

## The Old Testament Part Four: Isaac, Jacob and Joseph Genesis 25-50

In the last article, we looked at the Abraham story which primarily focused on Abraham as a man of great faith. Now we move to the stories of the other great Patriarchs of the nation of Israel: Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. As you will see, Isaac's story is quite short. The few chapters that focus on Isaac have as much to do with Abraham and his son, Jacob, as with him.

In chapter 24, we read the story of how Abraham's messenger helped find Isaac a wife (Rebekah) from Abraham's family.

Rebekah's joy at being pregnant is quickly turned into anxiety and depression when she notices the twins within her wrestling with each other. She turns to God for help. God responds in the form of an oracle which is the centerpiece of these verses. God tells Rebekah: "*Two nations are in your womb, two peoples are quarreling while still within you; but one shall surpass the other, and the older shall serve the younger*" (25:23). The oracle tells Rebekah:

- She will be the mother of two nations, the Edomites (descendants of Esau) and the Israelites (descendants of Jacob). Furthermore, these two nations will be enemies.
- There will be a struggle between her sons in which the older one, Esau, will serve or be outwitted by the younger Jacob.

**Esau sells his birthright (25:29-34).** In these verses, we get a clear insight into the character of the twins. The story shows the weakness of Esau who is willing to hand over his birthright (which entitles him to a double share of the family inheritance) for a bowl of soup. In his need for instant gratification, Esau loses all sense of proportion. To seal the deal, the manipulative Jacob gets Esau to swear an oath that he has given his birthright to his brother. Never content with second place, the heel-grabber at birth will grow up and grab at Esau's privileges as the first-born son.

**Chapter 26.** In this chapter, God appears twice to Isaac (vv 2-5, 24) and renews the promise of abundance which he made to Abraham. God's blessing on Isaac is immediately seen in the abundance of the harvest and his growing wealth (vv 12-14).

### Chapter 27. Jacob gains his father's deathbed blessing by deception

The deathbed *blessing* is a spiritual inheritance. The father invokes God's grace upon his firstborn so that he can carry out his responsibility to lead his family as patriarch after his father dies. Esau, as the firstborn, should have received this very important blessing from

his father. But as we shall see, the younger son, in connivance with his mother, steals the blessing.

*Isaac explained to Esau, "Your brother came here by ruse and carried off your blessings." Esau exclaimed, "He has been well named Jacob! He has now supplanted me twice"* (vv 35-36). This chapter is divided into five scenes.

**Isaac and Esau (27:1-4).** In this scene, Isaac who is old and blind, wishes to bless his firstborn and favorite son, Esau, before he dies. In the ancient world, deathbed blessings are considered to be very important. Before he imparts his blessing, Isaac sends Esau out to prepare one of his favorite meals.

**Rebekah and Jacob (27:5-17).** When Rebekah overhears Isaac's plan to give his special blessing to Esau, she hatches a plan by which Jacob will receive the blessing intended for Esau. Jacob goes along with the plan. His only fear is being caught in the act of deception.

**Isaac and Jacob (27:18-29).** In this central scene of the chapter, the suspense is heightened by each of Isaac's statements and questions: "*Which of my sons are you?*"; "*Come closer that I may feel you*"; "*Although the voice is Jacob's, the hands are Esau's*"; "*Are you really my son Esau?*" Jacob plays his role of deception very well. He even has the audacity to suggest that God is behind his trickery: "*The Lord, your God, let things turn out well for me*" (27:20). Finally, after smelling his son's clothes, he bestows the blessing. The first part of the blessing pertains to agriculture, which speaks of the "fragrance of a field," "abundance of grain and wine." The second part concerns the domain of Israel over Edom, Esau's people. The blessing is sealed by a counter curse.

**Isaac and Esau (27:30-40).** This is a very emotional scene. When father and son become aware of Jacob's deception, Isaac is "*seized with a fit of uncontrollable trembling*" (27:33) and Esau "*bursts out into bitter sobbing*" (27:34). Esau adds: "*He has been well named Jacob! He has now supplanted me twice*" (27:36). What Isaac bestows on Esau is essentially the reverse of the blessing Jacob has received: agricultural infertility, strife, and subservience. Esau and his people, Edom, will serve Jacob's people until they finally break loose from Judah (2Kgs 8:20-22). We might wonder why Isaac didn't take back his blessing from Jacob. In ancient times, it was the strong belief that a blessing (or curse), once bestowed, prevailed (Num 22-24, particularly 23:19-20).

