

# GENESIS 25–27

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## JACOB TAKES CENTER STAGE AMONG THE DESCENDANTS OF ABRAHAM

### Overview

In Genesis 25, we read about the early history of the “many nations” that descend from Abraham, in fulfillment of the Lord’s earlier promise (at Genesis 17:4). Nahum M. Sarna summarized and discussed the significance of the genealogies provided in this chapter:

Following Isaac’s marriage, the biblical text reports nothing more of the activities of Abraham, even though the chronological system of Genesis informs us that he lived for another thirty-five years. His death and burial are now recorded, preceded and followed by genealogical lists of his descendants. Thus the entire cycle of Abrahamic traditions, which was preceded by a detailed list of Abraham’s ancestors, is encased within a framework of genealogies. The closing section, which shows how God’s promises to the patriarch were realized, is dependent on, and presupposes, a knowledge of those earlier promises.

God promised that the patriarch would be “exceedingly numerous,” “the father of a multitude of nations,” “exceedingly fertile”; the genealogical lists specify how this was brought about. Abraham had been assured, “You shall go to your fathers in peace; / You shall be buried at a ripe old age.” Here it is affirmed that he died “at a good ripe age, old and contented” and that “he was gathered to his kin.” Previously God had declared that Isaac alone was to be the true heir of the covenant; here Isaac becomes the sole beneficiary of his father’s estate and, immediately following Abraham’s death, receives the divine blessing. Previously Hagar had been promised that God would “greatly increase” her offspring, that her son Ishmael would be made “fertile and exceedingly numerous,” “the father of twelve chieftains,” “a great nation”; here the twelve chieftains are listed by name.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 170–171.

Among the many descendants of Abraham, Jacob's posterity take center stage throughout the rest of Genesis. Why was Jacob so greatly blessed when "the pivotal moments in the scriptural account of [his] life seem to turn on deceit"?<sup>2</sup>

Jacob's youthful deceptions were indeed proverbial. Note that Jesus Himself praised Nathanael by contrasting him with Jacob when He said that Nathanael, unlike Jacob, was a man without guile.<sup>3</sup> However, as in many scripture stories, we cannot fully understand the lessons of Jacob's divine tutorial unless we follow it to its end. In the Bible's version of measure-for-measure justice, Jacob the deceiver eventually suffered from the deceit of others. Eventually, among the happy results of Jacob's crucible of experience, he learned humility, forgiveness, and that God fulfills promises in His own way.

The extent of Jacob's ambition is illustrated by his struggling in the womb with his twin brother, Esau. Jacob was said to have grabbed the heel of Esau in an effort to prevent him from being the firstborn.<sup>4</sup> Because of this, Jacob's original name, *Ya-akov-'el* ("may the god El protect"<sup>5</sup>), was supplanted among some of his peers by the similar-sounding nickname 'Akev ("heel"), referring to the reputation Jacob acquired as a "heel-holder."<sup>6</sup> Jacob's grabbing his brother's heel "becomes a kind of emblem of their future relationship."<sup>7</sup> It also was a portent of several later episodes when he tried to secure through his own uninspired trickery "blessings that God [was] already willing to grant"<sup>8</sup> but that could not be legitimately acquired through human cunning.

In answer to Rebekah's prayer about the meaning of the struggle between her two sons that had already begun before their birth, she received the answer that "the elder [Esau] shall serve the younger [Jacob]."<sup>9</sup> According to BYU professor Catherine Thomas, "This divine announcement prophesied that Jacob, even though second born, should have the birthright and the attached patriarchal blessing. The Lord's description of these two nations reflects choices made by these people in the premortal world as well as the choices they would yet make in mortality."<sup>10</sup> By prefacing the story of Jacob with this prophecy, the scrip-

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2 Catherine Thomas, "Jacob Rightly Received Blessings," *Church News*, June 25, 1994, <https://thechurchnews.com/archives/1994-06-25/jacob-rightly-received-blessings-younger-twin-foreordained-to-play-a-major-role-in-covenant-priesthood-line-139586>.

