

Genesis 25 – Birth of Esau and Jacob

Review

Last time we looked at the death of Sarah and Abraham's purchase of the Cave of Machpelah from Ephron the Hittite as a burial site. Then we considered the amazing story of Abraham's servant whom Abraham sent to the land of his people to seek a wife for his son Isaac. We saw that the servant made a very specific prayer of supplication when he arrived in Paddan-Aram and God answered immediately very specifically by bringing the servant into contact with Abraham's family there and allowing the servant to return to Canaan with Rebekah – Abraham's great niece – as a wife for Isaac.

Abraham's Descendants and Death

¹*Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah* [קטורה qîṭûrâ - incense].
²*She bore him Zimran* [זמרן zimrân - musician], *Jokshan* [יֶקְשָׁן yāqšān - snarer], *Medan* [מֵדָן mēdān - contention], *Midian* [מִדְיָן midyān - strife], *Ishbak* [יִשְׁבַּק yišbāq - he releases], and *Shuah* [שׁוּאֵה šûah - wealth].
³*Jokshan fathered Sheba* [שֶׁבַע šēbā' - seven, an oath] and *Dedan* [דֵּדָן dēdān - low country].
The sons of Dedan were Asshurim [אֲשׁוּרִי 'aššûrî - steps], *Letushim* [לְטוּשִׁים ləṭûšim - hammered], and *Leummim* [לְאֻמִּים l'ummîm - peoples].
⁴*The sons of Midian were Ephah* [עִפָּה 'ēpâ - gloomy], *Epher* [עֶפֶר 'ēper - a calf], *Hanoch* [חֲנוֹךְ hānôk - dedicated], *Abida* [אַבִּידָע 'ābîdā' - my father knows], and *Eldaah* [אֶלְדָּא 'eldā'â - God has known].
All these were the children of Keturah. Genesis 25:1-4 (ESV)

Here once again, we find a long list of names. I have included the Hebrew and their meanings for completeness, but most of them have little significance to the overall theme of God's Word – the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed, some are found only here.

Midian became the progenitor of the Midianite people dwelling in the Sinai and the northern Arabian Peninsula. Fearing the wrath of Pharaoh, Moses fled to Midian after murdering an Egyptian. Moses took a Midianite wife, and while he was tending the flocks of her father Jethro, God first spoke to Moses from the burning bush ([Exodus 2-3](#)). Later on, the Midianites conspired with the Moabites to oppose the passage of the Israelite people into the Land of Promise following their forty-year wilderness wandering, but the Israelites defeated them in battle ([Numbers 22](#), [25](#), and [31](#)). After the conquest of Canaan, Gideon defeated the Midianites again in battle with only three hundred soldiers ([Judges 6-8](#)).

Sheba is a commonly reused name in the Bible. The Queen of Sheba who visited King Solomon ([1 Kings 10](#)) ruled over a nation in southern Arabia. She was descended from Noah's son Ham and grandson Cush, not from Abraham's son. Recall that Abraham (and thus Jesus' mother Mary and step-father Joseph) was descended from Noah's son Shem, not Ham.

Dedan is another reused name. The Dedan mentioned here as a grandson of Abraham should not be confused with the Dedan first mentioned in [Genesis 10:7](#), who like Sheba was a grandson of Noah and forefather of a people who lived in southern Arabia. That Dedan figures in the prophecy of Jeremiah (25:23 & 49:8) and in Ezekiel's prophecy, particularly in the future prophecy of the attack on Israel by Gog of Magog ([Ezekiel 38](#)).

NOTE – The names listed here as sons of Dedan are actually the names of peoples not individuals as indicated by the ים – *im* suffix.

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⁵Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. ⁶But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, and while he was still living he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country. Genesis 25:5-6 (ESV)

Abraham knew that Isaac's descendants were to be the ones who would inherit the land of Canaan in accordance with God's promise. So, he sent his other children out of the land. Nevertheless, Abraham provided an inheritance for his other children as we see here.

⁷These are the days of the years of Abraham's life, 175 years. ⁸Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. ⁹Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, ¹⁰the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with Sarah his wife. ¹¹After the death of Abraham, God blessed Isaac his son. And Isaac settled at Beer-lahai-roi. Genesis 25:7-11

(ESV)

So now after 14 chapters in Genesis we come to the end of the story of Abraham's life. God had called Abram to leave the house of his father in Haran and journey to the land of Canaan when he was seventy-five years old. Apart from brief sojourn in Egypt, Abraham had lived as a stranger and a nomad in Canaan for a century. During that time, although he was very prosperous, Abraham had always lived in tents, never owning any part of the land itself apart from the cave of Machpelah in Hebron near Mamre in which he and his wife Sarah were buried. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Abraham believed the promise of God that He would give the land to Abraham's descendants ([Genesis 12:7](#)), and Abraham's faith in that promise has been credited to him as righteousness ([Genesis 15:6](#)).

