

Jacob, the Next Great Hebrew Patriarch

Jacob, son of Isaac and later renamed Israel, is the next of the great Hebrew patriarchs. The early years of Jacob's life reveal a character that deviates significantly from that of his father and grandfather. Even before Jacob is born, the text reveals a contention that will carry far into his adult life. Genesis 25 records that Rebekah bore fraternal twins (the brothers were very different in appearance) and even before they were born "struggled together within her (vs. 22)." While Jacob would be born second to his brother Esau, Jacob would inherit the patriarchal position after the death of his father. God revealed to Rebekah that "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 (Genesis 25:23)." Thus begins a long series of struggles in Jacob's life that will not be resolved until many years later when he is confronted by God and compelled to consider seriously his purpose in life.

In the final verses of chapter 25, the struggle unfolds as Jacob takes his first step in supplanting his brother as the rightful heir to the family's preeminent role. In verses 29-34 Esau was famished upon returning from hunting. Jacob was preparing a stew and his brother asked for some of it. Jacob selfishly bartered for his brother's birthright. Esau foolishly agrees to sell it. Verse 34 records that Esau "despised his birthright" and a New Testament writer, reflecting on the event, states that for his deed Esau was a fornicator, a profane or godless person, because for "one morsel of food [he] sold his birthright (Hebrews 12:16)." Jacob displayed poor character by leveraging from his brother the preeminent position as first born son. Esau displayed worse character by selling, at any price, the right and responsibility that was divinely bestowed upon him. The birthright was not of his choosing to accept or reject; to buy or to sell.

Later in the account, Jacob and his mother contrive to deceive Isaac and finalize the deliverance of the birthright to Jacob. Isaac appears to be unaware of the transaction between the brothers. In his old age he prepares to pass the leadership of the family to Esau, the first-born and favored of the two sons. Because he is old and nearly blind, Jacob and Rebekah, when they hear that Isaac is preparing to bestow his blessing upon Esau, disguise Jacob as his brother. Jacob goes as Esau to his father's tent and receives his brother's blessing.

Ignoring his own role in his demise and focusing only on his brother's intrigue, Esau "hated Jacob." Recognizing that Jacob will become his master, Esau plans, after his father's death, to kill his brother and become the family heir and patriarch. Fearing for his life, Jacob flees to the land of his forefathers.

Thus far, in spite of his father and grandfather's legacy of trust in the Lord, Jacob pays little attention to the God of his fathers. In chapter 28 we find Jacob en route to Padan Aram when, pausing for the night, God comes to him in a dream. In this dream Jacob sees a ladder that reaches into heaven with the angels of God ascending and descending on it. The Lord introduces Himself to Jacob and reaffirms his promise to Jacob's

father and grandfather to build their offspring into a great nation and to bless all the peoples of the earth through their descendants (meaning that the Christ would come into the world through the blood line of Abraham, Isaac, and, now, Jacob).

In the morning Jacob makes a covenant with God that if He will continue to prosper him and bring him back to his father in peace, Jacob will give a tenth of all he has to the Lord. This is a step in the right direction, but Jacob does not yet understand his purpose in the world. As we will see, God wanted, and deserved, more than a tenth of what He had given to Jacob.

When Jacob arrives in his homeland, he falls madly in love with the first woman he encounters who, unknown to him, is the daughter of his uncle Laban. Jacob, without seeking Divine counsel, negotiates with his uncle for Rachel's hand. The deal is struck. Jacob will work seven years for Laban; then he will get to marry Rachel. The seven years pass, but Laban deals treacherously with Jacob. By ruse he substitutes his eldest daughter Leah for Rachel. Jacob is unhappy and, again without consulting God, enters into another seven year labor agreement for Rachel's hand. This time he is successful in getting Rachel for his wife, but unsuccessful in bringing about domestic harmony. Nevertheless, out of these unions are born twelve sons, the future patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel.

We must await the next article to consider the final phase of Jacob's life and the message for mankind that is contained therein. [Read Genesis chapters 30-32. For a shorter reading read Genesis 30: 25-48; 31:1-3, 20-24, 41-42; 32:9-12, 22-30.]