3 John 1:47; compare Psalm 32:2.

4 Genesis 25:26. Compare Hosea 12:3.

5 For more about the literary etymology of this name, see Matthew L. Bowen, "Jacob's Protector," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 27 (2017): 230–231.

6 Sarna, *Genesis*, 180n26.

7 Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 1:87n26.

8 Bible Dictionary, "Prayer," online at [churchofjesuschrist.org](http://churchofjesuschrist.org).

9 Genesis 25:23. According to Josephus, it was Isaac rather than Rebekah who enquired and received the answer that the elder would serve the younger (Flavius Josephus, *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. Paul L. Maier and William Whiston [Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999], 1:18:1).

10 Thomas, "Jacob Rightly Received Blessings."

ture reader is informed that Jacob’s blessings eventually would be realized through divine intervention, not through “the improper means [Jacob] later employed to obtain his rights.”<sup>11</sup>

In this commentary on Genesis 25–27, we will touch only briefly on the death and burial of Abraham, the accounts of the other nations that spring from him, and further incidents in the life of Isaac. Our major focus will be on two incidents that illustrate Jacob’s efforts to secure his blessings through improper means: (1) his attempt to buy the birthright from Esau for a “mess of pottage”<sup>12</sup> and (2) his conspiring with Rebekah to trick Isaac into giving Jacob Esau’s blessing. In each case— by way of contrast to Abraham and Eliezer<sup>13</sup>—Jacob did not ask in faith<sup>14</sup> and wait patiently for the Lord to bring about promised blessings “in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will” but tried to force God’s hand through his own anxious manipulations (Doctrine and Covenants 88:68). However, by the time Jacob was ready for his ultimate “wrestle with God” in Genesis 32:24–30, his soul had become “full of charity towards all men,” and his “confidence [had become] strong in the presence of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:45). When Jacob finally allowed God to prevail, he himself began to prevail (Genesis 32:28).<sup>15</sup> From this point onward the “doctrine of the priesthood . . . distill[ed] upon [his] soul” in greater measure. The promised blessings would henceforth come to him “without compulsory means.” The last and greatest blessings of his life came to Jacob gently and unforcedly, “as the dews from heaven” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:45–46).

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 170–171, 177–178, 189.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 25–27

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<sup>11</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 179n23.

<sup>12</sup> Wikipedia gives the following account of the origins of this proverbial, non-scriptural phrase: “The phrase alludes to Esau’s sale of his birthright for a meal (‘mess’) of lentil stew (‘pottage’) in Genesis 25:29–34 and connotes shortsightedness and misplaced priorities. . . . Its first attested use, already associated with Esau’s bargain, is in the English summary of one of John Capgrave’s sermons, c. 1452, [‘Jacob] supplanted his broþir, bying his fader blessing for a mese of potage.’ . . . Miles Smith used the same phrase in ‘The Translators to the Reader,’ the lengthy preface to the 1611 King James Bible, but by the seventeenth century the phrase had become very widespread indeed and had clearly achieved the status of a fixed phrase with allusive, quasi-proverbial, force” (Wikipedia, s.v. “Mess of pottage,” last modified February 17, 2022, 03:48, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mess\\_of\\_pottage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mess_of_pottage)).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Genesis 15:2–5; 24:12–14. For the probable name of the otherwise unnamed steward of Abraham’s household, see Genesis 15:2.

<sup>14</sup> Contrast, for example, the scriptural comment on Abraham’s response to God’s promise: “And he believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).

<sup>15</sup> See Russell M. Nelson, “Let God Prevail,” November 2020 general conference, online at [churchofjesuschrist.org](http://churchofjesuschrist.org).

## **Genesis 25:1–6. The Descendants of Keturah**

The history and geography of the descendants of Abraham, as aptly summarized by Nahum M. Sarna, could be of interest to readers:

Aside from their literary-theological function, these genealogical lists bear intrinsic interest for the historian. There are two groupings of nomadic tribes or peoples, mostly identifiable as Arab. Both are said to trace their origins back to the patriarch, the one through a certain Keturah, the other through Ishmael, Abraham's son by Hagar. Keturah has six sons, Ishmael twelve. Since many of the names here listed are known to us from cuneiform sources as those of peoples, it is clear that the two genealogical tables represent in reality two confederations of tribes that once enjoyed kinship, trade, or political ties with the early Israelites. In accordance with common biblical practice, these relationships are expressed in familial terms and arranged in a genealogical pattern.

