

THE STORY OF A FAMILY: ISAAC, REBEKAH, ESAU AND JACOB

There are many stories in the Bible that refer to family life, from the postlapsarian offspring of Adam, through the polygamy of King David, to references in the New Testament to Peter's mother-in-law and, of course, the Holy Family. Apart from brief references to Jesus' disciple Thomas being called Didymus, the only detailed study of twins concerns Esau and Jacob, the sons of Isaac. Isaac was the first-born son of Abraham and Sarah.¹ After being saved from prolicide on Mount Moriah² little is heard about Isaac until Abraham sends his head servant Eliezer to act as marriage broker, and find a wife for him, from among his kindred, in his uncle Laban's home in Haran.³ The girl was identified as Rebekah, who was a first cousin of Isaac. The book called Leviticus lists a wide range of familial relations that a man is forbidden to marry, defined by reference to them 'uncovering their nakedness'. Despite what has been claimed by many down the ages, using arguments about consanguine relationships, the Bible does not forbid cousins to marry.⁴ After discussions with her immediate family, Rebekah readily agrees to accompany Abraham's servant back to Canaan. On meeting Isaac, Rebekah covered her face with her veil and became his wife; there appears to have been no form of marriage ceremonial in those far off days.

Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah and it may be assumed that she was much younger than him because she was a virgin. She would surely have been married if she was older than a teenager. Like Abraham's wife before her she was described as barren. She prayed to God for a child, and her prayer was answered, but, in her case, with twins. God told her that she would give birth, not just to two boys, but ultimately to the foundations of two nations. Rebekah was also told that the elder son would serve the younger. The first born was covered with red hair and given the name Esau, while the second one was named Jacob.

Isaac later re-entered the story. He is described as being 60 years old and he was eager, following the tradition of those times, to pass on his inheritance to his oldest son. The Jahwist author of these chapters of Genesis reports that Esau was Isaac's favourite because he was a hunter and brought food home from the field, with which he prepared his father's meals. By contrast, Jacob was a herdsman and was the favourite of his mother. Isaac's eyesight was failing and he decided that it was time to pass on his blessing to his oldest son. Charles Fritsch tells us that Isaac would have wanted to strengthen and fortify himself with food before this event.⁵ The last words of a dying man were considered to be especially potent and to be irrevocable once spoken, as is a deathbed confession so acknowledged today. Fritsch also explains that such words would be legally binding. Isaac was thus seen in a positive light as he wished to continue the traditions of his people. However, he was deceived by his younger son, who was persuaded by his mother to impersonate his brother. The story suggests that Isaac was very confused. Despite reaching out and feeling the skin, smelling its scent and kissing Jacob he did not appreciate that he was mistaken in the identity. The return of Esau from the field, where he been sent specifically to furnish his father's meal, was, again according to Fritsch, one of the most pitiable scenes in all literature.⁶ Esau, when

¹ See: Gen 21: 3. Abraham had earlier fathered a son, Ishmael, with Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian slave woman. See: Gen. 16.

² See: Gen. 22: 1 – 13.

³ See: Gen. 24.

⁴ See: Lev 18. The prohibitions form the basis of the Table of Kindred and Affinity, often found towards the end of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

⁵ Fritsch, Charles T, *Genesis, The Layman's Bible Commentaries*, (London: SCM Press, 1959), 82.

⁶ Ibid, 83

all was explained to him, ended up by asking his father for at least some sort of blessing. No more is heard of Isaac until his death was recorded at the age of 180 years.⁷

