a ladder to heaven? Biblical scholars typically understand it as serving two purposes:

- To stress God's stamp of approval of Jacob as the father of the twelve tribes of Israel.
- To explain how a prominent city in Israel's later story got its name changed from the older name Luz to "House of God."

For the later Israelites, having a story about an ancestor like Jacob with all his shortcomings (a liar, cheat, and scheming scoundrel) who still meets with God's approval must have been reassuring.

And a look ahead to next week...

CHAPTER 29 – WELL-DESERVED MARITAL PROBLEMS AND FIRST CHILDREN

Jacob continues his journey and meets his future wife, Rachel, by a well. She is Laban's youngest daughter. Jacob is smitten with passion and Laban promises to let her marry him, but in return for seven years of work. As biblical scholar Peter Enns writes, "What's seven years of hard labor compared to getting to marry your cousin?" Jacob agrees.

On his wedding night, however, Laban gives him a taste of his own medicine. He does the ol' switcheroo. He doesn't bring him Rachel, but her less attractive older sister Leah. And Jacob doesn't realize it until the next morning after it is already too late. The deed has been done. In many ways, it is poetic justice.

When questioned, Laban uses the excuse that according to custom, it's not proper to marry off the younger daughter before the older one, and so if Jacob will stick this out with Leah, he'll be given the opportunity to marry Rachel, but it will cost him another seven years of hard labor. And he agrees.

Now the story shifts to which sister can have more kids for Jacob. Knowing that Leah is unloved, God makes her fertile, but keeps Rachel barren. Leah has four boys right away (Reuben, meaning 'Behold, a son'; Simeon, meaning 'to hear'; Levi, meaning 'joined'; and Judah, meaning 'praised one'). And the chapter ends with the score being Leah 4 – Rachel 0.

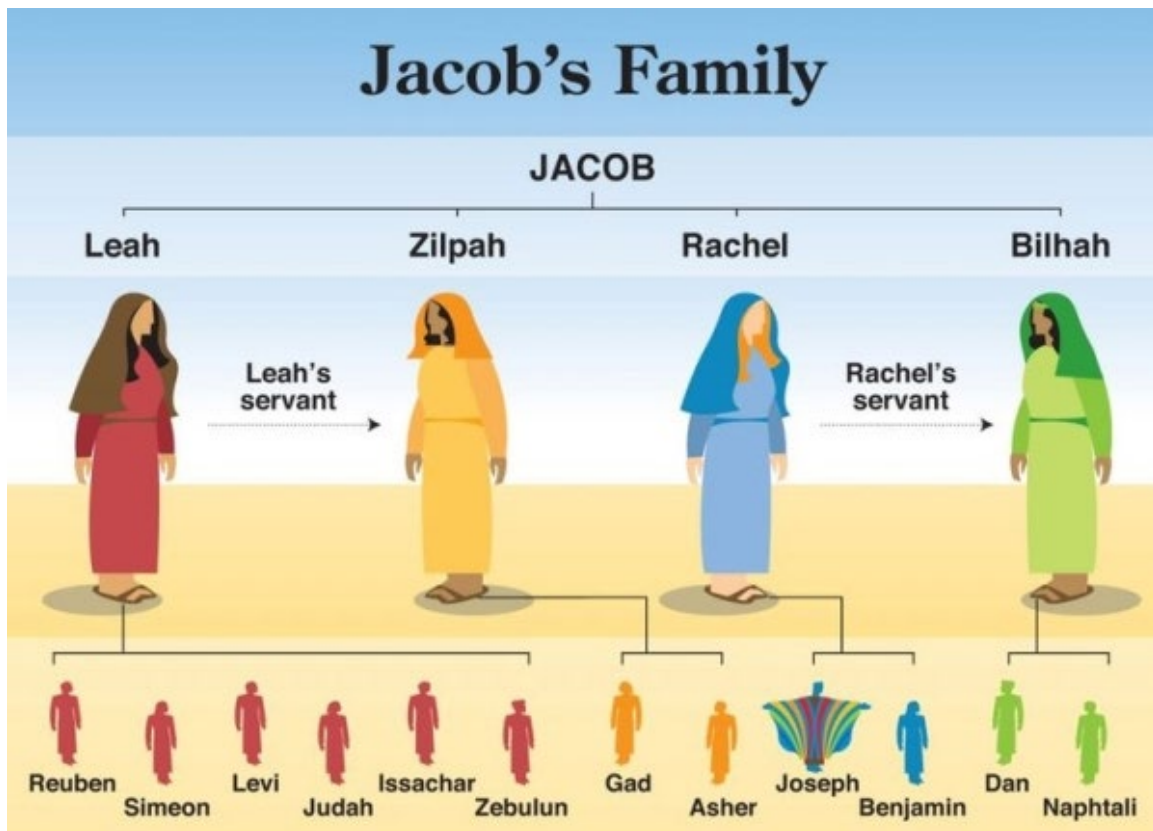
CHAPTER 30 – MORE WIVES AND MORE CHILDREN