The antiquity of some of the traditions that lie behind the lists is apparent from several of their features. The term "Arab" is not used, nor is there a personality of that name who is regarded as the eponym, or name-giving ancestor, of the Arabs. The reason is that the designation "Arab" does not appear in written sources before the ninth century BCE, when it is first used in both royal Assyrian inscriptions and in biblical literature. The omission of the name "Arab" from our lists would indicate that these derive from before the period when it came into vogue.

The inclusion of the Midianites provides further evidence of antiquity. This people was hostile to Israel during the wilderness wanderings; its fertility cult proved to be a provocative and corrupting influence; it engaged in a bloody clash with Israel, and in the time of the Judges, it exerted hegemony over the Israelites, who fought a war of liberation under Gideon to rid themselves of the yoke of the hated oppressor. This victory was long remembered in Israel. Given such a history of enmity between the two peoples, it is hardly likely that a narrator would have invented a record of kinship unless it rested on solid fact. Indeed, the story of Moses' flight from Pharaoh to Midian, where he found refuge and intermarried with the priestly family, corroborates the inference of an earlier record of amicable relationships between Israel and Midian.

Still further testimony to the early source of some of the traditions is afforded by the Ishmaelite genealogy. The text clearly presents a twelve-tribe confederation known as "the sons of Ishmael." Interestingly, there is no biblical allusion to the Ishmaelites after the time of David, suggesting that the Ishmaelite confederation disintegrated about this time and disappeared from history. This dovetails with the fact that no such ethnic entity is mentioned in the several royal Assyrian inscriptions that deal with Arab tribes. Accordingly, our list precedes the tenth century BCE. Finally, the present genealogy places the Kedarites in the second position. This must reproduce an earlier state of affairs than that reflected in the Assyrian documents of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE and in Isaiah 60:7, in which the Kedarites are the leading north Arabian tribe. . . .

The “sons” of Keturah, six in number, are to be regarded as constituting the original core of the tribal confederation to which others, “grandsons” and “great-grandsons,” later adhered. The name “Keturah” is obviously related to Hebrew *ketoret*, “spices.” There was a universal and sustained demand in the ancient world for frankincense, myrrh, and other aromatic resins and gums. These were needed for the requirements of the cult, for the manufacture of medicines, and in the preparation and preservation of food. The prime source and producer was southern Arabia, especially the Hadramaut region, which is modern Yemen (Arabia Felix), the most fertile part of the Arabian Peninsula.

Because of her name, it is reasonable to assume that the key factor behind the organization of the Keturah tribes was the spice trade—the production, shipment, and distribution of this precious commodity. It so happens that both biblical and Assyrian sources mention many of the names here listed as those of peoples or localities involved in this particular branch of international commerce. They controlled the trade routes that led from the Arabian Peninsula to the lands of the Fertile Crescent. This accounts for the picture of such widespread geographical diffusion of the Keturahs from southern Arabia to the Middle Euphrates region and northern Syria.<sup>16</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 171–174.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 25:1–6

## **Genesis 25:7–11. The Death and Burial of Abraham**

Through the brief and unremarkable summary of Abraham’s death and burial, the narrator of Genesis wishes readers to understand that the great patriarch had finished his work on the earth quietly, “in a good old age” as “an old man, and full of years” (verse 8). The sense of contentment and completion evoked by these words “is found with no other personality in biblical literature. The phrase describes not his longevity, which is otherwise mentioned, but the quality of his earthly existence.”<sup>17</sup> The final acts of his life—the careful negotiations that secured the site of Machpelah so he could be buried “with his kin” (verse 8); his marriage to Keturah, which further enlarged his family (verse 1–6); and his wise provision

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<sup>16</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 171–172.

<sup>17</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 174n8.

of a suitable wife for Isaac (verse 11)—were mentioned here as a fitting valedictory to the life of a humble, generous, and godly man, one of the greatest to have ever lived because he submitted his will to the Lord’s in every trial, including and especially in his willingness—against all reason, sense, and feeling—to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac.

