

All About Edom (Part One)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch," December 2006

Literature and history are full of stories about competing brothers and sisters. The technical term that psychologists and behavioralists use to describe this sort of competition is "sibling rivalry."

These internecine conflicts go all the way back to Cain and Abel, the first two siblings born of all humanity—and their rivalry ended with the death of Abel. Not only were these two brothers, but the Hebrew of the Genesis account does not eliminate the possibility that they may also have been twins. The classic studies of sibling rivalry have been conducted using sets of twins.

Other examples of sibling rivalry have come down to us through literature, stories, and more recently, movies. *Cinderella*, for example, is a standard story of sibling rivalry between Cinderella and her ugly stepsisters. Shakespeare sometimes included this particular twist in his plays, as in *Much Ado About Nothing*, in which the prince and his brother vie with one another throughout. Steinbeck used it in *East of Eden*, as have many other authors. Producers and directors have used it in movies like *Legends of the Fall*, chronicling a rivalry among brothers, and *A League of Their Own*, which included a subplot of a rivalry between sisters.

However, when we think of sibling rivalry, many of us bring to mind the classic conflicts of the Old Testament: Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, and David and his brothers, not to mention the rivalries among David's sons. There was even sibling rivalry among Christ's disciples, who were not all blood brothers but as brothers in the faith became caught up in the pursuit of power (Matthew 20:20-28). The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) is, in part, about the rivalry between the responsible older son and his prodigal brother.

Arguably, the sibling rivalry that has had, perhaps, the greatest impact on the entire plan of God is the competitive relationship of Esau and Jacob. It is the classic model of two siblings—twins—beginning on a level playing field, both struggling for attention, power, and wealth. Each one in his carnality employs whatever means necessary to be superior to the other.

Perhaps what is most amazing is that this sibling rivalry persists more than three and a half millennia later, as their descendants continue to contend for dominance over the other!

Wrestling In Utero

Incredibly, the roots of this sibling rivalry had begun to grow even *before* they were born:

Now Isaac pleaded with the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived. But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If all is well, why am I like this?" (Genesis 25:21-22)

Women who have carried a child can relate to morning sickness and fetal movements, but what Rebekah experienced with these two fetuses engaging in wrestling matches in her womb is probably

beyond our comprehension! Having an upset stomach or being somewhat queasy just does not compare with the abnormal amount of jostling and grappling the unborn brothers were doing. It grabbed her attention! Being a very wise woman, their mother

went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her: "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." (verses 22-23)

God put this in perspective for her. In these two little babies were the seeds of two great peoples who would become populous and powerful nations that would compete with each other for many generations to come. When we consider that this contentious relationship has directly and adversely affected many nations throughout history, along with the resultant sufferings and deaths of millions of people, it is no laughing matter.

Notice that in His explanation, God predicted who would ultimately prove dominant: the younger, whom we know as Jacob or Israel. The apostle Paul comments on this in Romans 9:10-13:

And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated."

The apostle uses this situation to illustrate that God's choice, or election, is based entirely on His grace, not on any kind of human merit. The human reasons often advanced for the ongoing strife between the descendants of Esau and Jacob are therefore groundless, as God for His own purposes has chosen to show favor to the nations of Israel and not to Edom. However, despite their being denied national greatness, Esau's descendants are not without hope of salvation, though they must swallow their pride and admit that "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22), through the Messiah, who descends from Judah, son of Jacob (see Matthew 1:2, 16; Luke 3:23, 33-34; Hebrews 7:14).

The sibling rivalry of Esau and Jacob showed itself again while Rebekah was giving birth to them:

So when her days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob [meaning "heel-catcher" or "supplanter"]. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents. (Genesis 25:24-27)

From the outset, these two characters were complete opposites. One was red and hairy, and the other was probably paler and smooth-skinned (Genesis 27:11). One enjoyed the outdoors with all its activities, while the other felt most comfortable indoors, perhaps engaging in more studious enterprises. Esau seems to have been driven to pursue one particular enterprise, hunting, with all of his energy, and he was no doubt quite skilled in it. Jacob, however, is described as a "mild man," which in Hebrew suggests he was a *complete* person, that is, he had a well-rounded personality and could divide his energies among a number of projects and interests. He was a man of great ability in several areas.

An Added Wrinkle

As the two became young men, their talents and personalities became evident, and it is here that another dimension enters into their rivalry. It seems that their parents played favorites, as unfortunately occurs too often in families. Such favoritism only heightens the competition between siblings.

And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, "Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary." Therefore his name was called Edom. [*Esau*, remember, means "hairy"; *Edom* means "red."] But Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright as of this day." And Esau said, "Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?" Then Jacob said, "Swear to me as of this day." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. (Genesis 25:28-34)

This is the account of their first significant conflict, and the differences in their personalities come to the fore. Jacob had a nose for opportunity, and once he recognized that Esau was in a position of weakness, he started negotiating. He was very much a businessman and a wheeler-dealer, trying to get the advantage of his rival, but especially in the areas that really matter. Thus, he made a bold stroke, reaching for the birthright, that is, the double portion of inheritance that came to the firstborn.