Not wanting to be outdone by her older sister, Rachel says to Jacob "Give me children, or I shall die!" which makes him upset. He has no control over her fertility. So, she takes matters into her own hands and gives Jacob her maid Bilhah as a wife so that she can have children through her. Bilhah then has two boys (Dan, meaning 'judgement or judged,' because God has judged her; and Naphtali, meaning 'my struggle, my strife' because of her struggle with her sister). Leah, not wanting to be overtaken, gives Jacob her servant Zilpah, who has two more boys (Gad, meaning 'Fortune'; and Asher, meaning 'Happy').

Then Leah's older son, Reuben goes and finds some aphrodisiacs (mandrakes) and brings them to his mother. Of course, Rachel wants some. Not wanting to give them up for free, she barter a night with Jacob for them. That night, she sleeps with him, and as a result, bears him a son (Issachar, meaning 'hire' because she bought Jacob's presence that night). Then she has another and names him Zebulun, meaning 'honor' (because she thought that now her husband would honor her). Finally, she has a daughter and names her Dinah, which means 'judgment'. Score: Leah 6 (or 8 through Zilpah) – Rachel 0 (or 2 through Bilhah).

Then God remembered Rachel (just like God remembered Noah). She finally has a son of her own who becomes Jacob's favorite son, the son of his old age. And she names him Joseph, which means "to add or increase" because she wasn't satisfied with just one, she wanted one more. Later, in chapter 35, Rachel will give birth to Benjamin who she will name Ben-oni, which means "Son of my sorrow", but Jacob will call him Benjamin, which means "Son of my right hand" or "Son of the south".

Meanwhile, it is time for Jacob to get a little payback on Laban for his trickery. And chapter 30 ends with the story of how Jacob convinces Laban to give him great wealth through some magical mating ritual where animals that look at striped branches produce striped and spotted babies.



Who's missing in the image above? Jacob's only daughter, Dinah, born by Leah.

THE TWELVE SONS OF ISRAEL

There were four women in Jacob's life: two wives and their two female servants. They gave birth to Jacob's 12 sons in the following chronology:

Leah (First wife): Reuben (רְאוּבֵן), Simeon (שִׁמְעוֹן), Levi (לֵוִי), Judah (יְהוּדָה)

Bilhah (Rachel's servant): Dan (דָּן) and Naphtali (נַפְתָּלִי)

Zilpah (Leah's servant): Gad (גָּד) and Asher (אָשֶׁר)

Leah (First wife): Issachar (יִשָּׂשכָר) and Zebulun (זְבֻלֹן)

Rachel (Second wife): Joseph (יוֹסֵף) and Benjamin (בְּנִימִן)

Chapter 27 can be broken down into four scenes:

Scene 1 – (vs. 1-4) The father prepares to bless his older son (primogenitor).

Scene 2 – (vs. 5-17) The mother schemes for her younger son.

Scene 3 – (vs. 18-29) The younger son deceives the father.

Scene 4 – (vs. 30-40) The father grieves with his older son.

Genesis 27:46 – 28:9

These verses are an intrusion in the primary narrative. They are unrelated to what precedes and to what follows. The main narrative advances naturally from 27:45 to 28:10. At the same time, these verses look back to 26:34-35, which are also inappropriate in their context. These verses come from the Priestly tradition and can be dated to the exile in which there was a theological agenda regarding identity and the distinctiveness of the Israelite community in the face of assimilation. The acute threat of assimilation came to be symbolized by the problem of mixed marriages.

By placing this text at this point in the tradition, two things are accomplished:

- 1) There is a mild criticism of Esau.
- 2) This gives an alternative reason for Jacob's flight from his family to his uncle Laban in Haran.