The story of Abraham provides us an answer to a challenging question – Are the Old Testament saints who believed in and followed the LORD saved even though they lived and died before Jesus was ever born? Jesus Himself provides the answer to that question in His response to a ridiculous hypothetical question that the Sadducees (who ironically didn't believe in resurrection from the dead at all) posed to Him in an attempt to discredit Him with His own words.

²⁶And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? ²⁷He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong. Mark 12:26-27 (ESV)

Exactly how the Old Testament saints receive eternal life has been the subject of some debate down through the centuries, since none of these patriarchs ever had the opportunity while they were still alive in the flesh to believe in their hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead, and confess with their mouths the Lordship of Jesus as we are told we must do to be saved in [Romans 10:9](#). Some have proposed that during the two days between His death on the cross and His resurrection, Jesus Himself descended into Hades and preached the Gospel to these Old Testament believers who then had the opportunity to either accept or reject that preaching. I personally reject this idea. It seems to conflict with Jesus' own teachings – particularly the one we just looked at in [Mark 12](#), and Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus in [Luke 16](#). Exactly what provision God has made for the salvation of His followers who died prior to Jesus' birth in the flesh must remain a mystery until we

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ourselves are transformed in an instant and join together with our LORD and all of our brethren who have gone before us.

Ishmael's Sons

¹²These are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's servant, bore to Abraham. ¹³These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, named in the order of their birth: Nebaioth [נְבִיאוֹת nēbāyōt - heights], the firstborn of Ishmael; and Kedar [קֶדָר qēdār - dark], Adbeel [אֲדַבְעֵל 'adb'ēl - chastened of God], Mibsam [מִבְּשָׁם miḥśām - sweet odor], ¹⁴Mishma [מִשְׁמָה mišmā - a hearing], Dumah [דּוּמָה dūmā - silence], Massa [מַסָּא maśśā' - burden], ¹⁵Hadad [חֲדָד ḥāḏaḏ - mighty], Tema [תֵּמָה tēmā' - desert], Jetur [יֵטוּר yēṭūr - enclosed], Naphish [נַפִּיֵשׁ nāpīš - refreshment], and Kedemah [קֶדְמָה qēdmā - original]. ¹⁶These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages and by their encampments, twelve princes according to their tribes. ¹⁷(These are the years of the life of Ishmael: 137 years. He breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people.) ¹⁸They settled [שָׁקַן šākan] from Havilah to Shur, which is opposite Egypt [מִצְרַיִם miṣrayim] in the direction of Assyria. He settled [נָפַל nāpāl] over against [פָּנִים pānīm] all his kinsmen. Genesis 25:12-18 (ESV)

Recall ([Genesis 17:15-21](#)) that even until the year before Isaac was born, Abraham was still promoting Ishmael as a viable “plan B” for God to bring about His promise to give the land of Canaan to Abraham’s descendants. But God was adamant that Isaac – the son of promise – was to be the one whose descendants would inherit the land. Nevertheless, God said He would also bless Ishmael and that he would be the father of twelve princes. Here in [Genesis 25:13-16](#) we find a listing of them. Of the twelve, only six are mentioned elsewhere apart from the genealogies found in Chronicles.

- **Nebajoth** – mentioned specifically in [Genesis 28:9](#) as the brother of Esau’s wife – Mahalath. But of course, all twelve of Ishmael’s sons were her brothers. The capital city of Nebajoth’s descendants was the rock city of Petra in what is now southwest Jordan.
- **Kedar** – Mentioned in the prophecies of Isaiah (21:16-17, 42:11 & 60:7), Jeremiah (2:10 & 49:28), and [Ezekiel 27:21](#), which all foretell the downfall of Kedar’s descendants who were Bedouin people living in the Arabian Peninsula.
- **Dumah** – Mentioned in [Isaiah 21:11](#) in association with the downfall of Edom (Esau).
- **Tema** – Mentioned in [Isaiah 21:14](#) and [Jeremiah 25:23](#) in conjunction with their prophecies of the defeat of Arabia.
- **Jetur and Naphish** – The descendants of these two sons of Ishmael were defeated by the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh in conjunction with their conquest of the lands east of the Jordan that they then took as their allocations in the Promised Land of Canaan ([1 Chronicles 5:19-22](#)). Jetur’s lands included Bashan known today as the Golan Heights.

