



TWINS AT WAR

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 25:19-34

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Brian Morgan

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Whenever someone asks me the embarrassing question, "Where did you go to seminary?" my short answer is that I didn't. The longer version is that I really did, although it was a seminary of a different kind. Two years after my marriage to Emily, I applied to seminary. We had hoped to use her teaching credential to pay our expenses; then, following graduation, we would start our family. But Emily had a strong desire to begin our family immediately. This was a scary notion for a young husband. But I felt I ought to at least pray about it. I shared my concern with Elaine Stedman. She smiled and said, "Why do think God gives us children when we have no experience and can least afford them?" I responded that I had no clue. Her uncanny reply was, "So that you learn to trust him!" And that is what we did. I had no idea of what to expect, but I must say that what went on in Emily's womb did more to shape me spiritually than any seminary could possibly have done.

Such is the case with the wives of all the patriarchs: what went on in the wombs of these women would give each of them the equivalent of a graduate degree in theology. Having concluded the story of the life of Abraham, from the book of Genesis, the narrator immediately switches to the next birth narrative, with the account of the wondrous things happening in Rebekah's womb.

Introduction: The "Toledoth" of Isaac (Gen 25:19-20)

Before describing the birth, the narrator makes use of a surprising title to introduce the next round of stories in Genesis:

Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham became the father of Isaac; and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife. (Gen 25:19-20, NASB)

The book of Genesis consists of ten different divisions, each of which is titled with the Hebrew term *toledot*.¹ The word is derived from the verb *yalad*, "to give birth to." Translated "begettings" or "generations," it speaks of the family history that issues forth from a particular individual. Thus the "generations of Noah" speak about the stories of Noah's sons, and the "generations of Terah" speak about the life of his son Abraham. At this juncture in the text we would expect to read, "These are the generations of Abraham," followed by detailed stories of Isaac, but instead we find "the generations of Isaac," which sets out the stories of Abraham's grandson, Jacob. Isaac's life appears to be passed over (with the exception of one minor digression, Gen 26:1-33).

The fact that Isaac's life is passed over is shocking when we consider how wondrously his life began. Isaac was the promised son whose birth was announced by God and angels and whose conception was a miracle of life from the dead. As a youth, his silent submission on Moriah became an icon of faith and trust, typical of the Lamb of God who was to come. Isaac's marriage seemed made in heaven. His bride came

from just the right family, and their vows were sealed in love and purity. With such a strong foundation we would expect an easy transition to the next generation. But somewhere everything went wrong. Though we are not yet told how this happened, this surprising gap has a shocking ring about it. The narrator challenges us to search for the clues to the mystery.

There is a second note of dissonance as well in verse 20. In his description of Isaac's age when he married, the narrator appears to give what seems to be an overly lengthy description of Rebekah's birthplace and family. Nine words separate the name Rebekah and the word "wife," as if to portray what a task it was to acquire her from her family. This detail foreshadows the tremendous difficulty Jacob will have in securing his wife from the devious Laban. Though Laban was forced to grant Rebekah permission to leave, that would not happen without a struggle.

After those two ominous details we come to heart of the birth narrative.

I. The Birth of Twins (Gen 25:21-26)

A. Isaac's Prayer and Rebekah's Conception (25:21)

Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived. (Gen 25:21)

Once more the couple bearing the promise is struck with the same plague as their parents: Rebekah is barren.

Brueggemann comments:

There is an incongruity here. The father is the special child of promise (21:1-7). And the mother is of good stock (25:20). But in this best possible arrangement, there is barrenness. There are no natural guarantees for the future and no way to secure the inheritance of the family. They must trust only on God...Other families might have been free to invent and govern their own future. But this family is marked by promise. It receives life as an unexpected gift. Promise requires an end to grasping and certitude and an embrace of precariousness. It is only God who gives life.²

In light of Rebekah's barrenness, Isaac takes the initiative to pray. He probably had learned from his parents not to manipulate the promise of God through human effort. Thus he will not use Rebekah's maid as a surrogate mother; rather, he prays for God to intervene (*'atar*) on behalf of his wife. The prayer is effective. God does intervene (*'atar*).³