Rebekah is referred to as 'a comfort' to Isaac after the death of Sarah, his mother. She wished her favourite son to be the head of the family. Saint Paul, in his letter to the Christian Church in Rome, explained that God had told her during her pregnancy that, 'the elder shall serve the younger, as it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated'.⁸ Was she not, in her actions, just obeying the will of God? She obviously did not consider it important to question God's instructions, she perhaps thought that she was helping to get God's promise fulfilled. The precedence of Jacob over Esau required two parts, the obtaining of the birthright and the receiving of the paternal blessing. Rebekah appears to have had no interest in the first of these. Her only concern was that Jacob should receive his father's blessing. In this she took a leading role. Esther Fuchs explains the importance of Rebekah's order to Jacob to follow her instructions.⁹ The whole deception revolves around Rebekah, but nowhere is she condemned for her actions. Fuchs further explains that Rebekah was, perhaps in some small way, correcting the imbalances seen in a patriarchal society, where, as a woman, she was legally inferior to the men in the household. She could not give her favourite son any blessing of her own.

Gordon Wenham argues that Esau was a name generally unknown in the Ancient Near East.¹⁰ It seems to indicate that such an individual was covered with red hair. As the twins grew older their innate characters developed. Esau became a hunter, a man of the open spaces. He was his father's favourite son, in part because he could satisfy Isaac's love of good food. He showed, in his disregard for his birthright, no feelings for the continuity of his family, begun by his grandfather Abraham and continued through his own father. Esau would still expect to receive his father's blessing from his deathbed, some time in the future, and would consider the birthright element to be of little or no immediate concern. Wenham further explains that the incident of the birthright sowed the seeds of animosity between the brothers. This would develop into serious feuding among the two resultant great nations of Israel and Edom.¹¹

The character of Jacob is more difficult to define. He was the local herdsman, probably living near the family home, regularly in contact with his doting mother. Had she told him of God's message to her? Was she preparing him from an early age to assume the mantle of family responsibility? Did he willingly and weakly do his mother's bidding? An author of an Internet paper argues that, while Esau despised the blessings of God and the riches of Eternity, Jacob, foresaw that a great nation would eventually descend from him and he had not waited for God's plan but had taken the matters into his own hands.¹² He was prepared to be deceitful and devious to obtain what he believed was his by right. Was his mother's involvement purely incidental? Jacob's actions are perhaps paralleled in the New Testament story of the unjust steward.¹³ His behaviour is shown in a somewhat negative light for two reasons; he stole those things which rightly belonged to his brother, whether that was God's will, or not, and he appeared to obey the will of his mother, which was diametrically opposite to the expectation of his father.

⁷ See: Gen. 35: 28.

⁸ See: Rom. 9: 12 – 13.

⁹ Fuchs, Esther, *Feminist Theory and the Bible: Interrogating the Sources*, Feminist Studies and Sacred Texts Series, (London: Lexington Books, 2016), 160.

¹⁰ Wenham, Gordon John, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol 2, (Leyland, Lancashire: Word Books, 1994), 176.

¹¹ Ibid, 180.

¹² *Esau and Jacob: The Temporal and the Eternal*, Ref: www.injil.org/TWOR/23.html.

¹³ See: Luke 16: 1 – 13.

The plot of the story of Isaac and Rebekah is of the maintenance of the purity of race. Abraham lived in Canaan, and the Canaanites were a polytheistic nation which was influenced by neighbouring cultures, particularly those from ancient Egyptians. As such it was wholly opposed to the will of Abraham's God. It was important in Abraham's eyes that his bloodline remained uncontaminated. It is common in our times of multicultural societies to see ethnic creeds and ways of life being maintained against outsider infiltration and dilution. It is equally easy to imagine that cross-cultural marriages could reduce the purity of two monotheistic religions and lead to the observance of neither one. Despite this generalisation there are many instances where one individual has willingly and fully adopted the customs, practices and faith of their marriage partner, with consummate success, be they the union of Christian and Muslim, Catholic and Protestant, or whatever. Abraham, had no such faith or understanding. The purity of the bloodline had to be maintained, and this meant marriage to a close blood relative, not just any member of the tribe. Sarai, her pre-marriage forename is described as Abraham's half-sister, the daughter of his father but not of his mother.¹⁴