**Rebekah and Esau.** Because of the dirty trick Jacob pulled on Esau in stealing both his *birthright and blessing*, Esau allows a big grudge to grow in him and he

plots to murder Jacob. When Rebekah finds out Esau's plans, she strongly suggests to Jacob that he leave home and visit his uncle Laban until Esau cools down. Jacob may have been God's choice to carry forward his plan of salvation, but his act of deception has very serious consequences for him. He will spend twenty years in exile for his sin.

What are we to make of this story? The overall purpose of Genesis 12-50 is to show God's promise being carried out despite all obstacles. We should not be surprised then that Jacob is himself one of those obstacles.

The oracle in 25:23 states that the elder son will serve the younger one. Is Rebekah to be condemned for assisting in the fulfillment of the Divine Word? Was Isaac not opposing God's will by wanting to give his blessing to Esau? The narrator leaves these questions unanswered. He simply tells the story. In his mysterious plan, God chooses whom he wills – in this case, one who manipulates his brother into selling him his *birthright* and tricks his blind father into giving him his special *blessing* – another example of God writing straight with crooked lines.

#### **Chapter 28. Jacob goes in search of a wife and encounters God at Bethel**

*“Know that I am with you; I will protect you wherever you go, and bring you back to this land. I will never leave you until I have done what I promised you.”* (v.15)

In 27:46, Rebekah lets Isaac know how disgusted she is with Esau's pagan wives. As a result, Isaac strongly encourages Jacob to go back to his mother's people, also Abraham's people, and find for himself a wife.

***Dream at Bethel (28:10-22)***. During his journey to his mother's people in search of a wife, Jacob has a dream—a visit from God. During the dream, the Lord repeats the threefold promise given to Abraham and Isaac: the gifts of a promised land, innumerable descendants, and that his people will be a blessing for the nations of the earth. And for his present journey, which is about to become challenging, Jacob is to remember that *“God is with him and will protect him wherever he goes”* (28:15).

When Jacob wakes up, he realizes that *“truly the Lord is in this place, although he did not know it. With a shout of joy he cries out: ‘How awesome is this shrine! This is nothing else but an abode of God...’”* (28:17). Jacob renames the place Bethel which means “House of God.” Jacob also blesses the stone and sets it up as a memorial stone. The chapter ends with Jacob bargaining with God: “I will serve you if you take care of my immediate needs for protection and food.”

#### **Jacob marries, becomes the father of twelve sons and one daughter, and escapes from his uncle. (chs 29:1-23:3).**

In chapters 29-31, Jacob arrives in Haran and ends up marrying his uncle Laban's two daughters, Leah and Rachel. He works for his uncle for fourteen years because he failed to bring his gifts for receiving their hand in marriage. Jacob has twelve sons and one daughter (Dinah) with four different women: Leah, Rachel and their maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah. Rachel, who like Sarah suffers from barrenness, finally gives birth to Joseph (30:22-24).

In his search for a wife, Jacob gets a taste of his own medicine as a trickster. Jacob's true love is for Rachel, the younger of the two sisters. But according to custom, the younger sister should not marry before the older sister. When the wedding evening arrives, Laban makes a cunning switch. At the end of the marriage feast, instead of bringing Rachel to Jacob, he brings the elder daughter Leah. In the dark of night Jacob consummates his marriage with a woman whom he presumes is Rachel. We can imagine his surprise the next day when he discovers what happened. The deceiver finds himself deceived; the trickster has been tricked. Jacob's twelve sons are destined to become the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel.

**30:25-32:3** tells the story of how Jacob, now with a large family, successfully frees himself from the clutches of his Uncle Laban.

***Jacob reconciles with Esau (32:4-33:20)***. In 32:4-22, Jacob takes four steps to prepare for a successful meeting with Esau who wanted to murder him twenty years ago after he stole his father's deathbed blessing. First he sends messengers with a conciliatory note to Esau (vv 4-7). Next, fearing for his own safety and that of his family, he divides his whole entourage in two. In this way, if one is attacked, the other will be spared (vv 8-9). Thirdly, he prays (vv 10-13). Finally, he sends a huge gift of livestock to Esau (vv 14-22).