The fact that the narrator uses the same verb for both the request and the answer reveals how the Creator of life is moved by our petitions, and how prayer powerfully engages the promises of God. At first glance it looks quite simple. One prays for God to answer his promise at the point of their need; God hears from heaven and intervenes on earth. But lest we become naive by the apparent simplicity of it all, the last verse of this scene (26) reveals that Isaac had to persist in prayer for twenty years before God answered. Like his par-

ents, he had to learn that the promises are not inherited by faith alone, but by faith and patience. And the waiting intensified his affections. But, in the case of Isaac and Rebekah, we aren't asked to suffer with them in the interminable delay of conception. Rather, the narrator quickly moves us ahead to new and different conflicts.

Following twenty years of waiting we can only imagine Rebekah's elation when she finally becomes pregnant. But the joy is short-lived, for once she is pregnant she is overcome by tumultuous tremors within her womb.

B. Rebekah's Prayer and the LORD's Oracle (25:22-23)

But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is so, why then am I this way?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. (Gen 25:22-23)

Although conception is a gift for this couple, it is also a mystery filled with conflict. The narrator's description of the turmoil is more violent than our English translations. The verb "struggled" (*ratzatz*) would be better translated "crushed." It is used in Judg 9:53, when a certain woman dropped a huge millstone from a tower on Abimelech's head and "crushed" his skull. It is also used of "grievous oppression" of the poor (Job 20:19). These boys in Rebekah's womb are practically crushing each other. So severe is her pain that it throws her sensibilities over the edge. She wonders if she will even go on living. Her anguished cry is so painful she can't even complete her thought (literally: "If this be so, then why am I..."). Translators usually fill in the gap using phrases like, "Why do I exist?" (JPS)

My wife and I can identify with Rebekah's pain. In three subsequent pregnancies after our son's death, we didn't know if our babies were going to live or die. Conception always came with a dual edge: a rare joy laced with the trauma of fear. While we had access to medical technology and amniocenteses, the only solution to Rebekah's perplexed state was "to inquire of the LORD."

So while Isaac prays for fertility, Rebekah prays for understanding. God is faithful to grant her request and gives her an oracle. But, as Fokkelman says, though "God seems easily accessible through prayer, his answers can be mysterious and even disturbing."

**The LORD said to her,
"Two nations are in your womb;
And two peoples will be separated from your body;
And one people shall be stronger than the other;
And the older shall serve the younger." (Gen 25:23)**

The first explanation Rebekah hears concerning her internal turmoil is the word "two." They are going to have twins! Isaac had prayed for a son, and he will receive two times more than he asked for. The LORD then details the destiny of these two boys, in four poetic lines. As is typical of Hebrew poetry, each line develops and intensifies the first.

First, we learn that the two boys represent two nations. What a reassuring pronouncement of fertility! But then the second line adds a note about a conflict so intense that it will force a separation right from birth. Fokkelman comments: "for Jacob and Esau any room is too small when they are together. The first battlefield is their mother's womb. How cruelly the sweet expectations of children, the greater after twenty years of hope and despair, are dashed for Isaac and Rebekah! As early as the pregnancy their parental happiness is threatened."⁴

Then Rebekah is told that these two boys will differ in strength, which is natural, but the oracle is sealed with a sur-

prising twist, "the older will be a slave to the younger." This final word would have brought great anxiety to an expectant mother in that world, for God's promise was subverting the entire social order of their day. The first-born in the ancient world was granted certain rights and privileges (primogeniture rights), so that the leadership and inheritance rights in a family were carefully managed from one generation to the next. The first-born was the key person around whom the social world was ordered.