The priority of Jacob over Esau in this story eventually led to the creation of two great nations which lived in mutual animosity down the generations. This author of Genesis is at pains to point out both direct and indirect involvement of God in these affairs of men. It can long be argued that if God had wanted Jacob to be the premier individual, then why wasn't he the firstborn son? It was not the duty of the book's author to explain God's will, only to report upon it. It seems strange that God would want to have it recorded in Holy Scripture that he was perfectly happy to use the deviousness of men and women to further his eternal ends? In a time when women were significantly subservient to men, did God want to show that they could do his bidding and thus have a more significant role than history would typically accord them? With the blessing and birthright issue resolved, certainly in Jacob's favour, both Isaac and Rebekah pass very much from the scene; their work for the Lord is done.

God had prepared Rebekah for the birth of twins but with the curious instruction that she is bearing two nations in her womb. The plot developed as the craftiness and deviousness of the younger brother leaves Esau and their father distraught. The writer(s) of the book called Genesis would have known of the animosity among the nations of Israel and Edom and could have used this allegory to explain it, but these stories seem too full of factual detail, the jewellery carried by Abraham's servant, the colour of Esau's hair, the description of the pottage, etc, to be purely fictional. The writer's principal activity is to amplify the importance of God's promise to Abraham, and subsequently to his son and grandson, that their descendants would multiply in great numbers.¹⁵

The author's stance towards Isaac and Rebekah seems to be quite neutral and ambivalent. Isaac is not involved in the search for a wife, this is initiated entirely by Abraham and concluded by his loyal servant. It is not reported that Abraham ever met Rebekah; they are certainly not cast as one big, happy family. Rebekah is shown as a pure, obedient daughter, happy and willing to leave Bethuel her father and her kinsfolk and travel with a complete stranger, albeit one who presented her with considerable treasures, to a far land to marry a previously unknown cousin. Had she had an unhappy home life? The author gives us none of this background. It may be argued that she was led by God to perform the actions of giving water to the visitor and his camels, just as the emissary had prayed to God that she

¹⁴ See: Gen. 20: 12.

¹⁵ See: Gen. 22: 17, Gen. 26: 24, Gen. 28:14.

would do so. The family asked Rebekah to stay awhile, but she is keen to depart. Again, does she know that this is God's will? The author does not tell us.

Daniel Elazar argues that it is part of the greatness of the divinely inspired authors of the Bible, that it poses the problems that God, as well as humans, have to face, in choosing between less than perfect options, even among those that it presents as uniquely God's chosen people.¹⁶ The story of Jacob and Esau is a classic example and the author, who Charles Fritsch defines as a Jahwist source, has the dilemma of explaining how God faces the selection of which brother shall carry on the Abrahamic line.¹⁷ The author indicates that both brothers have good and bad traits, without necessarily passing judgement on either of them, but indicates that a leader for the future of God's people must be identified. The description of the birth of the twins, where Jacob is described as holding on to his brother's heel, perhaps trying to get born first, is an example of the author's decision to be factual without being prejudicial. God is shown as having a limited number of options and he makes the best choice he can from those on offer. The author does not find it necessary to exaggerate the good in one son, nor the evil in the other. The author does offer further evidence of the separateness of the brothers when, for example, he writes of Esau marrying Judith and Basemath, both daughters of Hittites.¹⁸ Later he tells of Jacob's marriage to Leah and finally to Rachel, and again he offers no overt comment or criticism. Any praiseworthiness or reprehensibility attached to the characters in these stories is strictly left to the reader and to the writers of various commentaries.

Dr David Fuller
Lay Reader Emeritus
St Columba, Gruline, Isle of Mull
Diocese of Argyll and The Isles
Scottish Episcopal Church

¹⁶ Daniel J Elazar, *Jacob and Esau and the Emergence of the Jewish People*, Ref: www.jcpa.org/dje/articles/jacob-esau.htm.

¹⁷ Charles T Fritsch, *Genesis, The Layman's Bible Commentaries*, (London: SCM Press, 1959), 79.

¹⁸ See: Gen. 26: 34.