Before we press on, let’s take a closer look at Genesis 25:18. Recall from [our study of Genesis 16](#) when God told Hagar at Beer-lahai-roi that she was pregnant with Ishmael, we saw two distinct Hebrew words translated in the ESV as “against” in Genesis 16:12. We find the second of these – פָּנִים pānīm – again here in Genesis 25:18 translated once more in the ESV as “against.” But recall that when we looked at Genesis 16:12, we found that some English language translations translated פָּנִים pānīm as

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“in hostility toward” or “in defiance of.” So it is with some translations of Genesis 25:18. But I believe that the NLT, NIV, and NASB have gotten the meaning of פָּנִים **pānîm** in both these contexts wrong!

My reasoning is due to the presence in Genesis 25:18 of two separate Hebrew words that are both translated in the ESV as “settled.” The first of these – שָׁכַן **šākan** – does indeed mean abide, dwell, reside, or settle. But the second – נָפַל **nāpāl** – means to fall or lie prostrate as one might well expect since the context of the verse is the death of Ishmael. It would be very difficult indeed for Ishmael – being dead – to be in defiance of or in opposition to anything or anyone. Thus, I think the NLT, NIV, and NASB are wrong in the way they render פָּנִים **pānîm** here (and in fact in how they rendered the same word in Genesis 16:12). The meaning of Genesis 25:18 is clearly that Ishmael lay down and died in the presence of his family as well he should have.

ASIDE – Look at the [Descendants of Ham](#) and [Patriarchs in Canaan](#) maps. Although we are told clearly in this passage that Havilah and Shur were east of Egypt (מִצְרַיִם **miṣrayim**), the precise locations of these two places remains a mystery. We have seen references to Shur throughout the Genesis narrative of Abraham’s life. Havilah, you may recall from [our study of Genesis 9-10](#), is mentioned in [Genesis 2:11-12](#) as a place that has high-quality gold around which the River Pishon flowed after leaving Eden.

The Birth of Esau and Jacob

¹⁹These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham fathered Isaac, ²⁰and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife. ²¹And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. Genesis 25:19-21 (ESV)

Here once more we see an example of a recurring theme that we find throughout God’s Word – infertility. In virtually all ancient cultures when a couple was childless, it was assumed that the problem rested with the woman. Recall that when Sarai gave her Egyptian maidservant Hagar to Abram so that he could father a son through her, there was never any question whether the couple’s childlessness might be due to Abram’s impotence. Infertility was a shameful thing for a woman. The infertile woman was shunned by the mothers of her community as if infertility were a communicable disease. It was considered a curse from God, and people (even and especially the woman herself) speculated about what she might have done to cause God to curse her in this way. Tragically, those superstitions continue even today in “enlightened” modern society.

Here in this passage, we find an example of how we should respond to infertility, and to every other issue that arises in our lives. Just as Isaac did here in [Genesis 25:21](#), we need to seek the LORD’s aid and guidance in all things. Sadly, most of us only turn to God for help after we’ve exhausted all the other avenues available. Foolishly, we forget that no matter how the issues in our lives work out, God’s will in them is **always** sovereign and always for the good of those who love Him and are called in accordance with His purpose. Our own feeble efforts to solve our problems are **never** effective unless they are guided and empowered by God Almighty. We must be continually “plugged in” to God’s power and will, diligently seeking Him in prayer and searching His Word daily for the guidance we need in our lives just as Isaac did about Rebekah’s childlessness.

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5I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:5
(ESV)

22The children struggled together within her, and she said, “If it is thus, why is this happening to me?” So she went to inquire of the LORD. 23And the LORD said to her,

***“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the older shall serve the younger.”*** Genesis 25:22-23 (ESV)

Just as God blessed Isaac’s plea to allow Rebekah to conceive, so He honored Rebekah herself when she sought His counsel about her problems with her pregnancy. Notice that God did not heal the physical problems Rebekah was going through. Instead, He explained what was going on and gave her this amazing prophecy regarding her twin sons so Rebekah could have some peace of mind about it.

NOTE – The popular narrative in today’s schools, governments, and media is that the Israeli/Palestinian conflict was caused when the Jewish people returned to Canaan after World War II to establish the modern state of Israel, displacing the Palestinian people who were living there. But this conflict actually began thousands of years before as we see here in this passage. The twin boys who struggled with each other in Rebekah’s womb were the forefathers of the Israelite and Jordanian people. Jacob, who was later renamed Israel by God ([Genesis 32:28](#)) had twelve sons who became the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Esau who was also called Edom (as we shall see later in this study) became the forefather of the Edomites who occupied much of the area now known as the nation of Jordan from which the present-day Palestinian people living in Canaan originally came. Of course, the conflict between these peoples that began with these two brothers even in their mother’s womb before they were born, continues to rage today. It figures prominently in the history of Israel, and in the prophecies found in God’s Word. Many of the prophecies concerning it have been fulfilled, but some remain for the future.

