

Genesis 25 Passing the Torch

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1-11, The Last Days of Abraham

We are nearing the end of “the generations of Terah,” the section that began in 11:27 (and that we have been studying since October of 2001, over a year!). The section began with genealogical information about Terah and the account of his death; it ends with similar information about Abraham.

1-6, Other Family Connections

We are not told when Abraham took his third wife, Keturah. It might have been in the 40 years he lived after the death of Sarah, or it might have been earlier. Moses’ concern is not to give us the timeline here, but (as in the Table of Nations in ch. 10) to fill us in on the background of some of the other nations with whom Israel had to do.

Midian appears often in the later history.

- The traders who sold Joseph into Egypt were Midianites (Gen 37:28), there allied with Ishmaelites, probably through intermarriage.
- Moses fled to Midian from Pharaoh (Exodus 2), and there found a family that worshipped the Lord, into which he married.
- Midian sought to curse Israel in the affair of Balaam (Numbers 22), and was smitten by Israel (31)
- It is one of the oppressor nations in Judges (ch. 6, 7, 8).

Sheba is one of several people of this name; there are two others in ch. 10 (7,28), and the name is later applied to a region of Arabia, from which a famous queen came to visit Solomon (1 Kings 10). It is not clear which is her ancestor.

Dedan is also a name shared with Gen 10:7.

Likely, all of these are mixed together with the Ishmaelites in the modern Arabs.

We can take two lessons from this bit of history.

1. God is beginning to fulfill his promise in 17:4,5 that Abraham would be “a father of many nations.” Yet this is not the whole story: Rom 4:17,18 makes clear that this promise includes his spiritual offspring among the Gentiles. These physical sons are thus a picture of the great spiritual offspring yet to come.
2. Some of these nations (notably the Midianites) later became Israel's enemies. Moses wants us to remember that these people, like the Ishmaelites, originated with Abraham, and could (had they wished) have retained the knowledge of the truth. But they did not, and thus forfeited their claim to the blessings of Abraham. "They which are the children of the flesh, these *are* not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed" (Rom 9:8).

5, Abraham gave.—As the servant had promised Laban, Isaac was the principal heir, and the others received only gifts.

6, sons of the concubines.—The plural shows that Keturah, like Hagar, was a slave-wife, not a free woman, as 1 Chr 1:32 confirms.

7-11, The Death of Abraham

an hundred threescore and fifteen years.—We can set up some interesting synchronies from this:

	Abraham	Sarah	Ishmael	Isaac	Jacob and Esau
16:16	86	(76)	0		
17:17; 21:5	100	90	(14)	0	
23:1	(137)	127 (RIP)	(51)	(37)	
25:20	(140)		(54)	40	
25:26	(160)		(74)	60	0
25:7	175 (RIP)		(89)	(75)	(15)
25:17			137 (RIP)		
35:28				180 (RIP)	(120)

Thus Jacob and Esau were 15 years old at the time of Abraham’s death. The narrative is not strictly chronological; we have to finish off Abraham’s story before embarking on Isaac’s.

v.8 was gathered to his people.—Compare Gen 15:15, “thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace.” These expressions make two important points.

1. Death does not end our experience. His ancestors still exist, and he can join them. The view that death means annihilation is incompatible with these statements.
2. The plural and 15:15 show that more people than Sarah are involved, and his ancestors were not believers. The idea of joining those who have deceased does not mean that they are believers, in heaven. The OT does not distinguish clearly between the destiny of believers and unbelievers after death, the way the NT does. This point is critical for a proper assessment of David’s words concerning his first child by Bathsheba in 2 Sam 12:23, “I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.” David is not saying that the child is in heaven, but simply that the child is dead.

v.9 the cave of Machpelah.—We are reminded in detail of the transaction in ch. 23 by which Abraham came into the possession of a portion of the land of promise. As he intended, he will rest in the land that has been promised to him.

v.11, God blessed his son Isaac.—God’s blessing continues on the next generation of the line of promise. God’s blessing was originally on the entire race (1:28, 5:2), but with the spread of sin, became associated with a single line (Noah in 9:1, Abraham in 12:2; Ishmael at Abraham’s request in 17:20), but per 17:21, the covenant blessing continues through Isaac.