BYU professor Truman G. Madsen recounted the following story:

[Once I was in the] valley known as Hebron, a place now beautifully fruitful and where tradition has it, there is a tomb to father Abraham. As [I approached the place with President Hugh B. Brown], I asked, “What are the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?”

Elder Brown thought a moment and answered in one word, “Posterity.” Then I almost burst out, “Why, then was Abraham commanded to go to Mount Moriah and offer his only hope of posterity?”

It was clear that this man, nearly ninety, had thought and prayed and wept over that question before. He finally said, “Abraham needed to learn something about Abraham.”<sup>18</sup>

Modern revelation provides the following additional perspectives, assurances, and injunctions about the blessings of eternal marriage and posterity promised to Abraham’s faithful posterity:

Abraham received all things, whatsoever he received, by revelation and commandment, by my word, saith the Lord, and hath entered into his exaltation and sitteth upon his throne. . . .

This promise is yours also, because ye are of Abraham, and the promise was made unto Abraham; and by this law is the continuation of the works of my Father, wherein he glorified himself.

Go ye, therefore, and do the works of Abraham, enter ye into my law and ye shall be saved. (Doctrine and Covenants 132:29, 31–32)

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 174.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 25:7–11

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<sup>18</sup> Truman G. Madsen, “Power from Abrahamic Tests,” in *Five Classics by Truman G. Madsen* (Salt Lake City, UT: Eagle Gate, 2001), 232.

## **Genesis 25:12–18. The Descendants of Ishmael**

Nahum M. Sarna provided the following historical perspective on the descendants of Ishmael:

Whereas the descendants of Keturah include three generations, reflecting a complicated history of tribal relationships, the line of Ishmael comprises only “sons,” which suggests a very powerful primary confederation of tribes. Some of these are also mentioned in extrabiblical Near Eastern sources; others are known only from other biblical texts, while two—Hadad and Kedmah—are not otherwise identifiable.

Some of the names, which in this chapter are differentiated according to Keturah or Ishmael ancestry, are elsewhere combined within a single context. Thus, Isaiah 60:6–7 has Midian, Ephah, and Sheba—all Keturah tribes—side by side with Kedar and Nebaioth. Jeremiah 25:23 pairs Dedan with Tema, and Ezekiel 27:21f. has Kedar with Sheba. The same commingling occurs in the Annals of Tiglath-pileser III, which cite Massa, Tema, and the Idiba‘ileans (= Abdeel), who are all Ishmaelites in our tables, together with Sheba and Ephah, who are descendants of Keturah. This phenomenon illustrates the fluidity of tribal confederations and the instability of allegiances, a perennial characteristic of the ancient Near East.<sup>19</sup>

### **Source**

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### **Related verses**

Genesis 25:12–18

## **Genesis 25:19–34. Isaac’s Two Nations by Jacob and Esau**

Nahum M. Sarna summarized the brief account of the life of Isaac and the place his narrative holds in relation to those of his father, Abraham, and his son, Jacob:

The second series of patriarchal narratives, that relating to Isaac, now begins. The data about him are exceedingly sparse. Much of what is preserved—his birth and circumcision, the Akedah, and his marriage—is integrated into the biography of Abraham, while other episodes belong to the large collection of traditions regarding Jacob. Nothing is recorded of the first twenty years of Isaac’s marriage. Only a few isolated events in his life are preserved in the literature, where he is eclipsed by the towering figure of his father Abraham and overshadowed by the dynamic, forceful personality of his son Jacob.

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<sup>19</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 175.

Yet Isaac is more than a mere transition between Abraham and Jacob, and the biblical account does contain unmistakable elements of individuality. Isaac's name, uniquely bestowed by God, is not changed; his pastoral wanderings are restricted to a narrow range and largely center around Beer-sheba; unlike Abraham, he does not live at Hebron-Kiriath-arba but settles there only in his old age; he alone remains monogamous; he is the only patriarch to engage in agriculture and the only one never to leave the promised land; finally, the unique divine name *paḥad yitshak* (31:42 [literally "the Fear of Isaac"]) suggests some episode, not recorded, in which this particular name would have been meaningful. References in Amos 7:9, 16 to "the shrines of Isaac" and to "the house of Isaac" as an epithet for Israel seem to indicate that a more extensive account of his life once existed.

