

# WISDOM FROM THE BEGINNING: PART VI – SECTION I

## JACOB AND ESAU: BROTHERS IN CONFLICT

I. In chapter 25, verse 19, the book then turns to the next generation, Jacob and Esau.

A. The first part of the chapter described the deaths of Abraham and Ishmael, even though those events occurred after the birth of Jacob and Esau. The placement of those events first is meant to give a sense of the passing of the other generations and families in preparation for the ascendance of Jacob.

B. Verses 19 and 20 recount the history of Abraham and Isaac up to this point. There is an emphasis that here there is a continuity of the past and present.

1. For the first time, the covenant has been handed onto a son, who receive the covenant rather than accepting it for the first time as an adult. He still must choose to carry it out.

2. The text emphasizes that Isaac was forty when he married Rebekah. Forty years, although longer than the typical generation, was a shorthand for a full generation. Thus, for example, the Chosen People would wander in the desert for forty years until that generation (i.e. the leaders and other adults) died off. Likewise, Jesus said in about 31-33 A.D. that "this generation would not pass away" until His prediction of the destruction of the Temple was fulfilled; that occurred in 70 A.D.

3. The text also emphasizes that Rebekah's family were Arameans. Although closely related to Abraham, they are not a part of the covenant.

C. As with Sarah before here (and Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife later) Rebekah is at first barren, here for twenty years. However, here, unlike those cases, Isaac turns to God in extended prayer, rather than the human solution of taking a concubine. Isaac at first seems far more pious than Abraham.

1. Some of the Church fathers, building on the comparison of the (planned) sacrifice of Isaac to the sacrifice of Christ, also compare the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah to the marriage of Christ and His Church. See St. Caesarius of Arles, Sermon 85; Origin, Homilies on Genesis 10:5; St. Ambrose, Isaac, or the Soul 1:2. This time of sterility is an image of the time it often takes between the first preaching of the Gospel and the many prayers, until conversions take place. It is also a comfort to women who have trouble conceiving that many holy women, such as Sarah, Rebekah, Hannah (the mother of Samuel) and St. Elizabeth did the same. See also Wis. 3:13-4:6.

D. God grants Isaac's prayers, but in an unexpected fashion, in the form of twins who are (in a sense) fighting even within the womb. Here, Rachel turns to God in prayer and God tells her that she will be the mother, not of one, but of two nations.

1. If one believes in promigeniture, twins create a problem because both of them are basically the same age.

2. God gives a mysterious promise regarding the two sons and the two nations, which could be translated either, "The elder shall serve the younger," or "The elder, the younger shall serve." It is clear that there will be some dominance, but either one could be dominant. In a sense, both promises would be true. Israel would come to dominate the religious promises, but the foreign nations, exemplified by Esau and the Edomites who would descend from him would sometimes dominate Israel. In particular, Herod the Great, who ruled over the Promised Land when Christ was born, was Edomite.

3. Dr. Leon Kaas argues that this relations between Esau and Jacob, and the nations that would descend from them, is emblematic of the continual relations between political and religious power, sometimes getting along and sometimes in conflict. See *The Beginning of Wisdom* 379 f.n. 1.

4. It is not clear whether God causes, and thus wishes, for this dominance, or whether He is simply warning about a conflict to come. God may have been even giving Rebekah a role in deciding which son would inherit the covenant.

E. Early on, the difference between the two sons is apparent.

1. Right at birth, the first-born Esau is ruddy and hairy, indicating physical strength and a more obviously dominant personality. Jacob is gripping his heel, indicating more one who follows.

- The Jacob is derived from the Hebrew word for heel. Esau's second name Edom is based roughly on the Hebrew word for red.

2. As the two sons grow up, Esau becomes more the adventuresome, athletic type, while Jacob prefers the quiet life. Not surprisingly, Isaac, who has probably spent a lot of time in the wilderness, prefers Esau, while Rebekah, a daughter of a wealthy family and a woman who knew how to manage domestic affairs, prefers Jacob.

3. Noteworthy, the difference is in personalities, not moral quality. Neither brother is plainly morally better than the other. Given the next event, the fact that Esau seems cleverer and Jacob simple is ironic; expectations will soon be reversed.

4. Isaac's flaws are becoming apparent as he prefers Esau because he likes game, which could either mean that he simply likes meat, or that he likes hunting. Either way, it is a rather superficial preference. The text does not describe Rebekah's motives. It is possible that the next event is designed to explain her preference.

F. The next episode gives a clear indication that Jacob will be the one to inherit the covenant.

1. The event, where Esau sells the birthright of the firstborn for a meal, probably occurs when both of them are teenagers, or perhaps in their early 20s. The birthright was the special blessing that the firstborn would receive, religious and leadership responsibilities, and the larger share of the estate. Here, however, the birthright is of vastly greater importance because it means carrying on the covenant.