We are reminded here that Isaac lived more toward the south, rather than around Hebron as his father did.

Structural Review

Overview of the Generations of Terah

The story is organized around the elements of the promise in 12:1-4.

Genealogy with women	11:27-30	22:20-24	24:1-25:6
Death related to Canaan	11:31-32, Terah Canaan, 31	23, Sarah Canaan, 2, 19	25:7-11, Abraham (Mamre, v.9)
A. Testing journey with command and promise "Go ..."	12:1-9, From Haran to Canaan Canaan, 5,6 1 "said," ,7 " <i>appeared and said</i> "		22:1-19, Offering of Isaac 1 "said"
B. Sojourning; denying Sarah "He that curses you..."	12:10-13:1, Egypt	20, Land of the Philistines	
C. Contending for Lot "Be thou a blessing" "All nations blessed"	13:2-14:16, Kings of the North Military Rescue Canaan, 13:7,12 13:14 "said"	18:16-19:38, Fall of Sodom Intercession 18:20, "said"	
D. Relations with Local Kings "He that blesses you..."	14:17-24, Melchizedek of Salem; King of Sodom		21:22-34, Abimelech of Gerar (binding on heirs)
E. Covenant blessings (Land and Seed)	15 Canaan, 21 1 " <i>vision</i> "	17:1-18:15 Canaan, 17:8 17:1 " <i>appeared, said</i> "; 18:1, " <i>appeared</i> "	
F. Conception, Birth, Exile of a son "Great nation"	16 Canaan, 3		21:1-21 12, "said"

References to revelation

Order in the two panels: ABCDEF, E'C'B'F'D'A'. The second panel actually doubles the sequence of the first panel. E'C'B' focuses on the fulfillment of the promises of being a blessing, while F'D'A' focus on the seed.

NB: "Great nation" (12:2) is never used of Isaac! It is used of Ishmael (17:20, 21:18), later of Jacob (46:3).

The Larger Context

Recall the overall pattern of "generations" in Genesis: alternation between chosen and rejected lines, emphasizing the selection that is going on throughout the book. We now turn to another short summary of one of the rejected lines, that of Ishmael.

Chosen	Rejected
2:4, Heaven and Earth	

5:1, Adam	
6:9, Noah	
	10:1, Sons of Noah
11:10, Shem	
11:27, Terah	
	25:12, Ishmael
25:19, Isaac	
	36:1,9, Esau
37:2, Jacob	

12-18, The Generations of Ishmael

This brief record has three parts:

12-16, Ishmael’s Descendants.—Twelve, according to the promise of 17:20. Some of these names occur later in Israel’s history, though none with the prominence of the Midianites, descended from Abraham and Keturah.

17, Ishmael’s Death.—He was 89 when Abraham died, and lived 48 years more: not as old as his father or his brother (who lived to 180), but a decade longer than Sarah lived. Like Abraham, he “was gathered unto his people,” indicating an existence beyond death (though not equality of spiritual condition).

18, His Descendants’ Territory.—Havilah is the northern Arabian peninsula, while Shur is the northern part of the Sinai peninsula. They lived in the desert regions adjacent to Israel. Instead of “he died,” we should probably understand the verb to mean “he settled,” so that the clause reflects the fulfillment of 16:12, “he shall encamp in the presence of all his brethren.”

The main point of this section is to demonstrate the fulfillment of God’s promises concerning Ishmael. There were three such promises:

1. That he would become a great nation, with twelve princes, 17:20; 21:13, 18. The fulfillment to this is traced in 12-17.
2. That he would dwell next to his brethren, 16:12; fulfilled in v.18.
3. That he would be a wild man, in continual conflict, 16:12: not clear here, but they were largely united with the Midianites in later opposition to Israel (Judg 8:22-24).