The story of Isaac, interrupted by the genealogies of chapter 25, now resumes with the main emphasis on the birth of Esau and Jacob and the rivalry between them. These narratives present an ancient belief that the bitter hostility that marked the later relationships between the peoples of Israel and Edom had its origin in the prenatal experience of their founding fathers, who were twins.<sup>20</sup>

**25:23. "Two nations are in thy womb . . . and the one people shall be stronger than the other people."** According to the account of BYU professor Catherine Thomas, later in the story,

Jacob's twin, Esau, cried out bitterly, "Is not he rightly named Jacob [a supplanter]? for he hath supplanted me these two times: he took away my birthright; and, behold, now he hath taken away my blessing." (Genesis 27:36.) On the surface, the pivotal moments in the scriptural account of Jacob's life seem to turn on deceit. Yet we learn from latter-day revelation that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob "did none other things than that which they were commanded; and because they did none other things than that which they were commanded, they have entered into their exaltation, according to the promises, and sit upon thrones, and are not angels but are gods" (Doctrine and Covenants 132:37). How are these two perspectives to be reconciled? In this simple fact: that Jacob's history reaches far back into the premortal past where his life plan was made. . . . The Lord informed Rebekah, "Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). This divine announcement prophesied that Jacob, even though second born, should have the birthright and the attached patriarchal blessing. The Lord's description of these two nations reflects choices made by these people in the premortal world as well as the choices they would yet make in mortality.<sup>21</sup>

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20 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 177.

21 Catherine Thomas, "Jacob Rightly Received Blessings," *Church News*, June 25, 1994, <https://thechurchnews.com/archives/1994-06-25/jacob-rightly-received-blessings-younger-twin-foreordained-to-play-a-major-role-in-covenant-priesthood-line-139586>.



According to Josephus, it was Isaac rather than Rebekah who enquired and received the answer that the elder would serve the younger.<sup>22</sup>

**25:29. “Esau came from the field, and he was faint.”** There may be more to the story of the sale of Esau’s birthright to Jacob than is recorded in the Bible. According to Jewish lore summarized by Hugh Nibley,

Nimrod had [the garment of the priesthood]; then Esau was jealous of Nimrod, who was another great hunter. He lay in ambush, slew Nimrod, took the garment from him, and . . . ran exhausted to Jacob. . . . [This garment was the birthright which Jacob got from Esau.] That was the deal: he was willing to sell it in a financial sense. . . . Somebody is always trying to steal the garment; somebody is always trying to fake it. . . . [A]lways there is the false version of the garment going around.<sup>23</sup>

**25:30. “Feed me . . . with that . . . red pottage.”** Genesis opens the account by telling us simply that “Jacob sold pottage: and Esau came from the field, and he was faint” (Genesis 35:29).

However, the few words that Esau uttered give us what we need to see into Esau’s heart:

It is well known that in biblical dialogue all the characters speak proper literary Hebrew, with no intimations of slang, dialect, or idiolect. The single striking exception is impatient Esau’s first speech to Jacob in Genesis 25: “Let me gulp down some of this red red stuff.” Inarticulate with hunger, he cannot come up with the ordinary Hebrew term for “stew,” and so he makes do with *ha’adom ha’adom hazeh*—literally “this red red.” But what is more interesting for our purpose is the verb Esau uses for “feeding,” *hal’iteini*. This is the sole occurrence of this verb in the biblical corpus, but in the Talmud it is a commonly used term with the specific meaning of stuffing food into the mouth of an animal. . . . [I]n this instance, the writer . . . exceptionally allowed himself to introduce the vernacular term for animal feeding in order to suggest Esau’s coarsely appetitive character.<sup>24</sup>

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22 Flavius Josephus, “The Antiquities of the Jews,” in *The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus, the Jewish Historian. Translated from the Original Greek, according to Havercamp’s Accurate Edition*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1980), 39, I:18:1.