By his reply, Esau showed that he had little grasp of the worth of the birthright. In fact, he valued his life far above his inheritance. He said to Jacob, in effect, "Look, if I survive, this birthright may be of some profit, but right now I will trade anything to live." In essence, he counted his birthright as worth no more than a meal! Esau's major problem was that he could not properly discern what was truly important. The Bible's portrait of him suggests that his complete attention fell on whatever was before him at the time, and thus he took no thought of the future, whether of blessings or problems or consequences. In wits, then, he was no match for cunning Jacob.

As possessor of the birthright, Jacob, with the help of his mother, tricks his father Isaac into passing down the blessing to him as well (Genesis 27:1-29). Upon discovering this duplicitous turn of events, Esau is devastated:

When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, "Bless me—me also, O my father!" But [Isaac] said, "Your brother came with deceit and has taken away your blessing." And Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright. And now look, he has taken away my blessing!" And he said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" Then Isaac answered and said to Esau, "Indeed I have made him your master, and all his brethren I have given to him as servants; with grain and wine I have sustained him. What shall I do now for you, my son?" (Genesis 27:34-37)

Even realizing what Jacob had done, Esau did not truly understand what had happened. He cried out, in effect, "It was all Jacob's doing! I don't bear any fault in all of this!" God looks at it a bit differently, however. As Paul explained, God had already chosen Jacob, and though He certainly did not approve of Rebekah and Jacob's tactics, He allowed the blessing to fall on Jacob because it fit into His purpose.

Hebrews 12:17 says that though Esau earnestly desired the blessing, "he was rejected," for he did not have the strength of character to handle it for God's purposes. He had already shown that he "despised his birthright," and God judged that he would have eventually shown the same scorn for the blessing. Esau is a classic example of a despiser of good (II Timothy 3:3).

Esau's "Blessing"

Once Isaac had given his—really God's—blessing, there was nothing left for Esau. The blessing was an "all or nothing" addition to the inheritance; it could not be portioned between Isaac's two sons. In reality, the subsequent "blessing" Esau receives is tantamount to a curse. In the New King James Version, it reads as if Isaac blesses Esau in Genesis 27:39-40, yet it is not a blessing but a prophecy:

Then Isaac his father answered and said to him: "Behold, your dwelling shall be [away from] the fatness of the earth, and [away from] the dew of heaven from above. By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; and it shall come to pass, when you become restless, that you shall break his yoke from your neck."

As shown here, the two uses of "of" in verse 39 have been mistranslated; in this context, the Hebrew word implies, not "belonging to," but "from" or "away from." On this verse, the *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* observes, "By a play upon the words Isaac uses the same expression as in v. 28, 'from the fat fields of the earth, and from the dew,' but in the opposite sense, *min* being partitive [imparting] there, and privative [depriving] here, 'from = away from.'" Thus, Isaac prophesies that Esau's descendants would live in an infertile, arid area.

One consequence of this is prophesied in verse 40: There will be continual strife between the "have," Jacob, and the "have-not," Esau; they would engage in a constant, internecine quarrel over "the fatness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven." More often than not, Jacob would be dominant—until Esau would rebel in frustration and anger. Isaac predicts that they will frequently come to blows, and occasionally, Esau's descendants will enjoy the upper hand for a time.

Esau's utterly human reaction upon hearing Isaac's words is consistent with what we know of his personality: "So Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him, and Esau said in his heart, 'The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob'" (Genesis 27:41). Too late, he realized the value of the blessing, and now his entire attention was focused in hatred against his brother. Hebrews 12:15-16 describes his attitude toward Jacob as a "root of bitterness," a profound and deep-set animosity that ultimately corrupts and defiles one who maintains it.

This reveals the mindset of Esau and his descendants, the Edomites. Everything that should have been theirs was now Jacob's, and they will fight until the bitter end of days to get it back! Yet God says it is not to be. His prophecy in the "blessing" allows Esau only occasional supremacy. Since Jacob's seed possessed both the birthright and the blessing, they would normally prevail and ultimately have the ascendancy.

The birthright made Jacob the recipient of a double portion of the inheritance, and the blessing was a gift of God by which the patriarch passed on the promised family blessings. These blessings included the patriarchy—"Be master over your brethren" (Genesis 27:29)—which was now Jacob's! This

meant that, upon Isaac's death, the leadership position in Abraham's family passed not to the elder, Esau, but to the younger, Jacob. Esau was left to form his own house, but without the power, position, and wealth inherent within the birthright and the blessing.

In these prophecies, the Bible shows that dominant family traits are passed down to succeeding generations. Therefore, even today, Israelites generally think and behave much like their father Jacob, while Edomites still retain the attitudes and drives of Esau. Though not every Israelite or Edomite will imitate his ancestor's personality to the letter, these traits will surface as national characteristics, allowing perceptive observers to identify their origins and fit them into Bible prophecy.

For Jacob's thefts of the birthright and blessing, Esau hated his brother enough to begin to plot his death! This burning hatred has been passed on from generation to generation ever since that time, for approximately 3,700 years. This, then, provides us with a basic understanding of the contentious relationship between these two peoples.