But now God says he maintains the right to totally subvert that order, and he makes no apology for the disruption it will cause. "The older will be a slave to the younger." (Waltke notes how the verb "will serve," *ya'abod*, sounds much like Jacob, *ya'aqob*; while the noun "younger," *sa'ir*, sounds much like *se'ar*, "hairy," in reference to Esau).⁵ Therefore the son who bears the promise will be destined for conflict. The point could not be clearer. In God's kingdom our destiny is not shaped by the privileges the world confers, but on God's promise. And God often aligns himself with the insignificant (another translation of the term "younger") and disfranchised (orphans and widows, Exod 22:22; Deut 10:18; 14:29; 16:11). These actions by God create great disruption to the cultural norms, and the world shakes its fist in anger (Ps 2:1-3).

Imagine the emotions that this oracle created for this expectant mother. Rebekah seeks an answer to the physical tremors in her womb, and in receiving the answer is given emotional tremors as weighty to bear as the twins she is carrying. She must now reflect on how her two twins will forever be at war because of the choice of God. Who wants to bear children destined for conflict? Jacob's life will be riddled with conflict from beginning to end. It begins with Esau in the womb and escalates to such a point that Jacob must flee for his life. But even exile brings Jacob no relief. It only changes the stage of conflict to Haran, where he battles his father-in-law, Laban, for twenty years. Then the birth process of his twelve sons is shaped by the conflict between his two wives, one barren, the other unloved, each one competing for what the other possesses but cannot have. Finally, when Jacob is back in the land, he still cannot find rest because of the violent behavior of his sons whom he cannot control. But by far the most decisive battle is the one Jacob has with the angel of the Lord.

After Rebekah receives the oracle we hear no more details about her pregnancy. But we can imagine how deeply the oracle affected her. The next scene details the birth of the twins.

C. The Birth and Naming of the Twins (25:24-26)

When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau. (Gen 25:24-25)

God is faithful to his word. Indeed there are twins in Rebekah's womb, and as early as their birth, their different destinies are painted in bold colors. The first son comes out red in color (*admoni*, ruddy, related to the word Edom, v 30) covered with hair from head to toe. So they name him Esau (the meaning of the name and its relation to "hairy" is not clear).

Afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding on to Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob; (lit. "he called him Jacob") and Isaac was sixty years old when she gave birth to them. (Gen 25:26)

The second son comes out grabbing the heel of the first, so they name him Jacob. This is a pun on the verb *aqab*, which means "to follow at the heel," or figuratively, "to assail insidiously," "to circumvent," or "to overreach." If there is any doubt in Rebekah's mind about the truth of the oracle, it is re-

moved at birth. Jacob has already been fighting “for the best starting position!” (Fokkelman). But Jacob loses the prenatal race. The birth narrative concludes with the mention of Isaac’s age, a surprising detail of the prolonged agony of waiting. But it is family conflict, not patience that will drive this story.

From the birth narrative, the narrator moves to the early life of these two boys to show how great the divide between them had become by the time they had reached puberty. The divide is evidenced in all their fundamental relationships as they relate to their world, their parents, and each other.

II. Twins Divided from the Womb (Gen 25:27-34)

A. Differing Passions (25:27)

When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter [lit. “a man knowing game”], a man of the field, but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents. (Gen 25:27)

As they grow up, each of the twins develops different passions. The oldest, Esau, becomes a man’s man. Twice the Hebrew word “man” is used to describe his love for the hunt and the field. Esau is a man of the woods, a gifted hunter. Jacob, on the other hand, is described as a peaceful, civilized man, one who dwells in tents. The tent is a positive description. It evokes the memory of his grandfather, Abraham, who dwelt in tents as a symbol of his status as an alien and sojourner in the land. The word peaceful is the Hebrew word *tam*,⁶ which normally speaks of a person’s integrity (someone who is complete and sound). In this case it probably refers to Jacob being “civilized,” in contrast to the man who loves the wild outdoors. As the twins grow up, their interests grow apart.

The second thing we learn is that their different passions capture the attention of each of their parents.