23 Hugh W. Nibley, “Sacred Vestments,” in *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present*, ed. Don E. Norton, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 12 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1992), 130–131. For more extensive discussion of this topic, see Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God’s Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 309–311; Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “The Ark and the Tent: Temple Symbolism in the Story of Noah,” in *Temple Insights: Proceedings of the Interpreter Matthew B. Brown Memorial Conference ‘The Temple on Mount Zion,’ 22 September 2012*, ed. William J. Hamblin and David Rolph Seely (Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books; Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation, 2014), 35–36.

24 Robert Alter, ed., *Genesis* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1996), xxiv, 129. Highlighting the importance of the “first speech” of characters in biblical narrative, Robert Alter observed that “in most instances, the initial words spoken by a personage will be revelatory, perhaps more in manner than in matter, constituting an important moment in the exposition of character” (Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* [New York: Basic Books, 1981], 74). Also of note, Nahum Sarna observed that the repetition of the word “red” may indicate “deep red.” He suggested that Esau may have expected blood rather than lentils as the main flavoring of the stew: “Blood was considered to constitute the life-essence and was widely believed to contain magical properties. It was a symbol of strength and vitality. A suggestion that Esau thought the ‘red stuff’ to be a blood broth is most plausible. His primitive instincts were aroused by the sight. He expected his vitality to be renewed by drinking it” (Sarna, *Genesis*, 182n30).

The rapid-fire description in verse 34 of Esau's subsequent behavior ("he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way") "nicely expresses the precipitous manner in which Esau gulps down his food and, as the verse concludes, casts away his birthright."<sup>25</sup>

**25:30. "therefore was his name called Edom."** The root of the word for the pottage that became Esau's nickname—Edom, meaning red—is identical to the root of Adam. Esau had red hair, and his descendants lived in a land of red rocks and cliffs. In modern scripture, "Idumea," the Greek form of Edom, is used by the Lord as a synonym for the corrupted, telestial world.<sup>26</sup>

**25:31. "And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright."** BYU professor Arthur Henry King noted that even though "Esau was obviously wrong," it does not mean that Jacob was right.<sup>27</sup> Jacob's mother had no doubt already told him about God's promise that he would receive the birthright, and his attempt to buy it from Esau was not merely unnecessary but also an offensive vote of no confidence in the Lord. Besides, although "the gift of God" may be sold, it cannot "be purchased" (Acts 8:20). As Nahum Sarna observed, "it is highly significant that the text only mentions Esau's sale of the birthright but does not state that Jacob bought it. This is contrary to the usual biblical legal style. . . . The omission in the present story is another way of dissociating Jacob's eventual ascendancy from the means he adopted."<sup>28</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 177–182.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 25:19–34

## **Genesis 26:1–33. Isaac Follows in the Footsteps of Abraham**

Following the reaffirmation of God's covenant in verses 1–5, most of Genesis 26 is concerned with incidents in the life of Isaac. They closely parallel earlier events in the life of Abraham. At the end of the chapter, the story of Jacob and Esau continues with the notice of Esau's marriage to Hittite wives (Genesis 26:34–35).

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<sup>25</sup> Alter, *Genesis*, 130.

<sup>26</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 1:36; see also Old Testament references such as Isaiah 34:5–6.

<sup>27</sup> Arthur Henry King, "Reading the Scriptures", (lecture, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 1980).

<sup>28</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 182n34.

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### **Related verses**

Genesis 26:1–33

## **Genesis 26:34–35. Esau Marries Hittite Wives**

Nahum M. Sarna explained the significance of these two verses:

An addendum about Esau’s Hittite wives, wholly unrelated to the foregoing, is here appended to the collection of incidents in the life of Isaac. At first sight, its presence is all the more strange in that nothing about Esau’s family situation previously appears in the chapter. However, like the genealogies of [Genesis] 11:10–32 and 22:20–24, the intrusive material is here a literary device to supply essential data that is preparatory to developments in a subsequent narrative. The information given here lends intelligibility to Rebekah’s stratagem for saving Jacob from Esau’s anger, as told in 27:42–46. At the same time, the passage reinforces the idea of Esau’s unworthiness to be Isaac’s heir, for he commits a threefold offense: breaking with social convention by contracting the marriage himself rather than leaving the initiative to his parents; abandoning the established practice of endogamy by marrying outside the kinship group; and violating the honor of his clan by intermarrying with the native women.<sup>29</sup>

