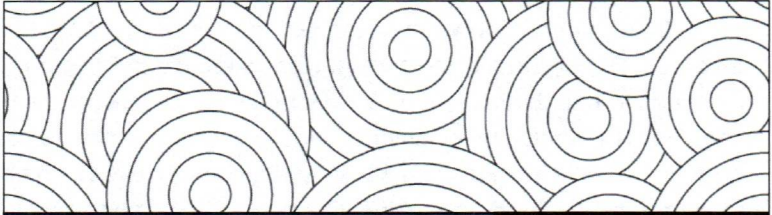


## LESSON 5

# JACOB AND ESAU

GENESIS 25:24-34; 27:1-13



### OPEN IT UP

**T**he book of Genesis features two sibling rivalries, one being Cain and Abel, and the other, Jacob and Esau. There are many parallels between the two accounts. First, both sets of brothers experience parental favoritism (Eve favors Cain; Isaac, Esau; and Rebekah, Jacob). Second, the brothers' professions play heavily into their futures. Cain and Abel offer to God the fruit of the ground and the best of the flock, whereas Esau hunts wild game, and Jacob cooks meals. Third, the younger overshadows the elder in both pairs. Most older brothers would be expected to take command of the family, eventually replacing the father, but with these brothers, the younger rises to prominence. These similarities are striking. But the Jacob and Esau account ends far more happily than that of Cain and Abel. Although the brothers are driven apart, they eventually come back together, and all is forgiven (Genesis 33).

### TWINS BORN • GENESIS 25:24-28

Jacob and Esau were not the only twins born in Genesis. Many ancient interpreters of the Bible viewed Cain and Abel as twins (although this is uncertain). A lesser-known pair is Perez and Zerah (Genesis 38:27-30). Jacob and Esau, however, are the most famous.

Ultrasounds did not exist in the ancient world; therefore, it could be difficult to detect twins. But Rebekah received a divine communication: “Two nations are in your womb, two peoples shall be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger” (25:23). The prediction of rivalry was already playing out in the womb (verse 22).

When the children were in the process of being born, Esau emerged first. Children in the ancient world were carefully observed immediately after birth, often being placed on the ground for inspection. This is because many children would not survive due to birth defects. Not only is Esau a healthy baby, but he also has two notable features. He was “red” and “hairy” (Genesis 25:25). The name *Esau* (‘ēsāv) is connected with the Hebrew word for “hairy” (sē‘ār) due to the infant’s unusual appearance. But Esau was also remarkable for his redness, being identified as “Edom” which means “red” (verse 30).

Jacob emerges immediately after his brother, and “his hand took hold of Esau’s heel” (Genesis 25:26). The name *Jacob* (ya<sup>ʿ</sup>kōv) is explained as coming from the word *heel* (‘ākēv), leading to the belief that his name means “heel-grabber.” Jacob is among the most popular of names today, but the name would have been unusual at the time, meaning something like “subversive” in modern English. By the time we reach the New Testament, the reputation of Jacob led many Jewish mothers to name their children after him. In fact, the name *James* is mentioned thirty-eight times in the New Testament and is an English spelling of the Greek *Iakobos*, or Jacob.

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### TWINS CLASH • GENESIS 25:29-34

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Just as Scripture contrasts the professions of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:2), so also it contrasts the professions of Jacob and Esau. Jacob is a cook, and Esau a hunter. Since meat must be cooked, the professions might foreshadow Esau’s dependency on Jacob for more than just meals. Nevertheless, Esau returned from the field “weary” (more properly, “exhausted”) (25:29). He thus requested, “Please feed me with that same red stew” (verse 30). Seeing an opportunity in his brother’s vulnerability, Jacob offered to sell him the stew in exchange for Esau’s “birthright” (verse 31).

The birthright signifies all the rights of the firstborn. In addition to the social importance that such a status brought, other benefits came with it. First, during the patriarchal era, the head of the home was also the high priest of the family (e.g., Job 1:5). This is why, in Israel's early history, the firstborn son had to be ransomed from the sanctuary (Exodus 13:2, 13). The Levites later replaced the firstborn as priests (Numbers 3:12). The special closeness to God the firstborn enjoyed was essential to his religious leadership. Second, the firstborn enjoyed financial leadership. The wealth of the family passed to the firstborn at the death of the father so that the remaining sons would work as servants under the firstborn (Genesis 27:37). Third, both law and convention dictated that the father show preference to the firstborn son even if he actually preferred a different son (Deuteronomy 21:15–17). Such preference can even be found in God's description of Israel as His firstborn son (Exodus 4:22; Jeremiah 31:9).

Examples from the ancient Near Eastern world confirm that the birthright was transferrable. Add to this that Esau was convinced he would die without the stew, and his bargain seemed like a good idea at the time (Genesis 25:32). Although Genesis does not pass judgment on Esau's choice, the book of Hebrews encourages readers not to be like "Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright" (Hebrews 12:16). Most of life comes down to judgment. We rarely choose between right and wrong; most of the time, we choose between wise and unwise. There was nothing *wrong* with Esau selling his birthright, but it was a foolish thing to do. In a moment of weakness, he exercised bad judgment, and it led him to other bad choices (e.g., Genesis 26:34). Unwise choices often lead us into greater temptations and ultimately into sin.

### **CONSPIRACY • GENESIS 27:1-13**

The scene is set in a secretive manner. Isaac calls Esau alone, asking him to provide some wild game in exchange for which he would give a blessing (Genesis 27:1–4). The blessing was highly coveted, it being the father's solemn request for God to show favor to the one blessed. This is why Rebekah, who was eavesdropping on the conversation, sought to procure the blessing for Jacob instead.



Rebekah waited for Esau to leave and then ordered Jacob to dress up like his brother to deceive his decrepit father. Jacob objects, knowing such deception was opposed to the will of God (Genesis 27:11–12). But his mother protests, inviting a curse to fall upon her in his place (verse 13). This probably made Jacob feel more comfortable, although it does not excuse his choice to bow to his mother's pressure.

**WRAP IT UP**

**T**he interactions between Jacob and Esau represent many of the hallmarks of a dysfunctional family. We have parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, deception, disloyalty, and dishonor. Yet God is able to work out His plan to fulfill the promise of Abraham. In fact, it will be Jacob—the worst of the patriarchs morally—who will be the father of the nation of Israel. The story of Jacob is proof positive that God can do extraordinary things with ordinary people.



**THINK ON IT**

1. List and discuss the similarities between Cain and Abel and Jacob and Esau.
2. What do the names of Esau and Jacob mean? How do their names serve as prophecies of their futures?
3. What is the birthright, and why is it important?
4. Who do you think is more responsible for the deception of Isaac—Jacob or Rebekah? Justify your answer.
5. How is the family of Isaac and Rebekah dysfunctional?