25:19-35:29, The Generations of Isaac

This section runs from 25:19 to 35:29. It is a detailed chiasm, centered on the birth of Joseph in 30:22-24; we will examine the structure as it unfolds.

In most cases, sections headed “the generations of X” deal mainly not with X but with the descendants of X. Thus

- “the generations of Adam” (5:1) lists the genealogies of Adam’s descendants.
- “the generations of Terah” (11:27) deals mainly with Abraham

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- “the generations of Jacob” (37:2) opens the Joseph story.

So here, “the generations of Isaac” says very little about Isaac, and deals mostly with the life of Jacob. It has three main sections, separated by digressions in ch. 26 and 34.

- 25:19-34, birth and early conflict with Esau
- 26:34-33:17, Jacob’s rift with Esau, sojourn in Haran, and return and reconciliation
- 35:1-29, Isaac’s death, and passing of the leadership to Jacob

19-34, Jacob’s Birth and Early Conflicts

After the announcement of the new section and the summary of Isaac’s ancestry in 19, there are three episodes in this section. The first and third are more massive, and chiasmically structured, while the second is a static characterization of Jacob and his brother Esau.

20-26, Birth of Jacob and Esau

The section is chiasmically structured, centered on the oracle in 22b-23 (Fokkelman):

Chronological Notice	
20 And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah to wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padanaram, the sister to Laban the Syrian.	and Isaac <i>was</i> threescore years old when she bare them.
Barrenness and Birth	
21 And Isaac intreated the LORD for his wife, because she <i>was</i> barren: and the LORD was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived.	24 And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb.
22 And the children struggled together within her;	25 And the first came out red, all over like an hairy garment; and they called his name Esau. ²⁶ And after that came his brother out, and his hand took hold on Esau's heel; and his name was called Jacob:
The Oracle	
and she said, If <i>it be</i> so, why <i>am</i> I thus? And she went to enquire of the LORD.	23 And the LORD said unto her, Two nations <i>are</i> in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and <i>the one</i> people shall be stronger than <i>the other</i> people; and the elder shall serve the younger.

20, 23b, Chronological Notice.—Isaac, like his father Abraham, is late in seeing the continuation of the line of promise. His wife is barren for twenty years before the next generation is born.

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vv. 20-21 cover 20 years of Isaac's life; compare Abraham, to whom Moses devotes 9 chapters for the 25 years between his departure from Haran and the birth of Isaac. Clearly, Isaac is in the background in this story; he serves only as a bridge between Abraham and Jacob.

21, Isaac's Prayer.—In spite of his minor role, we should not miss the evidence of his godly character. His approach to the problem suggests that he has learned from his father's experience. He does not take a concubine (as both his father and his son do), but intreats the Lord.

(*tr* "intreat": tends to be used where people are asking God for relief from some judgment. It is most common in Exodus 8-10, where Pharaoh asks Moses to intreat God concerning the plagues. See also 2 Sam 21:14 (concerning the famine in v.1), 24:25 (the plague), 1 Chr 5:20 (in war), 2 Chr 33:13 (Manasseh in captivity), Ezr 8:23 (protection from bandits), Isa 19:22 (when the Lord smites Egypt).

The use of the verb here suggests that he is submitting himself under God's hand, and trusting in him to resolve the difficulty. Furthermore, he does so over a period of years, during which he sees no evidence of an answer to his request. In this he is an example of the patience of faith.

He intreated the Lord "for," literally, "before," his wife, suggesting that this was a joint exercise of prayer between the two of them.

22, Rebekah's discomfort and prayer.—As the babies grew, she became extremely uncomfortable. Perhaps by discussion with other women, she learned that this was not the usual course of bearing children; Moses informs us that in fact the children were wrestling even in the womb, setting the stage for a recurring theme of Jacob's life, that of struggle.