### **Source**

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### **Related verses**

Genesis 26:34–35

## **Genesis 27:1–46. Jacob Receives Esau’s Birthright Blessing from Isaac**

Esau’s unworthiness was reinforced by his marriage to two Hittite women, “which were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah” (Genesis 26:35). The issue of succession in the family was brought to

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<sup>29</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 189.

the forefront by the observation that “Isaac was old” (27:1)—for that reason he was apparently anxious to give a father’s blessing to his eldest son, Esau. Note that under normal circumstances, Esau would have been called the “firstborn,” but scripture studiously avoids using this term since ultimately Jacob, not Esau, would receive the birthright.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, Isaac’s blessing did not convey the birthright itself. “Apparently, [the blessing and the birthright] were separate institutions. Nothing is said [by Isaac] about the disposition of property”<sup>31</sup> in the blessing given in verses 27–29 as would have been the case had it been a birthright blessing.

Isaac was then 137 years old. He would live another forty years. The most important detail in the preface to the story is that “Isaac’s eyes were dim, so that he could not see” (verse 1). Isaac’s loss of vision allowed Rebekah and Jacob to carry out their deception. More importantly, scripture seems to imply that Isaac was also blind in a figurative sense: his “perception of reality about Esau’s worthiness to receive the blessing appears to have been clouded.”<sup>32</sup> The theme of “not knowing or recognizing” that was highlighted in Genesis 18–20 appears again three times in this story and continues to pop up throughout the rest of Jacob’s biography.<sup>33</sup>

The details of Rebekah and Jacob’s conspiracy are not of primary importance at this juncture.<sup>34</sup> The point of the story is that for a second time, Jacob’s deception was designed to secure Esau’s blessing through his own efforts rather than through patience in God’s promises to him, conditioned on his faithfulness. To his mother, Jacob admitted that his actions may reveal him to his father as a “deceiver,” but he “seems to be more concerned with the consequences of detection than with the morality of the act.”<sup>35</sup> Neither one seemed to anticipate the high price of physical and emotional estrangement that would result.

**27:7. “Bring me venison.”** Josephus says that the meat was intended for a festival or sacrifice where Isaac desired the blessings of God and inspiration for a blessing for his son.<sup>36</sup>

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30 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), Genesis 27:1.

31 Sarna, *Genesis*, *Jacob purloins the blessing*.

32 Sarna, *Genesis*, 190n1.

33 See Genesis 27:2, 23; 28:16; 29:5; 30:26, 29; 31:6, 32; 33:13.

34 In the later commentary on Genesis 28–32, we will discuss some of these details more extensively, particularly the “ritualization” of Jacob’s experiences that seem to begin with his appropriation of Esau’s garment (and the ritual exchange of clothing that follows in verses 15–16). This ritualization continues in the offering (sacrifice) of venison, in the initial and confirmatory blessings by Isaac, and, ultimately, in the sure blessings conferred on Jacob by God himself as a mature man. For a discussion of ritualization in the story of Isaac’s blessing in Genesis 27, see David E. Bokovoy, “From the Hand of Jacob: A Ritual Analysis of Genesis 27,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 1 (2009): 35–50.

35 Genesis 27:12; Sarna, *Genesis*, 191n12.

36 Flavius Josephus, “The Antiquities of the Jews,” in *The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus, the Jewish Historian. Translated from the Original Greek, according to Havercamp’s Accurate Edition*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1980), 39, I:18:5.