- Esau plainly does not understand the importance of the birthright. Partially, it is probably because he does not care about long-range planning. Partially, it is because he is unaware of the spiritual significance, and thinks that it only involves some division of property long in the future, which may or may not even occur. Esau cares about establishing his current dominance by having Jacob serve him.

2. At one level, this account explains why Jacob is exalted in blessings above Esau.
  - a. Jacob has probably been trying to get Esau to sell him the birthright several times, and now, with Esau exhausted, probably both emotionally and physically, Jacob has his chance.
  - b. Jacob probably planned the event, preparing his best food for Esau's return and setting the stage. This time is probably not the first that Esau has returned and wanted Jacob to prepare him a meal.
  - c. Esau is plainly not at all cultured, for he refers to the meal simply as "the red stuff" and the word here for eat more literally means "gulp down."
  - d. Jacob's actions seem rather conniving, but his intelligence and planning does indicate that he will be much more able to carry on the covenant than Esau.
  - e. At the end of the event, the readers understand the significance, but Esau plainly does not; he simply goes on his way, probably thinking that he has once again gotten Jacob to serve him.

f. In addition, no one consulted Isaac about the sale, and it is not clear that anyone tells him. (Jacob probably did tell Rebekah, for she would be glad of it.) It is not clear how effective the arrangement is without Isaac's approval.

3. At a more symbolic level, there is the replacement of the hunter/hero figure with the a less heroic business-like figure. Hunting in general is more exciting, but less reliable than farming and caring for a household. The whole event reflects to some degree the passing of a more chaotic, fluid era in which mighty men were dominant to an era of stable societies in which less exciting, but more reliable men of business are taking over.
4. At a spiritual level, St. John Chrysostom compares any sin, especially mortal sin, as inestimably more foolish than Esau, for it involves selling everlasting glory for a temporary gain. Homilies on Genesis 50:7.

II. After describing birth, early life, and early rivalry of Esau and Jacob, the text once again turns to Isaac's dealings with the world. With God's blessings, Isaac flourishes, but he needs to learn to trust in God.

A. Chapter 26 describes Isaac's adventures in the same land as his father Abraham, with many similarities, but now increasing in tension.

1. The first five verses describe God speaking with Isaac and giving him promises similar to those given to Abraham. Verses 23-25 describe another vision and an altar.

2. The next six verses describe a famine that forces Isaac to go to Geraar, where a king named Abimelech again lives. And like Abraham, he engages in deception regarding his wife to save himself.

3. As with Abraham's purchase of a grave for Sarah and following dispute over a well, there is a dispute over land. But here the resolution, while still resolved peacefully, is less amicable. But Isaac's ownership of land in the Promised Land is confirmed.

B. The chapter begins with a promise as Abraham received and another famine, like the occurred shortly after Abraham entered the Promised Land, which led him to go to Egypt.

1. Here the famine occurs first and Isaac goes toward Egypt. But, instead of God's call to migrate to the Promised Land, and acquiescence when Abraham went to Egypt, God calls upon Isaac to remain in the Promised Land.

- Isaac had apparently lived to the northeast of Gerar and was on his way to Egypt, which was presumably not affected by the famine, when God appeared to him.

- Isaac is in the Promised Land and thus the call is to remain and make it work. The spiritual life is, in one way a journey, as with Abraham, but in another way, a steady consistency, as with Isaac.

2. God makes promises to Isaac similar to those He made to Abraham, regarding the land, descendants, and a blessing that would be conferred through Isaac's descendants to all nations.

- The promises are based, not upon anything Isaac has so far done, but rather upon Abraham's faithfulness. But Isaac does cooperate by remaining in the land of Gerar. Grace is first a gift of God, without human merit, but we choose whether to act upon it.

C. There is an episode of deceit with the citizens of Gerar that is in some ways similar and in some ways different from the similar event when Abraham went to Gerar and described Sarah as his wife.

1. Isaac had probably heard of his parent's stratagem in dealing with the people of Gerar by passing Sarah off as Abraham's wife. Here, Isaac and Rebekah are cousin's once removed, and thus the same deceitful, but partially true claim is available. Isaac and Rebekah do not resort to it at once, but when the people of Gerar ask about her, they goes

back the trick Abraham and Sarah used.

- Although described later, the event probably took place before the birth of Esau and Jacob, for their presence would have made the deceit very difficult. Still, it occurs at least 41 years, and probably a few more, from the similar event with Abraham and Sarah.