Her expression takes two directions:

- Toward men, she complains of her condition: "If it be so," that this conception is in fact God's gift in response to our prayer to him, "why am I thus," so uncomfortable? We are thus reminded that the path to God's blessings often lies through pain and suffering; cf. Rom 5:1-11.
- Learning from her husband's faith, she then takes her question to the Lord. "She went," going to some specific location, perhaps to consult with her father-in-law Abraham.

23, The Lord's Oracle.—Each major book of Genesis begins with a divine oracle that dominates the rest of the history.

- The Generations of Terah begins with the Lord's command to Abraham in 12:1-4.
- The Generations of Jacob begins with Joseph's dream in 37:5-11.

So this oracle, at the center of this initial section, sets the theme for the rest of Jacob's story.

It consists of two couplets.

- The first indicates that her children will found two different nations, two different peoples. "Nation" indicates political structure, while "people" indicates culture and similar characteristics, the people as an organic unity. Both in their manner and in their national identity, the descendants of these two children will differ widely.
- This difference in descendants reflects a persistent conflict between the children themselves. The younger one and his descendants will rule over the elder and his offspring.

It is important to understand that this oracle is not simply predicting what will come to pass, but is revealing the action of God's sovereign election, as explained by Rom. 9:10-13. It reveals God's love for Jacob and hatred for Esau (Mal 1:2-5), a difference that is explicitly said to stem from the purpose of God and not from the works of the two men. The next several verses reinforce this point that the difference defies human explanation, as summarized in 1 Cor 1:26: "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called."

24-25, The Birth.—Corresponding to the conception and uterine struggle is the birth, also attended by evidence of conflict.

- The etymology of Esau is not clear, but from the context, it must mean "hairy," just as Edom, his other name, means "red." His very appearance suggests a wild person, a man of passion.
- The full form of Jacob's name is likely "Yaqob-El," "God will guard." The verbal form means "hold" in the sense of "guard, protect" in all the cognates, but in Jacob's case the meaning shifts to a negative one; he is the "grasper," born grasping Esau's heel and continuing through life to seek the preeminence over him.

The fact that Esau is born first would seem to grant him an advantage over Jacob. God's election is not according to human prestige or social advantage: he has not called many noble (1 Cor 1:26).

27-28, Characterization of the Family

Now Moses reports to us how the differences between the boys manifest themselves both in the young men as they grow, and in their parents' attitudes toward them.

27, the boys grew.—When the Scriptures relate that "the lad grew," it always goes on to comment on his character or habits, as with Ishmael (21:20), Samson (Judg 13:24), or Samuel (1 Sam 2:21, 26). In this case, their growth accentuates the initial distinction between them.

- Esau is described as a hunter and outdoorsman. The only previous mention of a "hunter" in Genesis (10:9) is Nimrod, whose name, "we shall rebel," casts a pall over the occupation. Waltke, p. 362: "While the law made provision for eating game, the biblical writers commend pastoralists and condemn predators. ... true Israel, like his god, behaves like a shepherd, not a hunter."
- Jacob is the Bedouin, living in tents. He is described as "plain," literally "perfect, complete." The adjective is used predominantly in the wisdom literature, where it has a strong moral sense, but that can hardly be the case with Jacob, whose tendencies to deceive and take advantage of others emerge before the end of the chapter. It probably means "cultured, civilized, well-rounded." In contrast to Esau's manly energy, he is a homebody.

Based on this description, we would expect that Esau would be the more aggressive and energetic, and thus the more likely to succeed. God's election is not according to human ambition: he has not called many mighty (1 Cor 1:26).

28, Isaac ... Rebekah.—The difference between the lads' individual characters introduces a split between the parents.

