



## The Essentials Series

Week 6 – Jacob Gen 27-28,32-33

St. George's Episcopal Church

Spring 2015

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### Introducing Jacob

- The story of Jacob is given in Book/*Toledot* 8 in Genesis. Book 8 is called the “generations of Isaac” (25:19), but like Book 6, this book is primarily about the titular patriarch’s son (Jacob), not Isaac.
  - In a number of the Genesis toledots, the title figure serves more as a place marker than an indication of its content. Thus the “generations of Terah” (11:27-25:11) are almost entirely about his son Abraham, and the “generations of Isaac” (25:19-35:29) are almost entirely about his son Jacob; and as we shall see in Book 10 (37:2-50:26) the “generations of Jacob” are almost entirely about his son Joseph.
  - In this account, the second half of Isaac’s life is blanked. The first half, full of God’s provision and Isaac’s blessing, is given in Book 6. In particular we note God explicitly ratifying his covenant promise to Abraham now passing to Isaac (26:2-5).
  - But now, in Book 8, we see an aging Isaac who has become sedentary and rather neglectful of the needs of his family and his duties to guide them.
- Isaac’s wife Rebekah, like Sarah earlier, was barren; again raising the similar narrative tension as to the fate and continuation of the promised seed. This time, however, Isaac prays to the Lord on behalf of Rebekah, and the Lord answers his request and she becomes pregnant with twins, but they faithfully await that answer for 20 years! (40 to 60 years old, 25:20 cf. 25:26b)
  - She inquires of the Lord regarding her children and the reply is a prophecy (25:23) indicating that there are two nations in her womb which will be divided (recall Peleg in Gen 10:25, during whose days ‘the earth was divided), and one will be stronger than the other, and the older will service the younger (recall also Noah’s cursing of Ham in Gen 9:25).
  - Rebekah gives birth to twin boys, Esau the elder and Jacob the younger. Esau was ‘red, all his body like a hairy cloak’; Jacob was born grabbing at Esau’s heel, thus his name means “grabby”, an indication of his character as we shall see.

### Jacob & Esau

- We are told two simple facts of the boys when they grew up: their trade/lifestyle, and their relationship to their parents.
  - Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. Jacob is clearly intelligent and rather conniving, but so is his mother.
  - Isaac loved Esau; Rebekah loved Jacob. How troublesome it is in families when parents play favorites! However, while the narrator provides the reason for Isaac’s love of Esau (the game his hunting skills provided), Rebekah’s reason for loving Jacob is blanked. It is not unreasonable to infer that at least part of her preferential affection derives from the prophetic word over Jacob.
- Esau sells his birthright
  - Jacob, whose name means ‘to grab’ or ‘to cheat’, lives up to his namesake when he bargains Esau out of his birthright, when the latter returns from the fields so exhausted he trades his inheritance (or birthright) to Jacob for a pot of stew!
  - Jacob is portrayed as a devious, civilized man of foresight, and Esau as a crass man driven by the needs of the immediate. Esau’s unworthiness is illustrated without exaggerating Jacob’s worthiness (Waltke, 361). Esau’s further unworthiness is illustrated when he takes Hittite wives, a double sin of both polygamy and seeking a spouse from outside the appropriate tribal lines, the result of which makes life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah (see Gen 26:34-35).
- Jacob deceives Isaac and steal’s his blessing
  - Nearing the end of his life, Isaac has become blind and requests of Esau one last meal of the game he hunts. Rebekah overhears this request and seizes the opportunity to elevate Jacob.
  - She convinces Jacob to disguise himself as Esau and receive Isaac’s blessing. Isaac’s blessing is a recapitulation of the Abrahamic covenant (27:26-29).

- The ruse works and, fearful of an understandably irate and wrathful Esau, Jacob leaves with his parents blessing to the kinsfolk of his mother – specifically, her brother (his uncle) Laban – to find a wife. Ironically, Esau’s further unworthiness and frustration is revealed when he takes a third wife, but this time from an Ishmaelite family, hoping to win back favor with his parents.

### **Jacob’s Vision of God**

- On his way from his homestead in Beersheba to Haran, Jacob’s life is forever changed when God intervenes in a direct and significant way.
  - Recall that Terah, Abraham’s father, had moved and settled in Haran from their previous home in Ur (Chaldea/Babylon). It was from Haran that the Lord then called Abraham to Canaan.
  - One night during his journey he has a dream or vision (28:10-17) in which two things happen. He sees a stairway to heaven and he hears the voice of the Lord.
- God affirms he is the God of Abraham his grandfather, and of Isaac his father, and now re-ratifies the successive Abrahamic covenant with Jacob, with five key points, all very similar and in some cases verbatim with the earlier promises:
  - the land of Canaan promised to Jacob and his offspring,
  - affirms the vast number of offspring (interestingly the analogy this time is not the stars, as it was with Abraham, but with the dust of the earth, 28:14, cf. 15:5),
  - that they shall spread all over the earth to the east, west, north, and south (Creation Mandate, Gen 1:28),
  - and that in Jacob and his offspring shall all the nations/families of the earth be blessed
  - God will always be with Jacob and will keep him and bring him back to the land.
- Thus God continues to be faithful despite the sinfulness of his chosen family, and he continues to preserve the line of the Promised Seed and to keep his promises.
- The scene of “Jacob’s Ladder” (an inaccurate term, from an even more theologically erroneous hymn) is centered on the image of “angels ascending and descending”.
  - The concept here is a connection or union between heaven and earth. Ancient Sumerian ziggurats were given names like, “The House Binding [Uniting] Heaven and Earth”. However the point being that contact between heaven and earth is God’s doing, vs. Babel.
  - This is an odd scene, one that is not referred to again in the Bible until Jesus declares in John 1:51 to his new disciple Nathaniel that, “you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man”.
  - Jesus’ statement is an unmistakable reference to Jacob’s vision, only Jesus is now declaring that the union of heaven and earth is not a stairway, but a Person, namely, himself. Thus Jacob’s vision is an early anticipation of the Incarnation

### **Jacob Wrestles With God**

- Jacob and his wives:
  - Jacob falls in love with Laban’s daughter Rachel, but is tricked into marrying her sister Leah, and gets her handmaiden in the bargain. He eventually marries Rachel and gets her handmaiden too. He has children by all four, although for a long time Rachel is barren. She eventually gives birth to two sons, first Joseph, and then dies giving birth to Benjamin.
  - Jacob finally is led to return home and confront his brother Esau. He has grown wealthy and prosperous over the years, but he still (rightly) fears his brother’s retribution. Yet he specifically recalls and trusts God’s covenant promise in his prayers (32:9-12). We pray on the promises.
- Wrestling with a man (32:22-23)
  - The night before he is to meet Esau, a man appear from nowhere and wrestles with Jacob all night. By the story’s end we see that the ‘man’ was in fact God.
  - The man does not prevail over Jacob, and in the end Jacob asks for a blessing. The man/God asks his name, his reply is essentially a confession. He then gives him a new name, Israel, which means ‘he strives with God’.
  - The next morning Jacob is reunited with Esau, who forgives Jacob and accepts restitution. Jacob left in fear and selfishness, and returns with covenant blessing and fullness. Jacob does not stay with Esau, probably for the best, but moves to Succoth (bad) and then Bethel (good).

Next Week: The Adventures of Joseph – Genesis 37 & 41:46-57