**27:16. “And she put the skins of the kids of the goats upon his hands, and upon the smooth of his neck.”** In some Jewish sources, this account portrays Rebekah as dressing Jacob in Adam’s “wonderful garments, . . . the high-priestly raiment.”<sup>37</sup> It is said that when Isaac smelled Jacob (verse 27), he “discerned the fragrance of paradise.”<sup>38</sup>

**27:18. “Who art thou my son?”** Despite Isaac’s age and blindness, he seemed to suspect that something was not right. “Deprived of his eyesight, Isaac summons to his aid the remaining senses of hearing, touch, taste and smell.”<sup>39</sup> Immediately after hearing the first word out of Jacob’s mouth—“My father” (verse 18)—Isaac questioned Jacob’s identity. Heightening the dramatic tension, Isaac then wondered how the venison was obtained “so quickly” (verse 20). Jacob brazenly invoked “God’s name in an outright lie,”<sup>40</sup> saying that “the Lord God brought [the venison] to [him]” (verse 20).

**27:23. “he discerned him not.”** Hebrew *nakar*, “to discern, know, recognize.” The verb shows up again as a theme in later chapters.<sup>41</sup> This deception would come back to haunt Jacob.<sup>42</sup>

**27:25. “Art thou my very son Esau? And he said, I am.”** Jacob’s earlier answers about his identity were evasive. In his final answer, he brazenly lied about it.

**27:25. “I will eat of my son’s venison.”** S. Kent Brown noted that goat’s meat tastes different from venison, even when specially prepared.<sup>43</sup> However, through the touch and smell of Jacob’s clothing and the taste of the meat, Isaac was finally convinced—or perhaps was not convinced but decided to give the blessing anyway.<sup>44</sup>

**27:28. “God give thee of the dew of heaven.”** This is not the covenant blessing. (The covenant blessing was given later in Genesis 28:3–4.) Though the blessing stood, it is important to note that “Rebekah and

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37 Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1998), I:332.

38 Ginzberg, *Legends*, I:334. See also John A. Tvedtnes, “Priestly Clothing in Bible Times,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1994), 657; Stephen D. Ricks, “The Garment of Adam in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian Tradition,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1994), 710–713, 730.

39 Sarna, *Genesis*, 192n21–27.

40 Sarna, *Genesis*, 191n20.

41 See Genesis 31:32; 37:32, 33; 38:25; 42:7–8.

42 See Genesis 29: 25 and 37:32–33; Everett Fox, ed., *In the Beginning: A New English Rendition of the Book of Genesis* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1983), 155.

43 S. Kent Brown, “Old Testament” (lecture, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 1979).

44 Brown wondered whether this was indeed the case, concluding that Isaac knew almost the whole time, but that he knew by revelation that he should give the blessing anyway (“Old Testament”).

Jacob’s trouble is for nothing—the deception is not rewarded.”<sup>45</sup> The blessing Jacob received was not the birthright blessing: “it contains no promises of progeny or land.”<sup>46</sup>

**27:30. “Esau . . . came in from his hunting.”** When Esau returned from his hunt, Isaac realized what had happened. Despite Esau’s complaint to his father that Jacob had now “supplanted [him] . . . two times” (27:36), Isaac knew that “the blessing he [had] uttered [under the inspiration of heaven was] beyond recall.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, to Esau, he solemnly reaffirmed the promises of Jacob’s blessing: “Yea, and he [Jacob] shall be blessed” (verse 33).

**27:46. “if Jacob take a wife of the daughters of Heth.”** Earlier in the chapter, Rebekah had tried to undermine Isaac by deception, but it didn’t work. Now she “is forthright about her concerns,” reminding Isaac of her disgust at Esau’s marriages to the Hittite women and expressing her concern about Jacob’s marriage prospects. “The birthright blessing is finally given” as recorded in Genesis 28:3–4.<sup>48</sup>

Nahum Sarna summarized the point of this episode: “[In the second blessing], Isaac confirms Jacob’s title to the birthright independently of the deception. Jacob is recognized to be the true heir to the Abrahamic covenant, which is why he must not marry outside of the family.”<sup>49</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 146–161.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 27:1–46

## **Credits**

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45 Arthur Henry King, “Reading the Scriptures” (lecture, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 1980).

46 Sarna, *Genesis*, 192n27.

47 Sarna, *Genesis*, 193n33.

48 King, “Reading the Scriptures.”

49 Sarna, *Genesis*, 195n1.

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