***Jacob wrestling with an angel (32:23-33)*** is one of the best known texts in the Old Testament. During the night, Jacob enters into a wrestling match with a stranger, a heavenly creature in human form. The man who wrestled his brother out of his birthright and outwitted his uncle now wrestles with the Almighty. They wrestle all night until dawn.

When the stranger sees that he cannot prevail, he asks to be let go. But the warrior Jacob says: *“I will not let you go until you bless me”* (32:27). The blessing comes in the form of a name change. *“Henceforth, you shall no longer be spoken of as Jacob, but as Israel,*

because you have contended with divine and human beings and have prevailed” (32:29). Now he will be remembered as one who wrestled or contended with God and prevailed. His being is profoundly changed by his wrestling experience.

This event has been used as a source of encouragement for us whenever we struggle in our relationship with God. The *Catechism* states: “From this account, the spiritual tradition of the church has retained the symbol of prayer as a battle of faith and as a triumph of perseverance” (2573).

**Chapter 33** describes the emotional reconciliation between Jacob and Esau.

**Chapter 34** is an interruption to the story. Like our modern day movies, it is a story of sex and violence.

**Bethel revisited 35:1-7.** God calls out to Jacob and tells him to take his whole family to Bethel in Canaan. Before he departs, Jacob orders his family to get rid of all foreign gods and purify themselves. At Bethel, God appears to Jacob and renews the promise he made to Isaac and Abraham—the promise concerning a land and many descendants.

**Chapter 35:16-20.** Just before she dies, Rachel gives birth to a son and names him Benoni. But Jacob changes his name to Benjamin—“the son of my right hand.” In her commentary on *Genesis*, Pauline Viviano writes. “In the ancient world it was thought that there was a mysterious relationship between a name and its bearer; a name could determine the destiny of its bearer. Rather than mark the life of the child by the sorrow surrounding his birth, Jacob wisely gives the child a name that suggests an honorable and successful future” (p.102).

Crying while giving birth, Rachel comes to represent for future generations of Israelites, the suffering of motherhood. “Rachel weeping for her children” is an Israelite proverb. It is mentioned in Jer 31:15 and in the New Testament in Mt2:18 to express the horror of Herod’s massacre of the innocents. In our church, the *Rachel Ministry* is dedicated to bringing healing into the lives of women who have had an abortion.

**Concluding remarks.** Jacob was not the most honest guy in the world. Much of what he had, he got from tricking or cheating others. Despite his many shortcomings, he loved God, and God found ways to use him to further his plan of saving the human race. From Jacob’s story, we learn that God can use anyone and not just those who are very virtuous and saintly.

## **Chapters 37-50: Joseph**

Joseph is the last of the great Patriarchs. During his time, Jacob’s family move from Canaan to Egypt—which sets the stage for the Exodus story which follows.

The story of Joseph, which is sometimes described as a short novel, is pretty straightforward and does not require much commentary. On a human level, it is the story of how one man moved from rags to riches. On another level, it shows how God continues to care for his people and use the evil designs of men to further God’s plan of salvation.

The key to Joseph’s rise to fame was his ability to interpret dreams, especially frightening dreams of the *Pharaoh*, the King of Egypt. Joseph tells the Pharaoh that his dreams portend a time of great famine and a time of great abundance. During the time of famine, Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt in search of food and have an emotional reconciliation with their brother.

The meaning of the Joseph story is revealed in 50:20. Joseph says to his brothers: “Even though you meant to harm me, God meant it for good, to achieve his present end, the survival of many people.” God takes the many evils upon Joseph and uses them to bring about a great good—to put Joseph in a position in Egypt where he could save his family and many others from starvation. The story prefigures the story of Jesus in which God used the greatest evil in history to bring about the greatest good—the salvation of the human family.

**Judah.** The Book of Genesis concludes with Jacob gathering his twelve sons around him for a final blessing before he dies (49:9-10). These sons will become the patriarchal fathers of the twelve tribes that will make up the nation of Israel. One son—Judah—receives a unique blessing that foretells that God will bring a great King from Judah’s descendants. Who is this king? Some see a partial fulfillment of the prophecy in King David, but ultimately, it points to Jesus who comes from the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5-6).