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- Isaac is attracted to Esau’s manly qualities, and has a taste for the wild game that he brings home, which is more appetizing than the domestic animals from his flocks.
- Rebekah’s favor centers on Jacob, perhaps because of his more domestic qualities, perhaps because she has greater regard to the Lord’s promise concerning his destiny

The father’s favor would seem to imply a benefit for Esau, but again, God’s election is not according to human expectations.

29-34, Esau Sells his Birthright

Another chiasm (Fokkelman):

29 And Jacob sod pottage: and Esau came from the field, and he was faint:	thus Esau despised his birthright. and rose up, and went his way:
30 And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage; for I am faint: therefore was his name called Edom.	34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentiles; and he did eat and drink,
31 And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright.	33 And Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he swore unto him: and he sold his birthright unto Jacob.
32 And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?	

29a, 34b, Jacob sod pottage ... Esau despised his birthright.—The verb translated “sod” is only here applied to cooking food, and is cognate with the word for “pottage”: *wayyazid ya(aqob nazid)*. The verb occurs nine other times in the OT, but elsewhere it always describes a proud or presumptuous attitude. Certainly this is in line with Jacob’s character, and Moses is probably making a pun that enhances the contrast with 34c: “Jacob acted proudly in his cooking, while Esau had no self-respect with regard to his birthright.” Jacob grabs more than he is entitled to, while Esau is careless for what is rightly his. We do not usually think of cooking stew as a lofty calling, but Jacob turns whatever he does into an opportunity for self-aggrandizement. It is a mistake to think that only VIP’s are capable of the sins of pride and presumption. Inappropriate aspiration and high status can exist independently of each other.

29b, 34b, Esau came ... went.—Jacob is the stationary point, who defines the scene. Esau drifts in and out, unstable and insecure.

30, 34a, Esau said ... Jacob gave; 32, 33, Jacob said, ... and he swore.—Each brother makes a request that the other grants.

- Esau requests food.
- Jacob ought out of brotherly love to have granted that request, but he intervenes with a request of his own, that Esau surrender his birthright.
- Esau grants Jacob’s request,

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- So Jacob supplies the food. Here for the first time we learn that it is only lentil soup, not a rich meaty stew, for which Esau bartered his birthright.

The *birthright* must be distinguished from the *blessing* of ch. 27.

- “Birthright” *bekorah* is literally “first-born-ness.” This status conveyed on the holder a double portion of the inheritance and the position of being the family’s head in the next generation. Given the promise of seed and blessing granted to Abraham, this status would have a special, spiritual meaning.
- “Blessing” *berakah* is the father’s prayer for God’s bounty to a son. It would naturally encompass the benefits of the birthright, but as the example of Jacob’s blessing on the sons of Joseph shows (48:14), it is ultimately guided by parental discretion rather than birth order.

32, The Valuation.—This verse, falling at the center of the chiasm, is thus marked for special attention. Esau’s comment, “I am at the point to die,” shows that he values the birthright only for its carnal, material value. It means nothing to him that his father has been chosen to be an ancestor of the Messiah, and that he himself would naturally inherit that role as the firstborn; or that as eldest son, he would be the priest of the family (cf. Num 3:12; 8:18; the Levites were taken as ransom for the firstborn of Israel, and their priestly role was part of that substitutionary function; Gill on Heb 12:16 refers without citation to Jewish teaching to the effect that before the Levitical dispensation, the firstborn is priest of the family).

The author of Hebrews has this verse in mind in Heb 12:16 when he cites Esau as an example of a “profane person” because “for one morsel of meat [he] sold his birthright.” “Profane” is the opposite of “holy.” It describes someone or something that is common rather than set apart. As firstborn, priest and bearer of the Messianic blessing, Esau would have been holy, but this was inconsistent with his fundamental character, and so he casts away the privilege.

Esau’s fall is a warning to us all, as Heb 12:14,15 makes clear. Like Esau, we stand in line to receive a great promise, but are call upon to “follow peace with all *men*, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.” Those who truly are the Lord’s will value this holiness and manifest it in their lives, but those who are not will “fail of the grace of God.”