2. Here, the discovery does not occur by a revelation from God, but rather naturally.
  - a. The people of Gerar may have wondered whether Isaac was using the same deceit his father did and thus held back from trying to marry Rebekah.
  - b. It is Abimilech again (likely a son or grandson of the Abimilech who had dealt with Abraham more than 40 years earlier.) Isaac is much clumsier than Abraham and lets the secret out by his dealings with Rebekah, apparently in public view, which the king discovered by looking out his window.
  
3. Abimilech is a just and prudent king, who is again outraged by the deceit, which could have led to a grave sin and punishment. Isaac, like Abraham, excuses his actions by fear. Noteworthily, Abimilech does not dispute the claim that the people may have killed Isaac for his wife. Here, and later in the chapter, the king does not have full control over his people.

D. Despite his failings, Isaac is blessed by God and enjoys great prosperity, but also the envy of the people.

1. In a dramatic reversal of the famine, Isaac reaps a hundred-fold from his crop. A hundredfold return would be at the very highest level. Cf. Mark 4:8. There is an implication that Isaac continued year and year to be prosperous beyond that of the people in the same area.

2. The prosperity creates envy as prosperity often does. But there is probably also an element of fear that Isaac and his people will claim the land. The residents had filled up the wells Abraham's people had dug, rather than use them, probably in order to eliminate evidence of Abraham's use and improvement of the land.

3. Abimelech, again just and prudent, simply asks Isaac to leave to avoid a conflict. He cannot completely control his own people's envy, but he knows Isaac is blessed by God.
  
4. Twice Isaac, also eager to avoid a conflict, moves to a further area, but in both cases, the people argue that the wells he digs belong to them.
  - He re-digs the same wells Abraham's people dug and gives them the same name. He understands their symbolic importance as continuing Abraham's claim to the land. The native people presumably understand the same thing and thus dispute the claim.
  
  - The campsites were in wadis, which were ravines that would have rivers or streams when there was rain, but would be dry at other times. There would presumably be water beneath the surface even when the surface was dry.
  
  - The fact that there was only one main well in the campsite indicates that Isaac is not there with the whole people of Abraham. Presumably, he is not leading as large a number of people that Abraham did, which would also explain why the people are more willing to dispute with him. Rule over large numbers of other people is not necessary for God's blessings.
  
5. Finally, after the third move, Isaac is far enough away (apparently to the south as indicated by the next episode that occurs further south) that the local people do not dispute his claim to the land. That land is apparently unsettled and thus the first one to develop the land has a rightful claim to it. He digs a well, making a new claim to the land as a first indication of God's promises for all the land. The name Rehoboth means "broad place" or "room" indicating a free range.



- E. Verses 23-24 then describe Isaac returning to Beer-sheba, where Abraham and Abimelech made their agreement, to built an altar to the Lord.
1. There seems to be a holiness to that area that is understood by both the Chosen People and others. It would become the southernmost part of the Promised Land, thus marking the connecting point between the People of God and the world.
  2. God appears to Isaac and renews the covenant, connecting it again to Abraham. Isaac apparently is worried and thus the Lord assures him that he should not fear and again renews the promise of vast descendants.
  3. But Isaac is also establishing a claim to the land, indicated by another well that he digs.
- F. Abimelech returns to make another agreement with Isaac at Beer-sheba, apparently the same place where he made the pact with Abraham.
1. He comes with his councilor and military leader. Origin sees in them the symbols of all the good natural powers (political, intellectual, physical) that can be at peace with the people of God, anticipating the magi in the Gospels. See Homilies on Genesis 14:3. Noteworthily, they seem to be equals, indicating that neither type of power rules over the other, but that they here cooperate. It is in some ways the ideal of a secular world.
  2. At first, Isaac assumes a hostile intent, but the trio recognizes that God is with Isaac and wishes to be at peace with them. There is a harmony between the secular and religious powers, which is the ideal that the Church would seek. See, e.g., Matt. 22:15-22. Abimelech and his associates paper over the aggressive stance that their people took toward Isaac in driving him away, and indicate that they "allowed" him to depart in peace. They use diplomacy, but also rhetorical skill, to make the pact with one blessed by the Lord.

3. Isaac responds favorably and not only agrees to a pact of non-aggression, but also hold a great feast. He wants, not only peace, but friendship between the nations.
  
4. There is a dramatic contrast between Abimelech and Isaac. Abimelech has the greater natural abilities, and (unlike his people) virtue and peacefulness; but these virtues will die with him. Isaac is not as politically skilled or powerful, but the blessings flow through him to future generations. The contrast is an indication of the future contrast between worldly greatness, which lasts for a time, and God's blessing upon the first Israel and the new Israel, the Church.

G. The scene closes with Isaac's servants finding water for a new well, which they will now keep. The well is not only good news in itself, but also establishes once again a permanent claim on the land.