24When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. 25The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau [עֵשָׂו ‘eśāv - hairy]. 26Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau’s heel, so his name was called Jacob [יַעֲקֹב ya’ăqōḇ - heel holder, supplanter]. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. Genesis 25:24-26
(ESV)

This is the first explicit mention of twins, and the only mention of human twins apart from the remarks made in John’s gospel that the apostle Thomas was also called “the Twin.” Esau and Jacob were born after Isaac and Rebekah had been married 20 years.

So now with the death of Abraham, the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, and the birth of their twin sons, our study enters the fourth major section of the Genesis narrative focusing largely on the life of Jacob and his twelve sons. With that, we find the next step along the line of descent toward Jesus the promised מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ*.

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The book of Genesis guides us along that line that began with God’s promise of a Redeemer to come who would defeat our enemy Satan first given in the Garden of Eden ([Genesis 3:15](#)). The line leading to Jesus has been traced so far through Adam and Eve’s son Seth, to Noah’s son Shem, to Abraham’s son Isaac. Now with the birth of Isaac’s son Jacob we come at last to the establishment of the nation of Israel – God’s chosen people – through whom the מָשִׁיחַ *māšīaḥ* has come.

Like many of the proper names in God’s Word, the names given to Isaac and Rebekah’s twin sons have prophetic and symbolic significance. The significance of Esau’s hairiness will be revealed in [Genesis 27](#) – the story of Isaac’s dying blessings upon his sons. In that we will also be reminded of the significance of Rebekah’s name – רִבְקָה *Ribqah* meaning “ensnarer.” Like his mother, Jacob was also a schemer who was never above pulling a dirty trick to gain some advantage over someone. As we shall soon see, Jacob conspired with his mother to take Esau’s birthright as the firstborn from him. Hence Jacob’s name – יַעֲקֹב *Ya`aqob* meaning “heel catcher” or “supplanter” is also quite apropos.

Esau Sells His Birthright

27When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. 28Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. Genesis 25:27-28 (ESV)

How tragic it is when parents allow themselves to have favorites among their children – particularly when the favorite child of the father differs from the mother’s favorite. How shameful too that Isaac loved his son Esau better just because he enjoyed eating the game that Esau killed for him. This playing of favorites within Isaac and Rebekah’s family has had repercussions that continue to this very day, and impact not just the people of Canaan, but the entire world! It is a cautionary tale that all parents would do well to heed and take a lesson from – Don’t play favorites with your children! Instead love them all identically, savoring the unique character of each one.

29Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. 30And Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!” (Therefore his name was called Edom [אֶדוֹם 'ēḏōm - red].) 31Jacob said, “Sell me your birthright now.” 32Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” 33Jacob said, “Swear to me now.” So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. 34Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. Genesis 25:29-34 (ESV)

Ancient Hebrew tradition gave a special place of honor to the firstborn sons of the family who received a double portion of the inheritance. The father’s last will and testament was often given by the father with the pronouncement of a blessing upon his sons late in life. All of this has special significance in the case of Isaac’s sons – Esau and Jacob – as we shall see in the upcoming chapters. Interestingly, this tradition is not formally codified in the written Law of Moses except in [Deuteronomy 21:15-17](#) where God directs that if a man has more than one wife, he is not to give the firstborn’s birthright to the firstborn of a second, better-loved wife in preference to the firstborn of a first, less-loved wife. This principle – which would not be handed down in the law for hundreds of

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years after Jacob's death – would become significant when it came time for Jacob to bless his own twelve sons ([Genesis 49](#)).

Having said all that, we find throughout the Word of God that this tradition of the double-blessing birthright of the firstborn is often ignored or modified – often with significant undesirable consequences. Of Jacob's own sons, Joseph – the second youngest – received the double-portion through his own sons Manasseh and Ephraim. King David was not the firstborn, but the youngest of his father Jesse's sons. When David died, he directed that his kingdom would go to his son Solomon rather than any of Solomon's older brothers.

Nevertheless, since this was a private conversation between the two brothers, Jacob would have had no way to prove that his brother had sold his birthright for a single meal. But as we shall see in [Genesis 27](#), Jacob the supplanter and his mother Rebekah the ensnarer played a little trick to make double-sure that Jacob received the double-portion when it came time for Isaac to give blessing to his sons in his old age.

Looking Ahead

Next time, we'll study Esau and Jacob's coming of age in their father Isaac's declining years, culminating with Jacob and Rebekah conspiring to cheat Esau out of his father's blessing.