B. Divided Parents (25:28)

Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. (Gen 25:28)

As Brueggemann writes, “the two parents who prayed so passionately for a son have now chosen sides.”⁷ Isaac’s passions are directed toward the oldest, because we learn of his sensual appetites. Isaac has a “taste for game” (lit. “for the game in his mouth”). The Hebrew is unclear as to “whether the idiom suggests Esau as a kind of lion bringing home game in its mouth or rather bringing game to put in his father’s mouth.”⁸ In either case, the point is clear: Isaac’s love is based on sensual appetites that seem to have dangerously taken root in his old age. Rebekah, on the other hand, loves Jacob. The narrator carefully omits the reason for this, but it takes little conjecture to speculate that the divine oracle has done much to shape her affections. So these two twins not only have different passions, they have divided their parents’ loyalties. Favoritism on both sides will leave a legacy of damage for more than one generation.

Finally, the narrator reveals their differing priorities as the destinies of the twins collide over a pot of stew.

C. Differing Priorities (25:29-34)

When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; and Esau said to Jacob, “Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished.” Therefore his name was called Edom. (Gen 25:29-30)

Jacob, the heel grabber, is now seen as the opportunist who lies in wait for his brother, a sibling he knows all too well.

While Esau is out on the hunt, Jacob prepares a meal for the hungry hunter. But his is not an act of hospitality such as was characteristic of his grandfather, but a manipulative act to acquire what he desperately wants. Esau arrives exhausted and spent from the hunt. He is portrayed as coarse and crude, and though his address is polite (“please”), he can’t even express the proper word for stew. He grunts, caveman style, “Let me gulp down some this red red stuff.”⁹ Like an animal, this young man is governed solely by his appetites. Fokkelman captures the irony well: it is “because of his weariness he loses sight of proportion and of his self-respect. But of course, Esau himself was *‘admoni*, red! Jacob outwits his ‘red’ brother with his own nature.”¹⁰ From this the pun is born, “which forever associates crude, impatient appetite with Israel’s perennial enemy Edom.”¹¹

But Jacob said, “First [lit. “today”] sell me your birthright.” Esau said, “Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?” (Gen 25:31-32)

Here at last is the opportunity Jacob has waited for. He has something that Esau desperately wants, but he will not give it without extracting a heavy price. Unlike the impetuous Esau, his words are carefully weighed and calculated: “Sell today your birthright to me.” Esau is one whose desires make him a man of the moment, so Jacob makes “today” his day to sell. Esau’s response is astounding. His crying need drives him to hyperbole. It is as if he is on his deathbed and will not live beyond this moment. In light of his crying need he evaluates his birthright with the exact formula Rebekah had used to describe the terror in her womb, “What is this to me?” But while Rebekah spoke these words to describe the life-threatening trauma present in her womb, Esau uses them to devalue the eternal, in light of his screaming hunger that has him at the edge of “death.” Having his brother right where he wants him, Jacob makes one more move to seal the deal.

And Jacob said, “First [lit. “today”] swear to me”; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. (Gen 25:33-34)

Jacob plays once more on the present moment. He asks for an oath: “today.” He is like a shrewd businessman who requests a written contract, signed and notarized. He knows the value of postponing momentary pleasure for future reward. Esau responds immediately, not calculating the consequences. The agreement is struck and the exchange of destinies takes place over a meal. Now that the deal is sealed, Jacob adds a few items to the modest broth and turns it into a generous feast, lest his brother feel cheated. The terse report that Esau “ate and drank and rose, and went on his way,” is an apt description of what it meant for Esau to despise his birthright. It is spoken with the same emotion as a man engaging a prostitute, casting away his lifelong mate for five minutes of sordid pleasure. Esau will forever remain as the icon of what it means to throw away eternal reward for the sensual appetites of the moment.

See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. (Heb 12:15-16)

We will conclude with four observations which these twins teach us about our own spiritual journey, all centering on the theme of election and God’s mysterious call.

III. Lessons from the Twins

A. The gift of being called – life from the dead

We discover that for Isaac and Rebekah, a couple whose marriage was made in heaven, being chosen does not release them from pain. Like their parents, they are plagued with barrenness. It is long, protracted barrenness of twenty years, but one that provoked years of prayer and waiting. As children of promise we learn that for every generation life is the gift of God, one that can never be manipulated by man.

This was the profound lesson I learned with each of our children. After our first-born son died, Emily and I discovered that we have a rare enzyme deficiency that creates a one in four risk of our children not surviving. But I thought since we “gave” our first-born to the Lord, he would not “require” another. When our second child died, I knew then that I had no rights and that God could require anything of us. Then we received Rebecca through adoption and prayer, and I discovered that all children are the gift of God (Ps 127:3). When God gave us Jenny, I thought, “God did for us what he did for Job. He doubled our family, with two in heaven and two on earth.” When he gave us Katie, I was overcome with gratitude and had no clear categories to thank him for his grace. And all this is a type of the spiritual life, to demonstrate that we cannot produce life apart from the sovereign work of God. This was what I learned in the seminary of my wife’s womb. And this is the clear testimony of John,

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12,13)

B. The weight of being called – “the older will serve the younger”

Secondly, we learn from this couple that being chosen does not ensure a life free from conflict, but one destined for conflict. For the way in which God chooses goes against the basic social conventions that hold societies together -- and he doesn’t even seem to care or apologize. God will deliberately align himself and choose the younger, or insignificant, as his choice, which will destine that individual for conflict. “The first shall be last.” We will see this principle played out also with Joseph, with the nation of Israel (called the “fewest of all the peoples,” Deut 7:7), with David, and with the greater David, Jesus. In Jesus’ birth narrative there is mention of another Edomite, Herod, who was at war with the chosen seed, so that he carried out a bloodbath, killing all male infants in Bethlehem. On that day the streets of Bethlehem turned “red.” Finally, in a supreme act of grace, God has now chosen the gentiles to be among his elect people, as Paul says,

God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. (1 Cor 1:27-29)

C. The ambiguity of being called

The third thing we observe is that this election not only brings a weight to bear, but it has a certain ambiguity as well. From a human standpoint, Jacob seems extremely flawed. It is easy to understand why Esau is disqualified, but hard to imagine why Jacob is chosen. Though he wants the best thing, he

goes about it entirely the wrong way. For him there is no prayer and no waiting; just planning, manipulating and seizing. And his grasping that which was to be given only by God as a gift leaves the wreckage of human relationships in its wake. We wonder how for the next twenty years Rebekah imagined God would fulfill his promise to Jacob, for she would never see her son again. Jacob demonstrates little evidence of the faith that characterized his grandfather Abraham. Rather, the dominant feature is that he is the “heel grabber” who seizes the initiative away from others. In our day he would have been the shrewdest businessman in Silicon Valley.

But perhaps this ambiguity is a spiritual lesson for us. God has chosen us and placed his holy seed within our souls, but the flesh remains at war against the spirit in a never ceasing battle, like the conflict that these twins engaged in. So Paul writes to the Galatians, “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please” (Gal 5:17). Sometimes we can get so muddled in the battle we hardly know who we are.

But that brings me to my fourth point.

D. The hope of being called

Despite all the ambiguity in life, God’s election still shapes history. Though it will take a lifetime for Jacob to be conformed to the faith of his grandfather, in the end God’s purposes will win out. Paul writes, “For though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls... So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (Rom 9:11, 16).

And this, my friends, is the greatest truth taught in the womb. I would not have traded that education for any seminary.

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1. The ten *toledots* are found in Gen 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1, 9; 37:2.

2. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta, John Knox, 1982), 212, 214.

3. On this verb “to intercede,” Bruce Waltke quotes Albertz as he summarizes its usage: “Isaac entreats the LORD for the infertile wife...and Moses on Pharaoh’s behalf for the aversion of the plagues (Ex. 8:4f., 24f., 26)...’*atar* here, then, describes the powerful, appeasing effect on God of a man of God. It always transpires in private.” Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 357.

4. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1975), 88.

5. Waltke, *Genesis*, 358.

6. “Integrity” = *tam*, perhaps the author chose this word as a pun on the word for “twins,” which is *tomim*.

7. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 217.

8. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1996), 128.

9. Alter, *Genesis*, 129.

10. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 96.

11. Alter, *Genesis*, 129.